I'm Allen Binstock, and today we are interviewing William Seas, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Bill, when did you first become aware that the war had started?

I would think around '39, '40, something like that.

How did you become aware that the war had started?

Well, what happened actually is that Germany took away the Sudetenland, and a week or two later on, the Bohemian people which is called the Czechs, they were occupied by the Germans. They did not surrender. Now the Slovakian people, they got to be Allies of Germany. And it was by the name of a guy Jozef Tiso, and he got to be President, President of Slovakia.

And his party was called Hlinka, Hlinka, Hlinkova garda.

Do you know what that means?

Well, it was after a man, his name was Hlinka. And he was, this man was known as an anti-Semite. He was against Jewish people from way back. I don't exactly the story of that person. But that's what. And this party was sympathizing with them, with the Germans, with Hitler and all this. And this party was, they were now when they came in being and they took away the stores from the Jewish people and anything they had.

All these people who belonged to that party which is called the Hlinkova, the Hlinkova Party.

All the non-Jews belonged to it?

Pardon me?

Who belonged to that party.

Only Christians.

Only Christians.

Only Christians, you have to-- most people in Slovakia were Catholics. And they belonged to that party. And they were the ones, they were like the SS actually in Slovakia. And they got the stores. They got to be in charge on the Jewish people. And they got their houses. Anything they wanted to do, they just had to ask.

So despite the fact that you were fairly young at the time, you were aware of all this going on?

Yes, I was aware of the Hlinkova garda. And they were singing songs, which when they were marching and all that.

Was there any marching through the Jewish part of town at that time, when the war began?

Yes. There was marching. And as far as I know even, well that was already after the war, when the war was over, that Jozef Tiso, that President of Slovakia at that time, he was hanged. And the way I understand that he paid actually 100 crowns for every person's head, for every Jewish person's head. So Germany should take him out the sooner the better.

He paid. He paid the Germans? Yeah, that government at that time the government Slovakia, paid 100 crown for every person.

Was that a lot of money? Can you give us an idea of how much money that was?

At that time, not awfully a lot of money. No. You know what I mean?

But there was a price.

But yeah, there was a price. He want them that bad out. You know what I mean? And they were the ones that who gathered the Jewish people. They're the ones who set up all the transports. They're the ones, they run the whole thing about how to get the Jewish people out.

Let me ask you this. Did you follow the news events closely when the war began?

Well, I didn't read the newspapers. We had no newspapers. I saw my father once in a while reading newspapers. But most people in town did not read newspapers.

How about a radio?

We had no radio. We had--

How did you know what was going on outside of the town as far as the war goes? What was your source of information?

Well, I did hear from other people talking.

I see.

The people who did read the papers. And I imagine somebody had a radio. I heard once Hitler on the radio. And was in downtown, like in the middle of the town. They had a big radio so everybody could hear him speak.

I see.

So I remember that.

OK. So you say that actually the Slovakian government carried out the laws that were passed.

Right.

And they--

They get us together.

They policed all these laws.

They police, yes.

OK. Did the Nazis ever come into the town while you were there?

No. The only time I saw German soldiers, is when they were going to occupy Poland. Because my town was 80 miles from Poland. And all the trains came to my town. And from there on, the train couldn't go no more. Because there's a tunnel about two miles big of a tunnel, and that was all bombed. So they came in town, and from my hometown, they were going foot, with horses and wagons, and trucks and cars.

To Poland?

Yeah, to Poland. But they embarked right in this town.

So the Nazis did not actually occupy your town? No. I never saw any Nazi came. It all was done by the Slovakian

people, by that special group which is called Hlinka.

And they had a military organization?

Yes, they had a military organization. They were dressed in different clothes, in black or vaguely like this I remember.

All right. Well how long were you in the town once the war began? How long did you stay in the town once the war began? I was there till 1942.

Till June of 1942. And so from the beginning of the war until June of '42, you didn't see any Nazis in the town except the ones on the way to Poland?

Yes, only on the way to Poland, going to occupy Poland.

So how did your life change once the war began in the town? Was it just the laws that were passed that you've already described to me?

Fear, was a constant fear. Like in the old country, you didn't have no doorbells. And all the time only the gendarmes would come to the door with boots and knock on the door very, very heavy. And we all used to get scared. And they would come and they would say this is the law. This is for this. This is for that. You know what I mean? And it was a constant fear.

Do you remember them coming to your house at all?

Yes, I remember them coming to the house.

What brought them there, or what did they do when they came?

I don't remember exactly why they came for. But I remember we all the time used to get scared all the time when we heard these boots and knocking on the door.

Did you hide?

No, we didn't hide. We just were wondering what they want. You know what I mean? What's going on? Well, they were, what happened that the law came out that from 16 to 40, all the Jewish people from 16 till 40, they were going. They would take them away to the concentration camp.

Now this is in 1942?

In 1942, right.

I see.

And they would come to the door and look if anybody is there, if anybody is hiding. I was very lucky because I was not 16 years old at that time. So I didn't have to go. And my father was just exactly 40. So we didn't have to go, none of us. But my uncle who was at home, he had to go. And my aunt had a son, and he was 16 and they came after him and after my uncle. And they took--

And this in 1942?

1942.

And what did they say they were sending them or taking them?

Well, they didn't say nothing. They were just.

You had to go.

You had to go.

At the time, was the area that you lived in like a ghetto? Was it guarded by the military at that time?

It was open. We lived free.

But could you leave that area?

We lived in our houses. And we could we could leave the area.

You could.

We leave the area, yeah, we could walk around.

But you wore the star at all times.

The star, yeah, we had to wear the star, or a yellow band at the beginning.

Were you mistreated at all during before 1942 by anyone?

No.

I see. OK. Now when they first started to take people away, what was your impression of what was happening at that time? What did you think was happening to these people?

Well, the first thing that happened in my hometown when they took away from 16 till 40, I remember that the rabbi said all the Jewish people should come to the synagogue. And they took out the [NON-ENGLISH], the scrolls. And they were praying. And some people were crying and praying. And we were praying to God that what's going to happen to us. What's going to be.

So you feared the worst.

They fear the worst. And everybody was very upset. And all these people were seeing their kids going, and all these young people going away.

Did they take--

And they was very upset.

Did they take men and women in that age group?

Yes.

Men and women.

In that age group, yeah. And it was very scary.

Well now, were there some families that were broken up by the original transportations?

Yes. There were some families broken up.

What happened? Were there children left behind? For example, did they take young parents and people with young children? Were there young children left behind?

Well, as long as you ask me about the kids, I don't remember. And I think maybe that I have to retract that, that they did not-- I don't remember married people with children would be taken, only from 16 to 40, when you were single.

OK.

Yeah, because I don't remember about the situation about the kids. But then in another few months, not very far away, about maybe six months later, they made a new law, came a new law that all the families have to go to on this in this day, they all have to pack and to take so much. And they have to come in that-- there was an area in my hometown which the two shuls were there. And there was a playground where there was the parochial school, the state school, and the Hebrew school. It was a big place down there.

And we all had to come there. And from there on, they took them down to the railroad. But what had happened to especially to my family, is that certain people they would not take at that time. If you like a person who was a doctor, and they needed him, or a person who-- what happened to my family, the person who took over our store, it was a girl, about 23 or 24 years old. And she belonged to that party.

And she took it over. And she--

She belonged to the ruling party.

Yeah, to the ruling party she belonged. And she wanted my family to stay, my father stay, to run the store for her. And she was only getting paid I remember at that time 1,000 crowns a month. And she says, you run the store and her name was on the store. And she made possible for us to stay. And she went down to the capital of Slovakia by the name of Pressburg, and somehow I remember my father gave her 12,000 crowns or something.

And she came back and she brought out a special book, and I think it was called a yellow book, and we were excluded from going. And there was a few more families like this in town for certain reasons they were excluded from going.

So at the time that most of the most of the Jewish population was taken, you stayed behind?

We stayed behind, the whole family stayed behind. My family, the kids with the babies, and I was the oldest one. And we stayed behind.

Well, how did you feel about that at the time?

Well, it was very sad and very lonely. And most of--

We didn't--

--most of your neighbors were taken?

Yes. There was most of them were taken. Some of them were very rich, and they were needed for certain things. And they were probably buy themselves out, like we did. And I can't recall how long we stayed. We stayed a little while, maybe two or three months. And it just happened one day that they find some farmers, Jewish farmers, being in the woods, hiding in the woods. And they were about 17 of them.

And they want to make up a transport, a decent transport. And we were the biggest family, my family. Because we were four kids and my parents. So they wanted to make up like 25 or something. So they decided. They choose our family just to go with them.

And you were transported with those?

With those.

With those people.

With those people. And it was very tragic, very. I can remember walking down. And we had to walk down from our home all the way to the railroad. And they just came in the morning around 8:00 or 9 o'clock. They said in two hours you have to be ready to go. And my mother was crying very hard. And they took my father right away to jail, so he wouldn't escape or something. And they took me too to the jail. But my mother was crying so hard, they let me out to help pack.

And the horse and wagon came. And they put all the stuff on the horse and wagon, some stuff together like that. And we had to walk down all the way to the railroad.

At that point, did you think that you were safe since they had taken most of the people already?

Well, yes. Well in a way, we thought we were safe. And I was very proud of my father to save us. And one time, I remember he told me that he is very proud that somehow he saved us.

So it must have been a terrible shock.

A terrible shock. A very terrible shock. And they took us right away down by train, and we came to that place, which is a big city, Zilina it's called. And there where they got all other people from all over, from all over little towns and big towns. And they put them there together.

Did they tell you anything about where you were being sent?

No. And that was it must have been like on Wednesday or Thursday. We got there on Sunday morning. I was in Auschwitz.

So just a few days.

Just a few days. They put us in--

Originally, what sort of-- you said you went by train? What sort of train was it that you originally went?

To go to that place where they gathered us together, it was a regular train. And two gendarmes were with us, and two of those people who were the special that party.

Hlinkova.

Hlinkova garda. And they were with us too to watch that we wouldn't escape. And we got there in the morning. It was something like early in the morning. It was in June, and I remember the doors opened from the train. And they start hollering all the men to go here, and the rest of it stay there. And something got in me that without just by luck, and I felt like a man. Because I was the oldest one. I felt strong or something.

And I went between the men.

Did you go with your father?

And in front of me I saw my father about a few rows ahead of me. And that's the way I came into Auschwitz.

Well do you mean, in other words, this separation occurred when you arrived at Auschwitz?

When we arrived. And it was in the morning. We were all sleepy, sleep like 3 o'clock in the morning. It was still dark.

Now, the train that brought you to Auschwitz, was that a passenger train also?

No, it was already how you call it? It was like a cattle train. We were sleeping on the--

On the floor.

On the floor.

How many people were in the car?

I don't know. But it was full.

It was full.

It was full.

Were you with your family at the time?

Yeah, I was with the family.

You were all together?

We were all together.

I see. And that must have taken what several days on that train?

Not really, because it wasn't that far. I could recall that maybe it took us from like we start in the morning, and the next morning we were there. like about 10 o'clock in the morning we started, and the next morning we were there in Auschwitz. It's not that far.

I see. Do you remember what your feelings were on that train ride, what was going through your mind at that time?

The feelings? I tried to help my mother so much to put things together, because we were not prepared even to go.

You mean in terms of packing?

The packing.

Yeah. And God only knows we came there, and everything was lost, all our stuff.

I see.

I kind of felt how hard I worked all night on that train. And I tried to help so much my mother. And we got nothing. You know what I mean? And we came down there, and we just everything was staying down there. And of course, my mother and the rest of the kids, they will go to the gas chamber the same day.

I see. So that was the last time you saw?

Yeah.

During the separation.

Yes.

Did you have any idea of what was going to happen to them?

No, I didn't know. When I came to Auschwitz, I didn't know for quite a while what happened to them. My father did say, did you see your brother? I said, yes, marching by I saw him standing by the train. So why didn't you call him. I didn't know what was going on, and all this and there.

So when they said all the men go this way.

This way, I went between men. It's just by sheer luck. If I would think I mean that-- if I would think maybe, I thought maybe it would be better later on, maybe it would be better to stay with the kids and the women. You know what I mean as a child? But actually, that was my first ticket to life, just by a coincidence.

I see. When did you find out what happened to your mother and the rest of your family?

Well my father and me, we were staying together about three weeks. We were sleeping in the same bed. And I have a number my hand. It's 44915. And his number was 44916. And we were sleeping in the same-- we were sleeping in the same bed. Three of us were sleeping at the same bed.

When did they put the number on your arm?

The number? They didn't put on right away, because they were so busy the way I understand that they gave us a number which we had on the jacket, and one on the pants here. And they probably figured we wouldn't live that long to put on the number. But we had the number. We to go. That was our number. You know what I mean? I saw him once, and he at noon, we happened to work in the same place. And he would say to me, you better stay alive because your mother and the rest of the family might need you.

Because I will never be able to live here. It's impossible. You see what's going on? And we already find people who were there before us from my hometown. And they were most of them dead already since that time, they came the first transports. And whatever he saw, and he said, you better stay alive. You do the best you can to stay alive.

What were your first few weeks like at Auschwitz? What happened to you during those first few weeks?

When I came in down there and what I saw, that I thought that I am really dead. I thought I'm really in hell.

Well, what did you see that made you feel that way?

The way I saw that these people that were in charge, and other people, the kapos and blockaltestes, they were in charge-- the way they were beating up other people. And the way the people looked, they looked just bones, skeletons, walking. When you push one, 10 of them fall. They were so weak that beyond-- it's unbelievable.

When I saw all these people. And when I had to go, for instance, like in the toilet, I had to wait in a line of 40, 50 people ahead of me. And then my biggest problem was what's going to happen if I have to go to the toilet. All the time a line, and just seeing what was going on. I really thought that I'm dead. I'm just in hell.

What sort of place did you sleep in when you first got there? The sleep, we slept in a bed, in Auschwitz was beds only in Auschwitz.

Was it in a barracks?

It was yeah, it was a barrack. It was--

How many people, do you remember who were in the building?

The building, it was how many people it was, I would say probably around 500 people in the barrack.

Now which camp, do you know which camp this was?

This was the main Auschwitz.

This was the Auschwitz camp.

The Auschwitz camp which says in the front of it, Arbeit Macht Frei. And it was pretty nice in the camp. It was all concrete. And there was a band. There was maybe around 100 people were playing in the band when you marched in and you marched out.

see.

And it didn't look so bad by looking at it. You know what I mean? But this was really when after that, when they took it to Birkenau, which they used to call it Rajsko, too, by the name the Polish people used to call it, Rajsko. And the German people used to call it Birkenau, because this was called-- before that, it was called Rajsko.

And down there, it was already a different story. When I was first in Auschwitz, and I saw my father once about three weeks we were together. He was beaten up, and I kind of hide away, he shouldn't see me. Because I couldn't talk to him no more. I couldn't.

Did you see him beaten.

No. I just saw that he was beaten. He had marks on his face or something.

Was he living in the same barracks?

Yeah, we were sleeping in the same bed. But I could not bring myself to talk, because I just know that the way things are was, the way they were things were looking, that I wouldn't want to talk to him. I was hiding away not to see him. When I see him, I didn't want him to see me.

Well, did you want to avoid him having the embarrassment.

Yes. That was such a embarrassment that maybe three weeks before you were a person, and here you come in you were less than an animal. You were nothing. There was more pity for an animal than for a person. And I felt very bad.

So he was beaten?

The only thing, I did tell him, one time I told to him, dad, why were so cheap all the time? Why didn't you spend money?

But I never talked to him again anymore. So what happened is that--

Why did you ask him that question, do you remember?

Well, actually the money he saved, saved my life. Because the money he saved for us, I'm the only one who survived.

Well, how did it save your life?

Because when he bought us out to stay longer, I survived. If I would go with the first transport, I would never survive.

I see. So it was ironic that it worked that way.

So I felt that--

And was he--

--that he really, what he did, that he had enough money to pay to buy us out, that he saved my life. Because I could never made it before. Because it was like it happened, then when I got out there to the place they created a bricklayer school. And they took all the young people till about 20 or something like that, of the age I don't remember exactly. And they called me out a night before to stay in the barracks.

And they called my number. But I wasn't used to be called by the number. I didn't wake up. Woke up. But finally I did woke up and anybody who didn't woke up in time used to get 25 lashes, because you didn't have your number. And when I came and somehow these people felt so sorry for me because I was little and I was so young. You know I mean? I remember he gave me seven lashes. The guy, only seven.

This was what? A kapo or something?

Huh?

Was it the kapo?

Yes, the man. The blockalteste, the one who was in charge in the barrack. He's called the blockalteste. And I felt, boy, I only hope that my father didn't see that they were giving me seven lashes. And I went back, back in bed. He was sleeping in bed. And in the morning I stayed, and they took me away completely to another camp, to Birkenau.

And on there, we were there about 800 of us, youngsters.

I see. So how long were you in Auschwitz before they took you to Birkenau?

I was about three weeks in Auschwitz.

I see. And your father stayed behind?

He stayed behind and they took me to Birkenau, to that special school. It was called [NON-ENGLISH], bricklayer school. And we were 800 of us down there.

800.

800 youngsters.

In Birkenau?

In Birkenau.

And did you see your father again?

Never saw him again. I all the time you used to dream and dream, and like I see him here, I see him there, because all the time I watched. Maybe I could see him. I was there about three months in that place. And I got very, very sick. I got sick on typhus. And we had to carry two bricks at once I mean to that place, to teach now how to lay bricks. And I couldn't even carry two bricks. I couldn't do it. And it was the other guys who were in the school, in that school who were bigger and maybe older. And they helped me. You know what I mean?

And I used to constantly just fall asleep. They used to wake me up. And the guy used to hit me for it. And all the food,

whatever food I had, the little food they gave me for my portion, I couldn't eat. I was just-- something terrible used to happen to my head. And they were talking all the time about an aspirin, a Bayer aspirin I should get, which I never got it.

Were there other people who had typhus also?

Yes. Yes. And we didn't work at that time. They were only teaching us how to lay, but we most of us were very, very sick. And I know I was very sick. I couldn't walk. And I couldn't--

Well, was there any medical care at all?

No way, nothing.

You didn't see a doctor?

I didn't see no doctor. The only thing I know is that there was some kids who knew who were there already from the first transports, and they kind of took a liking to me because their uncle lived in my hometown. And they kept on telling me don't ever go on sick call. Whenever they say the sick, come out. Don't go. Just stay.

Because if you're going to go out on that sick call, you never come back. We didn't know exactly what was going on yet.

Yeah.

We didn't. We only know that they take you somewhere, and you never come back.

So you had some idea that they were--

Some idea.

--that they were executing people.

Yes. Yes. And I just--

How long were you there before you saw anyone actually killed?

Killed? I think I saw it every day when we were standing by to be counted in the morning and in the evening. I saw all the dead people had to lay in front of us. So I saw all the time dead people right away.

These are people who died from disease and--

Or killed by hand, or died from disease. And people who were going under-- Auschwitz were surrounded by electric wires, and about 8 to 10 feet tall. And if anybody went to these wires, they touch it, they got killed by themselves. And then after that it was white stones, and there was a big a big wall, a white wall all around Auschwitz. And I saw some people laying with their head split in half and all this.

And I saw right away people getting killed.

So this was fairly early on?

Yeah, right away getting killed people.

When you first came into the Auschwitz camp, you said you and your father were working together. What kind of work did they have you do?

Well, we did not ever work together in the same place. But one time we happened to have lunch at the same time and the same place we had.

I see. So you only saw him when you slept at night?

Slept at night, and one time I saw him at lunch.

What kind of work were you doing at that time?

At that time I was doing, well they were taking most people at that time, they were taken on trains. The trains came. You went to the railroad, to the trains. And they took you to a place. It's called Buna. It was some like factories or something. And they took me down there two or three times to work down there.

I see.

But most of the time I stayed in the camp and I worked around the camp, around they were building barracks. And I worked around, and cleaned the windows, and shoveling some garbage.

Were there other boys as young as you?

Yes, there were other boys. We were group, they were like me.

I see. And what was it like when you went to Birkenau? What sort of place did you stay in?

Well, we stayed in a better place than most other people. We were having our uniform the same thing like in Auschwitz, I mean the blue and white uniform. And most people down there, other people had civilian clothes with red stripes on their backs. And we were supposed to have been-- and if somebody at night, if somebody usually every night we were counted. And if somebody was missing, then they didn't know what happened to the person. We had to go out, the group I belong to that, to that school. And we had to go out and comb the area and find the person.

Maybe he's dead, he died or something. And just about every night, we had to go out and look for these people to find him dead or alive. That we had to come back.

What was the food like when you got to Birkenau?

The food, well, the food was all the time the same in Auschwitz, except it was all depends on the cadrÃ©, on the people who were in charge to distribute the food. Well, right there in 1942, the Christian people, the Gentiles who were there, were not allowed only a very small package to get from home. And so there were old-timers that were already there, some of them two years or three years. And they were in charge on the food.

And they made it so that instead of getting a fourth of a bread, which that was a fourth of the bread, we should have got. We got only a sixth or seventh. They gave us small portions. And the rest of it, they took it for themselves and for their friends.

So how much did you eat every day? What did you--

I eat very little at the beginning. But I was very sick. I couldn't even eat on the beginning.

I see. How did you survive the typhus? How did you get by that?

I just, without anything, I just got better by myself. I just all hanged in, and I used to faint, and the people would give me a little water somewhere here and there from a bottle. We had a glass bottle. And it just a miracle that I just got it over by myself. I was a very, very healthy person, a very healthy kid. My mother used to say all the time, I was very healthy, never have a headache in my life. And I was very healthy. I just survived.

But the other prisoners helped you through it with your work--

A little bit here and there, but the other people were dying an awfully lot, awfully lot.

Of the typhus?

Typhus. We were 800 in that school. By the end, I think maybe 95 survived.

Out of 800?

Yes, 95 survived. And we didn't work. We just died from doing nothing.

Well, how long did you stay in this bricklaying school?

Well, I was in the bricklaying school, I think I was three months. And then they came. One night, they said it was in the evening after they counted us, that the one group has to go here, and one group has to go there. And I finally choose, I didn't know which group to choose. I already felt better. I already felt I mean healthier. And I went with that-- but I was very weak. But I already ate. And I went with that group. And that group took us-- they took me back to Auschwitz.

Oh, I see.

Yes.

So you went back.

And I was very lucky because the other group who stayed, and the other group who stayed, all these people who stayed, they were taken experiments I mean to be castrated. And these other people who stayed they were taken, they took them all to a place for some castration. They had to do some kind of--

Experiments.

Experiment.

How did you find that out?

Well, when I was there in Auschwitz in Birkenau, I was already there in the other camp, and these people for some reason came to Auschwitz too later on, because they used to transfer us from one.

I see. So some of the people who had been in Birkenau with you--

Birkenau came to Auschwitz.

Came to Auschwitz and they told you.

And when they came, and they used to castrate them. In other words, they would call them out, and they would say. And I know all these people who stayed, they had them all already took them to some-- they did some kind of, I don't know what exactly. But these people, which I know before and they were castrated in Auschwitz.

Did they just sterilize them? Did they actually castrate?

They actually removed a testicle, one testicle and then they removed the second testicle. Some of them, they never had time to remove. The war was over. And when they started to remove the testicles, as far as I knew, it was in '44.

Did you see any evidence of that?

I saw the people.

You did see it?

The friends, yeah.

That they had done this to him?

They had done to them, yeah.

Because one time I was in the hospital in Auschwitz. I had pneumonia and I was very sick in Auschwitz with pneumonia. And I saw the other guy. And I said, what are you doing here? And he thought maybe I was castrated too. I say, I had pneumonia. And he says, well, I was castrated. And I know he was, that's what happened to him.

I see.

So you were among the group that went back to Auschwitz.

Back to Auschwitz.

What happened when you got back to Auschwitz?

I was a very lucky person compared to other people. And that's why probably I'm here. And I was there in that school again. And they were teaching us more how to how to about laying brick. And there one time, they came out. They came over and they said to the school that they have to have 70 people to go back to Birkenau to build crematoriums, you know, 70 bricklayers or something.

And when they said back to Birkenau, I just made up my mind that it's a terrible place to go, because I was there before. And I know how terrible down there it is. And we had awfully a lot of lice down there, so much lice. And all the time I used to just pick them out one by one all day long the lice. And when I came back to Auschwitz, they de-liced. We didn't have no more lice. They gave us new uniforms and they made sure that nobody has lice in Auschwitz at that time already.

Did you have a chance to bathe at all? We had no chance to bathe. But they used to take our clothes and put on a wire. And they took them into a place which they de-liced us. And all night we stayed naked. And all our clothes went to a oven or something which was very hot and when the clothes came back, they were really hot. I mean and killed all the lice.

So they said they need 70 men. And I went downstairs. And I had to go. They selected me to go to between the 70.

Did they tell you that they wanted you for the building of crematoriums?

Well no, they said they need 70 men to go, bricklayers. And there was this SS there downstairs. And I told him that I would very much want them to let me stay here in Auschwitz, because my father is here. But my father didn't live anymore.

When you got back, did you realize-- you realized he was gone?

Yeah, I find out that he is not there anymore.

How did you find out? Some of the--

I went to the hospital for some-- why I was going to the hospital. I fell down. And I had a swollen ankle. And the guy was there and he said he knew my father. And he knows that my father was taken to the gas chamber. He was very sick and he was taken away.

And I told this man, for this SS, please let me stay here. And he grabbed me by my jacket like, and he just lift me up and throw me down like a fly I was. I was very skinny and very little. And he told me I should get up. And I finally got up. And to my luck they counted and it was 71 people. So there was another man who was in charge. He was a kapo. He was a German. But he was a prisoner, a kapo. And he told me to go.

And I was saved to go back, not to go to Birkenau. And a lot of times since then I saw, I mean that sometimes when you go out and you speak for yourself and so on, that you could get maybe save yourself.

Were you scared that when you asked to stay?

I was very scared. But I asked him, and he really--

I see. Do you remember what your feelings were at the time that you learned that your father had perished?

Well, the feelings were by at that time I knew already that we're all going to go. And I was just waiting. The time is going to come when I'm going to go. But I said to myself that I'm going to stick around as long as possible there is. And I just want to see what's going to happen to the end.

So you at that point, you felt there was no really no hope of--

There was no hope. But I just want to see what's going to be. I just made up my mind that I'm going to see whatever I can. And I'll stick around. And I kind of had religion in me. And I kept on praying. And I kept on saying to myself, I'm not-- didn't nobody anything. I never did nothing to anybody. And I felt that somebody is going to save me, and somebody is going to be nice to me along the way.

And there was a lot of times that people were nice to me. I had that attitude that I know somebody is going to have pity on me. Somebody is going to--

Who was nice to you?

Well, there was another instance that in Birkenau when I was very sick, and they went to that place where they have all the sick people. And they took them to the gas chamber. And they find out that the trucks are not filled, it's not enough. So they came to the school to see how many sick people are in school. And I was very sick. And this probably was Mengele. And he came and he looked at me and he said he was going to take me.

And there was a man who was in charge. And he asked me to lift my trousers to see my legs, if they're swollen. But it happened that I was not, I was not swollen. My legs were not swollen. But I was very sick. But the legs were not swollen. And this man who was in charge, he was by the name of a guy, Miller was his name. He was he was a civilian. And he was in charge of that school.

He used to come in every day on a bicycle. And he would say to him, will you let him. Leave him alone yet. He might be OK.

Was this man friendly to you, this Miller?

That's the only time he said it.

Is that right?

And I used to see him the rest of the time while I was in Auschwitz here and there. He was all the time with that school.

Was he a German?

He was a German, yeah. And--

What made you think it was Josef Mengele who came? Did you know who he was?

I didn't know. But one time, I remember from now from seeing, I mean how I called the pictures, because when I was with pneumonia and I was in the hospital, and he came in to select people to go for the gas chamber.

So you did see--

I remember the way he looked.

You did see him at that time?

Yes, and I remember the way he looked and the way he was dressed, and tall and skinny. And he passed me by at that time. I kind of looked OK to him at that time.

Now once the 70 people were sent back to Birkenau, what happened to you? You stayed in the Auschwitz camp.

I stayed there in Auschwitz.

OK.

And what did you do?

And things were getting better in Auschwitz. The Gentile people were allowed to get as many as packages as they want. They used to get very big packages. And perhaps even Jewish people, if they had somebody to send them a package, they could have got it.

Now there were Gentiles in the camp with you?

Yes.

And who were they? Why were they there?

Well, there was a lot of Polish people who were there for all kinds of reasons.

Were they communists or something?

They were communists. They were against Nazis. And they were intellectuals.

Resistance?

Yeah, Resistance. And they were in charge mostly on us. And there was a lot of German people who were, they took them out from the prisons of Germany. And they were in charge. And they have the biggest jobs, the big jobs. They used to and they were actually professional gangsters, you know, I mean killers and things like that. And they enjoyed to kill people. They enjoyed to have power.

Did you see them do this?

They looked to me that they really enjoyed, that they really had a life of their time, the way they were dressed, and they were dressed different. They allowed them to have their hair. And they used to give them a black jacket, which was a

very shiny black jacket. And their uniforms were spotless. And they had separate rooms, a room for themselves. And they had a private barber, and the private this. And they were in charge.

In charge of what? Of the prisoners?

Of the prisoners, of the rest of the prisoners.

They supervised the work for the people?

They supervised the work. They supervised the barracks. And they were in charge.

Did you see them beat people, kill people?

Yes, I saw them, yeah, many times. They were beating. They used to-- there was yet in Birkenau way back, down there, there was a guy by the name of Albert. He used to wake us up at night. And he would have a speech. And God knows what he was talking about. And I remember I had to go so bad to the toilet. And if we would walk out, then they would leave with his man, his helper, they will knock you down on the floor. And they would have a big stick, and then put it across your throat, and they just killed you.

And I remember that I was praying to God whenever he's going to stop speaking and shut the light so, I could walk out and go.

Who were the Jewish people that you were in the camp with? Were they from different countries?

The Jewish people at that time, in the school was a lot of French Jewish people.

In the bricklaying school?

The bricklaying school, French.

I see.

French and from Slovakia.

And how did you communicate with the French people?

Well they--

Did they speak Yiddish?

Some of them spoke Yiddish. They spoke. Some of them spoke German, Polish mostly spoke Yiddish and German. And some of them spoke Polish. Because somehow, they took the first one from France who were from Poland, and lived in France or some kind. I don't know exactly the way they--

I see, so they were Polish Jews living in France.

Yes, Polish Jewish, or they lived in France. And if their parents were from Poland, or they were from Poland. And they--

Were they religious Jews in any way?

I don't think so.

I see.

I don't-- well, once we were there, you didn't know who was religious and who was not religious.

Well, did you have a chance to practice your religion in any way when you got to Auschwitz?

Practice the religion?

Practice your religion. Did you have a chance to observe the--

Well, you couldn't. You had no book, a prayer book. You had nothing. Do you want to pray by yourself without anything, or there was no such thing as praying.

There were no secret prayers that were held in the barracks or anything like that?

Later on, I used to see in 1944. There used to be a place. We used to go out and the people would pray, later on in 1944 in Auschwitz, yeah.

Did you pick up some French from these prisoners?

Yes, I picked up some French, because the cadrÃ©, the guy, the German man who was in charge, he made all the people his assistants were all French Jewish people. And I picked up some French. And they called my number in French. You know, like [NON-ENGLISH] And some of them, some French people were just about the same time came to Auschwitz when I came. My number is 44,000. Their number used to be 42,041 and 40. They were a little bit before me they came. Some of them came a little bit later than me. But I was a lot surrounded by French Jewish people at that time and the Slovak Jewish people.

I see. And was it the same when you got to Auschwitz? Were you were primarily with Slovak Jews?

The Slovak Jews, primarily. Slovak Jewish, most all of Slovak Jewish and French, and the other Jewish--

Were there any non-Jews in the barracks in Auschwitz?

In the barracks? Well there were non-Jewish but they were in charge.

Oh, the people in the charge.

The people in charge. They might have been sleeping somewhere around. You know around there, but they were in charge. We did have a one, I remember we had one Polish Jewish person I remember down there. He was an old-timer probably, because he was already in charge. But most of it was Slovakian and French Jewish people.

OK. When we continue with our discussion, we'll talk a little bit more about what happened to you after you returned to Auschwitz from Birkenau. So we'll take a little break right now, and pick up again.

OK, thank you.