

I'm Sue Danford. Today we are interviewing David Roth, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.

I'd like to start with your story about the labor camps, where you had left off. Could you go back and describe your living conditions and your food, and what they gave you.

I will give you one episode that strikes my mind what I will never forget. It happened the day when we worked out in the field digging trenches. It was a rainy day all day. It was Friday. We came home from work. We had our supper.

Our quarters were flooded with water, full of water. We tried to dig little canals out, so to drain the water. But everything was wet, anyhow.

So I took my backpack sat on it. I took my coat, what I had with me, the overcoat above my head sitting down. And keeping warm and trembling, sleeping. Around 10 o'clock in the evening, was a yell in the camp. Bread is here.

We didn't hear this word for about two weeks then. So everybody had to ready, go out and in a row, and waiting for his bread. We received a bread what was 1 and 1/2 kilo. It's about 3 pounds of bread. This was again until the next bread will come.

So it was ready after supper. Anyhow, everything, so I got my bread. I sat down on my back pack, my coat again over my head, and putting the bread under my arm, under my pit.

Excuse me, each of you got a kilo?

Yeah. Yeah. And trying to sleep, the fresh smell of the bread hit my nose. I couldn't resist. I broke off a little piece, ate it, another piece. I fell in trance. I didn't know what I'm doing.

All of a sudden, I realized a little piece of bread left. I got up, opened my backpack. Hid it all the way on the bottom. So not to touch it till next evening when I come back from work.

I closed my backpack, I set, and came morning. Got up, had our tea for breakfast to work. Of course, now the working place where it was, we lived on one side of a hill. We had to go down to the valley, up another hill, again down a valley, up on a dirt hill. There where we built the trenches and the bunkers.

And up was more difficult. But it was normal. When we came down, we had to run like because it was more down when we came home. So my thighs started to burn. I still feel it, still today. If I go up a flight of stairs, I feel the thighs burning. This was acquired from there.

Now, I came home. For supper, of course, there always were a couple of sick boys, what they couldn't go out to work. They were staying around the camp, or some people for watching the camp. Came supper, I'm reaching for my bread. I can't find it. I was sure I put it there. I took out everything from my backpack. Bread is not there.

So we found out there is around the camp a couple of bread thieves. They don't care about someone else. Everybody is selfish, of course. So one guy got caught stealing the bread. He got punished by us. And he promised he will never do it again. Next day, again he did the same thing. So here's one story.

Now, of course, to get in touch with civil population there, first of all, we were out from reach of them. Sometimes we could see a couple of peasants walking to work or coming from work because they had fields around here. If we were lucky we were got from one guy a baked potato. And some didn't bother even to talk with us.

But we had to be careful not to be caught that we are in touch with a civil population, with the local population. Here we are hungry. We don't have enough food. We give too much more calories out than the intake is.

I knew about certain grass. It looks like spinach, but it's sour. They used to use it in our part of the country. They used to cook it like spinach, or like a sour for summer. It's a sour soup. And I found one source of it. I picked it and I ate those grass. I knew I have some vitamins, what I need.

When was the berry season, I could find berries too sometimes, those wild strawberries. Whatever we could find here and there, we thought we are grabbing how to say-- our life depends on it.

One time, we worked on one hill where we dug trenches. There was are lots of blueberries there, about full. We thought we had in heaven. Lunchtime, when we had a half hour lunch break, we were hiding between the bushes and just eating it, grabbing it with two hands and eating it as it comes, sometimes even with leaves.

Then we worked one time on a road work, where it was an extra potato field. And I saw the potatoes are blooming. So I knew that if the potatoes are blooming, there are some little potatoes already there. So I asked to go to toilet. You had to go somewhere, hiding somewhere.

So this was my excuse. I hid between the potato leaves, and I dug potatoes there. And as it came from the ground, I ate it. It was sweet. It was very good.

Some of it I was able to hide in my pockets. But I have to be careful not to be caught. As a matter of fact, one time we picked a sunflower. It's good. They have oil in there. It's a good food. And the officers caught us with it. He took it away and punished us too. That's poison. We shouldn't eat it.

It was that he showed us that he was, well, ones are good, not he is with us. But on other hand, he punished us whenever he could. Matter of fact, to jump here, I think he was caught later on in Budapest after the war. And he was hung. They hanged him for the war crime punishment.

OK, now this is the food what we got there. Not once we got certain greens that was cooked in plain water, it was no oil, nothing in it. Matter of fact, you could even find some little gravel in it too. This is the way we were served.

And you will be amazed. We ate it up, and we went in line for a repeat to get some more. So this was the hunger. And this is what we had there until from May till August.

In beginning of August, we started to move on because the front came closer. We could hear already the war, explosions. And here and there we saw already the Russian planes more often in the day. We had to hide because we had the soldiers they hid. We weren't afraid. We just looked at the planes. And it looked to us that they are our redeemers.

They dropped a couple of bombs here and there and flew away. And one time we walked home from work and the Russian planes appeared. And here again, they left us where we are. And the soldiers ran into the woods.

They weren't dummies there in the plane. They didn't bother us. They shot, they started to machine gun for the soldiers wherever they ran into the woods.

But they didn't find, they didn't kill any. But anyhow, this was now we are moving back already, running away from the front. So we started to walk again. Because there was no other transportation available, except for the officer. He had a bicycle. The rest of us went by foot. As a matter of fact, the kitchen utensils had to be carried along too.

Two sticks and each big pot, or whatever, and was carried on the shoulders.

How many of them were you?

We were 240 people from the beginning. But here already before we started to move back, we started to from hunger and from sickness, people are dying slowly. Matter of fact, from beating people were dying too. So we were always less and less.

One episode that I forgot from before, somebody complained among us that bread was stolen. And they pointed on a sergeant. And this was now a punishment for us. You will accuse me that I stole bread? He took together his buddies, and I, the one that they behaved very well with me because I drew a couple of portraits here and there, so they respected me once in a while.

Matter of fact, it happened the sergeant had to build a bunker and measure a square. And he didn't know how to figure out a rectangle there. He came to me. Dave, how do you figure out a rectangle they get in square? So I gave him just one formula what I learned in the first grade yet. Three, four, five, so three one way, four one way, and five, you have a perfect rectangle.

We didn't have any measuring sticks or what. So we took strings. And with strings I measured it out for him. And so I gained a little respect. But I was still just a plain Jew with them, plain in working camp, in labor camp.

And here I was inside in the bunker. And we had to put dynamite and light the wick. He run away. Here I was even with the advantages what I had, I was weak too already.

Here I lit the wick for the dynamite and tried to go out from the hole. I couldn't. I didn't have enough power to pull myself up. And I fell down here. I saw the wick already is almost done, will explode. I hide myself in a corner there, what was a little bit in and took my shovel put it on my head because that's all that I was able to cover with. And the explosion came.

I was sitting there for a while. I tried to touch myself if I'm still alive. Then I got up. I couldn't hear nothing for about an hour. I thought I will be deaf. Luckily now or later, I started to hear slowly, slowly things. I thought my eardrums were broken.

And here I got the same day I got hit too by one of the sergeant's buddies for nothing, just he went to hit whoever was in his way. I was one of them. And maybe this helped me to gain back my hearing too. So whatever bad things is sometimes a remedy I have to recall it.

Now, we are moving back. Again, all day walking whatever dry food we had because there was no kitchen available, because it was dismantled. And we had dry rations, whatever was available. It came night, first field what we found this will be our place to sleep.

It was dark. You didn't know where you were lying down. I lie down in a place, put my stuff, my cover down on the floor, on the ground, and slept. Of course, I felt that I am between corn stalks, you know? Corn was there and they cut off and little stocks remained there. And of course at night, if I turned around, I touched something. I touched my hand in a cow manure there. So this is the kind of life we had to go through.

Finally in August 10, this is the day of my birthday. I got a present. We walked over the border again, back from Poland and the Hungarian border. So it was a little relief knowing that you are not in a strange country anymore. But still the same officers, still the same thing. We are now I can say between from 240 maybe 160 you are still alive.

A few of them were shot by the officer. A few of them were hit, beaten to death. And several of them died from hunger, from sickness. So it was a holiday, don't ask. Now we moved back. We came all the way to Uzhhorod. This is the capital city of the Carpathian. There is a water what's called Uzh, what slices the city in half.

And there where they put us to work to build tank barricades. There we were September, the month of September, we worked there, September and October. Again, now we had already some old school house or whatever it was, where we had a building. We slept on the floor there. We had where to come to and regular work, hard labor.

But now here happened an interesting story. One man who supplied the-- I don't know what he supplied for this project. He found out from the sergeant that I am drawing portraits. So he asked the sergeant If he can have me for a lunch, so he can draw my portrait.

OK. He gave me, but now I knew that I can't run away here. Because if this fellow would be some stranger and good for the Jews, he wouldn't have had the permission from the sergeant. So there is some corroboration or whatever between them.

He asked me questions. I tried not to answer. Because I didn't know what will be good and what bad. Of course, I got a good lunch there. That helped. I drew his portrait and he brought me back to camp. I thought maybe to ask him then maybe he will hide me somewhere. But I couldn't ask him because I knew that it's impossible.

And here one boy who had a little more courage than I, he disappeared from the camp. We came in the evening. They take roll calls. One man is missing. We had to stand there for three hours in one place, not to sit down, nothing, as punishment why we let him go away.

He was lucky. He survived. He was hiding somewhere. I met him later.

OK, here in September-- no October 16, I don't remember the exact date. But about, this will be the date when we went out to work in the morning, 10 o'clock. We get a call. Everybody in to camp. OK, with the tools and everything. OK.

Now the kitchen was busy. We had an early lunch. We have to run, because the front is coming. The Russians are beating. Here with all the advantages what I had, I had no shoes anymore. My clothes were stolen. My pants what I had, I always cut from the bottom, and put some patches on top so I had shorts already. There where we used cement for building those barricades against the tanks, I used those cement bags instead of shoes.

And here they made two groups, the healthy ones and the not so healthy ones. I went to the not so healthy ones. Now, the officer before moving away, moving out, he came and he actually finds me. What is this guy doing here? I says my feet are hurting. I can't walk.

I went to the doctor because the doctor was a Jewish doctor. He will be in my favor. He says, yes. He can't walk. All right. So he left me with this group. We were there 31 boys in this group.

And we started to walk from Uzhhorod to [NON-ENGLISH] was 20 kilometers. And the road was one road. The road was filled up with German tanks and all kinds of machinery what they had to go back from front. We walked on the side of the road, single line. And 6 kilometers away from the city, the little village's name is [NON-ENGLISH].

We started to complain to the officer, actually not officer, he was just a-- how do you call it? Below sergeant, next below the sergeant.

And we told him we can't walk further. We have to sleep over here. We can't here and there. But we can't walk. So finally he broke in. And took us into a barn. And up to the hay we slept in the barn.

Next morning, everybody up. Go. Everybody started to cry. I'm tired. I'm sick. And so nobody moved.

We were still 30 people here. Because one boy looks like he got sick on the way. We didn't notice it. And he got a bullet in his head too. We find them two days later on the side of the road when we went back to Uzhhorod.

So we were there a night, a day, and another night. Came out to Thursday night. We went to sleep. And about 4 o'clock in the morning, the owner's boy knocked on the barn door. The Russians are here.

So here everybody started off, calling me that I am the only one who speaks a little Russian. I should go out and talk with them. I said, let's wait until it will be light. It's dark. Let's not move. OK?

We were there quiet, but a little more relieved. All the shootings that was there, the fighting went around. There we heard it. We heard the planes, the bombs, everything. Luckily, we weren't hit.

And so the morning when it got light, I went out. I started talking with the Russians, [NON-ENGLISH], whatever, I knew already Russian. And I told them that we are here a few guys from labor camp, all Jews, and what the situation is. OK.

So they came in. They took us out. And put took this under sergeant guy, the soldier who was responsible for us. He had a gas mask. The Russian looked at the gas mask. He didn't know what it is, just tore it apart and threw it away. Took the gun what he had, the rifle, broke it in half, throw it away.

And him, they took separate. And with us, they said, you go this way. This is the only open way you can go into Uzhhorod.

OK. We walked those 6 kilometers much better and much lighter. We arrived back to the city. Of course, where can I go? Everybody is on his own now.

So I figured, we'll go back to that building where, through where we went out. Because we left there certain odds and ends, because we couldn't in a hurry. And there before I go in, there's a Russian soldier. He picks me up, asks for [NON-ENGLISH], ID, [NON-ENGLISH].

I don't have any. I tell him about who I am. OK, he took me to a camp. It was there like a prisoner of war camp, what they gathered all the prisoners together. Of course, what they did, still somebody was there who knew what they are doing. The soldiers, Hungarian soldiers separate, the German soldiers separate, and us the Jews from labor camp separate.

Here again, I am in a basement there. We were there in that basement at least 60 boys. And I start to talk with those Russians. So again, I was elected. All right. I ask the Russian soldier there to take me out to the water fountain, so I can bring water in, the water bottles for the water containers for the boys. All right.

So I took together a bunch of water containers and went to the fountain there, filled it up with water. Meantime, I asked the Russian soldier, who is the commander here, so I can talk with him? So he says, all right. He'll introduce me to him. OK.

He called the commander. I talked with him. I told him, listen, we are here from labor camp. We didn't fight any war. We were just forced labor. And I hope you won't take us to any prison.

All right. So he asked me some questions. I answered him the way with my broken Russian. But we understood each other. It started to get dark. They gave us a little supper there, some [NON-ENGLISH], some borscht, what they call it.

And then put together the boys, puts me in front. You are responsible for the boys. This is one way toward Munkács. If you will go that way, it still war, and that way still war. This road is open. You take them far away from here.

OK. I am now a leader. We walked out about a kilometer out from the city. I stopped. I said, boys nobody knows even my name. How can I be your leader? You are free. Everybody do what you think is right for you.

It's late at night. Everybody went to some peasant's house, ask for lodging. So did I. One household, they wanted to put me in the house on the floor.

I was full of lice. So I had a little heart. I said, no. I would rather sleep in the hay outside.

OK. I slept through a night, felt freedom a little bit. The morning, I got up and got breakfast from this peasant boy, and started to walk towards my hometown. Munkács is my hometown.

So get on the road. I tried to hitchhike. Russian trucks just drove by. They didn't stop. OK, it was noon when I got almost halfway, [NON-ENGLISH], it was a little town on the road. Stopped there to a couple of peasants maybe to have some food for lunch.

So one place I come in, chicken soup. Another place, chicken soup. So three chicken soups I ate, nothing else with it. So I didn't go no place anymore.

I still had some bacon, what we picked up from a wagon that was destroyed. And there was still bacon and bread we picked up on the road. And at least I had some solid food with me, kept on walking. And I still try to stop a truck.

Finally, one Russian soldier stopped with the truck. And I took my backpack. I throw it in the truck. It was a panel truck, a big one. And I tried to jump up. Not enough power.

Here he is nervous. He says, come on, come on. And he started to move I started to yell after him, please wait. He stopped. Then he gave me an idea from the front to walk it's easier. OK. I fell into that truck like a bag of potatoes, lying there waiting.

He came into [NON-ENGLISH], what is Munkács and a village next to it is divided by a river what's called Latorica. And the bridge was knocked out, was bombed.

So you could walk over yet, what there are there some how to say boards and how to walk through the river, but no vehicles. So I went off, started to walk home. Everybody was in a hurry to get home, because there was a curfew. About 7 o'clock, no civilians on the street.

So I came to my house. It was 10 minutes after 7:00 already. I was shaken. I knew its curfew and don't see nobody. Here this house, that was my brother's house and it was a closed in big gate like to walk in.

It was closed. I didn't know how to get in. I walked into the next door neighbor. I asked does, somebody live there in this house? They said, yes, the [NON-ENGLISH]. Oh, [NON-ENGLISH], they are the tenants what they used to be before then too. Are they home? Yes.

OK. I went back out and started to knock on the door. Finally, somebody came who was there. I gave my name. They didn't recognize me because I told my name the way I was used to it now in the labor camp, [PERSONAL NAME]. At home, they called me Dude. So finally, she opened the door and recognized me. OK, come on in.

It was the first time I got rid of my lice, and so on. She gave me a good hard bath. All my clothes I threw out. And she saved some of the clothes they had from the house. So I got fresh clean clothes. I wanted to go in the house, I slept in her house for this night because the house where my brother used to live and I before then was all boarded up.

So next morning I opened up the boards, went in, I saw there like, they say it in Yiddish [NON-ENGLISH], black everything. Everything turned over. Everything is empty. All the family pictures on the floor, stepped on. And I started to think, how did anybody come in this house if the door is locked?

I climbed up on the attic. There I saw the roof, there's a little roof escape like. And this was open.

Through the roof people came in and cleaned up, cleaned out the house. Like it had some things for the bed, pillows and covers. The neighbors took to her house. This is what was saved, nothing else. So I set up house slowly.

And in the meantime, I met, and started to work. Of course, now here is a big item signs, all the signs has to be painted Russian. Because till now everything was Hungarian there. All right, so I started to look for some tools to start working and making money.

So everybody does what he knows best. I knew best this. So I started and got work here and there. As I am walking to a job, I see a buddy of mine, with two suitcases. [PERSONAL NAME] Lotzi was his name.

Hi, Lotzi. Hi. Where are you coming from? Because I knew he was in a hospital, because he was sick, and they shipped him to the hospital.

And he got-- he found his freedom in the hospital. The Russians came in, in Uzhhorod. And from Uzhhorod, he came over to Munkács. So where are you going to? He says, looking a place where to sleep.

All right, I gave him my address I told him how to go. Go there and there, you have where to sleep. So he was a good cook. He was the cook in the house.

And then I found another fellow who was a labor camp, an artist, took him into my house, and started to work together. And we started to work for sugar, for meat, for whatever, for food. And slowly, slowly people started to come back from labor camp.

And I had a good kitchen there. We ate just once a day. Started off in the morning and finished at night. We were so hungry. And here I got a job with the Russian army too.

One time, I worked outside painting a sign. A captain came to me, a Jewish man, Captain Bergmann. And he started to talk to me.

I spoke to him in Russian. And then he asked me questions. I told him I'm Jewish, and what and how. And he says, he is Jewish too.

And we started to communicate. We understood each other. Whatever I couldn't say it in Russian, I said it in Yiddish. Whatever he understood, fine. Some words in Hebrew, so we understood each other. So he said he has a job for me.

He was in army hospital, what was dismantled and was in reserve. The doctors were there. Everything was there but it was not active. And he took me there, and they were all for the Fatherland. Whenever there was a holiday, they had to make slogans and making some big holidays from it, big events.

So he asked me if I know how to write Russian. I say, yes, because I learned Russian in school. So I started to write Russian for them. It was slogans. I received-- I was favorable how to say in their eyes. And he introduced me to a mayor there, and a major, whatever you call it, colonel, whatever they had. And here I am eating and gaining weight. But it came night, I was sweating too much.

It was wet like a bathtub, my bed. There was a doctor. He was also Jewish from Odessa. So I went to him and I complained whatever. So he gave me advice what to eat and what not to eat. And that I'm sweating, that's all right. Just to watch out not to eat too much fat. OK.

And so within three months with the Russians, I can say I gained 30 kilo, 60 pounds almost. I was as wide as tall, like a barrel. Even my voice changed from the-- And in February of 1946, no '45, 1945, my brother who lives in Cleveland, he came home from labor camp. So at least I'm not alone anymore.

And I knew what happened with the rest of the family. Everybody was taken away from the ghetto and wherever. We didn't know. And my other brother who was older, from brother was here, plus another brother.

The oldest brother, he was at home in the ghetto. The rest of the four brothers were in labor camps. I was in my way. My other brother another way. And so the other brother, he was captured by the Russians somehow.

And I found out he [NON-ENGLISH]. That's typhus. I don't know what's-- what they get from lice. And he didn't survive.

And the other brother got freed from labor camp, and taken with a ghetto to Auschwitz. And he got liberated in Auschwitz, but never got home. I didn't know where he is. He got lost on the road.

And the oldest brother, he escaped actually from Auschwitz. The way he tells the story was very interesting. He worked there and he was a woodworking man, because he originally he learned to be a cooper, he made barrels. So he knew

how to work with wood.

So he was in the-- how do you call it? Not a cabinet? That's another word for the cabinet shop? A carpenter shop. So he works in the carpenter shop there.

And he got little favors from the kitchen. He got the potato peels. So he built himself a little fire on two bricks, put his dish there, and cooked his potato peels. That's a little additional food.

As he was there playing around with the fire and potato peels, there was a fire broke out in the camp in another end of the camp, and on top of the fence, where the SS guard were walking, all the SS guards were walking towards, ran to the fire. And he noticed somebody pulled out a rock from the wall, and went out through the hole. Another guy about three or four guys. So he left the potato peels on the fire. He went after it too.

And luckily they got to a barn. They hid in the barn. They were there for about three or four days, somehow they survived. And finally as the Russians went through, they started to walk home. And he arrived home exactly for Purim in 1945.

I was out in the city delivering a job or what. I came home. And I saw some stranger walking in the yard with some striped clothes. He had his still from Auschwitz striped clothes on. And I wanted to ask him, are you looking for someone?

Meantime, there was a neighbor's girl in the house. And as I come in, she asked me, did you see your brother? Which one? She says, Isaac. Then I thought maybe he went out.

I didn't recognize him. There was no teeth. Finally, I recognized him. We hugged finally. I was happy that at least I had someone in the house. So I think we'll stop here for a while.

OK. We'll pick up here in 1945, when we come back.