

I'm Donna Chernin. Today we are interviewing Ezra Lazar, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, the Cleveland Section.

Mr. Lazar, thank you very much for participating in this project. I know it's difficult.

You're welcome.

To begin with, why don't we start out talking a little bit about what you're doing today. Are you married? How many children do you have? Where do you live?

I am married. I have one son. I'm very proud of it. He goes to dental school. He'll be finished this spring of '85.

That's my big project. I was very proud of it. I could accomplish that thing. But my parents was telling me, they wanted something like that for me.

To be a dentist? Profession?

No. To be a professional man. Myself, I live in the States over 30 years. I was in construction business. Now it's the last couple of years, it's slower. The economy isn't so good. So I pick up here and there something.

And where do you live?

I live in Beachwood, Ohio.

It's a nice suburb.

Yeah. Yeah.

Well, maybe we'll go back now to what your life was like before the war began. Where was it that you were born and what year?

I was born in 1927, in March 23. I can't remember really. A birth certificate, I didn't have a chance to get.

Why is that?

The reason, the communists occupied this part. I was born, it was called Czechoslovakia. Some people call it Maramures, but that was in the time of Austria-Hungary. And there was an empire.

And did you have a large family? Many brothers and sisters?

Yes. We was two brothers and three sisters.

And were you the oldest or youngest?

I was the oldest.

The Oldest I see.

Yes.

So you were born in '27.

1927.

Was it a small village? Or-- I mean, tell me what your life was like.

About-- they used to have expression in Jewish. The village was about 800 people, or there was about 600 Jewish families with a temple and a rabbi.

So was a lot of Jewish families for that small of village.

Yes. Yes. Quite a few.

And what did your father do for a living?

My father was dealing with cattle, taking it from market to market and selling it in wholesale-- buying it and selling it.

Did your mother work?

My mother did-- it was different then than this country. No industry, or we had a little-- a few acres of fields. In the summertime, we used to grow vegetables for food.

Do you remember, looking back, were you from a religious family? Did you-- talk a little bit about that.

Yes. I was just talking to my wife this evening. We was talking about the Chabad organization, what we called it-- we called it there, we called it Hasidim. Hasidim. My father was a businessman. He didn't have a beard. I mean, with hair, a beard, just a little bit. He used to go-- he was sick one time when I was small. I cannot remember. He had typhus.

He used to go to a rabbi, like some go now to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, to New York for so. He was religious. He did support the rabbi. I mean, the community-- very, very active.

And was there a lot of culture in your family? Did you go to the theater or film? What kind of life did you have? Were you friendly with Christians?

In my case, my father was a businessman. He was changing cattle for the Gentile people, doing business. If they had a large cattle for meat, so he used to exchange them, give them smaller, smaller cattle and give them balance of money. And they used to grow in another three or four years. Take the small one, then used to grow them up and then resell them things.

So what do you call it? The mayor of the town, of the village, was very friendly in the early years. He used to come-- he used to come over to our house. I can remember. Just as a kid, the reason I didn't have much opportunity to be growing up at home. So they-- and we had other people, other people coming to our house, Gentile people, sitting.

It was very-- I felt at that time, without knowing, with not having much experience in the world, I thought it was really nice. The reason we did feel we are different than the-- we are different. Not we want to be the difference, the Jews want to be the difference, it's the Gentile thought that we are different. And I call it antisemitic.

In the house, it felt good. The Gentile came, and you were sitting and having tea. At that time, it was fine. Or if we'll talk enough, we'll come across then I had some problem with some of them same people they used to come and sit.

Later?

Later on, in 1941. In 1944, my father came home from forced labor camp for a while. And that was the first day after Pesach.

Well, excuse me, but when did things start to change where he went to a forced labor camp? Do you remember that?

Oh, that started earlier by the Hungarian. The Hungarian occupied our part. And they took him. Instead to take him in the army, they take him to labor force camp. And that's a long story. Again, another thing.

Coming back, but them people, the Gentiles, they used to come to the house. So when they took away my family to the ghetto, to the bigger town, so my father says, you know, we don't have no bank. And you're going to go in the forest. And that guy worked for me, the Gentile.

He said to you, you're going to go to the forest?

Yeah. Yeah. He know that. So he says, let me take you over with-- I'll give him, like, 3,000-- they call it in Hungarian, in pengos. It's like \$3,000.

That much? Was it around that much?

Yeah.

And was this for your other brothers and sisters, or just for you?

For me and my brother. The reason they was going to the ghetto, they had an idea they was going to Germany. They're not going to need it. So he says, you'll be in the forest. You're going to need to buy food. So he says, you don't know how it's going to turn. So come and witness.

So I came and witness. He gave him the money. Then he says to come. I say whatever his name was, I says, I need the money. How about giving me some money.

And the money was supposed to be for you.

Yeah. He was supposed to hold it, like a bank, without interest. So he said-- not he, his wife and the children say, he is not home. But I know he is home.

Aw.

So I was going a few times.

How old were you at the time?

From '27 to '44-- I was already 15, 16. So I was afraid he's going to set me up.

Oh, that's right. And your family, had they left already to go to camp?

Oh, yeah.

So you didn't see them.

I'm on my own with my brothers.

And how old was your brother?

About 13.

Because you were taking care of him. Everybody else had been sent away?

Ain't nobody. Nobody is in the village, no-- no Jews.

So you were hiding then?

Yeah. I was already in the forest.

And were you already-- then you said goodbye to your family. You never saw them again after that?

No. No. My brother lived in Israel.

In Italy?

Yeah.

So you were afraid of being set up.

I was afraid set up. I didn't go. I didn't go anymore. So there were some partisans already in the forest. So I told them the story. After a while, I told them the story. I have some money, and I cannot get it. The reason, the third front, the Germans are there, the Hungarians are there. You gotta watch yourself. I mean, all over, soldiers.

So, I told him. I says. We'll do-- we'll do something for you. So one evening, one evening he said we're going to go down from the forest to the village.

How far was the forest from the village?

About 10 kilometers, five, 10 kilometers. And we came down, and we knocked on the door. There were some cases somebody got killed. People what they cooperated with the Hungarian and the Germans. So they opened up the door, they kill them.

So he didn't-- he heard they--

Who killed whom? The--

The informers, the village guy, he was cooperating with the Germans or with the Hungarians. So them partisans killed some of them.

Oh, they would kill him. Right.

He was so sure we are not anymore alive, he heard-- he heard they caught us and they killed us. The reason, there was some Jewish people with me, older people and younger, where I took them out in the evening to show them from the high ground to go down to the village to buy some food. They were from the same village. And they didn't come back.

They didn't come back. I overslept in the forest. I supposed to go and pick them up. He didn't know how to go in in the forest. So I was supposed to pick him up.

I was late. I slept over. I went my way, somewhere else to pick up food. So a father and son, they never showed up on record. They killed him right there in the forest, somebody, somehow.

So this guy what my father gave him the money but I witnessed, he was sure I'm already dead. So I start-- I start telling him, open me up the door. He got scared. He saw already a lot of people in the-- it's a farm. It's a farm. It's a lot of people, so he says, what do you want?

I says, I want to see you. I want to talk to you. I didn't-- I didn't mean anything bad about it. I said I want to talk to you. I didn't have, at that time, no-- no money, no guns with me.

The partisans did have guns for protection, yes. Or I didn't have no gun. And I said, I just want to see you. And he sure

didn't want me open up the door. He says I know what you want. You want the money.

So he got scared, and he gave me-- he gave me the money. He gave me the money. That's the way I got from him the money.

And this was the family, a friend who had been in your home?

Yes, he worked for my father. Yeah.

He worked for your father?

Yeah. Yeah.

Oh, that's a sad story. You had to have those people help you to get it. Yeah. I was very scared. The first couple of times I was going down there, it's dangerous to go there. And I thought, he'll set me up. He'll know when I come. He'll put up the Germans or the Hungarians, and they'll catch me.

You were smart to do that. That was shrewd.

Yeah. I had-- I hope we'll get to it. I had a family, Gentile family, Catholics very-- I wish I could see them. I believe in freedom of religion. So I think they believe too in freedom of religion. She was crossing. It was very religious. In Europe, they crossed themselves, the Gentile.

Did you know them in your village?

Yeah.

From before?

I did know them. I did know them. We had a big field. My grandfather had a big field. And one year-- they was using it. And one year my grandfather was using it. And I didn't know them. I know the family.

Excuse me. When you were growing up, did you feel like you were from a comfortable family, or did you struggle, or well-to-do, or--

For that part, I came up from a middle-class family. I mean, we had food. We had clothing. We celebrate holidays. We had on each holiday we used to get new clothes. We are a pretty comfortable family.

So then this-- you knew this family, this Catholic family from the fields. Yes. And I have a lot of stories about that. I mean, not stories-- what they did for me and my brother. And they had one son. They had one son. He was my age. I call him a revolutionary.

He used to go-- he used to sell me flour.

Was this before the war?

No, I'm talking in the war.

During the war?

I'm talking when I'm in the forest now, by that family.

Well first, I think maybe we should just say a little bit about what happened when you became aware that the war was going on. How did it affect your life? And then we'll talk about the Catholic family. , Like when it had to take a period

of time before your family was sent away.

Yeah.

Didn't it? So what was starting to happen?

Start to happen in 1942 roughly, they took away half of the village, Jewish people in it.

Just all of a sudden one day they came?

They told them-- they told-- the Hungarian government, the Nazis, told the Jews they are not-- their origin is not Czechs. They are Polish. So they took away probably 75% of my family to Poland. And they-- and I know they took away my mother's brother. He came, through a lot of forests, back. And I was--

He came what? I'm sorry.

Through the forests.

Forests-- he came back.

Came back. Took him days. I was young. He was hiding in this village. They didn't take my family. My father was in forced labor camp, so they didn't take us.

So when he went to the labor camp, did he come home at night?

No. No. He-- took him like in the-- it was like army.

So then he left and--

They took him to work to Poland, Ukraine, on the Russian front.

Then you didn't see him anymore.

Oh, I did see him. They used to release him maybe after a year, a half a year, or three months. There was no rules. Or never comes back-- he gets killed.

But you did see him.

I did see him.

What about see your mother? Was she with you still for awhile.

My mother was with me till '44, May '44-- April or May '44 was my mother with the brothers and sisters. We was together. In that case, my father was home.

Where did you live? Where did you live then? You're all in one house? Did you have to move?

That day-- that day they took us to the ghetto, that was another-- that wasn't the village. It was a town. They call it Khust, Chyst.

And then how many-- you all lived together in one little house, or a lot of families? What was it like?

In the village?

Yeah, in the ghetto.

I never went to the ghetto.

Oh, your mother did.

Yeah, my mother.

I see.

My mother and the rest of the family. My brother and I, we just left for the forest.

And that's when your father said, let me give you the money and you keep with the family, and you go to the forest.

That was a few days before.

So he knew that it would get bad.

Oh, yeah. He knew.

And you two-- so then your younger brothers and sisters, then they didn't go because they were maybe too young to fend for themselves in the forest.

Too young. Too young. My mother was encouraging we should go. And was two uncles of mine, older ones. One is in Cleveland, and one, they-- when we was in the forest, I was with them one evening going for food. And I was waiting for them by one river. They caught him. There was two brothers, my uncles.

So they took him. They took him to Germany, to concentration camp. So one, the one he's in Cleveland, he's in Cleveland. He lives in Cleveland.

He survived.

Yeah, he survived. And the older brother didn't survive. So their older brother-- their older brother, he was in Poland when they took him away around '41, '42. When he came back, he came back, what do you call it, non-legal. When he came back, he's not supposed to come back.

So he was sitting by us a few days, a few days. Didn't go outside. So he was telling my mother. My mother was a way older than him. He was going to yeshiva before the war. He was almost a rabbi.

And I was sleeping. I was sleeping, I mean, and listening to him. I didn't-- I mean, I see him in the house. So he says, how could a thing like that happen? Where, where, where is God? How could they kill people that way?

And from that time, I felt I wouldn't try not to fall in that kind of trap. I don't want to go to a ghetto or things like that. I was successful to survive. I don't know how.

You were determined.

They were shooting many times after us.

In the forest?

Out of the forest going for food at nighttime.

How did you live? How? You were there 10 months?

Roughly.

And how did you live? Where did you sleep?

We-- them partisans, them Gentiles.

You what?

Them partisans, the Gentiles, they had families in the village too. We dug. We dug underground, underground in bunkers. We call it bunkers.

Underground in bunkers?

Yeah. And we used to cook there at night time. There was a-- I remember vividly one month, we were living just on mushroom.

Just on mushrooms?

Yeah. We had three kind of mushrooms. We had one, is milk. If you press it, it's milk. Another one is something like Mexican hat. You put them on the coals and cook them. On coals, fry them, whatever you call it. And we eat, for one month we eat just mushrooms.

Did you feel yourself getting weak? Were you strong to begin with? What kind of a--

No, I was--

Well, because you're tall.

Matter of fact, I was very sick. I had an operation in January in a big hospital.

For what?

I never found out. They cut out 1 meter of my intestines. And I thought-- it was swelling up. I thought it's going to open up.

This was before everything happened?

Yeah. Yeah, right. It was three months-- there was the operation three months before the forest, [INAUDIBLE] the forest.

But you hardly recovered.

I hardly recovered. Well, my health generally was-- my health generally was good as a kid.

But then, wasn't it hard to keep your energy up? What did you do during the day? You had to be undercover.

All the time planning--

Strategy.

--strategy. After they caught my uncle, what he was very older, the one uncle he is here in Cleveland, he is about two years older. But the other one was very older. I thought I had some kind of feeling, support. I mean there, the oldest of the camp. Where after, after they caught them, that evening when I was with them, and I see they're not here, so I took

off and I went to the forest. I mean, I was near the village where they could spot me and catch me too.

What was I saying?

Well, about how many people were hiding in the forest?

Oh, you know, I was saying, after they caught them, I had one young-- one older fellow than me. Well, he wasn't familiar. He couldn't get no orientation in the forest. He didn't know. He didn't know how to get out of the forest.

So I took over the whole responsibility. We have had leftover four girls and three guys. One is my brother. And then the older fellow had a brother too. We went one evening, and they caught him. To the end, we came out of the forest. We survived seven, and three they caught.

Seven survived and three they caught?

Yeah.

And they would catch you when you went, like, at night into the village.

Yeah.

And seven survived. And so your brother survived?

Yes.

Were you real cold? Was it the winter time?

Yeah.

What would you do for--

No, that was the first day after Pesach. It's still cold. Or we were pretty rugged out there. It's-- one evening, one night, when they caught the older guy's brother-- but he had a sister, too, with us. My brother, when they caught that younger fella-- he was my age-- he brought the police and the Germans after us.

And we heard. We heard. They was going with heavy boots. We heard when they are gone on the road. So we thought they're going-- and we were sitting by a cornfield in a orchard.

Were you underground, or were you on the ground?

We were just waiting for him. He should come back from the village to where his neighbors used to live to pick up some food for money. We didn't feel somebody is coming in the grass on us.

Oh.

And the civilian population, they participated with the-- partly-- they participated with the Germans and with the Hungarian. With the Nazis they participated. So we was really circled around. The police and the Germans was on the outside with machine guns. And the cooperators, the civilians what they helped them, they was going in the cornfield in the orchards and with guns.

And we was laying, and we paid attention what the Germans will do, if they're just passing by. So let them pass by. It's after midnight. We didn't know there is coming something, and somebody-- somebody almost stepped on us.

Oh, no.

And they were surprised. They had a gun. They had guns. And they got frozen too. They couldn't shoot.

They were so scared, they couldn't shoot.

Yeah. They didn't know who exactly. They didn't know Jews are there. It's not partisan. They know that we are Jews. So Jews, you can do whatever you want to. Partisans, they would expect maybe they have guns and they'll fire on them.

So there was a swamp down there, about a half a mile down there. And they start shooting. They start shooting. I thought it's catching a, fire the whole thing. That's in the village. That's in farmland.

So I was running one way. The other one-- we was left over three. One was running the other way. And my brother run a half a mile, and there was a big swamp. There was them white flowers in the spring in the swamp. They have a name for it that I cannot remember in English.

He laid down in the water. And you'd think them soldiers, they had boots. Think they didn't go in the water and look for him. And he snuck in. There were some shrubs there. He snuck in in that water in the shrubs till they left him.

And then they figured the best chances, they'll be running after me. So they was running. We did-- we didn't have military experience. But we did have-- we did had some experience already. Some of them partisans told us and from just naturally. We had to survive. We had to know how to do it.

So they was running after me and firing. And I was running through a farmer's house in where his cattle is. So they thought I'll be stopping there. I'll be stopping there. That's about a mile already from there. They thought I'm stopping there.

And I was lucky. I was lucky. They stopped and started looking for me there. It gave me a chance then. I had a chance to run away further. And I run that night till the morning. To make it short, I run till the morning. And I find this older guy-- older guy, he was--

Where did you run to?

I was running to my base, to the forest--

Oh, to find it.

--where the girls are. The girls was by themselves. So we was afraid, maybe the guy they caught--

Yeah. Would tell them.

--he'll bring them-- he'll bring him to the forest. Or one lucky thing, the forest was deep so they wasn't too crazy to go in the deep forest.

How did you find your way around to the forest?

Oh, just in nighttime barefoot.

Barefoot?

Oh, yeah, barefooted all the time.

How did-- did you lose track? If it was so big, how would where to go to get back?

We used to go-- we used to go at night time. There was like-- the leaves was pressed. You could feel with your feet.

You could feel where you're walking, if you are on the trail or you're not on the trail. And you had to be orientated.

I mean, I can get around here too. It was from when I was young.

So you were running back to help the women out?

Yeah.

The girls.

The whole-- the girls. And before I get to the forest and I see that older fella-- he was just three years older than me. Or in that age, was a big difference. He was already--

Three years, sure.

He was already electrician something. And he was in Budapest and Hungary. And I say-- his name was Moishe. I say Moishe, wait. He got-- he got-- I mean, I mean it. I mean, I can see him now. He got crazy. He got crazy.

He says, you're bringing the police after me. They caught his brother that evening. And his brother brought--

Oh, they killed his brother?

Yeah. His brother was my age. He says, you bringing the police. I mean, he mentally go crazy. He says, you-- and he runs away. I says, Moishe. Moishe, you don't know. You don't know how to get around. If I don't take you out of the forest, you'll--

He says, no, no, no, no, no. But He didn't know what he was talking. I got-- so then we got into the forest. We came back. We came back.

Did he stay, or did he run away?

No, I caught him. Once we get in the forest, he saw already I don't have nobody.

Oh, I see. Then he realized and he stayed.

He realized. Also, he got crazy. His brain worked too hard. There were a lot of fire, a lot of fire. So we had to walk in the forest another probably another 5 kilometers to get to the base and find the girls. Meanwhile, I lost my brother, my brother too. I don't know where my brother is.

I gotta go. You cannot go in the daytime. You gotta wait for the nighttime. So I go to my friend. But we have the fields, them Catholic family.

It's the next day? Night?

A couple of days. I go-- I go there, and he says-- next night, I go there, and I says, did-- I mean, I'm trying to keep our secret. I said, do you know what's happened last night? It wasn't far from his house. And in a village, you know whatever happened.

He said there was a fight, and they never-- the people say, they never say a fight like that, fire. Partisans-- didn't say Jews. They said partisans. If a Jew, wouldn't make much difference. For a partisan, you're a bigger hero.

Oh.

The soldiers. So I said, did you-- do you know who they-- do you know who they got? He says, yeah, they got this guy.

I says-- and I don't say even my brother something.

Sure. You don't say that it could be your brother they were after.

No, no. I didn't ask him what's my-- did you see my brother? I didn't ask him that thing. Whatever, you don't have to--

You trusted them, didn't you? Or you didn't know at that time?

No. No. No. I did. I did trust him. I did trust him, but not completely. I still had to have some percent leverage.

Sure.

I never went, even, to his house, not for his-- not for his protection, even for my protection. He never know when I'm going to come down to get food. I say prepare it. I'll come in a week's time.

And I used to investigate before I get to the house. So, talking about that family, that Catholic family-- so my brother got there to their house. And she had fields, cornfields, and she was working in the fields.

They didn't know my parents real good. Usually--

They did or didn't?

They did know my family real good. And Jewish people had their own different-- certain different foods. They didn't know how to cook it. So my brother was laying down with the cows there.

Oh, so he was there?

He came back. He came there. He want to know what's going on too. He was afraid to come to the forest. He thought maybe they'll catch, maybe somebody is waiting there.

So he was smart too, to stay. He didn't know.

You don't leave anything open. So she cooked him-- she cooked him special food. And she prayed for him. And she says-- that was already time when you could find in the field potatoes and corn. She says-- she says don't make any damage or people are not going to complain if you're going to take some potatoes or corn.

And she was-- she was really a person.

Did you stay there very long that day?

No. We never stayed long. We never.

You couldn't. You couldn't risk it. Right.

No, the reason, there was certain people running away from the Germans. They didn't want to go to the army or something like that, to working camps. So it was OK for them. Or if they found out she was giving, for Jewish people, food, they could have shoot them, shoot them right on the place. That was the rule.

That was the rule.

That was the rule.

So did you and your brother both go back that night to the forest?

No. I didn't find my brother. I didn't. I didn't find my brother. My brother went to a forest, and he was sitting. He had food and sitting. So in another two or three days-- we had signals. We used to whistle like birds or there was birds, like the woodpeckers, like they knock on trees. So he signaled.

He signaled. We used to change the signals every few days.

Used to what the signals?

Signals--

Change?

--you change every few days to be safe. You would be safe. Maybe somebody listened to it and--

You had to be so smart to do this.

And my brother was looking and looking and looking. We left. We left the base. We left the base.

Oh, did you find a new base?

Yeah. We made up another base in another hill.

So you didn't know how your brother could find you then, at that point.

He was looking for us. He find-- he find us. I asked the-- I asked my friend where he is. Or I didn't say did they catch him or something. It's hard to explain.

No, you're doing it very well.

It's-- we met in the forest after a few days, after signals, after signals.

About how many were left then? It was your brother and you, and how many girls?

And four girls.

Four girls. So there were two guys and four girls. To the end, we survived, four girls and three guys.

Three? Another guy and your brother. Well, did anybody have contact with their families through this time? Or had all the families have been sent away?

There is no families anymore. The families-- the families probably-- I could almost-- whoever was in the ghetto, in the city, I can figure out. They took my mother and my three sisters. I could really know when they was killed. They was going right to the-- right to the crematorium.

They were? They went right there?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. After they was in the city, in the ghetto for a month, and they took them by trains. And they took them right then. People, what they did-- no, my mother didn't want to leave. I had a six-year-old sister, the youngest. And she didn't want to leave.

Six-year-old daughter?

Yeah. And she didn't want to leave. My mother was a healthy woman. She didn't want to leave the three daughters, so she went.

So they all died?

Yeah.

Well, did you-- when you were in the forest, did you know that they had all been killed? Or you just didn't know what had happened?

No. I didn't-- I didn't know. I didn't know. I just did know from my uncle, what he came back from Poland.

And what he told you.

He told me. It wasn't as sophisticated as it was here in Auschwitz or other. It really don't make any difference. There, they killed them in the fields in Poland. Here-- here, they brought in a transport of people to come in to take a shower. And there they was gassed, and then they throw them in the crematorium and burn them.

We wasn't that sophisticated, that going back, let's say, 45-- 40 years. We wasn't sophisticated. We didn't have-- we did have some newspaper from somewhere, from--

Now, did you know what was going-- did you-- you didn't have any newspapers in the forest, so you didn't know. You were in there for 10 months?

Roughly.

You didn't know what was going on in the outside world, right?

No. Just seeing the planes and seeing the Germans alive.

Did the people, the partisans or the village people tell you what was going on?

Yeah. The partisans, not the village people. I mean, we couldn't trust-- go ask anything about news. Matter of fact, by the forest, there was a lot of orchards, a lot a lot of orchards. And we used to-- we used to pass by there to go to the village.

That was big village. It spread out.

Was it near the village where you had lived right before, the same village?

Yeah, near the village. Yeah, near the village where I lived, where I grewed up. They used to have dogs. And usually in normal times, you couldn't pass by there. They usually would shoot us. They would shoot you.

When you said they caught different people, would they kill them when they caught them?

Jews?

Yes.

Oh, yes.

If they found in the forest, they would have definitely killed you right away.

Oh, yes.

They wouldn't have you to concentration camp.

Oh, yes. Definite.

Did you sleep at night? Weren't you so afraid all the time?

Too busy think how to survive. How to find some food to fill up the belly and how to figure out strategy, how to get tomorrow evening somewhere else. Especially me, where I was responsible already for all the people. They couldn't-- they didn't have the ability to go out to the orchards or go for mushrooms or go anyplace.

We used to go at night time, when sometime people with sheep used to discover us. We had to leave the base for another base. We used to go at night time.

So I used to go in the front. And the rest of them used to grab on behind my jacket.

Oh, my gosh. And they walked.

And all the seven walked in the forest. I mean, in the trees, walk all night till we go over. I didn't know where I'm getting at nighttime.

You didn't?

I did. I did know.

I mean, you had like a plan, where to go each day.

Yes.

Well, you were the leader. You were the oldest one.

Yeah. I had an older one from me. He couldn't-- he wouldn't know how to get anyplace.

The older one didn't know?

No.

So you were like the--

Yeah. Yeah.

You took care of everybody.

Like they say, the captain.

And did you-- you were the captain? Is it exact--

I mean, I named myself the captain. Yeah.

And did you have any kind of clothing or suitcase? You didn't have suitcases probably. It would take too long-- you would be too burdened down with them.

What we had, we had a lot of lice.

Lice?

Yeah. That's what we had.

What did you do for that? Itched a lot.

Nothing. Scratch. Was too dangerous to do anything. Didn't have no pot to cook up anything. When I came home-- when I came home, so that's another story. A Gentile man told me, here is a big, big pot what we used to cook for the cattle, potatoes or something with. He says, first thing do is put your clothes in and cook them, cook them up. I mean, kill the lice.

Oh. Did you have any change of clothes? Or just--

No. He gave me-- he gave me-- he gave me he a shirt.

But that was later.

I mean, then when we came back home, after.

After the war. But during, were you in, like, one outfit the whole time in the forest?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But we to-- we tore it up-- at night time going, the branches tore up everything.

So nothing-- you went with nothing into the forest. You didn't take any clothes, any possessions?

No.

Any cooking utensils? Everything was like-- you lived like forest people, like creatures, like animals in a way.

Oh, yeah.

And looking on it now, do you think was your resourcefulness and determination to survive that pulled you through?

I think. But it helped me-- but it helped me, going back, hearing that my mother thought I'm sleeping, protecting me when her brother, my uncle came back from Poland. For no reason, he was telling, how can they kill people like that? And where is God, when he was almost a rabbi.

That worked on me. I says, I'm just not-- I'm just-- I mean, I don't mind to get-- I don't mind to get killed, but I'm not going to be killed that way. And I'm really criticizing some of the leadership, some of the leadership in Europe.

Why? What way? Do you think it could have been better?

They failed-- they-- I'm talking who is the leadership. It was rabbis. And I know one big Hasidic rabbi, he ran away to England I think. He didn't-- it was already too late. The Jews couldn't go. There was poor, poor people generally in Eastern Europe.

Or what I'm trying to say, I did leave-- I did leave the house with support from my father and my mother and my strength knowing what the Germans are doing. I says, I'm not going to go in a trap like that. If I have to die, I'm going to die free.

So you would not have gone to a camp or anything like that if they had caught you?

No.

Were you religious? Was your faith in God helping you? I wasn't building. I wasn't building on that. I did believe. I did believe in God. I didn't think that would be really could help me. I had to protect myself. Get help from people.

You were smart. It sounds like you were very smart. You know, before all this happened, when you were living in your village, what did you think you wanted to be when you grew up? Did you have a profession in mind?

Yeah. Yeah. I can see my father and my mother. I have an uncle here. He is 92 years old, my father's brother. He says are you going to go-- are you going to go to a business school? Or I'm going to send you to America.

Oh, just what you were going to do. You're going to be in business or go to America.

Business school--

Or America. So you ended up in America.

Yeah, with a struggle.

Yeah, a real struggle. I mean, did the 10 months seem like-- how long did the 10 months seem to you? Like 10 years, 10-- I know this is difficult.

I think you're lucky. You're lucky in a way. You're young, and you don't think as much. Well, I'm saying now, by changing age, you change your mind.

By getting older, you change your mind.

Yeah. And I think that's natural. When you're younger, you-- it's like you're struggling. You want to survive it.

You don't think about it as much, in a way. You just-- yeah you're kind of impetuous act quickly. Well, did you see that Catholic family any more after that time?

Yes. That Catholic family, her husband was a woodsman. He didn't know how to make bridges on rivers. He was a professional to cut wood, make bridges kind of things like that. So the Germans and the Hungarian took him to work on them kind of work. They took him to the Russian front. He never came back too. He got killed.

By the Germans, you think?

No. He just got killed by accident.

Right, in the war.

In the war. I mean, he wasn't a soldier. They took him for a profession, to build them the bridges in the engineering department, build bridges and things like that. They forced him too. I mean, he wasn't an equal. He wasn't an equal of the Germans.

So after the war-- after the war, I came-- I came home. I used to go there. They had a pair of ox, ox. You go to the forest and bring wood home for her. So I brought some wood home for her.

Her son was my age. And the Russians-- the Russians was already there. And the Russians wanted they should be going into the Russian army. And the Russians, the Russians was-- the Russians didn't care much. They know you're going to get killed. It was really-- they call it in different languages, like cannon meat or something.

So he had-- he had to run away. He had to run from the Russians. And I did see him. Or he was running away, almost like I was running from the Germans. He was running from the Russians away, my friend.

His mother had the farm. His mother had the farm. I was trying to help her. She used to cook us, try to make us comfortable. And then later on-- that was around October, around October. And the war ended in 1944.

Well maybe this is-- I'm sorry.

No, '45. So after the war, I-- I didn't-- nobody came back home.

Well, this maybe is a good time for us to take a pause. And then when we resume, we'll talk about how you were liberated and when you were aware that the war ended and how you got out of the forest.