

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Rene Tressler conducted by Gail Schwartz on February 20th, 1997, in Silver Spring, Maryland. This is tape number two, side A. Is there anything else you wanted to add about your brother's transport, what date it took place on and so forth?

OK, my brother, as I had mentioned before, left with the Edelstein group to prepare the city, and that was on the 4th of November, 1941. The transport name was ST for Stab, which means the leaders. And that transport became-- the people of that transport became the member of the so-called Aeltestenrat, which means the Board of Elders of Theresienstadt.

Any specific names you wanted to mention who were in that group?

There is only 23 names here. There was Freddy Hirsch was a member of that group, as we mentioned his name before. He was the leader of the youth Hagibor. And I mean, the things that he was in charge of Hagibor where the children were allowed to spend their free time, as I mentioned before. And Freddy Hirsch, actually, already in that time was a very popular person, and even more known, and popular, and famous, actually, became in Auschwitz, Birkenau, where he was the leader of the children's block. And there's another story about him that we maybe come to later-- how he died.

Did you say goodbye to him when he left?

Left for where?

When he went.

To Theresienstadt? Yeah, we all said goodbye to him. Somebody else took over to organize the games in Hagibor place. And he left. I knew he is leaving with my brother in the same group, although most of the Prague Jews did not have any idea what that group is about, but I knew since my brother was a member of it, right?

Did you have any contact-- correspondence-- with your brother once he left?

No, none whatsoever until we got there ourselves. We didn't know if he is even alive and where he is, how he is, nothing, no.

Now, was your father coming to see you at this time?

No, my father, as I mentioned before, was married to the German girl, and I once in a while came to see him in his apartment in Prague, but, otherwise, we had not regular contact with him, no. Naturally, my father knew that my brother is leaving. And obviously, my brother came to say goodbye to him, but that was it.

Did you have any relationship with your stepmother?

No, just kind of a friendly relationship, yeah, but nothing specific.

Did you get to know her family-- her German family?

Yes, I knew her German family already from before the occupation because as a child, while they were in divorce with my mother in '37 still living in ĀstĀ, naturally, I went like for school vacations to visit my father. And he already lived at her parent's place in the city of the name Hummeldorf, and in German or in English, Komotau, which was not very far away from where we lived in Aussig-- about 60 miles or so, 70 miles maybe.

So your father was accepted by his German in-laws?

Yes, I'm not really sure of that. I feel that he must have been since he lived together with them in the same village and same place, yeah.

Is there anything you want to add about the year between the time that your brother left and the time that you and your mother left? Any other.

The time my brother left and what?

And then the time that you and your mother left between 1941 and '42.

There's a bunch of happenings, a bunch of stories there, which I am thinking which one I should tell you about. Maybe it would be interesting, and, again, I hate to say that, but, naturally, it is a part of one of the story of my book too. The story about a Obersturmbannfuhrer whom I named in the book Obersturmbannfuhrer [? Fertzler, ?] but I don't think that was his name. And, in fact, I forgot his name.

And when we lived in that nice modern apartment in the Czech brother's building church, one day, he came to us. I don't know. He was recommended by some organization that took care of the German officials who came to Prague with the occupation army to accommodate them, you know?

And that office, which was kind of very still friendly and nice in that time, called my mother once that I understood later, and prepared her for one man who would like to discuss lodging with her. She had no idea what's it all about. And he came. He was a man in civil clothes. And he was trying to persuade my mother to let him our apartment and to move to another apartment that he would provide for us.

And he was explaining that there is some provisions that we would have to leave modern apartments anyway-- the Jews, sooner or later in a forceful way-- and this way we could choose, and we could do it, you know, nice and friendly. And so we moved, although, actually, we had no other choice.

And also, when he was talking to my mother later since my mother still didn't understand his authority from which he is trying to do this kind of exchange, so finally, he snapped his heels and said I am Obersturmbannfuhrer So-and-so here in Prague with the occupation authorities, and that was it. And SS Obersturmbannfuhrer, in that time, we didn't know too much what it means. Unfortunately, we learned soon enough.

And we moved to the old place, as I told you, with that other family. And he, when they were negotiating, so-called, he was telling my mother that those people in that other apartment will stay there only for a couple months or so for a short time, and then we will have the whole apartment for ourselves. And so that he kept his word there. That whole family was sent with one of the first transports to Lublin-- to Lodz, actually, in Poland. And none of them returned naturally.

So that we didn't know in that time. And so we stayed there and also the men-- the SS men one day came back to visit us. I mean, to visit us? He just showed up. And that is kind of a more or less sad and funny story. He fell in love with my mother. And my mother kind of rejected him, naturally. And that was already at the time when my brother was in Theresienstadt.

And so my mother, when he became too fresh, she punched him in the face, and he left completely with his black SS uniform. And a few weeks later, we were going to Theresienstadt. And that was the result of that I think because, otherwise, we would have stayed in Prague for much longer time if not through the whole war.

Because there was-- I hate to say that but it was the truth-- the people who went with that special transport with Edelstein, their family was supposed to be also protected in Prague as long as, you know, probably forever. But in that case, they just sent us too. But I also learned that all other people sooner or later went anyway.

Were you ever physically accosted on the street?

No, I think you asked me that before. No, I was never physically hurt or attacked on the street in Prague, no. I understand in other occupied countries that was the case very often. In Prague, I must admit-- or I mean not admit. I must say although there were a lot of antisemites within the Czech nation-- people-- but I believe they were the mildest

ones of all the occupied countries.

Like I know in Poland, they had terrific problems with physical beatings and so on the street. And I don't recall any of such cases in Prague, no.

OK, you said that a few weeks after this incident with this man, your family was notified. How were you notified?

Oh, as everybody else. You got they came like a man with postman's bag, and he took out a piece of paper, gave it to you, you had to sign it, and that paper said you have to come to the gathering place for the purpose of being transported to another place, all right?

Were you home when this came?

Yes, I was, right. Because they came at night. They always came at night around midnight. I don't know why.

How did you feel when you got that?

I remember my mother was very unhappy, although, on one hand, she hoped that we would be sent to the same place as my brother was, although we didn't know. And she was very unhappy, but she was also happy that she's going to see her son again. And then she was unhappy because she knew that I'm going to have to go too. And she would have rather spared me from that kind of experience, although she didn't know what kind of experience it's going to be either. And so we went, as I said, with the transport Cc in November '42.

November 20th, 1942.

Right.

And we were in Theresienstadt, right.

And how many people were on that transport?

A thousand, yeah.

And you are 15 years old now.

I am 15 years old now. And the transport were-- I'm sorry, that was November, not December, right? Did I say November?

You said November.

20th of November. And there was a thousand people there out of which 843 died. I'm knowing it because I'm reading it right now from the Theresienstadt memorial book. And 154 were liberated-- three, they didn't know what happened to them. But naturally, out of those 154, I doubt too many will be still living in these days. This is a number from 1945, and, obviously, there is just out of 154, I don't really know, but I think maybe five or so.

Let's talk about the journey, or let's talk about first, getting-- so you got this notice to come. And where did you go?

We went in Prague at a place where there used to be world fairs-- fairs, business fairs and so. And they gathered us there. We stayed there actually for two nights before the transport went. And then they took us.

How did you sleep?

On the floor, some mattresses, some blankets, and things on a wooden floor. It was an indoor place.

What did you take with you from home?

We were allowed to take a couple bags each one. So that's what we had, my mother and I.

What did you take with you?

I wouldn't really remember that. [LAUGHS] I think just some clothes, and yeah.

Anything special that you wanted to take with you-- personal?

Not really, no.

No special books or anything like that?

No, I don't-- not that I recall really, no. We just went to TerezÃn, and we got-- my mother got a place to stay.

Well, wait, before we get there. You're still-- you're at this gathering place. And you're there for two nights. What did you do during the day?

I think we just gathered wherever, whatever kids there were-- a few kids-- and played around, fooled around, or details, I wouldn't really remember that now. But I know we had-- they gave us some food there. And it was not very restricted, except we were not allowed to go out anymore.

And the German guards, what was their treatment of you?

I think the guards were kind of invisible. They were outside at the gates and so. So inside the rooms, I don't remember. I don't recall there would be any guards inside or so.

And the sanitary facilities?

Yeah, I think there were some toilets there.

And then how did you get--

[INAUDIBLE] [? washroom. ?]

How did you get to Theresienstadt?

By train, yeah. They took us to the train that was the railroad-- a small railroad station of Prague. And I think the name of the railroad station was Bubeneč, and they took us there. I really don't recall whether we walked or they took us in a truck or something. I think we walked to there, yeah. And they put us on a train.

Were people very concerned? Did you sense an atmosphere of fear or what?

Don't forget, you're speaking about a 14, 15-year-old kid, right? And me, specifically, I never took anything very seriously, as I said. I still don't, and what is coming, is coming, you know? If I can do-- if I can change this, I try to change this. If I cannot change this, then I will not break my head with that. And I think I was that way as a child too, and, actually, I looked forward to see my brother. I didn't know where we are going.

I just thought it's just another city. We're going to get some apartment, small apartment or something, and that will be it. But unfortunately, that was not it. So they took us to Theresienstadt. And Theresienstadt, for the first day, we stood in one special big hall which was called [? Schloiska ?] I don't think there's a translation for that for English.

And it's a big room, big hall where nobody was allowed to go out. Nobody was allowed to come in. And where we were

laying down on the floor-- on the wooden floor-- and they were kind of organizing where each one will go to stay. And they took most of our luggage. They stalled, and never gave it to us, you know. Each one got only a couple things.

And then after two days, they just sent us to our [? ubications, ?] you know? Our places where we would stay. Now, fortunately, as I said before, my brother organized for my mother a place to stay in the same building as he had his place, you know? The Board of Elders each had his own room, although small room, and so no bathroom, no toilet-- just a small room. They didn't have to share.

And my mom was in that same building. And she shared a large room together with other mothers of members of the board. So they had in compare with others, I must admit, they had a very, very nice place to stay. I mean, just in compare with the other people. And I was put in a children's home-- youth home-- where I shared a room, a small room with eight other children, and that was it.

Was it hard to be separated from your mother?

No, we were free to move around in Theresienstadt. That was just where I slept. I could go visit my mother and my brother any time I wanted to in Theresienstadt. And inside the city it was open, the movement, only you couldn't go out of the city, you know? And naturally, most people's living quarters were not as good as mine, or my brother's, or my mother's.

They were very, very bad, like, let's say a room like this, there were 25 people sleeping in those high beds, right? And no hygiene facilities, nothing. And so Theresienstadt, I must tell you this, although I am sure everybody who knows something about the Holocaust history is familiar with that, Theresienstadt as such, was not really a concentration camp as we learned later, as we knew like Buchenwald, Dachau, Auschwitz, Blechhammer.

Theresienstadt was really more like a ghetto, and that's what they'd call it. And so although we are living there, we thought we are in the worst place in the world, but later we learned that it was like paradise in Theresienstadt in compare with other concentration camps. And the reason for that was that, actually, Theresienstadt was just a preparation camp-- a gathering camp-- to be for people to be sent further up and to Auschwitz from Theresienstadt. Everybody from Theresienstadt who went out of Theresienstadt, went to Auschwitz, you know? Like, there were some exceptions, but most of the people went to Auschwitz.

So now you're there, what did you do? What was a typical day like?

Oh so in Theresienstadt, all people had some kind of occupation, some kind of work, and as I said, in Theresienstadt, the Germans tried to make it an exemplar place that they can show to the International Red Cross people, and so it was a showcase really for them. And they allowed us to do things, which you couldn't dream about in other camps in Europe.

So, for example, there was theater there in Theresienstadt, which is described in literature. And there was orchestras there, and concerts there, and there was also a large soccer league there. And since there were people in Theresienstadt from all over Europe, not just from Czechoslovakia, right? And within those people, Jews were very good soccer players. And there were people who played at home for their national teams-- I mean, great professionals well-known all over the world.

And I was 15 years old, not even 16. I was the youngest soccer player of the professional level there of all the people. What happened, the teams were divided according to workplaces, although the people who played for the soccer team usually never worked. The workplaces were led by Germans-- by SS men or by German professionals, experts for the certain field of work-- and I played and was supposed to work as an electrician for the team of electricians.

And they had their own building where they had their labs, their laboratories, their workplaces. You know, they were needed, electricians in that whole city. There were, I don't know how many, probably 100 electricians there. And the man who led the whole thing-- the German guy, you know-- took care of the soccer team too. We had the best uniforms. We had the best soccer shoes.

And in Prague, the professional teams couldn't get soccer shoes. So we had the newest one, the best ones because the Germans got them for us, you know? And it was such a game between them-- the SS people and the Germans-- that "my team is better than your team," you know? And so they provided us, so we could really perform like horses.

And they also gave us special rations where every game or so, I got a roll of salami like this long-- half a yard long-- a couple loaves of bread, a square of margarine-- you know, the butter substitute. Other people would have this for a month. So we got supplied by them pretty well.

How did you feel getting more food than others?

I don't think I really broke my heart over that. I knew it happens, but it happened in the normal life too that some people have more than others, right? And being 15 years old, you don't think about it too much, but that was the fact. And so that was the entertainment there and.

What else did you do besides play soccer?

For one time, I was kind of bored and in winter, specifically, so my brother arranged for me to work in the dental laboratory-- I mean, a laboratory where they there were repairing-- what do you call it? Dental.

Dental plates?

Plates, right, dental plates for old people. They came there, broke their plates, they'd bring it in, and we were repairing them. That was the only work that we did. And so, officially, when somebody asked me because we were not allowed to say, what are you doing? I'm a soccer player. That's nonsense, you know, you cannot do that. So you I said I'm a dentist, [LAUGHS] which it wasn't true either, but it sounded better.

And I once in a while went to that laboratory and worked there repairing those dental plates. And that's all I did in Theresienstadt, otherwise, I really didn't do anything in Theresienstadt.

How much contact did you have with your brother?

As I said, I could see him any time I want to. In fact, I went probably went to visit my brother and my mother, as I said they lived in the same garrison, and I went to see them probably every day.

Did your brother talk about what he was doing or any decisions he had to make?

No, no, not at all, not at all, no. I know he was a member of the Aeltestenrat or the Board of Elders, but how and what, no. He never talked about it. And OK, go ahead.

Did you have a 16th birthday there?

I'm just thinking if I had my 16-- yeah, I think I had my 16th birthday in Theresienstadt, right, yeah.

Did you do anything special?

Not really, no. Maybe my mother made me a [? birth ?] cake probably that was a specialty in Theresienstadt. You know you save bread, and then you dip it in coffee substitute, and you put in the margarine that you ration that you got, and mix it up with a little bit sugar from the ration too. You know, we had rations there, pretty bad ones, very small ones, but still a thousand times better than other concentration camps, you know?

What did the 15 and 16-year-old boys talk about?

Soccer, girls, and I still do that.

Did you have any relationship with the girls there?

Oh yeah, yeah, I had some.

What was the social situation like for young teenagers like you?

I mean, I had some friends there. I had some girlfriends, you know? Girlfriends-- 16-year-old boy, right? And I had a group of girls that were excited about my playing in that big very important team, right? They came to see the game. There were games that were played in a yard of garrison. That name was Dresden by the city of Dresden, right? And there was a women's building-- women's garrison.

And then the yard, that was a large place where we played the soccer games. And the building had three floors, and around the yard were like balconies, you know? I don't know how to explain that. From the balconies, you went into the rooms, right?

It was like a courtyard?

Courtyard, no, but in the floors, right?

Yeah.

Yeah, right. And there were people standing there like in a stadium in the stands watching the games. They were 5-6,000 people at the game, yeah. That was that.

Did you take any classes, any schooling?

In Theresienstadt?

Yeah, any?

No.

No, [INAUDIBLE] people who weren't teaching. Were there any classes given?

No, there was no classes, no teaching, no school center in Theresienstadt. The only thing was for, I think, for younger kids-- for the real children kids-- there was a building there. It's the building where now in Theresienstadt is the Theresienstadt Holocaust Museum. That building had little children, and they had some teachers there who taught them. But I don't think.

But there was nothing for the older children?

No, no.

And what about cultural activities? You said you were musical, so did you take part in anything there?

There were concerts there. There was even a coffee shop where there was music played. And once or twice, you had to have tickets to go there, you know? I got the ticket to go to that [INAUDIBLE].

How did you get the tickets?

I think through the electrician guys too. And you went there. You got a cup of coffee-- of substitute coffee, and you're sitting there like in a coffee shop, big shot, and listening to the music. In two hours they kicked you out and some other people get in, [? you know. ?]

This is tape two, side B, and we were talking about Theresienstadt.

Yeah, we were talking about the fun there, right? Yeah, we had there were concerts there. Sometimes there were theaters. Everything on a very, very primitive base, very primitively done, you know? The stages, the paintings, the outfits, and the costumes, and the instruments, everything was very, very primitive, but for us, it was something.

Did you do any singing?

No, not in Theresienstadt, no. I didn't do-- as I said, I didn't really do anything else but date girls and play soccer. That was all I did in Theresienstadt and visited my mother, and my brother. And I also, and I forgot to mention my grandmother was there, my grandfather.

These are your mother's parents?

My mother's parents. And my mother's sister was there. They all wound up in the gas chamber in Auschwitz.

Did they come with you on that same transport?

No, they actually they came later than I did here, I think. I believe so. I'm not really sure now. But they left with the-- oh, actually, my grandfather died in Theresienstadt. He had some prostate problems, and they couldn't operate there, so he died. And my mother's sister, Erika, and my mother's step-mother, actually-- because her mother died long before-- they went to Auschwitz with that transport that came to Auschwitz three months before our transport.

And they were a part of that infamous, famous family camp in Auschwitz, Birkenau. And they were, unfortunately, also in that transport, as I said, three months before us. Therefore, their six months passed three months before our time, and after three months, everybody had the sign on this card in Auschwitz SB6, which meant Sonderbehandlung in sechs Monaten, which means special treatment in six months, which meant gas chamber.

And that whole transport, including Fredy Hirsch, who went there before us, and including lots of relatives and friends, were gassed. And three months later, we were supposed to-- I think we are jumping ahead now.

Yeah, Yeah, let's stay [INAUDIBLE].

Theresienstadt, there's not much more to say except the time when I left for Auschwitz really. That is a great-- I mean, great-- a big sad story.

We were definitely have to be covered by our brother. And all members of the Board of Elders of Theresienstadt were covered-- the whole family was covered whenever they came to Theresienstadt, they would not have to leave. I mean, whole family, only close family-- brother, sister, mother, father, OK? Not grandfather or so.

And we were pretty safe there. I kind of thought that I'm going to spend the rest of the war in Theresienstadt. In that time, we already felt it's kind of getting to go to an end, and we.

The war is ending.

Not end, but we knew that Hitler is not going to win.

Because we had been talking about that before. What did you know about what was happening in other parts of Europe?

In Theresienstadt, specifically, the adults were very well-informed. I think that the Czech-- what do you call it? The guards, the Czech guards who were there, they brought a lot of information into the camp. They also brought a lot of material into the camp. Some of them, I would think as much as I heard-- I was not in touch with them-- but as much as I heard later, they behaved pretty well, the Czech guards, so-called Chetniks.



And they also brought material to Theresienstadt, food and also letters, packages, naturally, all illegal. And they practically risked their own life to doing so, but they did so. Most of them did. There were some who were pigs, but most of them were very nice people I was told.

Did you talk to the German guards?

Not in Theresienstadt, except the ones that had their soccer teams. That came always to the game, naturally, and they had a special place where they were with their guards there, and they have festive uniforms. It was a big day when they played-- their team played, you know? And I am sure I heard, at least, that they were having bets between each other, those German guys-- the SS people-- and so.

As the months went on, did you have any change in your feeling towards seeing Germans in uniforms, army uniforms, SS uniforms?

Yes, as the time went on, my feelings were worse, and worse, and more harsher, and more harsher, and more scary than every day before because I saw what they are capable of doing with the progress of time, not so much in Theresienstadt as later on naturally.

Did you see any physical maltreatment in Theresienstadt?

In Theresienstadt, I must admit I did not see any, although I heard about some. Yeah, there was some physical maltreatment, especially before I came to Theresienstadt. I understand there were some hangings there, some punishments and so. But during the time I was there, I would not know about anything like that.

I heard there was a police there. I knew that. The ghetto [NON-ENGLISH], and the German policed sometimes the camp too inside. And I know if somebody quasi did something he shouldn't have done, they put him in jail. And sometimes you'll hear about big affairs-- something this and this happened-- but, personally, I was not involved in any, and I did not know anybody who would have been involved in those things, but, again, that is because my age so.

So here you think you're being protected because of your brother.

Right.

And then what happens?

What happened is the Edelstein group we're responsible for the transports going to Auschwitz, which we didn't know where it's going in that time, naturally-- going out of Theresienstadt.

Did you have contact with Edelstein?

Me, personally? I saw him a few times with my brother in my brother's place or my brother's office in the garrison where the Board of Elders was lodged and where they had the offices. Yes, I saw him many times, yeah.

What was your impression?

But I did not speak directly to him, not in a lengthy way. Maybe once or twice when I was with my brother, he petted my head and called me famous. Yeah, I think once he said something like I am more famous than he is in Theresienstadt or something like that.

Because of the soccer?

Yeah, right, but I'm more popular than he is because the elders were not very popular people there, although they tried to do their best. And actually, after the war, and all the literature shows that they really were trying to help the people. In fact, so what happened is they were making the administrative work for those transport.

They were told that and that many people has to go-- this and this kind of people have to go-- and they made lists, naturally. And they went-- the transport went out from Theresienstadt, later we learned to Auschwitz, right? What they probably, I think, I believe that Edelstein and the group, they knew what's happening further up there.

Did they come up with names?

Yeah.

That group.

What did your brother say about having to do that?

I don't think I talk about it with him. I just know that's what I want to come to that what they did is they put people who died in Theresienstadt, that they put them on the transport list. So each transport left with about 40, 50, whatever amount people less than it should have to. And the Germans were not in that case, you know, they loaded the trains inside Theresienstadt in the middle of Theresienstadt really. There was a rail there going straight into the city.

And the Germans did not really, strangely enough, have so much control there. So they just loaded the people, and sometimes they count, and sometimes they didn't. They had a list, and they were supposed to check the list. So what are they going to do if they miss somebody? They are not going to unload the whole train to find a person. They probably checked it, you know? There were lower-rank assessment there checking those lists, and so they didn't care that much.

So and that went very nicely, this system, until the-- and that is, again, I'm sorry to say that this is one of the big stories that I wrote-- until one day the commander of the Theresienstadt, I think Seidl was it, found a very strange name on the list of which he knew that the man was a member of a roofing commando-- of a roofing workgroup that roofed the roof of the commendatore in Theresienstadt.

And it was some kind of a very, very unusual name. And he found this name on the transport list, and he knew that men died. So he went after that. And so he found one and two and 10 and 1,500s, and that was a big melee there. And they immediately jailed Edelstein, and he was commanded to his jail for a while. And then they arrested several people of the elders-- not my brother, fortunately.

And the next thing what happened they put us, all the Board, and all Edelstein, and everybody, and the families, they put them in the transport to Auschwitz. And that's how we wound up outside of Theresienstadt which we hoped would never happen. But that was the reason. And so they saved a lot of lives, but they spent their own, specifically, Edelstein. He was shot in Auschwitz, you know?

But the whole family-- his whole family, his children, and his wife, they were all shot in the crematorium right at the time when we were supposed to leave Auschwitz after those six months, which we really did, but they did not. They shot them, and they were also killing most of the members of this group here, you see? They were mostly shot to death. And that was the end of Theresienstadt for me.

Now, what month? When was this?

I want to be very correct and tell you. I went to-- let me see-- 18th of December 1943, I went to Auschwitz from Theresienstadt. Reasons that

Let's talk about that.

All of us did.

Yeah, let's talk about the journey from Theresienstadt.

The journey was, I think, about four or four days or so, five days maybe. I wouldn't know exactly. That journey is one of the first horror situations that I recall. And the horror I was in the cattle cars were loaded with people that we were hardly able to sit down on the floor. There was no seats or anything actually.

And there was one bucket for increments, you know. And there was one little window with bars. And even the bars were waved through with barbed wire, you know? And so very little air, no food whatsoever, no water, nothing during the whole trip. And that was pretty difficult, and also a few people died in every car the day before we get there, right?

Which family members were you with in that car?

I was with my brother and with my mom in the car, yeah.

How was she holding up?

Actually, I think my mother was always a very courageous, a very strong woman, not that I would be a crying baby, but once in a while in that age, I leaned upon my mother, and so she always find a way to make me feel better, and easier, and said don't worry. It will be all right. We'll just get through this, and then we are fine. And that through this, with several through this's, you know, and, but we [INAUDIBLE] she kept her word too. We were fine.

And with your brother in the car also?

Yeah, right.

And did the three of you stay together, close physical proximity?

Until they took us to the B2b camp, we went through the procedure getting the tattoo on the hand, on the arms, you know, which I still naturally have here.

Well, but let's just before that, you're in the journey, were people helping each other? What was the feeling inside the car?

Inside the car, there was nothing much you could help anybody, you know? The only thing is you could pass the buck. And when it was overflowing, you tried to pull it out where there was some crevice in the cart so it wouldn't stink too much in there, and that was it. There was no food, no nothing. There was no other help. There were actually sick people there too, and nobody could help them. Some of them died during the trip, and that was that.

What was it like for you as a 16-year-old boy to see dead bodies and have to stay in the car?

Yeah, as I said, that was my first horror experience. Before that, it was difficult and unusual, and tough, but not really-- I haven't seen people falling and dying, and being hungry, and not having a toilet, and not having water to drink, to wash, or anything. That was the first situation I became familiar with in that time, and that was actually pretty strenuous for a 15, 16-year-old kid, yeah.

Were you allowed out of the car at all?

No, not at all. During the whole trip, the car did never open. Although there were stops, we don't even know where it stopped, you know?

Did you know where you were going?

No, we had no idea where we were going-- no idea. Some people saw, once in a while, a name on a railroad station that we passed through, and they were guessing and saying we're going here, we're going there, but nobody cared really where we're going, as long as they didn't let us out. And then when they let us out, we immediately learned this is no recreational place. This is concentration camp Auschwitz.

Did you know what Auschwitz meant at that point--

No, not at all.

--when you arrived?

But if you took one look, you kind of knew a lot already.

What was your first impressions when the car stopped? What do you first remember when it first stopped?

My first thought was I hope I won't be here too long I hope they will take us somewhere else, although I didn't know what it is, how it is, nothing. [INAUDIBLE] on the ramp there, and there were-- we were one of the transports, one of the few transports who did not go through a selection. You know, the selection, you know normally when a transport came to Auschwitz, Dr. Mengele selected the old and sick, put them in the gas chamber right away, the others put in some kind of a camp or so.

Our transport was the only transport that was not selection. That was the only transport who had their own civilian clothes from Theresienstadt. We did not get striped clothes. They took away all our possessions whatever we took with us from Theresienstadt, but what we had on us, they left us.

So the doors open. What was your first impression?

Oh, they started to beat us with the rifle butts, and yelling, and crying. And we saw sometimes they were throwing out the dead ones from the carts. And that was the first-- how can you describe an impression like this in first time of your life-- 16-year-old life, right? But it was terrible. But, again, my mom said, [? child, ?] look, they just died. They're old. They are sick. That happens. And let's go, right? Don't look.

I'm sure she knew a little bit more than I did. And they, as I said, they took us, they kind of shoveled us a little bit with the rifle butts. Here and there somebody got a hit over his head. And they took us to a shower.

This is everybody in your car?

Pardon?

Everybody in your car stayed together?

No, no, no, no, no, once you go out of the car, there was a bunch, you know? The whole bunch of the transport started to march towards the one building, which we didn't know what it is. It was a shower building. It said shower. And fortunately enough, it was really shower, all right? Later, if I knew, I would never go there. I would rather let him kill me right there instead of going there. But we didn't know better then. And we went, and we really got to shower.

We got our clothes back, and we got the tattoo. And during that process, they beat us over the head with sticks-- the Kapos, you know, and the Germans. And so I knew it's no fun.

What is your tattoo number?

My number is 170955. 1-7-0-9-5-5, you see here? You will see my number-- you will notice my number is a little bit larger than normally other people's number. The reason for that is because I was 15-16 and I still grew, and the number grew with me. Where an adult person, 18, didn't grow anymore, the number stayed the same size, so that's the reason.

How did you feel getting a tattoo?

I felt terrible really. I know to say that is just the understatement. But this was the smallest worry that I had in the time. I

said, all right. Give me a number. Leave me go, OK? Let's see where we are going to live. What are we going to do? That was more important than the number. I said, OK, some statistic they have to have, they put the number on you, all right.

Was it painful?

Not too. It was just kind of sticking, but it was not too bad, no. The thing was we went in a row always, you know, men in one row, one after another. And once in a while they hit somebody when the one in front of him didn't walk too fast. My brother, poor guy, he always went in front of me, and he was a little bit taller than I. And when somebody swung the stick or something, my brother got hit and I didn't. And I think he did it on purpose. He kind of protected me a little bit, you know?

Is his number one away? His number

is one number lower than mine, yes, 54. He was in front of me. And my mother's were different because women were separated in a separate shower room and separate numbers too. And so then they took us, we walked to that camp, which later we found out to be the B2b camp. And also later, we find that that is the only camp where men and women were together in the whole Auschwitz area.

I mean, I'm saying camp assuming that you know what I'm talking about. Auschwitz was one giant big-- I mean, Auschwitz, Birkenau-- one giant big [INAUDIBLE] camp, but inside that camp where small camps divided where always 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 people were lodged in. And there were always camps of two rows of barracks, except, as I mentioned before, I don't think outside-- I think outside the tape. The A camp was only one line of barracks, and that was such a transitional camp where nobody stayed for a long time.

Usually, they just put people there either transport them out or put them in a gas chamber, which was the case in our camp. So our camp became the so-called "family" log or family camp, B2b, where, as I mentioned before, Fredy Hirsch organized. He was such a courageous man. He, being German himself, you know, from Berlin and German Jew who came later to Czechoslovakia hoping he would escape from Germany.

And so he didn't speak too well Czech. He spoke brilliantly German, you know. His whole education was German. And he was such a type, such athletic type of man, and a little bit, I would say, a military man, you know. He also advocated since we still were in Prague and Hagibor, for us to exercise, and to learn discipline, and to be physically fit, and mentally fit. And that was his way of teaching us, you know, which we hated.

But we found out later that it was pretty good for us, and that he was doing the right thing. Because we wanted to play soccer, and he couldn't stand it. He just exercised and so, and scouting, and discipline, and military, and marching. And so anyway, he, in Auschwitz, got the courage to talk back to the Germans, which was unheard of and, I mean, crazy thing to do. But he did it, and he succeeded with that. And he managed to get a special barrack for the kids, for example, from the Germans.

And he managed to get special ration for the children, you know. And all kind of privileges he managed to get from them because he spoke to them as they spoke to him, in a military way. And they very much like that, you know. That impressed the Germans really. And maybe the fact that they knew he is German, and he speaks their language, and behaves in their manner and so.

So you arrive with your mother and your brother to this family camp in Birkenau, B2b.

Right.

And where did you stay? Did you stay with your brother and your mother?

I stayed with my brother, and there were-- the barracks were separated. There were women separated and men separate.

We're still within the family camp at this point.

Yes, yeah, in the family camp. It's family camp, but the sleeping areas-- because I cannot say living quarters. They were not living quarters. They were the old horse-- what do you call it? Stalls and there were those the leveled sleeping places, and there were in one barrack, I think, about 1,500 people. I don't know how many. A lot of people anyway. And it was not comfortable in any case. And so I was with my brother, and my mother was in another barrack.

With the other women, you mean.

With the other women Yeah many barracks of women many barracks of men right and very soon after I arrived we I started to work in that children's barracks that Fredy got for the children. And don't forget, they were there already, that transport of Fredy Hirsch and so-- a week and three months later.

Did he remember you?

Oh, yeah, surely, naturally. All of us knew each other very well, most of us I mean.

What was the age range for the children in the children's barrack?

What? Again?

What was the age range for the children in the children's barrack?

In the children's barrack, as I said, was just a barrack where the children came during the day. They did not sleep there. And I think the allowed age was 16-- up to 16. Anybody over 16 was considered an adult, right? But since Fredy knew me, and since I was just close, over 16 only, he wanted to spare us-- kids of my age-- from the normal adult life there, which was very, very difficult and horrifying really.

And so he let me, like, work in the children's barrack, although the only thing I did was that I was carrying the barrels with the children's soup at lunchtime back and forth from the kitchen. And that's all that I really had to do there, and the rest of the day I was just joining the kids like everybody else. Now, that we were preparing children's theater plays in a very primitive way-- Fredy did that.

And in fact, I remember in that time, I was translating since things were mostly writings and whatever we had, literature, books, whatever the Germans allowed us to have in the children block were German naturally. And we wanted to make a Czech play. I think it was Snow White or something, and I translated the German book into Czech. [LAUGHS] That was probably my first translating job. And we played that little play, very short, and very primitive, you know?

And what were the little children-- the smaller children's-- what was it like for them?

I don't know if they even were aware of the situation. They were so young. Some of them were I think four years old, five years, seven, 10. I don't think they were aware of what's actually happening there. I really couldn't even guess and imagine what their thoughts were. But, as I said, thanks to Fredy, they managed their life in a pretty decent-- not decent-- in a better way than they would have to in a regular camp and as an adult.

Who were the other so-called teachers there, the other adults working with the children?

There were usually teachers from Theresienstadt from the children building and young people of 20, 30 years old or so who had the ability, naturally, to take care of little children, yeah.

Did you know what was happening in the rest of Birkenau? Did you know about crematoriums?

We knew. We learned pretty soon that there are crematoriums, naturally, because you could see the flames flicking out

of the chimneys. The chimneys of the crematorium were just very close by really-- not very far-- and nothing was very far really. And so we could see that. And we heard probably from the first day that there is something like a gas chamber there, but we choose not to believe it really.