

Janet Waxman. I'm interviewing Morton Blumenstein from Los Angeles California at the DC Convention Center. And Mr. Blumenstein was saying that he had not spoken much about his Holocaust experiences until he saw the television program Holocaust.

OK.

How did that change it?

How did it change that? After watching the show on television, the movie on television, Holocaust, I tried to talk to people, the friends of mine, American born people, Jewish and non-Jewish people. They would express some opinion about it. But it made me realize how little people really know about. And my explanation is that a normal human mind cannot understand, not absorb what was done during the Nazi Holocaust.

I was 16 years old when the war started, September 1939. Three years later, Poland was conquered. The first experience was when the Germans were rounding up Jewish people. And they were shooting, let's say, every 10 to every 15, just to scare off everybody else.

And we heard of all kinds of stories, horror stories, that were told in the very beginning. Some we believe. Some we don't believe it. We didn't have--

You were how old at that time?

16 years old. We really didn't have ground to believe everything that was said that was going on. For instance, my parents had experience with the German soldiers during World War I. And at that time, supposedly, they were the kindest people, the nicest people. So all of a sudden, this happened. The German soldiers killing and robbing and whatnot. It couldn't fit into normal human minds that one human being can do things like that to others.

Where were you were? Were you in a city or a small town?

In a small town. It was the southwestern part of Poland. It was rather cultural area because economic conditions were better than many other parts of Poland. There were in the area-- the industry were coal mines. People were working. Business was fair and [INAUDIBLE].

Then little by little, we started to experience ourselves all those horrors. Up to 1941, we were in our homes. There were restrictions. Jews weren't supposed to leave the house after 7 o'clock in the evening. You cannot before 7:00 in the morning [INAUDIBLE].

We were taking every day to work. [INAUDIBLE] later time the work was to cover up the trenches that the Polish soldiers were digging before the war or cleaning up the facilities that the Germans soldiers had occupied and so on.

You were doing it? You were 16. So you were taken out of school?

Yes. No, there was no more school. For Jews was no more school. And then in 1940, first orders came to mobilize Jewish youth, Jewish men in central labor camps. And the order was from 18 years or old. I was 17 at the time. My brother was 19. And in October 1940, he was taken to camp. At that time, it was a labor camp, to German. And so were many other.

Of course, my parents when a child is being taken from home and away you don't know where, it was no more easy life for my family. But in the beginning, we had letters. Later on, that stopped.

Then in 1941, we had to leave town and move into a ghetto. It was a restricted area only for Jews. I was working at that time in a factory, a metal factory. And then from the metal factory, I was working at a clothing factory where we were fixing up German soldiers' uniforms. And that went on like that 1942.

Now food was rationed, of course. Wasn't too much of it. But we survived.

In the meantime, we had to wear the armband with the Jewish star. And then it was only Jewish star we had to wear in front of the chest. And the value of a Jewish life was as much as a fly.

One day, a German came to our place where we are living-- you couldn't have called that-- home or apartment or whatever it was. And he searched the premises.

In the ghetto?

In the ghetto. And my mother said to him, we all are human beings. And he said, Jews are like pests. That was the answer. And at that time, nothing happened.

Then I think in was later part of 1942, because we were working for a certain company and they moved the factory to another ghetto, which was Bedzin in Poland, we moved along. And we lived in the ghetto in that city of Bedzin. And we were working also in the same factory-- I mean for the same people, but to work in factory.

The owners of the factory were semi-Germans from Romania. In other words, they were Romanians, but German collaborators. That's why they were privileged people. And they let them have the factory. And that went on till 1943, August '43.

August 1, we heard shots. so we went in a basement, where maybe 40 people hiding in the basement. And it was so fixed up, the entrance to the basement, that if one really didn't know where there is, one couldn't find it. Anyway, we were in that basement from August 1 till August 5th.

Were no sanitary conditions, no food, hardly any water. People were there with babies. [SOBS] There's something I really want to put in. One woman had a baby [INAUDIBLE]. And we could hear the Germans on top of us. And the baby started to cry.

So she covered up the baby's mouth. And the baby suffocated. And when I watched Holocaust, the uprising in Warsaw ghetto, they had a similar scene. If you watched it, you will know. There was-- no, the movie was The Wall with John Hersey. Was a very similar scene.

There was a similar scene in the M.A.S.H. program recently too.

That I'm talking about-- yes, I am talking about now in the show The Wall by John Hersey with the description of the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. And in that movie it's a very similar scene. And it was very hard for me to take it.

Then eventually that August 5, we couldn't stay anymore in that bunker that we were hidden. We walked out. And I went up to the roof. And we were waiting for the Germans to come to take us.

Eventually, they came and asked us, where were you all the time? We called you, and so on. We told them we are sitting on the roof and waiting to be picked up.

So they took us. They shot a few people right away. Made everybody-- they shot a few people. Who wasn't shut, they took us to a certain place where we were sent to Auschwitz. It was my mother, father, my sister. And my brother was in camp already, I mentioned.

My hometown was about 25 miles from Auschwitz. What's the name of it?

The hometown? Bedzin, that was where we were in the ghetto. And from there, we were taking to Auschwitz. Arriving at Auschwitz, men and women were separated. And there was Dr. Mengele. [SOBBING] He with this baton, he was sitting there. They were sending people to right or left. To the right, you went to labor camp in Auschwitz. The other, to

the left, you went to the gas chambers.

My father at the time was 50 years old. He was good looking. And him and I, we were sent to labor camp. My mother and sister, they were sent to the gas chambers.

Now, something that I [SOBBING] never told to anybody, when we were leaving the train in Auschwitz, when we arrived in Auschwitz, there was a baby laying on the floor. The German soldier made my mother pick up the baby, which she did. And when they were in the line in front of Dr. Mengele, my assumption is that my mother and my sister were sent right away to the gas chambers because my sister was only 23 years old. And my mother was about 50 years old. And they were still material for [NON-ENGLISH].

They were still material for labor--

Material for [NON-ENGLISH]. But the way I see it because they had a baby with them, they were sent right over to the gas chambers. In Auschwitz, that was near Auschwitz, like in Birkenau. Birkenau was like a temporary camp from where they were sending people to other places. That's where we were to begin with, in Birkenau.

I was with my father for three months. We weren't assigned any permanent labor camp yet. We went there. Food was like one spoon-- say a quart of soup a day and a little piece of bread. And we were just [NON-ENGLISH] for no reason, just to, as they said, to train us to get used to the conditions.

One episode that was the Jewish new year in 1943, and for Jewish holidays they always had something special. And they figured out that holiday to take us to the showers. It was miserable weather. We had to undress and to run-- who knows how many kilometers-- to the showers.

And we got there. We got our showers. We got a change of clothes. That was first change of clothes after three months. It was August. We got there, beginning about August, September. And that was beginning of October. And we got a change of clothes. We were driven back to the barracks. A lot of people died. And my father and I, we made it to barracks.

Then one month later, I was picked with others. And we were sent from that camp Birkenau to Auschwitz itself. It was just a few kilometers apart. And in Auschwitz, I was assigned to work in a clothing-- it was a repair shop to be exact. What we did we repaired the prisoners uniforms, which was actually lucky for me because I was working under a roof while others had to go out and work in all kind of miserable weather outside.

Every day in the morning, 6 o'clock in the morning, we had to lined up. And they took roll call if everybody is there. And then we were taken to work. We walked to work till about 5:00, 6 o'clock in the evening. Then we came back and we got our soups and so on.

Every few months, Dr. Mengele and his friends made segregations, which means whoever had lost enough weight, couldn't work anymore, looked bad was sent to the gas chambers. Since I was young and my philosophy was always to stay in the back, don't push yourself to nothing, don't volunteer, because at the moment, many times, they come to ask volunteers. And they took them to some kind of working. Never saw those people back.

In January '44, I got sick. I had scarlet fever. Lucky for me, there were, not a regular hospital, but barracks for sick. Lucky for me, I was taken to the barracks.

And next to me was a man laying there. He used to be before the war, the secretary of the Polish Socialist Party, by the name of Cyrankiewicz, who became after the war the prime minister of Poland. He got to like me. He received packages from his wife. He also was a prominent Pole. And the Polacks that work, let's say, in the kitchen or wherever they cooked, stealing food, bring to him. And he would feed me.

There also was that every two weeks the SS would come to the hospital and look through the doors. And whoever had to stay more than another two weeks, or whatever, they send them to the gas chamber. While I was there, they didn't show

up for six weeks. And after I was released and I went back to the same kind of work that I was doing--

You were in the hospital for six weeks?

I was there for six weeks.

And did you say that every two weeks they came back.

Every two weeks, except the time when I was in that hospital, they didn't come.

Just a matter of luck.

Just luck. Then after I was released, three days later, they came. The SS came, looked through all the Jewish sick. And most of them sent to the gas chambers. I remember a friend of mine was on the truck going to the gas chambers. He said to me, I'm going to die.

And that went from mid January in 1945. January 18, the Russians were approaching Auschwitz. So they evacuated us from Auschwitz.

We walked about 35 miles in January, mind you, in that snow and cold and whatnot. And it took us about four or five days till we got to a certain point where they put us on open wagons. So we were transported to Mauthausen. Mauthausen was also a famous concentration camp in Austria.

And they brought us in Mauthausen. They let us in the area. It was between a wall and between a wall of a building. And they left us over there in that place for overnight. Temperature was at the time was like 20 degrees Celsius, which is very very-- And a lot of people died just from the cold.

And I managed after a couple of days to get it-- what happened is when I was working in Auschwitz, we were working fixing, as I mentioned, the prisoners' uniforms. Among other things, we also did this ripping apart clothing from the people that came to Auschwitz.

And in the clothing we found sewn in gold and diamonds, all kinds of things, which we were supposed to turn in right away. And I had hidden a few pieces. Not actually, what I had hidden was dollars. I had 20 American dollars. And I had it with me still when we got to Mauthausen.

And then in Mauthausen, at the point where we were, as I described, between a regular wall and the wall of the building, and people were dying, there was a guard. And whoever-- and the guard were consisted of professional murderers. They were--

Polish? Or Austrian?

German. German. Professional murderers. And they had a green triangle you know because from every-- for whatever reason one was in camp there was a sign, an insignia. And those professional murderers had green triangles that they wore.

So anyway, I went over to them. And I told them I got \$20. You should let me through to the wash barracks, you know, because then we went into the wash barracks where they gave you a shower and they give you a change of clothes. And he says, no, for \$20, he's not going let me-- yeah, he says, yes.

I said, fine, but I got two friends with me. He said, no, you got to wait because there are people who had more money, you see? So first, he let the ones who could offer more.

And then the following day, I went over to them again. Apparently, there were many anymore who had any money with them. And he let me and the two friends through. So we went into the barracks. We got showered. And we got change

of clothes.

And as a matter of fact, those two people are still alive. One lives in Florida. And the other one is in Israel.

And then we spent another day in Mauthausen. They sent us from Mauthausen to another camp, Ebensee, which we called the death camp. Over there, the living conditions were very bad. Working conditions were very bad.

We were working in the mountains, [NON-ENGLISH]. And they were setting up factories in the mountains. And that was the end of January, already beginning of February.

And while we were working, we saw the American planes coming and bombing places, shooting up the trains. And that was food for us. That was a medicine for us.

And the SS was with very, very rough. They treated people like the flies. They shot on sight, killed on sight, murdered and whatnot.

And while working one day, there was a German soldier stationed in the area. And one of the German soldiers came to me. He says, they need somebody to clean their room. I should come.

I went there. And they kept me there. Every day when I came to work, I went to their room. And I cleaned the room. And I shined their shoes. And they gave me a little extra food. And that helped me to survive.

Finally, we knew that either the Russians or the Americans are going to liberate us. We didn't know exactly who. And at the moment I didn't care.

All of a sudden, beginning of May, we heard that Allied forces are coming in fast. And one day, May 6--

What year?

In 1945, American tanks broke through the gate. And we were liberated. A few days-- one day before the liberation, German SS man came and told us we should go into the mountains, one of those holes-- how do you call them?

A bunker.

Pardon me? No, where they had the factories, you know, what was in the mountains. That in the mountains, we should go in there because the Allies are coming. And he wants us to be safe. So we should go in there and hide ourselves, and we will be safe.

And we knew already that they had placed dynamite in there. And nobody went on that particular-- nobody. We said whatever it's going to be is going to be.

Anyway-- [AUDIO OUT] time to go on with all that what they had planned for us. They mobilized in the last few days Austrians, old Austrians, they gave them rifles to guard the camp. And they escaped. The SS escaped. And when the Americans broke through the gate, those Austrians-- they were old people, over 70 or other, they put down the weapons, you know, with nothing left.

A episode, it happened August 15, 1945-- sorry, August 15, 1944, in Auschwitz. While we were working, every day the American planes came to bomb in the area certain places. In that area where we were working was 20 buildings numbered from-- I'm sorry-- were 25 buildings or so, and numbered from 1 to 25.

I was working in number 1 building. And the other buildings were all kind of different factories. And in building number 20, the SS had their quarters.

And in that day, the Americans came. And they bomb building number 1 because the German army had a radio station

in that building. So they bombed that building number one. And they pinpointed the building number 20 where the SS had their headquarters.

We had in the building, after the bombing, we had 53 dead, 120 injured. And I walked out with out a scratch. A friend of mine lost his eyesight. And the Germans for one reason, unexplainable reasons, preserved them. They didn't do away with him. And he survived. He lives in Paterson, New Jersey.

Now after I was liberated May 6, 1945, I was very weak, sick with dysentery. Americans wanted to do something special. They cooked up a big meal. We all lined up. And the stronger one got first to get that meal. The weaker one couldn't make it till it got to me, before me already, they had run out of food.

And that was a blessing for me because a lot of people ate that food. As well as it was meant, they couldn't take it. A lot got sick.

Is this where you register for the Holocaust convention?

A lot of people got sick and died. The next day, the American Red Cross came in.

They died right on the spot? Or--

No, took a few hours.

--took a few weeks?

No, no, it didn't take long. They died fast. You know the system couldn't take it. And the Americans came in and took charge of it. They put up field hospitals. They put us there. And it was thus to help.

Six weeks later, I left Austria. I went back to Poland in hometown. I found out that my brother is alive. And that he is someone-- no, not that. No, at the time, I didn't know anything about my brother.

Anyway, I met some people at home town. And there was absolutely nothing for me to do there. I didn't want to be there.

I went to a city, which used to be Eastern Germany, city of Breslau. I went there. I met some friends. And we started to put together a little life.

And I lived in that city. That was under the Russians. I lived over there pretty good, except one incident. You know I walked once at night over there. And a Russian soldier came over with his rifle. And whatever I had in my pockets, he took. But those things were very common.

And I lived in that city of Breslau-- it was under Poland-- till October 1945. October '45, I decided I want to go over to West Germany and be under either American or English occupation. So with other people we smuggled ourselves out of Poland to East Germany.

Then for each trip-- that was easy because we had the Russian Jewish soldier who put us on a truck. And he drove us over to East Germany. From East Germany, we had to get through to West Germany, which wasn't easy.

The reason is because there was no official border crossing. We had to smuggle ourselves through the border. And we were caught by the Russians.

And they threw us into a basement at the police headquarters for 48 hours before they asked us our name. And then they brought us in front of the big officer over there. And he says to me, where do you want to go? I said, well, I found out I have a relative, my brother is in West Germany. And I want to go to see to my brother.

And he screamed at me, he said, you want to go to the Americans? I said, no, I don't want to go to the Americans. I just want to go and be with my brother. I have nobody else.

So he sent me back. But we didn't go back. We went to another city in East Germany. And finally, we made it through the border to West Germany. In West Germany, I went to a city--

At that time, you didn't know where your brother was, did you?

I still didn't know where he was. And in West Germany, I went to a city, Bergen-Belsen, which used to be a concentration camp. And after the war, there was a big camp after the war, before the Jews were relocated to other parts of the world and so on.

And in that city of Bergen-Belsen I found out that my brother is alive and that he lives in Southern Germany in the city of Stuttgart, which then after a few days, I left Bergen-Belsen and went to Stuttgart where I met my brother. It happened we met exactly five years to the day, to the hour after five years.

And being in Germany at that time, you know, we were supported by the UNRRA and the Jewish Joint, the Jewish committee. And I shouldn't say that, we did a little black market business to support ourselves.

And you were supported by the underground?

UNRRA, United Nations organization, you know? And we had it good. But at no time did I consider staying in Germany. I could have stayed in Germany. We had it good and so on. Then came a chance to go to the United States. We wanted to go to the United States. And in March 1947, we arrived in the United States and lived happily ever after.

I have a wife. We're going to be married now for 35 years. I have to show. My son is 31 and married. I have two grandchildren from him.

We got that 27-year-old daughter. She is married. They have no children yet. They are [INAUDIBLE].

My son has a nice position with a saving loan company. My daughter is an attorney, a very nice husband, a radiologist. No parents can wish themselves anything better or nicer. And I would say fate wanted it that way.

And I'm now 60 years old. No matter what happened to me, tomorrow and 20 years from now, I have no regrets. Life turned out to be nice for me. I'm thankful to the United States for taking me in here, for giving me a chance to put together.

Now to get back about the showing of the Holocaust and realizing how few people really know what went on in Europe during the Holocaust years. And as I said in the beginning, it's no surprise-- the fact is when you cut your finger, you have a pain. Your husband or your wife or your children, they can only feel for you.

And that interview, I probably should have done that 20 years ago, 30 years ago. Get out a few things from my sister that I never talked about. I always knew it is so wrong not to talk about it. Because I believe in psychology, I believe in somebody has something on his chest, he should speak it up and will feel better and so on. But for some reason, I never did it.

As a matter of fact, when my son was like four years old, he noticed my concentration number on my arm. And he would say, Daddy, what's this? And I said, I was in-- that I was in jail. And my wife said to me, are you silly or something? Why don't you tell her? I couldn't come out and tell him the way it really is. And the memories linger on.

Why couldn't you tell him-- now in looking back, what do you think?

Now, of course, in the meantime, there are few things to know, you know, that I never really came out and told him certain things that they should know. And there's a saying that people get used-- no, saying is that memories heal

wounds. But I don't think so. You get used to live with the memories.

Somehow, from my experience, I'm usually-- I would consider myself a calm, collected individual. I don't get excited very fast. I usually size up a situation before I react or whatever. But this thing stays with one. I try to avoid many times to read about it, to watch certain things--

You try avoid it?

To avoid it, to read about it. I know when I read it Anne Frank's memories, he told me about it. I read The Wall. I read other books. But it see, you know, that the longer it is since the war, the words aren't here. There are there.

I am very well aware that normal times and best times, my parents would have been alive [INAUDIBLE]. But the fact that I lost them the way I did, to me, they're only 50 years old. And other family, uncles, aunts, cousins, young people, older people, practically all were wiped out.

I know I had an aunt [INAUDIBLE] and work in a camp by the name of Plaszew, which was maybe 30, 40 miles away from Auschwitz. It's sad. They were shot. They were killed, for what reason? I don't know.

But one didn't really have to have any special reason. It could be they stole a piece of bread. Or they had an extra garment to wear that they weren't supposed to have and so.

It was a common sight to see our friends coming back from work, the people hung. Many times, let's say, one won't have his shoelaces. People will take a piece of wire, used it for shoelaces. That were sabotage, using up the wire that the Germans needed for the war machine. They [INAUDIBLE].

Even at work, many places, usually the foremans, as I mentioned before, they were German professional murderers. And at one moment, they would beat one up, come up with all kinds of unbelievable punishments for practically no reason. The mere fact that only, according to statistics, I think about 250,000 Jews survived the camps out of 6 million tells the story.

And I know there was the gathering in Israel two years ago. I didn't go. I was sorry. At the moment, I used as an excuse, I'm busy. I cannot go. I don't have the time. That lay down, I was sorry I didn't go because there are many times once in a lifetime events. And that was once in a lifetime event. And people should attend no matter what.

This year, this gathering here, I think is a very important thing for many reasons. One is people get together, 20, 12, or whatever the number is. People find each other and whatnot.

Also, we know, in commemoration with the uprising of the-- 40th year uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. And most important is to prove to those people, so-called educated people, college professors that come out with books and articles that the Holocaust didn't exist, that it's just a made up thing, here you got living proof. 10,000, 20,000 people were at it. That's I think the most important point that we are making being here.

And also, through that, people read stories. They hear stories. Maybe somebody will wake up and realize that not only that it actually happened, but that convinced it happened.

When you get your copy of this tape, will you be able to share it with your children?

I'm sure I will.

Have they heard these stories before?

A small percentage of them. And maybe if they hear that, they might be able to discuss it. But through all those years, I couldn't bring myself to sit down with them and to tell it.

My wife would say to me many times, she would say, you are so, so [NON-ENGLISH]. Why don't you come out, tell it to them? So I did. And I know I'm not the only one. But many of us have [INAUDIBLE].

And as I said before, after all this, I'm very thankful being here in the United States. For now it's going to be 36 years. And I picked up the pieces and make for myself a nice life. This itself is proof of the value of the United States. It's not perfect. But I think it's the greatest country that ever existed. And who wants perfection?

I also thankful the United States for supporting Israel. As a Jew, it's very important the country exists when it gets full support possible from everybody. No matter what the president is through the years, and no matter what the policies are, they always supported Israel. And I'm sure they will continue to support Israel.

And as we know, there are still so many people that hate the Jews no matter where they are. And if this will ever really change, I don't know. There were people in the beginning of World War II, they were running away to the Soviet Union to save their lives. Some saved their lives.

When was that?

In the beginning of World War II, people ran away from Hitler's Germany to the Soviet Union to save their lives. And some did. But they're still encountered, you know, quite a bit of antisemitism. There were a lot of people were communists in Poland, Jewish people.

I don't know if you know history that in the beginning of World War II, Germany and the Soviet Union, they divided up Poland between themselves. So a lot of Jews, instead of waiting in Germany for their death, they figured it's better to go over, to run away and go over to the Soviet Union, which they did. Some saved themselves.

But those such staunch communists from before the war, after experiencing life in the Soviet Union, they came back after the war and they were staunchly anti-communist. And people here, they go to demonstrate against the government, which is fine. It's a democratic form of government. And it should be that way. But most of the time, they don't know what they are doing when they go and they're demonstrating against the government.

Because nowhere at the same thing for the same cause that they are demonstrating, they couldn't demonstrate against the Soviet Union or any other Eastern countries or many South American countries and many other countries. They don't realize the value of the democratic form of government here in the United States. And actually, it's not surprising because those people, they don't know any different. It's good they don't know any different.

You said you didn't tell your children many of the stories. Did you teach them any survival skills whether you identified it to them that way or not?

No. Let me say this, what do you mean by survival skills?

I was wondering if one of the reasons you didn't tell them a lot of the stories was that was one of your own survival skills that you were teaching them. That you were teaching them that you've got to continue to look forward and make the best out of the world today.

Yeah, well, my philosophy is I'm a middle of the road man, you know. I'm not too extreme one way or the other. And when my son started to have jobs and so on, always all kinds of problems. The one thing I said to him, never close the door behind you. When you are somewhere on a job or whatever, even if there are difficulties, don't quit. Don't shut the door. You never know how you might need to open that door again.

It's my way of seeing things. And many times that I would say-- that I said to him many things would come back in later years. Say if I would advise him something at his age of 15 or 18. And then when he is 28 or 25 or whatever, he would say to me, you know, Dad, you told me that and that. That time you were right. You know it is normal that say something to a youngster or whatever, at the moment they don't realize it. But later on, they realize that you were right what you said to them.

Well, teaching them survival, would mean to say, well, you might encounter some difficulties with somebody. And in case that comes along, you go ahead, you help yourself in one or such a way and so on. That would mean scaring one. And I don't think one should live in fear.

The saying is that one should see life, set up one's life like you would live forever. Otherwise, you don't undertake anything. Otherwise, you say to yourself, well, what's the use? Going to be dead tomorrow or after tomorrow, whenever. Why go ahead and bother?

Is that one of the things that kept you going?

What kept me going is the hope that I will survive. No matter how bad it was, I never lost the hope that I will survive.

Tough guy.

And at one time, I went with my wife-- I belong to a conservative synagogue. They have what you call a marriage encounter from the conservative movement. So we love the rabbi at the time where we belonged to the synagogue. And he was heading that particular weekend. And we went there.

Among other things, we had to write to each other life story up to then. So I wrote the one sentence, despite the ones who wanted to do away with me, I survived. And that's about covers it, you know, that never lost hope, not in the darkest moment.