

We were talking about your experiences in Birkenau. Are there moments that you wish to talk about? You said you were able to get out of--

Oh.

--being a room boy.

Well, you know, all of Birkenau was a continuous unbelievable horror story, much of which I'm sure I and many others probably have tried to suppress. I don't remember too many details anymore.

And you were still with your father?

I was always with my father in the camps.

Do you feel that made a difference being with your father?

Oh, definitely. It made a big difference.

Do you think you would have been able--

Made a difference to him, too. But, as I said, my father was very cool and very collected and very unemotional.

And he stayed that way even in Birkenau?

Always. Yeah, well, it's how we survived. Because he had the right ideas at the right time for survival. And also he never made waves. You hardly ever knew he was there.

Did he give you advice ever about how to act?

Yes, probably. Sure. He must have given me enough hints. But you learn very quickly in an environment like that how to act and how to protect yourself and how to survive.

But you're close to 17 now? Or about 17--

I was 16 or 17.

Did you consider yourself very old at that point?

Well, you do get-- I was very young 17, but you do grow very old very quickly. I was a-- yeah.

You were saying about, though were a young 17, you were old in other ways.

Yeah, we grow very old or very wise in an environment like that very quickly.

What about the other boys your age? The teenagers? Were they reacting the same way and responding as you in coping?

Yes. Those that survived. Absolutely.

Did you still at that point know people from Holland?

Yes.

So some familiar faces?

There were familiar faces. All during this period that we were with a group of people from Holland and also with many other people whom we didn't know, but there were always familiar faces.

Was that a help?

That was a help. It must have been a help. We were then sent-- after, I don't know, six, seven weeks, I believe I said, in Birkenau, maybe longer-- to Gleiwitz. Gleiwitz was a labor camp. Auschwitz was surrounded by numbers of factory-type labor camps, like the Buna, for instance, where IG Farben had the rubber factory, where Elie Weisel was. Gleiwitz was a very small camp.

How did you get there?

By a truck. It was only about two hours or so from Auschwitz.

With your father?

With my father and the whole group on the back of a truck. And it was a great relief to get to Gleiwitz because while it had a crematorium, it did not have any gas chambers. It was not an extermination camp.

When you were in Birkenau, how much freedom of movement did you have?

None. None to speak of. We were adjacent to the experimental block. And I did get some information. I did get some input as to what was going on at--

At the time, you're talking about?

--at the plant at the time, yes.

What was your reaction?

Horrible. We were totally horrified when you found out what they were doing to people. And yet, some people thought perhaps being there was a means of survival. That they might not even survive if they hadn't been in the [? e-block. ?]

Did you worry at that time when you were in Birkenau that you might be taken away right away or did you feel because you were young and you were pretty safe for the time being?

You could never feel pretty safe, but you always, as I said earlier, you couldn't survive unless you thought you were going to survive. But you could never feel pretty safe. And once we got to Gleiwitz, you could feel a little bit safer. The dangers were different. And it was very, very cold winter, and we had to work very hard in factories. My father worked in a factory making railroad equipment. And I was working in an ammunitions factory welding.

Were you still wearing your Birkenau uniform?

Oh, yes. That never changed. But as we got to Gleiwitz--

With your shoes?

With our shoes. But as we got to Gleiwitz, there was an old German Wehrmacht guard, not an SS guard, and as he was marching my father's group out to work one morning at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, he looked at my father and he said, weren't you Lieutenant Rosenstein? And didn't I serve under you in World War I? And so he was a decent man who had been drafted into guard duty when he was in his 50s or early 60s, an older man. And so my father managed to speak to him and he slipped him the \$10. And the guard slipped him occasionally some bread or a newspaper. So that's part of the tale of survival.

What were the living conditions at Gleiwitz in the barracks?

In Gleiwitz, we were again living in three tiers, either two or three-tiered, I think, three-tiered barracks with those straw mattresses and one blanket. And the mattresses had to be made up like a razor every morning. So it had to be absolutely straight. You couldn't have a lump showing or else there would be some kind of cruel punishment. And the punishment often was that you had to stand on one foot in the snow for about an hour or something like that. And that would kill you if you didn't manage to do this. If you lost part of your uniform, they would kill you. It was very severe. And we had to stand at Appell twice a day where people--

We're talking Gleiwitz now?

In Gleiwitz, yeah.

How often in Birkenau did you have the Appell?

At least twice a day, too.

For how long did that take?

It wasn't so cold then. It was still fall. In Gleiwitz, it was winter and it was freezing cold and there was no warm water. And we had to take [INAUDIBLE] and thaw out the water line every morning in order to get some water to wash with, which was outdoors. They did feed us enough to keep alive. The same soup, always.

Did you get any bread?

Yeah, coffee and some rye bread, I believe. The food was just barely enough to keep you going. I had started developing holes in all my feet and in my fingers from malnutrition.

You mean sores?

Yeah, deep sores from malnutrition. My father did not.

About how much did you weigh then?

About 90 pounds, 95 pounds, I think. Maybe 100 pounds.

And you said your father did not develop--

Any sores. No, he managed to stay quite healthy through it all. I managed to stay quite healthy. You could not not be healthy under those conditions. So we stayed in Gleiwitz until just about January 17 or so. 50 years ago next week. And we didn't have newspapers, but we had some news all the time. And we managed to get information--

How did you get those?

From the guards or from when my father managed, one of the guards slipped him a paper occasionally. From overhearing radio reports or something like that. And people were drawing maps in the snow to show where the Russian Army was. There was always somehow information got to us. And information was hope. You know, with information, maybe they would get here before they got us.

There were three camps in Gleiwitz, one, two, and three. We were in number three. And the German orderliness is, of course, that they evacuated camp number one first, then number two second, and number three last. We luckily were in number three, and so we were last to go on this terrible march to the east. And stragglers were shot. And the SS shot the stragglers amongst the Wehrmacht, amongst the older people that they had hired from retirement, like that man, that

guard that recognized my father. We believe he was shot at the end himself and that he couldn't make the march.

What was his name? Do you remember?

I do not remember his name.

So you and your father began this forced march--

Right.

--out of Gleiwitz?

With the whole crew. And we had the blankets around us and we were-- you know, it looked like something out of [PERSONAL NAME] drawing. And it was the harshest of winters. It was January with deep snow and was very cold. And one night, we were in some barn or other where we were allowed to sleep. And then the next day we were marched on and we ended--

About how many were in your group? Do you have any memory?

It was sort of a long, long column. And it was we were just at the end of it and in front of us were the other camps, probably.

But these all men in your column?

They were all men, no women. And we ended up in a camp called Blechhammer.

About how long a march was that?

A couple of days.

Were you given any food on the way?

No, I don't think so. I don't remember. I don't think we had any food.

And where did you sleep? Did you--

One night I remember sleeping in some barn. And then I remember being in Blechhammer. And there was terrible conditions. There was lots of typhoid and lots of people dying. And the guards were in the towers, but they were not on the ground, and they were just shooting at anything that was moving on the ground.

In the camp?

In the camp. So you didn't dare go out of the barracks. And then all of a sudden it became very strangely quiet. I remember when I looked up and looked at the towers and the towers had been deserted and the guards had fled. And then the camp gate opened and the Red Cross came in, two people from the Red Cross. But they didn't go into the camp, wisely, because there was probably so much typhoid there.

And then before we knew it, we found out the Germans had indeed fled. And we organized ourselves within a group of 10 or 12, that same group from Holland that had been together, and said, the first thing we got to do was get out of here. It's much too dangerous to stay here with all the disease.

What were your thoughts at this point that the Germans had fled?

People think--

Did you believe it?

--you throw your caps in the air and start dancing. No, it was just traumatic. We believed it, yes, but we were so traumatized it made no emotional difference whatsoever.

You were still--

You were still surviving. You were still surviving. And the Russians could not be trusted. We found that out very quickly.

How did you know that?

We found that out they were, A, very drunk and very undisciplined, and they were shooting and raping and shooting and raping. And women had a terrible time, particularly if there were Catholic orders in that part of the world. And the Russians made it the sport to rape, gang rape the women in the Catholic orders. That happened constantly.

So the minute we met the Russians and we saw that-- we knew that we had to be very careful with them, too. Because, A, we weren't sure that they knew who we were. Would they think we were Germans? But at the time we only spoke Dutch, we didn't speak German for self-protection. So anyway, 10 or 12 of us decided immediately we should not stay in Blechhammer and we should head east towards Poland.

So we just left the camp. We had our blankets and started marching. And we found--

This was the group of 10 or so?

Oh, yeah, 10 or 12, yes.

All ages?

Well, I probably was the youngest. My father was the oldest, I would think. Everybody else in between. But mostly people in their 20s, I think. We found an abandoned prisoner of war camp where English prisoners of war had been--

Incarcerated?

Incarcerated by the Germans.

Do you remember the name of it?

No. It was near Blechhammer.

It was near Blechhammer?

It was near Blechhammer. It was within kilometers. We didn't have the strength to walk more than a couple of kilometers. But it was clean and there were bunk beds and we found blankets in there. We found dishes in there, tons and tons of dishes, clean dishes, and a canister of tea. And the canister of tea is the one can see over there. It's not [INAUDIBLE] coffee. [LAUGHS] It's the only piece that survived from then. Well, we--

How long did you stay there?

About two weeks. Two weeks to recover. There was one of the guys in the group was a butcher.

In your group?

In our group. And the first thing that wandered by was a pig from some neighboring farm. So we slaughtered the pig. We had an ax and we killed the pig and we had found some knives and we butchered the pig. And everybody--

Did you eat the pig?

Everybody else did, I didn't. I couldn't eat the pig, but I ate the liver. I had the liver. And everybody--

Did your father eat the pig?

Yes. Oh, religion had nothing to do with it. Hey, we're talking about survival here. And at that stage, my father had absolutely no idea that he would ever set foot in a synagogue again. I remember we killed the pig and everybody got terribly, terribly ill because nobody's body could handle anything as heavy as that and had terrible diarrhea. And I didn't because I didn't eat the pig meat, I only ate pig liver, and I was fine.

And after a couple of days, I started getting-- the sores started healing. After about a week or two it will disappear. I mean, the scars never went away, but I started healing pretty quickly. Then we slaughtered a heifer. We found a heifer, and that was more easy to digest. And I think we found potatoes or something. So we found food. And we--

Were you left alone, the 10 of you there?

Well, the Russians came by and checked us out constantly. But, yes, we were pretty well left alone.

Did you understand Russian?

No.

No.

But there was one Russian officer who spoke English. So we could communicate with him in English.

What did you talk about?

Who knows? [LAUGHS]

Any Russian Jewish officers?

He was a Jew. Yeah, he was Jewish.

And what was his reaction to you all?

Well, he had seen a lot by that time. He didn't react anymore. He had seen-- he'd already been liberating Poland and Auschwitz and other places. I don't recall that there was much--

He wasn't especially sympathetic to you?

I don't imagine so. But, you know, the Russians looked at us to very strangely. They couldn't make us out either. They didn't know exactly who we were, what we were, et cetera. Were we the enemy or what? But we were there and we were left alone pretty well for 10 or 12 days. And then the Russians came and said the Germans had counterattacked and they needed us, and we had to help them dig trenches. So back with the shovels.

We helped the Russians dig some trenches. And so we didn't find that very conducive to our survival. And after 10 or 12 days, we were probably well enough to manage, and we just packed up our belongings. By that time, we had scrounged things together and we had some belongings, and we loaded them on little hand-held carts. And like a troop out of Mother Courage, we marched off to the east.

And then we spent the first night-- that was after the night after we had to dig the ditches for the Russians-- we spent it at a monastery. And one in our group was a doctor. And he was asked at the monastery to examine some nuns who were there and who had all been raped by the Russians. I mean, the mass rape was just horrendous. And there was this enormous exodus of people fleeing towards Germany, probably Nazi collaborators and what they called Volksdeutsche, the German settlers of the east, who couldn't understand that we were moving in the opposite direction.

So we finally got to a town named Katowice. Katowice is in Western Poland. And there was a Red Cross or some kind of refugee service there that-- or the Russians did it, I forgot. But we were simply quartered in with the Polish families. They were told they have to house us and feed us, period, and did. And there was some communication there with these people.

Between the Polish--

Between us, yeah. My father and I, we were with this Polish woman and her daughter. And I know there was some communication there and it was pleasant. And we were fed and registered and looked after. And we were given some-- we finally got rid of our blue uniforms and we were given--

This was the first time you were out of them?

No, actually it is not. I stand corrected. Because in the English Army barracks, we found English Army uniforms, and that's what we had on. By that time, we had already changed to English Army.

Had you been wearing the same uniforms in the camp or did they give you new uniforms?

That's a very good question. They must have given us new uniforms at one time, though I do not recall this. I don't recall this.

Just to back up then, do you remember ever being deloused again and again as a precaution?

Oh, yes. Yes, we were shaven--

No, in the beginning, yes, but I meant--

No. Again, yes. Oh, yes.

This was a standard procedure?

We were kept-- it was every-- once a month or so with a haircut and we were deloused. Which, in retrospect, was probably a very good idea, you know, because when we saw how many people died of typhoid afterwards. And the hair does grow back quickly.

Did you find that demeaning?

Of course it was demeaning. Everything, the whole experience is demeaning. It's just one of those things that just made you a non-person not having hair. But on the other hand, once we were in Katowice, by that time I had a full growth of hair again. And there, I also found another survivor, a guy I went to high school with in Amsterdam, about two of them.

And also there we found a young woman who was a friend of my oldest brothers and dated my oldest brothers in Amsterdam. Her name, I remembered, was Ruth Asher. And she came from a very fine German-Jewish family that lived in the neighborhood. And she had had terrible experiences in Auschwitz and she lost it after the liberation. We had to guard her and watch her. She was totally-- well, she was pretty insane by then and very suicidal. And for all that period she was with the group, we had to watch her and look out after her. I don't know what happened to her afterwards.

But we encountered a troop of gypsies, of dwarfs that had survived. You know, they had experimented on small people in the [? e-block. ?] And they were Romanian. They were on a train with us from Katowice to Janowice, and they got off the train somewhere in northern Romania.

You stayed--

It was very hard to communicate with them because we didn't have a language in common, some French, but very little. That they had-- and very traumatized in there also. I remember that there was not only lack of communication, there was a wish for no communication.

On their part?

On their part, yeah. But I suppose then it came the time where none of us really communicated or talked about it anyway. That had already, that was beginning to set in pretty soon after the liberation, in my case. We stayed in Katowice, what did I say, four or five weeks? I forgot how long. And then the Red Cross organized this train. Because all those British prisoners of war that had been in the barracks there had also been liberated and they were on the same train. And because of them, this was organized, not because of us.

Now I have to backtrack a little bit. After we were liberated from Blechhammer, in our group there was one guy, a Czech fellow, whose wife had also stayed in Theresienstadt. And we knew that my mother had stayed in Theresienstadt, that she had not been transported. Because we knew from the last transport that had come in from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, where people had survived and that we talked to, that she was still in Theresienstadt.

And this fellow knew his wife was still in Theresienstadt. He said he was not going to go to Eastern-- with us. He was going to wait until the Russian army advanced far enough to go to Theresienstadt, which was only days. And he went to Theresienstadt and he told my mother then who had survived in Theresienstadt that my dad and I were alive. That we were somewhere in Russia, but we were alive. So my mother knew this.

Now let me backtrack. Let me go back to Katowice. We were put on a train then with our group. There were by then not just us 10. There were about 100 or 150 survivors and all those British prisoners of war. And it was a regular passenger train that was organized by the Red Cross and it was sent from Katowice to Janowice. Janowice is in the Bukovina. It's Northern Romania. And today, I think it's Belarus.

It's a beautiful wide town in the Carpathian Mountains that had gotten through the war virtually unscathed. It was just beautiful with an intact Jewish population. Somehow or other, there were a lot of wealthy Jews living in that town that managed to survive. And the Jewish community kind of really looked after us. They took us into their homes. And they had beautiful homes with bathrooms and hot and cold running water and something. And, again, we were first deloused in Janowice. But it was Russian occupied and everybody was very paranoid because Russian spies were everywhere. And the Russians also had to be quartered with the civilian population.

So I know in the house where I was quartered-- and they had a son my age, and it was very, very nice, a nice kid-- A, the family, they were all preparing to go to Palestine, that entire population, virtually within weeks after we were there, moved out to Palestine. But in their home there was also a Russian woman agent, probably NKVD. and so they were extremely careful about what could be said and so on. But on the whole, it was a wonderful experience to be in a town, in a war-torn part of the world, that somehow like a little paradise had survived. I mean, most of the Jewish population was intact. I've never exactly figured out how that was.

Were you jealous of them?

No.

You weren't?

No, not at all. We stayed there for four or five weeks. And by that time, it was spring?

What was your reaction to seeing bathrooms and nice houses? You hadn't seen--

Oh, you took it-- it was very easy to accept. [LAUGHS] It was very easy to accept. By now, we-- yeah, somehow or other, also at one time my dad and I were lodged, well, my dad was lodged with a rabbi and his wife. I think this may happen in Janowice, too. But they were so orthodox that they wouldn't sleep in the same room when my father was in the house. It was all very strange.

We were then told in Janowice to move on to Odessa, which we did by train. And when we got to Odessa, the Russians put us in a sanitarium on the Red Sea-- on the Black Sea like maybe a couple of miles outside of Odessa. What may have been sort of a little resort town at one time or another. And a Russian officer who spoke English recruited me to be a translator for the Dutch people, Dutch to English, to Russian, so they could do their administrative work with us.

The weather was pleasant. There was no running water in the sanatorium or in the place where they had quartered us. And they gave us some cold, some salt water soap. And I know we washed in the Black Sea. We did our bathing in the Black Sea every day. But myself and another guy who were doing the translating were given a treat one night. The Russians took us to the ballet. My first time at the ballet in Odessa. And I remember it was [?My Death by Delibes?].

And there were two Russian officers, a man and a woman, with the two or three of us. And we were sitting in a box and we were speaking English because that's the language we had in common. And one Russian officer, he was getting out of the box, was saying something in Russian to the woman, but her mind was set on speaking English. And she answered him in English and says, don't worry, I'll watch them. [LAUGHS] So we knew we were carefully guarded. We were not supposed to have any contact with the civilian population there. Well, this was-- Russia under Stalin was extremely paranoid.

We stayed in Odessa waiting until the English Red Cross sent a ship for us. And I remember there were 300 English prisoners of war and maybe the hundred of us survivors. We were then loaded aboard a passenger ship. And in Constantinople, now Istanbul, the Red Cross or the British consul came aboard. And that's where we could make-- and he took telegrams for us. And so that was the first contact my father and I could make with the outside world.

You got on the boat and went to Istanbul?

Well, the boat was docking in Istanbul. But my father was docking in the Bosphorus. We were not allowed to get off the boat--

To get off?

--but the British consul came aboard--

And you gave him the telegram?

And we gave him telegrams to the United States and England and Egypt, where my uncle was living. And so that was in May of 1945, May 5, 1945. Because we had all been written off for dead by then by the family. We knew that. We found out in Paris when we saw some correspondence.

It's now May 5, 1945?

Mm-hmm.

OK, and you--

And we were able finally to give signs of life to the outside world. The ship then proceeded to Marseilles, where we unloaded. And on the dock, I found an old school friend from Amsterdam, who was just there to help the Red Cross,

who had survived the war in the Southern France very nicely. And that was very nice. So my dad and I got on the train, which was going to Amsterdam. Because by then, the entire group was from Holland.

But we knew that the conditions in Amsterdam were terrible. And my father had some accounts receivable and some money available to him in Paris, which I didn't know about. And in the middle of the night-- we were in Strasbourg-- he wakes me and shakes me up and he says, come on, we're getting off this train. I remember I said, why? He said, we're not going to Amsterdam. It's terrible. We're going to Paris. And so off the train we went at 1:00 in the morning. And there was another train he had spotted standing near an American Army train going from Strasbourg to Paris.

It was the two of you?

The two of us. Just got on the army train to Paris. And from Paris, there was a big reception at the-- that was really terrible when we got to Paris. In the morning at the [INAUDIBLE], as we got off the train and came out, there were all these women, Jewish women, standing. There was pictures, portraits of their children, their husbands, their fathers, their family-- crying. Would we recognize any of these people?

And if you look at somebody's picture with hair and a well-fed face, and then to equate that to somebody you may have known as a skeleton in the camps, impossible. You wouldn't recognize anybody. So the first thing was, as we came out of the station, was this gamut of people there that had survived in Paris trying to identify their loved ones. The French [? records ?] were very well organized, and they had a [FRENCH] on the Boulevard Raspail and then they quartered us in a wonderful villa outside [PLACE NAME] and got us back on our feet. And that's when I got sick and my father got sick.

What from?

My father got sick from overeating. His body couldn't handle food at all. He got terrible kidney problems and fluid problems. He had to be hospitalized. And I got a galloping case of terrible pneumonia. And when you can afford to be sick, you get sick.

And so you stayed in Paris?

We stayed in Paris. A friend of ours, a son of a family from Benshein, a very good friend, was in the American Army in the Signal Corps, and he was stationed in Paris. And when his family told-- when they wired him that we were there, he found us and made contact. And meanwhile, my mother had been repatriated to Amsterdam. So he gave me one of his spare uniforms. And I got on an army train to Brussels and then on a streetcar to Antwerp and then on an American Army truck, a flower truck, and hitchhiked to Amsterdam.

Do you remember the meeting with your mother?

I certainly remember the meeting with my mother. When I got to Amsterdam, I found a dime, a payphone, and I called her, and I said where I was. We knew where she was going to be-- with these friends who was my dad's banker. And his wife was Jewish, he wasn't. They had survived, and she was going to be with them. Yes, I remember that very well. And I called and it was wonderful. And she had survived in fabulous shape. She looked great.

And she had lost two children, but she'd also not lost her husband and another child. And that's more, under the circumstances, than any family could have hoped for. And, yeah, she wasn't physically in very good shape. So I had to get her back to Paris. Of course, we had no papers and we had no passports. We had nothing. And I think I had some French identification papers [INAUDIBLE] passport.

But I wasn't worried about myself. But she drove back with friends of these friends in Amsterdam. They had a farm near the border, near the Belgian border. And so they just drove her. And they had a car and they managed to have gasoline. So they drove her to the border, just took her across the border and drove her to Antwerp, to Brussels. And we met in Brussels at another business friend of my dad. We had an address, and I managed to get to Brussels, again, hitchhiking with the army. And in Brussels, there was a regular way of getting train passages and so on. The survivors, they leaned

over backward to be accommodating. So we then got to Paris.

And how long did you stay there?

A year and a half. I was in school. My father started a business. My mother, no she didn't work, basically. She was a housewife. We had a little apartment outside of Paris in the suburbs. But we started our psychologically ill-advised behavior right then and there. In that, the camps were not a subject of discussion, ever. For the rest of our lives, we never talked about it.

This was something you all three didn't want to do or--

This was something we all three couldn't do.

Couldn't do, OK. So it wasn't that one of the three felt or was able to [INAUDIBLE]? All three of you were on the same--

Wavelength.

Wavelength.

Yeah, very unhealthy.

And then how long did you stay here?

In Paris?

Yeah.

Yeah, a year and a half.

And then where did you go?

New York.

With your family?

Yeah. We were together, yeah. We lived in New York first. Well, my parents lived in New York for the rest of their lives. My father died in 1959 at age 65. He died relatively young. He had a stroke and uremia, mostly a result of diabetes.

And then you moved out to California?

I came to California in '49.

Why 1949?

I was very unhappy in New York. And I think a lot of the trauma caught up with me afterwards. And I had eating problems. And probably living under the same roof as my parents was not a good idea. So I needed to get away. So I've been in San Francisco since '49.

Can we now talk a little bit about your reflections and your feelings about what you experienced? How do you feel about being Jewish now that you've been through what you went through?

Oh.

Did it make you more Jewish, less Jewish?

Much less Jewish.

Much less.

I have gotten to be much more Jewish since we started the gay synagogue in San Francisco in 1980. And I was involved fairly early in that. And I was recruited for it, so to speak. It's the same thing to the Holocaust. I was not dealing. I could not deal with the Holocaust most of my life. I didn't do any work forward. I couldn't talk about it. I didn't go to schools. I didn't give seminars. I had my tattoo removed so that-- and until that was removed, I would never wear a short sleeve shirt because I just simply didn't want people to ask me about it. I couldn't deal with it.

How old were you when you had your tattoo removed? Was that a quick--

It was in the early '50s.

So soon after the war?

Yeah, in the early '50s. And then I went a couple of years into analysis and dealt with things and started getting out of denial about the whole experience. But I still wouldn't deal with it for many years. The Jewish involvement started really, more or less, with the gay synagogue. Until then, I only was forced into synagogue for funerals or holidays when I was in New York or something like that. So I never felt-- I felt positive as a Jew, but I didn't feel positive about the religious end of it.

Do you still think about the Holocaust?

Yes.

Does it still influence you in any way?

It doesn't influence me at all. I don't-- maybe it does influence me and maybe I'm wrong there. But one doesn't ever not think about this. There's far too much, when it's reminded too frequently. Yes, one does think about it a lot. And in recent years, I've been more involved since I'm the board of the Holocaust Research Center here. You know, one does get involved. I'm also much more involved in recent years in all kinds of community activities, which I wasn't heretofore. But heretofore, I was working until 1980. I was working full time and I didn't have time or money for these things. But now that I have both, I'm much involved in the community.

Did you ever apply or receive reparations?

Oh, yes. I received reparations.

How do you feel about getting them?

Perfectly fine. They owe me. I don't get a hell of a lot. And I get health reparations, but I got a lot of reparation for a lack and for missing education. Got paid a lot of money for that without me ever applying for this. It was kind of money that came automatically. And because I had a bad injury in the camps, I've been receiving health damages all my life.

What bad injury?

I was on unloading a railroad car and they overloaded me with a cement bag and my back cracked.

Which camp?

In Gleiwitz.

And you said you hurt your back?

Yes.

And so you got extra payment?

Yes. And also, that paid for a lot of surgery. That paid for all the operations. I have a fused spine.

When you were injured there, what kind of treatment did you get?

There was no treatment. You just had to ignore it. You couldn't even tell anybody that you'd been hurt.

So you had to continue working?

Of course. Actually, the reason-- well, I noticed when I was injured what had happened, the results didn't show up until three or four years later or five years later.

You had alluded to some of it before, what do you think helped you get through this? To survive this experience, these experiences? What do--

Luck. 99% luck. 99% is to be at the right places at the right time, to have the right reactions and not to be in the line of fire. Now, you have interviewed a lot of other survivors. Let me ask you a question. How do they-- what do they say?

The same answer.

OK.

And being with your father sustained you?

Yes.

Did you feel that made a difference?

Mm-hmm. Oh, absolutely. It did make a difference. And if you let Elie Wiesel, I'm sure you have, who had virtually the same identical story as I have, and who also was with his father, and who was in the camp three more months-- because from the death march, they left a day earlier than we did or two days earlier, and they were put on a train near Blechhammer and sent to [PLACE NAME] or east to Germany or Austria to other camps, we escaped that because of maybe 24 or 48 hours time difference. That's luck. Because I'm sure we would not have survived another three months.

Because of your health, you mean?

Yeah.

Do you have friends who are Holocaust survivors?

I have one very good friend. My oldest friend from school in Paris is a Holocaust survivor. He lives in New York. And I didn't know him in the camps. He knew Elie Wiesel. He was in the same camp at the Buna in Monowitz. And his name's Ernie [PERSONAL NAME]. And he has three children, and they all live here on the West Coast and the Northwest.

And we get together every once in a while. He was kind of like adopted by my parents. He lost everybody and his parents. He was alone. And he survived Auschwitz for one more year than we did, one and a half more years. He's a tough guy. Yes, and we are in touch. We see each other quite often. As a matter of fact, we're going to have a 50th year

anniversary this year in Seattle. We're going to meet.

Have you been back to Europe?

Often, very frequently.

Have you gone to Germany?

Yes, I go to Germany quite often. I have many friends, much younger than myself, in Germany, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

What is your reaction, your feelings about going back?

Oh, I'm very OK about it. I have no-- I have forgiven a lot, I've forgotten nothing or very little. And I consider myself not only a survivor, I think, I consider myself that I have won in the sense that I'm not carrying a lot of baggage with me of negative things that are totally useless, you know?

I don't associate with Germans much older than myself, unless I know who they are.

Why?

Well, because I can't trust them politically. And I'm very outspoken. I make-- I can be very unpleasant. I will ask people questions that shouldn't be asked or don't want to be asked. So I just simply avoid and I don't really know people. The people I know in Germany are either Jewish or not Jewish, but friends much younger than myself. Why should I feel negative about? How can you blame them for what happened in another generation? I mean, that doesn't make any sense.

Any other ways that the war influenced you that you wanted to talk about?

Well, I suppose we're all a product of our earlier background. And what happens to you for the first 10 or 15 years of your life is something that is far more important than what happens to you in the next 50. And so, yes, I would think, like everybody, not just survivors, who we are has been determined by what happened to us or who we were very young in life. And, of course, those of us who have gone through Auschwitz and other camps have been psychologically, profoundly influenced by that. And not all of us have learned a lot from the experience.

Do you feel you have learned?

Well, I think I have learned a fair amount. But when I'm together with a lot of other survivors, I'm sometimes shocked by their intolerance and their un-liberal attitudes, not just to its gays, but to its minorities, to its-- I have sensed that very often. But, of course, there's I'm sure many amongst us who are more liberal.

When you were in the camps, were you aware of the persecution of gays at the time?

No.

Or was this something you found out later?

Exactly. Well, I was aware that there were gays in the camp, but in Auschwitz there were very few. You saw very few pink triangles. They were mostly in Dachau and Buchenwald and in the German and the Austrian camps. And also, I had found out later that the persecution of one person is one too many. But recent research seems to show that the numbers were much smaller than it's usually anticipated. It cannot be established that more than 8,000 or 9,000 people total were in camps because they were gay. And surely there were millions of gays in Germany.

So, you, as a child, you did not come into contact with gay prisoners--

No.

--when you were there?

Not at all. Criminals, yes, but I don't remember having any contact with gay prisoners. Because I don't think many of them were in Auschwitz as gay prisoners.

Right, right.

And besides, I was a kid. I wasn't--

Right, you were still very young, right, right. Anything else you wanted to share--

Well, no--

--or you left out? Anything you'd like to say?

We've covered half my, [LAUGHS] you know, in something like two hours. There's obviously a lot of stuff that we have left out, but there's just no way of--

You don't have any other--

Well, I've been very fortunate in life. I've done well. And I've been leading a very nice and productive life here in San Francisco. And I think I was very lucky to get here when I got here. And I have many friends and I'm very active in the community and all kinds of communities.

Any message to the younger generation that you would give if you could?

Well, the only message is one of tolerance. Others are better able to give those messages than I, you know? We all have our limitations, and I'm not a very good spokesperson.

OK.

Good.

Well, thank you very much for doing the interview.

You got through that one.

[LAUGHTER]

Thank you.

This concludes the interview Gerald Rosenstein. It took place on January 13, 1995, in San Francisco, California. It was conducted by Gail Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.