

--Fettman from Omaha, Nebraska, April 12, 1983.

My name is Cantor Leo Fettman. I was born in 1925 in Hungary. I was in Hungary until the age of 19. I attended a yeshiva, a rabbinical college, and when the Nazis came into Hungary, they took my family to a ghetto. And I spent four weeks in different ghettos in Hungary.

And then while I was in the ghetto, I volunteered to assist the Nazis since they asked people to assist the Nazis. I volunteered, and I felt, being a Nazi, I will be able to go into the ghetto and help the Jews, which I did.

And orders came to leave Hungary. And I left with my parents, and we arrived to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, they made the selection who will go left and will go right. My parents were selected to go to the left, which meant to death. My brother and I were selected to go to the right.

I spent three, I believe, or four days in Auschwitz, and then I was taken to a camp. The first day my experience was in camp-- when they took us to work, when we came home, back home, when we came back to the camp, there were potatoes lying on the street. And we picked them up, although we were told not to because it is a trick.

However, they picked up the potatoes, and when we arrived to camp, the head of the camp said, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. It means, lift up your arm. And here went the potato was down. And then I found myself in a circle, 20 of us in a circle of Nazis. Each Nazi had a stick and a German shepherd, and they were jumping on us.

And the SS lagger, the head of the camp, said, by the count of 10, you will leave the circle, dead or alive, and while he was counting, the Nazis were swinging their stick. And I got out, but I was hit on my leg.

I was working in different groups, and I was getting a little bit sick and tired of the heavy labor and the cold. And I decided I'm going to commit suicide. At one point, while I was working, I climbed on a tree, jumped on a rock. Nothing happened. I was very disappointed because I really wanted to die. I thought that was the end of it.

That evening, then I went back to camp, I was sent to a different group to work which was called [SPEAKING GERMAN], which meant that the people who were rabbis there working in this group, and it was called punishment group. I was working there, and all day, the Thursday, one Nazi was above me, and he wouldn't stop hitting me. They didn't give me any food.

In the evening, the same Nazi asked me to help him saw some wood. The Nazis used to take home pieces of wood. And I was helping him saw wood, and my hand was shaking. And he slapped me one after the other. Then I asked him, may I say something? And I said, go ahead, dog. Dog was our title. It was our name.

And I said to him, I was 19 years old when the Nazis took me away from Hungary. I didn't eat today. I had no profession. I was a student. However, you ate today three times, and your profession is a wood chopper. He picked up a stick and hit me under my knee.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. They operated on my leg, and they put a gauze from here until here in this position. I was a few days in the hospital, and when they took off the gauze I couldn't straighten out my leg. I became a cripple.

I was in the hospital one day during the appell, zahlappell, I heard my name, and I walked out with crutches in front of 2,000 or 2,500 people and the rope on my neck. And the head of the camp, the Nazi, asked me, do you know why you will be hanged? I said, because I'm a Jew.

He asked me if I have any relatives there. I said no, although I did have a brother, but they didn't know because we had numbers. He whipped the stool from under me, and the rope broke. And I fell on the ground. He shook my hand, and he said to me, congratulations, dog. It is an international law that a person cannot be killed twice for the same crime.

And I looked up at him, and I said to him, I didn't know that you Nazis have any kind of law, or any human law. Take him away. They put me in the hospital, and in this particular hospital, they killed everyone who was in the hospital longer than three days. They left me alive.

Every time the Americans and the Russians came closer, they evacuated the camps, and they went back more into Germany, and they put me on a truck. And I was following the transport, and I'm alive.

Could you tell me a little bit about what you remember about the liberation, where you were, and what specifically happened to you during and afterwards, and your family?

Well, I was in Dernau. That was the camp. I believe it is near Breslau. I'm not so sure. Two Russian soldiers came into our barrack, and they told us that the war is over.

We couldn't believe him first. And he asked us who can handle a gun. I was one of them. I said I can, although I was a cripple. I couldn't walk on both feet. And he went out, and I laid down on the ground. It was pitch-dark. And the Russians made terrible noise, so the Nazis ran out from their barrack. What happened, in their pajamas, they were just killing, shooting. I don't know if I killed anybody or not. I don't know.

Then, of course, I couldn't walk, and the two Russians asked me what I want to do. I said, I would like to go back to Hungary. I really don't know why I said that because I have no one in Hungary. I seen my parents going-- marching into the gas chamber. I seen them.

But I had no place to go, and I was a cripple, as I said. So they took me back to Budapest, and I was in a hospital. And they operated on me several times. At one, point they wanted to amputate my leg because they said nothing they can do with it.

Of course I was against it, and after many, many surgeries, the surgery was successful, the exception that I have a fourth of an inch-- my left leg is a quarter of an inch shorter. And I developed back problems, and in Chicago, in the hospital, they told me that I have to wear special shoes, which I have, corrective shoes.

And then I was in Hungary, and then I came back to Germany in order to get out of Europe. I had to go to a DP camp. I was in Bergen-Belsen for four years. After four years-- while I was there, I registered to go to Israel, or to Canada, or to America. And I made up my mind, whatever comes first, I'll go. Canada came first.

So I lived in Canada. I learned the trade. I became a custom tailor. I was working in a factory. In the meantime, I continued my Jewish education. I went to yeshiva for eight years at night, and after the eight years, I graduated as a rabbi, as a cantor, and a Hebrew teacher.

Rabbi, did any other members of your family survive the Holocaust?

I have one brother in Chicago who was in a concentration camp. He's alive, but one brother-- I don't know what happened to him, the one who I was with. I don't know.

And your brother who did survive-- what happened to him, if you can--

He was first in Hungary in a labor camp, in Hungarian labor camp, and they brought-- they took him to a labor camp in Germany. He was not in Auschwitz. And I believe he spent about six or seven months in--

[NON-ENGLISH] oh, I'm sorry.

Go ahead, please.

And he spent six or seven months in a camp, and he was freed in Mauthausen. And now he lives in Chicago.

Can you tell me the specifics surrounding the time that you were actually taken into captivity?

Yes. We are wondering, how did the Nazis found out where the Jewish people live, I lived in a small town, about 35 Jewish families, a small community, and my Christian friends who I grew up with-- they took the Nazis, led them from house to house, to Jewish homes, and they told them where the Jewish person lives.

And since then, since then, I cannot-- I have this feeling I cannot trust and I never will trust a non-Jew with my life. I will do business with them and socialize with them. But when it comes to my life, never again.