

What were you aware of about the general Jewish situation in Budapest?

I'm guessing that about September, October, November, we found out about the availability of Schutzpasses issued by the Portuguese, the Vatican, the Swiss, the Swedish government.

You had not heard of Raoul Wallenberg at that point.

At that time, I had not heard of Wallenberg at all. We were fairly well isolated, and, therefore, it's very difficult to have had news of that type coming into the house. If you had no one that was visiting you, you didn't find out very much.

We were aware of that one of our neighbors had the access to the Swiss Schutzpass. He was selling it to those who were able to pay for it.

Did your mother try to get one?

We didn't have the money, so we could not get it. And at the same time, in the same time period, the Germans allowed, I believe, 1,200 Zionists to pay their way out of Hungary. The-- I don't remember-- I thought it was-- it was either 1,200 people or it was \$1,200 per person that they let go. But one family that did go was my uncle with his wife and two children.

Did you come in contact with any Jewish refugees from other countries who fled to Hungary?

We heard of people coming in from Poland but not Romania. I have not met any of them or--

You, yourself, did not--

-- I don't remember-- no.

--talk to them.

No. But we-- evidently, we heard that there was other countries that-- and this was, I think, in early '44 they were coming in continually--

Right.

--even before the Germans actually came in. So we're talking about '40 to '43.

Right. But you yourself did not come into contact with these refugees.

But we did not, no, primarily because we were Hungarians. We go back to the assimilation, and they were foreigners and were as prejudiced as they were toward us later on.

Even though--

--which I experienced.

Even though you both were Jewish?

Yes. But we're not-- we had the Jewish religion and not the Jewish-- we had the faith but not the-- I guess the ethnic grouping, which is fairly typical of the German and Hungarian Jews, the middle class. Weren't very proud of it, actually, but it was that way nevertheless.

Well, now it's December 1944.

My uncle left, which I resented. I resented bitterly that we had to buy our way into a Swiss Schutzpass, because by that time, I knew we should have-- that things are going to get real bad. And it came the time, specifically December 13th-- let me go back. In this September, October, November period, my uncle from Transylvania, my father's brother--

His name?

His name was Leslie [? Lutzy ?]. We found out that he was not deported, or he was-- he did not disappear. He was in the labor brigades, he was in Russia.

They took him to Russia. He was digging his way back into Hungary and ended up on a freight train, not like the deportations, an open freight train. That's where they were being transported and lived in. They were pulled in into-- across the street from our house in the Western railroad station.

And he got in touch with us. He sent us a message. And during the curfew, I was taking over food to the people and soup and such that my mother made. And they were there for several weeks and were pulled out at some point.

We didn't know when they were going. They just disappeared. They just left. So that was a relative out of nowhere showing up.

Relatives, my uncle, going to-- supposedly to-- I guess the Germans were promising to take him to Switzerland. We have found out after the war that they ended up in Bergen-Belsen in a transit lager about the same time I guess that the Dutch girl was there, Anne Frank. Mm-hmm.

Subsequent to their stay in Bergen-Belsen, the Germans indeed took them out and they did end up in Switzerland. But they had a, it was a fairly close call.

Going to December 13 in the morning, we got a phone call from my father from nowhere, from all of a sudden that he is in a railroad station, another railroad station in Budapest, and asking us to bring him food. I talked to him, and he asked us to bring him food and clothing and told us where he's going to meet us. This was December 13.

We went to see him and couldn't find him. So we brought the food and the clothing back, and we made it back before the curfew when the gendarmes came into the house and wanted all Jews. And there were only men, women, and children to come downstairs and be taken out.

These are the Hungarian--

These were the Hungarian. The Hungarian gendarmes, actually, were worse than the Germans by far, to us, anyway. Because they were the ones who were in charge of rounding up-- they rounded them up-- they rounded the Jews up in the provinces. Because these were the provincial-- it's like the state police, if you will, but it was really federal police. It was the government employees that oversaw the provinces, and they were doing the deportations from the provinces.

And then in October, November when the Jews of Budapest were being rounded up, they bring-- they brought all of them back into Budapest, and they were the ones who guarded us and who took us in. But in this-- when the gendarmes came into the house and my mother suggested that, remember the man who jumped off from the sixth floor, whether-- do I want to commit suicide with her or not? And, again, I made a decision, which was no, because things could be better, maybe better.

And so we went downstairs and joined a group of, I think, no more than seven or eight people. I was the only child in that group. Some of them hid and got away with it, because it was so late in the game.

Even the Holocaust museum in one of their publications mentions the fact that the last death march transport left November 17, which is not correct. There were some groups even after us, but I was certain we were taken away December 13 and ended up in a brick factory that night, the brickyard in old Buda.

You're down in the courtyard with the other people.

OK. It's raining, miserably cold, middle European winter. We had some food with us because I took it-- we took it to our father-- to my father.

What are you wearing?

I was wearing a pair of boots, knickers, which are my first grown up pants that I got that year. I wore a coat with a fur on it, which is the one that looked so very Hungarian, typically Hungarian, which later on helped. Then I had a short, waterproof jacket with a hood over it because it was raining. We also had blankets. We were told to take blankets with us, if I remember.

Did you take anything personal to you, anything special?

Oh, my father left us a silver Omega pocket watch, which I think he got from his grandfather. And my mother took that, took her wedding ring.

And you yourself, did you take anything?

I took nothing. I took nothing with me.

What was it like to stand there with the other people in the courtyard?

Well, by that time, it was becoming very scary. We didn't believe that we're going to get killed, but we did not know what was going on or what is going to happen to us. So there was kind of a fatalistic attitude set in at that point. It felt rather powerless, and, in fact, you were.

Were people calm?

Yes, they were unnaturally calm. And we were walked through the street under guard, taken to across the Danube on a pontoon bridge, because the main bridge was accidentally blown by the Germans, supposedly. The Hungarians claimed that they blew it with people on it, including German buses and-- in a summer.

So the army put a pontoon bridge across to an island, and from the island, we walked across the remaining part of the bridge to the old part of Buda into the brick yards, which was the first stop on the calvary that we went through.

The brickyard was a pretty horrible place. It was open on three sides. It had a roof over it. We got there-- it was fairly dark. There was no lights. It was raining, and we were jammed in there so that nobody really had any room to even lie down in the mud.

And one of the recurring things that still haunt after 50 years-- there are a lot of things that came out later on where some of my fears and concerns came from. But I remember even today, my wife is a very independent person. And when we go to a museum, for instance, she will disappear. She will go ahead of me or behind me, and I get terribly anxious and very angry.

Well, of late, I decided that the reason for that is the first night in a brickyard. Because I had to go to the bathroom real bad, and, of course, there were no latrines. There were some open areas where everybody squatted and did what they have to do, but then you had to find your way back in the pitch black.

And I believe my mother had a flashlight. And so eventually I remember getting-- well, I caught up with her. I found where she was, but I remember the anxiety of being in a pitch dark with hundreds and if not thousands of people milling about. And by that time, people were crying. They were-- certainly knew that something-- that things are going to get real dicey.

And there was no food, no water, and that was the beginning of the death marches where we were driven on day after day on the roads.

When you [INAUDIBLE]-- OK. You were in this brickyard for how long?

I think overnight.

You stayed overnight?

Stayed overnight and every day you moved on foot. These were groups of 1,000, maybe more people, strung out, moving from one of the stations of the cross, of my cross, if you will--

On foot.

--on the onward to what turned out to be the Austrian border. The--

Do you remember the kind of places you stayed at? You stopped at night.

We stopped at night, which also had an effect on me for all my life. If you were in ahead of the group leaving, you were the first one to get to a marketplace, where animals were sold in the daytime, or a marketplace where the food was sold. So these were open areas with the junk and with the animal droppings where you could pick a spot where you can sleep. These were all open, and we're talking about mid-December in Europe, which is pretty harsh.

Food was minimal. Once in a while, we got a piece of bread rind. I remember one bit of soup.

And on one of these-- before stopping for the night, my mother gave that silver Omega watch away to get a loaf of bread. And we had no money. We had nothing left after that.

The march itself was pretty hairy. The idea was, of course, to drive us as fast as we can move so those who can't move can be shot. And those who were old and couldn't move, they committed suicide, and there were people hanging from the trees and went on and on and on.

And you saw this--

And-- yes.

--as a teenager?

Yes. That particular period is important for me, because it became the catharsis maybe 30 years later, seeing the depiction of that march in a mini-series Wallenberg-- on Wallenberg that Chamberlain did for television. It was a two part series, and was the first one that depicted this particular death march.

And until that point, I was in total denial. Memories where I could see pictures of Auschwitz didn't mean anything to me. There was no emotion whatsoever.

And my sons and my wife, we watched in a bedroom on a bed, and I broke up for the first time. And I broke down and it was the first time I cried since Christmas of 1944. There were never any tears, no matter what happened. So that march was really cataclysmic for me in terms of memories.

Memory in a group that we went with-- let me just say again, importance of being first was because you could sleep longer. You could pick your spot. If there was food, the stragglers would get nothing, was-- were not able to.

So all my life I have to be at the airports hours early. I have to know exactly where I'm going, when I'm going to be

there, and I'm always early. Those are just one of the few things that affected the rest of my life.

Where you and your mother able to get to the front--

No.

--of the line?

No. She had a hard time keeping up, but we walked together all the way. We were strafed by Russian aircraft on one occasion because we had fire engines and soldiers in between the Jews being taken. And so the Russians saw the fire engines and the soldiers, and they came strafing.

But they did it-- the line was going on the road. They came across so when they shot at the engines and the soldiers, they were not strafing down the road so they didn't kill anybody. They did not kill, except people who were around those engines. And they were some of us, of course.

But I remember carrying the blanket and putting it over our heads, because I think it was a pink blanket and clearly to show the-- if the pilots even saw it or cared that these were not soldiers that were going. In one case, we ended up in the hold of a ship on the Danube where people were supposed to have been pushed into the water, those who couldn't walk. We saw some dead bodies.

But we were in a ship that was damp, and the clanging noise I remember still. It was just one of the six or seven stopover places before we got to the border. It was roughly six or seven days, six or seven stops before we got to the border town of Hegyeshalom to the railroad station.

Were-- did either you or your mother have the strength to talk to each other during this time?

I think we have talked some. I remember-- although not talking to her, but I remember that German troops-- like newsreels people took newsreels of us. And I told my mother to look into the camera at least, went with my mother and I pushed my hood back so if people see the movie, they would see that my mother and I have been taken away. And I was-- I guess, I was basically targeting that if relatives or friends would know what happened to us, because nobody would know. We just-- contact was dropped. Nobody would know what happened to us.

Were there other people on the March that you knew? Did you stay with the people in your apartment house?

No. No.

They were all strangers?

It was all strangers, and I don't know what happened to the-- clearly, there were so many thousands moving on that the people that we left the house with, they disappeared as soon as we got to the brickyard, the first stop, really.

What were some of the other places that you stopped at? [BOTH TALKING].

Mostly marketplaces in the day time. The bottom of this freight boat.

Boat. Mm-hmm.

It's not a tugboat. It's not a-- it's one of those that ply the Danube till today. It's essentially freighters.

What did they-- what did the soldiers say to you? Did they talk to you?

They did not talk to us. They were beating some of the stragglers. I heard shots, knew what that was about.

So-- and during the strafing, they disappeared and we still went on. Understand the circumstances that these were the old and the young, the women. I don't think there were men in there. There had been. I have seen [INAUDIBLE] suicides. They were men.

But mostly women and children, because the men had been taken away. All the old ones really didn't make it too far and they were killed. The idea was that there was no longer any rolling stock to deport the Jews of Budapest.

Eichmann wanted to finish the job, so this was a way of getting only the strong ones to the Ger- the Austrian border and getting rid of the rest.

What about young children?

Young children, but I don't remember that I've seen too many much younger than I was, which was 15, 14. I don't know what happened to the younger ones. Whether they were left behind or just what happened, I don't know.

But we were going on, and it was hard to trace where we've been. I remember the brickyard. I went back many years later to Hungary and tried to identify some of the places and had a hard time doing it.

I took my sons back to Budapest with me. The younger one wanted to walk with me, the route that I took, which was very interesting. And we were looking for and driving around trying to find the brickyard, because that was-- probably, that was more significant than anything else.

It was the first stop. It was also, I think, unusually cruel, being there with so many thousands. And it was razed and apartment houses stood in its place, so that was kind of a disappointment. I really wanted to show that to them. It would have given them a little bit more of a feeling.

But the trip of the six or seven days ended at Hegyeshalom, where the children under 16 were separated from the adults. My mother gave me her wedding ring. We kissed goodbye and I never saw her again, never found out what happened to her.

I guess one of the people came back from the group that was taken away from the from the house, and she ended up in Bergen-Belsen, but didn't know anything what happened to my mother. My mother disappeared into thin air, gone.

We were put into a barn with perhaps 10, maybe a dozen children, about the same age or a little younger than I was.

Boys and girls?

Boys and girls. And we stayed there hours overnight. And one day-- and this is what I told Per Anger last night, that a German officer came, skinny, well-dressed, spit and polished German officer came into the barn and told us children, come with me. We have a train going back to Budapest. And shortly after that, a civilian in a black coat and hat came in and said, don't believe the German. Stay here for a little while longer, and I guarantee to take you back to Budapest.

Now Per Anger was there. Wallenberg was there and Eichmann was there. We'll never know which one, but it's certainly the black coat and a hat Wallenberg wore, certainly, the spiffy German uniform that Eichmann wore. But at any rate, some of us-- and I think it happened that I decided that the civilian makes more sense, and some of the kids remained with me.

The others went with the German. I believe there was a classmate that went with the German, and I have never heard from him, which doesn't necessarily mean that-- in my mind, it meant that he was dead. And the likelihood was very good that they were killed off shortly after that. The effect was--

How many stayed with you?

I remember five or six, perhaps, a small group.

So about half went with one and half--

I think so. It would be interesting to meet some of them that stayed with me, whether we recall the same things or not. But the effect was such that for many years after that when somebody asked me for an advice of anything, what to eat, what to wear, what to do, and I gave it and they did not follow it, I was unreasonably furious.

And through therapy it came out that probably the reason was that if you don't listen to me, then you will die. And when I was bringing up my children, who knew nothing of this, my reaction to some of these things were rather vociferous.

But we were packed into open cattle cars. Not really packed. It wasn't the usual 80 or 100 people in there, but our doors were open.

Because I remember I had to go to the bathroom. The train was moving and I had to go, and so they were holding me up, and I went. And it took us about three days, I think-- that's a recollection-- to get back to Budapest.

Who were the other people in the car besides your six--

People-- there were some adults. I am now assuming that they were people that Wallenberg saved from the trains, the children. And we were not locked in. I think that the doors were closed at night, but we closed it and then we opened it again. So it was not-- it was clearly under the Swedish people that were organizing it and essentially manned the trains.

And you're on the-- you're on the train [INAUDIBLE].

And at night we could see the muzzle flashes of the Russian artillery that was encircling Budapest. And we made it back to Budapest on a train without getting bombed, arriving, I believe, Christmas Eve. We arrived at the railroad station not close to my house, but-- and I looked at it just last November-- to the Eastern station. And we walked off and were taken to the Swedish houses.

Now did I know that we were going to be taken to Swedish houses? I am not sure.

How much information did you have?

Very little. Very little information, which surprises me unless I'm blocking it. But I remember some-- walking by a fruit store and somebody gave me an apple. I remember that.

I also remember scribbling a message to the little Christian girl that was my friend. Her family, by that time, moved from the house because only Jews were remaining behind into a new apartment house. And I am guessing that-- because it would make sense and you're recreating history as to what's logical, so I'm not sure it's true. But I was able to send a message to them, because I knew where they were, where they lived, and must have indicated to them where I'm going to be going, where I'm going to be taken. That's the reason I'm guessing that we must have known something.

When you were on that train, were other people talking about what was going to happen?

I don't remember.

You don't remember.

The only thing that I can recall on that train trip that I had a piece of bread, which I hoarded and ate. And that was about the only thing that I remember eating. But I remember that I cried on that train, because I realized that I'm alone. I had no one to go to. I cried, and I did not cry again until my family and I saw the Wallenberg movie.

Did the older people on the train comfort the younger people?

I don't remember that. I am guessing no. By that time, and even on the death march, there was really no connection with anybody. We were all foreign to one another. We're all strangers, and we're all kind of in our own microcosm.

There was no heroism between people. There was no-- that I remember. There was no help being given. Because if you're helping somebody, you both could be shot. And so the isolation, I believe, which is what made me break down and cry that I was really, totally alone.

But having sent off that message after getting off the train, we were taken in to one of the Swedish houses on the Danube. And we were fed something, can't remember what. There were thousands of people at these-- hundreds of people in the apartment house, and I had to find a place to sleep, which I did.

We were upstairs, probably fifth or sixth floor. And, well, we did not go down to the cellar. There was too many people in the house for that, so we never-- raids or really the artillery shells were coming in by that time. Matter of fact, the first artillery shell that I saw was Christmas day.

Jumping ahead, sent a message to this little friend's family. Next day, which I believe was Christmas day-- it was a holiday-- and there was a banging on the apartment house's door. A Hungarian soldier was banging with his rifle, demanding to see and to take Becker Ivan. And people told me that he's down there, and I went out-- went through the gate, the door, and here was the soldier pointing a gun at me and said that he was sent to take me away.

After we went a few steps, he said, don't worry. You're-- I'm a friend of your acquaintances, and they have asked to fetch you and bring you to their home. And so with a pointed gun, he marched me to their apartment house and I met them.

Of course, this was the father, the mother, and two daughters, the young one, which was my friend, a 12-year-old. She was, by the way, the first girl that I went to the theater with. My parents took us to the theater, so we're dropping back a few years, but just because she is going to surface for several years after that. But-- and the first theater piece we saw was Our Town in Hungarian in a balcony.

At any rate, Christmastime, her sister, who was what four or five years older than we were or that she was, so she had to be about 16. And they fed me. We had dinner together. And--

What were your feelings when you saw this German soldier, telling you--

Hungarian soldier.

Excuse me, Hungarian soldier, telling you--

Scared. Didn't know what was going on, of course, and didn't quite know what to do. I mean, clearly I couldn't run because it would've been too easy to shoot. And so I went with the flow. And, of course, finding out that he was a friend, that was quite a load off my mind at that point.

The friends, their name is [? Cardar. ?] They had another person there, a woman there, and they have suggested, I believe-- the daughter many years later told me that they asked me to stay with them and that they will hide me. Because they have another woman that they were hiding. And I refused to do so.

Why?

I am not sure whether I was afraid that if they find me, they going to kill them as well. I think that would be very nice, but I'm not sure that was my driving point. I think, perhaps, that the authorities said that I should be in another house, and that's where I should go back to. But-- and here it becomes fuzzy.

I do go back to the Wallenberg house, the Swedish houses. I remember that. I remember also that during a bombing raid, one of the impacts was fairly close.

I was eating a plate of food, and the door came out and cracked me across the face and my tooth chipped. And that is the only injury that I have from the war, other than psychological and physical just well-being, stomach problems, et cetera. But that was the only thing where I bled and my hearing got affected. But that was not an injury. It was an explosion.

But nevertheless, in this period of time I was back in the Swedish houses, and this is between Christmas and New Year's. And I'm assuming that our friends, the [? Cardars, ?] took me out once more. Because the rumors were heard that the Swedish houses will be evacuated.

There were military, German military transports, horse drawn transports around the block where the Swedish houses were, full of ammunition. And it was on the Danube, and the Russians were coming closer. And the assumption was that they're going to-- they need the fuel the fire and they going to evacuate the Jews, whether they were Swedish passports or not, taking them into the ghetto that was already established in Budapest.

Did you have any new papers at this point?

No.

Nothing?

I did not get my Schutzpass until much later and I went to the Swedish office, not far from where the Swedish houses were to get it. It was not handed to me, and I never used it as a saving grace. It was really used as establishing an identity more than anything else, because I had no papers. I have no birth certificate. I have no-- I have my father's passport, and that's about the only thing that I have.

But in that period, being in a Swedish house and getting out, going back to the [? Cardars, ?] the constant bombings, the artillery shells coming in, I mean, we were at that time completely encircled. I think the Russians were already in Vienna. We were still fighting in Budapest. And hearing rumors that the houses will be moved into the ghetto, I came out again and, without wearing the star.

I went back to the [? Cardars, ?] and [? the Cardars, ?] heard, I believe, of a Red Cross shelter for children. And I would think it's just before New Year's, end of December, beginning of January, very beginning of January.

One late afternoon, I was going into that Red Cross shelter, and they sent their youngest daughter, who was 12 at that time-- I was 15-- to go with me. So these two Gentile-looking children went across this dark, abandoned, bombed and shelled part of town, pitch dark, and we went hand in hand to the address where I was to go. We did not lose our way, but we're not sure where we were exactly.

I saw a-- somebody in the dark, and I walked up-- we walked up, actually, and I asked him where the Red Cross shelter was. And he flicked on his light and shined it down on our faces, and I saw that he was one of the Arrow Cross people. And, of course, I paled.

And the girl didn't know what I was scared of. And the guy looked at us and told us where the shelter was. Never asked us for papers. And she asked me why I was so scared, and I told her, very reluctantly, she recalls later, that I told her that I was afraid that they were going to take my pants off.

And I didn't tell her why, that circumcision was something, and, of course, she was young. She didn't know it. But I would say 30 years later, she told me that she did not understand what I was worried about, until she married her husband who was Jewish. And then she realized what could have happened.

But she left me and walked back through that dark town by herself. And, again, 30 years later, more than that, 40 years later when I saw her in Switzerland, I asked her what made her do it, to walk with me, and what made her parents suggesting that she did? And her reaction was that she felt all her life that she was not as important to her parents as her sister was. And she and her sister had not talked since the war days, whether that's the reason they sent her and she just

came with me because we're friends.

But I ended up in this Red Cross shelter for a few days. We were taking care of babies, young children.

Do you know the address of it?

I'm sorry?

Do you know the address?

No, I don't. Never could find the building. I remember the layout. I remember that we broke in to-- because the houses were already-- people were taken away. I think they were Jewish houses to begin with.

And so the houses were empty or the people ran away. And we broke into houses, trying to find some leftover food to feed ourselves and to give it to the-- to children. Very hazy on that, but I remember very well that another guy, probably a little bit older than I, we were sleeping on cots. And he was singing, and I was singing.

We were singing "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." From somewhere, who knows where the song came from, but the pronunciation was, it's a long "vay," because we spoke no English, didn't know what we were singing.

But it was kind of a defiant thing. I mean, we could have [INAUDIBLE]. It was stupid to do it, but we did it nevertheless.

You said you were taking care of babies at the Red Cross?

Yes, and I don't remember any of them. I remember some little ones, some young ones walking about. But we were not the only ones taking care of them. There had to be some adults there. We were just foraging around for food.

Didn't last long because we also heard a rumor that anybody over 10 or 12 years old will be taken away by the gendarmes or the Arrow Cross. And so at that point, I went back to the Swedish house. And shortly after that, the Swedish house was evacuated and taken into the ghetto.

The people in the Swedish house?

The people in the house. We were marched through Budapest. I remember stepping over somebody who just got killed, taken into the ghetto.

When you would see people who were killed or dead on the street, did you have any emotional reaction to them?

No, not by that time. By that time, there was really no fear. It was not catatonic but certainly--

Numbness?

A total numbness of going with it now and making decisions that essentially-- going right instead of going left. It was the right decision. Running away, it was the right decision. Hiding, trying to make a go of it. It just happened. Probably not, but probably it was the kind of a primeval survival syndrome, the flight, fear and flight, survival.

But we were taken into the ghetto. I remember being very upset about it. It didn't look good. It was tremendous numbers of people and went into a house with a courtyard. And I was essentially taken into one of the apartments and given a place to flop.

I took a down blanket. Not blanket, but-- what is this called?

Comforter?

Comforter from the Swedish house. I carried that with me, and it's the only thing that I had. Except what I wore.

Did you still have that blanket of your family's, the pink blanket?

No. No I don't. I really have no souvenirs that I brought along with me.

You were still wearing the same clothes?

Same clothing, I was full of lice but beautifully manicured. Because that was one thing that I was fastidious about. Trim my toenails and my hand nails, because my-- when I lived at home my mother used to have a manicurist coming in who manicured her and, just as a lark, did it for me as well.

She was also a woman who brought us some milk and some fruit. Her husband was a German Nazi and had pictures of her-- with her of him in a Nazi uniform. But she was a manicurist for a long time for us and so she was trying to help us.

But when I was getting into-- where I got into the ghetto, got the space in front of a huge, double French window. And one early morning, I don't know what made me pull the comforter over my head, but within a split second there was an explosion. It was an incoming shell.

Blew the window out, all the glass came tumbling down on me, and essentially people had to get the glass off me before I could get up. But then I had to move into another house with pregnant women and young babies. And I always worked, did something, somewhere, trying to pass the time really more than anything else.

Did you think about your mother and father a lot at that time?

[SIGHS]

No. No, I did not. It was really trying to stay alive and dodging bullets. Although did some stupid things like watching people shooting at me, Russians, or Russian airplanes strafing me and bullets hitting the wall, missing me but pulling-- the bullets were slamming into the-- five feet above my head before I jumped.

And in this particular Red Cross shelter, there was some food, very little. I remember that we were given some split peas that were originally, I understood, not for food but for sowing from the fields. And I remember at that time, my first real big, bad stomach pain, because we crushed it crushed those hard peas, made flour out of it, mixed it with a little water, and then tried to make kind of a pancakes out of it. And I had terrible heartburn, which was the beginning of all my stomach problems.

But in this Red Cross shelter for the women, I was helping getting some food, getting provisions.

Is this in the ghetto were talking?

In the ghetto. There was some food, and they were trying to keep the women and children alive. And so I was asked to go and get some basket or bread.

And in bringing it back, at that point I did not really have any food for days, if not weeks, at that point. I took some of the outside of the bread and I ate it on the way back. The resulting guilt trip lasted for 100 years after that.

When my children were taking pennies out of my pocket-- well, the younger one-- I was terrible sad about stealing, and, again, traced it back to when I stole bread to survive. But the other aspect of that working there was that at least once, I had to make a trip to the morgue with, like, a laundry basket on my back, a woven basket, with dead babies. And I remembered a feeling of movement as I walked to the morgue.

And they gave me a plate of beans, the first warm food in weeks. Then they gave me a-- what is it called? A stretcher,

blood-soaked, frozen, blood-soaked stretcher to take back somewhere.

That-- those dead babies were-- that stayed with me forever. When my children were young in their crib, I used to go in there at night to see whether they were breathing or not, because that part of it was extremely tough.

And so I was not that blocked that I felt something, although I did not feel that when I did it. I mean, I walked into the morgue, which I tried to find and couldn't, where-- because it was so cold, the ground was frozen. The-- I think it was a mikveh. And the dead bodies were piled up like wood and hundreds of them would eventually, of course, were buried in a mass grave in the temple, the central temple garden, where, when I was in school, I used to sing during high holidays.

And I stayed in that Red Cross shelter until liberation, which was 50 years ago today, this morning at 8:30 roughly. And during the period of time I was in the ghetto, again, I stayed upstairs, never went down to the cellars, walked around with bullets whizzing around. I'm not sure I felt that I could not be hit, because I went through so much shit before where I was just-- didn't want to go down into the shelters, because I didn't want to be buried, I think.

Maybe that-- it could be that. I can't really guess at what the feeling was. But by that time, I really went through such hell that nothing seemed to touch me, that I felt that I could just stand up and watch the Russians taking potshots at me.

Because it was the-- that was the latter stages of the siege of Budapest, of Pest, and they were coming close to the ghetto and into the ghetto. And you could see them fighting [INAUDIBLE] house to house.

In the last day I went down into the shelter, maybe the last couple of days, and a Russian soldier came through the wall of the shelter. In a shelter-- there was interconnecting shelters between apartment houses for emergency purposes. There was always a lightly bricked-over doorway, and they just broke through and came right through, laying telephone lines.

Was this your first--

That was the first Russian. And--

When you saw him, what did you feel?

I hugged him. I tried to hug him. He didn't know where the hell he was or what was going on. I mean, the Russian shock troops were absolutely illiterate from the Far East, looking very much like Mongols. They were illiterate, and they didn't know where they were.

But you--

And they lived off the land.

And you realized what this meant?

I realized that it meant that the Germans were out. I took my-- took the star off and was heading for where I used to live. And just before I got to the Western railroad station, which was maybe a mile away from the ghetto, there was a group of a long, long line of soldiers, policemen, postman. Anybody with uniform was rounded up by the Russians, and they looked at me and they looked at my coat, and they pushed me into the line of prisoners.

I tried to tell them that I was Jewish. They couldn't understand me and couldn't care less and went, well, several blocks with them.