

We're interviewing Robert Kertesz. This is tape 2, side A. Today is August 7th, 1996. I would like you to please clarify just how it was possible for you and your brother to manage by yourselves when you returned to the ghetto after the Red Cross safehouse.

Well, going back, these were unusual circumstances. So you grow up very, very quickly. You realized that, as I said before, you have to survive. So what you do is first, you look for food. And I found out quickly enough, you know, where some of these so-called soup kitchens were that we could go to.

And second was of course someplace to stay, but you have to remember that everybody in the ghetto was basically in the same situation. So nobody really owned a house in there, you know, unless they live in that area before.

So you just went and attached yourself to almost any family that would have room, you know, because I think the Jews were helping each other, so that they could see two little kids-- I mean, they wanted to be a mother and father to us, you know. So that's how we kind of survived, by people helping and by people taking us in and treating us as their own.

But don't forget, they had their own sorrows. You know, they had their own problems, and they could not give us a complete situation of love and caring and everything. But at least they gave us shelter. They gave us whatever little bit of clothes that we might have had if they had something left over.

And we were sharing. I mean, we were either sharing or we were stealing. Not from other Jews-- we were stealing from dead bodies. You know, you take somebody's shoe. You take somebody's clothes, because you were cold and you were hungry. And it's terrible, but when you get that desperate--

I'm not saying you're going to do just about anything because, I'm talking as an adult, but I had a good upbringing. You know, I didn't try to do bad. But when I was hungry, yes, I did take food that maybe didn't belong to me because I wanted to live, and I was hungry. It was just a basic instinct to satisfy that hunger, and to do the same thing for my brother.

So we survived by other people's kindness, and I have to say by my own cunning, I guess, by doing what was necessary just to live for, I can't even say for that day, just for that moment. Just the very next day was a blessing, you know, that you got up and you were still alive. I didn't understand it maybe then because it was just instinct, but I understand it now.

You spoke a few minutes ago about your parents coming back, but before we get to your parents coming back, I want you to take some time and explain to me what your liberation was like.

Liberation, of course it happened when the Russians liberated Budapest. I remember very, very vividly. The Russians were almost as bad, I would say, some of them, as the people that just got defeated. They declared two days of free looting in Budapest.

Anybody could go and get anything they wanted. You could go into any store and take anything. Of course, the ghetto walls were knocked down and we were free, but now we just had a bigger area in which to scrounge and in which to find food, because food was always the main thing that we were looking for.

But I remember people running through the streets with all kinds of things on their backs or in their arms. I had a roll of material. I don't know if it was linen or what it was. It was what they called a bale of it. And you know, I don't know why I had that. I guess just because I saw a lot of people take it, so I took it. You know, I thought maybe it was something that I could barter with for food.

But as I said, it was open looting, so as I'm walking down the street, some guy came and he says, young boy like you don't need that. And he took it from me, and there was nothing I could do. But he was looting from me. And Russian soldiers running through the street, going into jewelry stores, and some of these people must've come from very rural parts of Russia.

Some of them had never seen a flush toilet, for instance. I remember one of them washing their face in a toilet. They flushed the toilet and he washed his face in it because he'd never seen a running toilet before. I'd seen some of them have their pictures taken with watches, wristwatches all the way up both arms, because that was a luxury, that they probably never had a watch in their lives. And it was pictures they were having taken to send back to Russia.

And I mean, these things were wondrous to me because I'd never seen Russian soldiers. You know, some of them, as I said, were good. I remember one time I begged one of them for some bread, and one gave me bread. And the next time I would ask one for bread, he would kick at me because, I mean, I guess there was meanness in them too.

I'm sure he didn't know I was Jewish and I was one of the people that was in a ghetto or something, because all of Budapest was now, quote unquote, "liberated," you know. And everybody went wild. For two days, it was an open city. You could do and take anything that you wanted to do. Eventually, we moved back into that one-apartment house where we started from in the beginning.

That apartment was still there. It was still really in the family name. It was really my grandmother's. And we moved back in there, and then liberation became a little bit better for me because I spoke German. Well, I do speak German because my grandmother spoke nothing but German. She didn't even speak Hungarian. And my mother at home, they spoke German, and it wasn't Yiddish. It was really Hochdeutsch. It was German because that's the only thing my grandmother understood.

And Russian soldiers would take over some apartments where they would just move in and just take it over. And there were four of them that moved into this building. Now, this building I'm talking about where we lived was quite big. I mean, it was four stories high. There must have been maybe 25, 30, 40 apartments on each floor. And they took over one of the four of them, moved into this one apartment.

And I went to ask them for food, and I found out one of them spoke German. And I became their guide. They wanted to see Budapest. They wanted to go to different places, and he could converse with me. And that's when I started getting some food for the family and myself, by being his interpreter and being his guide, and things started to look up at that time.

Did liberation have with it a sense of freedom for you in terms of the oppression and the fear?

Absolutely. The only thing missing at that time were my parents because they were still not home, but we were free to do and go. I mean, it was just like as I remembered a few years back except now I was a couple of years older. And at that time, it became my duty, more or less, to provide for the family.

I guess at that time, I must've been-- what was this, 1944, '45? '33, I must have been 11, 12 years old. And I remember downstairs from this apartment house, there was a bakery that used to do some beautiful pastries. And the man knew me, and I would sell pastries on consignment. He gave me some pastries and I'd go out, and I'd sell it on the street and bring back money. I'd make a little bit of money and, that's how I help the family to buy food or what have you.

For heat in the house, you know, we burned a wood stove. We would go to bombed out homes and find hardwood floor, and a lot of it was beautiful hardwood floor. And we would just rip up the hardwood floor and take it home. That's what we would burn as fuel, you know. But I grew up very quickly at that time because it was a necessity.

Tell me about your reunion with your parents.

As I said, it happened several months after the liberation. And we used to-- when I say we my aunt used to go to some place, some official place where they used to have lists of people who were liberated from different concentration camps, and their names would be on it.

And one day several months later, she came home and she said that she saw both my father and my mother's name on it. And that's when I knew that they were coming home. And I think about two weeks later, they came home. And it was

unbelievable. I think it was probably the happiest moment of of my life.

My father passed away-- he was only 59 years old-- later on here in this Washington area. And I miss him very much even now. My mother is still alive, but I'll tell you about that later if you want. Sorry.

Did your parents have any difficulty locating you when they came back?

No, not really. They came back to the same house where we lived before they got really taken away. So that was the focal point. They came back straight and they knew where to find us. And by this time, both my aunts lived over there at that time, and my uncle, my brother and I. And by this time, my grandmother died, so my mother and father, when they came home, they knew exactly where to come to them.

And we lived there until sometime in 1945, I guess around the fall of 1945. And again, my parents, I guess they were smarter than I thought, because they must have realized that living under communism and under the Russians was not going to be a heck of a lot better than it was prior to the real bad things that were happening to the Jews in Hungary.

So again, my father started working as a barber again, and I assume they saved enough money. And at that time, they used to be guides. They used to be people who used to take Jews or anybody wanted to leave Hungary across the border into Austria and from there into a DP camp.

And that's how we eventually wound up-- in 1945, we wound up in outside of Munich in a displaced person camp called Neu-Freimann Siedlung, which means New Freimann Community Camp. And that was what they did. Here it's reverse discrimination, I guess. They displaced all the Germans that were living in these little semi-detached houses into another area, and they made a compound for the Jews, and we moved in there.

In fact, about 13 years ago, my wife and I went back, and I wanted to show her where it was. And we went in, and some lady came out and said, can I help you? I said, no. I said, I just wanted to show my wife where I lived. And that was a mistake. I talked in German, and she started cursing me again. So I said, it's time to go. So anti-Semitism is still alive in Germany.

Can you tell me what the conditions were like for you as a child in the DP camp?

Oh, it was happy times. It was great fun. It was like-- now, there is where I had nothing but Jewish friends. In fact, all my friends-- never say "all." Most of my friends from there went to Israel. School was a Hebrew school. I spoke quite well Hebrew at that time. The school was in, of course, in Yiddish and in Hebrew, and I entered in many plays. I played King Herod one time. And I was always a cut-up. I was very forward.

I started my music lessons with one of the other people-- this gentleman was a player from-- I don't know if he was in the Moscow Symphony, but he was one of the symphony orchestras in Russia. He was a Jew-- because not everybody in the camp was Jewish. There were a lot of displaced Polish people, but the majority of us were Jewish.

And I started out playing clarinet, and I remember I didn't used to like to practice and all that, but eventually I spent 20 years in the services with the Air Force band as a clarinetist, so I made my living out of it for many, many years. And I retired from the service doing that.

But it was happy times. We did a lot of mischievous things that the kids, 11, 12, and 13, will do. We made bicycling out of bicycle parts because we couldn't afford a new bike or something like that.

But we just had fun. We went to camp. Everything was Jewish and in Hebrew. We played a lot of soccer. We had our own little league, and we played against the German youth teams. And we were very good at it.

I think it was fun. I'm sure for my parents it wasn't fun. We lived upstairs in this semi-detached house, two houses together, but we only had the upstairs apartment in one of them. And then downstairs-- somebody else slept downstairs.

And my father-- there was all kinds of black marketeering going on right next door to us, but he could never get into that. He was an honest man. He would cut hair and shave people for a few pennies, and that's how he worked even while we were there, and we were there for three years.

The camp was run by the auspices of the American government. There was a camp commandant who was a major from the army. And like I said, for me it was very, very happy times because I did all the kid things that I couldn't do just a few years prior.

And at that time my brother became a burden to me. Now, here I didn't want him to follow me around anymore. I took care of him long enough, and he would just not leave me out of his sight. And I would always chase him home. He'll go home, cry to my mother about it and my father.

But we were happy there. Us kids were happy. We played. We went to school. We had our summer vacations and a lot of new things to see. I actually worked part-time as a 12-year-old kid in a German camera factory, just putting together parts. I don't know if I was an apprentice of some kind.

So I had fun, but as I said, all my friends went to-- almost all my friends went to Israel, and I was hoping we would go, too. But as I'm sure you know, it was done by quotas. My mother, as a German citizen born in Germany, German nationality, had a very small quota, which meant that she would get her choice before my father would, who was Hungarian. And we put in for both of them, and it was whichever one would have come first.

And we had a chance to come to the United States, and my mother decided that's where she wanted to come. So my brother, and I, and my mother were the only three that were allowed to come. My father had to stay behind because he was not on our quota. We, as youngsters, as under age-- we were on my mother's visa, but my father was couldn't come.

So we came here, and we established not residence, but we got someone to guarantee my father work and who sponsored him, and that's about six months after we were already in the States. So my father came because he had a sponsor.

Before we get to your life in the United States, I have a few questions I wanted to ask you. One question I want to ask you is if you had a bar mitzvah in the DP camp.

No, I didn't. I was never bar mitzvahed, and I don't know why. But I was never bar mitzvahed.

When did you start to understand what happened to the other Jews in Europe?

While we were in the DP camp. I had older friends. Here I was 12, but I was kind of hanging with kids who were 16 and 18 and some of them who were actually in concentration camps, had numbers on their arms. So we knew. They didn't tell us everything, but we, of course, questioned the tattoos on the arms. And there were explanations, and we did understand. So we knew-- we didn't realize the magnitude of the Holocaust, but we did realize that a lot of people didn't come back.

What did your parents tell you about their experiences?

Very little. It must have been very painful for my mother to talk about it. I just remember my mom my mother saying, if it wouldn't have been for your father, I wouldn't be here, and things like that. He's the one that saved me.

And I would ask, how come? And that's-- and I explained to you what she said. And to be very honest with you, I was just too much for me to comprehend what really happened. did The actual atrocities that I finally understood I only understood after I'd seen some pictures and much later on. People talked about it.

But let's face it. Even right now, people talk about it, and how many people do not believe? Now, you can talk about the ovens and the shootings, but I read about them after I grew up, got a little older. But just somebody saying-- it is so preposterous that-- 10 years from now, if you will tell that story, will they really believe it? Will they say, is it possible

that humanity did this to each other? One person could do such atrocities to somebody else?

So it would be hard to believe, unless you see pictures, talk to people. And I was a youngster, and I'm still here. But there's so many of us that are not here anymore and who have taken-- like my mom, who must say tremendous stories to tell. But she has Alzheimer's, and she is not capable of telling you anything. And some of the people that have stories to tell are no longer with us.

You said that in the DP camp it was a happy place for you. Do you remember other people having a different life in the DP camp after the war? Do you remember how other people were trying to rebuild their lives after the war in the DP camp?

Well I think a lot of people realized that that was just a transient place. It was just a temporary thing, and the uncertainty of not knowing what the future will bring created a lot of anxiety, I'm sure. But we tried to lead as much of a normal life as possible.

There were a lot of Hasidic Jews who kept the laws, the Torah, the covenant, you name it. We had services. We had an excellent cantor, and it was a mandatory thing, basically, for us to go to the synagogue, not only on holidays but Shabbos.

But some of the people had trouble. As I said before, there were a lot of people from Poland, a lot of people from Russia who were not Jewish, but they were also looking for something better than what they had back home because there were also displaced. And believe it or not, even in DP camp, there were some anti feelings against each other. The Poles didn't like the Jews, and the Jews didn't like the Russians, and the Russians didn't like anybody, and so on and so forth.

So the DP camp was almost like a little city all by itself. There was everything there. We would get our food rations through-- I'm sure you heard the-- UNRRA, U-N-R-A, which was United something, something. I don't know. It was a-- in fact, it was them who sponsored the people to come out to the United States through them, and they would place you different places. Once you got to the United States, they are the ones that helped you to start a new life someplace.

But food would be coming in like once a week, and you would get rations every week. It all depends many kids there were. And we would have powdered milk, and sugar, and canned goods, and things like that. And so it was a in-between time for the grown-ups. I'm sure that they were very anxious of knowing where they will eventually wind up and what will the new life be, but for us kids it was just passing time, just happy times.

When did you come to the United States?

I came to the United States in October of 1948, and we left Bremerhaven on a converted freighter called something, something Shark. But I know I was sick for seven days, whatever it took to get over it. And some of the crew took pity on me, and they fed me the orange juice and everything.

But that was happy times. That was even more happy, except we didn't know what was going to happen to my father. But coming to the States was-- the first time going into New York-- that was an eye-opener. That was unbelievable.

Did you stay in New York?

They didn't want you-- this organization that brought us over didn't want us to stay in New York. There were too many people already-- DPs, who were coming over from overseas-- there were too many of them in New York, and they wanted you to go to different places. Now, don't ask me why. Some slick guy talked my mother into going to St. Paul, Minnesota, and I tell you, I loved it. As a kid, I loved it. It was a beautiful place to live and to grow up.

But it was cold. For my mom it was cold. For me, I loved skiing, and I loved ice skating. And I just loved to be-- I started junior high school and learning a new language. And it was just great.

And I got myself right into the main-- I played an instrument, so I immediately got into the band. And I had immediate

friends. I had something in common right away. It wasn't just "the kid who just came over from Europe." They accepted me, and I had some very happy times, again, personally, very, very happy times in St. Paul.

We are doing an interview with Robert Kertesz. This is tape two, side B. You were talking about coming to United States, and I was going to ask if were having any difficulty with transition. But apparently you don't seem to have had any problems with that.

No, not at all. I was always outgoing type. And as I said, I played an instrument, so I was accepted right away in the band. And I had a wonderful, wonderful time. And living in St. Paul, being a small-town-type-- we lived on the outskirts of St. Paul. It was just absolutely great.

Marvin Levine is still a very good friend of mine who is a CPA in Minneapolis right now, and we talk every once in a while. He's just a great guy. He went to the University of Minnesota, and he was a trumpet player. In fact, he still plays, and he and I used to play duets. And we just had a wonderful time. He lived around the corner from me.

But then when my father came over about six months later-- he liked the big city. He lived in Budapest, where everything was moving and streetcars, and buses, and bustling of people, and everything, so he wanted to move back to New York and with me kicking and screaming. But we did move back to New York.

But I was very, very persuasive, and we only lived in New York for a year. And I talked him back. I talked him into going back to St. Paul, which we did. We went back to St. Paul, and I graduated from Humble-- I'm sorry, from Marshall High School, which-- but now it doesn't exist anymore, but I graduated from Marchall High School.

But my father still was yearning for owning a shop in a big city, so he made a move the second time back to New York. And I've been back to the Minneapolis area, but I wish I could have brought up my kids in Minneapolis, or in St. Paul, or somewhere out there, on the outskirts of it because-- although being in the service, I schlepped them around all over the place, and I think they turned out fine. But small-town living compared to New York is the way to go, I think.

And while in New York, I applied for City College in New York. I was going to go to City College. And then all of a sudden, a couple of buddies of mine decided to join the Air Force, and I said, well, I'm going to try it myself. I'm going to go and become a pilot, not realizing that the since I was still not a citizen of the United States I couldn't become a pilot no less. Even though I passed my tests for it and everything else, they would not allow me to get into that type of training.

So it just happened that I was down in Tampa, Florida by this time, MacDill Air Force Base, and there was a band playing on the outside, someplace outside. The windows were open. It was a beautiful day. And a guy said, well, what do you want to do? I said, you have a band? He said, why, do you play? I said, yes.

So five minutes later I was in the band, and that lasted for 20 years. The last 11 years I spent with the Air Force Band right here in Washington, DC, which is the top band in the services. I have a nice career. I enjoyed it very much.

My education, if you want to know, was spent mainly-- I went to a music conservatorium in Germany, even though I studied with a private teacher. So rather than college, although I have taken college courses-- I don't have enough credits for graduate study or anything like that, but I do have probably enough credits to-- I probably need about three or four semesters, and I could get my bachelor's degree. But I never finished that.

But I used to practice, especially in the summertime, four or five hours a day. That was my education. I took a lesson practically every day because my teacher was right there in the DP camp, and he was not only a friend of the family but also my teacher. And in the old days, when you didn't practice or you made mistakes, something, you got rapped on the butt or on the hand or something like that, which is, of course, now forbidden, but I think it didn't do me any harm and that it made me a better person.

What have you done since you retired from the Air Force?

I have done a lot of things. I used to have a real estate office. When I got here, I had a lot of free time on my hands. Even though I was with the Air Force Band, our work day was a short one. I got into real estate and eventually owned a real estate company, a small one, but it did fine.

That led into-- I started to build a couple of houses here and there, and eventually I realized that I liked being outside, being around work crews and everything, rather than be cooped up in the office and having to work Saturdays and Sundays at the whim of people who want to buy a house. If those were the only days they wanted to go, then I had to be available. So instead of doing that, I spent-- I got into building, and that way, I had more time with my family.

And we did a little bit of traveling. My wife is a avid golfer, so the-- my wife, as I said, is an avid golfer. I got her into the game because she always wanted to be with me when I went on a golf course. So since she learned how to play golf, we would do a little bit of traveling, different golf courses in the States and also Caribbeans and all that. I always, always wanted to learn how to fly.

I always wanted to learn how to fly, so I started doing that back in 1975. And I have amassed over 1,000 hours of flying. I have my own little airplane that we take trips in. But I'm getting too old for that, so I think I'm going to--

And we spend time with our grandchildren. We have three grandchildren. The oldest one is 13, and we got an 11-year-old grandson. And we have a nine-year-old granddaughter. And they live very close by, so I see them all the time.

By the way, I have three children. I have two sons. My wife and I have three sons. I mean three children. Our oldest son is 39, and [AUDIO OUT] and is my daughter [AUDIO OUT] 35-year-old son. [AUDIO OUT] They all live nearby, so [AUDIO OUT].

[AUDIO OUT] I'd like to ask you if there's anything you want to add, any episode that has come [AUDIO OUT].

Something does come to my mind that I forgot to tell you. You remember when I told you that we escaped from the ghetto and went to a air raid shelter because an air raid came out? My brother [AUDIO OUT] who at that time was about [AUDIO OUT] found [AUDIO OUT]. At that time, it was like \$100, but it was [AUDIO OUT]. But that was the [AUDIO OUT] for the bill.

And we went out-- when [AUDIO OUT] really before we went into the [AUDIO OUT] the first thing that did was we went to a [AUDIO OUT] candy and [AUDIO OUT] the air raid actually hit [AUDIO OUT]. I remember that. It's funny because instead of buying [AUDIO OUT] but I guess we had a [AUDIO OUT] went and got some [AUDIO OUT].

My pleasure.