

The following is an interview of Erwin Forley. Today is September 19, 1995. The interview is taking place in Chevy Chase, Maryland and is being conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Please give us your full name.

My full name is Erwin Forley.

And where were you born?

I was born in Czechoslovakia, Kosice, Czechoslovakia.

And when were you born?

December 6, 1927.

Let's begin by talking about your childhood. Who made up your immediate family?

My father, mother, brother, and sister.

What was your father's name?

His name was Henry.

And what kind of work did he do?

We had a farm and also alcohol factory, refinery, rather.

How large was the farm?

It was large. It was several generations.

And your mother, her name?

My mother, her name was Elizabeth, and she was born where I was born. Actually, the farm was about one hour away from where I was born. And her name was Charmin. Her maiden name was Charmin. Elizabeth Charmin.

And did you have any brothers or sisters?

I had one brother and one /

And how old were they in relation to you, and their names?

My brother was four years younger, my sister was four years older.

And their names?

My sister was Barbara, my brother was George.

Did you have a large extended family living nearby, aunts, uncles, cousins?

Very large. My father had four brothers and four sisters who were each was married. That made up of 16 people because eight children. They all perished except my mother, and they all had children. Some of their children survived.

So were you close to them? Did you get together on holidays?

Very close. Well, in temple, but we lived in the same town. Most of us lived in the same town, close by, and we met often.

Did you live in the confines of the town or out in the country, being a farm?

Well, in the beginning, we lived on a farm, and then we moved into town, which is the town that I mentioned, Munkacs.

When did you move, what year?

That was when I was six years old, so it must have been 1933, '34.

How would you describe the economic status in your family? Was it middle class, upper class?

I would say upper class.

Upper class, OK. Was it in a neighborhood? Do you remember? I know you were very young because you said you moved when you were six.

Yes, it was a very good neighborhood.

Before you moved, was it a neighborhood of non-Jews and Jews, or just strictly Jews?

It was mixed.

It was a mixed neighborhood.

Mixed neighborhood.

And again, because you were young, do you have any recollections of any problems? Or was that a good time?

No, I don't remember any problems.

OK. And then you moved at the age of six.

At the age of six, yes.

Yeah. And what kind of area did you move to and what kind of neighborhood?

We moved to so-called big city, which was Munkacs. By the way, the farm was Rakosh, which is 10 kilometers out of the city that we finally settled. And we visited, of course. We always visited the farm, but my father, everyday he went to the farm.

From the city.

From this city.

What was the reason that your family moved? Did you know that? Do you know?

I think my mother probably and my father both wanted a big city, so-called big city.

Tell us about the big city. How would you describe it?

Well, it was very-- Munkacs was a very Jewish city, actually. We had-- I can't remember how many, but 7,000 or 8,000

Jews, and the population was about 25,000. But most people were very orthodox, and the rabbi in Munkacs was very quite well known, whose son-in-law still lives in Israel. And we were religious orthodox, but not to the point where-- we didn't have curls. And the we observed Shabbat and we observed kosher, and we were considered orthodox. And life in Munkacs for us was wonderful.

What kind of religious training did you specifically have?

Well, in the beginning, I had a Hebrew teacher, a Hebrew rabbi who came home every day.

To your house?

And he gave us lessons for an hour, and at which point we always moved the clock ahead so the hour became 45 minutes [INAUDIBLE]. And after that, I went to public school, elementary school. And after that, there was a quota in high school, which was 6% at the time, of Jews allowed.

Well, before we get to high school, let's talk still a little bit about your younger childhood. We'll get to high school. You said you went to elementary school. This was a public school--

It was a public school.

--with Jews and non-Jews?

Jews and non-Jews.

Teachers, Jewish and non-Jewish?

Well, the schooling was very-- in the beginning, I went to Czech school because it was from 1927 to '38 it was Czechoslovakia. Then in '38 and the Hungarians came, then we changed schools and went to Hungarian schools, and at which point then, right after we went to Hebrew gymnasium, which I went to the Hebrew gymnasium until the end.

But the friends that we had were mostly Jews. We usually did not socialize with non-Jews, except for just saying hello. But the close friends were always Jews.

What about in your neighborhood? Did you have neighbors who were non-Jews? Were you in a Jewish enclave?

No, we had some neighbors that the non-Jews, not too many.

And the relationship then?

It was cordial, cordial. But it wasn't-- I never had really-- my mother had a very good friend who was not Jewish. And later on, I'll tell you just what happened to her. But I did not and my sister didn't, and we usually socialized with Jews.

Were you interested in sports? Yes, I played soccer, I played tennis, but mostly soccer and ice skating. Did skiing, swimming. We had a river which was called the [INAUDIBLE], which, as I understand-- I haven't been back, but I understand it's dry now. And we used to go swimming there.

Did you belong to any youth groups?

I belonged to-- actually, in the beginning, I belonged to-- we had the Zionist groups. I belonged to the Betar.

And what kind of things did you do in this group?

We just met, and it was mostly social. It was mostly social.

Boys and girls?

Boys and girls.

Did you live in a house or an apartment?

We lived in a house. In the beginning, we lived in an apartment when we moved, and then we moved to the house.

Did you have a very strict upbringing? Where your parents disciplinarians?

Relatively so, but not really, not really. They were strict. I mean, in those days, everybody was strict, but not-- I didn't find that they couldn't make me do things that I didn't want to do, except for maybe Hebrew lessons and things like that.

Did your mother work?

No, but she worked at home.

Yeah, sure. And were there any special holidays that you remember, anything special you would want to talk about of getting together with family or anything that stands out in your memory of that time?

Well, just immediately what stands out, I was very close to my cousin, one of my cousins, and we used to travel on bicycles to the farm, which was about 10 miles-- 10 kilometers-- where my grandfather lived, who was, at the time, maybe 75 or 77. And so we visited him, and he couldn't understand how a young man can drive with a girl together.

This was a female cousin?

Female cousin, by the way, who is here, who is in the States, survived.

And her name?

Her name is Irene.

OK. When did you first notice a change in your life? You were 11 years old in 1938. Do you have any recollections of things, conditions starting to change?

You mean after the Hungarians came in?

Yeah.

Not really, because we somehow we were-- somehow we never realized just-- it's just like here. People don't realize that the things are happening. In Serbia, if you ask a 12-year-old or a 15-year-old about Serbia, most of them, even though with television today, we have more news.

But I remember my brother was four years younger, and he always asked, when Hitler spoke, he said, is this good for the Jews or bad? So today, possibly, a 10-year-old would know whether it's good or bad. I don't know. But those days, we were not involved with news as much as today.

But we cared and we knew what was happening, but we didn't believe it. Nobody believed. We didn't believe it until 1944 when they took us.

OK. I mean, granted, you were still very young in 1938. Is there any incident in 1938 that stands out in regard to this, the coming war, the future war?

Not really.

You felt comfortable on the streets?

Yes. There were no changes as far as that.

And 1939?

Well, we--

Did you sense a changing energy?

We sensed a little bit, but not too much.

In what way? What was the first change?

Well, because in Hungary, the changes were there, but we really didn't feel it in the cities. The first change was really in 1942 when they-- '41, end of '41, '42-- when they took all the Polish Jews and all the non-Hungarians, so-called, and they deported them to Russia. And they just took all the non-citizens.

From where you were living?

From where I was living. From where I was living.

So up to '19--

And they deported them to Russia or Poland.

But up to 1942, life went on for you as a little boy.

I was very young at the time, yes. Everything was more or less normal.

Normal. What about your bar mitzvah? Did you have a bar mitzvah?

I had a bar mitzvah.

It was 1940.

I had four friends, and we had peanuts. That was the bar mitzvah, and then we-- of course, the temples were very orthodox, all temples. There were no reformed temples. So every Saturday we went to temple, and we usually stayed outside and the children played. And fathers stayed inside and mothers stayed home. So the women, as I remember, they didn't go to-- I don't remember my mother going to the temple, except on holidays.

But your bar mitzvah--

My bar mitzvah was--

--went off smoothly?

Yes.

OK. And now let's move up a year or so or two. So 1942, when you were almost 15.

In 19-- well, then we started-- no, I was about almost 15.

Almost 15, yeah.

Well, then I-- we usually did not think of other things in social school and social parties, and we used to have a big group of children. And I would think that we were not too concerned what was happening the world at the time, which is, I think-- it happened not only with me, but with all the children. We used to have parties and we used to get together. We used to take trips, day trips to the mountains and swimming.

And so you don't remember--

Well, certainly the social aspect, but I don't remember anything of the--

Restrictions.

--any restrictions, except for school where we couldn't-- we were limited as far as how many children can get into a high school.

Because of your religion.

Because of the religion.

How did that make you feel?

I think we were living with it, and it was just like a natural occurrence at the time. I wasn't-- today, we would be bothered. We were bothered, but not to the degree that-- today, I look at it differently, of course. But no, it didn't-- we just changed. We went to Hebrew school, but we really never associated with non-Jews at the time.

And what kind of courses did you take in the gymnasium?

I think it was math, Latin, Hebrew. In the Hebrew gymnasium, it was Hebrew, Hebrew history, Hungarian. But most classes were in Hebrew.

And how much information did you get from the daily paper about what was happening, about Hitler?

We got very little because it was-- they never did a pro-Hitler anything, the Hungarians, and the Jewish-- I didn't read the Jewish papers. I didn't read Jewish. They had Jewish papers, but I didn't read Jewish papers.

By the way, what languages or what language did you speak?

We spoke-- well, even when we were young and it was Czechoslovakian. When I was born, it was Czechoslovakia. We still spoke Hungarian, and my mother was always very Hungarian very nationalistic. But we spoke Hungarian and German, some German. My grandmother lived with us after 1938, so she spoke German mostly. So we spoke to her in German.

So you were fluent in both.

But at home we were fluent in German, Hungarian, and then in Czech because I went to Czech schools, so I spoke Czech. And our friends, we only spoke Hungarian. Even in Hebrew school, we spoke Hungarian. We always hoped to go to Israel eventually, secretly.

We being your family.

No, no, the children, the youth. The youth always spoke about it. And that's why today I probably wouldn't belong to that group. But the Betar was always a radical group.

Were you a member of that when you were-- what age were you when you--

But I think I wasn't a member because of belief as much as because it was a social kind of--

OK. It's 1942, and you're in gymnasium and life is going on.

Actually, in 1942, I was not in gymnasium. In '42, I was in Hungarian high school, and then I went into the gymnasium later on, in 1943.

OK. So things were going on.

So things were going on, and the change really came in 1943-- in '44 when the Hungarians came in.

Anything in 1943 that you wanted to put--

Well, there was nothing that drastic that happened, except we were always listening to news. I remember my parents were always listening.

Did you sense that they were getting more tense, more concerned?

Well, they were. I mean, we spoke about it, and there were some of the Jews have gotten papers, Christian papers, and they moved to Budapest. And they were trying to live as non-Jews at the time so that they can escape should something happen because we were the last-- I mean, everywhere else the Germans moved in. And we didn't have the Germans because the Hungarians were allies with the Germans at the time. But in March, they moved in. They came in, and that's when all hell broke loose.

OK. Now let's talk about the first--

Well, everything happened very fast because as soon as the Germans came in-- now, prior to that, of course, we had a farm, and we were never liquid because if you have a farm, then money is always invested. So even if you wanted to make a major move, we couldn't have at the time. And you couldn't sell land, you couldn't sell real estate. So Jews couldn't sell because there were no buyers and you couldn't sell it. So in 1944, everything was taken away, the houses. We moved-- they moved us into a ghetto.

Is this around March?

This was around-- no, the Germans came in March, and this was in April, end of April. Germans were in for about six weeks.

Do you remember seeing them come into your town?

I don't remember-- I remember seeing them, but I don't remember seeing them march in.

Yeah. But I meant, you saw them come in?

I saw them, but very few. There were very few that came in. It wasn't, like, an army that came in, just a few Germans.

As a 16-year-old, what were your--

We were concerned, of course, and we moved from a comfortable house. We were taken to a ghetto. But first, we had to put on stars. Little by little, they started taking businesses away one week, and the next week you had to put Jewish stars on.

How did you feel about wearing a Jewish star?

It didn't feel good. We didn't feel good because-- of course we didn't feel good. It was a very bad feeling, but everything happened so fast that you had no time to really feel. It wasn't that got used to it. There was no question of getting used to it because you didn't.

What were the first restrictions, that you had to wear the star?

We had to wear the star.

Were there any other restrictions on--

Jews couldn't have businesses. They took the businesses away. Of course, we didn't go to school. The schools were closed. The Jewish gymnasium was a very well-known school. It was one of the schools that started in 1924, and it developed into a very fine school, and people from all over the country came to Munkacs. Anyway, they closed that.

How did you feel about having your school closed?

Bad. I mean, not only the school, you didn't care about the school as much as the houses, all the neighbors. Everybody was herded into a small area, a ghetto.

This was a ghetto in your town.

In my town, where we stayed for about two months-- no, less, about six weeks. It was until-- we were there about four weeks. In the ghetto.

Were you in an apartment?

We stayed in one house, in a small apartment with other families, who also some of them survived.

Did you have enough food?

We had food. Well, usually, I was in one of the groups that was able to get into town to look around and to bring in food.

How was that possible?

We were never hungry there. We always had enough food.

But how was it you were able to get out of the ghetto?

Because that they had what they called a Judenrat, which is-- you know what that is-- a Jewish committee representing all the Jews, which, at the time, we were getting favors from the Germans, and so they would tell us whatever the Germans wanted us to know. And they constantly told us that this is temporary and that we are going to go to Hungary to a work camp, and just a relocation and we are not going to-- nothing would happen to us.

But of course, we knew-- well, we didn't know. We hoped because the Jews always hope. So we hoped that it's true. And that's what happened.

Was there a wall around the ghetto?

No, there were gates. No, not a wall, just gates. We couldn't get out, the guards. We couldn't get out. And so the food was enough, and then everybody was hiding jewelry. And people that had jewelry, they dug holes in the ground and were hiding all their jewels and valuables.



What did you as a 16-year-old, 16-, 17-year-old, take with you into the ghetto from your house?

Well, we took clothes, mostly. The valuables we dug into the ground, whatever silver and things like that, which we never found after. And we took clothes, mostly, and food.

Did you yourself take anything special that belonged to you?

No.

No.

You mean to the ghetto?

Yeah, to the ghetto.

Nothing that I remember that meant much. But ultimately, from the ghetto, we couldn't take anything.

Were you able to sleep well in the ghetto?

In the ghetto? Well, you had so much excitement that we slept. But life in the ghetto wasn't good, wasn't good.

People very frightened?

People were frightened of what will happen, and we all knew. But we heard stories. I'll come back to '42 for a minute. There was a family, a Polish family, that was deported to Poland, four children, four girls, and parents. And they came back, they escaped. And they came back and told us stories about how the Earth is moving and the people were underneath.

Who would believe-- I was 15. Would I believe that people would do that? So we never believed them, so we thought they were stories. But of course, we found out later it was true. And these people have gotten non-Jewish papers and all kinds of gimmicks, and they all survive. They all went to Budapest and they all survived. Eventually, they went to Israel, and the man just died. He was 96.

And what was their name?

Eneman. E-N-A-- E-N-E-M-A-N.

So here you are in the ghetto. And what did you do? What was a day like in the ghetto, typical day?

A typical day was just trying to get food and trying to find out news as to where we were going or what will happen. And if I remember, even had a holiday there. We even had-- but it's not very clear.

Passover?

Yes, but it's not clear just what we did.

How was your health then?

It was good.

And your family's health?

My family's health was good. My grandmother was with us constantly. She was 72, she was very ill-- I mean, always ill. She had gallbladder problems, but she came along and she was with us in the ghetto.

How many people were in your ghetto apartment?

In our ghetto, we were six of us, and they had about six or eight people. So probably, in a two bedroom apartment, we had about 12 people, two or three bedrooms.

So that went on for six weeks.

That around from four to six weeks. In May, of course, we were taken to the-- after the ghetto, we were taken to the brick factory, which was about two miles out of town.

When you say "we," the whole family?

The family, everybody, the whole-- all of us, all the Jews, the whole ghetto.

How did you know-- how did you hear that you had to go to the--

How did we hear? Well, you couldn't help but hearing. 4:00 in the morning, the police came in, the Hungarian-- what do you call them? They had a feather.

Arrow Cross?

They weren't Arrow Cross. It was the gendarmes. And they came in, and they started beating everybody, and out, and you're going to be moving. So then we walked the 2 kilometers.

Do you remember any thoughts you had on that night, that part of the morning?

No, it was you just-- well, you just wanted to survive. You just didn't want to be hit because they were very bad. They were worse than the Germans, actually. These were Hungarians.

I think, all through this time, I have seen maybe four or five Germans because most of them were Hungarians. And they were part of the Arrow Cross, but it wasn't the Arrow Cross. It was the police, actually, group of the police.

And how did you get to the brick factory?

We walked. Well, we were all consolidated on marketplace, and then we just marched to the brick factory, whoever could make it. There's one man who couldn't make it. They just shot him.

Did you see that?

No, I didn't see it, but I heard it. And they were very ruthless. They were really-- beginning, starting from then, it became bad. So then in the brick factory, once we arrived there--

How long did it take you to get to the brick factory?

A couple of hours, two, three hours. It was the whole day because until they accumulated us and until we started.

And what did your family take with them?

Well, we mostly took food, mostly, and then we took clothes, some clothing. It was summertime, so we just took some clothing, whatever we could carry, but mostly food. And I remember my brother always asked when Hitler spoke-- I didn't mention it before-- it this good for the Jews or bad for the Jews?

All right. So the brick factory, we had the groups of people that were in charge. So I was in charge of my section. And I

remember the girl that I used to like at the time, her father came to me, says, take good care of my daughter. But they all-- none of them survived.

So there were families that were totally, totally died, complete families. They had no-- there's no memory, there's no nothing. There's a family in the farm there were a father-- there was parents and a son. They died, and just no-- nothing. And they had brothers and sisters, they all died, and there was nothing left.

So anyway, we stayed there for a few days. How many days? I don't remember how many days, but a few days.

What was the tenor?

We had food. But the first thing that the Germans did-- the Germans, the Hungarians, actually. They took all our identifications and they made a bonfire. So then we said, well, how would we go to Hungary for resettlement if we had no papers? You couldn't walk on the streets without identification. So then they started suspecting that something is happening and that really are not going to live.

But the Jews are always hopeful, so we hoped. But that's the time that we really started feeling very bad. And they said, well, you don't need it We will go to [INAUDIBLE], which is a Hungarian farm area, and we're going to be resettled and we're going to live there. And of course, that never materialized because then there were three transports and then we were resettled to Auschwitz.

Could you just describe a little bit about the conditions in the brick factory?

Well, of course, the bathrooms-- I mean, we had thousands of people, and certainly there was no-- the only interest we had was how to get food and how to escape. But at that point, there was no escape because there was just no place to escape. And the neighbors--

Did you yourself, as a young teenager, think about escaping?

We thought about it, but we always wanted the family to be together. In fact, my sister was in Budapest and she was studying in Budapest. And when the Germans came in March, she decided to come back to be together with the family so that the families would be together, which was a mistake because it should have been that everybody should be on their own.

And it took her-- in fact, it took her about two weeks to come home to be with us. And would she have stayed in Budapest, she would have probably survived there because many of the Jews have gotten papers there and they just survived. So she came back, and then she was with us in the brick factory, of course, and she was-- but would she have not come home, my mother wouldn't have survived.

What did you do in the brick factory?

In the brick factory, we just-- nothing.

Sat?

We just sat around and we just waited to be-- for the next step.

Which was?

Which was the transportation to Auschwitz. And well, I've just neglected to say something. My grandfather, who was 83 years old, also was brought in from the outside of town. Many of the Jews were brought in from the little villages into Munkacs, which was the big city, and the transports took place there.

And so he was brought in, and actually, he was beaten up. And his beard-- he had the beard. They pulled his beard out,

and he was bleeding. I mean, he ended up in Auschwitz, but he died, of course, the first day. But he was brought into town from the farm because he was on a farm. The farm goes back a few generations, actually. Goes back to his father.

Talking about your experiences while your family was in the brick factory. And for how long were you there?

We were there just for a few days. And it seemed like a eternity, but it was a few days. And we all hoped that we would be sent into Hungary, but really didn't believe it. But secretly, one always hoped. And if he wouldn't have had the hope, then we wouldn't have survived. But it never materialized because no one was sent to Hungary. Everyone was sent to Auschwitz from the brick factory. And it was just a temporary stop for a few days. And the food was adequate. There wasn't enough, but it was adequate.

Were people in general helping other people? What was the tenor of the feeling there?

Yes, the older people, parents, our parents, and friends, their friends, they seemed to be more pessimistic than the youth. The youth was always more optimistic. So we always felt, that, well, something will happen and this won't take place. And we didn't believe any of the stories that we heard. And in fact, I think my parents didn't believe it, either.

Were people sharing food with each other?

They were sharing, yes.

And was one family helping another?

They were sharing, yes.

All right. And then your next recollection.

My next recollection is when they divided the groups and we all took trains to Auschwitz, so that was the first group. We happened to take the second.

How did they divide them?

Well, they took about 80 into a car, into transport, so it was about-- I can't remember how many, but to be had between 80 and 100 in one of those cattle cars.

Were you with your family?

We were together with our family, and we were all together. I mean, the immediate family, immediate family with my mother, six of us. And so the life in the cattle car was really miserable. But anyway, the first part, the first group left. And then three days later, the second group, which is us, which was May 25 sometimes. And the trip took two days.

And on the way we have gotten water once or twice, but the bathroom facilities were we had a big pot. And then people stood around it. And if somebody had to go, then they just stood around. And then once or twice, they emptied these big pots.

Was it very dark in the car?

We had two windows. There were two windows. But no. Well, at night, yes. But during the day, it was dark. It was dark.

And how were your parents?

Well, then at that point, we thought that, well, this is it, that it really didn't-- we were not too optimistic.

Did you know where you were going?

No.

You did not know.

Once we arrived, we still didn't know where we were. And we really didn't know about Auschwitz. I didn't know that it existed at the time.

So in the car, people were trying to-- I remember there was one man whom I shaved because he had a beard, and he wanted to arrive nice and neat, so I shaved them. But the people were getting sick and some people died, not in our car, but in some other cars. Some people died that were sick.

Were there many children in your car? Babies?

Not little babies that I remember, just my brother's age, who was, at the time, 13.

How crowded were you?

We had about 80 or 90 people in the cattle car. So you couldn't really lie down. You could sit or stand on the floor, but we had no facilities to sit.

So how did you sleep?

I don't remember sleeping. I don't think we slept. So it was two nights. Then when we arrived, on our arrival, which was about 3, 4 o'clock in the morning, they, of course, opened the doors, and it was like a thunder. "Raus, raus!" And that was the German. Of course, Mengele was standing there, which is--

How did you know it was Mengele?

We didn't know then, but we found out after who he was. I mean, we didn't know until many, many days after who he was. We just saw a man. We just saw a man, and he said, you go here and you go here. And everything happened very fast.

So my grandmother went with my brother. And of course, they went because she was very old, and she was old-looking also because she was sickly. And my brother was sort of not tall, so we-- but not by choice. It just so happened that this Polish-- there were some Polish guides who were trying to direct all the young people to work, like us, and all the little children with the grandparents rather than the parents so that the grandparents should perish, but the parents would survive.

But at the time, we didn't know. We thought that they were very bad and that they were very mean. We knew they were Jewish. They were Jews, these Polish--

Polish Jews.

This is a commander, that was their job. And so they said, you go there because otherwise you'll die. So they said, whoever can't walk should go to the left. And they'll have trucks and buses, and then they'll take them. But so many, many people-- so many people volunteered. I mean, they did go to the right.

But some of the mothers didn't want to leave their children, of course, and they went with their children. So of course, they died. And in many cases where a mother wasn't home, sometimes-- it happened in my family with my cousin, whose sister was home and she took out of the child, and she went with the child and then the mother survived and the sister died, of course, with the child, not her child. So all children perished at this stage and old people.

And then the others, like myself, my father, we were together, and my sister and mother was together. So we ended up-- we walked into--

Were the four of you still together at this point?

No. They separated the men--

They separated the men and the women.

Did you say anything to your mother?

At that point, I saw them once. It happened so fast that we couldn't talk. I mean, they just pushed us aside. And we didn't know whether it's temporary or whether it's permanent. They said, you go here and go here, and that was it. And that was the end. And then we couldn't-- we didn't see each other.

And of course, they said the packages were all in the middle. So all the luggage that we had, food and everything, was left there. So nobody took anything.

So you just had the clothes on your back.

Just what we had on. And then we went to barracks, to a barrack that we had, maybe, I don't know, 1,000 people in the barrack.

What barrack was it? Do you know the number?

I don't remember. But I remember it was a wooden barrack and it had wooden three-level beds. And on each level, there were about between 8 and 10 people. And that was the temporary quarters, until we were-- until we moved into different areas, everybody to a different area.

So at this point, we were there for a few days, and then we knew what happened. The first day we arrived to these barracks, we knew what happened to our families who didn't come with us.

How did you know?

Well, in the first place, we saw the fires. We had this-- we smelled the human flesh that you could feel because they also had they also had three holes that the little children were burned. And they used to just pour gasoline on them and they burned them.

Did you see these ditches?

No, you could just smell it. I mean, these were the Polish people that worked there, they told us. But I didn't know. It was never--

The Polish Jews?

Polish Jews, yeah. So in these barracks, in the bathrooms, so-called bathrooms, where it was a row of toilet seats, and they always had some dead bodies in the corners that they had to remove eventually. [INAUDIBLE].

So we stayed here for a few days, and this is where the people that were assigned to work, they had numbers. They received numbers, which I had received. My number was 89957. My father's was 89956. So we were--

This is a tattoo.

A tattoo.

How did-- what were your thoughts when you were getting a tattoo?

Well, we were-- the tattoo meant very little. The tattoo really didn't bother us as much as everything else around us. The tattoo was just--

But when you were getting it.

It really didn't bother us that much at the time because there was so many other things happening, so many people around us that we saw so much death and people and dead bodies in the bathrooms, and then stories that we heard from other people that the tattoo was nothing. It wasn't painful. It's not a painful procedure.

What were you wearing? Did you get a prison uniform?

We got a-- yeah, striped-- did they get it there? I think we-- I can't remember whether we had it already or we got it later. No, we did get it. Yes, we had prison-- striped uniforms.

And so we were assigned. They asked us what type of work we do, and we were assigned to a camp called Budy, which is B-U-D-Y, which was a farm. And the reason they-- I don't know whether that's the reason, but they asked what kind of work we did at home. And my father said he was a farmer. So whether that helped him, I don't know. But anyway, so that meant that we are going to live because if you were assigned to work and you left Auschwitz, then for the time being, you're living.

So after maybe a few days, maybe a week in Birkenau, actually, not Auschwitz, Birkenau, which was the distribution point, we left Birkenau and we went to this place called Budy.

And you lived there.

We lived in Budy.

You lived in Budy.

And it was a permanent-- it was a small camp, a small camp, maybe 400 people, 400, 500. And of course, every morning, we had our bells, which was we lined up and they counted us.

For how long did you line up?

Early morning for half hour, 20 minutes, half hour, rain or shine. And there were selections--

[INAUDIBLE].

There were selections. Yes, because there was selections, sometimes they said, oh, we need 20 volunteers. They would take out volunteers, and they never come back. Now, whether they were reassigned or not that we never knew. But they never came back.

I mean, often they didn't come back. Sometimes they did because I volunteered sometimes, some days, and I was lucky enough to come back. But very often, they didn't.

And the work was farm work, and my father and I. And the guards once, I remember, we went out to the farm, they asked, are you a farmer? He said, yes, I'm a farmer.

So they asked him, how many pounds of seed do you need for an acre of land? So of course, he knew that because he was really a farmer. And said, yeah, you really are a farmer. And then he had some other questions.

And would he have lied, which some people did, they beat them terribly. Some were beaten so that they couldn't even work anymore. And then, of course, eventually, they died. But they always tried to find-- they didn't need any reason, but this was just one reason why they would beat somebody. Oh, you're a liar, and then they would beat them.

So we left here, and it was-- life in camp, of course, was better than in Birkenau because we had food and some of the guards were decent, but most of them were not.

What do you mean, someone of the guards were decent?

Well, they were not physical. They didn't abuse us. As long as you did the work, you didn't abuse us. Now, at the farm, to supplement the food, I remember I was eating this grass because it wasn't just regular grass. It was a sour grass. I don't know what you call it. It was like-- it's a sour grass, a wild grass. So I ate it and I got diarrhea, which lasted for 30 days.

You were given this or did you get it?

No, I was just-- no, on the farm I was just pulling it up. And I lost about 40 to 50 pounds at the time. And we had a dispensary and I was getting cold tablets. So I used up all the cold tablets they had to this time. And then they didn't have enough cold tablets and I had the cold. We had an oven, and the doctor said to take out the coal, to supplement the coal tablets--

Oh, coal, C-O-A-L.

Coal, coal. C-O-A-L, to supplement the tablets. And after 30 days, I was all right. But I never regained the weight because there was no food to regain. But I survived with the food that they gave us.

You had started to say what a day was like.

But the day started very early. And then, of course, we all went to our assigned work areas.

Did they give you anything to eat in the morning?

Just coffee. Coffee and sometimes a slice of bread. And lunch, they gave us a soup, which had sometimes a little piece of meat in it, salami or something like that. And sometimes they gave us black bread with it, though not always. But it was adequate. The food, whatever it was, we could survive on it.

And you were-- the barracks?

The barracks, we had our own beds. The barracks were good. We had blankets.

So it was not the levels.

No, it was individual beds, individual. I think there were a couple of levels, but individual beds, individual beds. And we had an oven that we could heat up and we could eat.

Did you have blankets?

We had blankets. And we had rats.

And you were still wearing your prison--

We had rats, plenty of rats. We still wore our prison uniforms.

Were you ever deloused?



In the beginning, when we came in. Not there, not that I know. I don't remember, no.

But in Auschwitz-Birkenau you were.

In Birkenau we were, yes.

You were talking about a typical day. So you got up.

So we got up, and then we went to the farm and we would-- well, in August, of course, we had the wheat, so we had to cut the wheat. So none of us-- I mean, I didn't know how to-- what do you call that?

A scythe?

You know, when you cut the wheat?

With a scythe?

Scythe? Is that what--

That's the instrument.

Oh, that's the name of it, the scythe?

Curved?

Yes. So one behind the other. Now, if one didn't go, then I don't have to tell you what happens. But we somehow managed to learn and we did it. And during that season, we used to work between 16 and 17 hours a day. And I remember I used to work together with my father, and he was-- I always begged him not to work so hard because he needs his strength. But so he did.

So were you always next to him, working?

Always together.

Physically next to him working?

Well, no, not physically, but we lived in the same place. And we never told the SS that we were father and son, and they never knew it because they always separated people. If they found out that there was father and son, they separated them and put them somewhere else. So we never called each other-- I called them by its first name usually.

Or even if I call them by his name, but the SS didn't know our names. We only had numbers, so it didn't matter, really. Would they have had names, then they would have had a name and they would have put it together. But they didn't have names. They only had numbers.

And well, they were-- guards were pretty bad. At one point, I stole some food that I had given to-- there was a camp for women, and I threw it over to them. It was, like, kohlrabi, you know, those big--

Where did you get the food from?

Well, we had a farm, so we had it. And I just took it, and I just threw it to them. And I was caught, so I got 25 lashes. I couldn't lie down on my back for about four weeks. That was the only time that I got hit. I was never beaten any other time except for this one time, which was unusual.

And on Sundays I did extra work.

Sunday was not a day off?

It was a day off, but I volunteered so that I can get extra food and cigarettes that I cleaned-- we cleaned up the SS quarters. And so I got extra food for that and the cigarette butts. My father was a heavy smoker, so I got him the cigarettes from the SS for him to have cigarettes at the time, I remember.

What was it like to clean up the SS quarters?

They didn't give us any problems. They were nice.

They were around when you were doing this?

Sometimes, sometimes not. But they were-- we had no problem with that.

What do you mean you cleaned them up? What did you do?

We cleaned up the floors, we cleaned up-- they had parties. They had the glasses, the dirty glasses. We made their beds. We just--

Who worked with you, other young--

Well, I had one room, somebody else had somebody else's. We had about two or three people. And they asked for volunteers.

But were those people who volunteered young like you, teenagers?

Yes, mostly young, yes. Most of the people were young. I mean, even my father was younger. But he was 50, so that was not so old at the time.

Yeah.

But that was what they considered old because the older people didn't survive. So most of the people were young.

What did you talk about with the other teenage boys?

Well, we spoke about whether we'll ever-- well, the talk was mostly how to get food, really, and how to survive because if you-- so we always tried to get food. At one instance, there's one group that worked with pigs. And there were a little piglets, and now the question was how to bring in the piglets, how to take the piglets into the camp, into the dorms. And so they put them in the manure.

When they cleaned up the manure, they brought a pile, and they that's how they got them out. Then they went into the manure and they picked out the piglets, they brought them in, and they cooked them. We had an oven that we could cook. So that was one instance.

And there were many instances that-- there was one instance that two people wanted to escape, two couples, actually, two Jews, but they were couples. They had Jewish couples also. And one of them, they were very friendly with the SS.

So they got uniforms, and they were changing in into the uniforms in one of the horse barns. And somebody saw them and one of the couples saw them, so he called the SS, and they caught them. And of course, they were torn apart by two dogs, two of them, because the idea was that one would be in uniform, the other one would have a shovel or some kind of tools, and just walk out. But they never made it.

What was your relationship with the Jewish kapos?

I really had nothing to do with them, nothing much, other than just follow the instructions. I was never friendly with them.

Did you have any feelings about them?

I thought they were miserable because they really-- they did more than what they should have. They didn't have to-- they were then--

In what sense?

Well, they were-- for example, when I was beaten, they didn't have to do it.

They were the ones to beat you?

They were the ones, yes. The SS never did the dirty work. It was always the German-- the kapos, the prisoners did it to themselves. And there was one instance that I had-- there was somebody who I don't remember what he did, but the SS made me pump water on him in the winter, just became an icicle. And then he was taken into infirmary and he died.

So they didn't do it, I did it. But if you don't do it, then they shoot you. So you did things. But the kapos didn't have to do what they did. They went beyond the call of duty.

You're talking about the Jewish kapos?

The Jewish kapos. And the other kapos were mostly homosexuals, and for whatever political reasons they were in prison. Many of the kapos were Germans and other homosexuals. They had different insignias.

Did you have contact with them?

No, not other than in Birkenau when we arrived. There was one who liked me, and he was homosexual and he always brought me food. But I left and I never saw him after. But they always tried to get the young people and have affairs with them, but then they gave them food.

Were you enticed into an affair or [INAUDIBLE]?

No. No, he just-- he started it, but it never came to the point where he really said anything I didn't even know he was. In the beginning, I didn't know. I thought he was very nice to me. But later on, then I saw his-- I think it was red triangles, if I remember correctly.

Or pink?

I can't remember whether they were pink. I don't remember which ones they were. But later on I found out that that's what he wanted from me. I mean, that's what they told me.

What about your relationship with the women's camp in Budy? Did you see women?

Well, for example, my job was also we dug ditches. We dug a trench, but it was a 8-foot trench. And my job was to place the-- what do you call the grass squares?

The sod?

Sod. So the women were bringing the sod, and I with somebody else, with a hammer, we were placing the sod on the side of the trench. Now, these women-- it so happened that our guard was very nice. And I tried to place the sod very

slowly because the women that were bringing us the sod, they carried three to four sods at a time.

And their guard was a terror. He was a horror. So he had a dog, a German shepherd, and they were running. He said that they are not supplying us enough sod, and so the dogs were chasing them to bring the sod. And of course, these poor women, I mean, we said we wouldn't want to see our family here because it could have been our family also.

So this was for about three days. They just kept on, and we couldn't-- they stood behind us, so we couldn't put-- and they always kept on saying that they're not bring enough sod and they kept on running, and they ran them further. And it was just a terrible sight. So that was one of the very bad experiences that happened.

And finally, we were happy when this finished. So but there were women, but they made them work very hard.

Did you make any friends with any of the other teenagers at that time?

In the camp? No, just associations. We were just-- actually, we were all trying to survive because at this point, we knew that the gas chambers exist, and they knew everything, when somebody is taken there, we even suspected that. So we were just trying to survive, just trying to get all this food, and hoping that one day we'll survive.

Did you have any feelings when you would see a dead body?

It was a natural occurrence. So it wasn't it wasn't as if-- it was just a natural occurrence. In the beginning, it was frightening. But after, it was a natural occurrence. And what else do we have?

Did you ever harbor thoughts about trying to escape?

There was no escape. There was no way to escape there. The escape should have been before we left. We shouldn't have gone there. We should have escaped. But once we were there, there was no escape because the guards were all around us, electrical wires all around. And these two people that tried to escape, you heard what happened to them. And very seldom did anybody ever escape any of these camps.

Did you have any contact with your mother and your sister?

The first week that we got there, I saw them.

So they were taken to Budy, too?

That was a terrible shock. No, no. No, this was still in Birkenau.

Oh, in Birkenau.

What happened was I asked someone, and they said, yes, they saw them here. And I just went-- I remember I had some soap and I took them some soap. And they were shaven, their heads were shaven. So it was difficult to recognize, even. But we met for very briefly, a few minutes, and that was the last time I saw them. My father didn't see them.

Did your mother or sister say anything special to you?

At this time?

No, we were just happy to see each other, and then we had to separate. It was just-- no, nothing that I would remember. We were crying and then-- so and what else?

So you worked in--

I worked on the farm.

How was-- you said, obviously, your health was not good. You had lost 40 or 50 pounds.

My health was good.

Even though you lost a tremendous amount?

I was fine. I was fine. I worked very hard. Then I worked-- oh, after that incident that I gave the food, I was put in-- no, there was another incident. I was working in a fishery where we--

This was in Budy?

This was in Budy. And I was working in the fishery there the fed the fish, and it was a fishery, regular fishery, where we, knee-deep, we had to go and feed the fish. And I can't remember anymore what we did, but we fed the fish and we cleaned the place. And then I stole once a fish, and they caught me. I put it in my shirt and it was sort of moving still. I didn't kill it, I guess. And then I was put--

You slipped a live fish inside your shirt?

Well, I sort of hit it. I thought I killed it, but I didn't. And when you're standing at attention, you couldn't do anything, and this thing was moving. So they caught me, and I was put in-- I wasn't beaten. I was put in a punishing kommando, which was cutting wood in the woods. It was huge, pine trees, oaks.

Actually, it wasn't a punishing, it was just a bad, worse deal. But it wasn't where everybody was punished was sent there. But they sent me there because it was much worse than being in the fishery. And so I took it as a punishing kommando, but it wasn't really everybody that was caught doing something was there.

And then I was doing that until-- I was there for about two months, and at which point I only saw my father at night because at night we came back to the barracks. And so then a tree went through my leg, and--

How did the tree--

A tree went through my leg.

How did that happen?

Well, it was as we cut the tree, a branch went through it. So then I-- this was in December, end of December. And actually, my father, before this even happened, my father was sick. He had-- what do you call the--

A bee sting?

Not a bee sting, but he had a sore on his neck. It's called a bee something. Anyway, they wanted to send him to Auschwitz to the hospital. And anybody that was sent to the hospital, of course, that was the end. So I always was against that, and I told the doctor not to send him because we were together. And so they didn't send them, but meanwhile, he was getting worse and worse.

And then it so happened that I had to be sent to the hospital because I was bleeding. And at that point, they couldn't send him, so we were separated anyway, and I was sent to the hospital. And then they evacuated the camp. Then, of course, he died in Buchenwald. But I survived because in Auschwitz-- I'll come back to that later. So at that point, I was sent to Auschwitz.

To the infirmary.

To the infirmary, and they took care of it. And I was there for about three weeks, four weeks.

Who took care of you in the infirmary?

Doctors.

German doctors?

Jewish doctors.

Jewish Germans?

Jewish doctors.

What kind of equipment they have, materials?

I think they had sophisticated equipment because they had done surgery, all kinds of very sophisticated types of surgeries.

You had your own bed?

I had my own bed.

Were you given enough food?

I was given enough food. It was-- I was all right there until, of course, until the 18th, when Germans left and the Russians who were coming very close. But can you--

Sure.