

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Rene Tressler conducted by Gail Schwartz on February 20, 1997 in Silver Spring, Maryland. This is tape number one, side A.

What is your full name?

My name is Rene Edgar Tressler.

And where were you born?

I was born April 16, 1927.

And where were you born?

In a small southern Bohemian city of Strakonice, very famous by producing fezes. You know what a fez is?

Fez hats?

A fez hat, right, and motorcycles.

And your parents' names?

My father's name was in Czech originally Bedrich Tressler, translated into English, Frederick Tressler. My mother's name was Bedriska, which in English means Frieda, like in German.

And did you have any-- do you have any siblings?

Yeah, my brother is Harry Tressler. Now his name is [? Tarsi, ?] and he is five years older than I am. He was born the 22nd of the second month in 1922, nice number.

Let's talk a little bit about your parents. Were they from that town? Is that where they were born and grew up?

No, my father was born in Prague, which, as you know, is the capital city of what used to be Czechoslovakia, and my mother was born in Brno, which used to be the capital city of Moravia, a part of Czechoslovakia.

And what brought them to this particular town?

To what-- to Prague?

What brought them-- no, you said you were--

[? You mean to the place ?] where I was born?

Yes.

My father was a music professor and a musician, and he was teaching. And he had a job, which was actually only temporary in the town where I was born. So it was just accidental. Most of our lives-- most of their lives they lived in Prague, and when I was born they were accidentally in Strakonice, and I was born there.

Did you have extended family nearby or in Prague?

We were a pretty large Jewish family in Prague, yes. In fact, as much as I know, there were close to 70, 75 people in the close circle of our family, and out of which, about 64 died in the Holocaust.

Out of the close family, my father-- I must say, my parents were divorced in 1937. And my father married a German lady, and my mother married another Jewish gentleman. And so my father did not go to any

concentration camp because he was so-called "covered" by his Aryan wife.

And until the last three months I understand he was supposed to go into that mixed marriage camp, but he was walking through Prague with a white cane and black glasses, pretending that he is a blind man so they wouldn't catch him. And he slept every night at another friend's place, so he never went to any camp at all.

And my mother, my brother, and me-- we went, naturally, and miraculously, all three of us-- out of those 70 people, all three of us survived, my mother, my brother, and I did. Unfortunately, my mother died in 1987, being 85 years old.

Let's talk a little bit more about your childhood. How long did you live in this smaller town?

No, we actually did not live in Strakonice, I think, more than a couple of months or so after I was born. And then we lived in the city of the name of Teplitz, which is a decently large city in the northern part of Bohemia, and that was the place where I started to go to elementary school. Yeah, in between, we also lived in the city of Most. As I said, my father was traveling a lot, and we traveled with him to wherever his job was.

And so in Teplitz I started to go to school, and then we moved to a city of Ústí. In Germany or probably in English, too, the name is Aussig. And from there, when Hitler occupied the so-called Sudeten area, the area of the border of Bohemia, we escaped from there, actually.

We were warned by a friend of the family that they are coming, that they will occupy the city within the next 12 or 24 hours, and we had a pretty large, nice, equipped apartment there with lots of valuables, my father, being a musician, very valuable musical instruments, and libraries, and, naturally, furniture, and clothing, and everything.

We left there because we were told, you better go out of the city, and it won't take long. You come back within a couple of weeks or so. They will straighten out the political situation somehow, Mr. Chamberlain and so forth.

Let's back up a little bit before, and we'll come to that time. You said you were living in Aussig, and you started school. What kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it a Jewish neighborhood or mixed?

I think, generally, in Czechoslovakia, especially in Bohemia, there was no such a thing like Jewish neighborhood or so. We lived within the normal population, normal people, and we had, naturally, lots of Jewish friends. And my father and my mother went to the synagogue once a while. But otherwise, I must admit, the Czech Jews are kind of pretty assimilated, so there was no such a thing like a Jewish neighborhood. We lived in a pretty-- not rich, but well-on-people neighborhood. And yeah, that's what it is.

So you said you had friends who were Jewish and non-Jewish?

Oh, yes, yeah.

Did you have any unpleasant experiences with the non-Jewish children when you were very young?

So being a child in that time, a very young child-- I said elementary school, fourth, fifth grade, in Ústí, in Aussig. Yeah, I had here and there some experiences which one, specifically being a child, did not take too seriously. I remember I had a few kids in the class who, once in a while, called me names.

Like what?

Dirty Jew and so. But as I said, not being very religious and very Jewish brought up in that time, I actually didn't know what they mean by that.

Did you tell your parents about this experience?

Yes, I did tell my parents, and they said, just ignore them, and don't get in trouble. Don't fight, which I did anyway.

So you did fight?

Yes, I did, once a while. Actually, I want to mention a small story that happened since you ask. We were supporting a poor boy in my class who did not have enough-- their parents didn't have enough means to give him lunch to take to school, so I, for a year or two, took every day extra pack of lunch for this boy and gave him the lunch. And one time I, for some reason, after about a year and a half or two years-- I forgot not just his lunch. I forgot also my lunch at home. I just forgot to take it.

And he was so angry, and in that time. He called me cheap, and skimpy, and dirty Jew.

He was not Jewish?

No, he was not Jewish, no. And he hit me with the pencil box in my head. So that was too much for me, so I beat him up. And that's not the end of the story. Afternoon, the doorbell rang, and the mother of the boy and the boy stand in front of the door. My mother was home. She opened the door, and she said, look, Mrs. Tressler, what your son did to my little boy here. And he had a black eye.

And my mother said, yeah, my son told me about it, and did your son tell you what happened? And she said, no, they just had some kind of a boy's fight. And my mother explained exactly what happened, and the lady was very embarrassed and really apologized to my parents and to us for her son's behavior. That was just-- the parents probably we are not as antisemitic as that little kid, or the other kid, I'm sure, didn't know what antisemitic means, just picked it up somewhere in the street and called me dirty Jew just because I forgot to bring both our lunches.

Did you continue to bring lunch after that for him?

I don't think so, no. I don't think I didn't, no.

What kind of school did you go to as a young child?

That was an elementary school. I think it was the fourth--

A public--

Yeah, public school, fourth or fifth elementary grade.

Any problems with the teachers?

No, I don't remember having any problems concerning religious persecutions or so, no. No, I don't remember that. And I don't think it was a common thing in Czechoslovakia, no.

Now, you said your parents went to synagogue occasionally. How much of a religious training did you have as a young boy?

Religious training-- I don't think I had any. The only thing I remember-- my parents, specifically my mother, went to the synagogue at holidays, high Jewish holidays. Sometimes she dragged me with her, and I didn't know why I'm going there. No, I must admit, I did not have any strong religious upbringing. I always knew, I'm Jewish, and although, as I said, when I was very little I didn't know what it means.

And then definitely my awareness of Jewishness I have to thank to Mr. Hitler, that through the Holocaust, the suffering, and the things that we lived through, naturally, I became a scholar of Jewish history and "Jewishness" in quotations. So no, I was not really brought up very religious.

So your parents did not celebrate the Sabbath or anything like that, any holidays at home?

Yes, on Friday evening my mother lit candles and said the prayers, yes, and that was one thing. And then the high holidays we went to the temple. We both had the bar mitzvah, my brother and I. We had bar mitzvah. But we were not kosher. We were not strict religious, and they were both working on Saturday and Fridays. But I think that was very common for Jews in Czechoslovakia. There were very few really orthodox or kosher Jews in Czechoslovakia.

What language did you speak at home?

We spoke Czech mostly, mostly, but when I was three years old I spoke fluently Czech and German, which I, naturally, still do. And thanks to-- we had a maid-- as I said, we were pretty well off. We had a maid, and the maid was a German girl. And when she came-- actually, she came while I was three years old. When she left about two years later, she spoke fluently Czech, and I spoke fluently German, being actually five years old.

But the family language, I believe, would be like 80% Czech, but I must admit, like 20% German. Some of our relatives did not speak too well Czech at all, just a broken Czech, so we spoke German with them, some of them, not too many, though, the older ones, the ones from Austria-Hungary Empire, those very old ones, in that time very old ones, yeah.

Did you have any other interests, like music? You said your father was very musical. Did you have such interest or talents?

Yeah, I play the keyboard. I play pretty well guitar that I learned both from my father, naturally, and then developed a little bit. So I'm kind of a decent guitar player, classical guitar, not modern, and keyboard a little bit, too, but not professionally, no.

Were you interested in sports?

Yes, in fact, I was a professional soccer player after the war, after the camp, yeah.

Yeah, but I'm talking now as a child, as a young child.

Yeah, as a young child I was interested in sports. Yes, I played soccer, and hockey, and ice skating, and everything. Yeah, I did a lot of sport, opposite of my brother, who did not. He hated sports.

It sounds like you were a very independent young child, or were you very quiet and withdrawn? How would you describe yourself? We're talking about before the war.

I think I always was an extroverted child and person, which I am still, and actually, this is a good question that I am asking myself. And many people ask me very often, who brought you up? Who raised you? And I have no answer for that. Nobody because my mother and my father, specifically my father-- he was constantly traveling, and he was abroad with orchestras. And he was a conductor, too. He was conducting in different countries in Europe.

And my mother had a very high position in a coal concern. That was the coal area that Teplitz, Aussig, Ústí, and that was Weinmann, Petschek-- I don't know if that tells you anything-- a very, very rich family in Europe. And my mother was an executive secretary for the director in Ústí, in Aussig. And so she had a very good job, and she was rarely home during the day to-- that's why I said, we had a maid, and sometimes I even had-- what do you call it-- the lady just for myself to make sure that I'm not getting in any trouble and that I do my homework.

But parents' upbringing of children-- I am afraid there was nobody there. And when I was 11 years old-- 10 years old, actually, or 11-- as I said, we went from Aussig to Prague, and we never came back again. I wanted to mention that, that all those possessions and all those beautiful pianos, and clothes, and furniture we never saw again in our lives.

And we went to Prague, where we had our grandfather and some other members of the family. My mother married to a gentleman who was so smart. He just came back from America. Living in America 18 years, he had to come back a year before Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia. And he married Mom. And we didn't have an apartment in Prague because they were not available already in that time, and also it was expensive. We didn't have any means because we left everything there. Even bank accounts my parents left in Ustí, and so-

Now, your parents divorced--

--in '37.

--in 1937. Was that hard for you, difficult to see that happen?

I would like to say yes, but I don't think so, no. Actually, since my father was rarely home anyway, I didn't notice too much of a difference. In fact, when they were divorced, he came more often to see us than before. So in Prague-- that's what I want to say-- I was living with my grandparents because my mother and her new husband had a one-room apartment in Prague, and there was not enough room for both of us children, too.

So we lived with my grandparents, who had a large apartment in Prague, but they didn't care for us. They just fed us, and do whatever you want to do during the daytime. And then I went to the camp when I was 15, so I don't know who brought me up, actually, nobody.

How close were you to your brother when you were young?

[? When-- ?]

I know he's five years older than you.

Yeah, well, when we were young, I was very close to him. In fact, I was very close to him. He couldn't care less about me, actually, being five years older in that age. But I know that I copied my brother very much. Whatever he did, I copied, I did. And fortunately-- I don't know if I should say fortunately or unfortunately. He usually stopped doing things that he did and that I started to do after him, and I became pretty much successful where he just left it.

Example-- sports, soccer. My brother was the one who took me to a soccer field once, and being five years younger, five years younger than him, and being chosen to play with a team before he was-- that kind of embarrassed him, and he stopped. And I continued and became, after the war, a professional soccer player.

My brother one day brought a guitar home, and he started to learn guitar and show me the chords and how to play. And I picked it up, and I played, and he stopped. I play until now.

And there was a time-- my brother was kind of very famous in our family for writing short stories, and he once wrote a Christmas-- a Jew wrote a Christmas story, right, and the whole neighborhood cried over that story. And I told myself, why don't people cry about my stories? I have to write stories, too. And I did, and he stopped writing, and I continued writing and write until these days.

Was your family Zionist at all?

I think our family didn't know what Zionism is in that time. My brother became a Zionist right after the occupation of Hitler. He befriended with a gentleman of the name Jacob Edelstein, which-- I'm sure you are familiar with that name. And he became kind of-- if one can even say it, became a Zionist. He was 18 years old, 19.

And when Edelstein was taught to make a group that would go to build up Theresienstadt to prepare Theresienstadt for the city that Hitler gave to the Jews. And Edelstein put up a group of, I think, 21 people, and they went to Strakonice not knowing what's going to follow, naturally. And that group became the Board

of Elders of the Theresienstadt, of which Edelstein was the elder.

Good, yeah. OK, now when did you first start hearing about a man named Hitler? Do you know what your first memory is?

I think I started to hear just before the Germans occupied the Sudeten of Bohemia, of Czechoslovakia, the point where we had to leave to Prague. And short time before that, there was a lot of talk about a man by the name Hitler and actually more about the name Henlein, if you're familiar with that name. He was the Gauleiter-- I think was his title-- of the Sudeten, the leader of the Germans living in Czechoslovakia and those border areas. And he was the organizer, the one who prepared the occupation, really, for Hitler, but we also heard about Hitler.

And so there's also a little story, if you interested, about Henlein. Before the Germans occupied the Sudeten, the Germans already had marches in the city of Aussig, of Ústí. They marched through town with the flags of Hakenkreuz and still during Czechoslovakia. And people who sympathized with them-- they put up flags in their windows and banners, and we lived on the main street in kind of a villa of four floors. And we occupied the third floor, that floor, and we had a large balcony around the corner.

And the people who were above us were Germans, and they sympathized with Hitler and with Henlein. And they had the banner on the top of their-- on their balcony, actually hanging down towards our space. And when the Hitlerjugend and the people marched by, they stopped, turned towards our building, raised their hand in a Nazi salute, and yelled, "Heil Hitler, Juden raus, Juden raus," which means "Jews out, Jews out."

And they thought that the banner belongs to me. I was standing on the balcony. They thought I'm a Nazi family or whatever, and they were yelling at me, "Juden raus," thinking that I'm one of them. That was just a funny situation.

And what were you thinking of at that time?

I really hate to say that I kind of didn't understand the situation, being 10, 11 years old, and I was laughing. I was, in that time, already thinking, look at those idiots. They are waving at me. They don't know I'm Jewish. And then that time I knew already a little bit I'm Jewish, and so that was kind of a sad and funny situation.

What kind of relationship did you have with the people above you?

I have no idea. I have no idea. I don't even know if our family knew them too well. I think-- no, I cannot say. I really don't know. I have no idea. I just know they were Nazis. That's all.

Was it a-- what was it like to see all these troops marching below you? Were you impressed by the way they looked?

No, I must say, I was never impressed by them, and I didn't take them seriously from the beginning. I think that saved my life during the war, too. I just didn't know better because, being a child, I just laughed. I didn't know what's going to come, what's going to happen. I thought they are just some crazy people playing around.

Did your parents say anything or your mother say anything to you then?

I think they did not really try to explain the situation to me too much. I don't think they wanted to worry me, naturally, but I'm sure they knew that it is a serious situation, otherwise we wouldn't probably run away to Prague.

What were your feelings about having to go to Prague and leaving Ústí?

Oh, actually, I was pretty happy. I didn't have to go to school, and I went to see my grandparents, which I liked pretty much. And I liked Prague always. I was impressed by the city of Prague whenever we went

there, and we went there like four or five times a year and traveled a lot. So I liked Prague, really. I was happy that we moved to Prague, although I didn't realize at that time what that moving actually meant for us.

Were you aware of refugees coming into Prague?

Not in that time, no. I had no idea that we are not the only people who came to Prague. I just thought we went to Prague because it's a little bit more convenient for us, but I really didn't have the grip of the situation at all in that time.

And now you're in Prague living with your grandparents. You said your mother remarried. Did she remarry another Jewish man? Was your stepfather--

Yeah, he was Jewish. As I said, he just came from America, living here in Baltimore for 18 years. But he shortly left Prague again for Israel, in that time Palestine, naturally, thinking that he is just going ahead of us and prepared the situation for us and that we are going to come after him. But he practically went with either the last or one before the last possibility of leaving the area that the Germans occupied. And there was a difference of three or four weeks after he left that it was clear that we are not going to go anywhere.

Were you upset about leaving your friends in Ústí?

Not really, no. I wasn't aware of the friend situation. I just made pretty quickly friends in Prague at the school where I went again.

So you would say you were a very sociable young child?

I think so, yeah. And here I went-- in Prague, then, they put me into the high school. No, actually, in the gymnasium, which is a college, because I was already in the sixth grade. And in Czechoslovakia you had a choice, either continue high school, and if you were a talented kid, you went into a gymnasium, which is equal to high school, only a little bit better, like college or so. It's a preparation for university, which I was preparing to do. I wanted to be a doctor.

You wanted to be a medical doctor.

Yeah, a medical doctor. I wanted to be a gynecologist.

This is tape one, side B. And now you're in Prague, and then the next big change-- you said you started the gymnasium, and what was the next big change? Or if you want to get to September 1, 1939--

No, I think I want to tell you, I went to the gymnasium there, and they threw me out in about two or three months because Jews were not allowed to go to gymnasiums anymore. Gymnasium has nothing to do with gymnastics. That's just the name for higher education. And so they put me in a high school, and they threw me out from there in a few months because Jews were not allowed to go to regular high school either.

How did you feel about that, being thrown out the first time and then the second time?

That was the time where I slowly started to be aware of the situation and the fact that I'm Jewish and that I don't have the same rights as the others, and that kind of started to bother me slightly. But as I said, I was a happy kid, and I didn't take anything too seriously.

And they put me in a so-called "Jewish" school, which was a Jewish high school in Prague, and I was very happy there. I had a lot of friends there and lots of fun there, and we played a lot of sports, and soccer, and things. And actually, I noticed that in that school nobody calls me dirty Jew anymore, which was nice.

In the first two schools, when you were called that, that was by the other students or by the teachers?

By the other students and later even by the teachers, too. Just before they always threw me out, they said,

we don't want any dirty Jews here, so go somewhere else.

When you then went to the Jewish school, did you feel safe going to and from school on the streets?

On the street, yeah. On the street, I cannot say that I would feel unsafe in Prague, no. I don't think on the street people care to recognize if somebody is Jewish or not. There were not that many German children coming with the occupiers, with the army and with the SS people when they finally occupied even Prague. And so on the street I don't think I had any problems like that, no. Naturally, there were problems later in the press, and the radios, and--

So are we now talking about March 1939, when Prague was occupied?

Right.

And was there anything specific about the beginning of the occupation that you can recall?

Not really. I just were aware of it, slightly became aware that it is a political situation, that it is a probably worldwide situation. I heard the word "war" mentioning more often and got interested what it would mean, a war, and so far. And then I got aware of the fact that the Germans, who occupied Czechoslovakia, do also not like very much Jews, and then later I learn that they want to somehow separate the Jews. And naturally, even later I found that people were sent by transports to different places.

That time I already understood the situation pretty well for my age, I'm sure, that being-- I'm talking now '41, when the first transports from Prague or from Czechoslovakia went directly to Lodz, to Poland, out of which just a handful of people survived.

So it's after March '39. You're a student in the school, and life went on normally, in a sense. You're in the Jewish school.

Yeah, even the Jewish school after a while got closed.

When was that?

I think it was in 1941, beginning of 1941, the middle of '41. I wouldn't know exactly. But in that time, they even closed the Jewish school, and so I didn't really have anything to do, except we were-- the only thing the Germans allowed us to do-- I'm talking about the youth, the kids.

There was a sports club in Prague, a very famous one. The name is Hagibor, and I don't know-- really, we don't understand it until now. They allowed that sport stadium to be in the hands of the Jewish community in Prague, and the Jewish kids and even adults were allowed to go there, and play, and play sports, and exercise, and so far.

Fredy Hirsch, who we mentioned before as a leader in Auschwitz and Blechhammer, the children's barrack-- he was also the leader put in charge of that sports stadium during the Hitler-occupied time before he himself went to the camp, naturally.

And so I knew him very, very well, extremely well, really. And so we went there, and we played soccer. And we had a gorgeous soccer team, of which-- the photograph you can see over there. Too bad it's just around here. You see over there on the wall is that photograph, those 11 kids. I'm the one in the middle, and that's just before we went to the camps.

It's too bad it's just tape because next to it there is a photograph of-- this soccer team is 11 children and the age of 14, 15, 16 or so. And I'm in the middle there, and there are-- five children survived the concentration camp, and six died. And I'm in the middle, right in the middle there.

And next to it is a photograph of 11 children again, but that is a few days after the war, liberated in Buchenwald. That photograph I discovered a couple of years ago when I visited Buchenwald from here now,



and I paged in a guidebook of Buchenwald. There's a museum there. And suddenly I opened the page, and I find this photograph there and said, that's me in the middle right there, 11 boys. In the middle, exactly like the soccer team, is me. Unfortunately, I don't know any of the names of those 11 people, where I do remember and have in my mind and heart all those 11 names of the kids there.

Can you tell us their names?

Better not.

OK. Do you have any recollections of September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland?

Poland?

Hearing about it?

Yeah, I heard about it. I couldn't tell you now, honestly, if I really noticed it too much or if I was very aware of it. I just knew that the war started. That war that was talked about for such a long time finally started. But fortunately for me, although I wanted to know what does actually war look like, what is it, I never learned that in Prague because Prague was never bombarded, or there was never fights during the occupation.

Only after the war and the last few days of the war were in Prague. I don't know if you're familiar with that. The war ended May 9, and the last fights of May 9 were in Prague. But I was not there in that time.

After the Germans invaded Prague-- and you said you switched schools and all that-- were there any other restrictions for you personally?

Yes, naturally. There were restrictions for Jews--

Such as?

Pardon?

Such as?

Yeah, such as we were not allowed to use trams. In the beginning, we were allowed to use the last car and the last platform of the last car of a tram. Then later weekends we were not allowed at all to use the trams or any kind of transportation in Prague, which also brings me to that problem. When the youth, the kids went to play in the sports field on Saturday and Sundays in Hagibor, it was very far out south of Prague, and we had to walk because we were not allowed to use any transportation. And it was about, I would say, a 3-to-4-miles walk, maybe five, which for kids is a long walk back and forth just to play soccer.

Also, even it was made more difficult because across Prague was the so-called "Golden Road," and we were not allowed-- which is the main road. And we were not allowed to cross that main road during Saturday and Sundays, Jews, and also, we had already the star on our chest, which made us very recognizable.

So there was one place we could cross this road. There was a tunnel, an underpass where the National Theater is, which is very far out of the direct line towards where we were going. So we had to go like a mile to the west and then a mile to the east again and north to the sports field. So it made it even more than the distance that I said, but we enjoyed it because we knew we were going to have a good time in Hagibor at the sports place, the kids.

What was it like to wear a star?

Again, I think we children were not that much troubled by it as probably our parents and the adults were. We even played such games, like we had a hand bag, and we put it over the star so nobody could see it, which was not legal. It was illegal. We even get dared sometimes to go into the tram and covered the star

with a bag or something. And luckily enough I was never caught, and I don't even know anybody who was caught. But I know the stories that some people were caught and punished severely for that.

Was this star sewn on your clothing or pinned?

The star was supposed to be sewn on our clothes, but being a very inventive race, we put them on-- I don't know how do you call it-- the clips-- you clip it on. What do you call those things, the metal-- it has two parts, one you saw on the clothes and one--

A snap, like a snap.

Snap, right, right, right, snap, snaps. So we put the star on snaps, and we put it up or down whenever we wanted to. But that was a dangerous game, really, that we shouldn't have played.

And again, when you had to wear the star, did you talk this over with your mother at all or your brother?

No, just one day I was told we have to wear the star, and that was it. And we wore the star. As I said, I think we did not realize the importance and the seriosity of the situation, children being 13, 14, 15 years old. What do we know? We just made fun out of everything. Only later I realized how serious it really was.

You said that you had a bar mitzvah.

Yes.

Can you describe that?

I even have a invitation card for my bar mitzvah somewhere here still saved. It's the only one that I had. I was a member-- and I'm coming to another story. I don't know if you want to hear it. It's also a part of one story that I am using in my writings in my book. It's a story about a singing choir, a Jewish singing choir which is described in literature of Terezin and art of Terezin over there. It's mentioned there, that choir, led by a Professor [? Wachtel ?], musician, who did not survive either.

And the plan was to create a singing corps of Jewish children that should be something like the Wiener Sangerknaben and the corps was supposed to go on a tour through Europe and stay in some of the Western countries unoccupied countries I mean-- not to come back to the occupied area and therefore saving the lives of some 50 children.

Unfortunately, we were very good. We were extremely good, in fact, by professionals, Jewish and non-Jewish. We were considered equal to the Wiener Sangerknaben.

And we had a [? tour ?] planned already, and there was a manager who got some money. And they sent him out to Switzerland to prepare the road for us, and the hotels, and all those things, like an agent, a manager. And he got, I understand, something like a million dollars, and he left. And nobody ever heard of him again.

And 50 children died in the concentration camp. I am the only one who survived, the only one. And that is one of those things that-- what was your question?

I'd asked you about your bar mitzvah.

Bar mitzvah, right. Why I'm talking about that? Because my bar mitzvah was held together with another member of this choir and in the choir uniform. I mentioned the short pants. And it was held in a synagogue in Prague in the Dušní street, which later became a carpet museum, and I think it still is some kind of a museum now.

And it was one of the very pretty synagogues in Prague. There were many of them in Prague, and that's where I had my bar mitzvah, yeah. And I was saying the prayers and all those things. I didn't know what I'm talking about, which I, until now, still do sometimes. I mean in Hebrew, and I didn't know what it means at

all. And I still don't know. I still don't know Hebrew.

We're talking about 1940--

That was 1940.

--and your city being occupied.

Right, yes. That was all during, actually-- yeah, '40 or '41. Yeah, anyway, it was occupied already by the Germans, yes. It was already not Czechoslovakia anymore. It was Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia since the Slovaks separated themselves. They stayed a separate country, yeah.

But there was no restriction on your having this religious observance?

Strangely enough, no. There were still synagogues open for high holy days, at least some of the synagogues, and there were still bar mitzvahs performed, even during the first year of occupation, yes.

Were you wearing your yellow star?

I am thinking about it. I don't think so. No, I don't think we had stars at the bar mitzvah in the temple, no.

Was there any kind of celebration?

We had a celebration in that choir. Within that choir there was kind of a big celebration. We had a lunch, and in that time there was already restricted rations of food. And so there was not that much available anymore but much more than later on, naturally.

Were there any curfews then?

Yeah, there was those curfews that I was talking about. We were not allowed to go out on Saturday, Sundays. We were not allowed to use the transportations except the rear platforms and so lots of-- I don't know at that time or a little bit later-- there were rations, and there were ration tickets. But the Jews didn't get any rations, not at all, so we had to organize just to get any way we could, black market. And so I didn't do it, naturally, but I just heard about it. My parents and my grandparents were involved in that, naturally.

Did you talk to your grandparents about the changing conditions?

To be honest, no, I didn't talk too much to my grandparents at all. As I said, I just came in the evening and talked for a while, not about political situation, so no. And also, I didn't mention, actually, that later at the grandparents' place I was staying only for about a year or a year and a half.

Then later we had an apartment. My mom finds somehow an apartment, which strangely enough was a apartment in a very modern building. That building belonged to the religious group of the Czech Brothers, the so-called Hussites, and it was a gorgeous building where downstairs, on the first two floors, was a church. And above that, five or six floors, were very modern apartments, which-- we had one of those.

Now what's the next big change that you noticed in your life?

The next big point of that time was the fact that my brother, who was working in that Zionist organization, was choosing to go, as I said, with Edelstein to Theresienstadt. The year before, there were already transports going, those that went directly to Poland, as I mentioned before, and that--

Did you see any of the people leaving?

Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. In fact-- you were asking what I was doing-- since we didn't go to school anymore, we were ordered to help those people who went to transports, to carry their possessions and put them in cars and wagons to the place where they were gathering before they took them in the train in the camps, which--

we didn't know that they are going in camps in that time. We were told that they are changing the living places of the Jews in different cities only. We didn't have any idea about concentration camp or any kind of incarceration or something.

Who told you to carry the luggage, the Jewish organization or the Germans?

Yeah, the Jewish Community Center was the organizer of that group that helped those people to carry their luggages because sometimes there were old people that couldn't carry it, so we had to help them to carry it to the gathering place.

Did you know any of these people personally?

Oh, yes. Yes, very much so. Yeah, I knew very many of them, and in fact-- but we are jumping here a little bit-- later they threw us out from that nice apartment from the Czech Brother Church building, and they put us in a very old quarter of Prague, into a very, very old building, an old apartment, and together with another family. So there were three bedrooms there, but we were-- let me see-- about seven people, eight people living there, maybe 10. It was a pretty [? big ?] family.

And that family left long before we did to the camp.

The owners of the apartment?

No, the people who lived there. They left, so we then later had, for a while, that apartment for ourselves. But it was kind of empty anyway. And so I knew those people very well, yeah.

Was that hard for you to say goodbye to them?

It was kind of hard to say goodbye. It was like saying goodbye to anybody who changes his living place, moves to another city or something. As I said, we were not aware, and specifically the children were not aware that there's some kind of a tragedy brewing there. And we just said, oh, yeah, they were just moving out somewhere else, although we knew they had to move out, they were ordered to move out. But we still did not have any idea what is coming.

And you continued to go to the sports center?

Yes, right. We went to that sports center to the last minute, just before they sent us to Theresienstadt in, as I said, November 1942. And my brother went in 1941, as I said, and we went with my mother in 1942.

When your brother went off in 1941--

'41.

Yeah, in 1941. How was that for your mother?

I think it was not very easy. I remember the discussions she had with him not to join that group because it was kind of volunteering. Actually, my brother did not have to go. Edelstein chose a group. He was told to build a group and to go there to prepare the situation, although they, I'm sure, didn't know what situation it was. And my brother said, yeah, he wants to go, and most of those people were really from that Zionist group.

And they went. In fact, they went with a private passenger train, without any guards whatsoever. In fact, as I understand, they arrived in Theresienstadt. Nobody knew what to do with them, why they came, and so then later the German authorities there started to understand the situation. And they kind of put them in the camp, in this city, which was a fortress city, and then since then that was it. They never came out again until they went to the--

Now, did you say that he was with 50 young men? Is that--

About 20, I think, 20 or 21 men. In fact, if you're interested, I can find-- the transport is here also listed. The book I have here is a listing of all Jews from Czechoslovakia that went to the concentration camps, and if they lived or if they survived, and which transport they went, where they went, Theresienstadt, Lodz, Auschwitz. Everything is listed in here, very, very good statistics here.

Did life change a lot for you after your brother left?

For me, personally, no, except I missed my brother, naturally, for a year. But for me, personally, no, it did not change too much really.

You're 14 years old, and you're living with your mother. And what else are you doing with your time besides helping to carry the belongings of people?

When there was a transport, which wasn't every day, naturally-- it was once in a while, sometimes more, sometimes less transports going. Then the only thing I did was spent my time in Hagibor at the sports place. That's all we did, the youth, because there was no more school.

Did you have a sense of isolation feeling Jewish?

In that time, we already understood, we Jewish children, that we are being isolated from the Christian children, from the Christian public, too, the whole family. And so yeah, we started to understand that, although we still thought it's just a temporary arrangement somehow. We were actually told by our relatives and parents not to worry, that this is just a temporary thing because it's a war, and when the war ends, everything will come back to normal way again.