

My name is Jay Ross and I'm filming my father, Nat Ross, who is an Auschwitz Holocaust survivor. And interviewing Nat Ross is Reverend Bob Ross. Nat, first of all, tell us your name as it was.

My name-- I was born as Nathan Rosenberg, born in a small town in Poland. It's called Pultusk, near Warsaw, roughly about 35 miles away from Warsaw. I come from a large family, from brothers and sisters nine of us, my parents. And my father was a rope maker. He also had his rabbinical credential too. And we all came from a very religious family.

What was your father's name?

My father's name was Jacob and my mother's name was Sarah.

Did they grow up in Poland?

They all grew up in Poland, but in different cities. My mother-- she rest in peace-- she was born in a town that's called Minsk Mazowiecki, near Warsaw. And my father comes from Łódź. It's another large city in Poland, the second largest city.

Originally, your family was from Germany.

And the ancestors come from Germany.

So that's why your name has a Z in it?

Yeah, Rosenberg, right.

Tell me a little bit about your childhood before the war.

Before the war, I used to go to religious school till-- was happen first from the public school. I went to school in the morning till around 1:30 in the afternoon. I used to wear a uniform because all the school kids had to wear uniforms. And coming home, I used to change my uniform into another uniform going to the Hebrew school. We were different dressed up in school, which I studied till around 6-7 o'clock in the evening.

Was this every day?

Almost every day. And who taught at the Hebrew school?

There were rabbis. And they taught us Hebrew, the beginning-- how to read, spell-- and then learning to pray, and learn the Chumash and Gemara too, if you know what Gemara means. Yeah. And that's how I-- that was my education. There was another with Polish and Hebrew.

With-- when you went to school, you went to school with the Polish children?

Yeah. That was a public school, which was mixed. So it wasn't any segregation at that point? There were Jewish schools, of course, Jewish. But there were some segregation, definitely. It was segregation, but mostly was mixed afterwards, yeah. They were mixed.

Were the neighborhoods mixed also that you lived in?

The neighborhood was mixed.

So you lived with Polish people?

Yeah. We-- in my building, there were about four or five families of Jewish faith and about eight or 10 families of

Christian faiths. There was a-- Poland was strictly Catholic.

Right, yeah.

So it was actually mixed.

So the segregation-- we didn't come--

The segregation-- they would rob-- the Christian would rather live with their own kind. But that's how it happened. We were mixed.

Was there animosity?

Against the Jewish people?

Yeah.

Yeah, definitely. They-- of course, that was-- this was-- when a Christian child was born, they were told him everything. If you don't behave, we'll send you to the Jews. Well-- they'll take the blood for you for Passover, which in the Jewish religion, we don't-- we're not supposed to touch any blood. If you eat something goes blood, you have to spit out the food because we are not allowed to. But anyway, that's how they-- the kids were brought up to hate the Jewish people and have a grudge against them.

Were there just slurs, was there violence against the Jews?

Yeah, well there was a lot of riots in-- especially in the small towns. They did-- they were agitating against the Jewish stores, not to buy by Jews.

This was before the Nazis came?

Before the war, yeah, before the war.

It was already started.

Already started, right.

So the Nazis came in and they just built upon that.

Right. And when the Nazis came in, they had no trouble that the Polish collaborated with the Germans against the Jewish people.

How old were you when the Nazis invaded?

When the Nazis invaded, I was roughly by 13 years of age.

Where are you in the order of your family? Are you the youngest?

When the Nazis came in, they killed my parent-- my father.

Right off?

Yeah, right off. And then we-- then my brother-- my older brother, who lived in a different town-- it's called Gostynin-- he heard that my town was thrown out, they threw out all the Jewish people from that town. This was the first town where the Germans threw out the people. You couldn't get even back to the town.

So we outside of the town. And we wandered to Warsaw. Wandered to Warsaw. And my older brother who lived in Gostynin found out that we are in Warsaw, he came, and he picked us up, and he took us in to Gostynin, where he lived. And when we came there, automatically, right away, they were building a ghetto, another one with barbed wire, put every Jew in that space.

Was it in Gostynin?

Gostynin, it's called-- made ghettos. And a short time later, they asked the Jewish leaders, the elders, because they need the Jews to go on forced labor camp in Germany or some other places. And the Jewish leaders, they had to supply Jewish workers. So I was one from the family, the first one from the family to volunteer-- not volunteer, but from the family, I was the first one to go to work in a forced labor camp.

It's called-- in Polish, it used to-- the town was right near the German border, near Schneidemühl. The town was called Chodzież in Polish. But the German gave it the name Kolmar-- Kolmar near Schneidemühl, that means close to Schneidemühl.

Over there, I was in a forced labor camp till 1943. From over there came an order, everybody has to liquidate those-- all forced labor camp, bring them all to Birkenau-Auschwitz. And I was on the transport in 1943 to go to Auschwitz and Birkenau. Over there, they put my number on it.

Is Auschwitz how you got the number?

The number on Auschwitz, that was my identification. I had no papers, no proof of nothing. They knew, this is my identification. They called you by number and only by number, nothing else. You could actually forget about your name because that's the only thing you'll know is your number. And in Auschwitz, I was roughly by three months.

And they-- there were selections, of course. Every day was a selection of who is fit to work, who is not fit-- to go to the gas chamber. And that's how I went through for three months, until they selected me to go to a different camp, near Auschwitz. It's called a Jaworzno.

That camp, they needed worker because it was four coal mines. One coal mine used to be called Dachsgrube. Grube means a mine. And Rudolfgrube is-- Sachsgrube-- anyway, there were three mines. And I was selected to work at night in the coal mine. At the night shift, they used to handcuff all of us, handcuffs all of us, five in a row, the handcuffs five in the row.

To each other?

To each other, five in a row. And the outside, they used to carry the light lifts going to the coal mine. And the shift where we went to the shaft, the shift, they used to unchain us. And that's how we went down to the shaft. And we worked in the coal mine for the night.

I was in Jaworzno working in the coal mine. And then I couldn't take it anymore from the gas. The gases used to kill me. I couldn't take it anymore. So one day, I didn't stay on my Appell. I didn't stay in the column where to go to the coal mine. And I ran away to a different, where we used to build a huge electric power plant in the-- supposed to be the lager's Niederschlesien.

When I run into a different Kommando, go to work, and finally, by luck, I walked out to the Kommando, and I walked outside. Because in the coal mine was unbearable for me to work. The gas would kill me.

And I went-- the whole story which I'm telling you is a short story. I'm not giving you the details on everything, which we-- in the next tape, I'm going to tell you how I went to concentration camp in the cattle trains, which I never mentioned, and how I went through, and everything. This is just a review of the things I went through.

And over there, I worked on the Ausserkommando in that electric power plant. And there were-- one day, they discovered, there's about a group of Czech and Polish prisoners trying to escape. They built a tunnel.

And finally, one-- they discovered that they planning to run away. From the Kommando we came, they asked an Appell. We-- everybody had to come to the Appell. We-- they marched back to the camp, Jaworzno. And we all had to witness how they executed 18 people in one shot, hanged.

One bullet?

They were hanged, yeah. They along benches. Everybody was standing on a bench. And that's how they executed all 18 of them.

And that's teaching a lesson.

And we all had to watch. And the Gestapo was with machine guns all around. They were-- they thought, probably, we'll have an uprising. And they killed 18 of them, hanged up. And they warned us in German language that everybody would think of it to do, this will be the thing.

What did they do?

They tried to escape from the camp. They dug a tunnel into the-- to run into the woods. In the middle of the building of the tunnel-- how they found out, I don't know, but they found out. And all of them were executed. And then it was-- then being in the end of 1944, when the Russian Army start to get closer in, they're trying to liquidate the camps not to fall in into the Russian hands.

And they restarted-- have-- we called it a death march. Anybody who couldn't walk, he fell down, right away, they shot him on the spot in the gutter. And that's how it was. In the middle of walking, at night, they took us in into a German farm for the night because the Gestapo themselves couldn't walk anymore.

And I couldn't walk. I got my-- my legs got inflammation in my legs. I couldn't walk because it was in January of '45, was bitter cold. And I walked barefoot because with the wooden shoes-- I was wearing wooden shoes. I couldn't walk with the shoes in the snow. I walked barefoot.

And in the German-- in that German farm, in the morning, they made an Appell to come out of-- and walk further, the marching. And I knew, if I'm going to go out and march, I'll be killed. I remained in that farm in-- under the hay, stack of hay, buried myself deep in, and lay there for a day and a night. I came-- I woke up in the morning.

Hey, you have to stop it.

Jay. I woke up in the morning. I've seen everybody walked away. And we run into that farm. There was a Polish maid and a guy who worked in the farm. He gave-- there were about 13, 14 of us who remained in the thing. And they gave us to eat and to drink.

And then the Gestapo came in again into the farm. I don't know how they found out. And they took us in into a prisoner of war camp, a British prisoner of war camp. It used to be called the Abyssinian camp-- British of war. Now, well, they took us in.

And then whatever the commander, the German commander didn't want political prisoners to be with the military prisoners in camp. Then Gestapo came. And they told us to get out of it. We went out. And they took us to the frontier line, where the Germans and Russia were fighting, that we should get killed. By a miracle, we ran away. We all ran away. And I ran on the snow. And I stepped on barbed wire. And I start bleeding.

It's recording a minute.

Go-- take a-- tell them off to-- start bleeding, and stop-- Jay? Then barbed wire-- I was bleeding. And I ran into a prisoner of war-- a German camp, where military soldiers were there. And I found a uniform, civilian clothes, and a pair of shoes, a brown and a black shoe, and I got dressed, and I walked out from that camp. Because there were no soldiers over there, they ran away. As I came out from that camp, I saw all of my buddies. A lot of them got killed from the-- where we were hiding out in the barn.

How were they killed? Were they shot?

They were shot to death, yeah. And then I didn't know where to go. I ran-- I went-- I walked back into that military prisoner of war camp. And there was a British doctor, a captain. He took me in, he washed me up, cleaned me up, and he gave me a British uniform. And I hanged around all the time.

Since that time, I was together with the British Army, the prisoners, together as a prisoner of war camp. And then we-- then they closed up the prisoner of war camp. And we had to march further, but as a prisoner of war camp with the British soldiers. And I walked till Braunschweig Hannover.

Over there, they put us in another camp. And the following day, the American Army liberated us. And then from the liberation, they-- the next day, the British came and took it over because this was divided in the Potsdam agreement for the British.

Yeah.

Turn off the lights.

I'm listening to the whole thing. You see, you missed--

Notice that they were Jewish.

They're blonde.

They wouldn't know they were Jewish.

Were they blonde?

Two Polish guys ran to the police station and they gave him up. And they were-- and there was-- they killed them one after the-- one killed, and the other one had to bury, and then they killed the other one.

Had to bury his brother?

My-- the other brother had to bury the-- my brother, and then they killed the other one.

In the same grave, did they bury them?

I guess so.

And who saw the other brother then and if his father saw it?

Polish gave him up. They could have been saved. They were on their way going to Sweden, through Lithuania, Sweden.

And they were-- and they looked Christian? So they were sort of blonde with light eyes?

They never-- nobody would have ever said they were Jewish. I mean, they never looked Jewish at all.

Not too sure what Jewish looks like. I've seen so many people that--

Here.

Can't tell.

This is the one.

Real Polish.

This is the one.

Doesn't look Jewish, come on.

The one on the right.

And a rough kind of side, not like a typical-- you see, the typical Jewish boy in Poland-- you mind if I speak? The typical Jewish boy in Poland--

And this is my sister too, was killed.

--was very different.

What were you saying, Pam?

Was the typical Jewish boy in Poland is that they were brought up in religion and very timid, yeah, where his brothers were different. They were rough guys. They were rough kind of guys. They weren't afraid of anyone.

It's interesting looking at the picture of your grandfather here--

Yeah, right.

--and then looking at the family, it's a big change somewhere.

Oh, unbelievable.

So your father, did he look like this?

No.

My father didn't--

Did he have a beard and everything?

Oh, a bigger beard than this.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

And he let your-- his children look pretty--

They looked like that.

--Gentile.

Yeah. Well, we did-- we didn't have beards and-- and the no spot noses.

More like folk noses.

Nobody could tell. Only those-- those Polish guards, they were the ones who rat--

How did they know? Did they know who this was?

Because they knew. They saw them. They were guards in that camp.

Oh. When you talked about-- you use the word volunteer to go to the labor camp, to your family. How did that occur? Who made-- so I guess they came to the house and said someone in the family has to go Yeah but then how in the family did it work out that you

I wanted to go because I think that was a responsibility for my older brothers to mend the way-- I had a younger brother, a younger sister. I was young myself too. So I figured, I'll be the one who can manage in one effective family. But they kept on-- every week they asked for more people and more people. And that's how they-- I was-- from the beginning, we thought that this is the only one time, and that's it.

Did you know that-- well, did you think that this would be the last time you'd see your family, when you left?

No. Was it--

Did you think this was just temporary, and you'd be back?

Yeah, we will work, and I'll be able to see them. I won't be a free person. But I thought--

But when your father--

I'll have to work and never got paid. And right away on the ground, no freedom of movement.

What was your question now? This I understand. When your father got killed and got away, there were all of 17 Jews in the town, didn't you have suspicion that was going to happen to you people? Or you wouldn't know?

Listen, millions of people didn't know. We are-- everybody afterwards, the same question-- why didn't you run away? Nobody knew. A matter of fact, a lot of Jews were in Russia. They could have been saved. They tried to go back to Germany. And they got killed in concentration camps.

They were lying to these people. It was like--

I guess it's unthinkable to think that something like this could actually happen.

Look, in the 15 century, and--

They were educated Germans, educated. How could they do things like this?

The highest cultivated people in the world. And--

They show--

--did atrocities like this against women and children, taking little children, throw them to the wall to get killed, pull away the child from the mother, throw them to a wall.

They showed on TV something that's unbelievable. They-- after the war, American soldiers grabbed, dragged German women that worked in the camps, and also, German people that collaborated with the Nazis, and took them to see what the dead bodies in the camps-- do you remember what happened? They were passing out. They couldn't take it.

No, we don't know. But we don't know that would happen. You did know what was happening. You had to know. You worked in the camps. They were throwing up. And they couldn't stand it, you see. There were so many dead bodies lying around. It was terrible. They said, no, we never knew what was happening. You never knew? You worked in the camps. You saw this. You were beating the Jewish people

Oh, I know. Yeah.

How come you didn't know what happened?

Yeah, that's the thing. I remember the-- one of the cities that was-- I don't know if it was outside Auschwitz, one of them. And they interviewed one of the German women.

And she said-- which I think was honest-- she said, it wasn't that we didn't know. It was that we didn't want to know. We knew something-- we saw the smoke. We saw the cars going in and no cars coming out with people. And it was just too many people going in all the time for there to be that many people in this camp. And she said, we just didn't want to know. And it's amazing how--

Look, nobody knew this-- they will do this kind of atrocity. We figured, they will take away the property from the Jewish people. They won't-- they'll have to go to work, not to do business. OK, that's what we knew. But to just take and kill people for no reason because of--

You have to be an animal instinct to do this.

Oh, it really is. It's amazing. They keep doing studies on it and they still can't understand it.

And now they had a gathering in Miami two weeks ago. They have an estimate of how many? 70,000, 7,000?

300,000 in the whole world left.

How many?

350,000.

Who left alive.

From the Holocaust?

Yeah, but they're dying fast now. In another 10 years, nobody will be a--

Anybody and anyone, that's what you should think about. It could happen to anyway.

History-- people will deny that it never happened. It couldn't. It couldn't. They made up stories.

It could happen to anyone.

Yeah. Because people don't want to believe that it could happen. And that's why it has-- like the-- every year, we have the Holocaust service, the interfaith service.

Because it happen to Jews then. But where is it written that doesn't happen to a Catholic or a Protestant?



Oh, I know.

This could happen.

But it doesn't really matter. I always love the statement by Mahatma Gandhi when India was going through the turmoil. And his beautiful statement was-- he said, I am a Hindu, I am a Christian, I am a Muslim, I am a Jain. He went on, of course, we're all human beings.

We're not-- we can't-- we have different-- like I am half-German and half-English, as far as I'm told. I've never known anything other than America. I know nothing about my roots. I'm a Christian by birth. And pretty much that's who I am.

But I could have been someone entirely different. I could have been a Black person. I could have been a Jewish person. I could have been Hispanic. And we're all the same. And until the world stops seeing people as a culture, as a race, or something, this stuff's going to still go on.

You see, like watching on HBO the other day, the Aryan nation, who hates everybody-- at least they're pretty consistent. They don't like anybody. They hate Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, and everybody. But the violence that's in their heart-- and they're a growing group.

And a lot of it's just-- I noticed that when I look at these people, they're very uneducated. The other thing is that they've probably never met a non-white. When you have an enemy that you don't have a face to-- like we talk about the Jews, most people that hate the Jews have never met a Jew or don't know any Jew.

Don't know how a Jew looks like, yeah.

They just see the picture of some guy with a long beard.

The beard, yeah, they hate, yeah.

And they-- it's different. And that's all it is. It's just different. If you were a hippie, you look at that, and you sort of admire it because it looks like you. But if you're not--

I have a friend of mine who is dead. He was in the American Navy. And he was in the South. And they're talking about the Jews. And he actually really was blonde.

Oh, he didn't look like the Jews we know.

And they wouldn't believe him. They wouldn't believe him. They think a Jew has horns or so.

Is that Jew what she said? She said, how could that be? You're Jewish?

They were-- you're not Jewish. You have no horns.

Talk about the part where-- how did it happen-- the first day of the war, how did it come about in your small town the first day when you found there's going to be a war-- or you didn't know it was going to be-- the Germans were coming. How did--

They announced in the morning, they announced the morning the Germans attacked. Their border lines--

Was there a suspicion a week or two weeks before?

Yeah, we knew suspicious of a week before. Yeah, they're trying to-- you see, the German wanted-- first of all, they asked for-- to go to a special line, to go to Danzig. So Poland all agreed. And then they asked-- no, they wanted the whole the seashore so Poland would have any enter to the sea.

So it started with Danzig.

Without the sea, Poland where-- is no country. You understand?

But it started then?

I mean, that was the gimmick. Like he went to Czechoslovakia, he want only the Sudetenland, only that part. He didn't mean Sudeten, he meant the whole Czechoslovakia. That's how it happened. The war was planned by him, I mean, World War II. He grabbed-- like a matchstick, he grabbed Belgium, Holland, Denmark. He grabbed all those country like nothing. France, a big country like this, in 14 days, are in.

OK, now, the first day of the war, when the first-- the first day you found out, it was the morning, how did it happen?

The morning--

Were you in school?

--they came out-- no, the radio came out in the morning-- no school. The German attacked Poland.

You didn't go to school that day?

No. And there were soldiers sleeping on the streets. It wasn't organized like in the United States, with beds. They had no room. So they were sleeping in the movies, in the theaters.

Polish soldiers?

Soldiers, yeah.

Polish soldiers.

There were no room for them.

They were going to fight back. They were going to fight.

They were waiting to--

Attack, right. So what happened? Germans came into your town-- just speak up. Germans came into your town?

I don't have to speak up. We were-- this is nothing important.

It is important.

No, that's not. This is-- they have films, history. This is nothing important.

--town that you grew up in, did you take anything with you?

We couldn't carry. How much can you carry?

Did they let you get it back into your house though?

They took away everything. They confiscate everything. The Polish people right away run through the windows. When the Germans came in, Jews get out, right the Polish people came into to steal and grab whatever they could.

And it was right in front of your face.

Because we never-- no one ever came back.

Now, this picture, for example, where did you get this? Because this came from somewhere.

This is a picture of my aunt from Argentina. That's her daughter. That's his daughter.

She had it. She had it there?

She had one.

You didn't carry pictures with you out of Poland?

No, can't-- had nothing. Because I had to run. When we went to the gas chamber, some-- we didn't know if we will get a hot water, cold shower plate. We didn't know if we getting a shower, water, or we get a shower with the gas. So we ran naked, completely naked.

Now, you knew about the gas chambers?

Of course we knew. We couldn't do nothing. We just were very helpless, like flies. No, the smoke, you kidding me?

Yeah. How often did you have to go into the showers?

To the shower, we went every second day.

But you never knew when it was going to happen?

No. And we were chased with dogs to run fast to the shower. And from the shower, chasing the dog. So this used to be a military camp from horses, Polish horses. And they made the concentration camp out of it. And it was clay mud. So running from the shower, we were more dirtier than before because the mud was all over us.

Were there two different sets of showers, one with gas, one with--

No, the same pipe would go.

--the same one? And they just-- outside, they would switch it?

That's right, yeah.

So it was sort of like Russian roulette. You never knew.

Never knew. I just told you, you didn't know if you get a gas or you get water.

What was the response in the shower when water came out?

When the water came out?

Was there a response that people--

We knew we getting a shower, water.

Was there a cheer or just sort of a sigh of relief?

We lived with fears that our life-- when you would give up your life, I mean, living. When you give up living, you have no more desire whether-- whatever you get. You don't know. If a person is in danger, he knows he's going to die, so he gives up. He gives up his living.

So there was really no response at all. It was just--

No.

--you were living almost like a [CROSS TALK]

--we lived like dumb, like deaf/dumb.

No, he doesn't mean that. It's probably something else.

I know. We understand what he said. I mean, we didn't-- we knew our lives meant nothing to them.

They were indifferent, in other words.

When you are in a dangerous spot, you don't care.

Yeah. Did you ever have any relationship with German soldiers? Were there are some that were nice to you?

The Gestapo, no. We were guarded the Gestapo.

That's what you dealt with, was the Gestapo. And they pretty much treated you--

They looked at us more than-- at least you are a dog, you're bad, you love him.

The cattle cars that you would take, what were-- how big were they, would you say, in your area?

The cattle car? The cattle car, how big it is doesn't count how many people they pushed in.

Oh, I know, but even the size of this room?

They pushed in, there was no room to turn around. They plugged in and no air, nothing at all.

Could you see the size of it? Was it as long as this room?

This room, a little bigger.

A little bit bigger, but thinner?

Thinner, yeah.

And it was just as many people as they could stuff into it?

Stuff in.

Where were you when you were in the cattle car? Were you near the door? Or were you in the inside?

Me, I was-- I tell you, I don't know. I can't-- they pushed around and this-- the mind wasn't there.

You couldn't see anything.

No, the mind wasn't there. They were pushed around. After they open the door when we arrived in Auschwitz, they chased us out, and they were standing with their whips, whipping everybody.

How long you were in the car?

In the car, from the forced labor camp? We were a day and a half. It was going slow, slow, and slow.

And that's without stopping, just going for a day and a half?

It stopped and go. But we were locked in, and Gestapo were guarding in outside.

Didn't open.

They didn't open the doors?

No, no.

And there was no way that someone could jump out?

To jump out? The only jump up is when they open the door. A door would be open, maybe a lot of people would commit suicide, jump out, or get killed, or all be alive. No.

Did you get to know-- did you get to be friends with other Jews that were in the concentration camp? Are there any people that you remember especially that you were close to? Or in the forced labor camp or whatever--

From out-- after the war?

No, in the camp.

No, while you were there. Did you have friends there?

Everybody were-- everybody for themselves.

Yeah, but you had friends in the camp, two of them in Rosenberg.

It means in the camp, we fire-- made friends. They all were friends, all we had to be together.

But you didn't really make friends.

Friends? There was no such a friendship, if you socialize. This was no social. I mean-- your mind has to be clear to be friendly. Listen, I'll meet you tomorrow. I'll see you. Let's go together for dinner. I mean, this is a-- this was a different kind of a life. That was some unbelievable.

I know what he's trying to tell you. There ought-- let's say, there was someone in the camp that you maybe felt close to?

Close to?

To talk to or--

No, you can't be close.

Or someone you shared a bunk with?

No, the only thing you would share-- my brother, Moishe, he was sick. He swelled up from hunger. They took him to--

the hell-- they called it a hospital. And I had the extra soup or a piece of bread. And I tried to bring him into the hospital through the window.

Did you get it through?

Yeah, I gave it to him.

So you were there--

In the camp.

--you were there with your brother in the camp?

I came three days before he came. They liquidated all forced labor camps. So in other words, well, they liquidated mine three days before his. Then we wind up meeting in Auschwitz.

So in other words, he left to forced labor camp too.

Yeah.

So your mother was left alone with the two kids.