

Lean back.

OK. I just want my pad--

Right.

Have we started?

Yeah.

OK.

This is Harry Weinberg. Today is November 5. Mr. Weinberg, if you'd be good enough to begin by talking about your boyhood and your family and how things were in your country of origin. And from there, we'll progress through time. OK?

My name is Harry Weinberg. I was born in 1916 in Bezovce, Slovakia. When I was about four, the family moved to Uzhhorod, the capital of Ruthenia, or Podkarpatska Rus.

When I was about 4 and 1/2, they took me to cheder, or Hebrew school. At 6, I started public school. It was a Jewishly kept school. And language was Ruthene, Ukrainian or Ruthenian. I went to school for four hours in the morning, went home for lunch. In the afternoon, I had to go back to Hebrew school till about 6:00.

When I was enlisted to the high school, I had to get up every morning at 4 o'clock, go to the temple, pray and study, come home, run to school. After lunch time, back to Hebrew school, came home around 5:00. And nearly every day, I had to chop the wood for the next winter.

Beside that we always had three or four hour homework from our regular school. As you can see, my boyhood was spent all studying, all working. If I had extra time, I had to help out in the store.

Can you tell me a little bit about your family? How many children there were? What your father--

Yes, I was 1 of 10 children, 7 girls and 3 boys. It was a very loving and close knit family. And I suppose that's what took me to a happy boyhood because I never had a toy in my life. It was always work, always study. But when the Shabbat came, the Saturday came, and everybody sat in a beautiful room, the nice white tablecloth and the snow coming down through the curtains, beautifully, slowly, and so peaceful and quiet. And everybody had a book and reading or studying.

When I was about 11 years old, we were happy in spite the population was very antisemitic and very rude. I never could go by on the street without yelled "Jew, you kill God." "Jew, go to Palestine." One morning I was going to school, a Gentile boy about my age came along and stabbed me with a rusty knife. I was about a half a year in the hospital to have blood transfusion.

This was about 1928 then?

About, yes. And I went around with my father all the schools to find the boy. He was in the neighborhood. But it seemed they moved away or something they heard about it that I was looking for them.

When I finished the high school, work was very hard. I was between the youngest. The girls finished school at 14, 15. They all had to go out work, millinery or dressmaking. Everybody brought home the money. Here's money. Here's the money.

My mother worked very hard. She got up every morning at 4:00. She had to bake and cook, darn everything, scrub the

floors. And beside that, she had to go to the business because father was out shopping, getting the merchandise.

Were Jews able to freely hold businesses in those days?

Yes, in those days. It was a lot-- it was very easy for the Jewish community, even with the hatred around us, because the Czech government was very liberal and protective. We had equal protection at the law.

My mother's only joy was Saturday afternoon when the three oldest girls dressed up beautifully, going out to show themselves on the promenade. And she was going on her toes because they were gravel in the yard. They showed here. And as I was very young, I was always watching my mother what she is doing.

And she went to the gate. And standing there, and the beautiful smile on her face, that was her only joy in life, the children. Otherwise, was only work.

When I finished high school there was at 14. It was a complete education in Europe. Then you can go out in the world. You had an education, maybe as good as college here.

But you decided to pursue it further?

I intended to pursue some-- always had ideas, doctor, lawyer. I couldn't decide, engineer, whatever, even a painter. I was very good in painting. My high school teacher came over to my parents they should send me to academy for painting. My father said, what? Do you want to starve? All the painters starve. So that was the end of that.

But at 14, my father insisted I have to go to yeshiva. He took me to the local rabbi. And the rabbi said to me, well, now you'll have to put on a round hat, black hat. And you have to burn all your books. And then I'll accept you as a student.

And I don't know where I got the nerve to say, well, rabbi, I came here to study a little to know what Jewish life is all about. I intend to pursue my studies further. So I won't burn my books. If you want me as I am, fine. If not, I'm going out and I'm going right away to school. So I suppose I didn't give him any choice. He said, all right, you can stay.

After the first semester, there is always exam. And there was a part of the Talmud that had only three lines and all the other was commentary from the Rambam, Maimonides. And we studied for weeks. It was very hard to understand because all philosophical.

So the exams, rabbi asked one, two, three. Nobody knows it. And he says, not for the 200 boys? And boys, boys are people 30 years old students. No one is here who can explain what it's all about?

Put up my hand. And I come up here on the podium. And I recited the whole thing. He said, you see, I didn't want to take this little boy to the shul because he didn't have the right hat. You be ashamed of yourself.

So I studied there for about a year. And then, my father had an idea that he is an adherent, a Hasid, of the Munkácser, Munkácsér rabbi. I have to go to his rabbi to study.

I had quite a shock at the first Friday evening sermon when I heard the rabbi calling fellow Jews, who maybe they were Zionists or Aggadist or Mizrachi, which I was secretly too, really cursing them, condemning them, and condemning Palestine. Now, after what happened years later, that I went through the Holocaust, and I see all my best friends and families die in the concentration camps, I really think most of the blame can be put on those rabbis who kept back the Jewish population from going to Palestine.

When I was growing up, it was going up a new generation, highly educated, idealistic, most of them belong to Zionist-- different kind of Zionist organization. And they were willing to go and build a new land. And these rabbis kept them back.

And, of course, we, in Europe, father said, you can't go. That was it. You can't go.

And I think the history of Israel would have been different because we would have had a majority. They would have let these people go in time where they could go. They could have been a majority. Maybe they could have taken in more Jews. And it was trouble. And there was a need to have a land where to go.

I was in that yeshiva for half a year again. But I never went back to the sermons, Friday evenings. And I came back, and I insisted I want to have a modern yeshiva where it's more freedom to think and to do what you want.

So first, my brother-in-law had a textile store in Michalovce. And he had a manufacturer in Galanta. And he persuaded me that that's a very good yeshiva. So I went there. I was there for one year.

Then that wasn't modern enough. So I decided to go to Bratislava. That's Pressburg yeshiva. And that was a place where mostly rabbi's children were studying.

The reason for it was that the congregations in the '30s already demanded that rabbi should also know something about worldly issues, not only about Judaism or about the Torah. Custom was in Europe that the son inherited the rabbinate from the father. So those children who knew there would be rabbis came there. And there was a possibility in evening schools to advance yourself and to finish colleges.

So you were able to pursue secular studies there?

Secular studies. But for three years, it was impossible because they gave you board and you had to go to all the lectures and to all the studies and all the exams. So you didn't have time for other studies. But after three years, you were exempt from all these thing. And that was, I suppose, done primarily so the boys, or the men, have time to go out and pursue their own studies. And they had enough to eat and where to live.

I always wondered where that money comes from. There were hundreds of students and very good meals. And one of the holidays, I wasn't able to go home because I didn't have enough money. And I stayed in for the new year in Bratislava. In the temple, the most prominent Jews-- and there was such a beautiful community in that Pressburg. It's just unbelievable, every Saturday afternoon, all the temples were full, people studying. And you never could tell they are Jews-- no beards and no kaftans. They were just beautiful Jews.

On that holiday, they called to the Torah about 300 people. The custom is that you read a verse. And then somebody else comes. But they read one word. And somebody else came. And these people donated hundreds of thousands of koruna to the yeshiva. And then I realized that's what the money comes from.

How long were you at the yeshiva? When did things--

Yeshiva, I was still '38 till Chamberlain and Hitler decided that Czechoslovakia will be divided.

What happened then?

And that part of the country that my family lived became Hungary. And Bratislava was in Slovakia. So I had to come home. And as my parents were quite elderly, we, the younger children, took over the store. But we couldn't manage on our own because there were new laws that Jews can't own stores. So there was a acquaintance, the wife of the railroad-- because we had to go to the railroad station constantly for merchandise because we had a wholesale business.

And we got to know the railroad manager. And he suggested that his wife, of course, become a partner. We have to give her half of the profits. She became a partner. And the business was running on her name.

So she became the front for the business?

For the business.

Were there many people who made that kind of an arrangement-- Most--

Many Jews who made that--

Whoever wanted to stay in business had to do that. Otherwise, they just--

Had to make an arrangement with a non-Jew--

Right.

--in order to stay in business.

Right.

So was there any risk involved in doing that?

No, because they knew. And there was no risk because they knew that the only way that they will have merchandise and food to eat if the Jews stay in business. All they wanted-- or to give bribes to the officials or give the Gentile population the half share.

So we took over the management of the store and was going pretty well, even better than before because the city was included in Hungary by all the villages. The surrounding neighborhood was cut off. That stayed Czechoslovakia. That meant that we had no choice but to go to Hungary to get the merchandise, the food.

And because that woman was so prominent, she got the only permit. So we were the only ones who brought in-- like on a Saturday-- on a Friday, we used to bring in 600 to 700 fattened geese. This for the Jewish population. They used that for the set of lard, or Crisco.

Then in '39, end of '39, all the Jewish men, young Jewish men had an order to report in Mukachevo in the barracks that we are taken into the army. We arrived. We were equipped with Hungarian military clothing. And we started to drill.

And it seems there was some confusion because a week later, there came an order that we are not soldiers. We are labor camp inmates and all the restrictions and-- we worked all over Europe. We worked in Yugoslavia. We worked in Romania, in Hungary, in Podkarpatska Rus, mainly building roads in quarries to bring the stones for the roads.

We built railroads. We had to carry those heavy tracks. And we got orders to build a railroad without any equipment, even not a measure. We had to fill up first the embankment where the rail was put down. We didn't even have to make the ground even, like a measurement like a water measurement. So I was the one who went around to the boys a little more a little less, grading down.

We had to build in [NON-ENGLISH] a second line so the Germans can-- was only one line running. And they had to go through. They wanted to store some carloads on the side. So we had to build tracks, new tracks.

They didn't even give us the measurement, how much wide the tracks should be. So we took a piece of wood and just measured the one on the track, put it to the other one. We built that track for about two years. Then the management from Budapest came out with the engineers. And they went through with the locomotive because you had to have-- this was very complicated to go for one railroad to the other one, one track to the other one. I don't know what they call the--

Switch.

You had to switch.

Switch.

They went through it. And it was perfect. Because we were very young, mostly 16, 17, 20 years old ones, we are still strong enough. The food wasn't very fancy, but adequate. It was beans without butter, and potatoes without butter. But we filled up our stomachs. And we still go on working.

Were your lives at all at risk? Did you feel very insecure? Or--

We didn't feel insecure because we knew the families there, and we still could get letters once in a while. And the hope was always there that they will send us home. In fact, we had to be in the camp only two years. And then an order came that we have to go home.

But we had a very vicious colonel, Hungarian colonel. We were all under the Hungarian command. The enlisted men were mostly-- I think it was done on purpose-- primitive people, couldn't read and write. We had to write their letters to their girlfriends, read when they come-- the letters came back.

After the heavy work, all day long from 6:00 in the morning till 7:00 in the evening. We came home, instead to let us eat first, they would let us run for 3, 4 miles or push-ups 100 times. And I think they liked the idea that here is a man who is primitive and he can-- these all these educated people mostly started college already-- he felt that they are something because he puts us down, because we are Jews.

Was there any chance for any kind of Jewish observance? You had come from--

Yes--

--a yeshiva.

There, if you wanted to, I suppose you could. People get up an hour earlier. If you had to be 6 o'clock out in the yard, you got up at 5:00 and you put on the tefillin. The food was non-kosher, of course. But at the same time, in the beginning, they gave you a little bit of a square of pork fat, which those days I didn't know. But now I know that would have kept alive because that's the calories in it.

And I just couldn't bring myself to it to eat it. I just gave it-- I just no way, even today, I just can't eat it. I think I'm brainwashed because you are taught as a child this is it and that's it.

So they were very brutal and hard work. But the knowledge that the family is still home and get letters-- and it came a time after two years that we got a weekend, different people got a weekend to go home. But the man I'm talking about, the last commander, we always-- let's say I was responsible for 50 boys. It was like an army. Like I would be a sergeant or something equivalent. I was getting orders what to do, and I had to execute the order with the boys.

And the bookkeeper and the cook and all these were very good friend of mine. We were many years together. So the cook came over once and says that I am writing down in the books that you went to the baths and we paid 300 pengo. And we didn't take a bath for two years. He was stealing all the money. He put it on the books.

He gave us pork meat. We didn't see ever any meat, not even horse meat. He is giving us beans, potatoes, every kind of thing. All he fed us for two years was lentils, morning lentils, noon lentils, no salt, no butter, full of gravels. I suppose he bought the cheapest there on the market.

And when he told-- he told us, if we finish the railroad, he will give us a big meal. He will kill a pig. And we'll have a celebration.

We finished the railroad. Everything was perfect. And there is no meat. There is no meal.

And then one of the boy came and says the colonel is on the station with plenty of suitcases, and I think he is taking home the pork to Budapest. I went out myself, and I see them standing there. So I let everybody sign a petition sending to the command what he's doing, that we are all getting dirty and he doesn't give us the bath and he's stealing all that

stuff.

So after about two weeks, there came an order that we have to go-- we are dismissed. We have to go home. But he had some very good connections in Budapest. And they reversed the order. And we have to go-- he arranged it that we should go to Romania. There was a rumor that there is a very vicious Hungarian unit on the border. They are killing all the Jews. And he arranged for us to be sent to that unit.

A commission came out from Budapest about that petition that we sent in. And the men came-- the general came in front of us, all right, anybody knows something was going on, stand forward. Everybody is quiet.

And I just stand out. And my commander comes and get back to the line. So the general said, come into my office. There I told him that we signed it and all that stuff.

So in the evening after the general left, he made a circle. He was in the middle. And he was going on, raving and ramping all kind of stuff against the Jews. None of us will survive. He will show it to us, go and complain against him.

About two weeks later, they loaded us up on a railroad. And they took us to Romania. We arrived at 4 o'clock in the morning. We had still something from home on our bags, some covers and shirts and pajamas. And he let us stand there till 4 o'clock in the afternoon in attention. It was a very hot summer. And some passed out.

At 4 o'clock, he gave us the order to march. We had to go 40 miles into the mountains. We arrived. And he was in the back of the guard. And I was in the back. And he kept telling me, you bastard Jews, none of you will survive. I will show you.

We arrived in the village where we had to go. And there was one little room. He had four layers of cut prepared for us. And it was very heavily rain. We're soaked. And some of the boys were in the chicken coop wherever just to hide from the rain.

6 o'clock in the morning, he comes out and starts to yell at the sergeant, how come we are still inside? We have to clean up the yard. He said, we don't have any utensils. We don't have anything to do with it. They should do it with their claws, with the fingers. We have to go down and get out of the grass, to pull out the grass.

About 8 o'clock, a local commander arrived. And he said to the men, where are the accommodations? He come in, he says, what do you think about? How can 200 people live here?

He was a general, the one. Go right away. Get out all these people here the neighborhood. Get them out and-- these people have to work. And they have to have decent accommodation. So right away he knows what's wrong because he see something isn't right here.

So he took us out to the work. And they didn't have the shovels and all stuff to start digging. And again, he said, we have to go down and do it with our hands to dig out the stuff. When he left, the local people-- it was another unit there. The Russians were already advancing. And that vicious unit, the Hungarians were pulled back, and only local Hungarians were working there. And these people brought us bread and potatoes. Instead of a bad time, we had a really very good time there.

So about a week later, a new commander arrived to replace this one, the one who fed us with the lentils. We had to line up on the yard. And the new man comes along. We had-- four of us had to stand in the front. He comes along and shakes hands and like with the Hungarian style-- shakes hands with us. And the guy got right in the face of the other one and turned around and just left.

Now, this guy was pretty good. He told me all the thing was going on in the neighborhood. They're taking away the Jews and what the Christians are doing. He was a Christian himself. But he was a very liberal man.

Then we suddenly had an order we have to start marching back because the Russians were advancing. We marched

about 1,000 miles, always stopping. If there was a little Russian stopped, we had to build the fortifications. We started advance. We went there. It took us about half a year till we arrived in Budapest.

About what year was this?

Pardon?

About what--

It was in 1944.

1944.

Right. All these years we were working all over.

And did you have any knowledge of what was going on--

Nothing at all--

--at that time in the world?

Nothing at all.

No.

We have seen in Romania far away, we have seen a railroad blocked. And they had those windows for the cattle. And they had wirings on it. And some people yelling something Romanian. But we didn't know they are Jews. We didn't understand Romanian. And those were the cars that he took Romanian Jews to Auschwitz.

But you had no idea--

No idea--

--that was a world war going on?

That we knew, of course.

That you knew.

We didn't have-- we knew because the Russians are coming. So we didn't have any papers. But here and there a snatch when they were talking with themselves, the Hungarians, we had an idea. And then seeing that we are coming back, and we hear the bombardments.

And we always was praying to get captured by the Russians. We think that will be a paradise because we knew communism from the books. Even we had a border in 1938, we became neighbors to the Russians, the first time in history.

We still didn't know what's going on in Russia because completely sealed. In fact, we had the wholesale place. And my parents had to go out buying merchandise all over the neighborhood. And many of these very intelligent boys, very educated boys, unfortunately believed in communism because they said this is the only way out for Judaism because this is equality. Everybody is equal.

When the Hungarian army came in, they were all captured and very terribly tortured. So my brother always had to go with the truck to the border, to Uzhok was the border town. He always took three or four boys as helpers. We had to

write it down that he takes helpers with him. There, we had a man, and he was paid a sum. And he took these boys over to Russia secretly.

My brother was coming home and telling the parents, they are safely over. Oh, everybody is happy because now they are safe. I tell you the story later what happened to those boys.

What happened in Budapest?

In Budapest, we were assigned to unload the barges from the Donau, in the port. The Russians were advancing. There was a sugar factory downstream from the Donau. And they were sending home the barges with the sugar. Also, the local officials who could manage, they sent home their furnishings and their belongings to Budapest. And our task was to take those things out of the port.

When I was first assigned to it, I said to the port manager, well, I have to go for one ship to the other ship to supervise these people, and that's quite a distance. And I might be stopped what am I doing here. I'm lose. I'm walking around. So he gave me a permit that I can freely walk in Budapest, not in the port, but in Budapest.

Now, a few days after we start to work, they have over about 3,000 to 4,000 Hungarian Jews, children, women, old men, with their hand ups and were taken with the soldiers across the bridge to Buda. There was a concentration camp where they gathered them to send them away to Auschwitz. As I was still in that Hungarian outfit, and when I was younger I didn't look Jewish at all, just took off my yellow band.

And I walked in and looked around and saw they didn't see. I put my arm around a girl and I took him in the public toilets and say, stay here till they are gone, and went out again, another girl and another girl. And I saved about 6 to 7 that way. When they marched away, then I took them in. They walked away, back to the Swedish homes.

Can you tell me how you first became aware of the exempted homes, the Swedish homes?

Yes. So the American planes started to bomb the neighborhood. And they gave us permission to hide in those nearby homes on the port. As we were working in that sugar barges, everybody filled up their pockets. And we went out. There was a grocery, and we sell, very good money because it was completely shortage. There was no sugar in the city, which money came very handy later on in our lives.

And we usually stayed in the doorway of these buildings. And somebody was curious, I go see who is there. And then I realized, talk to the people that they are the Swedish homes exempted from deportation by Wallenberg. So anytime after that, I told the boys, anybody see something that belongs to the kitchen, any food, just break open the boxes and take it out. So I was carrying it in those houses.

Then I also ventured out into the city. I see a big line standing. It would have been 500 people standing in line in front of a bakery. So again, as a soldier, I had a privilege to go in without a line. So I went in. I said to the baker, listen-- I talk Hungarian. It was easy-- we are starving. Our people here, they are starving in the houses. They have one hour to go out for shopping. By the time, they come out in the afternoon, everything is gone anyway. You hear the Russian cannons already. The Russians come in. I will protect you that you have these Jews.

So he gave me a few sacks of bread every day. And I was carrying it into these places. In fact, in one place, I found a lady who had a candy store in my city, Mrs. Gross. And she begged me, stay here, surely nobody will touch you. I said, well, I have 200 boys with me, my family. There's no way that I would even think of it to stay home.

Then once when the air raid was going on, a young man came along. And he took one of the boys aside. And he whispered something to him.

The boy came back. I said, what is it all about? What does he want? He said, oh, the guy is crazy. He told us they will kill us all. We should run away.

We didn't imagine it's possible what will happen later on. We just-- the mind can't comprehend it that something like this can happen. We didn't want to believe it.

When I was still at home, a man came to the city. And my family took him in from Vienna. And he was telling horror stories. And we didn't believe him either. We always said, no, it couldn't be. This man is out of his mind. He told us that people are killing and concentration camps, all kinds of stuff.

Now, I took in about four or five people because there were rumors going on that they are taking all the labor camp inmates to Auschwitz. But I felt secure because that manager of the port, I got very friendly with him because I always brought him-- he gave me the attache case. And I always brought him some sugar from the barges.

Were you identified as a Jew at that point?

Of course.

You were?

Yeah, sure.

You were wearing your yellow star?

I had the yellow-- yeah, we had the yellow-- not the star. We had the yellow band because we were soldiers.

Soldiers.

And I told him that I heard rumors that they were taking us to Poland. And he said, well, I have very good connections. Anytime you have any inkling that they might take you, let me know or phone me, and I will arrange you that you will stay here. I will claim that you are very important to us. You are doing very good work. And OK--

But in spite of that, there were some boys who said I don't want any more, I just want to escape. So three boys I took to the Swedish consulate. We heard about the Swedish consulate takes in people. I went in the consulate. There were quite people-- they had cots on the floor in all the rooms. They stay there.

And I had a friend of mine there also. And he also said, stay here, you are safe here in Swedish consulate. I said, no, I'm sorry, I'm pretty safe outside. And people, other people who are in danger can come and stay here.

So in other words, in 1944 in Budapest, you had quite a few opportunities to escape?

To escape, sure, yeah. I could have gone in any of the Swedish house and stayed there because--

Or sought refuge in the Swedish consulate.

Right, right. As I said, I went out, and I bought a sack of bread. I could sit down and have bread for myself for weeks, even if it gets hard or whatever, right. So one afternoon, the bookkeeper went out with a sergeant for supplies. And we all knew that he is very good friends with the sergeant.

And the sergeant came back by himself, and the boy stayed outside. And we knew if the boy, who is secured, has a guard, his own sergeant, he escapes, something is terribly wrong. Went in the office, and I said to the colonel, I have an idea, I have a fear that the group will be taken to Poland.

No way. Who gives you these ideas? No. No. No.

I said, well, the manager of the port promised me something happens that I should let him know or call him. Can I use the phone? No, you don't have to do that. Tomorrow morning, I promise you personally I go there with you, and we will

talk about it.

At 3 o'clock in the morning, the camp was surrounded by Hungarian army. We had all to line up. They took us out to the railroad station. And we were counted. We are exactly enough, the number that he gave them.

They jammed us 100 in a railroad car, in a cattle car. And he didn't say even the hell with you. Just turned that way and walked off.

By that time, the Germans took over the command. They locked those-- they locked the cars. For 2 and 1/2 days, we were without food, without water, without able to go-- to have our needs. Finally, we arrived in Austria on the border. Then they opened up the cars. And they gave us water.

Next morning, they put us back in the car. And they took us back on the Hungarian side. It seemed the Russians stopped for a while. In a village called Bucsu, they lined us up in front of the train. And the German came along. And he says, who is the commander here of the 50 people?

I was afraid to step out because I had enough of responsibility. And I don't know what will happen in Germany. So I kept quiet. So the boy said-- then he asked, anybody knows German? And most of them didn't because they were all from Hungary. They didn't even know Yiddish.

So the guy comes pointed me out, I was the commander. He comes over, he says, [GERMAN]? Yes. Say, all right, and you will be the commander, responsible for 50 people.

After the first curfew in the village-- they took us to a village. And they accommodated us in a barn. It was quite cold already. And the barn had the boards quite apart, just a board in an empty space and a board. And the wind was blowing through it. Well, at least we had something over our head.

Overnight, the man who was responsible for four of us-- we had over us another Jewish boy who was responsible for four of us. He took the order, gave us to us. And we had to execute the order. He tried to escape. And they caught him, and they shot him.

In the morning, the commander had to have somebody to give the orders. He lined us up, the four, and points to me, you will be the one who will take orders from me, because I knew German. He took us out to the working place. He gave us the plans, how the bunkers should face, how the trenches should run from one bunker to the other one, and come on doing it.

It was very easy for me because I was working on that stuff for nearly four years. So I made the measurements with a cord. And that was it.

The other companies who I didn't know, other 200 people, other groups, they had mostly Hungarian, all the Jews, who were manufacturers who had money and could pay for the job because this way you didn't have to work. You just had to supervise. And these people didn't have any idea how to start. So the German engineer, civilian who was overseeing the work, he had to do all the job and measure things. And he was mad like crazy because he has to do the job.

Around noon time, my commander came over to me and says, I want to go and visit my friends at other group, which was about a mile away. Come with me. I start to walk. And he says, you know we are in trouble. The German army, we are retreating. And the Russians are advancing.

And I assumed that he wants to put a trap for me to see what I am-- how I feel, what I will say. So I said, well, don't worry about it, we will regroup, and I'm sure the Germans will win the war. He looks at me and says, listen to me, I am a plain carpenter from Sudetenland, which was Czechoslovakia. And I suppose that was already humane because he had seen humane people there. I was drafted to come here. I didn't volunteer. I know that the only way that you will survive, you and the other boys will survive, if we lose the war. So you can talk to me straight, the way you feel, what you think about the war.

So I still wasn't too sure what's going on. The next day, we are again going to the other company. And the planes came along and dropped leaflets, they should give up, the Germans. So he was scared just as me to pick up a leaflet because that was a death sentence.

He said, go in the woods and see if nobody sees you. Pick up a leaflet. And go in a bunker. Then, I'll come after you.

He came after me. We read the leaflets in German to give up and what will happen to them, they kill all the Jews and all that stuff. About two weeks later, he had one day-- we were working pretty hard, all these bunkers. It was then snow started to come down. But at least we were in the open, and we had still some meals. They were nourishment. But at the same time, we are young and working hard. We still thought we are starving.

And my best friend who-- you had to have to always, two men together, because everybody had a cover. And we arrived in the woods or in a field. It was raining or mud or snow. You had to lay down and sleep. We were marching. So the only way to keep warm that you put one blanket down and with one you covered. And the body kept warm.

So you had a buddy system, and you looked after each other.

So the friend with whom I was partner, he was the medic, was nearly finished the college. So he knew what's medicine. And there were some of the boys who were all lazy or weak. And they claimed, I where I'm sick today. They all came around, I'm sick.

And I was sitting there. And I look at them because I was next to this medic. And I looked at the boys. And I saw, well, it's not too bad. They complain all kind-- you know you make up all kinds of diseases.

So I said to them, you know what? I'll make the list who is sick. According to alphabet, every day 10 people will stay home. I told the cook to boil water. These people had to wash their underwear, had to delouse themselves, had to wash themselves.

And I said to them, in the evening, if I come home, because it was cold and everybody was under the blanket, was a little warmer, if you are too lazy to get up, if I come home, are not clean, you won't get supper. It happened once only. And I thought to myself, well, I make an example that I wouldn't give him. So I didn't give him for an hour to eat. And then, I was so sorry for him. So he got a meal anyway.

But this way, the boys were out in the fresh air. And they were clean. So I could keep the company, the unit, a little bit in order.

Then about two or three weeks later, the commander, the German commander, had a leave for a weekend. And he said, you talk Hungarian? Yes. Will you come over with me to the peasant woman where I live and will you interpret what I want her to give me? Because in Bohemia, in Sudetenland, where he lived was completely nothing. He wanted some lard. He wanted grain. He wanted paprika, whatever--

To bring home to his family.

So I went over with him. And I look around, a very wealthy family, farm family. I don't know where I had the idea that I could do that, but I said to the peasant woman in Hungarian, you know we are starving here. And you hear again the same story. You hear the cannons. We have some money. We don't want for nothing. But will you be willing to sell us some potatoes, beans, so we can have a meal?

Now I'm telling the story only to show that if the-- mostly the Germans claim that they had orders. They couldn't help it. They had to do what they got the order from the Nazis. If you were willing to help and you had a human soul, there was plenty could do to help people.

How was this commander able to help you in that instance?

OK, now, first, I talk to the woman. And she says, all right, if you pay for it, you willing to pay for it, of course, we will sell it to you. The commander came back. And little by little, I started to lead him into you know we are starving. We don't have anything. And then I said, you know I talked to that peasant woman. And she is willing to sell us some food. She said, all right, I will think it over.

Now, I didn't have an idea what he has on his mind because maybe I would have retracted the whole thing because a few days earlier a young man from Hungary-- his name was Altman. He was in the yard. And the next neighbor-- because we were in the middle between two neighbors, between two farms-- the next door neighbor handed him a piece of bread. And the engineer, a civilian engineer, had seen it.

They took him out in the woods. They took with them-- the reason I know about it because they took four boys from my unit. They shot the man. And the four boys had to bury him.

In the evening, it was quite dark, already dark. We had to put out all the lights. I said a few words as form of commemoration. And we made a pledge that every January the 2nd we will say Kaddish for that boy. It shows you that we have no idea what's coming. There will be so many Kaddishes that it's impossible to say Kaddish for everybody. We already were in their clutches, the Germans, and we still didn't know what's going on.

The man, the commander, comes back in the afternoon-- in the evening. And he says, I talk to the guard at the gate. And he will let us out and back again. But we have to hurry up because in a little while he will be exchanged with somebody else.

Went over to the peasant woman. And that German man took a sack of beans. And I had a sack of potatoes on my shoulders. And we had to walk half of the village. Lucky, there was no lights in the village.

And we brought it in. And I divided it-- we had those aluminum dishes that we got our food. So everybody had a dish of beans and a dish of potatoes.

Next morning, we went out to the work. He told me, tell the boys to bring it out to the work place. We went out. And he said, now, we have to go away because I'm not allowed to see that what you are doing. Tell them to make a fire and cook this stuff, the potatoes or whatever we had.

That was going on for about two weeks, always going out and bringing some stuff in. Then the last time I went out and I said, we need some more. Well, we are out of potatoes. We are out of beans, no more. So I said, do you have any wheat? Yes, we have some wheat.

So I said to the German, how can we get the wheat to the mill and make some bread. He said, I'll take it. That German, I have seen him from the yard. We could see because he had to walk by.

The mill was about two miles out of the village. He put the two sacks of wheat on a sleigh. He pulled it himself. He was, I suppose, afraid to confide--

To trust somebody--

Trust somebody else to help him. He pulled it over to the mill. Then I see him coming back with the flour. In the evening, he came in and he says, tomorrow morning, you know where I live. Stand up the company in front of my gate. As we had to be early up 4 o'clock in the morning, we had to be in line. He was running in and out of that yard with big loaves of bread under his coat and giving it to the boys.

After a while, the boys said to me-- every time he wanted to go away. He didn't want to be present when they cooked. So the boys told me, you look like a father and son walking together. It was just unbelievable that something like this, there will be a man risk his life. Because if they catch us, both of us are shot. I mentioned that piece of bread. They shot somebody for a piece of bread.

So one day we were-- that was later-- now, one day in the afternoon, he comes in and he's all upset about it. They got an order to go home. They were two months in, and he was released, goes back to his home.

But he says, I have very bad news for you. I talked to the man who will get your unit. And he's the most vicious of all of them.

So I was a little bit scared, you know. And then about 4 o'clock in the morning, he wakes me up. He says, Harry, get up. He brought me a big bread and a jar of jelly and a jar of fat.

And he said, well, we are going home. And I have good news for you. I found out which is the best one of them. And I let them exchange the units. So you will have the better one.

Next morning, all his colleagues, about 20 of them, the other guards, the other officers, they're all drunk and with the bottles on the sleigh going to the railroad and singing. And this man, my commander, marches out with us to the working place. As he told me, tell the boys to stay a little backwards so they don't hear what I'm talking.

And he was going all the way how he should take care of me, how [NON-ENGLISH] I am. That means how handy I am. And he can trust me and to see that I shouldn't starve and see that the boys shouldn't be mistreated.

And we arrive at the working place. And he tells me, come in the woods with me. The man shook hands with me. And he said, my name is Joseph Drechsler. I live in [PLACE NAME] near Moravská Ostrava. The minute the war is over, let me know what happened to you and what happened to the boys.

So the other man, well, he was very good. But I wouldn't dare even the idea to ask him to get food or something like this. First time we are out in the work, later in the day, and the man walks around, looks at everybody up and down. So then I say, what are you looking at? Lost something?

He says, no, but I was told that I am sent to a Jewish unit. And he said, this is not Jewish. I said, of course, we are Jews. He says, that's impossible. I said, you never see a Jew in your life? He said, no, I live in the Tyrol in a little village. And all I have seen is the *StÄ¼rmer*-- that was a propaganda paper from the Nazi Reich. And all I have seen the Jews with big beards and crooked noses. So he had the idea that we are this kind of Jews-- or a Jew looks like that.

He was with us for about two weeks when an order came to march. The Russians are advancing. We left Bucso 17,500 people. We heard that we are being taken to Mauthausen. They told us Mauthausen. But we had no idea that that's a concentration camp.

Mauthausen was about 40 mile distance from the village we were in if we went straight to Mauthausen. But instead of, they wanted to kill as many of us as possible. So they took us south. They took us to Graz.

And there, I have seen the people behind the curtains looking out. They claim they didn't know about it. But when you see people just skin and bone marching you know that something is wrong.

And on the road one afternoon, the German SS ran away because the cannons were too near. They just left everything, throw away the weapons and run away. The local villages assigned to us Hitlerjugend, who were about 14 to 15 years old I estimate. I've seen them right walking next to me.

On the road, I'm walking next to two boys, these two German boys. And one says to the other one, you see that guy there in the brown sweater? See if you can get him. The other one lifts the rifle and shoots him. And these were the Hitlerjugend. When today, Mr. Kohl, the prime minister of Germany, goes to Israel and tells there the government I have nothing to do with the war because I was just 15 years old when the war ended. And I claim that even 15 years old have something to do with it.

We were marching then about-- it took 5 to 6 miles later, some other German guards came along. We were marching

through villages. There were barely anything to eat once a day, some loose soup with a few beans floating in it. As I said, we had those aluminum little dishes.

And some men run into a yard, or yards, of farmers where the farmers had a barrel keeping all the leftovers, all the rotten things for the pigs. They were running there. And they got a dish of that stink. And the farmer would come out and call the German, this guy was in my yard. Right there in front of us, he will be shot for that little bit of garbage that he took.

One evening, we had to have sleeping places. We arrived in the woods or in the road or in a field. And I seen it's a potato field. I'm pretty well versed in what kind of vegetation. It was already harvested. But you could still see some stems. They were potato field.

So I said to the boys, let's stay here. And it was dark. We went with our clothes. And here a piece of potato, the way they take with the haul, they cut a piece. So we had a few days to eat soup of that.

We are marching on. And there was a mustard field still in bloom. There were some people running the field to get a few pieces of mustard. And the Germans just cut them down with the machine guns. Quite a few hundred died there.

But when we stayed at that potato field, somehow we stayed nearly to the end of the group. There was 17-- by that time, we were maybe 16,000. We were in the very end. And then I noticed that anybody who stayed behind-- he was weak or couldn't take keep on walking-- they just shot right there on the spot and left him there on the road.

So I got the men together. And I said, wherever we sleep, wherever we are, we all, we are still young. We still can walk. We always will walk to the head of the group. Because if somebody gets sick, something happens, so it's time enough till you get to the end, maybe we already stopping and it's another evening. And then I told them, if you see anybody sick, two boys will carry them on the two arms. I was carried for three days by two boys too. I was-- I don't know, cold or whatever, diarrhea. Then--

--took us up to on the Alps. Instead of taking us straight on the straight road to Mauthausen, they took us up on the Alps. There, I first time noticed people falling off and right there dying on the street. Everybody left them there. Snow started to come down. They were covered with snow. Nobody knew where they are.

We were about middle of the road. Suddenly, a very severe storm developed. And we are walking, marching about 6 to 7 abreast. The Germans parked a heavy truck in the middle of the road. And when we get to that truck, we barely could squeeze to one person because the sides were all hilly up.

So we went through. It didn't take about 5 minutes. Suddenly, we heard machine gun fire. We didn't know what happened, what's happening. But we're running as much as we could in the snow.

Then I found out that they machine gunned on the two hills where the truck stood, they were Germans and machine gunned the people.

So they created this roadblock--

A roadblock so they can kill the people. The reason the shooting stopped because the general who was supposed to accept us and transfer us further, he came out with his Jeep. And he was yelling at other guys, how come you are shooting them? I have to have a count for 17,500 Jews, and then I won't have enough to show.

There were a few huts there. I don't know if it was a hunting lodge or whatever it was. And they jammed us in as many as we can stand in because it was very cold. Must have been 30 to 35 below zero on top of the mountain. The man who couldn't fit in, there they stayed out on the plateau, a very big straight plateau. And they slept outside in the cold.

In the morning, they lined us up. Most of those people outside froze to death. The Germans were walking around and kicking the bodies. Somebody still moved, they shot him.

They marched us on for another two days. And then we finally arrived in Mauthausen late at night. We had no idea what Mauthausen is. At the gate they counted 200. Each unit had 200.

Could you just tell me what date this was about?

This was in the beginning of March. One thing I left out, when they lined us up to march on the beginning of the road, they claimed anybody who is sick or weak, they have horses and wagons. They will carry them on horse and wagon.

There were quite a few of my boys who said I will go. I said, no way, you come with me because I had a suspicion something is wrong. And we weren't far, too far away where we had shots. So they killed all those right there on the-- who stayed behind.

Now, in Mauthausen, when we got up in the morning-- when they counted my group, they made some mistake. And at 180, they cut off the unit. And I had 20 people stay behind. I said this is 20 belongs to me. Get on. Get on. Get on. Go weiter.

Next morning, I found out that they are counting us. We have to account for to 200. So there are those 20 boys who were with me for nearly 5 years to always line up in the end of their company. And when they were counted, they all ran over to my side and were counted again.

One morning-- and we had to stand in front of the group and be accountable for the 200 people. One morning, the next man to my right--

A commander.

--the commander, the Jewish commander, he could account only for 199. The commander says, where is the one who is missing? He says, he's dying. He's inside. He can't come out.

He took the rubber hose he had in his hand. And he kept hitting his head that I had seen the man's brain come out. Then his dog came along and petted the dog and walked off with the dog.

Now, I was terrified to death. Here, for one man he's killed. And I have 20. But I had a little advantage because I also got provisions for 200. So always could give a little more soup for each man because instead of 200, I had to have only 180 to discharge.

One day, a German came in the barrack, in the tent, and looks around and points to me. He says, come with me. I went out with him. He said, go down on you four. It was all muddy outside. He said, crawl on your four. And he started to hit me with his rubber truncheon on my back. It took about a half an hour. Finally said, all right, now you go in.

Now, then, suddenly, I knew that something is terribly wrong. First of all, it was a vast camp. And there were rows and rows of corpses, naked, outside, lined up for maybe a mile. Far away, there was smoke going up.

And I asked some of the boys, inmates who were there earlier. I said, what is that smoke there? They said, they are burning the bodies there. But I didn't have any idea that they were crematoria there too. But people are dying so quick, they just couldn't handle it.

Then I started to see every minute somebody dies. And we just gave up. That's it. We didn't have any hope at all that there will be a day that I will be sitting here and telling the story.

One night, we heard airplanes and a bomb explode. And it seemed-- it felt like right there next to you it exploded. Nobody got up to go and look what it is because it didn't matter. You die today by a bomb or tomorrow by starvation.

Next morning, I go out the tent. And about 20 yards from my tent, a tremendous crater and tens and tens of people on

top of the crater holding legs and feet and eating that.

So a little while later, they gave us an order to be evacuated again to another camp. All the meals we got in Mauthausen was a little soup and a little piece of square through and through green moldy bread. But even that, you had to guard and keep it to yourself to your body because anybody came along, they would grab it from you because everybody was hungry.

They took us to Gunskirchen. And they jammed us in a barrack which could have accommodated maybe 400 to 500 people, put us in 300.

300 or 3,000?

3,000. At nighttime, we couldn't stretch out. We had to pull up our legs and just sit down if we wanted to rest a little bit. People were dying by the thousands. There was only-- in the middle of the barrack was a little empty space. We had to walk out for your needs. Anybody died, we put them on the aisle. And anybody had to go out, just walking on the corpses.

And what else they did, they took off the clothing of those corpses. And they threw it around all over the yard where we had to walk. And the reason for it was to spread the diseases. They didn't even bury them anymore, just threw them around wherever you were. You had to watch where you walk on the yard, you shouldn't step on the corpse.

At that time, I gave up cleaning myself. There was no way that you can clean off those lice anymore. I didn't see myself. But I have seen it in other people that the lice were like clusters of grapes, one lice on top of the other one, the whole body. And that was spreading, carrying-- we were so jammed together that was carrying the disease.

Finally, as a commander, I had to get the soup, the kettle of soup from for the meals at noontime. There were six soldiers responsible for 3,000 of us with the guns. When they made for them a potato soup or mashed potatoes for the six people, the peels of those potatoes were put in that warm water for the 3,000. And if anybody had a peel, he considered himself very lucky.

So finally, one afternoon, the Germans throw away their guns and run away. The American army was coming in.

This was in May of 1945?

May 1945, on May the 4th, 1945. There was an advance from the American army. They came in the camp. And they said, nobody should eat any of the bread because it's poisoned. The Germans poisoned to kill us slowly.

Most of the people who could do it, they right away, even in the evening, they just marched out of the camps and out on the roads and they go someplace. And I said to myself, I'm weak. Now what can I do? I'll stay and sleep over and go in the morning.

In the morning, about 2 miles away from my camp, I arrived at a big German military warehouse, which was jammed with all kind of food, beans and peas and lentils and sugar and barley, stacked to the roof. And those inmates walking around and tearing everything up and walking through there with all kind of mixture, they mixed up everything. And there were also people who found meat conserves. And they went out on the embankment near the camp and started eating.

I said, please, don't eat it. Your body can't take it. There was no bread with it.

Well, I'm hungry. I have to eat it. They finished the conserve and just keeled over. And that's it. The body couldn't take that meal.

So finally, I had something to eat a little bit. We were marching, and American tanks came along. And they threw us some white bread. So that's what I had. But I started to have very bad diarrhea. But I had no idea what's all about.

And we came to another German warehouse. And it was full of boots and SS outfits. So I put on an SS just make myself clean-- I became an SS man-- and some boots. And they took us to another camp. And then the American Army came in and sprayed everybody with DDT.

But 99% of the people were sick. And the only doctors were the doctor inmates. Now, later I found out there were plenty, hundreds of German doctors, and not one volunteered. The war is over. Now I go and see maybe I can save a few Jews.

The reason I know it because that medic friend of mine, he knew that something is wrong with him. And we couldn't wait in line to get into the local, inside, because we know it will take days. He took off one of the boys on the fence, and he sneaked out. And he found a doctor.

He came back. He says, Harry, I have black typhus, which was dreaded from him. We knew that's very dangerous. And he says, if you want to go, because if I have the typhus, you must have it too. This is the symptom that you have diarrhea.

He gave me the address. And I went out with the same doctor. The male doctor looked at me, picks up the phone and called a special hospital-- school, they made a hospital out of it. And they took me to that hospital. They didn't send me back to the camp again.

In the evening, they brought in potatoes in shell. Everybody is eating it. And everybody is happy about it. And I just couldn't take it out, just impossible to eat. That was the symptom also of the black typhus-- you can't eat.

Then at night time, I somehow start to feel my pulse. There was no pulse. It was so weak. Just that's it. That's the end.

Next morning, finally, a doctor comes in, pulls over a chair in the middle of the room, and just collapses into it. And he says, all right, everybody will come. Get another chair, everybody come to me. And I examine them. He had the same trouble. He had this typhus.

You cut it off?

Hmm?

I want to blow my nose. I'm sorry.

Do you want to take a break for a few minutes?

Just a minute, yeah.

OK.

Because-- pardon?

Take a picture of the flowers.

OK.

You want some water.

Yeah, I'll have a little water. I'll take a hold of that. Jacket, oh, I have--

Put it on your vest maybe. Can we pull it down? We're going to be going for quite a bit. There's somebody-- there's somebody who's waiting. There's somebody at 11:00. And there's-- no, we'll be done around 12:00 probably.

Well, let's tell them that--

OK.

These lights are-- I know why all the people who are on TV they all sweat.

There's a box of tissues there if you like--

OK. OK. OK, thanks.

Help yourself.

Yeah. There are so many things, but you can't remember them all.

You're doing pretty well.

OK.

You tell such a coherent story that we really don't have to ask very much and intervene very often.

Maybe you would ask, maybe I remember more.

[LAUGHS]

Well, we don't want to break into your train of thought either. It's just--

We're rolling again anytime you want to start.

OK. You were recuperating in that hospital.

So finally, they took him to the hospital. And when I sat down, he looked at me and he says, right away you have to be taken away because you are end of the stage. They called an ambulance. And they were going just, I don't know, 100 miles an hour through the fields and that bump, bumped me around.

This was in American hospital?

American, yes.

An American medical--

American medical team, yes. And they took me out to a field hospital. The trouble was it wasn't-- they just started to put it up. There was only an iron cot. They put it on top of the iron cot. And it started to blow and rain. And all I was asking, wasser, wasser. I didn't know what water is in those days. They didn't have wasser.

And then I said, I'm very cold, something. I don't know how I said it, to cover. But everything was still in the crates.

Then suddenly I felt that I'm sinking, that's the end. And my whole family, sisters, brothers, I all see them in front of my eyes and I'm dead, dying. About two days two days later, I woke up. And I had all kinds of wires in my arm. I don't know if it was a blood transfusion or feeding.

I was very weak. They brought beautiful food. Never seen in my life something like it. They had 7 to 8 compartments on a tray. And each one was something different. And it looked so good.

I just couldn't take it on. The only thing I could take was a little bit of whiskey they had. They had to wash me. They had to lift me. They had to give me the pen. It was just terrible.

And I couldn't understand that the people next to me in the other beds, they were just waiting the minute I put down the tray, they just took it, and they double and triple. And about a week later, the first time I ate a few little things, rice or something. And I ate.

But that was the good time was over right away, they thought I feel better, they took me to the Wels in the city to a school hospital. There terrible things happened. Still hundreds of people dying. There were cases people jumped out of window. They became mad because they found out that their families must be dead or something. And there, I volunteered to work in the kitchen to help out, just to have a little bit more food, because then I realized now when you start to get better, then you really have to have food.

Now, there wasn't any reading material. And my next neighbor in the hospital was a boy who was with me for five years. And he was reading a book. And I barely could wait till he gets tired of it and put it down. So finally I said, can I have-- can I read that book.

He hands it to me. And it has a cross on top and realize New Testament. And I just threw it away like fire. I can't touch it.

I said, what are you crazy? What are you reading the New Testament for? These people just did it to us. They are responsible what happened to us.

He says, well, I'm Catholic. I said, how can you be Catholic? You were with me five years in a concentration camp. He said, well, one of my grandfathers was Jewish. So they took him in as a Jew. Now, from Wels--

Had you had any contact with anybody from your family?

No, I didn't know anything, anybody lives. From there, the first thought was-- some of them stayed in that camp, in the concentration camp. From there, they took them to Russia or Sweden. My first thought to go home and see if anybody from the family survived.

I arrived in Budapest. And I wanted to go to the Jewish organization to find out anything, they know anything of the survivors. On the street, I met a man from my own town. And he says, oh, I just met your sister yesterday. She left home for Ungvar, Uzhhorod.

So I took those little belongings I had. And I had to go on a train, on the top of the train, in the open. I had with me a few pictures from my family. I had a prayer book. I had the tefillin, the phylacteries that I carried with me these five years, in good and bad. And I guarded it all always just to have it with me.

The trains were traveling very slow because they knew there are a lot of people on top of it. Middle of the road suddenly Russian soldiers appeared, jumping from one top of the train to the other one and taking all the belongings. Anybody had throwing it down on the ground, and down on the ground Russian soldiers collecting it. So they stole the last thing that I had. The Russian took it.

I arrived home. It was late in July or in August. I went to see my home. The home that I kept always beautiful since a child, always flowers all along the fence. There wasn't a person in the city who wouldn't stop and look at that thing, all the roses all along the fence. Everything neglected. Everything full of weeds.

The man who was living in the house come out with an ax. Get out of my yard. What are you doing here? That's my home. I said, how come it's your home? I'm a communist. The Communist Party gave it to me. I said I know you're a communist today, but yesterday you still were a Nazi.

I didn't listen to him. I went up to see the garden. We had a big garden, over 100 trees, fruit trees. I reached up and I

picked a plum. A neighbor sees me. She called up another guy, another communist. He comes running. I heard you are stealing my plums.

So finally, I went up to the city hall. And I arranged-- wrote over the property on my name because I was the only man who came back from the family. When my family left, they wrote me that they are taking them to resettle them in Poland. That was the standard-- they let them write it, not that they wanted to write it.

It was just a card, a postcard. Everything is fine. And they are going to work in Poland. But they also wrote me that all the belongings, they had any valuables or my clothing, if I come home, they put it to our dear neighbor, Ilonko [NON-ENGLISH], Mrs. Ilonko.

So I went over to the next neighbor. And I said, Ilonko [NON-ENGLISH], I was told that I have the belongings are here. Oh, my dear Harry, I'm so sorry, the Russians took everything from us. And that was a standard answer. You wanted something back, the Russians took them from us.

The city had about 5,000 Jewish inhabitants, the most beautiful, the most kind people you ever can find for charity, for goodness, for helping people. If a girl got married and she didn't have a dowry, we running around collecting money. My mother, every Friday evening, gave me a basket of food. She covered it nicely. And every week she sent me to another poor Jewish family. And she told me, before you go in, look around if nobody sees you because the people will be ashamed that they have to have charity.

If anybody wanted a favor in the city, Gentile or Jew, there was always Mrs. Weinberg. The Gentile didn't go to the Gentile because they knew they can't count on it. If there was-- they were usually feeding geese to fatten them up. If there was a corn in the wrong pipe, the goose will die. Both my mother-- and my mother will sit there for half an hour and slowly, slowly get it out of it.

If a chicken couldn't have the egg, bring it to my mother, massage a little bit. Egg come out. If they need chicks, ask for chicks, they came to my mother, look at the light. And she could tell which is from a rooster, which is not. If they needed money, if they needed advice, they needed a pot, come to my mother.

Today, if they-- some of my friends tell me, why are you going out of your way to do things for people? You know they are not appreciative of it. I don't do it for thanks. I do it because it feels good to do good thing because that's what I have seen at home.

Because in my home, for one thing, there was every day another poor student came for lunch. There was never a Friday evening or a Saturday noon that a poor Jew from the temple, like beggars came to the temple, that they didn't bring them home for a meal. So you grow up to do good things.

And when I came home from the concentration camp-- and I questioned, like anybody else, how is it possible? What happened? God, how could you allow it? When you have seen those Jews, the goodness of it, it's unbelievable that what they did to us.

And for a long while I said to myself, well, I will never be a Jew again. That's it. What's the use for it?

But then comes a time when you start to reason. And I realized that God didn't do this to us. People did that to us. God has enough worries the galaxies shouldn't collide. Maybe the deer should have enough food in the woods because it can help himself. The man came down on this Earth, and God tell them, I'm giving you the reason to know what's good and what's bad, and you can choose.

God had nothing to do with it. Because I have quite a few friends who are completely unbelievers. In fact, there is one friend of mine who was always sitting with me on the one bench in school. We went through yeshiva together. And we parted ways because he became so fanatic in his belief that the local yeshivas were not good enough. He had to go to Belz. The Belz rabbi was a famous rabbi.

And when I came home from my vacations and we met on the street and he said hello, he didn't stop to talk to me because my hat was turned down modern way. He was married at 18. The wealthiest man in town gave him his daughter. He was sitting and studying day and night. He had three babies already.

He was a genius. He knew the Talmud, the 24 books by heart. If you told him a sentence, he would tell you on what page that is, from what book it is. And, of course, he believed that he is pals with God. And when he comes home and see his family is wiped out and his children are gone, and on top of it something happened-- now, he was here in New York last year. I invite him for a dinner to my home.

And he told me why really he doesn't believe anymore. Now, he was one of those who were caught after the concentration camp on the street by the Russians. And they took him back to Russia in another concentration camp. He was there another two years.

And he didn't explain quite what happened. But some fire was in the camp. And I think that might be the same fire where my brother died.

And he said he was working in the office, bookkeeper. And he was running to the house to save his tefillin and the tallit because he was very religious and he was praying every day. And they were consumed by the fire. So as he told me, if God didn't want me to have even my tefillin, then he doesn't want God.

Now, after the war, I thought to myself, well, after a while he will change and reason himself what's happened. But a year later on Yom Kippur, I walked by his home to the temple. And I knocked on the door. And I said-- he came out in his shirt. I said, put on your clothes and let's go to the temple. He said, there's no temple for me today. Till today, he's denying there is a God.

When you came back to your village, did you meet any people, neighbors, people who had lived in the village with and grown up at the same time--

It wasn't a village. It was a town of 40,000 people. There were 5,000 Jews in the town.

We came back about 300 from the city. But there were more Jews in the city because from all the villages, there was one or two Jews, they were afraid to stay in the villages. They were persecuted even after the war. They all moved to that regional capital, to Ungvar.

I was about home about two weeks. I mentioned that we had to have a front for the store before the war. When we came home, we found the same woman-- the husband was taken prisoner to Russia because he was a high ranking official. And she married a Jewish man. She divorced, let him divorce-- I don't know how she could manage. But she married or just lived with a Jewish man.

The man had a restaurant on the main street. And mostly Russians had the money to frequent those fancy restaurants. And one day, the Russians shot the man. And she became owner of that restaurant.

And when I first went over to tell her that we are here, of course, she said come over. We rented a room and some of her furnishings. And then when she heard about it we are home, she took us in. And she fed us well and brought us back to life.

I wasn't home more than two weeks when the agricultural minister came to my apartment. He was a man who was our customer before the war and became a big shot with the Communist. And he embraced me. And, oh, I'm so happy that you are here. Please do something. Bring some food. Everybody is starving. They had to kill all the Jews, take their property.

I went out to the flea market to buy an old table. And I recognized my matzah cover for my family selling the flea market. I bought it back. They took everything from the Jews, but they didn't know and didn't have any way to risk their money to go out and buy food and sell it. They didn't have no way that they could live. They were really starving.

So I said, well, I'm still sick. I was about 80 pounds when I came out from the concentration camp. I'm still recuperating. I said, well, I will think about it.

I went out on the street. And I met a friend of mine, Feierman. He was home about a year earlier because he was captured by the Russians. And he managed to get away. And he was already in business.

And I said, you know the minister wants me to go for food. He said, I have about 30,000 pengo. Let's be partners. You will go to buying. You know what's it all about. And I will give you the money.

So I said, all right, let's go to Hungary. That was the only way that you get merchandise. The city in the summer time mostly lived on watermelon. Poor people buy watermelon and a piece of bread, and that was a good meal. It was a very big item. So I said, let's go and buy some watermelons.

I arrived in a village where my parents used to buy the watermelons. And I made a deal. I bought the melons, the acre, just to call it [NON-ENGLISH], estimate how much merchandise there will be. We had three carloads of those melons.

I got to the railroad. And I said, I want to send it to Ungvar, Uzhhorod. He said, you can send to Uzhhorod. You have to put down money for the wagons, for the cars. This is Hungarian property. There is Russia there.

And that Feierman got scared. I lost all my money. And he turned around. And next train he went back home.

And I said to myself, no way, I can't lose all that money. It's not even my money. I went to Budapest. And I tried to get a permit.

They said, you have to put on a half a million pengos for each car. No way I had that kind of money. I had about 2,000 pengos left.

So I was thinking for a while. Then I said to myself, well, I will send the melons to the borderline and see what I can do there. I send the melons to Miskolc, which is still Hungary. No waiting, right away they send it over to Miskolc.

The train was running from Slovakia. They had to go to Miskolc. And from there back a little while later, that was the only line, to Czechoslovakia, now Russia. I had a friend in Miskolc who was with me in the concentration camp.

And I said, listen, I have three wagons of melons here. How can we manage to get it through? He said, oh, that's no problem. The railroad manager is a very good friend of mine.

I went over there. I gave him 2,000 pengos. He locked me in the car, gave me the key. Middle of the night, suddenly I feel I am traveling. First train came along, just latched it on and we arrived in Ungvar.

When I brought those melons out from the station, we had they were those flat-- wagon, flat cars with horses, the people standing on the street and applauding. And I started to make terrific money because most of the customer was Russian soldiers. And they paid with Russian rubles. Always are, do you take Russian rubles? Yeah, of course.

And I said, a kilo is two crowns. So I got two Russian rubles. But for a ruble, I got two Russian crowns in the exchange. So I had a four. Instead of one crown, I had four. And I start to make big money.

But meanwhile, most of the population, the Jewish men and women, moved to Czechoslovakia, near Prague. And you go there where you have friends, know people. And they're writing me letters, come on, come on, here they give away stores, and you can have whatever you want. You have big opportunities.

And I naively think, well, I'll make some more money, some more money. Here my sisters, I have to fit them up with clothing. And I have to marry them--

How many sisters did you--

Three young sisters, the youngest one who were not married, they came back. Six of them who were married, they had 21 children, from 1 to 14. And not one came back. That's just the nearest family. I'm not talking about cousins and uncles and--

Three of your younger sisters did--

Yeah, because they were not married. They were in Bergen-Belsen. And they kept them also as laborers. And they had their own stories to tell, the starvation and everything else. So--

You opted to remain in that community--

The community--

--with your sisters.

--as long as I could because the Russian government gave us an option. The ones who were born in Slovakia or Bohemia, the other side of the border, have a year to decide if they want to stay in Russia or we can go back to Czechoslovakia. And as long as you're making money, I said to myself, well, I'll wait till the last minute.

But then one morning, around 2 o'clock in the morning, the town was pitch dark because the Russian army shut out all the lights in the city so they can go out and rape and rob and do what they want. I didn't experience it myself. But I had many cases, they said that a whole company of Russian soldiers would come in the home. There was a three-year-old baby or an 80-year-old woman, and they all go through.

So I hear noises downstairs. We lived above the restaurant.

Your sisters were living with you?

Of course. I wouldn't dare-- I wouldn't even think of it. I was the man, even I was just 22 years old. But I was the man. And I have to take care of them. That was the custom in Europe.

I hear noises downstairs. [NON-ENGLISH]. Open up. And I didn't know who they are. I went out on the balcony. And I started to yell to the police across the street-- it was a police station-- somebody is breaking in. They should come over. No answer.

But at the same time, there was a Jewish soldier, a Russian soldier, living also across the street who was coming in the restaurant and talking to the girls, you know, courting my sisters. He heard that something is wrong. So first of all, I took the three girls and I locked them in a closet because I had a suspicion it must be Russians, they're there to make a noise middle of the night.

One of my sisters passed out, lucky they didn't notice because they were half drunk. These three officers in the Russian army came up the steps. And we had a window to the apartment through the steps up to the apartment.

The break in the window. They come up on the balcony with a machine gun, [NON-ENGLISH]. Jew, I kill you. Where are the girls?

I say, I am not Jewish guy. I don't have any sister. I don't have any girls here.

Lucky that soldier heard about it, that noise. And he came over and put on his clothes and comes over. And it's a different kind of situation, you see that they have their own men there. And he talked to them, you know. I know the man. There is no girls. You're mistaken. This is two doors away from here.

I had some whiskey in the house from the restaurant, you know. She kept some whiskey upstairs, the woman. And I kept pouring the whiskey for three hours, the machine gun on the table. And they lifting the machine gun, I kill you, I kill you.

I get up early in the morning. And I said to myself-- yeah, they left around 5 o'clock, the policeman came over. And what happened? What happened?

I said, you ask me what happened, when I was calling you, there was no answer. He said, we can't help it. These officers had so high ranking medals. There's such a-- 'I don't know what kind of-- how do you explain that.

There such rank or such stature--

Such heroes, such heroes, even they kill you, we can't do a thing about it. So I got together my sister and said, listen, if this is the situation, I don't want any part of it. I have the store full of merchandise. I have my house, my garden. We put the money what we have left-- most of the money was in the bank-- whatever money we have, I let them put it in the lining, in our suit and coat, and we filled our shoes because I had plenty of money, all kinds of money, Hungarian money, Slovak money, dollars, rubles.

And my youngest sister had a boyfriend. And he insisted that he wants to come with us. So I said, all right. I gave him some money too in his shoes.

Now, I was, as a child, I was always on my own. I always went out in the villages. And I bought my own eggs. And I come back to the city, I sold it. And that was the way I kept myself always in the schools.

Or I bought chickens. Or I bought melons. And I went to the-- there was always pilgrimages to the churches. I brought melons, cut up in pieces. I always managed to make my own living.

In fact, I just remember something that I must have had a sense of business as a child because they always made fun of me. When I was still in the village in Slovakia, I was playing with another Jewish kid in the yard. We couldn't be more than about three years old. And two older Gentile boys came in, and they beat us up.

And the other Jewish boy said, all the Christians should drop dead. And I said, no, they shouldn't because where will my parents buy all the eggs. [LAUGHS] So I must have already thought kind of business because we need them to produce those eggs. So--

What happened when you left your town with three sisters and the boyfriend?

So we are-- I knew all the whole neighborhood because I had to go to those villages to buy eggs and poultry. And it was only about six or seven miles away from the city. We just about a half a mile from the border, the boyfriend just couldn't walk anymore. He's dying. He can't walk anymore. The money is killing him in the shoes.

So we walk back on the roadside. And there is a little old home. And I see a mezuzah on the door. So I figured it must be Jewish people who came back. Said, all right, must be Jewish family. Go in there and change your-- take all the money, throw it away or give it away, and let's go.

We went about 100 yards away. Suddenly, the Russian soldiers arrived. The woman, who was, of course, a peasant just took over the house, and she didn't bother to take down the mezuzah. She called the Russian army.

And they said to us, all right, how much money do you have? We had to open all the money. He says, give us all the money you have, or we kill you.

We took out all the money from the linings of our shoes. We had to take off the shoes because they took our shoes too. We stayed barefoot without a penny.

They let us through the border. And we hitchhiked if we could. If not, we walked barefoot 40 miles to the nearest city of Kosice. There were three different boys who were with me from that town. I visited them. They were pretty well off by that time. And they gave us money to travel to Podmokly, to that city that all the other people from Uzhhorod lived.

We arrived there. Most of the people had small businesses, the one from the concentration camp. The only bigger businesses or a factory-- now this was the Sudetenland. The Czechs expelled 3 million Germans from the borders because they were demonstrating before the war, we want Germany. So they said, you want Germany, you can go to Germany.

They gave them 30 kilos to carry, like the Jews went out with 30 kilo from-- we thought they are going to be resettled. And there was all kind of wealth. People found in the attic all kind of gold hidden. And factories were taken over. And wholesale places were taken over.

When I arrived there, and most of the people from the concentration camp, could apply only for a small business. The only people who could get something valuable, like a factory, was people who joined the Czech brigade in Russia. This is where inmates in the concentration camp in Russia, finally they managed to build an army, Czech army. And they were fighting back themselves to Russia. And those were the people who were getting the bigger businesses.

There were people who didn't have any trade or couldn't manage a business. They made a living on black marketeering. They went down to Hungary or other places, bought cigarettes and made a living like that. Or they brought salami. Or they brought textile because everything was short. There was nothing at all left after the war.

How were you able--

And-- huh?

How were you able to support your family in that community?

Now, the family couldn't be supported at all. The boy, my younger sister's boyfriend, applied to learn as a carpenter. He talked about marrying my sister. And I said, no way. One thing, you don't have schooling. You don't have a trade. And I, coming from a family, that I had higher expectations, or a doctor or a lawyer or something like this for my sisters. Another thing, you are the youngest. In the Jewish family, first comes the first to get married.

But she was carrying on and carrying on. So I said, OK. About a year later, I agreed to marry her. But by that time I had a big business. And I could equip her apartment and buy whatever she needs in the house.

So you had to--

But that boy didn't have any income at all because he was just learning how to carpenter shop, carpentership. And for half a year, we just got along somehow borrowing money. But I just didn't want to do any black marketeering. And I didn't feel that I am fit to carry on in a small business because I had all these ideas that-- I grew up in a wholesale.

So finally, I found a man who is quite inexperienced in anything, because if he would have been-- he was there a year already in that city-- he would have had something. So he is willing to be my partner. The name was on his name. But I didn't need experience because I knew what to do.

We applied for a very big wholesale place. And we had tremendous warehouses in the villages around us. And we were allocated about 300 stores, grocery stores, to supply those people. And we had to have had about 10 bookkeepers because everything was on ration. How many children are in each family? How many each store has customers? And how many are below 12 years old? And how many are older? That was the way they counted the rations.

I was bringing in merchandise. But it wasn't enough. No way that people could live on it. Like I was allocated for each family half a kalafior-- what is it in English? It's white, a head like cabbage, but white.

Cauliflower?

Cauliflower. [LAUGHS] I was allocated 300 boxes of cauliflower when I went with two or three trucks. It was nowhere near what I needed. And then I wanted to help out all the Jewish merchants who couldn't make too much a go of it because most of the people will patronize the Gentile stores.

So I found a way. I told the manager who was in the office, you have to wait for days till the farmer brought it in and then he allocate to me. So I paid him some money, some bribe. And I said, why don't you send me out to the field and I will get it myself? You don't have to wait. And I don't have time to wait.

So each box was 12 cauliflowers in a box. Now, I gave the farmer a better price that he got from the union. And they cut off all the leaves. And instead of 12 cauliflowers, I had 24 or 30 sometimes.

So you did good business, yeah.

Yeah. So I lined up the cases on the road. Six, seven times the police stopped us. How many cases do you have? Permit for 300. 300. That's all, the three-- come back to the store. And all night long, I had to work to make the parties' cases because otherwise the businessman has a case, I had to give him the 24 instead of the 12.

In the afternoon, I called up always a different merchant. And I said, well, I have some leftovers. People didn't come for it. Here, you can have two or three cases of cauliflower. Never black market, just the right price.

And later on, I heard that there is a possibility to bring in merchandise from Slovakia. But the Slovaks weren't very friendly to the Czechs because they had a Nazi government during the war. They weren't occupied. The Czechs were occupied. And they purposely made their prices higher in Slovakia than it was in Bohemia because the government made the prices. That way nobody could get anything out of that country because you had to sell it on black market to get your price because you couldn't pay three crowns for a kilo of merchandise, or carrots or something, and sell it for two. You get broke in a minute.

So I went up to Prague to the Ministry of Agriculture. And I said, I would like to go down to Slovakia and get some merchandise, vegetables. And he said, all right, how many permits do you need? I said about 15.

He said, what are you talking about? He said, I'm giving the local established merchants one for one wagon. They come back, and they return it because they can't get anything.

I said, listen, we are starving here. They have the merchandise. If I bring it over, fine. If not, you get it back. Anyway, what do you lose? So he made out a 15, but very skeptical about it.

I came down to Bratislava where I was studied in the yeshiva. And I was running around from one wholesaler to another one. No way, you can get it. The prices were over-- too expensive.

Finally, I got to one Jewish man who was in business. And he says to me, the only man who can help you is a Mr. Berger. He's from a village nearby. And he's employed by the government. And he allocates merchandise to different people in Prague.

And he told me that he is in the Mandala Hotel at 10 o'clock every Friday morning. I went to the hotel. I gave a tip, 10 crowns, to the waiter and said, will you please point out who Mr. Berger is? He says, he's not here. But he will be at 10 o'clock.

At 10 o'clock, I didn't have to have to show me who it is because anybody who was in that restaurant, the man came in, everybody's around him yelling, screaming, I want one. I want one. So I said to myself, no chance, I won't get anything here.

But finally, everybody left. He had a cup of coffee. And I went over to his table. And I introduced myself. And I told

him my story. I just came home from the concentration camp. And I have a story in Podmokly. And I have a lot of trouble from the local competition because the other store's owner is the brother of the police commissioner. And I have every day inspections. They want to prove something that I am doing black marketeering.

I talked to him maybe 5 minutes. The man says, go home. I am expecting a railroad-- a carload of carrots. I will send it to you over. Next day, I had to be in the store to wait for any report from the railroad station that apples or potatoes came. And we had to put it away for the population for the wintertime, to store it.

And we had to be right away at the railroad station because there were no railroad cars. They had to empty it right away and send it back. And I was expecting some potatoes. But the phone rings. And the man says, you have a wagon of carrots on the station. So I was skeptical about it. But--

Mr. Berger came through.

Came through. So we a big sensation. I was selling the carrots without coupons because instead of a wagon, it was a double wagon, too much of it. And it came later on that the merchants from Prague came to me. And I sold the merchandise wholesale, instead of going to Slovakia.

So what happened, I went back to Slovakia and talked to Mr. Berger. And I said, what is the way that you get your merchandise? He said, well, I have agents. And they go out to the villages. And they report what they bought. And they get commission for each railroad car they send over.

So I said, how about if I will be your agent also? I will go to different villages. I won't be competing with you. And I will give you the same commission. And you don't have to allocate me merchandise, that much less that you have to give somebody. He said, it's fine with me. He called on the minister in Slovakia to his place. And they put on the stamps. I am allowed-- I had 14 more wagons to get out.

I went out to the first place. They had cabbage. It was a very dry summer, quite late in August already. And the cabbage was just like my fist.

What do you want for the cabbage, for the field, two or three acres? He says, well, for 20,000 crowns, you can have it. Made a deal, 20,000 crowns. But I have the right to keep those cabbages till end of October on the field. Then I have to take it out.

Then I went out on the market, on the retail market. And I see a guy has beautiful cauliflower again. And I said, where do you buy this cauliflower? What is the price? He says, 3 crowns a head. And we had to sell it for 1 crown a head in Prague. Where do you buy it? Give me the name.

I took a taxi, go out to the guy. Beautiful cauliflower, he wants 3, 4 crowns for a head. No way I can buy it.

Go back to the hotel. I started this in the morning, look out the window, and it's snowing. I took another taxi, go back to the guy. I arrive in the place. The guy is still asleep. I say wake up, Mr-- I don't remember the name was. Look what's going outside.

And I looked at the cauliflower. And the ones were already open, they're all frozen, all black. I said, come out of the fields. Look what happened to the cauliflower.

All right, I'm selling, what do you want to give me for the whole field? I made a pretty good deal. I brought home the cauliflower, about 5 carloads. And as I said, I had tremendous warehouses, ones I didn't even know. I never opened it.

I took the cauliflower and put them down one by one on the earth on the ground and let it stand there for about two weeks before Christmas. Before Christmas, I went up to the city hall and I said, well, I have cauliflower, but you've never seen something like it. No way I can sell it for \$1. I bought it more expensive. He gave me a note for how much I paid for a piece. He didn't know-- didn't tell-- the farmer didn't say how many.

I say, or I bring over a cauliflower. I brought over a big head. And they measured it with a centimeter. I never seen something like it. All right, you can sell it for 3 crowns. The sensation of it in the city at Christmas time, no where could you get a Christmas time. Before there were no cool houses those days.

Can you skip along--

I had so much of that stuff, that merchants from Prague came over, wholesalers, to buy it from me. Back to the cabbage, in October, when I went to the cabbage, suddenly the rains came over. And I couldn't lift that cabbage. I just couldn't sell enough of it. And I made plenty of money again.

Things started to change once the communists, Czechoslovakia--

So I'm doing the big business. I'm up every morning at 4 o'clock. Then we also had the oranges. We got oranges from Israel as a present because the Czechs helped them with the-- they were the only ones who sold them ammunition, in spite of the resolution, the UN, that nobody can help any side.

Since I've been asking you about the years and when it was, could you put this in--

This was--

--place for me one year this was?

1940-- the beginning of 1948 that we got the first oranges. I didn't know what a grapefruit is. I took it home. And I had to put it in sugar, turned around-- we'd never seen a grapefruit in the country. So we had grapefruit and oranges.

And I managed with the city council that they gave me a permit to discount 300 kilo because I claimed that there were some rotten ones in it. Of course, everybody had a bag of oranges for nothing. This way I could help all the Jewish ladies who are pregnant, and they needed nourishment. So everybody got a bag of oranges. Otherwise, a child till 12 had one orange.

There were-- the Jews were pretty comfortably settled at this point? Or were there people leaving for-- was it possible to leave for Israel or for America?

Yes, it was possible. I also had my number already. For three years, I was looking for a very dear cousin of mine here in the United States. All I knew was the name Piri Rose. The reason for it I was between the youngest-- of course, I didn't correspond with the lady. Nearly every year, she sends an enormous box of clothing and shoes.

Well, we couldn't use it because she sent us lilac shoes and pink shoes and all kinds of stuff. Things that were Gypsies. So we just stored it someplace. We didn't really want. But the clothing they usually put--