

My name is Michael Finkelstein. I was 13 years old when the war broke out, and the Germans invaded our city, and occupied the city of Radom. I had my bar mitzvah in the ghetto, in our house, since the Jews were forbidden to go to temples or to participate in any religious services. So my father arranged to bring a Torah to the house and invited some of the relatives and friends. And I had my bar mitzvah in the ghetto.

During the war, we lived all together in an apartment. Was my two grandmothers, since their husband had passed away, and my mother, and my father, and my sister. We lived through a lot during the war because we had to move in quite a few families into one apartment because where we lived before the war became the ghetto. And on one side was the Aryan side, where the Gentiles lived. And on the other side, in the same address, was the Jewish ghetto. And it had to be split up with a partition in the middle of the buildings in order to separate the two, the Aryan side and the Jewish side.

For a while, we lived in this ghetto. And this was called the big ghetto after the first time that they took away quite a few from our Jews in Radom to Treblinka. And then they consolidated. At first, they had two ghettos. And then they consolidated everything into one ghetto. And the population of Radom before the war was of Jewish population, was 30,000. And eventually, when they brought from the surrounding communities the Jews into Radom, we had 45,000 Jews. After the war, there wasn't that many left.

We were separated. My mother was taken away from us and my two grandmothers. And I never saw them. One morning, they came in, the Germans. They made us leave our homes. And when we came back, it was just left me, my sister, and my father. Eventually, I and my father, we went to-- we were in camps, where they were producing ammunition for the German Army. And that was called Pionki. And we were there for a while.

And after the Russians came closer to us, they sent us to another camp, to Auschwitz, the infamous camp Auschwitz. And in Auschwitz is where I got my number on my arm. And from Auschwitz, they sent us to coal mines. And it was called Silesia. The actual, the city was called the [NON-ENGLISH], where we all worked in the coal mines underground all day.

And from there-- and everything-- when the war was getting closer to us, they made us walk, I think, for three days to-- day and night, we kept walking without food and to a station, to a rail station. And they put us into open boxcars without cover. And it was wintertime. It was snowing. And by the time we got from there, they took us to Mauthausen.

By the time we got to Mauthausen, half of our people that were on this transport died and/or they were killed because they had to leave the boxcars to go out from-- because they didn't give us food, or water, or anything. When we got to Mauthausen, we were standing for 24 hours outside in below-zero temperatures without food.

And after they made the selection and picked out so many people that were still healthy, and some of them they sent to the gas chambers, and some of them that were still young enough and healthy, they sent to work on the railroads. After that, they sent us to a camp, it was called Mauthausen. This was a death camp because they only kept the people there. And they were dying out slowly. And then they sent them to the gas chamber.

In 1945, or before that, I was with my father together in Mauthausen. And we both got sick. And we were in a hospital that was-- and we were four in a bed, like, this was a double-decker. What are these beds called?

Bunk bed?

Bunk beds. In each bed there was 12 people because they were bunk beds. There were four on top, four in the middle, and four under the bed. And my father somehow got well. He got better. And they sent him out to work. And I never saw my father again.

When we were liberated, they-- and I was liberated in the hospital. But at the time, I was half-dead because I only weighed 90 pounds. And when we were liberated, I was looking for my father, but I never found him. And at that time, I must have been 15 years old.

After the war, I was in a field hospital. We were liberated by American Army, which were very good to us. And they put me in a field hospital. And to try to recuperate, they put-- we thought that they were not giving us enough food. But this was for the best because we were not allowed to eat too much because we were undernourished. And if we would eat too much, so many people that ate too much died after the war.

And after the Americans liberated us, and they put us in field hospitals-- I was in the hospital for about a month. And after that, we went back to the camps, temporary camps that were administered by the American Army. And eventually, we-- I got to Italy through the Jewish Brigade. The English Jewish Brigade took all the youngsters under 18 and took them over to Italy.

And we were supposed to leave for Israel at that time. And there was only one ship. I was in Italy for five years. There was only one ship that, during that time, between 1945 and 1949, that left to Israel. At that time, was still Palestine. But the British did not allow so many people to come in. So one ship went from Italy. And they tried to take the younger children that were under 15 or 16 to Israel first and leave the older ones.

And by that time, I was very disappointed that I couldn't go to Israel. My relatives in the United States found out that I was in Italy. And they sent me papers and brought me to the United States. I came to the United States. I stayed with my relatives for a while and then got my own apartment. I got a job. I went to night school.

And eventually, my sister-- she was liberated in Germany in Bergen-Belsen. And she went to Sweden. Swedish people were very good to her too. And eventually, she immigrated to the United States and we both together. After a while, my sister met a man. And he lived in California at the time. And we both moved in 1950-- 1951. We moved to California.

And my sister got married. And I lived with her. And then that was in 1951. After a while, I came-- stop. After a while, my sister-- after she got married, she had a son. And I was still single, living with her.

And eventually, I moved out and got my own apartment. And I met a young lady in 1954. And she was also a survivor, a child of a survivor. And we got married in November 1954. My first son was born in 1956, November. And he's now 26 years old. I have a daughter. And my daughter was born in 1959.

We are very grateful to the United States for letting us into this country and giving us the opportunity to be able to live our lives as free people. And we are very happy in this country that we can do whatever free people want to do, and be free to vote, and become citizens of the United States, and be good citizens.

And we are also supportive of Israel. Whenever we can, we visited Israel several times. My daughter visited Israel and she loves Israel. My son was in Israel. I bought the first Israeli bond that ever came out in Los Angeles. And I keep supporting Israel. And we hope to one day immigrate to Israel.

Do you feel that you're finished?

I think so.

You think so?

Yeah.

It's a lot.

How long was it?

Sister was the only survivor in your family?

The only survivor, yes.

Where was your mother?

And I have a cousin. I have a cousin that also survived. And she also lives in California, my first cousin, which is my mother's brother's daughter.

How about your mother?

My mother, she went-- one day, they came and surrounded the ghetto. And they took out all the Jews out in the street. And when we came back to the house, there was only me, my sister, and my father, nobody else. My mother went away. From what we know of those times, they sent them to Treblinka, to the gas chambers.

And your wife also was from?

Yeah, she was in Kraków. She's from Kraków. And she was also in the camps. She's even younger than I am. And she was hiding out as an Aryan with some Gentile people. But before that, she was in the camps. And so many times, her life was in danger because the Germans were always looking to see if there were any children around.

And she has a very-- she has fantastic things to tell about herself because she was hiding out as a child. And her father had to supply always money to the Gentiles, to the Polish people, so they would keep hiding her. Otherwise, they wanted to expose her to the Germans. And she would have gotten killed.

Well, where was her father at that time?

Her father-- she had an uncle in the-- not far from where she was hiding out. He was living in an Aryan. And her uncle was paying those people in order to keep her and hide her out. She was about-- let's see, she's about seven years younger than I am. So if I was 13, she was six years old.

Does she have any other survivors in her family?

Yes, she has her father here.

Her father is here?

Her father's here. She has a twin brother. She had a twin brother and he was killed. And her mother was killed.

That's amazing.

OK, well.

The people.