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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 four, side A. And you had been talking about surviving the bombing in Dresden and then continuing on.

Yeah, they put us under the old, broken bus and took us through complicated, partially interesting circumstances. But I don't think we'll go through that. They took us to Buchenwald. And in Buchenwald, they put us into--

How many people are we talking about now?

We're talking not even 100, I believe. I'm really not-- I didn't make any statistic, didn't count them. It was a big bus, but it was loaded. But I don't think it was more than 100 people there.

And your physical condition at this point?

My personal physical condition in that time was naturally much worse than it was to begin with. But I was still pretty good condition, pretty good shape. I haven't lost as much weight as other people did. I was not yet really bone and skin. That I was only two months later, that suddenly I broke down then. But until then I was still capable of marching, capable of moving well. And that was it.

So in Buchenwald, they put us into a Jewish old wooden camp. Buchenwald was brick and cement barracks. And in the middle of the Buchenwald camp was another camp, just fenced off with barbed wire, not electric barbed wire. And in that camp, that was the so-called old camp. There were wooden barracks and there was only Jews there. And that's where I went. That's where I was for the next two months or so.

You're still wearing your striped uniform from before?

Still wearing my striped uniform, right, yeah. And didn't work there at all. They didn't use us for any work. Although outside people in a regular camp, I think they did have work Kommandos. And not us. And then there was a situation before the end. They were trying to liquidate the camp. And they were trying to put all the Jews on the truck and somehow carry them somewhere away.

They did manage a few to take away and shuttered them, as I learned later somewhere outside. But most of that time, it was such a disorganized time already. And some of the people helped us a little bit not to enter those trucks, not to go into those transports that we were supposed to go. So I went on a truck about five times and five times just jumped out of it again. And they were very--

What did they say to you to get you to jump off?

The Germans were so few in the time, the guards. And they were so disorganized, so panicky, because they knew that's the end, right? And they just yelled at me and I ran away. That was it. And they got at me again. And about five times I jumped out of that truck. On the end, I didn't go anywhere. I stayed.

Who yelled at you to get off the truck?

German guards, SS men, you know. But they didn't want to run after me because they needed to watch those who they are still on the trunk-- on the truck. Otherwise everybody would jump away. So that was it. I did not go. And I learned later that most of those people got killed. Because they just wanted to liquidate the camp, which they didn't manage.

And later, the day before we were liberated, I remember an interesting story. There was a little airplane flying over the camp, like-- what you call those-- researching the area for the military. And we put a little SOS sign on the ground of that marshaling yard from rocks and white clouds or whatever we could find. And we remember that the plane was kind of waving his wings that he understands, that he knows the situation.

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And then soon afterwards, I think the same day or maybe the next day, 3:00 afternoon, the American army came into the camp. Yeah, 3:16. I know it because the time is still standing on the clock of the tower of Buchenwald until these days. You know, that was-- I assume that's what the story is.

It was electric clock, powered in the same way as the electric fence was powered. And when the Americans came, the first thing they did was disconnect the power. Therefore, the clock stopped at 3:16. And that's how it is today. When you go to see Buchenwald, it's still stopped at 3:16.

Did you feel liberated when you saw the Americans?

In fact, it continues, again, here in this writing afterwards. Because I spent another month, more than a month in Buchenwald liberated already. Because Buchenwald was liberated April 11, where Prague was liberated May 9. You know. And we went-- before they organized the trips for us to go home was I came home May 19.

But my question was-- when you saw the Americans for the first time.

I will get to it. There was a tank that came into the gate and a Black soldier jumped down from that tank. And you know, we embrace somehow. And then this guy became friends with me. And unfortunately, when he embraced me, I fainted. And I fainted because I really didn't have any strength anymore. And in that moment, I really was bone and skin only and wasted. Used up, really.

So they put me in a makeshift hospital the Americans made right away there. And the doctors took care of me. That was April 11. And I fainted and I woke up in a nice, white bed with doctors and nurses around me.

You're 18 years old now?

And let me get to it. It's hard. And I said-- and they said, you are fine now, you're fine now. And I said, what do you mean I'm fine now? So I fainted a little bit, so? I'm fine, sure I'm fine. They said, yeah, you fainted for five days. I said, what are you talking about, it's 11th of April, no? I said, no, it's the 16th. I said, thank you, that's my birthday. I was 18 exactly on that day. That's the end of it.

And then they took care of me a little more. And I had befriended this man, the Black man. And his name was Sammy. And I never write about that. But just for you, he looked exactly like Sammy Davis. You remember Sammy Davis the singer? Not that I liked him too much, but he really-- when I came to America, I noticed-- I never thought of this man anymore, you know.

But then when I saw him on TV, the first time here, I said, my god, that's him. Only it couldn't be him because it was 20 years later, you know, he would have been an old man. And so then I spent a few more days in Buchenwald because they were not ready to transport me. And then they made a bus and sent me to Prague.

You had mentioned something before about a tree in Buchenwald.

Oh, yeah, you want to hear that. OK, just very briefly I make that. OK. There is a song that I was singing as a soloist in that choir before the transports to the concentration camps in Prague. By the name-- the name of the choir was [? Jubal. ?]

And the director of it was Professor [? Wachtel ?]. And I was singing that solo of the song [GERMAN]. You understand? And I sang it with a very high, almost girlish voice, being a kid, 13, 12 years old or so.

And I came to Buchenwald. Buchenwald, as you know, is laying on a mount of Ettersberg, which is a suburb of Weimar, where Mr.

Goethe?

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Goethe had his home. And Schiller, too. And Mr. Goethe rode a horse up to that park of Ettersberg and sat underneath a oak tree. And while he was writing Faust, which he did for 60 years-- and I always say, if he can write 60 years Faust, why I cannot write this one in 70, right?

And so he relaxed there for relaxation. He wrote this song, [INAUDIBLE], because there was a briar, you know, and roses, briar rose, white roses, and grass, and green, and trees. And he was sitting there under that oak tree, and wrote these words for this song that I sang before.

And when I came to Buchenwald, I found that tree there in the middle of the camp of Buchenwald was the only tree standing. They didn't dare to cut it down. Although it fell because of a storm later. And so that was the tree.

And when you go today to Buchenwald, you will find the clock on the tower standing on 3:16. And you will find the stamp of that tree still standing there in the middle of the Buchenwald area, where now a museum is, with a sign which says this used to be the Goethe's tree.

So you are recuperating in the American hospital after liberation.

Now, as I said, after my birthday, then I was fine. They threw me out. I mean, fine. I could stand on my own feet at least for a while. Not for long, though. Because really, when I came home, even while it was more than a month, when I walked on--

How did you get back from Buchenwald to Prague?

They took us by bus. They took a bus of Czech guys, Czech people, and took us to Prague on May 19.

Was there any other young man like you that went through all of this with you?

Not specifically with me, but I'm sure there's other young men or man.

There was nobody from home that followed along with you during all these years?

Oh, yes, there were. There were a few even boys who were in that group that arrived in-- all the way down to Buchenwald. Unfortunately, I don't really remember those names anymore. I know there was the Mr. Verber was there. In fact, when I was in Buchenwald three years ago, they gave me a list of people who came with that group.

I meant, you know, friends from Prague that-- that's what I meant.

Not really, no. Though all those people who were really from Prague through Theresienstadt, and so I don't think anybody survived this trip, no. I know about one man who was in Blechhammer, or two. They're living in Israel. I can't remember their name now.

Yeah, Walter Bressler, for example. His name is Walter Bressler. He went through this with me. But I think he didn't go to Buchenwald. He just went to Blechhammer with me. But all the way to Buchenwald, nobody that I would really know from Prague, no. I know there were some Czech people there. But nobody of those that I knew in Prague, no. And most of them were older than I was, definitely.

So you're now back, coming to Prague.

Yeah, I came to Prague. And they told me to find somebody of my relatives. And so they said I can stay in a Y for the night if I don't know where to go. And so as long as I want to, there was a YMCA every day. And I really went through YMCA, slept there. Next day, I went, and they told me to go to a building. They called it already Repatriation Office. You know, the Czechs have quickly names for offices, they're like that.

And I went to that building, Repatriation Office, and it was a building which had a courtyard with a wall. And the

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building was kind of an old building, was halfway destroyed. But not because of the war, I think because of the age. And that wall was big, like a football field.

And under the wall were little tickets written of people looking for other people. So they were looking for Mr. So-and-so, who was supposed to be in Theresienstadt or supposed to be in Buchenwald, and so. And his father, his mother, or his daughter is looking for him, please come, too. Because there was no telephone then.

And when I saw that wall, I said, I mean, it's crazy. How can anybody find anyone in here? It's impossible. My father had a peculiar handwriting. He never used anything else but green ink. I have a hand script here-- he was a musician and he wrote music, you know. I have it here, this one [INAUDIBLE]. It's also written in green ink, naturally. He would never use anything else.

And I was looking there, and literally not knowing what to do. And suddenly I look in the corner. There was something green there. I said, my god. So I came to it and it says Harry Tressler, please come to address. Harry, because Harry was the elder one. My father didn't even hope in one [? iota ?] that I would survive.

He heard that some kind of a Tressler arrived in Prague. And he thought, definitely, it's my brother. Because then they knew already what's happening. And he knew children would not be able to survive that.

So I saw that. And I went to the address. That's where my father was. And that's why I lived my next 20 years, in that same apartment. It was a nice apartment in the middle of Prague. And my father, with his wife still, they moved back to Komotau, to the place where their parents used to be. And they had some possessions there, some farms and some buildings. Do you have to close?

And so they moved there and left the apartment to me. So then my mother came. My mother came from Bergen-Belsen. And she came about three months after me, because she worked in the American army kitchen as a manager. And they liked her so much, they didn't want to let her go. I even have here thank you notes from the army, from the American Army, to my mother for her work there. So then she finally came home.

But my brother, never. And we didn't know about him until in fall, late fall, they sent us to some recreation to out of Prague, to some mountain resort place, you know, to get better, get well.

Yeah, before we went, my mother ordered a little plaque. We have a family grave in the cemetery in Prague, you know, where my mother is also buried now. And there, she made a plaque to put on the grave for my brother's name that he died in the Holocaust in a concentration camp.

So we went to this resort place. And a friend of mine who played with me on this soccer team over there. He's right there, the last one, the little guy, who also survived. Who now lives in Norfolk. Who is the main reason why I am in America. He came to Prague during the communist times to visit as an American citizen and arranged for me to escape. Helped me, at least, to escape from Prague. And that's why I'm here.

So he, also, but he is not a very wise person. He's not something that you would say his wisdom is overflowing the barrel. And so he called to this resort and asked for my mother and said, I am here in a sanatorium. And your son is here. Harry is here. He's sick, but he's fine. He's here, too.

Mom said, let's go. Go home. So I, don't be crazy, it's nonsense. You know John. He doesn't know what he's talking about. Who knows whom he met there, some Harry or something. And you would think it's my brother. No. Don't go. Just stay here. He's in a hospital. Anyway, if it's him, don't go.

No, my mother took the train and went to Prague. In the evening, she called the resort, called me through the phone, said yeah, your brother's here. He had tuberculosis, he was very sick. But he was fine. Then the journalistic organization in Prague sent him to Switzerland for healing, you know. And he still was working after the war in the Palestinian office in his journalistic organization.

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And then in '48, he went to Israel, married already with a kid. And straight into Kibbutz HaHotrim, where he lives until these days. He is sick, though, but he's still alive.

And your health? You recuperated?

I recuperated pretty well, pretty easily.

How much did you weigh by the end of the war?

That was what I wanted to come to. When we came and the bus landed in Prague in Wenceslas Square, I wanted to go on the sidewalk. I had to go where a lamppost was to pull myself up to the sidewalk. I couldn't make the step up, I was so weak. And then when I walked, I walked, you know, just step by step, just shoveling my feet forward.

But I felt not too bad. And I recuperated very quickly. Very quickly. And I became, as I said, a sportsman again, and a professional soccer player, everything. Writer. Took some university courses of journalistics and writings.

You were able to go into university right away, even though you would missed all those years of school? Oh yes, right, I had to make a test of knowledge, of high school knowledge. And I went through a course, actually, where I learned about a couple of months all the stuff that I had to know. And that was it, yeah. And then the communists came. And they just-- I don't know if you want to hear that.

And I lived 20 years under communism. I escaped from Czechoslovakia, from communism in Czechoslovakia. And in 1965, escaped, really escaped. And since then I live in America. So I lived under fascistic Hitler regime. I lived under democratic Czechoslovakia before the Hitler regime. I lived through 20 years in a communist regime. And now I live 32 years in a capitalistic regime in America.

Had you considered right after the war-- but you were quite young-- to leave Czechoslovakia?

I was considering it, yes. But I couldn't manage. It was very difficult. In fact, I had such problems, like I was a writer always. And I was writing and publishing here and then. But they always came to me, the communist officials, and said, Mr. Tressler-- Comrade Tressler, actually.

They said, what is your job? What are you working? I said, I'm not working. I'm a writer, I write. I published here, published there. Short stories and things, not about camp. Love stories I wrote, then poetry I wrote. And one time, a few years, I made crossword puzzles. I mean, not solve them, I created them for papers, for magazines. And that's how I made my living.

But they always came and they said, are you a member of the Writers Guild? I said, how can I be a member of the Writers Guild when I'm not in the Communist Party? Because you can't be a member of the Writers Guild if you're not a member of the Communist Party. And so no, no, no, you're not a writer, you have to go to work. And they put me to work somewhere.

And I always worked for a couple months or half a year somewhere. Building some brick walls or working on a railroad, building tunnels and building bridges. For a while only always. And then I disappeared and they forgot about me. And then they again remembered me after a while.

And so I was working in mines. For nine months, I was in a mine. There was a big explosion. I have a blue coal line here on my forehead. And I was supposed to be there for 12 months. And nine months, I went home again. And that was it.

And after the war, they told-- when the communists came, they said, you, such a young guy, you went through all those things, concentration camp. You should join the Communist Party. And I said, because I was in the Holocaust, because I was in a concentration camp, because of those sufferings, I will not join the Communist Party. And that was my answer. Not very wise, but that's what I did.

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Any experiences of antisemitism after the war?

Slight. I must admit, not too heavy ones, really. But the communists were not really very sympathetic towards Jews. They tried to minimize the suffering as much as they could. As well as they tried to minimize everything they didn't like, right?

They were trying to tell the world that Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Soviet Army, which is not true. It was liberated all the way, the whole West part-- the main city of the West, Pilsen, for example, was liberated by the American army. You go there today to personally see all the signs, thank you, American Army.

Yeah, so, they were not sympathetic to the Jews, no. They were not daring to officially do anything against them, but they were not sympathetic, no.

What was it like just to come back to Prague right after the war? You were so different. You left as a child and you came back as a young man.

I was still a child, really. I was still a child. You know, I was--

Even at 18.

--not even three years, really.

But those three years were more than three years.

I left Prague. I was 15 and some half or so. And I came back exactly 18 and one month, right?

So much happened in those three years.

Which is actually a time of childhood, right, for normal people. That's my childhood. Now you ask me, who brought you up? Who brought me up? Concentration camp brought me up. And so the feeling was just be a free person. To have gone through that and now start my own life. And trying not to cry about the past.

And that's my philosophy until these days. There is lots of people who went through similar things that I went through. They spent their whole life, I dare to say sometimes, they even waste the time of their whole life, by crying about the spilled beans, what happened. I don't make it any lighter by not crying over it.

But I lost so much life and so much time during the Holocaust time that I don't want to waste and lose any more. That doesn't mean that I want to forget it. Opposite. I spent my life writing about it, practically, you know. But not to feel sorry for myself. That was my motto and still is.

You said you had, obviously, lost part of your childhood.

Yeah.

Do you feel that you ever got some of that back?

I don't know. I like to think that I'm still a child. I'm still young and still thinking youthfully. And I never lost my childhood. There are such people, they are kids forever. And I think I'm one of those. Yeah.

Are there any sights, or smells, or sounds today that bring back some experiences that you had during the war? That kind of trigger what you--

Oh, I don't think there's passing one day that I would not remember something out of the Holocaust time. As I said, I'm

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writing about it, you know, so I constantly think about it. But I would say in a not negative way, positive, useful way. And naturally, it was not a happy time. And what was the question?

I was going to say, are there any particular--

Oh, yeah.

--sounds, sights. Is there anything that triggers?

I tell you, I have no nightmares. I never had nightmares. Although I did dream once in a while about concentration camp. But not the way that you say, oh, that's a nightmare or so. And I think it's my positive mind.

Even when I was dreaming about the camp, about Auschwitz, I was dreaming that that's just a dream. I will wake up and be at home at my bed. Even in my bad dreams, I try to be positive. And that's what my view is. There are certain times, certain pictures, certain situations that remind me of the Holocaust time. Yes, surely.

This is tape four, side B. And you were saying there are certain pictures or some times that remind you of the Holocaust.

I really don't think there are particular things that would remind me of it. Maybe if you turn your head and you look at my library here, you will see the artist of Theresien, you will see the Buchenwald report, you will see the 2,194 days of World War II. You will see several books of Holocaust literature. Naturally, whenever I look up, it reminds me of those times.

Sometimes-- I am the cook here in this family, my wife doesn't know where the kitchen is. Well, sometimes when I don't do a dish well enough as I want to, I say that tastes like in concentration camp. And I'm trying to enlighten and joke about it. No, there are not particular things that remind me of the camp, really. No.

Sometimes when I watch movies, Schindler's List, for example, naturally, it reminds me situations in which I was myself. Not that I would have liked Schindler's List too much. But yeah, some movies remind me of the situation that I was in myself. Lately, they are not that many movies anymore. After the war, there were so many movies about concentration camps.

And so naturally, whenever I see something like this, it reminds me of the situation that I was in. But not in a kind of crying, sad way. Sometimes, when I talk about a certain situation-- and it's usually mostly the lyrical, the sentimental situation, more like than the situation of suffering, that makes me cry inside. Or sometimes even outside. And that's that, yeah.

Did you ever consider having your number removed?

No. Never, never. No. Never in my life. I wouldn't even think of it.

Why not?

Why yes? I mean, it's a part of what I went through, right? It's like I want to remove what I went through. I don't want to remove it. There are certain people who-- I don't criticize them, but they probably have a reason why they don't want to acknowledge that they are Jewish. Or they don't want to even acknowledge they were in camps.

I have a friend. I have a friend who lives-- I hope he still lives in America. He's older than I am. And he lives somewhere in the Midwest. And I hear, I understand his children do not know that he was Jewish, that he's Jewish, that he was in a camp. They don't know it. He doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't want them to know. He's ashamed of it.

No, that's wrong. He's not ashamed of it, I'm sure. I'm sure he does it because he is afraid that his children would have to go through a situation that he went through. That's probably the reason. But it's a certain fear. And I think, I believe by

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having this kind of fear, that you could succumb to such a situation again all your relatives or your children. You actually acknowledge that you didn't win that fight. OK.

And I think I won that fight. I just don't want to acknowledge that. And I think I will never come to a situation where I would not admit-- or not even not admit it, not be proud of what I went through.

But I understand some people. As I said, I don't want to criticize them. They just are afraid. They don't want to do that. But I feel sorry for them. Because as I said, I feel they didn't win that fight. They kind of let the upper hand to those who wanted to destroy us.

Did your feelings about being Jewish change in any way because of what you went through because you were Jewish?

No. I am Jewish. Many times, we get to the discussion why I'm not going to the synagogue, why I'm not religious. I'm a traditional Jew, not a religious Jew. I know the rabbis don't want to hear that. And I kind of acknowledge that I am maybe wrong saying so. But this is my feeling. And I cannot say anything else if it's not true.

This is the truth. I am a Jew. And I am a traditional Jew. I was born a Jew. And there's nothing I can do about it, even if I wanted to. And I don't want to. And I'm really proud of what I went through. Not that I would have wished not to do that, not to have gone through it.

I wish the times would be so I would become the gynecologist doctor in Usti and never know what Hitler, Nazism, or racism, or Holocaust means. But since that didn't happen, since we did go through those times, to deny them and not to be true to them, as I said, you would lose your fight. I don't want to do that.

You said you're married.

Yeah.

Is your wife a survivor?

No. My wife is not Jewish. She's Evangelic. Yeah.

And did you get married in Czechoslovakia?

Yes. Yeah, we got married in 1953 at the night of Stalin's death.

Well, is there anything else that you would like to add to your remarks?

I just did, I think. I just did, I think. Yeah. No, not really any more. If you have any more questions, I'd be happy to answer them.

Well, thank you very much for doing this interview.

You're very welcome.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Rene Tressler.

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