

We're interviewing Max Eisen, Max Tibor Eisen, at the Holocaust Convention on April 12. Would you please begin by telling me where and when you were born?

I was born in Moldova, Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1929.

Do you have any recollections of the house that you lived in as a child?

Yes. It was a fairly big house. Three families lived in the house, my parents, my two brothers, young sister, my grandfather, grandmother, and my uncle and aunt. It's like-- usually, that's the way the European families-- they lived together.

And what did your father do?

My father was in the-- he had a small distillery, and he was selling spirits. My grandfather and my uncle were in the lumber business and had a lumber yard.

Is this your maternal grandfather or your paternal grandfather?

My paternal grandfather.

OK. Do you have-- would you please tell us the name of your siblings-- the names of your siblings?

My younger brother's name was Eugene. The other one was Moishe, and the little girl's name was Judith.

OK. Do you-- was your house an observant household? Were you Orthodox?

Our house was a very Orthodox house like most of the people in the city.

Can you tell me something about the holidays that you remember?

Yes. As a kid, we were looking forward to different holidays. It was a tradition that was really ingrained in the families, and every holiday had its certain excitement. We went-- went to shul. We used to walk about 2 miles to shul. And as kids, we went to cheder, and we had a lot of fun together. And the holidays were very exciting for us.

What about Passover? Did you have more relatives come in for Passover?

Well, Passover usually-- we had just the immediate family. It wasn't-- it was mainly the immediate family that had Passover together, like my grandparents, my uncle and aunt, and ourselves.

OK. Will you tell us about how you were arrested and taken into the concentration?

OK. Can I give you a little history just prior?

Oh, please.

As I mentioned, I was born in Czechoslovakia. In 1939, a part of Czechoslovakia was partitioned off, and it became Hungary. And we started to go to Hungarian schools. My mother tongue was Hungarian because the people in that area all spoke Hungarian.

But this was the first time when we really started to feel antisemitism come in. Our teachers were Hungarians. They were very antisemitic. I particularly remember the police with their big rooster feathers on their heads. We are very frightened of these policemen. Gradually, they brought in the Jewish laws where Jews could not sell spirits or tobacco. My father's license was taken away. His business was taken away from him.

And plus other laws-- Jews couldn't employ Gentiles, and I believe in 1940, Jewish males had to go to forced labor camps. They were called up in certain age groups. And my father and my uncle, plus many of the adult males, were taken away to forced labor camps, to different parts of Hungary plus to Poland, I believe, to dig trenches for the Hungarian army.

At that time, in 1942, when my father and uncle were away in occupied part of Yugoslavia in a forced labor camp, we were picked up by the Hungarians. My mother, and my two brothers, and my aunts, and my grandparents were left behind. And they took us on a transport. They were going to take us to Kamenets-Podolsk.

We have gone through-- on a train right up to the Carpathian Mountains, where we stayed in a lumber mill for about two weeks prior to our transport to Poland. However, we were very fortunate, and apparently, this last transport was not allowed out of Hungary. And we were fortunate enough to come back home again. This was in 1942.

And things sort of went back to normal, '42 and '43, although my father was away in forced labor camps all this time. In 1944, just after the Second Seder night, that is, the next morning, about 6 o'clock in the morning there was the-- I believe it's called called a town crier, who had a drum before there was an important announcement made.

And this happened right in front of our house. We woke up. We were startled to hear this announcement in the morning, and the announcement was that, as of that moment, no Jews are allowed to leave their homes, and we were supposed to stay in our home and await further instructions.

Yes. Prior to this, the previous day, we have already seen some of our neighbors being taken away by the police to a gathering point in our town, which was the schoolhouse, and about 6 o'clock, the police arrived in our home. And they told us to take a little bundle, and leave everything else, and to get ready to come with them.

And everyone took a little bag of some clothes and some food, and we were hustled off to the schoolyard where the rest of the Jews were collected in our little town. I believe we spent about a day there.

The next day, we were put on transports and transported to a city called Kassa, which was the provincial capital of the province, and we were let out to live with some other Jews in the city. This lasted for about a week to 10 days, where again they picked us up, most of the Jews from Kassa as well, and they collected us in a big brickyard.

We lived in these killings, other places that were available, and I believe the people that were collected there from the whole province could have probably numbered about 7,000 to 8,000 perhaps. I remember-- I believe we were there for about two to three weeks, and the hardship was great.

It was a very rainy time of the year. Shelter was very bad. Kids, babies were suffering. And what I remember mainly is that every day there was an SS officer that used to come there and condition us, telling us that we're going to go to Poland, and we'll all be working together on farms, and not to worry about anything, to take whatever we can with us.

That's sort of-- I understand now that this was a real conditioning that we really wanted to believe that these things are going to-- that's the way it's going to happen. And we started to see the transports leave.

My family-- I believe we left with the last transports from Kassa. We were put on these boxcars, and that was-- the feelings that I had were-- I was kind of desperate. I was afraid. There were too many people packed in these boxcars, and the train left. And we were taken over at the next stop by the German SS guards, and this is when the doors were locked. And everybody was kind of desperate that-- we could feel that things have really changed, that we are leaving this part of Hungary, and we're going into the unknown.

I believe the train ride lasted for about three days perhaps. The doors were not open all during this time. There was no drinking water. There were no facilities. The hardship was absolutely unbelievable.

After three or four days, we arrived in a place. When the doors were open-- this was at night that we arrived. The

boxcars were open, and I remember seeing an awful lot of lights on fences, and dogs barking, German soldiers with dogs, and a lot of type of people with striped uniforms which we couldn't figure out who these people were, and the panic with the German soldiers telling everybody to get out of the boxcars fast, fast.

I remember my uncle was trying to grab a suitcase, and a German soldier hit him with a gun, and he told him, just leave the suitcase behind. You're going to get these suitcases the next day. And the next thing I remember, we were lined up into columns. There was a-- there were a group of officers. I remember my mother holding the baby in her arms, my two little brothers, my aunts, and my grandmother, and my grandfather.

And I was left with my father and my uncle, and we didn't realize what-- at least I didn't realize-- I was, I guess, 14 years old at that time. And when I came in front of this officer, he looked at me, and for some reason I had to-- I stretched myself out. I didn't know why I did this, but I was told to go to one side with my father and my uncle.

And at that time, it was the last time I saw my mother, and my brothers and sisters, and my grandmother, and my aunt. And we were marched off. This was Birkenau. As we were marching, we saw some flames and pits, and somebody in our group was saying that he thinks there are some people jumping in the fire.

We couldn't believe this. We could smell-- there was a terrible stench. We didn't know what this was. We were taken to a barrack, and we were told to give up watches, rings, and any valuables, documents, wallets, money. All these things were taken away from us, and they told us to undress and take off all our clothes.

From there, the only thing we were left with was our shoes. We were taken to another barrack where our hair was cut off, and from there we went to a shower, to the showers. And I remember my father telling me to take care of my shoes because right there there were some of these inmates that were running the-- helping the Germans run the place. They were trying to steal good boots.

When we were finished with the showers, we were herded out. We went inside the camp in Birkenau, and we were-- I believe we were sitting outside, naked, for about two days without any uniforms. They haven't given us any uniforms at that time. The only thing we had was our shoes.

And I remember being very tired, very thirsty. There was no water to drink. It was all swamp area. And at that time, then-- about two days-- a day later, when we were sitting there in Birkenau, I remember seeing the first carts with bodies being wheeled by to the crematorium, and these old timers who were there-- they soon told us what was going on there.

About two or three days after, we were given our uniforms, and we were given our tattooed numbers. And we sort of felt that once we had our tattoos that they're going to let us live for a while.

They had asked for a volunteer-- or at first, they have asked for people-- for different tradesmen. My father told-- my father and my uncle-- they talked about it, and they said if they're going to ask for farmers, we should say that we are farmers because he thought that perhaps, being in that type of detail, we would always have a chance to get a hold of some food.

Well, there was a detail like that. It was called [NON-ENGLISH] kommando, and we were taken in, the three of us. And we were marched off to Auschwitz, which was, I believe, about 6 to 8 kilometers from Birkenau. And by the way, my number was A9892. My father was 93, my uncle was 94.

We marched off to Auschwitz, which was-- the camp was brick buildings, I believe about three stories high, and we were given bunks in a room. And the next day, we went out on this work detail. I believe there are about 200 people in this group. It was called the [NON-ENGLISH] kommando.

As we left the camp gates, of course every morning, going out of the camp and coming in, there was a orchestra playing. As we left the gates, the guards picked us up on each side and took us out to the work detail. However, to our surprise, this work detail was not-- we really haven't seen any food where we were working.

What we were doing mainly was draining swamps, and we had to work under terrible conditions. We had to pick up a basket of lime, which was leaking from water, and we had to pick this lime with our hands and spread it on the field. And this lime was eating away our skin and the meat, and I remember my shoulder was absolutely raw from the basket that I had to carry.

And I remember our clothes and our bodies were all white. We couldn't get washed up. We looked like a bunch of walking zombies. However, this detail ended after a while, and we were taken to some other jobs. This was walking through Auschwitz, from Auschwitz, out to the working detail every day perhaps 10 to 15 kilometers.

This started-- I guess this was from May until about August. My father-- during this time, my father suggested that we try to split up because it was very difficult for him to see if they were beating me, and it was very difficult for me to see if they're beating him. So he thought it would be best if we split up into different groups.

And for some reason the German guards, once they found out that there was a father and a son, they even-- they were more-- they were trying to pick on you. They knew that this was-- so you didn't actually-- even though you had a father with you, you didn't want to know him while they were on this working detail. So they were working in a different group.

In September, I was working on another job. We were cutting down trees, and the stumps had to be dug up to level the ground. They were going to use this for farmland. And naturally, we were pretty weak, and when we didn't have to work, we tried not to work. So to sabotaged, so to speak.

And as we-- as I was standing by there, sort of daydreaming, I wasn't too careful, and I didn't see the German guard coming up behind me. He caught me not working, and I was hit on the head with a gun. And the only thing I realized-- all of a sudden, I felt like there was something hot coming down my neck. And I put my hands there, and it was all full of blood.

And I started to work, and this wound just kept bleeding. And finally, I just-- I lost too much blood, and the kommandant who-- his name I still remember. He was an SS officer, Kuntz. He told me to lay down in the ditch, and he gave me the sign which they had with their fingers like they're going up in smoke. This was a signal that everybody knew that you're going to go to the gas.

And by the evening when the detail had to go back to work, I couldn't walk anymore, and four people had to drag me back to camp. And every time when our detail used to come back, my father and my uncle were waiting for me outside the gates. Anyhow, I was taken to the hospital, and there was an operating room there.

And they cleaned up the wound when I was put into the hospital. And there was a-- every week, there was a selection in the hospital. Anybody that was useless, that was-- they would have no more use for-- they were just taken out and taken to Birkenau, to the gas chambers.

And I was taken out by a French doctor who was working in the operating room. He told me that they need somebody in the operating room to clean the floors and sterilize the dishes, and I was very fortunate that I was picked for this position. And I worked in the hospital from about September until January 1945, where we were operating on prisoners who were badly beaten or emergency operations, appendix and such.

And until January, about January the 15th-- am I going too fast on this?

No.

Is there any more details--

No, please keep on talking.

Well, while this was happening, towards-- I have to backtrack here for a minute. In October, there was a selection, and

the selections used to be in Auschwitz in the middle of the night. And they used to take people block by block.

And as I said my father and my uncle were in a different block, and I was in a different block. So I couldn't find out until next morning whether they were selected or not. The next morning, when I went to look for my father and my uncle, they were not in their room, and I knew right away what happened.

They were taken to this quarantine block where the people that were going to be taken to Birkenau stayed for about a day, and so that's where they were. And they stayed there for about a day and a half, and my father and my uncle knew what was going to happen to them. And I certainly knew, and my father told me-- we said goodbye.

And I remember that he gave me a small prayer book that he happened to find somewhere in the camp, and I remember he told me to never forget to be a good Jew. And that was the last I saw of him, and this was September 1944.

Prior to September, probably starting about July, I remember the American planes coming, Superfortress. They were bombing every day at 12 o'clock. They were coming from Krakow and coming to Auschwitz, where they were bombing the synthetic rubber factories at Buna, IG Farben.

And we were waiting for them every day. We were happy to see them, but we couldn't figure out why they would have never dropped any bombs on the crematoriums because their bombing was absolutely accurate. They never dropped the bomb on the camp itself. The bombs always used to fall on the factories outside.

This went on until about late October, I believe. By that time, October or November-- when they were given orders in November, I believe-- all the records that the Germans were keeping of all the prisoners in Auschwitz-- they started to burn all these records in the lager.

And we figured-- we knew that things-- the Russians were not far away. But at the same time, we knew that we are not going to leave this place. They're not going to leave us out of here alive. And we found out that they gave orders to blow up all the crematoriums in Birkenau.

Prior to that, I know they were really working feverishly to liquidate the people that came from Theresienstadt. And I remember that all the Gypsies were put into the crematorium just prior to the crematoriums being blown up.

December--

December, we knew that things were really approaching the end and certainly in January '45. I believe about January the 5th the first transport was leaving Auschwitz. We didn't know where they were going.

And the second transport left, and I remember, prior to my leaving-- I believe I left about the 22nd or the 25th of January-- they brought in all the satellite camps from around Auschwitz. They were brought in to Auschwitz itself, and I have met several of my boy friends from my own hometown that were absolutely helpless. They just couldn't walk anymore.

And I remember begging them to please come with me on this transport because the Germans wouldn't leave-- they would blow up the camp before they move out. And we could practically hear the Russian artillery. I don't think they were any more than about 10 miles away when I left, January the 25th.

We went on this march. I don't know how many people there were. I remember it was a very long line with German guards on both sides. And we were five people abreast. We had to hook our arms under to each other. Anybody that couldn't walk, that fell by the wayside, the German guards shot him.

And I guess we were walking for about three or four days. I remember a name of the town in-- this was in Oberschlesia. It was called [NON-ENGLISH], where we were packed on open boxcars, and we were taken through Czechoslovakia. I remember the train stopped in Moroska-Ostrawa on the railroad station.

And there was a overhead bridge where people walk on top of the railroad tracks. People were bringing baskets of bread. They were trying to throw the bread to us in the boxcars, and I remember the Germans shooting at these people for throwing bread to us.

We came through Czechoslovakia, and we headed to Austria. And we stopped on the Danube. There was this big bridge on the Danube, and this was Mauthausen.

It was a cold day. I remember marching up to Mauthausen. We were marching beside these stone quarries, and we saw these prisoners hanging on those rocks. And it was very frightening because I couldn't see-- I could see that these conditions were going to be really bad if we have to work in these stone quarries. It was absolutely frightening to see those people hanging on those stones.

Anyway, we came into Mauthausen, and we went through the usual ceremony. They called it delousing. And-- where they took away all your clothes and you started again from scratch. They gave you a shower, and you started again with a pair of boots and nothing else.

Again, we were packed into a room like sardines for about two days, and then we were taken out of this room, given these striped jackets and pants. And we were put on another transport, and I wound up in a camp called Melk, M-E-L-K, which is not far from Mauthausen. It was right near the Danube.

And this was an old military barracks from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy from the Hussars. I remember stables, and the conditions were really bad. And here we worked-- we went every day to work by rail, by train to these shafts that they were building in the mountain where they were building airplane parts.

And we were working with air drills to shape the tunnels, and I believe they had about six shafts that were finished. They were absolutely huge shafts where trains used to come right in to pick up the spare parts for airplanes.

This lasted, I guess, January, February, early March. At that time, the American bombing of Vienna and those parts-- I'm not sure exactly where it was, Vienna or other places. But the Americans were bombing every day, and we could see the Germans running from Vienna because we are camp was right near the highway on top-- just on a hill. So we could see the railroads, and people-- the Germans were running by rail. They were hanging from the trains, running from the Russian-- from the Russians towards the Americans.

And they were fleeing by rail, by roads, by boats. And we were really happy to see this, but we didn't know what's going to happen to us. And finally, they decided to move us again, and we were put on the Danube in these barges. I believe there are about three or four barges pulled by a tugboats. They were carrying steel from a Hungarian mill, and we were put in these barges. And the doors were locked, and we were pulled up to Linz, where we debarked from these barges.

We got out in Linz, and I believe we were walking for four days. I can still remember the name of these places from Linz. The first stop was Gemeinde Lambach Wels and up to Ebensee. And this was late March or early April. Ebensee, I worked-- I guess the time of my-- that we worked there was about two weeks before the Germans-- with time was getting-- the end was coming rapidly, and towards the middle of April they just closed the camp. We didn't go out on any more working details.

We could hear bombing and shooting because the American army was not that far away. There was typhus in the camp. There was no drinking water. There were thousands of bodies piled up. I myself saw cannibalism by other people because there was absolutely nothing to eat.

I was sick of typhus. I couldn't-- I was just laying in a cot. And approximately-- I believe it was May the 8th. We heard-- one prisoner came in, and he said that the Germans are-- the German guards are gone from their towers. There were some-- those that could still walk-- they went out to check, and they did say, yes, the guards were gone, and there were white flags on the towers.

So I dragged myself out, and practically crawled on my stomach, and came up to this appell ground-- it was called the

appellplatz, where we used to line up every day for counting. And I couldn't believe it, that there was actually no guards.

We could hear artillery, and we could hear explosions, which I found out later that the American army was trying to get up to the camp because it was up in the mountains, and apparently, the Germans had put some roadblocks. And I believe it was May the 8th.

I remember being out, there just feeling-- not thinking of food or anything, just couldn't believe that the Germans were gone and I'm still here, however, not-- didn't-- I was hanging on by a thread, probably. And the first thing I remember is this tank coming through the gates of Ebensee with soldiers in their-- holding their guns in their arms.

And this tank came in, and I don't believe I'll ever forget the look on these American-- in their eyes. I don't think I'll ever forget their eyes. What they saw in the camp must have been so horrible for them that they just couldn't believe. And all of a sudden, they saw these thousands of skeletons trying to touch them, and I remember they were so afraid. They didn't know what this was.

However, pretty soon, more of the army came up. The Red Cross units were coming up. And they set up showers and set up hospitals, field hospitals, and they started to clean up the camp. And I remember the first meal, these field kitchens that were brought up, and I remember seeing these sides of beef that they were bringing up on their trucks. And as the cooking was progressing, the smell of the food going through the camp drove everybody crazy.

And they gave us this food, and this was probably the worst thing they could have done because I think it killed an awful lot of people. As soon as they realized, they stopped giving us food, and they kept us-- I believe it was on toast and some milk.

And this-- I was in the hospital there for about a couple of weeks, and then we were taken back to Czechoslovakia. Shall I go on and say what happened?

Please.

Excuse me.

Go on, please.

I came back to Czechoslovakia, and hoping-- I was thinking of going back to my town, although I knew what happened to my family. But I was still hoping that perhaps by some miracle somebody may be coming home. I came to this provincial town which was called Kassa, where I met a farmer from my town who gave me a lift back on his wagon to our town, which was called Moldova.

And as I came closer to the house, I saw the house was completely wiped out because the war apparently went right through that area, and the house was completely destroyed. And I met some survivors. There was one fellow who was actually-- who actually came back with the partisans and a few other survivors.

I believe I stayed there for a couple of weeks, and then I left. I went to another place in Czechoslovakia called Mariánská Lázně, where the Joint Distribution Committee had a home for us. I guess we were about 35 or 40 surviving boys. But we lived in this small hotel, and we started to rebuild a life.

We were working part-time, learning trades, and part-time, we had a rabbi who was giving us Hebrew and some related subjects. And life sort of started to go back to normal until about 1948, I believe it was, when the communists took over in Czechoslovakia. We knew that we had to leave, so we left Mariánská Lázně, and we went to Prague.

We had permits to come to Toronto as students of the yeshiva. It was a Rabbi Price who sent us these permits. But the problem was we couldn't get-- we couldn't get the permit of the Czechoslovakian police to let us out because we were coming of military age, and they wouldn't leave us out. So we had to find some foreign-- like Hungarian papers or any kind of a paper so that we could leave Czechoslovakia.

At that time you couldn't stay in a hotel for more than one night because they had to report us to the police, so we had to switch around, stay one night-- about three or four of us stay in one hotel, and the next day, we would check out. And the other boys would come and stay in our place, and we would go and stay in their hotel until we got our papers in order.

But we couldn't get our papers. One day, we were caught in a police raid, and I, myself, and four other boys-- we were arrested, and we were taken to the Pankrác, which was the biggest political prison in Czechoslovakia. And we were charged as political prisoners trying to overthrow the government.

I believe we were in prison for about five months, and I really thought that from here I'll never get out. It was absolutely-- conditions were absolutely terrible, and it sort of seemed odd that after a camp you have to go through a jail again until, by miracle, one day, we were called. And there was a Jewish organization that paid I believe \$2,000 for each of us to let us-- to let us out of jail, which they did.

And when we came out, we asked this man that picked us up from this Jewish agency, what did you want us to do now? He says, well, you go back to Slovakia and find a way to get out of the country.

Anyway, we all tried different ways to get out, and I went from Slovakia through Bratislava to Austria, to Vienna, reached the American zone in Vienna. And this was in the middle of the Russian zone at that time. Vienna was divided into four sectors.

And I remember I came to the Rothschild Hospital. That's where all these displaced persons were congregating in the American zone of Vienna. I soon found out that, in Vienna, there was no Canadian consulate. I would have to go to Salzburg, which was an American zone, and that was another challenge to get out from Vienna, through the Russian zone, into the American zone.

I found an organization that took us through from Vienna. We had to meet this Austrian fellow who was dressed with his leather hosen and his boots and hat, and he told us to meet him one morning in the French sector at the S<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>dbahnhof, at the railroad station.

And it was-- he told us that we should each sit separately. He was taking about 10 people through that morning, and we were going to take this train into the Russian-- through the Russian zone. And he said when he gets off the train we should all follow him separately, sort of strung-out.

And what struck me-- when the train stopped, it was-- I got off the train, and I saw the sign in the station. It was Melk, and that was where I was in the concentration camp. That was really a shock to see that. Anyhow, we went through the mountains and valleys, and he told us where the American sector was starting. And we managed to reach Linz, where I had-- some of my friends were already there in a camp, waiting for me.

And I managed to get my visa to enter Canada in '49, and I came by boat-- I remember the name of the boat was called Samaria-- from Bremen, Germany to Quebec. This was October '49.

And I established myself in Toronto, and I-- shall I say I'm married and so on? I met my wife in Toronto, and we have two sons, Ed and Larry. They're twins. And one is married. And I have a little granddaughter now who's a year old, and I'm a very happy person today.

OK. Thank you very much for your interview.