

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 3, side A. And we were talking about the family camp in Birkenau, B2b.

What was a daily routine like for you?

I believe, for me-- you mean for the children or for me?

Well, no. Well, for both. For you and then for the children.

For me, it practically was the same routine like the other children, except that I was, as I said before, carrying those barrels with the soup for the kids, of which I did not get any portions because I was considered adult and got my portion in adult barracks-- the lousy watery stuff, you know.

So in that barrack-- in the children's barrack-- for me, the routine was actually the same as for the other children. We were trying to do some singing group, some theater group, some reading groups. Fredy also got some allowance of books-- children's books, fairy tales, and things like that, which usually was in German.

The Germans supplied-- actually supplied, they allowed to take it out of the possessions that we all brought with us. Some books and some things came always in the luggages, which they confiscated. And during the stay there, they're allowed to have those books brought into the camp-- some of them, a few. I know there was--

About how many? Do you know?

Oh, there was a little library there, which we called library. I think there were about 50 books there, or so. And as I said, usually just fairy tales, picture books, and things like that.

Any particular books that you remember?

The only thing, as I said, that I remember, we were trying to do the-- I think it was Snow White or some fairy tale. I really couldn't say exactly. And there was that book. And since I spoke German at that time already, fluently, and Czech, I was the one who translated that from the German into Czech so we could make a little scene, a fairy tale scene.

So did you teach the children too?

No, no, no, I did not teach at all. No, I was just one of the kids there, of the older kids, you know. We were divided into age groups, naturally. And each of the group had its own teacher provided. And so I was in the group of the eldest ones. And the 16-year-olds, or up to 14-, 16-year-olds

About how many were in your group?

Oh, I wouldn't be really able to count. I think, oh, probably, 20, 25, or so in that group. I wouldn't even know exactly how many kids were there in that children's block. Could have been around 200, 300, maybe 400. I really wouldn't know.

This is block 31 of the children's block.

Right. And so I lived the normal life of any other child there. And--

Were there roll calls for the children, for you?

I don't think so. But I had to stay roll call with the adults every morning. And after the roll call, I went to the children's block for work, you know.

Tell me about the roll call the roll calls.

That's something really very hard to describe because every barrack, every block, had to come out of the barrack, stand in front of the barrack, in line, and wait until being counted by the SS men. You know, they had sheets of numbers and names and I don't know what.

And they were trying to figure out by counting the rows of prisoners if by any chance is somebody missing there. And then they had to count the ones that died. And the ones that are in a sick barrack and things like that. Sometimes it took hours. Sometimes it took the whole day if they couldn't find somebody. They couldn't get the number right. And we were standing out there in attention, actually, winter, summer, snow, hot, doesn't matter, rain.

And the clothes-- I think it's not necessary to describe what we wear, what we wore. Just thin prisoners stripe, or either the thin prisoner's clothes or-- actually, in that time, I'm sorry, no, in that time, we had our clothes from the Theresienstadt. But we had only what they left to us, what we had on us-- shirt, jacket, pants. I'm thinking now, I don't think anybody of us had a coat. No, I don't think we had a coat. And so it was really not very good dress.

The shoes usually went already because the ground in a camp was mud. And the mud was there winter, summer, all the time. And you go in that mud, sometimes you lose your shoe there. And sometimes you break your sole and things like that. So the clothes was really very quickly used up, and the shoes too.

And so that's what we had to stand in every morning there, until they figured out if the count is correct. That was so-called Appell. They called it Appell. And when it was done, then I went to the children barrack and stayed there the rest of the day.

What about the sanitary conditions?

There was one barrack in which there were washbasins. Actually, one long metal-- what you call it. Such a--

Trough?

Pardon?

Trough?

Yeah, something like that. And there were a few faucets there, of which some of them were working. But ice cold water, naturally. Not very filtered water. Sometimes the water was coming out brown and black, and you definitely couldn't drink it most of the time.

So the only drinking you could do was the morning so-called coffee they served us-- they let us have-- that came with a big barrel. And each prisoner got one big-- what you call it-- this big spoon full of that watery coffee substitute, which, naturally, I don't have to mention was not even-- had no taste, was terrible. But we drank it because we had no other water to drink, really. Because the water from the faucet was, most of the time, not drinkable at all.

How was your health at this point?

Personally, my health was, compared with others, very good all the time, actually. Until the last day of concentration camp, I was always better on than other prisoners. And I think it's because of my physical upbringing, my sportsmanship, and so I think I was physically much better than most people were.

Did you feel very Jewish by now? By now you couldn't help but feel Jewish because you knew the whole camp is Jewish-- you know, Jews only. And by then, we knew that Hitler is trying to destroy the Jewish race of the world. He wants to get rid of us.

Were you angry that you were Jewish and this was happening to you?

Was I blaming the fact that I was Jewish? No, no, I don't think so-- no, never. I didn't even think of it, why it happened. It was the fact I was Jewish. I had to go through it. That was it. No, I didn't. I was not angry at the fact that I was Jewish. I did not try to blame my parents or somebody that he made me Jewish, no. That was a given fact.

And during the time of concentration camps, you didn't really philosophize in that way at all. You just knew you were in the mud and that's it. You have to try to get out. Why are you in the mud? You didn't waste your time thinking about it.

What did you and the other 16-year-old boys, at that point, talk about?

I think we talk in the barrack-- in the children's barrack, you mean. I think we talked about things that we would talk in Prague about, or in Theresienstadt about. The same thing-- about sports, about soccer, about girls in our age. That's it, yeah.

What else can one-- you can only talk about things that you know, right? You cannot talk about something you don't know, you have never experienced. So we were 16-year-old kids. We knew things that a 16-year-old kid knows. And that's what we talked about. And what we knew was sports and girls.

Did you talk about what you saw surrounding you in Auschwitz-Birkenau?

Again?

Did you talk about what you saw around you?

Yes, naturally, we did. We did talk about it, because you couldn't ignore what you saw, even from far away. Specifically, we talked, surprisingly enough, in a joking matter, we talked about gas chambers. We talked about crematorium. We said, oh, we are going to fly through the chimney anyway, and things like that. We didn't mean it. We just wanted to joke about it in that time.

And we also didn't believe it that much. We thought it's maybe not even true that there's a gas chamber there. Maybe the crematoriums are only because people die, obviously, and they have to burn them. But the amount--

How did you know that they were crematoria?

Oh, that was no secret. Everybody knew that. They were so close you could see them. You could see, sometimes, cars with dead people loaded, going towards the crematorium. And so you knew it's not a bakery, I mean, you know.

Did it upset you to see so many dead people?

We were not too happy about it, obviously. There was a certain point of fear in our souls. And a certain point of hope that we will never get close to it. But we knew about it, in that time already. Specifically, at the end of-- specifically, after being in B2b for a longer time already, a couple of months or so.

So we knew its crematorium. And we just hoped it's not for us. That's for other people, you know. We also knew, or heard about, that there are transports coming and they go straight in the gas chamber. And we just said, oh, that's just the Kapos are making fun of us, they're just teasing us, and they just want to scare us. But inside us, we knew it's true. And so we were just hoping we will never learn the facts about it.

Were there Kapos in the family camp?

Kapos?

In the family camp.

Yes, right, yeah, there was--

Who were they?

I remember only one by name. His name was Fisher. And he was a little hunchback man who, I think there was something about him. He was a hangman or something in some place. But I really don't remember that anymore too well. I think there's some literature about him too, somewhere.

What was his first name?

I wouldn't remember that. I know he was Kapo Fisher. And that's all I remember. But I really don't know too much about him. And there were other couples going through, which names we didn't know. They usually were Polish guys or German prisoners who had some business to come into the camp and out and in and--

So you stayed in within the family camp limits?

Pardon me?

You stayed within the family camp, within B2b.

Right. We never left that camp, that B2b camp. Never left it, no. Until the end, then.

Until the end?

Yeah.

What was your contact with girls your age?

Well, there were girls of my age in the children's barrack, naturally. And--

Did you notice a difference in the way the young women, the young-- the girls reacted to this situation than the boys?

I don't think I noticed any difference. I don't even think there was a difference, really. We were all in one boat. We were all in one same situation, trying to do the same thing just to survive. I believe that's what the girl's feelings were, at least. Detail I wouldn't really know because I'm not a girl.

And they would not tell us in that time, you know, what their feelings are, really. But I think it was just the same difference between boy and girl as it would be in normal life. Physically, I imagine, they must have probably have problems, but we did not. I wouldn't know the difference between girls--

Did you feel very old then? Did you feel older than 16?

I did not feel old. I felt experienced. And so did five-, six-year-old children. I am sure [? they's ?] mind worked in a different way than the mind of a regular child outside in civil life. Because even those five-, six-, seven-year-old knew there's a crematorium nearby. And they also heard about the gas chambers.

And they tried to be adult about it. How would I say? They tried to be heroic about it. They tried to say, that concerns me as well as my father over there. So we were more experienced. We were not older, no.

Did you have any social opportunity to be with a young woman?

Not in-- no, not in B2b, no. And I didn't even care for that, what it is you have in mind, I think. No, we didn't really care for physical contact with women.

Or even just-- what about just talking to a young girl by yourself? Was that something that you had any desire to do?

You see, like in Theresienstadt, each boy had to have a girlfriend, like in civil life. In Auschwitz, I think that was not the case, no. That was not the case. We didn't think in that terms in Auschwitz.

Obviously, the adults were helping the children in the children's barracks.

No, the old.

I meant the teachers.

Only those who were teachers there, yeah.

The teachers. Did you notice how adults-- if the adults were helping each other?

That is a very difficult question. But to be very honest, and not to try to make it better than it was. I think, in a concentration camp everybody was for himself, trying to do the best for himself he can, not caring for the other person, no. I'm sure of that. Although it is said that some camps had groups that helped each other.

I never found any of such groups, and never found any people that I would-- that, systematically, would help each other. So, naturally, there were cases. One person helped another person in some way. But it would be organized or systematic or something, no.

I believe-- and that was actually the credo of everybody in a concentration camp-- you got to do the best for yourself. You are for yourself. Nobody will help you. And if you don't help yourself, you die. And you can't just try to care for somebody else for the price of not caring for yourselves. First of all, you have to care for yourselves, yeah.

Was there any talk of resistance?

Not in Auschwitz, no. Well, there was talk, yes, but not organized, again. Like, when we come further down to the way when I left Auschwitz, I will tell you about a certain quasi-organized way we planned. But no, I don't think there was an organized situation anywhere in Auschwitz.

Now you said Fredy Hirsch's group came three months before yours. So what happened three months after you arrived in Auschwitz?

OK, three months after we were together in B2b, there were told that the first transport-- the first half of B2b, family camp-- is going to go to another camp in Heydebreck. I don't even know if Heydebreck exists. I don't think it does. Heydebreck was supposed to be the place they would be moved to-- that first transport-- for work.

But we soon enough learned that they separated them from our camp. They put them in the A camp, where there's only that one row of barracks. And soon we knew what's going to happen. And that happened.

One day-- one night-- they loaded them on trucks and they disappeared. And we learned that they were gassed, the whole transport was gassed-- or half of our camp-- children, adults, everything. Half were gassed.

And Fredy too, that's another story of Fredy. He was-- he committed suicide. He never got to the gas chamber. He had a friend there who wanted to help him. I don't want to go into details again. That's a part of my writings. And he refused to be helped, to be taken out of the transport, because, he said, if I go, my children have to go to, which was impossible, the children couldn't go.

So he decided he is not going to take the offer to go out of the transport. And he, in some way, somebody helped him, gave him veronal. That's just a poison, you know. And he took that and died. We know that for sure.

You are 16 years old and you hear this news about him and the other people. What-- how did you respond?

We were horrified, obviously. And even the 16-year-old knew already what's going on, naturally. But again, we were not 100% sure that they went to a gas chamber. And, actually, it was our own doing that we were not sure. We just didn't want to be sure.

Although tens of people came into the camp, out and in, those different commanders, and so-- the Kapos. And they told us, the adults. Later, I learned details about that. We were told-- later we learned, not told-- we learned later that this group of people, when they took them to the gas chamber, were singing the Czech national anthem. And the Hatikva. And they were killed. That's it.

And we learned that later, naturally. But during the time when we were there, we didn't know anything on that. Although they were telling us details, we just didn't want to even hear them. Because it would have, obviously-- not would have, it did-- affect our own morality, our own feelings, our own philosophy, everything. We didn't want to get into a worse mental state than we were already anyway. So, therefore, we choose not to believe it. At least, the kids and the people as I was, you know.

And then later, three months after that, those next three months were not very interesting. Very interesting, nothing that-

Did the children's barracks continue without him?

The children's barrack continued under the leadership of-- his name was, I think, Hans [? Brommer. ?] He still lives, also, in Israel, in kibbutz with my brother. And then another one, [? Cep ?] something. I forgot now the name. And they kind of kept the children's barrack as long as it was possible to keep it.

And you kept doing the same thing in the next three months.

Yes, I kept doing the same thing. And then after three months, it was our time to leave, our transport.

Was there a Passover Seder in--

No, nothing like that. Nothing like that in Auschwitz.

In the children's--

No, not that I would know.

Or in the family camp?

Not that I would remember or know of, no. Maybe I didn't pay attention to it. But no, I wouldn't know about it. Maybe there was something, some little group somewhere. But I wouldn't know that. I wouldn't also join that.

So after those three months, there started to be rumors that we are going to leave. And so that was a slight panic. And actually because we knew it's six months, it's our time. But in the same time, we also knew, even before, that Hitler is slowly losing the grip on the war. And that he will need people working in the factories so he can send the German from the factories to the front, as soldiers. And that was something that was going, the rumor, very seriously around.

And also, I think we heard about some group of people leaving Auschwitz. And so, although we didn't see them, but we heard about it. We thought it's a possibility that they really want to send us out again. We wanted to believe that.

So what happened was, one day they said we're going to make transports out of Auschwitz. First, a men's adult transport, men who are capable of working. Which sounded interesting because they really choose only men like of a

working age, between 18 and 40, 50. The younger stayed and older stayed. So we said, that would be really tricky if they send those people to the gas chamber and leave the old and sick and the kids here. Although everything was possible, you know. They knew all kinds of tricks.

Also, at that time-- so they built a transport of man, which, my brother was in that transport. And we saw them going to the next camp there across the railroad. And we saw them because the railroad ramp was by our camp-- like, by any camp, actually. And we saw them embarking the train. So we said, that's fine. I mean, I don't think they ever took anybody by train to the gas chamber. So it was impossible really. And the transport left. My brother left.

Next day, they built a women's transport-- also, again, working-age women. My mother left. And we saw them across the railroad at the woman's camp. And my mother waved at me. And we knew she's fine and she's there. And we saw them already in striped suits. They changed them suits. And we also saw them embarking the train and leaving.

So in the camp was children, old people, sick people. Me too. So then the next day they came and said there is going to be a selection. They need a small group of a hundred or so people to take to a working camp. And they're going to select capable people from that group.

So we all played adult and strong. We had to undress and show our muscles, you know. They really selected-- left, right, left, right. So I was lucky enough. They picked me. And they picked me together with, I think it was about 60 kids around our age, and a couple adults. And they put us on a truck, on a canvas-covered truck.

And I know when they loaded us into the truck-- and now I'm back to that, what I wanted to tell you, the story of organized resistance. And we, kind of-- between us, while the Germans were not listening, we said, if that truck goes to the left, that means we go to gas chamber. Because the gate to out of Auschwitz is on the right.

So if we go to the left, we're going to jump the guard and do what we can to kill as many as we can. And if it's one or two managed to run away through the gates or through the wires, fine. If not, we rather die being shot than go to the gas chamber.

And we were sure we'd do that. Unfortunately, what happened, the Germans-- the guard in the truck, who was sitting on the end of the truck with his gun-- pulled the canvas down, so we couldn't know where we going. And there were puddles in the road there-- what you call it-- holes in the road.

And the truck was trying to go around those holes, because he would be in danger to break a wheel or so. It was so bad, that road there. And so we lost directions. We didn't know were we going right, were we going left. We have no idea where we are, where we going.

And unfortunately, one kid lost his nerves and jumped out and got shot. And in that moment, when we saw the kid is dead and shot because he was full of bullets, in that moment, we saw we are passing the gate out of Auschwitz. So we were out. And we went and came to Blechhammer.

This is tape 3, side B. And you had just related the story about leaving Auschwitz and on the truck. What was it like to leave Auschwitz, once you realized you were going through the gate?

It was a sad and a tragic moment and, for us, a happy moment too. If there are such things like happy moments in concentration camp in that time. But we really saw, thanks to that poor guy who got shot, the guard put the canvas up again-- the rear canvas-- and we could see that we are passing the main gate of Auschwitz, outside.

And they took us on that one truck all the way up to the camp of Blechhammer, which is not very far away from Auschwitz. I would guess maybe 80 miles or so. And there we stayed in Blechhammer. That was a working camp, and only a men's camp. Although there was a woman's camp too, but in a different section. In that section where I was, were just men. And that was--

At this point, when you were leaving Auschwitz, you did not know where your mother was going.

No, we had no idea where my mother or my brother went. We also had no idea where we were going. We just knew that Auschwitz is getting further and further from our view. And that was the happy note of the whole song. And so we-- as I said, that was a work camp. We marched every morning, the whole camp, to a working place of the name Oberschlesische Hydriewerke, which was a giant planned factory producing artificial fuel for the war machines, naturally.

And that factory was bombed very frequently, almost every day. And some of my friends died there because of the bombing. And some of the friends I made from some of the people of the camp died there.

You had been in Auschwitz for six months then.

Yes, right.

So this is now summer of '44?

This is now June or July of '44, right. And so we worked in that factory, actually worked. Our group, the group I was in, was digging ditches for pipe. So for-- what you call it-- just for pipings. All kind of different pipings, you know, digits. And so that's what we did there. And the food there was just slightly better than Auschwitz, again.

Generally, we thought in the beginning that it's better than Auschwitz. We had-- the lodging were better. The barracks were smaller. They had wooden floors. The beds were only in two levels. And very clean, very nice. The barracks had windows, which all in Auschwitz did not exist. There was a washroom there with water flowing, clean water. So we felt like we really have a better place now.

But we worked. And very hard, naturally. And then we learned very soon that every Sunday when there was a off day-- because some Sundays they let us work, too. But some Sundays was off day. And every Sunday of such, there were hangings. They had selected five people. There was a gallow there, in the middle of that counting place and marshalling place. And every Sunday, they found five people to hang. And that's what they did.

And there was a hangman there. I call him Pierre in my writing. He was a Frenchman. He was in the French resistance. And he was caught-- not Jewish. He was in the French resistance. He was caught with the French partisans in some mountain area. And he was a medical doctor, a physician.

The story was, long before we came there, actually, that they were looking for a hangman. I don't know what happened to the old hangman. But they were looking for the hangman. And they tried out several hangmen. And they did such a lousy job that even the German SS couldn't watch that, how bad it was. So finally, they found this guy. And they said, you are a doctor. If you can heal people, you can kill them too. So that's what happened. He became a hangman.

And there was a-- what do you call, where the sick people were-- the--

Infirmary.

Infirmary, right. Infirmary where a Czech doctor was in charge. His name was Hirsch.

Was he Jewish?

I don't think he was Jewish. I'm actually not sure about that. Although the Jewish-- the name would indicate that he was. But in that camp it was difficult to recognize because we all had the same clothes. And we had no the insignias on the chest anymore. And everybody came from somewhere else.

You were wearing a uniform by this time, not your--

Pardon?



You were wearing a uniform?

Yes, right, the striped uniform. And we really didn't know where who was from, and so except those few guys who came with me. And it was a camp collected from all kinds of different other camps, you know-- Jews and non-Jews.

How many young men came with you from--

I think the truck load was about close to 60, something between 50 and 60. And so they were hanging people there. And--

How did they decide who was to be hanged?

They found illegal stuff on them-- so-called illegal. Like, for example, I remember one boy of our group who was not hanged. He was beaten on a bench with a stick. And he was selected because he-- when we came back from work and his-- we had wooden-soled shoes with canvas top. And there were strings in there. You know, the--

Laces?

Laces. But the laces usually got broke very quickly. There was not good material, And we didn't get a new one. So we used whatever we could find. And this boy found a isolated thin red wire in the factory on the ground somewhere, a piece of it, you know. He didn't steal it in any way. He just found it on the ground. And he put it in said laces.

And he came back and they were so red and shiny. So they caught him. And he got 30 hits with a stick, which was very little-- very, very little. People got 50, 100 sticks hits, and lived through it. Unfortunately, something happened with this boy's heart, I think. And he died on the table there.

And then there was-- the time came when the Russians were pushing the front near, you know.

Were you ever beaten in there?

Not systematically, no. I got hit here and there. A punch in the nose, a punch with a stick.

Why?

Oh, for no reasons at all. Just for skipping one step by marching somewhere, or something like that. And we also had one SS man in that camp was a specialist. They punished us too with exercise.

We came back from work and he-- a group he didn't like for some reason. And, unfortunately, I was in that group. And he made us exercise for about five hours at night. All the way through the night, jumping up and down. And all those gymnastic things in the mud.

How did you keep going during that time?

Keep going? Like everybody else, you had to keep going. That's all. I mean, there is no special philosophy, how to stay alive or how to survive. You just did the best at the moment that you thought would be for you to behave like. And that was it. There was no plan. There was no system. It was just to try to survive that particular minute, that particular day. And that's what I did. And what we all did, I think.

Were you thinking of your mother or your brother while you were there?

Oh sure, naturally, you know. Especially in my age, surely I was thinking of my father and my family and everybody. What happened to them, where they are? So I didn't-- except a few, the ones who died in the Auschwitz gas chamber, I did not really know what happened with anybody other than them.

Were you forced to watch the hangings?

Yes, right. That was on the marshalling yard every Sunday. The whole camp had to come stand there like for the counting. And they brought those guys. They usually already separated them in some way in a special jail in the camp. And they brought them already shackled, the chains and everything.

And they put them up there on the bench, and nooses, and just hung them. He read the-- what do you call it-- the decision of the court-- which was, there was no court-- for the German Reich and for behaving in a manner that is not legal in the German Reich. And that's it. And so they hung them. And that French guy, that doctor who was the hangman, he hung them.

And he also had to-- there was a little crematorium there. Very small, probably the size of this room. And I was in Blechhammer three years ago with my wife, just looking for the camp. First of all, it was very difficult to find the camp. And as I was driving to Europe-- I had a car rented and drove.

We went to all those camps. And I went to Auschwitz. And from Auschwitz, I went to Blechhammer. And it was the nearest one. That was my doloroso trip. We went to Auschwitz, to Blechhammer, to Weimar, to Buchenwald-- except Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt-- I went then, when I went to Prague, I went to Theresienstadt. So I saw all those camps.

Anyway, we were driving and it was very late. And I was asking people in Poland how to get to that Blechhammer camp. Nobody even knew what Blechhammer is. And so finally, I found the name of the factory. It's not obviously [INAUDIBLE] is Blachownia.

So finally, they directed us towards that area. And in one moment it was like a fairy tale. My wife-- it was getting dark and we were on the road, not very good road, in the middle of the forest. And then, far away, I saw chimneys of a factory. And I said-- by the formation of those chimneys, I said-- that's the factory. I worked in. And that was it.

But the camp we still couldn't find. And then I stopped. It was almost getting dusk. And we were stopped in the middle, not knowing where to go. And suddenly-- and it's, until today, absolutely unbelievable-- suddenly, in front of our car, a man on a bicycle stood. I don't know how he got there. If he passed us by while we were standing or what. I don't know.

And I said-- partially Polish, partially Czech-- if he knows where the camp is or was where the people worked in the Blachownia. And I said, Blechhammer. And he said, yeah, it's right here. And I turned around, and on a tree, of one of the trees of that forest where we're standing at, was a little rusty metal plate which said on the top, something used to be camp buh-buh-buh nothing. You couldn't read it anymore. It was so rusty, so worn out.

And he said, it's right here. I said, yeah, but it's just a sign. And he said just go through the woods there. There's a little pathway. You go there and you come a couple of hundred yards, you come to that camp. It was dark. I was scared to walk there. I turned-- the car was small. I turned the car around.

And while I was turning the car around, I wanted to say thank you. And the guy was gone. Gone. If I would be there myself, I wouldn't believe it. I thought I made it up. My wife was there. She said, where's this guy. I said, I don't know. He was standing here. I was like, I don't know, if I would be a very religious man, which I'm not, I would say somebody from above directed me. Why, I don't know-- why he wanted to see that I see it again.

I drove the car around and I went into that little wooden part. That part was just about wide enough so I wouldn't scratch the car. No road, really, just broken grass and broken branches and things. And after about 100 meters, I came to our gate-- to a ruin of a gate. Metal and steel and cement, all just fallen about. If I wouldn't know, I would never recognize what it used to be.

But immediately, when I saw those ruins I said, that's it. That's the entrance to the camp. And that was it. And we went in. The fence was not there anymore. But the stands were there for the wire. So we went in there, drove in. There was a nice place there with a little monument on it. So, actually, it was kept by somebody, but nobody knew how to get there.

And why I'm telling you this story-- that little crematorium of the size of this room was still there. And it's still there and I have photographs and films of it. It's still there. That was also not just a crematorium. It was meant for people who die in the camp. Not too big, you know, just a few dead at a time he could burn there. That henchmen-- that hangman, the doctor-- had also a little room there where he lived, where he slept. And he also burned and served the crematorium.

And he also-- there was, in the fence there was a little gate with a reflector with a tower with a watchman on the top. And that doctor, that hangman, was allowed, every time he burned people, to drag it out with a two-wheeler through that little gate. That watchman would open the gate. And he would go out the camp through this gate. And there was a hole dugged out, a big hole there, where he always put the ashes of those dead people into that hole, and went back again. The watchman closed the gate again.

And that's a part of my leading story of the book that has lots of other things in there, like the boy whom I am talking about escaped with the help of this hangman and the doctor because he was supposed to be hanged. But that's complicated. I don't want to go into that. So anyway, those two guys hope this boy to escape.

He escaped and the German didn't notice it, because he was supposed to be hung and dead and burned. And so he escaped. And, in the woods, he was found by a girl who was the daughter of the forest man, or the forester. And he had a shack there in the woods. And they spent time in those woods. They were together. And she took care of him.

And she also was taking care of a little farm, of a pig farm. Which was delivering the pigs to the German army, the food, you know. And some food, some pigs got lost there because those two kids used that within a couple of months. And then they decided to run away because they were after her. And so they decided to run away.

And they jumped a train that was carrying the fuel out of the factory, to the front. And they wanted to jump on the train. And they did that. But, unfortunately, as I said, there were air raids on the factory and also the surrounding area. And while they were jumping the train, there was an air raid. And the air raid hit the train. And the boy was capable and still lucky enough to jump off the train. But the girl exploded with the fuel tank.

But the boy was found and sent to the-- because he was unconscious, naturally. And he was sent to the camp because even German people went to the camp to see the doctor there, because the famous Czech doctor, he was so famous, known to be very good in taking care of people that even civilians-- Germans and SS men-- came to him to take care of their illnesses and problems.

So there were also dead-- or injured, actually-- people, railroad guards from that train. And they loaded all of the unconscious people on a train and quickly took them to the doctor in the camp there, not knowing that this one guy is one of those who was in the camp before and escaped. And he was found out after a while, naturally, and was supposed to be hung again.

But in that time, the Russians were pushing the front very quickly. And before they managed to hang this boy, they liquidated the camp. And that was when the camp went on the so-called march of death-- death march. The March took about 10 days or 11 days, and wound up in Gross-Rosen.

Well, let's talk about that march.

OK.

OK.

The march, I also describe it, is, just quickly, 4,000 people left the camp of Blechhammer. Out of which, about 60 or 70 arrived in Buchenwald, for different reasons. First of all, they started to-- they had not enough guards to watch the march. And the guards had to march too.

So they started to shoot the people for all kind of reasons. You know, you stop, bind your laces or need to go bathroom,

they shot you right away. You step one step behind, they shot you. Or sometimes they just randomly shot. So they let people lay down and they kick them into the side of the road.

And after a while, they were not too many anymore. And there were so few prisoners that the guards could divide in two. And one half of the guards would march with the prisoners, and one half would be taken by truck, by car, to the next station. And then they would switch again. So they made it comfortable for them.

We're talking January, '45, now?

February-- end of January, February, right. February, '45. And so then they march in this way, no food, only once. They got a ship--

When you say "they," you're talking about yourself.

Yes, right. I mean the-- yeah, the group, I mean-- the prisoners. Me too, right. We marched and we got food only once, as I remember. And that was a situation where, close to Prudnik, in Poland and Silesia, where they brought so little food that there was not enough for everybody. And so there was a big group of people who didn't get any food. There was not enough. So they told them, you stay here.

It was winter, freezing, snow like this. In the thin clothes, we slept in the snow. The only thing that we could drink was the snow, the melted snow in the hands, or so. And no food. So finally they brought that bread. It was not enough for everybody. So they said about I don't know how many hundreds of people, stay here. We bring you a new load of bread and we march after them.

Only when we marched away, we heard the shooting very soon afterwards. And then we learned that they shot all of them. And it's-- I think it's historically in the-- there's a book about Blechhammer somewhere. And it describes that situation. I think I have an excerpt here somewhere. So where it says about a Prudnik massacre, too.

Did you stay with any friends on the march? Did you stay with the same people?

Yeah, how did you know?

I didn't.

I have one very good Polish guy who was, in Blechhammer, a provision distributor. In fact, he worked in a kitchen. And he distributed the food over the camp-- the bread and the coffee, the soups and everything. He came to the barracks with the barrel and the bread. And he marched with me.

Was he your age or older?

No, he was much older. He was probably in his 30s, maybe 40s. And he kind of played father to me, protected me all the trip. I wanted to do all kind of things and he kicked me and punched me and dragged me.

What did you want to do? I wanted to rest. I wanted to go into the woods. I wanted to wait for the other bread because I didn't have enough. So he had some bread in his apron that he took from the kitchen with him. And he shared it with me. He said, no way, you cannot stay there. And he dragged me away and he punched me, he kicked me. And then we learned that those people got killed there.

What was his name?

[? Swintig ?] was the name that we called him. But I don't know his last name, really. But [? Swintig, ?] we called him. And so this guy-- we marched all the way up to Gross-Rosen. Do you have to stop? OK. Oh. And in Gross-Rosen. I think we were probably still a little bit around a thousand people arriving in Gross-Rosen. And then a couple days--

About how long did the march take? Do you remember?

I think 11, 12 days, or so. I really wouldn't know, exactly. But--

And the only time you stopped was at night to sleep?

To sleep. Once they let us sleep in a barn. Or twice they let us sleep in some barn, in some farmer's barn with straw and so. And once we got the bread food. Once they brought us some-- I think it was, like, hot soup. But it really wasn't soup. And that was all. During the whole 10 or 11 days, that was the whole food we got. The only thing that saved us, actually, was the snow that we could drink.

And so in Gross-Rosen they fed us there as normally as every other prisoner, actually. And three days later, we got some provisions. And they took us to the railroad station.

So you stayed in Gross-Rosen for three days.

Three days, yeah.

What else did you do there while you--

Nothing. In fact, they locked us in one barrack because they didn't want us to interfere with the regular prisoners, because they didn't want to count us. Because they didn't even know how many we are supposed to be. So they actually locked us in the barrack. And then when we were ready to leave, they let us out. But they gave us the regular prisoner food and so. Because if somebody would interfere with the count of the regular occupants, it would be a mess for the SS. So they did that.

And so we get to the train. And the train from Gross-Rosen went and in day or so, too, and we came at night. I think it was the 13th or 14th of February. And the train stopped in Dresden, out of all the places.

And I think you know what happened. The whole-- the night of they stopped the train there, Dresden was leveled with the ground of the Earth, was erased from the maps. And that was the night. And we were sitting on trains on an open wagon. And out of those thousand or whatever we were, there was only about 100 left. That was it. The last was died from the bombardment.

Oh, the prisoners died from the bombing.

Right, yep. And then after the bombing, there were--

What did the bombing look like to you?

Oh, incredible. I mean when we came there, it was a nice, nice railroad station and railroad yard, with several lines of rails-- guards and rails-- train rails, I mean. And when the bombardment-- in the morning, when we looked, there was no rails. There was just piles of metal, piles of soil. And here parts of wagons, of railroad trains, cars. The only car that was not touched was the car I was on it. But even there, people were hit by falling debris and died from that.

And I was-- when I woke up in the morning, I know I wasn't sleeping, I was just unconscious. Because a railroad wooden-- what you call it--

Trestle?

--trestle hit me. And I woke up in the morning and the trestle was leaning on the sidewall of that wagon. And the other end of the trestle-- you know, they're heavy, big like this-- was implanted and it's in [? Swintig ?] body. And he was dead. And I was just underneath, saved by his body, by the trestle.

And so they took us on a bus, because there was no train. There was nothing. And they somehow guarded us. I don't even know how. They tried to gather all German-- no German-- prisoners, no prisoners from the railroad track area in front of the what used to be the railroad station, was just ruins, just pile of bricks left. And there was like a plaza, a little bit left over.

And they all shifted us over there-- civilians, prisoners, everything. And then they picked us by our clothes, naturally. Prisoners were not too many. And they put us on an old, halfway broken-down bus. And the guy who was [INAUDIBLE] responsible for the transport took us, with a bus, to Buchenwald.