

Yes. Good afternoon. I'm Bernice Harel. And I'm interviewing my husband, Dr. Zev Harel, for the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section, Holocaust Archive Project. This is our third tape, or the third part of our interview.

Zev, when we were talking before, we had just about gotten to the point where you were liberated. One of the things I wanted to ask you before you actually describe the liberation is what was it that helped you survive do you think, in addition to your inner resources? Obviously, from what you've said, it took a tremendous amount of inner strength on your part, especially as a 14-year-old. But was there anything else, such as thought of maybe seeing some of your family again, or, if you will, of having some of the things you dreamed about? Was there anything else in addition to simply the determination to keep going do you think that help you survive?

In retrospect, and again, trying to think back of those days and recalling the thoughts and feelings of then, two memories that I have is the finish line, the expectation that I'll get there, and not so much the reasons why. And I could speculate, but then the same way someone else could speculate about them. I don't think that other than the sense keep on going because the finish line is there and you'll get there, you'll get through, and what it is that will be there and wanting to get back and to see what happened to my father and to see that what happened to my mother and maybe to see them again, is what the thoughts that I had at the time.

So we were toward the end of my experiences at Ebensee. And just about, I believe it was March of '45 that I was sent away on a work detail to a place called Wels. And I was there for about three weeks.

And what we were supposed to do there we were a work detail that was supposed to clean up the effects of the bombs. And I'm not sure whether these were the bombings of the Allied forces or the bombs of the Russian. But they just devastated.

And so we cleared up the railroad tracks. And we cleared up around the railroad. And since during the day they would bomb there, we worked at night. And those three weeks were just the most awful. People were just falling since this is--

You've been there about a year now, almost a year.

Right. But there were people who had been in concentration camps for two or three years. See, by this time, they had work detail, had people from all places in the world. Like I recall Greeks and Italians and Polish and others.

And like the Polish Jews, by this time, some of them were three or four years or five years in concentration camps. So some of them were really at the end of their rope as far as their physical stamina. And that was just all around you.

And it was just terribly frightening, that experience. First, because you worked at night. And at day, whenever you opened your eyes, you saw around you all this death.

And I remember the sense of release when they decided to discontinue this work detail and being sent back to Ebensee. And that must have been like April because I remember when we got back that it's beginning of spring.

And then, I wasn't in any kind of permanent work detail. I worked for a few days on a cleaning detail, as a Stubendienst. Worked for a few days like on taking off wood, trees. And that's where I got my skills of learning how to chop trees.

And then the last couple of weeks, I worked in the crematorium of Ebensee. And that work detail was also very, very hard. But the more frightening thing about it is that here there are already the beginning rumors that the American soldiers are not far away, that the Russians are closing in, that the finish line is getting closer and closer. But what we feared is that the Germans will not want anyone who has been part of knowing of how they were burning the bodies and all that to be around to tell about it.

So I remember the last day in camp that a Russian guy and I who were on the same work detail, that we decided that we'll just hide. And so we hid under our barrack.

You mean literally underneath? Like--

Underneath, right. Underneath the barrack. And we were expecting for the Germans to come. It was a dumb thing to do in retrospect. We were expecting the Germans to come with the dogs to sniff us out.

But it was too late already. We have done this dumb thing. Just on a spur of a moment, we decided from the Appellplatz instead of going to work that we'll hide.

And then we hear a noise. And this guy who was a Russian, one of the Russian soldiers, crawls out and looks in and comes back and says, I can't believe it, the gate is open. And there isn't anyone around.

And so I came out. And we are going toward the gate. And the gate is open. And so with the flow of people out of the gate-- and that's my liberation.

Who actually liberated you then? Was it--

The American soldiers. The American soldiers arrived. But what happened is, in retrospect, I understand that morning when the German soldiers were aware that the Americans are nearby, they handed over the guarding to some civil militia. And the civil militia, a minute or two after the Germans departed, they just left their posts. And so people just started streaming out of camp.

And this was in April or May, do you recall?

This is May 5, 1945.

And that was at Ebensee.

In Ebensee. And what I recall of that day is just a mass of people walking out and being part of the people that walks. Where? What? The only thing that I remember saying to this guy is, look, I know that Wels-- and I saw the sign pointing toward Wels. Wels is toward east. And since we want to go back-- since I wanted to go back east, that was just a general sense of that's what I started walking toward.

So people just started walking without really knowing what they were going to?

Right. Well, I really don't know what people did because I never came back to Ebensee. I started walking. And I was on my way.

And in retrospect, just since my brother was liberated in Ebensee, and I was so obsessed with this thinking of getting away from the crematorium detail that I just started walking. And it wasn't until a few weeks later that I realized that my brother is in that camp, and I should have gone back and tried to find him. Because on my way home, and I figured that he'll be on his way home and maybe that he'll catch up with me, and that I wanted to get away from Ebensee as far as I could. That's the sensation that I remember carrying with me.

Do you remember how other people around you were acted or reacted?

I can't really recall any like triumphant, joy, expressions of joy, or any of that thing. It took about two or three days to sink in that we are liberated for me. And I remember that we arrived in a place called Traun.

I'm sorry what was that?

Traun-- T-R-A-U-N-- Traun. This is a village in between Wels and Linz. And I recall us going to military headquarters and getting some food there and continuing to walk on the way toward Linz. And I don't remember much more because apparently toward the end of my experience probably as a consequence of my work detail, I contracted typhoid.

And I understand later that one of the American soldiers who was at that headquarters stationed in Traun picked me up, took me to the hospital. And I was at that hospital unconscious for about a couple of weeks. And I was at that hospital for about a month.

But I understand from one of the sisters there-- it was a hospital run by a religious order. And there were some civil nurses and some sisters. And I understand from one of the sisters, there was an American soldier that came there, brought me there, and swore the head nurse that if anything happens to me and if they don't bring me back to life that he'll come back and personally take care of all the doctors there. So--

In other words, too, what you're saying is that the sisters were more inclined to treat the patients properly than the civil nurses who were--

Right.

--primarily German or--

I got as good care as possible there under the circumstances. And I began-- you know I realized, especially the last week that I was there, that I had three nutritious meals a day, that they would bring breakfast that looked like breakfast and lunch that looked like lunch and dinner that looked like dinner. And the food was just normal food again.

And you were there really six weeks then?

No, I was there about a month. So that brings me to about--

Early June, middle of June.

Middle of June. Middle of June.

Did you ever know who that soldier was?

No. If you remember when we were in Washington, I tried to locate him, but yet unsuccessfully. I still have not given up hope to maybe find him.

So from there on I kept on in the direction homeward. And I reached Linz, which is another city in Austria. And then from Linz, I headed in the direction with a group of survivors in the direction of Hungary.

But you had to pass through a place called Wiener Neustadt. And that was the only place where there was a bridge that was still functional and operational. And at Wiener Neustadt, since I was speaking Russian and Polish and German and some of the other Slavic languages and Hungarian and Romanian, the [NON-ENGLISH], which is the person in charge of that place singled me out and said that he wanted me to stay there and serve as a translator. This is with the Russian military force.

Now Wiener Neustadt was a town on the--

In Austria.

--on the Austro-Hungarian border?

On the way toward Hungary, right. So I spent there about six weeks in this camp. And--

You were with the Russian army then.

The Russian army. But I wasn't really with the Russian army because I was with the staff headquarters there, the ones that interrogated the more important of the Hungarian, Ukrainians, or those that were trying to return home now. And

this was one of the few places that you had to get through.

And so like the first days, the officers would ask me the question, tell me what to ask. But the second or third day, I was already in charge so that I would do the interrogation myself and make the decisions for dispositions of these collaborators of the Nazis. And every night, there was a train that was hooked up to the train that was going through Hungary toward Russia, on the way to Siberia. So during that time I had this relatively important position of making decisions about former collaborators.

Did the Russians seem just as glad to let you make the decisions? I mean I'm presuming technically, this was something that the Russian military--

Well, they had to sign and obviously have the information on the basis of which they made the decision. So I wasn't that completely independent decision maker. But like those that served in this government or that government and this or that capacity, there were criteria as to how those decisions were made.

But in other words, though, as a survivor who had been in a number of locations, you could add a considerable amount of detail to what a collaborator would have been willing to tell on his own? In other words, you could broaden the perspective that the Russian military was able to obtain.

Yes.

So that they had more information--

Probably so.

More than they might have otherwise.

Also, speaking the language, I was able to converse in the person's language. And at that time, I had the facility of being able to converse Hungarian with the Hungarian, Romanian with the Romanian, and Russian with the Russian, and so on. So--

And you worked for them about six weeks?

Right.

And--

That takes me through the middle of August of '45.

I gathered from what you said before that your working for them probably wasn't totally voluntary.

No. Every day I asked them to let me go, and they wouldn't. So the way that I got out of there is one of the informal functions that I had that I was going around-- since I spoke German, I was going around with the staff sergeant who was in charge of acquisition of food. And we would go around to the Germans in the area and get vodka and other dietary--

Supplements.

Supplements. And so then we would end the day waiting at the railroad station for one transport that was coming in to be detached and to attach the wagons that were freed and that they can continue, and also the wagon that was on its way to Siberia. So one of those times with one of the second in command who we became good friends and he wanted to talk me into going back to Russia with him, we were drinking there. And he was drinking. And I was pouring the liquor on the floor, got him drunk.

And when the train was starting to move-- I was wearing Russian soldiers there because they gave me Russian soldier

uniform. And I got on the train, went into the bathroom, changed my clothes, and held my breath until we passed the Hungarian border. But I had false signature of a piece of paper that permitted me to continue, which I made sure that I had in my-- so when I reached the Hungarian border, I was able to show my piece of paper that got me through the Hungarian border. And so I was on my way home.

And when did you arrive back home?

I got home after a few days in Budapest early September. And at home, my brother was already home and my mother who also survived. And--

What did you find when you got home?

Other than my brother and my mother, I found that I just can't fit back in. And my sense was, as I got back there, that I don't want to settle here. Since I had an uncle in the US, I reached an understanding with my mother and my brother that I'm on my way to America.

Since I'm so impatient and I don't want to do anything, I had this sense of like I can't fit back in here. It's almost like a cut with my past, that all of that that the Hungarians were doing willingly, all that they were doing, and I can't settle here. So I started on my way to the US with the attempt of getting to Germany, and then from Germany getting in touch with my uncle and asking for papers in order to come to this country.

Had you and your family been in touch with your uncle before the war?

Yeah. Occasional letter here and there. But it's again--

This was your father's brother?

My father's brother. But again, like one of those things you don't have any firm plans, it's more in the way of-- when I left home on my way to America, it wasn't very realistic. It's unlike today where you go and ask for a passport. But again, I didn't have the sense that if I want to do something I cannot do it. I started out I'm on my way to America, and I'll get there.

So with three other young men who have decided to do what I did, at the beginning of winter-- that's probably December '45-- we are on our way. And we cross the border from Romania to Hungary first, and then got to Budapest. And in Budapest, since I spoke all these languages, they asked me if I was willing to take transports a few times from Budapest to Vienna, which I did. But it was square and fair, or fair and square. And after a month, I continued. And since I wanted to get to America, I continued and I reached Bergen-Belsen.

Let me ask you, when these transports, were people being assisted by HIAS or any other group in any way? Or did you get any kind of assistance to this point?

Up to this point, no. In Budapest, I got assisted by the Bricha. And the Bricha was organized then by what was to become the state of Israel.

Could you explain a little bit further what the Bricha is and what the word means and what the organization is about?

The organization helped survivors of the Holocaust to get out of the countries. And the intent was to get them to Israel. But I made no bones about it. I wanted to go to America. So they said, fine, but you'll go a few times back and forth to Vienna. And I think I did it three times. And the main reason was again my command of language.

And then from Vienna to Munich, and then Frankfurt, and then from Frankfurt to Bergen-Belsen, and I got to Bergen-Belsen in still wintertime. That's the end of January '46. And I registered. There I understood that children who survived the Holocaust could register and that they would be provided a special entry category to enter the United States. And I waited about five months in Bergen-Belsen.

This was winter of '46?

This is first winter of '46 and then spring of '46 until June--

Or spring of '47 then.

No, '46. Winter of '45, spring of '46, and in the beginning of summer of '46. And we are beginning to get newspapers. And I read both the German newspapers and I'm beginning to read some-- some-- very little Hebrew. And I read that the English are considering giving Palestine to the Jews and then all the trials and tribulations about that that was going on then in the media.

And then I remember that along with two of these friends of mine that we came together to Bergen-Belsen that we decided that if the British give Palestine to the Jews, then we go to America. If they don't, then we go to Palestine and fight. And that was the big decision of, now, a 16-year-old kid to be tired of waiting to get the permit to enter the United States and makes the decision I'm going to Palestine and fight.

And that was an interesting journey because, since I was speaking all these languages and I was known to the organizers of the illegal immigration, they thought that I'll be able to get through in a way that is somewhat more difficult. So what they did is I replaced a guy who stayed behind to work in the Bricha. And I had to assume the identity of someone who served as a corporal in the Jewish Brigade, which was part of the British military force.

So I got the British uniform. I put it on. And I had to assume the identity of a corporal who was serving in the Jewish Brigade and go through the border to Belgium first and then to Holland and then to France.

Was English one of the languages you'd picked up?

No, not yet. [LAUGHS] Not yet. And that was a real experience because being a corporal in the Jewish Brigade, which was part of the English military force, and not speaking the language obviously was incongruent. But small details of those kinds at that time didn't deter you. And--

So obviously, though, there were a lot of people covering for you.

Yeah. But I had to get on my own to France. I was given the details, how I will get there, and what to look out for. Like I had to get off at Brussels and go and use the details that I had to get a meal in the canteen there, which I did without even thinking twice about it, and what to say or what not to say when the military police will stop you at the border from one country to the other. And I went through all those details.

And if someone would talk to me in English, I would look back straight in the face. And I would say, [NON-ENGLISH]. I didn't know a word of Hebrew either, or very little. I knew what I knew from the prayers. But I didn't know Hebrew either. But in order not to get stuck, I would shove them the papers and say, [NON-ENGLISH]. And if they did, that was it.

So I got to Lyons where was the place that was used to assemble the group that was to return. And I was to be returned to Palestine at that time through Egypt. So I had a very, very interesting journey from France to Egypt. And I spent in Egypt about two weeks in the middle of the desert and then arrived at the end of July, or the middle of July, to Palestine.

And that was July '47 then?

Right. No. July '46.

Excuse me, July '46.

July '46, I arrived to Palestine. And then after a short time, I arrived at kibbutz Danahume.

When you first arrived in Palestine, where did you actually enter? What was the first point in Palestine then that you reached?

Rafah. And then from Rafah to Sarafind. And that's where I was taken off, returned my military clothes, and given a pair of civil suit, and then taken to kibbutz Nan. And I handed over the money that this guy who I replaced got-- because I was discharged from military service replacing this guy.

So from there on I got to kibbutz Danahume. And that's where I spent a year and a half. Altogether, I spent from '46 to 1965 in Israel. In Danahume, I was part of a youth emigration group. And then toward the end of '47 when the beginning of the war starts, then we started to get military training. I joined the Haganah.

Now the Haganah was the predecessor to the Israel Defense Force Forces?

Right. But then in the spring of '48, I joined the Palmach, which is the equivalent of a strike force.

That perhaps was-- they served the role I think something similar to our Marines--

Right.

--at that time.

And that's where-- remember, I started out saying that my name was Herskovits. And if I didn't say it, I should say it now. I was born in Herskovits. But I served with the Harel brigade in the war of independence. And then at the end of the war of independence. I decided to change my name. And I took on the name of Harel, which means the mountain of God. And that's the brigade that I served with.

So I served in the war of independence. And after the war was over, I lived on the kibbutz until 1958. And I started working as a truck driver. Then the kibbutz forced me to start to be an intellectual. And they send me to a teacher seminar. And I worked in education on the kibbutz until '58.

Then from '58, I worked in children's village, Ben Shemen. And then I was the director of a boarding school, Kfar Galim. Along with this work, and I also started thinking about education. And I attended the Hebrew University.

I started on my formal education at the age of 30. I passed a high school equivalency test then. I started attending the Hebrew University. And in '63, I got my BA degree.

I worked from '63 to '65 as the director of boarding school at Kfar Galim. And in '65, I got a fellowship and came to the University of Michigan, where I met my wife. And in '66, we got married. And that's how I got stuck in the good USA. And--

Well, let me ask you, Zev, you went through a number of very meaningful experiences after the war. You fought in two wars in Israel, the war of independence, which had to have been especially meaningful to you as someone who survived the Holocaust, but also the Sinai campaign. And since I've lived in Israel, I know something about it. In between wars, there's always military duty. And then your educational experiences, working with young children, and I believe the kibbutz wanted you to get more education to be able to teach and so forth because you were so good with the kids. How did your experiences during the war and being a Holocaust survivor, how did this impact on what you did and the kind of career changes you went through?

Well, in Israel, as strange as that may sound, it was more what happened that determined that because I really wanted to be a truck driver or a farmer. Growing up in a small village and all that, I was perfectly happy on the kibbutz being a farmer. And when I got to be a truck driver, that was the height of my aspirations.

And on the kibbutz at that time still there was the idealistic conception, throw behind you the heritage of the galut and

be a farmer, be in touch with nature. And I identified with that very much, except that the decision was made that I should become an educator. And that's what got me started on it. Now eventually, I got used to the idea. But initially, I wasn't too excited about it.

Participation in the war of independence and the life on the kibbutz really gave me the ability to stand on my two feet and to raise my hand and to have a sense all that can happen to me is get a bullet through my head, but I'm not going to bow my head down again. And it gave me a sense of a backbone of what I am like a person, what it is that I'm standing for, and what are the things that are important for me as a person.

And obviously, I decided that the education was important. That's why I applied for, got the fellowship, came to this country, and got my graduate education at the University of Michigan, then my PhD at Washington University. And part of that route would travel together. And then we came to Cleveland State. We came to Cleveland, and I worked at the Benjamin Rose Institute first and then decided to get a faculty position, mainly because I wanted to get back into education and so that I can do some of the things that I feel comfortable with, that I feel that I would like to do.

Again, in looking back on it, would you say that your experience as a Holocaust survivor, or more specifically, your experiences during the Holocaust, have affected you in any negative way in the long run? Has it affected your physical health? Your emotional state? How you relate to family members and so forth?

Obviously, anyone who has gone through this experience has been scarred to this or that extent. No question about it. And I'm no exception to that rule.

The time that you had to spend in being in deliberate control of your emotions, in a way you force yourself to detach yourself from feelings. You force yourself to be in control of the situation. And so your cognitive map and-- your instincts and your cognitive map meshed with each other to control your emotions so that your feelings will not overwhelm you in the situation so that you can keep on going.

And to some extent that strength and that sense of having to be in control, you carry with you. And as you know me by now, there isn't anything that I want to do that I will not try and do. And I may decide that some things are not for me, and I don't want to do them. But anything that I think that I want to do, I'm going to start on it. I'm going to set some deadlines and work on it. And that's a reflection, that kind of compulsion of being in charge, being on top, being in control, having the mastery of the situation, is something that I acquired during that time. And it stayed for me.

There are also to this day-- I mean you are aware when I go to take a shower and there's a little breeze, the associations with the shower and the breeze are bringing back the memories of the fear of what it is like because each time, not just the initial time, but each time when you went to the shower in the concentration camp, you had to undress. And it didn't matter whether it was the summer heat or the winter freeze, you were all naked. And that's how you were waiting until they let you in. And you didn't know it would be hot water or cold water.

So there are a lot of associations that you have that relate to your fear and your experiences that you had. And you carry them with you, the losses. I lost my childhood. I had to become an instant adult very, very fast. I didn't have the opportunity to go through a normal childhood, youth, the normal things that a child and a young person wants to do, has experiences with. Because when the war was over, in a different way, I had to be, again, a soldier.

And in everyday life until '65, when I came here at the age of 35, in between that, I served every year in reserve. And I was on the alert unit on the kibbutz. And I slept constantly with a gun, either in military service or on the kibbutz under my bed, if the need for it. And many times when there was a need for it so that you are available and that you--

But during those years, you did that because you wanted to defend yourself. In a sense, you had a good feeling that you can defend yourself. So that sticks with you. And you carry that into your everyday life.

And what about survivors as a group, do you think they're different from other Jews in any way?

Yes and no. Survivors have gone through an experience that as it had occurred on another planet. If I think of



conventional life before the war and after the war, and the life in concentration camp, the experiences are just unlike-- there isn't anything just that you can compare the two. In concentration camp you had no control, no structure that you can relate to, no sense of expectation. And what you had to do is acquire a sense of instinctual strength to carry you through the degradation, the inhumanity that's surrounding you.

When these pictures come back, they are just terrible. And one has a very hard time. I have a very hard time now explaining to myself how I managed to get through that because just the memory of some of those experiences are terrible. So survivors have gone through that. Survivors lost family, lost a lot of things that were dear to them.

And like me, many of them came to the realization I can't go back to that place. It's almost like a friend of mine told me I have two birthdays. I had my first birth date and then the second birth date was my day of liberation. And that life really started from my second birthday.

And in many ways, one of the reasons that I took on the name of Harel is symbolic because as you know we were in Bucharest visiting my uncle. I didn't have the need to go back and visit the place where I grew up. I have no use for it. And in a sense, you cut off a certain part of your life.

And the reason for it is that's a way of demonstrating your feelings toward those that so willingly collaborated with the Nazis in carrying out the atrocities of the war years. And for that reason, in a sense, my life starts with the arrival to Israel and from there on. So, yes, survivors in that sense are different.

But in another way, survivors are a cross-section, like any other group. There are some that are saints or approach sainthood. And there are some who I wouldn't care to associate with because they are into all kinds of things that I feel ashamed that someone is engaging in those activities. But the majority are in between, people that went about trying to avail themselves of the opportunity that were available, try to establish themselves personally, professionally, in a new culture with a lot of obstacles that they had to encounter even in the new life.

Do you think that survivors have a message that others need to understand?

Well, that's probably the part that is the hardest to observe. See, in retrospect, when I'm thinking of the war years, today as a professor, at an educational institution, I'm thinking of how this all came about. I don't think I have a rational explanation except I have the facts. And the facts are that Nazi Germany championed this. Hitler's Europe willingly collaborated and aided him in carrying this out. The Allied forces and the United States consented implicitly or explicitly for this to be carried out.

In other words, Hitler himself couldn't have done it alone, or not even just Germany.

Right.

They would never have gotten so far.

Right. Like in retrospect, I have questions today. How come-- and we were talking about in concentration camp and after that-- how come the Allied forces did not bomb the extermination camps? How come? And I can think today that the cocktail parties didn't stop in this country and for that matter in other parts of the world. Life continued to go on.

And the main reason for life to go on is, in my estimation today, having the benefit of the hindsight, that the economic reasons were the dominant reasons that overshadowed other purposes. And if I look around today with all that one sees, I feel very discouraged that the world has really not learned the lessons of the Holocaust, of how both those of us who are Jewish and those who are not Jews, how to safeguard the dignity, safety, and security of every person, to use resources in a constructive way so that no person goes hungry, so that people are free to exercise their life and living, so that resources are used not to benefit the rich, but to benefit mankind. And that's the main message of the Holocaust.

What made you decide to share your experiences with us today?

The main reason is that there are those who are contending as if the Holocaust never occurred, first. Second, I would like to see that the world-- that I have the opportunity to try to make my little dent in the minds of some of those that are likely to watch this tape and have a chance to say to them, look, this happened. See to it that the world heads in the direction where people cannot do this kind of thing to each other and that resources can be used to better life, and not to the detriment of people in life.

Thank you very much, Zev. I know it was very difficult for you to share everything that you did, not just with me, but with the world. But it certainly was a tremendous contribution. I think your message is very well taken. And hopefully, when our children and grandchildren see these tapes, the world will be a better place.

Thank you.