

Welcome. My name is Michael Greenwald. Today is August the 2nd, 1984. We're here at the studios of Channel 5 here in Cleveland, Ohio to speak with Mr. Leslie Robicsek.

Mr. Robicsek, my thanks for your coming today and for your participating in this particular program, sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women. Mr. Robicsek, just for purposes of our record this morning, would you state your full name and spell your last name?

My name is Leslie Robicsek-- R-O-B-I-C-S-E-K.

Now, Mr. Robicsek, how old are you?

I am 59.

And where is it that you were born?

In Romania. Oradea is the name of the city.

All right. And currently, you live where?

In Beachwood.

In Beachwood, Ohio--

Yes.

--which is a suburb of Cleveland.

Yes.

All right. How long have you lived in Beachwood?

In Beachwood, this is the fifth year.

OK. And you're employed and in what capacity, sir?

I have my own business.

Which is what?

Plastic injection molds and dies and some molding what we are doing there with plastics.

And you say, it's your own business, meaning that you are the proprietor or the person who owns or operates and manages this particular business?

Yes.

OK. Now, currently married are you?

Oh, yes.

All right. And how long have you been married? And your wife's name, please.

I am married 39 years ago. My wife is Magda.

Any children?

Yes. I have a son, 37 years old. And I have a daughter. And I have a grandson.

And we've had opportunity to see them a little bit earlier today. And it's a very, very marvelous family that you were able to bring with you.

Thank you.

I know they've been a valuable support to you, have they not?

Oh, yes, definitely.

Would you have dreamed over 40 years ago that you'd be sitting in a studio today having an opportunity to address any number of people to tell them?

Especially in the United States, that's a big thing.

You like it, we'll announce it.

No, I didn't dream. My dream was only a loaf of bread. That was my highest dream ever there.

Just by way of beginning, we understand that you spent time in a concentration camp. And that camp was located where, which camp?

They took us first in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, and from there, the outskirts of Auschwitz.

Mr. Robicsek, let me ask a few questions, if I can. To the events which took place before you had opportunity to sustain this type of grief at the camps. You indicated that you were born in Romania. And you're going to pronounce the name of that city for me again. And perhaps for purposes of record keeping, you'll spell that for me, if you would, please.

The city's name is Oradea-- O-R-A-D-E-A.

And where, approximately, is Oradea located?

It is close to the border-- it's in Transylvania. It's close to the border between Hungary and Romania.

And how many people were in your family?

In my--

Let's talk first about your immediate family.

In my immediate family, there was-- we were five altogether.

Mother, father, and three children?

Yes.

And you were where in relation to which of the children-- oldest, youngest?

I was the youngest.

All right. And you had brother, sister-- give us some insight, please.

I have still a brother in Romania, who was in forced labor. He wasn't at the concentration camp. And that's why he was lucky enough. He defected from the forced labor and he survived.

Oh, we'll get to that momentarily.

And my sister who was older than me. She was 20 years old. She died in Bergen-Belsen.

What kind of occupation did your father have?

He was a kosher butcher.

And was this an occupation-- just by way of preface, was this the kind of occupation that had been in your family for years?

Yes. He had his own business. And approximately, way back, 300 years, they were butchers in the family.

Would Dad talk to you about family history?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

And he was able to document some 300 years, is that right?

One of my uncles, he had enough time and money to look after the roots. And he documented even more than 300 years.

Now, was that 300 years in Romania?

No. It started in Czechoslovakia.

And what was your understanding as to the travels that your family had, how you were able to expand from Czechoslovakia, by way of example, to Romania?

It happened how I found out from my parents, that three brothers, they were living near Prague. From there is the Robicsek name. This is a Czech name. And these three brothers came in Hungary, which was Austro-Hungarian that time. Even Czechoslovakia was Austro-Hungarian that time. And they were living near Debrecen in Hungary for these almost 300 years. From father to son, it was this business because the ancestors, the first what they could trace, they were butchers-- two brothers were butchers.

Were you expected to join the family business?

No. No, I hate blood.

What type of training and education did you have and what kind of interest or field or occupation were you looking forward to?

I had seven elementary classes. And then because we weren't rich people, I had to go to work. So I started in this field, in plastics, in 1937, '38.

Well, that was a relatively new field at that time.

It was very new.

How was it that you became involved?

We had a friend who had a factory, who had-- who produced plastic parts, electronic.

Do you remember your friend's name?

It was Glick. Glick was the name, yes, the family name of it.

Now, was this a friend of your father or your friend?

Of my father, yes. He passed away in New York not long time ago.

So apparently, he was a survivor.

Yes, he was a survivor, not his family, alone he was a survivor. And that's how I picked it up. And I liked all my life to read. And this was our hobby in the family. It's a really Jewish hobby, I think so. We love to read.

Was it also true with your brother and sister?

That's right. And we-- I read a lot everything what can be read. And through this, I got a fairly good knowledge about the profession, about the world.

Did you have formal training in the sense of--

I was for four years apprentice boy. And after I came back from the concentration camp, I went through in a night course, where I picked up sub-engineering. So that's my-- the rest is books what I had learned in my life.

How about your mother and father? Were they readers?

Oh, yes. This was the-- even today in my family, we have this tradition. Everybody goes in bed with a book all the time.

Any particular topic or particular area?

Anything what you can read about it-- science, geography, anything.

Out of curiosity, do you read articles, or books, or novels pertaining to the Holocaust?

I read a few, not too many. Not too many. There was a book in my city. It was a doctor who was a-- what is-- who is make autopsy.

Coroner.

Coroner. He was a coroner before the concentration camp. And they took him to Auschwitz. And he was working near Mengele.

OK, well let's, if we CAN save some of that to a little bit later point in the interview.

He wrote this book. So that's what I--

So that obviously gave you an interest. And what was the name of that book so we can have it for record purposes?

I Was the Coroner with Mengele. That was the book. In Hungarian, he wrote the book.

Now, with reference to your early childhood and your home life, as you indicated previously, you stated that reading was very much a Jewish hobby in your household. Tell us a little bit about your religious background in the sense of

some of the ways that you practiced your religion, how closely you and your family were religiously, and how you celebrated some of the holidays, and what type of shul you might have belonged to, and so forth.

My mother had a wig, so sheitel. My father was a kosher butcher. In that time, you couldn't be a kosher butcher if you weren't religious enough. My father was religious, but in modern way. We were Orthodox, but not very. We ate kosher in our place. And we kept all the holidays. I was a-- I had a very nice voice when I was a youngster. And I was singing in the temple with one of the most famous cantor in Romania.

Who was that?

Riff-- Emanuel Riff. He was something.

Was this a large congregation?

It was a large congregation. Oradea had 31,000 Jews from 120,000 citizens. It was one of the largest congregations.

So approximately 25%, or a quarter of the population, was Jewish?

That's right.

Within the realm of the Jewish population of Oradea, were there, at that time, Conservative factions of Jews, at that time, Reform faction of Jews?

They were. It was a so named Neolog temple there. And it was Orthodox. It was even the Vizhnitzer, the Rabbi Vizhnitzer, who was world famous, it was there. We were singing every Purim at his place, and seeing that Hasidic joy what it was there. So it was every type of-- not religion because it's the same religion. Only the congregations were many different congregations.

Tell me, in the days of your childhood, knowing that there are something like 25% of the city's population is Jewish, would it be fair of me to state that perhaps a good portion of the city's professional class of population-- the lawyers, the doctors, professors, teachers, people of that type of occupation-- were they, in many ways, Jewish in terms of percentages?

Not only the intellectual part, but even the first steel mill started by Jewish-- was started by Jews. And I just read-- because I didn't know in that time-- in Israel, they edited a book about my foster city and with pictures, with-- even my parents' name is in it and my uncle's name. So the family is in it-- and from the beginning of the city. They were the most active part. It was played by the Jews to enflourish that city.

Were there any universities in the city?

There is now. But they were very highly technical schools-- no university.

Was this in an area of Romania or Transylvania that would be considered industrial?

It's industrial and commercial. It was commercial-- not anymore, but it was very--

In those days, we're talking about.

--in those days, it was. They named them the little Paris because it was such a flourishing life there.

And you, of course, were at that stage where you were able to sing with the famous rabbi and the--

Oh, yes.

--famous cantor.

Oh, yes.

It must have been a most pleasant and happy childhood.

It was.

And normal.

Yes.

And I take it, on some of the days, like the High Holidays, the city may as well have closed down.

Oh, yes, absolutely. It wasn't any business there. That's for sure.

As a child, do you remember any incidents of antisemitism?

Once-- you see, we were living-- we didn't have our own house. We were living in a house where there were 11 tenants. My mother's best friend were-- one family, it was Romanian, the other family was Hungarian, and my mother Jewish. We were living one near other one.

We never knew. At least in my childhood, I never knew that is a difference between us. In the school, yes, I found out a few times.

All right. Let's first of all talk about your home life in one more respect. You indicated that all of the neighboring tenants that you had were themselves Jewish, be they from Hungary, Romania.

They weren't Jews, not everybody.

No, but many.

Yeah, yeah, oh, yes.

This was before the institution, of course, of ghetto.

That's right.

Was there not, Mr. Robicsek, however, a voluntary getting together of all of the Jews, more or less, to form their own little ghetto voluntarily?

Yes, voluntary.

OK. So while you were within the confines of that ghetto, I suppose, life seemed relatively safe to you.

Yes.

Now, you spoke a moment ago about an incident that happened in school.

Yes.

All right. Do you recall how old you were at the time?

Oh, around eight years old. But I never forget it because it happened.

Tell us about it.

They were two kids in the same school. And they were twins. For instance, one of them, it was-- when I was in Romania, he was the minister of the heavy industry. So he went up in the communist ladder real fast. And they were not jokingly, but they told me that you are a dirty Jew.

And I lost my-- I am not a violent person. But this is the only thing when I lose my temper. So I lost my temper. And I beated up both of them. I was a hero because I beat two bigger guys than me. So that's why I never forget this. And there were things what showed to us that we are not the same like the others.

Such as?

In the school, you got a different grade, even if you were so good like nobody else-- first of all, the Romanian kid, even if he was worse than you. So you have to prove yourself all the time and show not 100%, 110% to stay in the level. So you always had to give more effort. And this was not only in that time, even after the Nazis were gone, in Communist country, also.

And this distinction was based strictly on the fact that you're Jewish?

Yes. Yes.

Now, during that period of time that you went through schooling, and you had these type of episodes, and so forth, did you have the thought, have the really conscientious thought that you're going to be able to succeed within that society?

No. When I was a youngster already, I was involved in the Zionist movement. And that gave us a lot of pride.

The us meaning who?

The rest of the Jewish kids. We got together. We had our own club at the Zionist movement. And we were dreaming about Israel and building our future, in our mind, to go there.

There was no question in your mind.

No, it wasn't a question.

How old were you at this point?

I started around when I was seven years old.

In the Zionist movement?

From-- that's right.

Do you recall your first involvement?

First involvement was singing there, dancing there, and make-- I was good in drafting, drawing. I made drawing about Herzl. That was-- and about Trumpeldor. And really, we were very active. We were going out in the woods together with the whole Kutzala-- that's the name of it I was in. It was very nice, beautiful memories.

How about your folks? Were they as strongly impressed with the Zionist movement as you were?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Now, did you go up through the ranks of the Zionist movement within your city?

I went-- I wanted to be a halutz, to go out. But soon as-- I majored in that. I had-- and I was taken to the concentration camp.

Now, you were how old when the Nazi movement first, shall we say, came to your attention?

In my attention, it came first when they destroyed in 1930-- '32 or '33.

And you were how old at the time?

At that time, I was-- let's see, from '24 to '33-- I was nine years old. I was singing in different synagogues with the cantor. And one of the synagogues was destroyed. It was a big convention of the students from all over Romania in that place.

And the students, the rightist students and the Nazis started to come in with the Iron Guard. That was the name in Romania of the Nazi movement. And they rioted in the city.

And where they start first? On the Jewish synagogue. So they destroyed the synagogue, where we supposed to sing on that Friday. That was my first shock what I got, big shot-- shock what I got in my life being Jew.

When this particular incident happened, you stated they destroyed the synagogue-- by means of explosives, fire?

No, they went in, and they burned everything, and they tear the Torahs.

Were you witness to this?

I was witness when we went next time to sing there. And it wasn't restored then, only a part of it only who can pray there.

How about your family and their reaction? And what was said at home after this incident?

We were very depressed. And naturally, that-- this was something which never happened before. Because the Romanian people are not very bloody people, not-- we could get along with the Romanians before.

Jew and non-Jew.

That's right. That's right.

In that regard, did your family have many non-Jewish friends that you socialized?

Oh, yes. Yes, they are very-- my father's best friend was a Romanian butcher who tried to save us from the ghetto. So the Romanians are good, peaceful people-- most of it.

Do you see this Nazi movement, then, as just something that happened in the times? Or is this something that is very akin to the personality, or the attitude, or the culture of the Romanian people?

You see, we could make a distinction between two different-- not nations because I can't talk about nations. Because a nation can't be bad. There are bad people and there are good people. Only the difference is in one of the nations, they are more bad than good. That's the difference-- looking with the Jew's eye.

So we had Hungarians. Not the Romanians deported us, not the Romanians took us to the concentration camp. That part of Transylvania, where I was living, it was given back to Hitler-- by Hitler to the Hungarians because they were behaving very good. They were good allies. So the Hungarians took us to the concentration camp. And we could make a



distinction between the two nations. It was a big difference.

Well, did you consider yourself as a citizen of Romania, or a citizen of Hungary, a citizen of Transylvania, or Jewish?

I was always Jewish. I was always Jewish. My parents-- because in 1922, they came in this city. And they were living in Hungary. They were very culturally-- they were very Hungarians. Jews, Hungarian Jews, but every Jew is assimilating to the country where they are living. So you pick any Jew, you will see that it has-- if it's Polish, it has a Polish thing.

More specifically, I suppose, my question is whether in your family, as you were growing up and in your forming years, whether you experienced true national spirit, nationalism, where you felt proud about Hungarian progress, or Hungarian feats, or Romanian progress, or Romanian feats, whether there was that spirit of country?

It was. It was. It was. Because our parents were very Hungarian-- good Jews. We were Zionists, so we were good Jews. We were feeling with Palestine at that time.

The fact that Hitler gave this country back to Hungary, did that sit well with your parents?

Oh, no, we were ashamed that we speak that language.

Did there come a time in, let's say, 1933, at the time of these events-- and we understand now how fast-breaking these events really were. And by way of specific example, when you illustrated the instance where the synagogue had been destroyed by the Nazi youth and the university students, did there come a time that you and your mother, father, brother, sister had conversation where, perhaps, the topic was are we going to leave? Or can we get out of here? Is there a means of escape? Do we need to escape? Questions which dealt with actual survival.

It happened only when-- my father was the most wonderful man in the world. Everybody's father is like that. But he was such a believer in people. He was such an innocent soul that he never would think that something can happen with those people with whom we were living together and good friends. We never hated anybody. And we tried to live a very nice life there.

And even when we were in the ghetto, I mentioned before that his best friend was a Romanian man, who passed away since then. And soon as the Hungarians came in, the Romanians who could go-- he was a fairly wealthy man. He went across the border. And he went to the Romanian. It was very close, the border, to us between Hungary and Romania, as soon as the Hungarians moved in-- approximately 10 kilometer and there was Romania.

So they pushed them back together. And he even send that people there through the border to tell us to do everything to go. And he will help us to get out from the ghetto. And my father's reaction was I don't believe anything can happen. And if it happens, what happens with the rest of the Jews? It happened with us. That was his philosophy.

Was that yours? You were much younger at the time. You had more of a fighting spirit.

I was younger. I respected my parents like they were my god, like a Jew can respect their parents. And they were saints in front of my eye. And what they said, I was together with them. I was alone at home and didn't mind it there.

Mr. Robicsek, you described yourself earlier as an individual who physically beat up two individuals who called you a dirty Jew.

Yes.

Now, having witnessed what took place, you obviously had to have a great deal of turmoil in terms of your thoughts and what you intended to do. I was thinking with my parents. I don't know. I was in a-- I don't know. I couldn't think clearly at that time. It happened so fast. It was later, I was thinking about it.

And it was-- put it together so perfectly scientifically by the Nazis that even I put the question, why I didn't revolted?

Why I didn't do something? But with anybody, you were talking there, everybody-- even the rabbi told us that everything will be OK. God will help us. And that's what we did for thousands of years. And that's what happened. It was too late to do something later.

I was about to ask when it was that it first really hit you and really dawned upon you that, at this point, it's too late. We can't get out. We can't escape. And we can't fight.

When I was in the box car, locked in with my parents, and all the other people there, and see the suffering there.

So even up to the point where you were taken to the railroad station, you felt that there was still some basis for hope?

Yes, yes.

Tell us, in terms of what happened in your city, in Oradea-- tell us about the institution of the ghetto.

On May 5, in 1944, it started-- in 1945, it started, the ghetto.

Excuse me, you mean '35.

No, '40-- '40-- we were taken we were taken 1944 to Auschwitz. So then it was very simple. They came to our house with a paper that we have to pack together everything.

It was in the newspapers also that all the Jews has to pack. They will go in a certain area of the city which will be fenced around. And they have to leave there till they give other orders what will happen with us.

When you began reading about what was going to take place in your city, now, by that time, you had knowledge of what had gone on in other cities, had you not?

Oh, yes.

When did you first come to the conclusion that what was happening in these various cities had served to target the Jews as a primary victim of the Nazi regime?

Even till they took us to the railroad station to take us to Auschwitz, even in the last moment, they were telling us, and everybody were telling-- nobody else gave us a different information-- that we are going together with the family. And we will be together with the family. In Hungary, they will take us. And there, we will work or on the farm till the war is over. Well, that was what we knew.

In the late '30s, history obviously has recorded any number of things which took place in both Eastern and Western Europe specifically pertaining to the Jews. And there were a number of incidents which had occurred in the late '30s which gained worldwide recognition and worldwide press coverage. Did you have that information available to you when it happened back in the late '30s?

We had information. We had. But we didn't believe it. Ourselves, we didn't believe it. We had some Polish Jews who defected from Poland and came even at our table because my father-- we were poor, but we had meat enough.

And every Shabbos, we had not only the family, but we had always a few poor bocher, a few poor people around the table. And even we had Polish bocher who told us that-- get away from here. Is something wrong there. OK, he didn't defect from Auschwitz. He didn't know about Auschwitz. But it's something wrong because they are taking our people away.

When was this?

This was around-- oh, around '38, '39.

Did you read about Kristallnacht?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yeah.

Did you discuss that with your family? And what was said?

We discussed it. But we had that optimistic view that it never can happen with us.

You felt that your Romanian or Hungarian brothers--

The Romanians. We didn't trust the Hungarians because as soon as the Hungarians came in in 1941, they occupied that part of Transylvania, they started with the antisemitism. The laws against the Jews started to come out.

Prior to that time, just before the Hungarians came in, were there incidents of some of your liberties being taken away?

No, not with the Romanians.

Not with the Romanians.

No.

Were there incidents with reference to any confiscation of your property?

No.

Did life, by and large, continue as it always had?

It continued. We read in the newspapers that the Iron Guard is getting active and doing riots here and riots there. But they weren't-- and it was far away from us. This is-- we were very, very optimistic.

It's often been said that Hitler wanted to do what he did in terms of conquering the world, or in terms of marching his armies, because of a terrible fear that he had of the Russians and the Bolshevik movement. You've heard that.

Yes.

What was the nature of the Bolshevik movement within the Jewish community where you were?

There were many Jews who defected to Russia from Romania. The Communist Party was illegal in Romania--

By the way--

--before the Nazis.

--the Zionist Party, was that considered legal or illegal?

Legal. It was legal. And they were-- the Zionist movement had a left movement also, the Hashomer Hatzair. And I knew a few people there. Because we knew who is Zionist and who defected. From Romania, they went through, because Romania has a long border with Russia. And they went in the other side.

But they were treated very badly. Most of them died. And who survived later, they said that they were working in the mines there.

But at the time, you didn't know this?

At the time, no. Many Jews-- even if he wasn't feeling the leftist movement, feeling-- many Jews ran there to save themselves from the Nazis. Because from two evils, they thought that the other one is better.

Now, you describe that it wasn't until the Hungarian army came through that, indeed, the truly repressive measures that we've associated with the Holocaust began to take place.

Right.

What was the type of measures that they instituted? And what were your early recollections as they were first put into place? And tell us as to describe, if you would, what discussions you might have had with both friends and confidants or family, if you would tell us that, please.

First of all, the first thing what I am remembering, it was that they started to get in the Jewish businesses and forced the Jewish businesspeople, the owners, to get a Hungarian part-owner in to share the business. That's what the first thing what I was. And they started to bring in antisemite movie pictures, many.

Did you see them?

I saw one of them.

Were you expecting it?

I didn't expected what I saw there.

Do you remember what else you saw that day beside that movie?

Oh, I saw the reaction of the people there.

In other words, was it a short newsreel? Or was it an actual?

No, it was a movie. It was a movie. It was-- it's a worse like Dickens wrote about Shylock. It that type of person, who used the German people. And he was a crooked, the antisemite type of guy, whom the Nazis described that the Jews look like, all of them like that.

The stereotype.

That's right, the stereotype, who cheated everybody, and who went, even making people kill each other. So the hatred was so big in that small, little movie theater that we walked out. And we didn't think that we will see that in a movie. And they started to riot around the movie theater and things like that. The propaganda, it started very strongly against the Jews.

How about newspapers? Do you have any recollection of any specific incident, or story, or headline?

Yes. They were writing. Right there, as soon as the Hungarians came in, it took a very big turn. They fired the Jewish editors. And they took over. And it was an opposite newspaper.

Now, this was approximately when, 1941?

1940, '41, yes.

Now, did they report in the press, or radio, what have you, incidents of Jewish businessmen or Jewish individuals--

That's right.

--who were put on trial?

Not in the beginning. Later, yes, oh, yes. And always, they picked some stories against the Jews, showing the stereotype of the Jews, how they are cheating people. And I didn't know this type of Jew because my parents were very hard working, very honest, very respectable people. And everybody around me, I never saw it-- only in the-- I realized that they are writings which are not the truth.

Well, from this particular time, 1941-- and you said previously that it was approximately May of '44 when you were taken to the camp. Is that right?

Tell us a little bit about what started to happen, bit by bit, from when you first started seeing these newspaper accounts or this movie theater incident. This became a way of life, did it not?

It became a way of life. And then we had to put the yellow David star.

And this started when?

That was before they took us in in the ghetto.

All right.

With the dates, I won't be precise.

We understand that.

Because in the concentration camp, I got a brain typhoid. And I forgot many, many things which was-- I have the flashes. And the dates are not the best part of my memory.

The times, though, that you were of an age-- you're in your teens, you're able to read fluently, see the newspaper, and see what is being stated about Jews. You could hear on the radio, could you not?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Same type of propaganda about the Jewish stereotype?

And were signs everywhere where you went.

Movie theaters?

Oh, newspapers, special newspaper, antisemite newspapers.

Did this have an effect upon, let's say, your father's business? Did he have to close down early?

Yes. He had to close down. He had to--

Entirely?

He went to work for this Romanian butcher.

Was he able to sell his store, sell his business?

No. Nobody bought a kosher business in that time.

What about your brother or sister?

My brother was working.

Do you recall where?

And my sister was working.

Do you recall where?

My brother was working in a textile mill. And my sister made from leather goods gloves and things like that.

Now, when Dad closed the business down and went to work for your Romanian friend, did this have any effect upon him being a provider. In other words, was he able to provide sufficiently for your family with enough of you working?

Not very sufficiently. We had what to eat. And not too much. I grew up in a one-bedroom half-house. The house wasn't ours. The landlord was living in one half of the house. And we were living in the other half of the house.

Now, when is it that the actual ghetto itself was instituted in your town?

The actual-- it started at May 5, 1945.

Of 1944? '45?

'44, excuse me.

All right. Now, between the time of the Hungarian occupation and the time of the ghetto creation itself, you obviously had three years-- three and a half years of the war that you were able to read about and converse about. At what point did you think that the Nazi movement would lose or win?

We were praying that the Western world, it will make a stop of this war, get in and-- that was our greatest hope. We were listening to the Voice of America-- no, the BBC. It was the English channel in that time and we were listening.

Every evening, the family was around them. And we were waiting for a miracle. We were waiting that it won't happen. We didn't know what will happen. But we felt that this is not the right way because we weren't living this way before. So we thought that the war, it end up much faster than how much it's lasted.

Well, there comes a point when a person has to say, I've been hoping and hoping. And all of my hopes are going unanswered.

Yes.

When did you reach that point?

Only in the wagon, only in the boxcars.

What was your understanding or impression with reference to America?

It was a dream, a heaven. It was always--

What were you told about America?

In the family, we knew people who were very distant relatives, and friends' brothers and sisters, they were in America. And it was the greatest dream to be in America sometimes.

Did there come a time that there was a conflict between the desire, perhaps, to achieve the dream and go to America and your previous discipline as a member of the Zionist movement and wanting to go to Israel? Wasn't there a conflict?

It was a conflict after the war started. Because we had all our hopes in America. To build a Jewish state, we didn't think about that we have the power to it, to get out from there. Because everything was-- you couldn't get out from there. So we were looking up to United States, who will solve all our problems, winning the war. And then we can build Israel.

Do you recall any specific incidents where close family members or close associates and friends of your family had some of the acts of repression that we previously spoke about from the Germans and from the Romanians or Hungarians-- any incidents that you recall involving people who you know, and things that happened to them, and the effect that it had upon your family?

Well, I had my-- but it was late in-- when the ghetto was on already.

That would have been after--

There were many incidents there, which-- even the way he goes.

Involving people you know?

Well, my uncle, for instance, he was taken soon as the ghetto was on. They took him. He was a-- he wasn't a very rich man. He wasn't a rich man. You can't say that.

But he was in the public life. He was a very active man. He was also a butcher, kosher butcher. And he was the life president of the chamber of commerce.

And also, it's very interesting. He was a lifetime president of the Hungarian Party under the Romanians. And he was taken as soon as they moved in with the Gestapo. Because the Hungarians moved in and the Gestapo got-- and the foster Jewish ghetto, they got a beer-- a warehouse, where they transformed in torture camp-- chambers. And they took the wealthy Jews in there to beat out or torture out their wealth from them. And that's how they took my--

Were you ever witness to any of this yourself?

I was witnessing my uncle when he was taken out on a stretcher from there. And he was taken with the stretcher in the boxcars. And he went to his death.

Do you attribute their doing this to your uncle because of his political background and his political activism or because he was Jewish?

It couldn't be because he was promoting the Hungarian politics. And the Hungarians were in there. Because they thought that he has money. And he didn't.

So they tortured him till he almost died because he couldn't tell where his money is because he never had money so much. He lived-- he had his own house. And he had his own business before they closed down. But he was in front of the eye of-- and many people went in like that. They took them in and never came out.

Just so we would clearly understand-- did the events that you're describing in your area of Romania, which is the Transylvanian section of it, were the events that happened there different or the same as the events that may have occurred in other locales around the country to your knowledge?

I don't think so it was too much difference. I don't think so.

Were you hearing?

I don't know. Because as soon as they took us in the ghetto, they took all the surrounding Jews around the city, from the small villages. Everybody was taken in there. And that's all what we knew. From there on, everything was happening with everybody the same.

When the ghetto was instituted, did you see far more army or personnel, soldiers coming through?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

All right. Was this before or after the institution of the ghetto?

It was before. Before, it was. Yeah.

And the purpose of all of these soldier personnel and the military coming through your particular area, what were you told? What was your understanding as to why they were there?

Oh, they are going to the Russian front. And it was understandable. Hungary was at war, and Germany also. So there were a lot of German soldiers and Hungarian soldiers.

You're talking, then, about those soldiers or individuals who came through your town.

And stationary there. They took a lot of-- because they just so named liberated that part from Romania. So it was understandable that they came in with army and they stood there with army.

In terms of your national leadership, in terms of the individuals who you understood to be the political leaders of your country, what, if anything, did you believe concerning whether they were antisemitic, or whether they were anti-Jewish, or whether they were pro-Nazi?

Romania was a monarchy before the war. And Carol, who was the king, he left the country. He had a mistress who was a Jewish woman, with whom he had children also. And he died not long time ago, a few years ago in the Western world, somewhere in Switzerland or France. I don't know. Now, this man was a very-- not because his mistress was a Jewish woman, but he never was an antisemite. You can say that almost all his friends were Jews.

Now, his son, Mihai, who is still living in France, I think so-- I don't in which part. Now, his son got involved with the Iron Guard. So we knew about it that he is not a Jew-lover. And that's when the Iron Guard, it got-- as soon as-- he took over as soon as his father left the country. And that's what we understood, that the top echelons of the country, they are antisemites.

Well, we're now going to get into that portion of our interview concerning the events and the things that happened to you immediately as you went to the camp, and the institution of the ghetto, and so forth. I understand we have but a few seconds left on this tape. So this would probably be a good place to pause for a quick break. And then we'll come back shortly.

OK.

Good.