

This interview is part of the National Council on Jewish Woman's Cleveland Section's project on the Holocaust. My name is Dr. Zev Harel from Cleveland State University. And the guest today is Mr. Jack York. Mr. York, would you please introduce yourself.

My name is Jack York. I was born in Poland, Łódź, in 1926, 2nd of February. My name used to be. Jack, Jacob, Jurkewic. Jurkiewicz to be correctly.

What do you remember of your childhood, Mr. York?

Well, right now, as I remember as my child as the war broke out, in 1938-- the war broke out in '39-- I was only about 12 and half years old. What I can remember about my childhood is that when the Germans was coming into Łódź, to my hometown, I was going to school at that time. And I was just going to become bat mitzvah, which is confirmed. And my father, at that particular night, ran away to Warsaw because the Germans were invading our hometown and they were coming in.

Maybe before-- we'll get back to when the Germans came in. But what do you remember-- can you describe what your family consisted of--

My family consisted of my mother. I had two brothers, my father. Of course, I had grandparents. I went to public school. I went to-- which is a high school comparatively to here. I went also to a kindergarten comparatively over here. And I had one year, which is-- high school in Europe is different than over here. So I had one year of a higher education than the high schools over here.

And what was your family life like? What do you remember?

We're a very close family. We were a very close knit family. My father worked. My mom was a homemaker. And I had a brother that was seven years younger than me. And we lost him through the war.

Was your family in touch with neighbors? Like who were your neighbors, friends?

We lived we lived in a building. As you know, Łódź has buildings like they have over here, the big condos. And we had like 100 families. And we were all close-- people knew each other. Everybody knew one another at that particular building that we lived in.

And we had neighbors. And we had friends. And you go and we would walk, but we had no cars. Of course, most of the thing that we were done was by walking because there was no cars, or horse and buggy because I was born in a big town. If you wanted to rent a horse and buggy, you could, but not as such that you owned one.

And where most of your friends Jews or were you--

We were mixed. There were Jews. And there were Gentiles. And we were pretty close with-- people were very usually pretty friendly, the ones that you knew. Some of them antisemites. But you learn to live with those things.

And as you were growing up before the war, were you aware of antisemitism?

That's exactly what I was saying. A matter of fact, I lived in-- they used to go around and hollering at you, you Jew, get out of Poland Jew. And when I went to school, to public school, I had to fight my way almost through every day. And if you were weak, you were losing. You had to be strong enough to survive and to fight your way through school and out of school because they always point at you, you Jew, and, Jew, get out of here, and, Jew, don't do this. And every time there was a Jew, there was quite-- I was quite aware of that.

Were you also aware of acts of friendliness of non-Jews toward you and your family?

Exactly true. We had some friends, like I mentioned before, we had some people, Gentiles, that were very nice people. And they ignored or told us to ignore the other people. Or they didn't even like the other people, a lot of them. But there was very few and far in between. There wasn't that many.

Was your family a traditional family? What do you remember about that?

It was very traditional. We observed Sabbath. We know that Sabbath was a day to go to the temple. And on Friday night, we all like to, say, you clean up and put different clothes on. And you go to the temple. And you go with your grandparents. You're with your father, and you spend your day in the temple.

And when you came home, you observe the Sabbath. I remember that on the Sabbath you're not supposed to cook although we did not have any gas stoves. It had to be by coal. So they had what they call over here-- you say a mikvah now.

Water, hot water?

No, there was a special place. I forgot what they call it. A bathhouse, that's what it was, a big bath house that you went there with the two canes the sugar. And you get hot water to bring home because you had not hot water for tea. Or they put in food on Friday night. You took it over there on Saturday afternoon. You brought it home. You carried it like a mile, a mile and a half sometimes. That was the traditional Sabbath thing.

There was nothing cooked in the house. Everything was cooked outside. And that's how the Sabbath was brought up.

What about holidays? What do you remember about Jewish holidays?

Every Jewish holiday was observed because we used to get together with the grandparents. And the grandparents were very, very Orthodox. Even so, if we were a little confirmed, they were very Orthodox and they kept you going to the point that you had-- like Thanksgiving over here, that's how the Jewish holidays were observed with us.

We knew only about those things. We did not know any other holidays to observe than those. And they were very traditional, very mannered. And there was the life of the year. Everybody was looking forward to those things, especially when I was a youngster because at certain times that you were getting a penny for this and a penny for that. And it was joyful.

You smile when you remember the holidays--

I sure do.

--and life there. So you had a pretty healthy and happy childhood.

I was very, yes, we were very good brought up.

Other than your grandparents and your parents and your brother that you mentioned, what other family did you have?

Well, I had uncles and aunts.

In the same town?

Most of them the same town. But to be honest with you, I do not remember much of those-- of them. I just remember as the years went by, small, but I was very small. And you know, I wasn't to the mind as I am today. And I don't remember much of those people.

So you remember that your life was traditional Jewish--

That was positively-- as a matter of fact, they were sending me to a Jewish school to study Judaism and the history of Jewish life and how the tradition of Jewish people should be, certain things like that.

Has Zionism played any role in your family? Were you aware in any kind of way about it?

I don't-- we did not stress the point of a Zionism as such, as per se Zionism. But we stress the point of being a good Jew-- that was the most important thing-- and a good traditional person and study all about your Judaism and everything else. And remember-- and respect, the most important thing that we learned is respect your elders and look forward for other people, respect those.

When you think back of those days, how do you recall yourself before the war?

As a happy child, as a good going-- athletic. I was always in all kinds of games. I was in boxing. And I was in soccer. And I was playing volleyball. I was doing all those things.

Jews had a hard time-- if you went to a public school-- had a hard time to get to those. You had to be outstanding to be able to do something. But I succeeded in doing all those things. I remember I was never deprived of those things in any of the schools because I was not afraid. I faced everybody head on. I remember that I was never afraid.

So your life was going on a normal childhood, going from grade to grade--

Oh, yes.

--growing up.

Oh, yes.

And then the war begins. When were you first aware of the war?

It was an evening when they says the Germans invaded Poland. A few weeks later-- I don't think it was more than a week almost, as my recollection comes in-- they were in Łódź. Łódź is the second largest city of Poland. It is next-- Warsaw is the largest. And Łódź is the second largest. I think we had a population, if I remember correctly, about 300,000 Jews in Łódź at that time. And were textile worker, shoemakers or barbers, or whatever you have, were all in some kind of a profession.

And one evening, I remember-- my father was a barber. And one evening my mom took us together. It was me and my brother and the little brother I had. And she says, your dad has to run away. And I asked him why. She says because the Germans coming into our hometown, and they killing all the people. I mean the elders.

So he ran away to Warsaw. My father ran away to Warsaw and left me, my mom, and my dad. And it was not that he ran away. He ran away to save his life. He came back like three weeks later, I think. He came back and we were back together. And we lived in the same place for about maybe six months. And then they took us all together, all the Jews, and put us in the ghetto.

When did that happen? Do you remember?

This happened-- I am very hard recollecting dates for you. But it happened some place between fall and winter.

Of 1939?

1940 I think.

1940.

'39 they came in. I think it was late in '39 when they came in. So it was in the middle of '40 they started putting us in the ghetto.

And the ghetto consisted of a part of town that he took off. And they barbed wire around, with electric wires, and barbed wires in some places. And they had strategic points where to place the soldiers. We, as per se, could not get out individually out of the ghetto. You could be-- it's just like a compound. You can live within the ghetto. But you cannot go beyond the ghetto.

They were giving you a ration of certain amount of bread and certain amount of meats, or whatever, for a week, which is enough probably to feed maybe one person. But that was for five, six people. And whoever was able or whatever, they have to go to work in the ghetto. And they were working for the Germans.

Like I was runner in a straw factory. They were making straw shoes for the Germans. I guess when they were going to Siberia, Russia, they were wearing-- I don't know if you people are aware, but it's awful cold. So on your boots, they would put on the straw shoes to keep-- the straw supposedly keep away your cold. So I worked in a straw factory. My father was maintaining his barber trade because people had to get haircuts.

But life in the ghetto, as long as we were together, was-- no matter what it was miserable because the Germans used to come in. You never knew when. They would come in-- now, the ghetto consisted of big homes. A home maybe there was 100 families living in a home again because the houses are big. It's like the Carter Hotel here, great big--

Apartment complex.

Apartments complex, very big. And you had-- like we were a family of five. And we lived in one room-- five in one room. So I imagine how many people lived in a complex of 100.

And there was a big backyard, what they call, with the big door that closed up, with a gate that closed at night. And you had, what you call, the bathrooms. Nobody had bathrooms. But it was in the backyard. So everybody had to congregate to go to the bathrooms in the morning or night or whatever.

You must've lived on the fifth floor-- the fifth floor there consists like probably over here I would say eight or nine floors. That's how tall it was I think. So you had to run down the stairs-- there was no elevators or nothing like that-- and go to the bathrooms.

Now, you never knew when the Germans would come in. And I remember on a few occasions, they would come in. They get drunk up, or whatever. They come in with the Gestapo, break up the gate, tell everybody, downstairs in the backyards.

They pick on elderly people. They make them kneel down. Some of them they shave a half a beard. Some of them they shoot in their head, which-- and I was a kid, you know. But I was tall for my age. I wasn't much shorter than I am now. I was skinny, but I was tall.

So they never could figure out how old I was because if they knew I was 13 and a half or 13, they would have shot me right there on the spot. But they did not do that. They just took the elders.

They took some kids for-- born babies, so baby was crying. Mama would hide him. They threw it out the window. They would shoot him through the window, like ducks. They were just practicing.

So those are the things that we lived in the ghetto with the fear. When they leave, we go to normal whoever is alive. Not alive, we bury.

Then they would have come in sometime with trucks. And they would say, we need you to work. They loaded up some people to work. And you never see them again. Where they went? Nobody knew.

Sometime some people receive letters. And they say, some good news, saying, oh, they working in a beautiful town someplace or whatever. That was not true. They were already dead. But there was Jewish prefabricated letters. It was all prefabricated things. Those are the things that started my life in the ghetto.

So in 1940, you were about 14 years old.

Just about.

What do you remember going through your head? What were the thoughts that you had? What were you thinking about what was going on?

I just couldn't figure out for what I-- OK, I knew that there was antisemitism in Poland. But I did not know that Germany per se would do such a thing, inhumane situations, the way the ones-- in my head went through unbelievable to believe that one human being can inflict pain and do murderous things the way they were doing in our hometown.

And there were a lot of people-- and I remember, when we were-- like I said, we were 300,000 Jews. I don't remember when if they cleaned out the ghetto there was 100,000 left. I don't believe there was when they start cleaning them out. I don't remember there were 100,000 left. So they did away with that many people.

And I, as a child, could never progress this or get into my head to believe that one human being can inflict pain to another. And special children, they don't know anything. I can understand a grownup. He can be politician or whatever. But a kid does not understand politics. A kid is born, doesn't know anything about life.

They would come and take and throw them out through a window or shoot them or take some people-- I remember on one occasion when they came in. And they said everybody, down. I stood in line. And my brother-- he was seven years younger.

I'll never forget it. We hid him in the outhouse, what you told him, the toilet in the backyard. And we put him down there. And he hung-- we had hooks built in underneath the toilet. So he was in the hole actually, hung on hooks for an hour because that's how we saved his life-- although I lost him. But that's how we saved his life until we couldn't save his life. I lost him going to Auschwitz.

So those are the things that they really many nights now I wake up with nightmares and things about those things, that some people can inflict pain like this to other human being, which is unreal. It was just unreal. It's hard to describe.

And what kind of feelings or reactions do you remember having about what you have observed as a young man growing up?

As I was-- well, I grew up five years-- between the ghetto and the concentration camp, it took me five years to grow up. That's what I spent. So of course, I came out to be 18 years old.

The first thing that went through my mind is survival because when we were in camps, in labor camps--

Before the camp, in the ghetto. You were already aware of the dangers and you knew that you had--

Exactly, we had to survive. In the ghetto, we lived as a family unit. And that was fine. Whatever we had we tried to share with one another, but all there was not much.

Even some of the kids turned out-- their own kids turned out to be inhumane to their parents feeling, hey, you're old enough. You don't need to do it. That's what actually Hitler brought on in your mind to do, to say, mom and dad, you go because I have to survive, which I think that in itself inflicted on my head all my life, which is very hard to describe that a child would say to a parent you've got to go because I have to live. And that's what Hitler did.

There's a good deal that was written about life in the Łódź ghetto. Other than the harassment by the

Germans, what was life like in the ghetto?

It was a communal life. People knew each other more so because we were congested. You see, in the United States, we call a ghetto because the people over here-- they have ghettos over here because the people are congested. And they turned out to be a slum area. We were congested and we were barbed in. That is what they call a ghetto. We were barbed in. You could not get out from this-- if you stepped into the wires close enough, you had a chance of being shot.

But what happened in the ghetto was the people were congested in this particular area. So we were closer with one another. I remember I used to stay-- we seeing an airplane fly over. We heard an airplane. And the people were running downstairs, says, oh, here comes the American, or the Russians. We're getting liberated. Tomorrow we're going out. We'll be liberated. Tomorrow never came.

So there was a lot of people that were togetherness. They would talk. And people survive by a hope, by talking, by one another-- one was stronger than the other, they would say, he would say, oh, I heard a plane last night. Did you read the-- I heard over the radio, they're coming tomorrow. We'll be liberated. Those are the kind of things that kept a lot of us going.

There was a lot of sickness, a lot of typhus, and a lot of inhumane facilities in all this, which there were not doctors or whatever to take care of you. You have to do by old time remedies, like the old Indians do. That's the fitted survived. And the ones that were not too fit were a lot of them did not survive. I'm sorry to say that. And I'm sorry to talk about things like that. Things like this really happened.

What do you remember the grownups, the adults, talking about? Other than the hope that this will be over. What are the kinds of things that you remember?

In my home, most of my parents-- because we were always taught to respect the elders and everything else, they say, do not take a picture of what you see here. Try to remember it. There are some good people in this world. Try to live your life over if you live. Do not take a point of what happened. But remember and do not forget what was going on here. And teach your kids to not forget what was going on in your life and how your life was so they know that you treat-- one human being should be treated as well as the next and be nice.

But other people again say life is not the way it's supposed to be in it. You see what life is all about. The stronger kills the weaker. And that's how it is. And there was a lot of talks like this going on.

The older people didn't know what to do for you, didn't know-- they were the victims. The younger, maybe a lot of the youngest maybe survive. But the oldest ones were the victims. I'm sorry to say that.

And do you remember of any plans as to what to do or not to do about the situation? You remember any talk about escaping? About--

Well, in Łódź, per se, we did not have what they call big forests or whatever. But there were a lot of people from our hometown did escape, what they called, to the partisans. We had a group of partisans. And they were the ones, they brought a little hope in.

And at the same token, they also inflicted pain because what the partisan was doing, they would blow up railroads. Or they would raid warehouses, like Robin Hoods in those days. They would do certain things. But whatever they inflict on the Germans to do harm to the-- they would come into the ghettos and take for each one soldier, they would take 10 people and shoot them. For each one individual that was killed or harmful done, they would come in and take 10 other ones and shoot.

But we did not worry about that no more. We would worry about that one day when, he says, OK, that was hooray for us. But still we lost families. And that's what they were doing, inflicted. So we did have hope because the partisans-- and I know if you people heard of the partisans so you know what that word means-- if you want me to explain it-- would you like me to explain what the partisan is?

The partisan is a group of people they got together. And they try to defend themselves against Germans. They were not any political group or any political organization. They were just people that were hiding in the woods, like Robin Hood in the old days. And all they tried to do is prevent the Germans from progressing any further they were doing-- like I said, they would bomb railroads or depots or ammunition dumps and help actually the oncoming Allies to come in easier to rescue us or make a faster and a better rescue situation than it would be otherwise. So the partisans was actually a non-political group, but a fighting group, the same like the Warsaw Ghetto uprising--

Form of resistance.

That's exactly it. That's exactly it. Thank you, a form of resistance.

And other than the partisans, were you aware of what the Russians were doing and how the war was going?

Well, the Russians, the way we understood the Russians, the way we were talked about at home, the Russians were in trouble themselves because Germany invaded Russia. And they were pretty successful quite a bit there. Because I remember when I went up in the concentration camps, there was a lot of Russian prisoners, a lot of Ukrainians and Russian prisoners, a lot of them. And I was with a lot of them.

But we were hoping-- we were living because that was the closest ally to us was the Russians because it's bordering to Poland, that they come soon and liberate us. But as it turned out, it wasn't that soon. The Americans and the Russians finally got together. And we were then getting a little understanding out of there.

Were you aware in any kind of way of the United States in those days? And what were you thinking about that?

People were always saying that the only liberating thing that we can get that we probably would be liberated if there is a big invasion. And there is a big country called the United States. We knew of the United States from school because you study on the maps. There's Great Britain and the United States and certain things. So we knew about those things.

But we also knew that they were the most powerful nations in the world. And through those powerful nations, somehow or another, the relief will come. And they will liberate us.

So the thinking about the Russian and the thinking about the Americans that they may eventually come and liberate.

That's exactly-- not eventually, we hope they will soon. I remember in 1942, they were saying, tomorrow, tomorrow. We heard it tonight, the Germans are falling. They just took this part of town. They just took this part of town. Germany's losing here. Tomorrow, we'll be all free. Tomorrow they come, another invasion around the backyards. Tomorrow they killed some more people.

Well, as your life in ghetto continues, you could not go to school. And you were working.

No. No. I was deprived of schooling. I had to go to work. I was lucky that I was hired by one of-- you see, each factory that they put up, the Germans, they had elders. They used some elders, people in the trade.

We had a mayor, what you call him here, what you call, Chaim Rumkowski. He was the boss of the ghetto. He took the orders from the German Gestapo and whatever. And whatever they wanted to do, they come in and do it.

We also had what they call a Sonderkommando, which is a special police force. But they were also under the German-- they were Jews. But they were promised if they would help do what they were told to do, their families, they might spare their families. So they were under the influence also of the Germans, a lot of them.

Could you explain what the Sonderkommando did in the ghetto?

The Sonderkommando was a police force that was created by Rumkowski. We are supposed to be policed by ourselves. As it turned out, they policed us. But they also were more policed under the Germans. Whatever the German order would give, or whatever the German soldier would-- the Gestapo or the Reich would say, they would come in and they would carry out the orders, in other words.

And then they created factories, or working shops or working places. In order to get the coupons-- there were coupons. In order to get a coupon, to get a-- they were giving you, I think, a loaf of bread, which is a round bread, which is 2 kilo, OK.

It's about 4 pounds.

Yeah. That bread had to last you for a week. They would give you all-- or we ate horse. That was the-- they would give you maybe about 2 or 3 pounds of meat a week, maybe a pound of meat. But that was for 10, 5 or 10 people.

Butter, there was absolutely not getting the butter. Water, yes, but the water was so contaminated that you had to boil it because if you did not boil the water, you die immediately. So you had to boil it.

You did not get too much coal or whatever. We had to chop-- find scraps of wood here or there. I remember we broke up chairs, a table. So in order to boil the water, so we can have some boiled water.

So most of the time what we had is potatoes and onions. And they give you bread. The bread would last maybe for two days. And then you'd be starve.

So a lot of people go to different situations, to different things. There was a lot of smuggling going on, a lot of things going on. And like I say, the fittest survived. And whoever couldn't, it's like anything else. It's very hard. And like when you went to work, you got a coupon. You didn't go to work, they either come and take you away or you were a dead man, one of the two.

So when they created those factories, one of the elders took a liking to me and said that I'd be his runner. And that means there were like two or three factories there. If they needed something, I would go from one - everything on foot. There was no bicycles or nothing. Everything on foot you. Sometimes walk four or five miles to get to one place to the next. But that was fine know, but that was what you had to do to survive.

So your dad and you, you were working.

My dad was a barber.

And you were working in this factory as a runner.

Right.

What about your mom, what was her daily life like?

My mom, we had two kids at home so she had to take care of the kids. So she stayed home. And whatever we had whatever, we could scrounge, or whatever you can steal, in other words-- you just say plain English-- whatever you can steal, they will give you soup at work. So you bring the soup home. You try to divide, everybody should eat.

Because if you didn't bring the soup home-- for lunch and they give you soup. There was more water than soup. But there was soup. There was something warm. So you take it in a bucket, and you bring it home. And you divide everybody up.

And I remember they gave us water. And sometimes we save a potato at home. Mom would put the potato in it. And then boil it. So make it a little better. So we all can eat, have a little more water to eat. And that's



how we survived. I mean, whoever-- things got-- in the ghetto, that's how we survived in this particular part of the ghetto. It was a life that is-- in my memory, when I keep remembering and going back to it, it just shatters my mind.

I know it's hard to think about that. But other than going to work, what do you remember about other things about those days, some of the things that you had a chance to see? Can you recall some of the things that you had a chance to see that the Germans did and what the ghetto--

What about the Germans, I told you just about everything what there is to say what they did in the ghetto. There is a lot of things I cannot even describe to tell you because people will not believe that they throw out kids and shoot them. I repeat those things. Or they shoot elders.

I saw they come in cut a guy's beard in half. And they tied him to a tail, a horse's tail. And they were dragging him down the street for fun, an old man. The man never survived.

We did not practice religion. You could not because they come in, they burned the temples. If you wanted to practice, you have to practice in hideouts, in basements, and hideaways, and get together. So the more Orthodox, the people they're really down to Earth in their heart God-fearing people, they went through it. They got caught. They would be burned out.

They burned-- they took our scrolls, our books, our Torahs, they burned them in the middle of the place when they caught you doing this. They did not believe that we were praying. They felt that we were the devils, not praying people.

I remember Gypsies came into town. They killed all the Gypsies. They burned out the Gypsies. They burned out the whole place of Gypsies there. They put them in a ghetto, burned everybody out. There was a part of Łódź they did that.

And like I say, it was just a nightmare of all the particular things that I'm saying here. The Gestapo would come in for no reason at all. And what they got to you, you never came back alive, never. Once the Gestapo took you in, they torture. And when they did let you out, you were not the same person. You were a walking zombie.

I remember some people that got picked up because maybe they were speaking of freedom. Or maybe they were speaking out against something that they believed in. And once they let them out, they're like walking zombies. You never knew they were the same people.

There was a beautiful human being. You talk to him. And three days later, he did not know you. He held you on your arms three days before, talk to you, and told you how nice things would be for you and everything.

And three days later, he did not know you. He didn't even remember your face. He walked-- he was like a walking zombie. Those are the things that were inflicted upon us before I even got to the concentration camps, to the working camps, through Buchenwald, and all that stuff. This was, I think, 10 times worse than all those camps I went into.

And then they start the selection process, taking people away.

Right. They were taking people out of the ghetto. And what they were doing, they would come in and they were saying that they sending us. They want to eliminate the ghettos. And they're taking us out. They need people to work in their own ammunition factories to build tanks.

And everybody thought that it's better to go out and work and get some food in your belly or whatever because the most important thing was the food, and maybe doctors or whatever, than being in here and dying. A lot of people died of dysentery. There was choleras, dysentery. People were dying by the hundreds.

We did not have facilities, medication, no doctors. We had a doctor, he had no medicine to give you. He was a doctor, was the greatest in the world. What can he help you? It's not that they come and say you're

healed. You couldn't do that. He had to do something for you.

So people were dying of blood poisoning in their systems. People were just dying out like flies. Kids had no chance at all. Babies had no chance at all. If a mother didn't give him up or a mother didn't do away with him, they did away with him.

So with the selections, were people aware as to where the selections are going?

When they come into select, like I said, we were never aware where we were going. We always thought that we were going to a working camp to better ourselves, to do better. But as it turned out, it was one nightmare into another nightmare. It was worse than a nightmare.

So how much time were you in Łódź, in the ghetto?

I was born in Łódź. I went to Łódź school. I went to school in the Łódź. I went to Jewish schools in Łódź. I studied whatever I could, up to 13 years of age. I left the ghetto in 1944. They transported us out of the ghetto.

So you were in the ghetto until 1944?

Just about, the beginning of '44.

OK. Let's just spend a little more time-- I know it's hard on you to think back of these days. But you were there from 1940 until '44 in the ghetto.

Yeah.

And your life was constrained. Your life was made hard.

Oh, yeah.

What do you think kept you going? How did you get through that time in the ghetto?

Well, a lot I have to thank for my youth. Youth had a lot to do with it. I don't know if this same thing would reverse itself and happen today that I would survive it. I don't believe if this same thing was going on today, in my age today-- and I don't consider myself being an old person-- that I could survive those things. So a lot had to do with youth.

A lot has to do with forcefulness. And then, of course, the family, the unity the kept you there, that says you have to live, tell the world, one of us has to live to tell it, do it. I lost almost everybody. I found a brother 16 years after the war. I found my brother.

Yeah, we'll get to that. But I still would like to hold on a little bit more on the ghetto. Looking back today on those days, what do you think of how life there evolved?

Meaning?

Meaning that people were dying and the hard days of that and what the leadership of the ghetto did or didn't do.

The leadership couldn't do you anything at all. The leadership of the ghetto, Mr. Rumkowski, was installed by the Gestapo. He was installed by the Germans. He had, like they call, a troika. A troika means he had three horses and a buggy, and he had a driver. And they drive him around. And he just fulfilled the orders.

When they told him they need 50,000 people today, he had to produce the 50,000 people, or he himself would go. So somehow or another they produced the people to go to the camps, eliminating. They were taken section by section to elimination of the ghettos.

That's what they-- the Sonderkommando, the police department was the same way. They were working hand in hand at that time. And they had to because they had a gun to their head. I am not blaming the person putting them down because he's a Jew he inflicted pain on me. But somebody puts a gun to your head, you either save your life or you say kill me and I don't want to do it. A lot of them did that.

But a lot of them didn't do it because they had families. They had little babies. They had kids. They thought that by doing so they maybe saved their own kids. But that is not so. It did not turn out so. They went as well as the kids. The kids were killed before anything else.

So the mayorship of Łódź, I'll call it the mayorship, or the statesmanship, were a part-- were getting orders from the Gestapo of the higher up Germans to eliminate. And they would say, well, I need 20,000 people today to go out, may to be to dig a ditch or maybe to kill them. We had to produce the people. So most of the time, the elders would say, well, we go. Save our kids because those are the people that will tell the story, the world should know what happened, that anything like this should never happen again.

So when were you taken from Łódź? And how did that take--

OK, we left from Łódź I think the beginning of '44. It was summertime, so it had to be the beginning of '44. They took us and put us in a transport car.

Your entire family?

Yeah, the boxcars, what you call boxcars, where they put cattle in. They threw it in there. They closed it in. And we rode, I can't tell you how many days we rode, because I was unaware. It was dark. It was daylight.

I remember people were dying in the boxcars. People were doing defecating in the boxcars because there were no place where to defecate. So you had to defecate in the boxcars and do all those things were inhumane. There were women, children-- children were dying because there was-- the boxcar was just packed. You couldn't move. From one to the next, when you sat down, you sat there for days.

I remember I broke open a piece of the window. And there was snow outside on part of what I went to. I don't remember where I went to. And I picked up some snow to wet my lips. But we were in the boxcars.

Then when we came out of the boxcars, all I knew was police standing there, German Gestapo with dogs and gendarmes, what they call them. And there was segregating people. They were saying you go here, you go there, you go here, you go there.

That's the last thing I saw of my brothers, my mother. And my father was with me. Somehow I wound up with my father. And that was in Auschwitz.

So from the ghetto, you were taken to Auschwitz.

Right, directly to Auschwitz.

OK. And the selection takes place. Were you aware of what was going on there, what the gas chambers and all that--

We were not aware. But we were aware once-- when they took us in, we were right aware what happened to us. Because once we jumped out of the boxcars, I remember-- see, I have a pinched nerve in my head right now. And if I may go into it, I--

Sure.

--tell you about it. When we jumped out of the boxcar and took my mom away and my little brother, I was running up to this-- mom, you know, and I got hit with a carbine across here. So I have a pinched nerve in my head.

And being that I was young, I somehow survived. I don't know-- I can't describe the survival of myself. I guess I survived because I'm here. So I must have survived. I survived in a lot of pain. I survived in a lot of-- I have a lot of scars to show for it. But it's-- but I'm still here.

I was maybe more boisterous than other people. Maybe that's why maybe I survived. I cannot describe what the survival meant and how I survived. But maybe I was more boisterous, more risky than the other person. Because if you did not risk or do something about your life, you would not survive.

So when they separated you at Auschwitz, were you aware as to what--

What happened at that particular time we did not know until they took us to what they call a cleaning part. When you went into Auschwitz, after they separated us, we did not see no more my mom, nor my brother. I did not see anybody anymore. What they would do is they would take us and take all the clothes that we had on, whatever you had worn-- or there were rags anyway-- they would tell you to take them off.

We stood completely nude outside in the cold. And they would look in with microscopes into your back of your rectum to see if you hit anything. I didn't understand that because I didn't know-- at that time I couldn't understand that you can swallow certain things to save and people would swallow some possessions that they had.

So they would look with microscopes in your rectum. They were shaving your rectum out, and not shaving like a humane person. They were shaving, cut you, half of the rectum up. A lot of people today have problems with the rectum, including myself.

Then they would take you and drop you in-- they would say open your hands and your mouth. Then they'd wrap you in some kind of a water, that the skin almost came off. And then they take you to the showers.

Moving into the showers, that's when I was aware that they had gas chambers because that's when they told us-- you heard from people around there-- when you go in there, watch which door, you're going into, then you know you're coming out. Well, somehow or another, I must have come out because a lot of people that went in there, I never see no more.

I wondered about the water was so hot that everybody was jumping on top of one another. They wanted to-- if they didn't gas chamber you, they want to burn you to alive, or whatever, to crisp you out. I don't know what it was because my skin came off and everything else.

But then they took us to some kind of-- to a camp, to, what they call, to a compound. And in Auschwitz, the compound, as I found out later, was a Polish cavalry compound. They had horses. So in the middle of the compound, they had-- the compound was a long compound. It had two doors. Around there, we had all barbed wires, all electric wires. And they were very high voltage wires.

And as we went in there, not enough that we went through all this, they gave us a stripe-- they shaved us, the heads, everything. I had a shaved-- I was unrecognizable. And as we went in there, they had a partition in the middle of the floor. I guess they were for the half of the horses stay on that side and a half over there.

They a brick partition-- I never forget that entry. I'm picturing it now-- had a brick partition. It must have been about 3 to 4 feet wide and about, I would say, about 4 feet high. And they would put us on one end of that partition.

And a guy came with a black robe. He looked like somebody-- a henchman-- with a black robe, with a black thing, with a bamboo cane, and had a guard on the other side with a dog. And they were chasing us from one end across to the other. They were just chasing us.

Well, they would say, [GERMAN]. And they were chasing us across. And a lot of people were hitting those brick petitions. And they cut their stomachs wide open. They lost everything in the guts. That was the

beginning of Auschwitz for me. When I went in there, that was in there.

I remember at night when I wanted to go to the bathroom, you had to stick your hand out first and your head with beret saying to the guard you want to go to the bathroom. And you should pray to God that the guard was sober, because he was drunk, he says, yeah, yeah, come on. And while you're walking out, he shot you.

So you had to pray to God that he was sober. Or you would pray to God that you were wide awake and didn't walk into the barbed wire. Because if you did, we woke up in the morning, found a lot of people hanging on the wires. They were dead.

And in the morning, they would take you outside, take your clothes off and mud up to your knees. You would stay naked for hours. So we used to do a huddle in groups. So the inside would keep warm. Then we change groups to keep warm.

I remember people used to smoke cigarettes. They smoke their smoke in each other's mouth, thinking that it would be the heat for them. And food that would give us once a day.

Then every day, they had some people come-- I guess Gestapo or whatever they are. And we were staying in line. And every day they would come and take a group of people away. We never seen the people again, every day.

They would say some groups stand outside and look you over. You were stark naked. After three or four hours, they look at your genitals. They look at you. And then they take you and they walk you away. What happened to those people? I don't know. I know they disappeared in the gas chambers.

So how much time were you at Auschwitz?

In the Auschwitz, I was a short period of time, because at that particular time I think the invasion was start to come in more or less. So I wasn't too long in there.

Were you working there or were you just--

I was-- in Auschwitz, there was nothing to work at. In Auschwitz, they either kill you or they ship you out.

Right.

There were nothing to work. They just-- the only thing is they would give you in the afternoon, you take a big kettle. And three or four people would walk. And they give you this cooked slop, what they cook like you give pigs today. Not even a pig would eat today. And then you walk over there, and you serve the food to whoever be around alive.

I know that some people would steal somebody else's food. They would kill each other for a piece of bread in there. It was just horrendous life. It was just-- oh, please.

And then the invasion was starting out I think, or beginning, because we heard a lot of American soldiers that were prisoners and were getting Red Cross packages. And they were saying, soon, soon, soon. So they shipped us out to working camps.

Where did they ship you to?

I was shipped to Oberbayern, to a working camp. And there was no more gas chambers. But they took us out to railroad stations. We were building railroad stations, rebuilding them as they were bombed. The Russians were bombing. The United States would bomb them. So we were building railroad station.

We were unloading ammunition. We were unloading tanks. We were building things, repairing things. And a lot of times we were unloading a boxcar of food one day, and I stole some honey. And I got a 100 lashes on

my back for that. I took a small jar of honey that we're going to chop my hand off.

So this man come up there. I remember because I was-- somehow or another, I don't know, how that happened, maybe a miracle from God. He says, no, let's give him some lashes. So they give me some lashes. My back is cut up. My neck is cut up. I had blood poisoning through my system.

So I was in the working camp. And I worked in a working camp. I worked-- for how long was I there? I was there close to a year almost, those working camps. And then the invasions come along. And they shipped us out with boxcars again.

Yeah. For you, all that is very clear. But some people don't know. What was life like in that work camp?

In a working camp, if you got in a working camp, you were a little bit more-- in a working-- in a working camp you were a little bit more civilized. Not civilized, it was not-- you did not have to do a lot with the Gestapo. There were the Wehrmacht, the soldiers. And they were getting their ration.

And we would get up at like 5:00 in the morning. And we would have canisters, like milk canisters. You know what I'm saying, milk canisters? And we would take those milk canisters, and we'll put soup in them, or coffee or water. And we'll get a slice of bread that you can look through it, the one slice. And they send you out to work in the cold weather.

And you work all day. And in the evening, you come back at 6 o'clock. You bring the milk cans back. And they fill them up. And they give you the soup for the night. That was the working camp when you worked.

We work in fields. We were plowed fields. We were tending to horses. We were building-- at one point, we were building bomb houses.

A bomb house consisted of not into the ground. It was a bomb house that consisted-- it was flexible right, there was growing up in the air, like with the-- in other words, it was giving some kind of shelter that was giving with the bomb. The bomb would hit. If it didn't directly hit it, that thing would go up and come back down. I was working that out.

I remember I was cutting my fingers to the bones because you could not wear-- you were not allowed to have gloves or nothing. And they were all graveled, some kind of-- and we were all cut up to pieces working on that. I worked on that.

I worked on the railroads. I worked on the potato fields and on the horses. And I got kicked from a horse in my knee. I got a shattered knee cap.

So it was hard work?

Oh, please, you had to work.

Hard work and very little food.

No food. You just got a little bit of-- in the morning, you get a slice of bread and a little water. It was water. And at night, you get a little soup.

This is the completion of the first part of the interview with Mr. York. This interview is part of a videotaping project conducted by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. I'm Dr. Zev Harel of Cleveland State University.