

The following is an interview of Jerry Rosenstein. It is taking place on January 13, 1995, in San Francisco, California. The interviewer is Gail Schwartz, and it is being done on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Could you please give us your full name?

Gerald B. Rosenstein.

And when were you born?

I was born May 21, 1927.

And where were you born?

I was born in Bensheim, Germany.

Let's talk a little bit about your childhood. Who made up your family? Who were the members of your family?

My family-- my parents.

And their names?

Sophie Bendheim and Max Rosenstein. And I had two older brothers, Ernst and Hans. Ernst was four years older than I, and Hans was two years older than I was.

What kind of work did your father do?

My father was a manufacturer. He had at the time of-- when I was a child, a furniture and upholstery factory in Bensheim, Germany.

Did your mother work?

No. At that-- women didn't work there.

And what kind of neighborhood did you live in?

We lived on the-- in the house that I was born in was a large house on a very, very big grounds on the outskirts of the small town. It's-- today if you look at the house, it's an Edwardian-- a fake Edwardian house with lots of stucco on it, and the grounds have been subdivided in the meantime by the current-- by recent owners. And there's about 20-- 15 or 20 individual homes and pools, and it's a very fancy neighborhood now.

Let's talk a little bit about your town. How would you describe it? Do you know how many people were living there at the time?

I would say at the time between 30,000 and 40,000. Today it's probably closer to 60,000 or 80,000.

And what percentage of the people were Jewish?

There were probably about 150-- 100 to 150 Jewish families there.

And in your neighborhood, did you have Jewish neighbors?

Yes. No. We had-- the Jewish families, the friends of my parents that I grew up with, were interspersed. They all lived in fairly large houses amongst Gentiles, and there was not that one Jew was living next to another Jew. It was fairly emancipated town. We were Orthodox when I grew up. But I would say most of the Jewish families in the town were

not Orthodox. So there was only one synagogue, which was Orthodox.

So your neighborhood was made up of, as you said, Gentile families.

Yes.

As a young child, then, did you play with Gentile children?

Only very briefly, because when I was six, Hitler was already in power, and there was definitely a cessation of playing with neighborhood children then, and seven. And we were then not really playing on the streets with other children, which we had never done much anyway because the way the structure of the neighborhood was, one didn't play with other children on the street because people had lived in large houses with gardens.

About how much property did your parents have?

Oh, I'm sure it must have been five or six acres at the time.

So your family was very upper class, obviously, to have this kind of property.

Well, almost all the Jewish families in this town were well-to-do, were well-off, yeah. There were obviously Jewish families-- there must have been-- I researched that a little bit later in life-- that weren't so well-off. And I'd always thought that the entire town had left, that all the Jewish families had left and settled in the United States. But that wasn't quite the case either. I found out in recent years that there were at least 30 or 40 Jewish people from the town that were deported to Auschwitz or other camps.

Did you have an extended family-- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins?

No. Not-- when I was born, my grandparents had already died.

On both sides?

Except my father's father who lived in another town. He was a retired teacher, and we saw him maybe once or twice a year. There was not-- my grandmother on my father's side had died very young.

What about aunts, uncles, cousins?

Yes. We had aunts, uncles, cousins, but most of them lived either in Berlin or in London or in the United States.

At that time.

At that time. Most of them had immigrated earlier than we had.

How much education did your father have?

My father had gymnasium-- no University.

And your mother?

My mother was educated in one of those Catholic girls schools, where all the Jewish girls in town went to a fancy Catholic girls school. And I imagine it went through about 14, 15, 16 years, and then she went to the conservatory in the neighboring town, in Darmstadt, and studied music, which she never pursued.

Oh. Let's talk about your education. When did you start school? How old were you?

I started school just before the age of six, or just at the age of six.

And what kind of school did you go to?

It was a public grammar school in Bensheim. And I only had first and second grade there, then we moved to a small town called Darmstadt just before we immigrated for about six months. And I also went to a Jewish public school there.

When you-- let's back up a little bit. When you were very young and you went at the age of six, obviously there were children who were not Jewish in your class. And the teacher-- were the teachers Jewish?

No.

OK. Did you-- do you remember any unpleasant experiences at that time, or did you have a sense of being different? Granted, you were very young.

Not very much, but it became-- it came upon us very quickly the sense of being different, the sense of being singled out, the sense of being different, yes. When I was seven years old, seven and a half, possibly, on the way home from school in the dark, and it must have been in the wintertime, I was attacked and beaten up by the father of a schoolmate who was probably drunk. And he had-- he was-- waylaid me in the portal of the neighbor's garden, and just because I was Jewish. It was not a terribly hard beating, but it was just being attacked by a man.

Do you-- again, do you remember any thoughts or feelings that you had?

Oh, yes. I was horrified. I was crying. And I had never been attacked by anybody.

Did you know why you were being attacked?

Well, yes, because I was Jewish. It was--

You knew that?

I knew that.

At that young age?

Right. And I came home, and my mother was out, and my father was traveling, and there was only the maid. And I'm sure she tried to console me as best she could, but she was not Jewish either.

Any other incidents like that in the first couple years--

No. Really, this is the one that really stands out, that singles out. Then, of course, in 1935, at the time I was seven or eight years old-- eight, probably-- I remember that my father was away on a business trip. And they threw gasoline-soaked rags into our-- not into the house, but into the garage, which was quite at the end of the property. But it didn't set anything on fire. But I do remember that.

And right after that incident happened, and then we couldn't have-- we were not supposed to have maids or personnel any longer. We moved to Darmstadt. My parents sold the house, and we moved to Darmstadt.

When your family was living in Bensheim, and again, I know you were very young, do you remember your parents explaining anything to you as a very young child? Did they talk to you about what was happening?

I'm sure they did. I'm sure we all knew what was happening. It didn't require too much explanation.

And you did not have Jewish friends to talk this over with as a child?

Oh, yes, we-- oh, yes. All our friends were Jewish.

Oh, all-- OK.

The only people we were associating with at that time were Jewish. We did not have other friends that I recall.

So the changes that you remember in the beginning when Hitler first came in were these attacks and so forth. OK. Then your family, you said, moved to Darmstadt in 1935?

Right.

OK. And did you live in the town there?

In the town in Darmstadt. We had-- they rented an apartment for about five or six months. And I do remember that the maid we had in Bensheim moved with us to Darmstadt. And she then also moved with us to Amsterdam, but then she didn't like it and she went back to Germany.

And you started school in Darmstadt?

I had-- yeah. And there was a Jewish school. There was a Jewish grammar school for six months.

Uh-huh. 1935. You had mentioned before that your family was at Orthodox.

Right.

OK.

So did you have any kind of Jewish training?

Yes, we-- I went-- we all-- all the Jewish children in Bensheim went to Hebrew school. I mean, this was-- there was a Hebrew teacher there by the name of [? Mueller. ?] And we all had to go. We all hated him. We all hated Hebrew school, and he was a terrible teacher. But we all went to Hebrew school.

This was after school?

It was after school, yeah.

How often did you go?

Two or three times a week-- probably twice a week, I imagine.

And did your-- your family was very observant then?

Yes. Actually, my father's family was not. But my mother's family who had lived in Bensheim since 1750, 1780, somewhere like that, were very Orthodox. And yes. And my mother's orthodoxy prevailed in the family.

So you-- did your family keep kashrut?

We kept kashrut, but we didn't write on Saturday, but there was no such thing as wearing a sheitel or-- wasn't that Orthodox.

Yeah. And obviously, observing all the holidays.

Oh, yes. All the holidays were always observed.

When you moved to Darmstadt you were now eight years old.

Yes. Seven or eight.

What did you do besides school? Were you in any kind of sports groups or any hobbies? Did you do anything besides--

No. I was-- at that time was the only time in my life I was kind of interested in things Jewish, and I think I took a real interest in Hebrew school at the time for about six months, and was just about the only time I took an interest in it. I don't recall having any other hobbies at the time. You know, the Nazis were prevailing, and you just stayed off the streets.

Right. Right. What was the next unpleasant incident that you remember as a child? Anything in Darmstadt that happened to you particularly?

Nothing happened to me--

Personally.

--personally. Nor did anything happen personally to my parents or to my brothers.

So you were just a young child going to school.

Yeah, going to school, waiting to move to Holland. My father was mostly absent. He had already established an office in Amsterdam. And we then moved officially from Darmstadt to Amsterdam with all the furniture, with-- by car. It was a regular transport. We were not refugees in any sense. We were regular immigrants to Holland.

And what-- do you remember what your feelings were as a young boy having to pick up and move to another country?

Oh, it was a-- we all left Germany with a great feeling of relief. We couldn't wait until we got to cross that border to Holland, and it was wonderful to be in Holland. It was wonderful from day one there.

We had to go to a-- we were quartered first, us three boys, with a Dutch family somewhere in the middle of town, because my-- the furniture hadn't arrived, and we didn't have-- my parents were just renting an apartment. And I'm not exactly sure anymore where my parents were staying-- probably in a hotel until the furniture came. [COUGHS] Excuse me.

We were immediately sent to a special language school, a six-week Dutch high-intensive language school. And after that, we went to a regular Dutch school and managed this.

Speaking of languages, what language did you speak at home?

We spoke German at home. And then later on in the camps, we spoke Dutch mostly. In Auschwitz-- I know in Auschwitz we spoke Dutch. At home we spoke German.

Yeah. Do you remember any feelings that you had in Germany when you would see a Nazi soldier or a uniform? Was it frightening?

Fear, yes. Oh, absolutely.

And did you talk it over with your parents?

No.

Why not?

Because we were just not a very communicative-- I think it's generational. We didn't talk about things. We'll get into this a little bit later.

OK. OK. OK. OK, now you're in Holland, and you're in Amsterdam, you said. And you and your two brothers temporarily were living with a family until your parents got settled.

Right.

And then what happened?

And then we all moved into a very nice apartment in Amsterdam. If you want, I can show you pictures-- building's still standing exactly where it always was in the south of Amsterdam, which was a neighborhood which was-- where many German Jews were settling. And I went to school. And I loved school there, and I loved life as a child in Amsterdam. My older brothers were in different schools.

Did you talk things over with your older brothers--

Actually, the--

--about the changing times?

The age gap was tremendous. When you are eight and nine, two and four years old is hard. They had lives of their own. We all had lives of our own. We were not particularly close, but boys that age aren't often.

And when you were in Amsterdam, did you do any sports there or--

Skating.

Oh.

Skating and swimming, yes. But not-- nothing serious, nothing competitive.

Right. Were you part of any youth groups, or you just did solitary and personal things.

Yeah. No. We had a lot of friends, and it was a very friendly time with lots of neighbors.

Jewish friends.

No, both. In Amsterdam it was both. And certainly in those years if-- there was no-- you didn't pay-- they didn't pay much attention to it. Yes, there were, of course, a lot of-- my parents had a lot of Jewish friends, but they also had non-Jewish friends. They also made friends with non-Jewish people.

Did you-- do you know if your parents had contact with people back in Germany once they moved to Holland?

Some. I'm sure that there were some business contacts my father had, but minimal.

What happened to your father's business back in Germany?

Oh, he sold that business at a bad price. And like he sold the house at a bad price, he sold the business at a bad price. He reestablished himself--

To non-Jews.

To non-Jews. He reestablished himself in a new business in Holland, which was surgical instruments and surgical-- supplies for surgical-- drug supplies and surgical instruments, primarily. And he also had maintained some of his older business in the upholstered furniture. And he managed to do fairly well, I imagine, because he supported a family with three children.

OK. When is the next change that you remember? You were going along, swimming and skating. And then when is the next--

Well, when my grammar school was over-- in '39 or '40, I was finished with grammar school. And I was a very good student, and I got into the-- one of the better high schools. But I could only stay in the high school for a very short period of time. My bar mitzvah was in May 1940, and the German invasion had taken place three weeks before my bar mitzvah.

Tell me about your bar mitzvah, what you remember.

It was very sad [LAUGHING]. It was not a very happy affair. It was a small-- it was a bar mitzvah, and it was a small-- at synagogue. And it's like all bar mitzvahs. You had to study for it, but not as hard as kids do here. You just did a minimal.

And I think my parents had a little open house or a little reception in the afternoon and that was it. They allowed me to smoke my first cigarette, which was a bad mistake because from that day on, I became a chain smoker.

But the family obviously had a sense of foreboding at your bar mitzvah?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Most certainly. The Germans were there, and there was real a sense of foreboding. During the invasion--

What do you remember about that?

--which was two weeks earlier, we tried-- at the last minute, we packed up the car with another family or friends, very good friends of my parents, and we drove to Zandvoort, which was a beach resort really, to see if we could find a fisherman to take us to England. But that was a little late in the game, and there were no fishermen left and no boats left. And we just go back to Amsterdam.

And then the next change in your life?

Well, then the next changes came very gradual, or not so gradual. First of all, I was in this wonderful high school, and I'm not sure I'm going exactly chronologically now, and I don't think it really matters for the purposes of this interview.

But in matters of importance, I had to-- not just me, everybody who was Jewish had to leave the non-Jewish high school and go to a Jewish high school. This Jewish high school was in a different part in East Amsterdam, and it entailed a long walk.

Meanwhile, our bicycle had been confiscated, and Jews were no longer permitted to use to the streetcar or public transportation. So I had to walk to school. My parents had friends who lived in the neighborhood, and they were nice enough to feed me lunch every day so I didn't have to go home.

What other restrictions? You did mention some about confiscation of your bicycle and walking to school. What other restrictions--

The car. My father's car was confiscated right away. But most cars-- or many cars were. Not just Jewish cars were confiscated. But that happened almost within weeks, the first couple of weeks that the Germans were there.

Did your parents have to turn in any valuables?

I believe they did, yes. They were asked to turn in valuables. Not everything was turned in. I still have today silver from my great grandparents or grandparents-- some items which were buried by business friends of my father's outside Amsterdam that they were underground. And some of the carpets, some oriental rugs and so on were saved. But basically-- eventually, everything else disappeared.

What were you thinking when you had to give up your bicycle? Were you angry?

Well, everybody else did. You know, if something happens to you that happens to everybody else in your group, you do accept it. You do not feel singled out.

Right.

Of course, one was not happy about it, but it was just one of those things we had-- we learned to accept a whole lot of things, and this was just one of them. And I suppose what we learned to do is to suppress or supplement the trauma that we were going through all along. We did that very well. We became most professional at it.

What about when you had to change schools, and--

Yeah. That was--

Was that a difficult experience?

That was a difficult experience.

Leaving your friends and--

Leaving this-- well, particularly leaving the academic environment of that particular school. And I managed to do quite well in the next school, but I'm sure my heart wasn't in it nearly as much as it was in the first school.

Did the teachers in the next school talk to you about what was happening in Europe?

More, because they were Jewish.

Right.

Oh, yes. They did.

Was this a coed school or--

This was coed, yes. Yeah, the schools in Holland were always coed.

All right. So you tried to take the boat, but you couldn't. Then you came back to Amsterdam, and then what was the next experience?

Well, as I was saying, Amsterdam-- during the war there were no bombing incidents, but there were many bad experiences. It built up gradually. First one was [INAUDIBLE], then the next was [INAUDIBLE], then we had to wear the yellow stars. We couldn't use public transportation.

Let's talk about the yellow star.

OK.

Did that bother you a lot?

Yes, I think it did. I think it really did. But again, it was one of the things everybody else had to do, and you couldn't be caught without it because it would-- you'd be in real trouble if you did.

Where did you wear it? On what part of your clothing?

On the--

On the left side?

On the left upper.

Did your mother sew it on?

Yeah. You had to have it sewn on. You had lots of them, and they were sewn on all outer governments.

Were you proud of it or--

No.

--embarrassed?

I was neither proud nor embarrassed. It was just one of those things. But it wasn't pleasant. But, of course, we lived in Holland, and the population in general was very sympathetic.

One day in the summer of 1942, I got caught in what they called the [GERMAN], where they closed off the street on two blocks and just picked up all the Jews they could find on the streets.

You are 15 years old now?

14.

14. Probably 14. And our iceman-- we did not have an electric refrigerator. We still had an old ice chest, and ice was delivered every day by a guy with a leather jacket with the ice on his back. And he was in the same block with his horse and his carriage.

And he spotted me on the street as the street was being closed by the Nazis on both sides. And he just grabbed me and shoved me in the back of his ice truck, and drove me home, cold, but frozen, and so probably saved me. I don't know if they would have picked up a little guy, but that might have.

Did you see any, at that time, any beatings on the streets?

There were very few beatings on the streets in Holland. You never saw that.

OK. OK.

That didn't happen in Holland.

What kind of curfew did you have?

We had dawn to dusk curfew, I'm sure. Or rather, dusk to dawn curfew.

Right. OK.

But in 1943, or was it '42, the deportations began in Holland.

By October '42 [INAUDIBLE].

In October '42, deportations began in Holland. And my middle brother was the first one to be called on for deportation. And he was then 16, and he was sent to Birkenau, after which we received one postcard from him, a handwritten postcard.

How was he taken away?

He was told to report to the railroad station and--

Did he say goodbye to you?

Yes. He had about three days notice I think. He said goodbye, but of course, we didn't know. We didn't know what was happening.

But I must backtrack here a little bit because my older brother, whom I hadn't mentioned, was a Zionist. And at a very young age, he did not want to stay with the family. He did not want to stay in Holland. He wanted to go to Palestine.

And he went to-- when I was in school, a regular school in Amsterdam, he already was outside Amsterdam in an agricultural college situation where Jewish boys were trained for immigration to Palestine. And he made Aliyah in 1938 from Amsterdam-- '38 or '39, before the war-- and he went to a kibbutz in Israel in Palestine.

He then enlisted in the war very early, in the Palestine Corps, and did very well, became a commander and a parachutist. And he was shot down and killed over Albania or Yugoslavia in 1944, very much towards the end of the war. We found out about that right after we got to Paris. And--

What were your parents' reactions when he had to leave the house?

He didn't have to leave. He wanted to leave.

I'm sorry. I'm talking about your other brother.

I'm sorry. OK.

[INAUDIBLE] I am. Your brother--

You're going back to the middle brother now.

Yeah.

Oh, they were-- you know, it was very traumatic, obviously, and very sad. My father was a very calm and quiet man. But obviously, everybody was terribly upset about it. But in retrospect, we would have-- everybody would have been much more upset had they known what's on the other side.

So you were the one child left at home?

Right, the youngest.

OK, and then--

And was raised to reason you couldn't go out at night. I went into an intensive reading thing in my life. I learned how to play bridge, and I read a great deal.

What about any sports during the day?

No.

That was restricted?

No. You couldn't go to swimming pools, and you wouldn't be out on the streets unnecessarily. There were no sports. But we also were mentally prepared. People were disappearing constantly and were being deported constantly.

And we were also prepared that this would be our fate, that we were going to be deported. There was no way for us to go underground, apparently. And I don't know if my parents had discussions about this, but I wasn't privy to it.

And so in 1943, middle of the night the doorbell rang. And we had our suitcases packed, and we were deported. At first we were taken to a theater.

The suitcases were already packed?

Oh, yes.

Why?

Because we knew it was going to happen. We just knew. It was just a question of time.

Had any of your friends disappeared--

Yes.

--and been deported by then?

Yes. By then most of them had.

Most of them had.

Friends and distant relatives we had, most of them had been deported by then.

Did you pack your own suitcase?

I don't remember that.

Do you know what you packed?

[INAUDIBLE].

Do you know what you had in your suitcase?

Yes. Good shoes, good socks, sweaters, that sort of thing.

Did you take anything especially personal to you?

Some photographs. I'm sure I had some photographs, but all of that disappeared eventually. But I didn't know, but my father had some American dollars which he packed. So--

So it's the middle of the night, and then she said the knock on the door.

Oh. Knock on the door, and there were Dutch policemen collaborators who took us to a [INAUDIBLE] station which was an old theater in an East Amsterdam. [? Scarborough ?] House, I believe, it was called. And we stayed in that theater for about two days. And then we were sent--

Did you have any food then?

Yes, they fed us.

Where did you sleep?

On the ground. On the floor. In the seats.

Were there a lot of people?

Yeah. It was not too full, but it was pretty full. And you could either sleep in theater seats, or you just made yourself comfortable on the ground. It was carpeted theater. It was no-- was not terribly traumatic. But people already were-- I was a rather sheltered boy, and I was being exposed right then and there to people with epileptic fits and things that you were not prepared for in life. And--

Was the overall atmosphere calm or very nervous then?

Very nervous. I would say very nervous. From there we were sent to Westerbork, which is in Northeastern Holland. And my parents were put in a different-- I think all three of us were in different barracks in Westerbork, but Westerbork was not a bad camp at all.

And I forgot whether my parents were working or not. They were there for a short period of time. I was put to work, partly agricultural work in the summertime, partly as a messenger and as a typist.

And I had to type lists of incoming transport, outgoing transports, and do bicycle messenger work and things like that, so-- or peel potatoes or work in the kitchen. I always was occupied. There wasn't a day that I didn't have to do something, which was very good basically.

You were talking about your experiences in Westerbork. What were the living conditions like? Where did you sleep?

Today, we view the living conditions in all the camps from hindsight. And we slept in barracks. I slept in the men's barracks with double-tiered beds.

But you were not with your father.

No, my father was in a different barrack. Let me inject here, my parents were only a few weeks in Westerbork. We were separated. It was probably a very traumatic experience for me. My parents were sent to Bergen-Belsen after about two weeks, and I was kept in Westerbork.

Were you able to say goodbye to them?

Yes. Yes.

Did they say anything special to you when they left that you remember?

I'm sure they did. But--

And so you were on your own then?

I was on my own for a couple of months in Westerbork.

Any friend-- previous friends there?

Yeah, there were lots of previous friends. There were people coming through. There were people I knew-- we knew. There were probably relatives. There were-- I didn't feel alone, strangely enough, even though I was a small-- a young child. But there were people there, and there were other people in my position. And I managed it quite well, I imagine.

Though I do know, you know, emotionally it was a bad situation for me at the time. I don't think the interview will be long enough for me to go into details and relate individual things that happened. I do--

Any particular experience?

Yes, there was one experience, which was very moving. A friend of my parents, a woman, she and her husband had befriended me as a child in Amsterdam, and she would-- they had a-- She was a very famous bridge player. He was a theatrical agent from Berlin. They entertained a lot of the movie people and the theater people from Berlin at their home in Amsterdam. And I got to know them because they were elderly, and I was there every day after school to walk their big German dog, Boxer, which they were both too feeble to walk.

Her husband was dying of lung cancer, and luckily died of lung cancer. They had tenants-- a German brother and sister, non-Jewish, anti-Nazis who had fled Germany. I believe he was homosexual. And both these tenants, I think, were picked up by the Germans and executed.

Well, as I was in Westerbork-- the name of the lady was-- of the woman was Mrs. Jacoby. Mrs. Jacoby arrived on a transport in a pink nightgown. And I tried to help her and I tried to get her blankets and clothing, and she absolutely refused to wear any clothing.

She came in a pink nightgown. She was deported in the same pink nightgown from Westerbork. She made absolutely no effort to survive. She must have sensed more than anybody else what was ahead of her. It was a very tragic but not uncommon thing to have happened.

I was in Westerbork probably two or three more months after my parents had been sent to Bergen-Belsen, and then I was given orders to report for transport to Theresienstadt.

How did you get these orders?

The bureaucratic way. I'm sure that they were posted in my barracks, or somebody handed me a piece of paper or whatever.

And how big were your barracks?

It's very difficult to describe. I would say there were probably 50 people in a barracks.

Were they young men like you or all ages?

Well, I was the youngest. I was always kind of the youngest. There were very few people younger than myself in the camps at that time. They were not uncomfortable. I mean, there were bunk beds. There was a stove. And there was good camaraderie-- people looked out for one another.

I was going to say, did the older men look out for you being the young--

Yeah. People looked kind of after each other. And there were no problems that I can remember from Westerbork.

And you still had your suitcase?

I still had my suitcase. So we were-- I was told to go to-- get on the train to go to Theresienstadt. And all the other trains that left for the East, the camps, were always cattle cars. And this was a regular passenger train with regular compartments.

You were part of a large group.

I was part of a large group, yes, of course. And so took the train to Theresienstadt, and I don't remember, there was-- we were probably given some food in Westerbork, some rations to eat on the train.

You had enough food while you were in Westerbork?

Yeah.

That was not a problem?

Oh, that was not a problem, because food was sent to me from Amsterdam. Friends in Amsterdam of my parents-- non-Jewish friends-- had money that my dad had left with them, and they could send me food packages from Amsterdam. And so I was not uncomfortable. And they even managed to get food packages to us in Theresienstadt for a while.

And your health was good?

My health was always good.

OK. So you took this train now to Theresienstadt.

To Theresienstadt. And it probably took a couple of days to get to Theresienstadt. And we were unloaded from the train and marched into the town of Theresienstadt. And possibly you've been there. It's an old garrison town going back to the 18th century. And it had the special feel and looks of a garrison town-- lots of barrack-like building-- called kasärny. And it was a motor town.

Who were your guards?

The guards were locals, or they were Germans. I don't recall exactly who all the guards were, but it was well guarded. But basically, it was not bad. It was not a concentration camp in the sense of hard labor or in the sense of physical deprivation.

Now, what month are we talking about now in the--

That's a very good question. We were talking about the winter of 1944.

Early '44.

Early '44. OK.

In spring of 1944--

Where-- let's talk also now about the living conditions.

The living conditions-- again, we were living in these barracks in these kasärny, also in the bunk beds. And--

Did you have blankets?

Oh, yes. There were blankets.

And you had enough clothes to keep you warm?

And we had enough clothes. Oh, we had our own clothes and there was enough clothes. Yeah. There was--

Were you still wearing your stars?

Yes. We were still wearing our stars, but we didn't have to wear any blue and white striped uniforms or anything like that.

Right, right. When you had clothes [INAUDIBLE]--

In Theresienstadt there was some schooling. I remember there were some school-- there was some schooling. There was some work. Again, I did some agricultural work, and I forgot what else I did-- actually, very little, probably.

My mother-- oh, my mother. Now, I have to go back like a little bit. After I was in Theresienstadt for six weeks, I was in the middle of the day, somebody called me on the street and say, hey, Jerry, or [DUTCH], or whatever my name was in Dutch, your parents have just arrived. I just couldn't believe it, and it absolutely true. That's in a transport from Bergen-Belsen to Theresienstadt, and my parents were both on the transport from Bergen-Belsen.

So we were again together, but not in the same barracks, and that was wonderful. And my mother went to work in a place called the glimmer. The glimmer was a place where they did hand work to manufacture mica used in the insulation of submarines. And there were about 300 women working in the glimmer, as I was told. And those were the only survivors.

The old survivors in Theresienstadt were probably the 300 women who worked in the glimmer. Everybody else who survived, there were people that had been sent in at the last minute from other camps. I don't understand exactly because the numbers are fairly high that are given, but when I was in Theresienstadt, everybody had been sent to Birkenau, Auschwitz during the summer of 1944.

What was your parents' state of mind? They were coping?

They were coping.

They were coping? They were working?

They were coping. My mother's state of mind was probably better than my father's in the sense that she was a real survivor. And she was a real coper. She managed to look well and do well and stay healthy physically, and they were coping reasonably well, I would think, yes.

Your father's health?

My father was diabetic before the war-- has always been diabetic, severely diabetic. And the starvation diet in the camps was very good for him. He lost weight. He was very thin. But because of the weight loss, his diabetes disappeared, and he didn't have any kidney problems. He didn't have any heart problems. He didn't have any problems at all, and he could work very hard. And that was particularly noticeable in Theresienstadt and in Auschwitz because he was already at the upper age limits in Auschwitz where people would not survive.

Right.

My mother stayed well. My mother did quite well emotionally in Theresienstadt. I do remember her always being a physically attractive and upbeat. There was a lot of underground and also officially sanctioned entertainment in

Theresienstadt.

This entire group of theater people that I knew in Amsterdam-- Kurt Geron and [PERSONAL NAME] and playwrights and whatever, only one of them, I believe, survived-- they kind of looked after me in Theresienstadt, too. You know, I was the little pet from Amsterdam, and so I was invited to rehearsals of the three-penny opera and musical things. There was chamber music there.

There was a certain amount of cultural life in Theresienstadt. As you probably know, there were many famous Czech and German composers there, and a lot of the music survived. I wasn't particularly well-versed in music at that time of my life, but I must say it was a very positive influence. And Theresienstadt on the whole was a camp that was survivable. I mean, there wasn't enough food. People died-- OK, many people died.

You remember seeing dead people?

Oh, yes.

And as a teenager, how did that make you feel, seeing people dying?

Well, sadly--

It's such a vulnerable age.

It's such a vulnerable age, but you also have to put yourself into the mindset of people in the concentration camp. You always-- you only survive by thinking you will survive. You do not survive if you think you're going to be dying next. Because if you think you're going to be dying next, you're going to be dying next. So your mindset is it's always the other person that dies. I'm sure that there's almost a thread that runs through most of survivors.

Kind of like a protective armor?

Kind of like a protective armor, yes. And my mother had it very strong. My father probably had it, too. My father had a lot of sense.

Did your parents or any of the other people know what was happening in other camps?

No. Had we known, I don't think anybody would have had the will to live or to go through it.

So you were not aware?

We did not know. The camp elders must have known. We did not know what went on in the other camps. I also was at Theresienstadt during the time that they did that Red Cross film, and I'm sure I participated in it. I was filmed, and it's the only time we were allowed in the swimming pool was when they did that Red Cross film. But I wasn't aware what was going on at all.

What did you think was happening?

I didn't give it much thought. I really didn't give it much thought. I didn't know what was happening. But it was just-- you were grateful for the opportunity of a-- getting to swim in a swimming pool, and maybe being fed an extra meal or something.

Did you talk to any of the Red Cross people?

No.

No.

No. I had no contact with anybody on the outside. So Kurt Geron and some of these German movie makers and film people that were there, I'm sure were participating in making that particular film. I learned that much later.

So at this point, you knew German and Dutch, were your two languages?

Yes, and also in French.

And French?

Yeah.

You learned that in school?

And I also had a fair amount of English, too.

Where did you learn French and English?

In Holland in school. When you go to school in Holland, you learn four languages. I learned German really in school in Holland, better than I learned it at home. I took German as a foreign language, and that's why I speak very good German today.

When you conversed with your parents you said you spoke always in German.

Always in German. But it's still different if you learn the language in school.

Were there many other teenagers like you--

Yes.

--around?

Yeah, there were quite a few teenagers like myself around.

Did you all stick together?

Yes. I know I had a Czech friend, a boy my age who his mother was an opera singer. And he knew all the Puccini opera, [INAUDIBLE] at age 15.

So there you are in Theresienstadt talking about Puccini.

Well, Theresienstadt was a rather special place for these many-- for many reasons also. It was a bit of a privileged place, but as I said, there was just-- as we all know, it was a terrible place in that everybody, almost everybody, was deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. Trains went every week, and you just were lucky you weren't on the train, until one day my dad and I were told to report for transport.

Your father?

Yeah.

But not your mother.

Not my mother, because she worked in this particular place, the glimmer. My mother stayed in Theresienstadt until the end of the war. My father and I were deported to Auschwitz in a cattle car with about 125 people and a bucket of-- for

toilet purposes.

Did you know where you were going?

No. We had no idea. All we knew was somewhere in the East, relocating to a camp in the East. We had no idea where we were going. I'm sure we didn't.

Do you remember saying goodbye to your mother again?

Yes. I do remember that.

Did she say anything special to you this time?

I blocked everything.

You blocked it. Yeah.

I blocked a whole lot of stuff and it remains blocked.

Right.

We--

So you were with your father in the car?

In the cattle car.

Was it all men, or was--

No. It was mixed. To the best of my memory it was mixed. People died in the car. It took three days I think to get to Auschwitz, three or four days. I can't remember [INAUDIBLE].

Were you in the car the whole time?

Oh, yes. Doors were never opened.

What did you and your father do? Did you comfort each other?

[? We did. ?]

How did you manage to get through those three days?

We managed. We managed. Everybody else had to get through those three days.

Were people a help to each other?

Sure. I am sure that-- I don't recall anybody fighting over anything. We were all there in the same-- but people did-- some elderly people I'm sure didn't survive.

So again, you saw dead people?

Yes. Well, by that time you're used to seeing dead people. I mean, you saw them every morning in Theresienstadt being picked up and carted off to the crematorium. A cousin of my mother's in Theresienstadt was dying of throat cancer, and I remember visiting him every day. And there was no morphine. There were no drugs to help. Poor man was suffering

horribly until he could finally die.

He had a son my age and a wife. And the son and the wife were both sent to Auschwitz about the same time I was. And the son didn't survive, but his wife had survived. I remember seeing her once after the war in New York. She had immigrated to the states. But she was very sad case.

So you were on the train for three days and--

We came to Auschwitz in the middle of the night, and--

What was the first scene that you saw?

The scene was-- raus, raus. And the SS with the German shepherds, and line up five in a row, and the harsh lights coming, shining down. And we were told--

Did you have your suitcase with you?

No, no. We were not-- yes, I did, but we were not allowed to-- it had to be left in the railroad car. You could not take anything out except ourselves.

Were you still standing with your father?

I was with my father. And as we were marching up, and we saw that selection table with Mengele--

How did you know it was him--

We didn't know that at this--

At the time.

--after the fact, of course. We saw a selection table with two officers sitting there, and people being assigned left and right. And as we were walking up, my father said to me, if they ask you what your profession is, tell them we are metalworkers. The German was [GERMAN], meaning metal separators. And it was just a very good idea of my father's. And we said that, and we were sent to the right.

The two of you?

The two of us together were sent to the right-- to the left. And right then and there, one of the kapos who was herding us or shepherding us, who were whipping us, who were beating us, whatever it was, told us that all those that had gone-- wait a minute. All those that had gone to the right, I believe-- we went to the left. The ones to the right went to-- he said, they're all going to be smoked in no time and pointing to the chimneys.

Did you believe him?

We could smell the-- the smell was very pervasive of flesh burning from the ovens, from the crematorium. And we saw these six chimneys with a flame, because there's no oxygen in those chimneys. The flames were burning above the chimney. It's like when you go to an oil field, and you see the fires above the-- the flames above. That's what the chimneys looked like except much higher. Oh, yes. We believed them all right.

And well, there was a harsh dose of reality right there on arrival within the first hour or so. You knew everything.

How was your father then? Was he--

Very calm.

He was calm?

You had to be very calm. He-- so we were marched with this group of men, all more or less-- I was probably the youngest, or amongst the youngest. And I was a small--

Oh, you were a small child?

I was a small person always, yes. And I look much younger than my age. My father certainly did not look younger than his age, and in 1944 he was 51. And there are very few people that age that-- particularly with gray hair-- that managed to get through. So we were--

Were there any other familiar people with you?

Yes, there were--

You were still with people [INAUDIBLE]--

Yeah, a group of Dutch people with us that were familiar, about 10 of them. None of the names that I remember, but there was a nucleus of people that--

So you were surrounded by at least some familiar faces?

That were familiar to us, yes. We were-- then the usual treatment-- I'm sure you have this on many tapes. We were told to disrobe. We could put our shoes aside. I mean, we were allowed to keep our shoes. Everything else was confiscated. We were deloused. We were shaven, all bodily hair. We were tattooed. I do not have a tattoo now. I had it removed.

Do you remember what your number was?

Yeah. B12773. And there was a number at the Holocaust museum on the second floor, I believe, in Washington, which was 12778 or-- within eight or nine numbers. It had to be somebody who was in the same transport.

Was that very painful to have done to you?

The tattoo? No, it was humiliating, but it was not painful. It went very quickly. And it being 1944, we were tattooed--

What month? What month was that?

This was in summer of 1944.

Summer of '44. And we were tattooed on the inner arm, whereas the earlier first couple of years, the A numbers and the earlier serial numbers were tattooed on the outer arm with huge numbers, and that got the technology [INAUDIBLE].

Was your father's number--

His was 12772-- either 2 or 4. But he never had his removed.

And then what were you given to wear?

Well, first of all, we were deloused and showered and shaven and tattooed, and then were given the blue and white uniforms and the blue and white cap with that number on the uniform and the yellow star-- a triangle. That's what we were given to wear, but then we were allowed to take our shoes back.

And unbeknownst to me, and even then I didn't know it, my father had hidden a \$10 bill, his same \$10 bill he still had,

and it was is the lining of his shoe.

Of his shoe?

Of his shoe. And we kept our shoes, and they were good, sturdy shoes. And without those shoes, we would never have survived.

These were leather shoes?

Good leather shoes with thick soles. Well, then the usual-- the Auschwitz torture started.

You then went to a barrack?

We went to our barracks. It was very tightly-- herded into a barracks.

You and your father?

My father and I and the whole group, yes. And we had to sleep on the ground on cement floor, body to body, very close together under lights. The conditions were terrible.

The arrivals every day were horrible. I saw a man beaten to death by other inmates in the barracks the second day I was there.

Why was he beaten?

He had just arrived from-- he was a traitor. He had betrayed other people in the underground in Holland. And then he himself had been sent to Auschwitz. And people that he had betrayed found him there, and they just beat him to death, slowly but surely.

And you witnessed this?

Yeah. It was very cruel and very gruesome. That's where you learned a whole lot of life very quickly. People who didn't want to live would and did walk to the barbed wire and killed themselves. That was an easy way to commit suicide.

We were stand-- we had to march. We had to stand on the parade grounds. We had to stand on one foot and--

For a long time?

Yes, it was all cruel and unusual punishment I would say for a long time. And there wasn't-- in Birkenau itself, there was no meaningful work for us to do, and we were there for about four, six weeks, perhaps even longer. I just don't remember exactly how long we were there. And I do remember that after two or three weeks, we had to go through a selection, and that was probably the worst part of all the camp experiences.

Because the first time we arrived we did not know that there was a selection and it was a life and death matter. But then we had to undress, and we had to jump and run and do all kinds of physical things in order to prove that we were fit to work. And if you couldn't pass that selection, you knew you were going to go to the gas chamber. So that was probably one of the worst experiences we all had in those--

This is in Birkenau?

In Birkenau, yeah.

What about your father? He had to do this also?

He had to do this.

And how did he get through it?

He got through it.

He did? He was able to do the physical--

He was able to do-- yeah, he got through it. I got through it. We all got through it.

How long did it take?

It seemed forever, but it probably was just a few minutes. You know, that's hard to say. The food was terrible. If you were lucky and you got fed something out of the bottom of the bucket, you probably got a little bit more substance than if you got something from the top of the bucket.

You had a tin can, and the sanitary conditions were terrible. And you could see people who were slated for death. We called them [GERMAN]. You've heard the expression. And it was almost some people who no longer could-- had the will to live and that showed a certain demeanor. They were almost self-selected for death.

Fate selected them for death first, and then they gave up. And they became sort of-- not pariahs, but you avoided contact. It was your own way of survival, I suppose, is to avoid contact with these-- with people we termed to be [GERMAN].

How supportive were the older people to you-- the older? You obviously were still with men, the older men. Did the older men take care of the younger men?

Well, yes. There was really-- there was really support. The second day or the third day in Birkenau-- I was a cute little kid. The kapo who was a criminal for the barracks had picked me out to become his room boy. And I knew, and my father knew, what would be involved. And I somehow managed to play dumb and get out of it, because it-- they used these--

How did you do that?

Huh?

What did you say? How did you get out of it?

Well, I just played very dumb and said I didn't know what he wanted from me, et cetera, et cetera. No, I wasn't interested in the sardines or in the chocolate.

Yeah. Yeah.

And--

And he let you get away?

Well, there were other cute kids in the barracks. And I knew that-- I had already heard earlier what would happen to these kids is they get tired of them, and so they let them go to the gas chamber, you know, [INAUDIBLE]. So I got out of that, and somebody else was picked instead. But there was no dearth of people for them to pick on. And there--