

--survivors, Washington, DC, April 12, 1983. Interview with Curt Fondell. Could you say and spell your last name, please?

Fondell. F-O-N-D-E double-L.

And where and when were you born?

I was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia.

Would you like to tell us-- is there a certain part of your experience that you would like to tell us before the war, or during the war, or after the war, or would you like to start at a certain point?

Well, perhaps I should start-- I was an only child. My parents were born in Czechoslovakia. I was in several camps before I got into the real camp, in and out of work camps in Czechoslovakia, until we were all registered to be transported east.

Our transport went from Brno, Czechoslovakia, to Theresienstadt, which was a ghetto. You know? We arrived in January of 1942. My parents and I, we were separated there.

It was a ghetto where you didn't get killed, exactly, especially if you were young. But this was only a stepping stone, right? And there's no direction of concentration camps, because we didn't know then, people were possibly transported to the east.

In August of 1942 my father got pneumonia, and he died, because there was not enough medical care. He was 60 years old. He wouldn't have died if he would have been at home. My mother took it to heart, of course, and she was very depressed.

And then in October of '42, she was in a transport because she-- the number was listed, and she was to be moved east.

Do you know what that meant?

We did not know. We did not know what it meant. It was a very, very [INAUDIBLE]. It was like being moved to a different working camp in Poland. That's all we know.

But there was five transports from Theresienstadt, five of 2,000 people each, that was supposed to go. There were transports going all the time. This was one that she-- there was B-Y was the number of that transport. I happen to remember that.

I volunteered to join this transport, because I was not meant to go. You see, I was not old. It was for elderly people. I found out later, of course, that they were to be exterminated immediately.

I, as a volunteer, after I tried very hard, succeeded in getting into this transport. I had to use connections to get in.

Because you wanted to be with your mother.

That's right. That's right.

And how old were you then?

I'm no hero. I didn't know I was going to Auschwitz. But I wanted to be with her.

How old were you then?

21 years.

And we arrived. We went into cattle cars. And we were two days on the road. We had no food, no nothing. No toilets. I don't have to tell you, closed cattle cars.

Then, we arrived one night in a place, on a ramp where it was dark. It was October 28, 1942. I remember that because it was Czechoslovakia's national holiday, like July 4th here.

And we were unloaded. Raus-- right? Saw SS. And they hollered for volunteers to unload the luggage. And I didn't want to volunteer.

And an SS man saw me standing there. He goes, raus-- you. And I helped unload the luggage. And that's when I said goodbye to my mother. And I said, I'll see you later, because they kept telling us, you'll get your luggage later. Don't worry about it. And we believed it because we had no idea where we were, you see?

Where were you?

We were in Auschwitz. How did I find out? As the luggage was unloaded, and they very politely unloaded the elderly ladies and a few children into the truck so they wouldn't have to walk. And they helped them. And the child go, and all that.

This truck, at night, turned. And as the truck was turning, I noticed a little-- oh, what do you call those little huts that are on the railroad stations, where they changed the railroad tracks. It's like a little house that stands on the railroad track, where a guy comes every so often, changes [INAUDIBLE] the track. And by, the light hit Auschwitz. It said Auschwitz on it. And that's when I knew where I was.

So then they marched us away. And we were only maybe 175, 200 at the most of the 2,000 that were young. So they marched us into Auschwitz, Auschwitz I. On the entrance, the door, it says, Arbeit macht frei. I'm sure you've seen that sign.

And there we were, standing inside. We knew already where we were. And at this point, I had a pretty good idea what's going to happen to my mother.

Oh, you knew by then?

Most certainly. We knew. I knew that Auschwitz-- we heard of Auschwitz before. I heard of Auschwitz. I knew it was a concentration camp. But I did not know that it was an extermination camp also. There's a big difference, you see.

And then, of course, we stayed half of the night in a washroom, where they kept us still in civilian clothing, had our hair and all that. We've still got hair, and we had everything like the way we arrived. We didn't have any [INAUDIBLE] That was a piece of that that wouldn't be left. [NON-ENGLISH], they called it. We knew it was the washroom.

And I asked him. I says, tell me. I says, what is [INAUDIBLE]?

He says, to be honest with you, for a Jew, two or three days.

[GASPS]

That was the situation in October 1942. It was very tough then.

Did you believe him?

Yeah. I couldn't figure out how this is possible. But we soon learned, you see?

That night, they told us that, see those chimneys? That's where your things went through there.

And you were all alone? You had no friends, nothing.

I had no friends. I had no brothers, no sisters ever. And I was an only child.

On that transport, I had no friends. I mean, there was nobody that I knew that was among those 200, or 180. I know that after three weeks, I found just a handful of those that came with me. I remember faces, because it went rather fast.

Conditions were very, very bad at this point. Shoes were, in the first day, somebody stole them.

Our luck was that they needed workers at IG Farben. Have you ever heard of IG Farben? That's like DuPont of America, you see. They were making synthetic grass. They needed slave labor. It was the IG Farben trial. You may have heard about this.

They needed us. So they transported 10,000 people to Buna III, which was Auschwitz III. It was Buna-Monowitz, they called it. You may have seen signs here-- Buna-Buna. That is the camp where I was from 1942, till the day we had to evacuate the camp.

The camp was tough. It was a brand new camp. It was really rough on us. I lost maybe 20 pounds the few month or so. We worked outside, and we soon found out if you work like a horse, you're not going to last long here. So the food wasn't good. There was no [INAUDIBLE] workers.

And then, of course, the rest is luck, because if you lived on what they gave you, and if you worked like they wanted you to work, there was no way you could survive, because you didn't get enough to eat. You were exposed to rain and cold weather, and beating, and being hit in the wrong places, so they crippled you for life like this, right? You got hit you in your hand, and you broke a hand, you were finished.

Did you make friends and help each other? Did you have a--

I made friends. I made friends. I eventually got a job. I was saying to the CBS guy this morning, if you didn't have a job of any kind, where you were saved, where you were saved, let's say, from the cold, or where you were able to get a little extra food, you couldn't make it. There's no body who's going to come to you, from anybody. And anybody that lived on the rations there and was exposed to hard labor could survive this. You had to be lucky, to be at the right place at the right time, at times, you see, to stay alive in the first place.

Eventually, I was able to get into a Kommando, what they call it, where I worked inside. The first winter of 1942 we were falling like flies. It was cold. We were not properly dressed.

You see? We had no towels. We had no toothpaste. We had nothing. We wanted you to wash up and be clean, we had nothing to be clean with. It's unreal. [INAUDIBLE] And the sidewalks were not paved. We were walking in mud to the washroom. You see? It was just to make our lives miserable.

Eventually, I got a job in a laundry.

But it was a good job.

It was a good job. How did I get that? I got sick. I got sick, and I-- I got new jobs. And there was a fellow here that is the chairman of the [INAUDIBLE] legation. He was with me in the same camp at the same time, [? Freddie ?] [? Bierman. ?] He was the one that lit the candle last night at that ceremony, was already--

And we met. We laid on two beds, side by side. He had the same thing I had. And he was in Auschwitz with me till the very end. And he lives now behind my house in Los Angeles. Would you believe that?

No kidding.

No, that's unreal. You would have never believed that.

Was that a coincidence?

Coincidence. Coincidence.

Anyway, eventually I got a job in that laundry. That was near the kitchen. That is washing laundry for the higher officers. You see, the big shots. Not for the flunkies that were standing guard. The higher SS.

Having this job, did you still feel you were in danger, or did you feel safer?

We were in danger, but we were not in danger of starvation. You understand? We were in danger--

But you weren't that hungry. I mean, you were--

We were not hungry.

You were not hungry. You were fed well.

No, because we were in [INAUDIBLE]. We were able to get it.

Oh, you stole it.

--from the kitchen. And there was one SS man that was decent to me, in the kitchen. He looked the other way. He knew, you see.

Wasn't that dangerous?

Sure. But we did steal. You had to steal, don't you see? You could have been honest, and died slowly but surely. You had to take the chance. You die? Which is better?

You had to take the risk of guys that were committing suicide, because they were pathetic. Not too many, but some did and walked against the loaded wire. I didn't do that. I kept telling them, how do you think we will [INAUDIBLE] kill you or don't kill you. See, you have to have a tremendous [INAUDIBLE]. And you have to be a little lucky, also, to get through this.

Later on, we were a Kommando, and we were [? making ?] in the laundry, It was a mixture of United Nations. Two fellows from Poland. I was from Czechoslovakia. There was one from Germany. One was from [INAUDIBLE].

Then you didn't know-- you didn't all speak the same language.

Yeah, but we spoke German. And we had a map, and we had an idea of where the front was. You see? It was a smooth Kommando because I was inside, near the kitchen. So our life was not bad. We lived there a long time like this.

Did you know what day it was? Did you know from day to day--

Yes, yes we knew exactly the day, what we knew about it.

What about the Jewish holidays? Did you know when they were?

We had a pretty good idea.

Were people fairly religious at all? Did you know any people who observed any part of the--

Some, some, some. some people who were very religious. I was not one of those. [INAUDIBLE] We fasted half of the time. Anyway, you see?

And so it was tough. It was very rough. And the outcome was oppression. Because you see, those that had something to eat could make strength. You know, I don't know whether you-- of course, I don't know. I know you don't know that, thank God.

When you have nothing to eat, and you wake up in during the night hungry, you know, your head doesn't work. You get to the point-- and I was at that point. Well, that all you think about is food. You sleep with it. You're talking. It's unreal. I mean, one really has to go through this to really understand this.

Now one woman said that she had to-- the women used to sit around trading recipes while they were hungry.

Yeah, I believe that.

Because it made them feel--

Well, when I was there, there was no women.

Right.

And we talked about food. Yes. And I told someone in Estonia that in 1944, when I did not need the packages anymore, I was once called to the office, the SS office. And I was advised by my number, 71 488, and my full name, that there is something I have to sign. It was a package from the International Red Cross. But I had no idea. I tried to figure out. I figure out later what it was.

See, I had an uncle in Los Angeles. And we were once permitted to send postcards. But they didn't call it Auschwitz Konzentrationslager, if you know what I mean. They called it Buna-Monowitz Arbeitslager, with my name. And I sent that postcard to my uncle in Los Angeles. I remembered the address. [INAUDIBLE] is not alive anymore. He wasn't alive when I got to the United States.

And he must have made arrangements with the International Red Cross. I got three packages-- sardines, chocolate, the finest stuff. But unfortunately, how this works, when I'm starving, I wasn't getting any. This was in 1944, when things got better [INAUDIBLE]. I got three times.

And in January of '45, we were evacuated, as you probably know.

What was that like? Tell me about liberation, when you found out--

That's not liberation. The camp was--

Oh, that's right. They evacuated first.

Overnight they closed the camp, January 18, 1945. That morning we didn't go for work. I had an idea about something, because you see, during the day, the Americans were coming, bombings--

Bombings.

Around us, yeah. During the day, the Americans came. At night, the Russians, fighter planes. And the next morning, we didn't step out of the camp anymore. There was no work anymore.

I worked inside the camp all the time, all the time since I got that job, I worked inside. Most of them were outside, for

this IG Farben. So they didn't march on. And then during the day, they told us we were you're going to be evacuated. We were evacuated. Where, we didn't know.

You didn't know what that meant.

That meant for the rest. It was a question, are they going to shoot us or not. This was the risk. That was the thing I was always worried about. That maybe in the last minute, they're going to knock us off. Because they had guns outside, [INAUDIBLE] guns. And sometimes they were pointing down, not into the air. See?

Is your hand uncomfortable? You could put, like, in--

No, I'm fine. They evacuated. We walked and walked. The first night, we walked to a townhouse.

Was it cold?

Oh, it was cold. It was snowing. I don't know. On that day it was not snowing. The snow was laying on the ground, and it was winter.

And you had shoes.

We had shoes. We had shoes. We got a loaf of bread, or a half a loaf of bread And they gave us something to take along, and a blanket. And we went.

I was thinking of staying in camp, because we had hideouts. In the SS laundry. I could have stayed, but I was afraid they're going to raze the camp if I stick around. But they did not, as I found out later. About a week, or five days later, the Russians occupied Auschwitz.

And you were all gone, mostly-- everybody.

We were gone, except those that were sick. Those that reported sick could stay. You see? And they stayed. And I heard later that some guys later on walked out to get food. And they were still in the towers, and they shot at them. Some got shot. But those that hung out there long enough, the Russians eventually liberated.

So meanwhile you were marching.

Meantime, I was watching. And there was guys who were marching that could barely. They got knocked out the first day, because you see, anybody that could not walk and continue, was shot. We were counting to the hundreds. They shot them into the side of the road. There were guys shot left and right.

How long did you continue walking?

Can you believe that I walked till the end of the war.

What?

I walked through the end of the war, with small interruptions. Many of these--

How long was that?

Months?

From January 18 to May 5.

You just kept walking every day.

We kept walking. Not every day. We sometimes stayed a week here, two weeks there. We were here three days, two weeks.

Most of these guys wound up in other concentration camps, in Buchenwald, in Dachau, in Mauthausen.

Meanwhile, the second day, we wound up in a concentration camp by the name of Gleiwitz. We stayed there overnight. That was the second day. There was not less of us already.

At during the night it was an American bombardment. They knocked out the railroad station. That was something else I'll tell you.

Were you worried that you would be bombed and hurt?

I was happy when they bombed. I was so happy.

You weren't worried, afraid for yourself.

No, I wasn't worried. [INAUDIBLE]. But at least I saw progress. Then we were loaded into all the trains. And we were on that train for two days and two nights. And I bet you we didn't travel more than 25 miles. It was cold. We got no food, of course. And the train, the railroad, the tracks were probably interrupted in many places, so after two days, they got sick and tired of us.

We were supposed to go to Gross-Rosen now. It was a concentration camp. But we never got there. So they unloaded us.

When they unloaded us, some of the fellows were carrying ammunition for the SS, guns. They started to shoot. And a lot of the guys started to run away into the woods. Would you believe it? They ran out them with dogs, and they caught some. All those that they caught, they shot immediately.

Mind you, that was three months before the end of the war. You didn't have to be very smart to know that they lost the war. I mean, anybody knew that at that point. That was 1945. The Americans were half in Germany already. The Russians were within 50 miles, 100 miles at most.

And so they consolidated us, so to speak. And then they marched us. And one night we slept in a jail. One night we slept in a movie house. I recall these occasions. Wherever they had us, by that time we had lice. You see? Many places didn't want us. You see? The Germans, and the German [INAUDIBLE] population [INAUDIBLE].

And we walked and walked and walked. I was even digging ditches for the air force, this L-shaped ditch that you could run through, soldiers run through-- I don't know what you call this. I can show you-- trenches.

See? They are 6 feet deep. So a man can run through it without getting hit in the head. And we was digging and digging and going on to another place, and digging. We had to run through here and through there.

Were they just making work for you to do?

Yeah, yeah. Didn't know what to do with us, and didn't know what to do with themselves.

Why did they care?

It was SS there.

Why did they care?

Why did they care? They had orders, right? The guy that was in charge was not even an officer. I will say to that-- an SS officer. He was an Oberscharführer, what you'd call here a staff sergeant. He was in charge, an older guy.

On that death march once we were gassed in a mine, coal mine. I mean, they put us there overnight. But gas was escaping. A lot of guys got gassed in the night.

Forgot to tell this to that CBS guy. It was a terrible thing. It was February 15.

Did you begin to wonder why you were so lucky? I mean, did you begin to-- when you kept seeing these things happen, did you say, you couldn't believe that you had made it.

Yeah. Well, we were liberated May 8.

Tell me about that.

Well, it was me and a few other guys and two SS, younger guys that I have never seen before. There was a lot of young SS that-- they were green.

We were pushing a-- on a truck. They had no horses, so we were pushing the truck that had the food on it for about 150, 200 people. And as we were pushing west, we got barricaded by people that were civilian people. The roads were taken. And you couldn't go through. And we kept falling behind and falling behind from the main drag of our transport as we were walking.

As it got about 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I said to this one SS man, I said, maybe we should-- let's disappear. They knew when the story is by then. He says, yeah, let's wait until it gets a little darker.

Oh.

So there was one Slovakian fellow and a Polish fellow, and me, and two SS. It started to get dark. Mind you, this was May 8 already. That was the last day of the war.

That's late.

I got late. I didn't save one day. We were just in the middle of the whole SS division. That was a general turnaround. It was an SS-- the records show that. I read about this later.

This Panzer division was in Czechoslovakia, in Bohemia. On one side, the Americans, top the English, and on the other side, the Russians. One division was in the middle, and we were in there with that division.

And so you see, I couldn't savour a half a day. I had to leave, you know, till the very end. And that evening, we picked out-- and like he says, SS had nothing to do with this, SS Panzer division. You see? I mean--

You had nothing to do with that.

They had nothing to do with this division. They were SD. That's the concentration camp for the SS. So we separated. They suggested we walk together, because you see, it looked good this way. They were carrying-- they were guarding us. We had the striped stuff. Without that, we could have gotten killed by some Panzer division.

Meanwhile, I saw some tanks, where they were sitting on top of a tank, the Germans, not knowing what to do. They were just sitting there giving up. Now all of a sudden some prisoners walk by there, You see, they are liable to shoot. We walked into the woods and we--

Why were these SS guys so nice?

Which ones? The ones that were with us?

Yeah.

Well, we could have knocked them over too. We could have delivered them to the Allies. We could have.

So we sort of walked into the woods. And they said, let's go separate. They tore off their insignias. I saw it with my own eyes, the SS insignia. Now they looked like regular army, at least on the surface. They were small fries, you see?

And we hid in the woods for a night, half the night. And then we walked down to a [INAUDIBLE], where I became free. It was just north of the Czechoslovakian border, near a town called [? Liebowitz, ?] [? Reisenberg ?] in Germany. And we were exhausted of course from this death march. We stayed there for one week.

In the meantime, the Russians occupied this town. First they had said to us, take anything you want in this town. So we went out. We got some bread. We got something to eat. We didn't kill anybody.

It just wasn't in us. We could have. Should have, maybe. But we didn't. We didn't-- we don't pay back. We didn't pay it back nobody in this town. They were innocent too. Maybe to us, or maybe to some German people, they were all of a sudden very nice because-- who knows?

And I stayed there for a week, and I went back to my home town.

Oh, you did?

Yes. It was perhaps a mistake, but I did-- returned now to Czechoslovakia.

What happened?

Of course, I knew I had no parents. That I did know. I had an uncle, and he went in Theresienstadt. Was married to a Gentile lady. I knew that. So he was a little protected. And I was looking for him for two days. And I found him. Found him. I found her. He was still in Theresienstadt.

I got my own apartment in Czechoslovakia. The government was very good in those days, in Czechoslovakia. They really was. The Czechoslovakian people were very good--

They helped you.

--to the Jewish people. It was not like Poland. It was an entirely different sentiment. And things were good.

What happened to your house where you lived?

My parents lived in an apartment.

Did someone else live there?

Yeah, somebody-- the house was bombed anyway. The government gave me an apartment, and it was assigned to me.

But the things that your parents owned.

That was all gone.

All photographs.

That was gone. Everything was gone.

Nothing. You had nothing.

I had absolutely nothing. I had about 1,000 crowns from the UNRRA-- U-N-R-R-A. You've heard about that, right. 1,000 crowns wasn't very much, but I got an apartment.

Then, of course, I wanted to go to the United States. So I almost made it in 1940. I have a good [INAUDIBLE] from my uncle. Well, by the time my quota was reached, July 1, 1940, the American Embassy in Prague closed up. And I couldn't get a visa, as there was no consulate. So I wound up in Auschwitz.

After the war, I pursued the same thing. And then, in 1948, I finally got my quota, and I arrived in the United States.

Where did you arrive? In New York?

In New York.

And what happened?

So I lived there for three years. And I came to Los Angeles on my first vacation, first paid vacation for two years. I fell in love with Los Angeles. It was very sexy, the palm trees and all that. I've never seen a palm tree in my life before.

That's true. Yeah.

I had never seen an ocean--

It's very exotic looking.

until I-- you know, until-- exotic, right-- until I came to New York. I loved the beach, because I thought it was something marvelous, in New York. Thought I was in seventh heaven. And a lot goes into it.

So I went back to New York. I quit my job and came here for good. And I [INAUDIBLE], met my wife.

Where did you meet your wife?

In Los Angeles, at a party. And she's American-born. I met her in '53, and we married in '55.

And you have children?

We had one little girl. She's 22 years old. She wanted very much to come here. She is very interested in the Holocaust. There was one person from CBS talking, asking [INAUDIBLE]. I said, she's very-- she buys me books about the Holocaust.

She's going to law school here. She is in her first year. She is two weeks before finals. And she couldn't afford the luxury to take off three or four days to come.

And you are proud of her.

I'm very proud.

Did you talk to her much about your experiences?

Yes.

Always, or--?

Well, first she kept asking me about that number. She saw the number. And my wife kept telling her, this is a telephone number. And she was maybe nine years old.

But later, little by little, I did tell her the whole story. The kept-- she kept the-- being interested very much until today, she has. And she thinks I'm a big hero, of course, because--

Does she say, Dad, how could you do it? How did you live through it?

Yeah, that's what she says. I said, you [INAUDIBLE], not through this and survive. And I often ask myself that question. This was one-- to do an example, it's got nine, 10 friends, who used to do [INAUDIBLE]

Only one of them lives, and he is in Israel. I saw him two years ago for the first time after the war. After the war, I saw him once. He was in the Israeli Army. He was in the Czechoslovakian Army, yeah, under Montgomery in World War II. And he's the only one that lives.

But he got out. He got out in 1939. I'm the only one who did not, that stayed in. I mean, I'm the only one of those that stayed behind that's alive.

I had a fellow friend that was an excellent soccer player-- strong, physically strong. He was caught on the street in Czechoslovakia. He went into a concentration camp, to Mauthausen. He was confiscated, you can call it in a coffee house, where he went to play [INAUDIBLE]. The Germans just came in, and--

[AUDIO OUT]

Came in and.

The Germans came in, and took everybody in this coffee house because that was a Jewish coffee house, central Jewish establishment. They took him, and he wound up in Mauthausen.

And a week later, a postcard came from Mauthausen to his mother, telling her that he died of a heart attack. This fellow was never sick in his life. He played soccer for an hour and a half.

I'm surprised they did that. Why would they-- why would they do that?

They made it look like it was kosher. You see? He died because he was [INAUDIBLE].

In 1944, I ran into a fellow. He was a Gentile, one of those German guys that came from Mauthausen to Auschwitz-- became friendly with him.

And I ask him. I said, tell me, can you remember a transport from Czechoslovakia that came in 1941. He was there till 1940. He was a criminal, a green greenhorn, they call it. He was there because he was an Aryan. He was a German. He was not Jewish.

He was in a concentration camp. He was a German citizen. He got arrested for criminal thing or for some-- something. You'd never know what it was for.

And he said, yes, I do remember. I remember, because they were all so well-dressed. They were Czechoslovakian. They were well-dressed. You see, they were [INAUDIBLE] to concentration camp. You could tell they came from a higher standard of living, country. It was Czechoslovakia. They were well dressed, and they came from a coffee house. I said, that is correct. I says, tell me what happened to these people? It was mostly young people. How come in a week or two that-- And see, in Mauthausen there was a quarry, where they would break the stones.

Quarry, yeah.

There was 100 steps. I was not there. After the war, I heard this. There was 100 steps to go up. They had these carry storms from the bottom, up to the 100 steps, and then throw them down again. If the guy-- and on both sides the SS was standing with clubs. If the guy carried a small stone, they'd club him because he was lazy. And if he got a big stone, he was carrying this. How long can you do that?

Guys were jumping off the stones, jump from the top down, commit suicide. He says, there wasn't one left in a week. I believed him. I wouldn't believe him before. I believe him.

Why do people talk about the kapos?

Kapos.

Kapos. Did you have problems with them?

I had one. I had one-- I had problems for a while. I had problems with a kapo. He used to find the work for. He was a German. He was supposedly a political prisoner. He had a red thing here. He was German.

And he had what they call-- he could wear his hair. We were shaved. He was what they call an honor prisoner. He could wear his hair. This was cut. He was a political prisoner, my foot. If he was a political prisoner, I am Chinese. He was not.

He took advantage of his position. I'm not saying he was in a [INAUDIBLE]. I don't know. But he look down on anybody that was a prisoner. And he was one himself, but he thought he was better.

And he beat me once. He gave me 10 strokes on my behind because I lied to him. I lied to him because I told him I was a cabinetmaker, and I wasn't. I wasn't. That was good.

But I needed that job. It was inside. So when he looked for 20 [INAUDIBLE], I raised my hand. It saved my life.

But he told me one thing, and you're going to laugh about this when I tell you. I should report you, he says, but I'm not going to. He says, you know why? You're not a carpenter, but you sing well. I was singing well.

You see, when we used to march in-- you heard about this-- we had to sing. And he was proud of his group because we sang so well when we walked in, and people would look. And I had a good voice. So I wasn't a carpenter, but I was good for the kommando and good for him that I sang so well, because it sounded good as we marched through the gate. [INAUDIBLE] I'm telling you this. [INAUDIBLE].

What did you-- the camp, were you coming in contact with people who were fathers who knew that they lost their children, and how did they-- now that I'm a parent, I really relate to that kind of-- you were a child, so you didn't--

I was a child. I had no children. I mean, I was a single fellow.

Right, so you didn't have that kind of worry.

I knew I had no mother or father. I didn't. I was thinking of friends often. I was [INAUDIBLE], hoping that they survived. There was nobody around that I knew. I made my own friends there.

It was tough on people. The majority did not make it. I mean, out of the 10,000 that walked on that death march, when Auschwitz was evacuated, only a couple of hundred became free.

Now some people, there was a few that took off. I don't know how many. I didn't count. But thousands of them were shot-- shot for not being able to walk. You see, after so many days, you are just so weak. You can't walk.

I had a little problem too, and it was right the first day. I'm walking about 25 miles the first night, 20 miles. I developed a pain right here, over my groin, on the right-hand side. It was a pinching pain, like stuck a knife in you, anytime I took a step.

And there was a fellow there that helped me massage this-- it was in Gleiwitz-- with butter, with margarine. You need massage it to-- to massage it. And it helped. It helped. And it really helped me to walk.

Because there was no two ways about this. If you fell behind, you sat down, you says, I'm sorry, I can't walk. They shot you.

And it was a young fellow in the back that was shooting guys But he enjoyed this. And mind you this was only three or four months before the end of the war.

It's hard to understand. It was hard to believe. You sometimes talk about things, as you watch a movie. I see a lot of movies on television. I myself sometimes can't believe that, you understand? I don't blame them sometimes, the questions that you have.

Do you think it could happen again?

Yes.

You do. Here?

Yes, goodness. Today, this morning-- yes, it could happen, if we are not careful. If we don't fight. This time, like I told this guy this morning-- it's going to be on Coast to Coast Sunday morning. I told him. I says, next time there is no way that my daughter, for example, would be led by her hand to a concentrate camp. Youngsters today, I do not fee, will not be--

We went not because we were weaklings. We were tough to survive these camps. We were led there. We had no idea that even under the [INAUDIBLE] you can be rest assured this is the end. If we knew what was going to happen to us, we would have fought. So we would have taken a few along. Do you agree?

Yeah.

Huh? I says, we cannot let this happen again. I don't think it will happen again. It could never happen in this shape or form. It has never happened anywhere, anything like this, because you see, these people now going around, it will not happen.

I California, they have a case. I don't know if you know that, where there's a fellow suing-- a Jewish fellow that was in Auschwitz that's suing a group-- I don't know what they call themselves-- say that it never happened. The Holocaust never happened-- \$50,000. He doesn't need the money. He doesn't need the \$50,000. And he won the case. Now they can't find him to get the money.

It did happen, this guy's [INAUDIBLE] before. But it did happen. My mother and father got killed there. And I have it on my arm. I didn't put that there myself.

It must make you so angry when you hear someone say that. It makes you angry?

Certainly. Certainly. They don't really believe this. They don't really believe this. They don't believe that it never happened. They know it did. Sure. Sure.

So if it wasn't 6 million, it's 5,800,000. That's enough. Like what's his name, the guy in Vienna, Wiesenthal, says, they kill 1,000, or 100, it's a murder, right? If you kill a million, it's only a statistic. You see? That's what we became.

To kill 6 million, it was not so easy. I mean, you take a town of Los Angeles, let's say that's about 6 million people, without the outskirts. I mean, just to load up these people on a bus, you know how long this would take?

Yeah, somebody else said they were so busy with us all the time. She didn't understand, why were they so busy with us?

I know. And it's unreal that they sometimes neglected war effort to get trains loaded with prisoners. It doesn't make sense. If you read certain books, you will find that the army was fighting the SS for trains, for cars, cargo cars. And the SS said they needed it for prisoners. And they said, we need it for soldiers. And the SS won.

It's hard to understand. But now you've come here, and you've had a good life.

I came here.

And a family.

I made good in this country. I made good here.

A lovely family.

I'm very happy. I love the country. And I'm married, happily married.

Do you always feel it-- does it ever leave you? Is there always a sense-- do you ever forget you're a survivor, or is it always something that's with you.

Well, sometimes I do forget. Like, I was telling here this morning, I says, I have a lot of American friends. My wife is American-born. And I don't disagree with all these readings. And then they asked me, why did you come here? I says, I came here because I wanted to be counted, that this thing did happen.

I don't live on this thought of being a concentration camp survivor, consider myself a hero. I don't push myself. I don't go to the big meetings, where I have to take the microphone, where I speak, or I write speeches, or push myself to be a big shot, or-- you understand what I'm saying?

Yeah.

I stay in the background. This morning, that was the first interview I ever gave, and this is the second one.

So I don't push myself. I don't fly here and there to make speeches. I was there from day one. I was in Auschwitz, one of the very first, October '42. There isn't many that live today that have a low number like I have. Many went by Auschwitz. They came in the end of '44. By that time-- I'm not take nothing away from them. This was a sanatorium compared to what it was in October of '42. You see, things gradually--

Got worse?

--been better in Auschwitz--

Oh, got better.

--as the war progressed. They-- and these days, they already closed them. The gas chambers, October of '44, they dismantled them, destroyed them, because they wanted to destroy the evidence.

I heard that there was an underground at Auschwitz. Did you know about that?

Yes and no. There was an underground. The underground was-- we knew-- as far as I knew about them, we were informed of what was going on.

I heard that there was an explosion of-- there was a-- that the underground blew up a crematorium. Did you hear about that?

I heard about this. I don't know what is true, to be honest. That was in Birkenau, and I was in Buna

Oh, I see.

Which is about 3 or 4 miles away. It's the same camp. It's under the same roof, you see, but yet it isn't.

So many people.

Yeah, so many people. And you see Auschwitz, there was Auschwitz I, II, and III. Auschwitz I was the main camp, Auschwitz II was Gleiwitz, and Auschwitz II was Buna.

And there was also Birkenau. You've heard about that.

Is that where the women were, mostly?

Yes, the women. That was right next to the main camp. Some people went to Auschwitz, never got a number, and went away. Those that went into gas never got a number.

The number that I have can be-- is a matter of record. That list has been saved by one of us, you see. So, some of the guys, you had a number, and they didn't have one-- let's say a German put that number on his hand to avoid [INAUDIBLE], they could determine who was there and who wasn't.

And my number, it's a matter of record. There is no question about that, that I was there. They have these records, I promise you.

I could claim some. I would have pay for me from where I was in camp, every month so much. I made a claim on my health, but I never collected a penny. They didn't recognize that my claim was good enough because I wasn't sick enough. This was in 1958. I was finally examined by a German doctor in Los Angeles. The German Consulate instructed him to examine me.

But I told him, are we examining me in 1958? Why didn't you examine me in 1945? You would have seen how I looked, what I weighed.

You weighed. How much did you weigh?

I'm already 13 years in America, I said.

How much did you weigh when you--

Oh, I don't know.

You were very thin.

Very thin. Maybe it was in kilos. I don't know. Maybe 100 pounds 110, I don't know. You could count all my ribs.

Now, at one time-- then in camp, later on, I got a little better. And then, on the death march they took it away from me. You see, I lost all the fat I accumulated. It sort of helped me maybe survive too. So, they took the fat off.

A lot of people who have been through the experience say they can't throw any food away ever. Do you have that?

Yes, I have that hangup. Yes, I do.

One man told me, in my house, no one throws food away.

We do throw it away, but I am mad that we do. But it's all up here, you see. I know that. And my wife understands.

That's understandable. Sure.

Because you see, when she buys a bread, we eat four slices. And three days later, the bread is hard. And I'd say, what happened to the bread? She says, I threw it out. What am I going to do with it? That bothers me. It bothers me. You know about this.

Well, yeah. A lot of people have said that to me today.

We are on the conservative side, those that came out. I am not the kind of guy that feel that I have to put it under my pillow because tomorrow I may not have anything to eat. But I'm basically conservative. I don't save the bread anymore.

We throw out more expensive things, I think, in the United States already. When I found that we throw more stuff away than what we throw out here, the nations in Europe, we easily, we have more. We basically, we've wasted a lot of things here.

You have an appreciation, though, that a lot of Americans don't have.

I have tremendous appreciation for this country. I know of this. I was there, and I was here. I'm not so crazy about the communists. I would like to send [INAUDIBLE]. They should go there for a while and see what it's like.

You see, it's easy to be a hero when you sit on the other side. It's very easy. Like, many people will tell you, we know what you went through. They don't. You see what I mean? You can never know. The president said that yesterday.

Unless you were there, you have no imagination how terrible it was at times. That you could gone crazy from hunger, beating, all kinds of things. Sure we can sympathize. I know, I know the guys went through a lot.

But there's no use harping on this. But you asked me before, how often do I-- I talk about it from time to time. It doesn't bother me. It didn't bother me from day one. I could talk about it to my daughter, with my wife.

But you can't talk about it all the time. You're going to get sick and tired of it. There is other things in life-- not that I want to forget about it. I should never forget about it. And I never will forget about it. How can you, you see?

You have my mother, and I choked up last night. [INAUDIBLE] talk after that, after that talk.

[INAUDIBLE], I'm not religious as he. But he can Kaddish, and all that. And then afterwards, you know it hit me.

You must have felt good though, in a way, because it's nice to have-- you need to have those feelings all together with the people who really understand your feelings.

Yeah, but my wife understands me, and she feels for me. She never went through this.

My daughter feels for me. She watches these movies. She sends me books that she got at UCLA. She wrote essays on the Holocaust at UCLA. She got triple A's on them. You should read it. It's magnificent. Yeah, magnificent. She's more involved than I am, to tell you the truth.

Oh, it's because she loves you, and she wants to know what happened to you.

And she wants to know. And I told her everything. And so it--

But you can't talk about this day in and day out. That's why I do not belong to any organizations of that sort. People are after me all the time. You should. You should. You should. I didn't want to go for this. I don't know what you this. There's a lady that dragged me over here because her husband was in them. She says you must.

And you recall the lady that was sitting there wanted to give me an interview for tomorrow. I'm sorry. I'm not going to miss the party. If you want to hear my story, you have to make a plan for me. I already know my story. It's not going to do any good to anybody to hear my story.

There's a lot of stories like this. I'm no hero.

Everybody's story is important. You know why it's important for you to tell this story.

I think it's important future generations should know that we don't walk in blindly into the next Holocaust. There's no way.

Sometimes I have dreams. And that's true. I claimed this to the Germans, but never got anything because they didn't believe me, I'm disabled now. You can ask my wife. I've many times now, it's how many years ago that I-- not lately, but I used to get up in the middle of the night. I used to start moaning and groaning. And she used to wake me up.

I was all perspiring. I was somewhere in camp, and they were selecting, and I was on the wrong side. And I was all puffed up, and I was being gassed. And I kept postponing the gassing. I said, let's [INAUDIBLE]

I was once on a block in Auschwitz, getting from one to another, where we didn't make the blankets right. The Block the Block leader said. So we were ordered we were going to get 25 stroke each with a thick rubber hose, on your tushy, pants off.

But you couldn't have so many guys. He was a real-- the general. This was a Pollock. So 50 one night, then 50 the next night. The 50 out.

So I didn't go. I got time for tomorrow. You know what happened the next day? I swear. This guy was transferred, that was moved to somewhere else, and I didn't get the-- I didn't get the torture. That was on Block 14 in Auschwitz. I didn't get the 25 strokes. I figured for that, I could wait till tomorrow.

You can wait for that.

Yeah, baby. till tomorrow. I mean, we had the stories. The cook wants 50 pounds of potatoes, on the-- some aprons from the kitchen, from the kitchen laundry, you see. There were these big containers where we're cooking soup.

I was in the SS laundry, and we were cooking. That SS man was nice, the one who did-- that's the one, that guy who was in charge of me. He was a sergeant. [INAUDIBLE] His name was Karl [INAUDIBLE]. And he knew we were doing shtick to survive. But he looked the other way.

And I was boiling potatoes, 50 kilos. That's 100 pounds.

In the laundry you were boiling?

In the laundry, in that same container, in the same type of container. In the kitchen they had those containers too. But they were cooking soup. That's why we were getting soup, soup, with nothing in it.

We were in the laundry, so we put on top of the potatoes the aprons.

So it would look like you were--

It would like, yeah. And then we got into the block where we slept, to the block where-- I didn't have to be there anymore I had better food to eat. This one works in the kitchen. But for the remainder, I put some [INAUDIBLE] in.

You brought the food to them?

I didn't bring them food. It was all organized. I looked the other way. And it got on the block. And everybody got a [INAUDIBLE]. Very dangerous, but did this sometimes. But I was able to get my hands on the potatoes. That was the trick.

Did it make you feel good you could help?

Yes. The [INAUDIBLE]. I got witnesses for this. They're right here, Americans in Los Angeles. There are-- the first trick was to steal them, to get them. The second trick was to boil it. And the third was to get it through the gate inside the camp.

You see, when they're counting the-- how much food you're taking, because from the food. You have to come up. You have to send men out to carry the things back. They had them in those-- you may have seen that.

Buckets?

Buckets. You had to hold them on both sides, one man, because they were heavy. But it was a good job to carry, because they could, later on, dip their fingers in and lick out the-- yeah, right.

And bathrooms, we had no bathrooms. They had holes there where you went. You choose what you had to do. There was no toilet paper. There was no toilet paper. There was no paper of any kind. There was no toothbrush.

You see, in Buchenwald, when somebody got into the camp, from the beginning, Dachau-- you know, those famous concentration camps? The Nazis? They had even toothbrushes, you know. And they were giving them towels. I didn't have a towel.

We had no toothbrush. We had no soap. We had no-- I had shoes and the string, it went kaput. So we used wire to tighten your shoes. I mean, until--

Then, later on, when I was in the laundry, of course, I was able to help myself to better shoes and better luck. But the ordinary soldiers-- that's what you would call it-- the ones that worked outside, you see, they didn't have this privilege.

I had a fella from Brno. He still writes me. He writes me. He says, you saved my life. His name is Otto [INAUDIBLE]. He lives in Brno, Czechoslovakia. I saved his life. He got my ration every night.

Oh, because you had food from the--

I didn't need this. I didn't need it. I arranged for him to pick up my ration. So he got my bread and my soup. On this you could live.

If you had two rations, you gave the--

Yes. Yes. And then he sneaked into my case. Ah, he wrote me, and he asked my wife. He used to send me after the war. He writes me letters.

He was in Norway recently. He has a son that ran away from Czechoslovakia into Norway. And he wrote me from Norway, how things really are, until he went back to Czechoslovakia.

He was a nice man. He came late in camp. But in 1944 he came from Theresienstadt. He survived.

You must have felt good that you could help him.

Oh, yeah.

And it must have given you--

I have a fellow, a friend in New York. His name is [? Nathan ?] [? Krieger. ?] He was with me in Auschwitz in my Kommando. I saved his life. He knows my wife and my daughter. I was in New York. I got from him a clock in remembrance. You have never seen a clock from a-- the fancy jewelry store. Tiffany's?

Tiffany's.

Must have cost a fortune.

How did you save his life?

I picked him for my Kommando, for the laundry. He was boiling-- he was peeling potatoes. His legs were as thick as you can-- you know, those are the ones when get when you have no vitamins. The legs get thick. [INAUDIBLE] His son is an attorney. And when I get to New York, he [INAUDIBLE]. He came to this too.

It was him. I didn't know him from Adam. I looked at him. He had those beautiful blue eyes, a calf's eyes, like, you know? That's all you could see, were his eyes. He was like this.

And he cannot remember anymore. He does remember. I said it wrong. He remembers that the first time I got him into our Kommando, I didn't let him eat all that beautiful stuff that he was--

Because you knew it would kill him.

Well, it would kill him, yeah.

You were smart. A lot of people didn't know.

And I remember that day. And he remembers this very well, and he's telling this to me, about how I didn't let him eat. And little by little, I let him eat more and more. And then he got on his feet.

And he was doing well in New York. I talk to him occasionally on the phone. He's Polish. He's a Pole.

That's wonderful.

I don't know about work. But he said, the clock I have at home. "And for friendship beyond the call of duty," or something.

Certainly was.

I was so touched when he gave me this. And I was only there three days. I didn't have enough time. He must have had this on an express way down. It's a beautiful, beautiful sight.

That's wonderful.

But that's not here nor there, right--

Well, the trouble is we're getting older.

You look just fine, I'll tell you. You both look wonderful.

I'm 62.

You don't look 62.

I'm 61. Ha-ha.

No, you look kind of--

It's only lately, when you're getting gray, and what you do now, right?

You look wonderful.

Thank you.

You're healthy.

Yeah. Whatever. We all have little things.

Oh, little things. We don't count the little things.

They have little things from the camp that sooner or later crop up. And I found this out--

Oh, really?

--from other people.

Like what?

Like varicose veins, let's say.

From standing up.

Yes. They say no, it's not connected. My doctor says it's not from walking. It's nonsense. American doctor, I don't believe him. [INAUDIBLE] from walking.

You get little problems with the heartbeat, or the lungs, or over something else. I have several friends that have little problems, like high blood pressure and one time. I got [INAUDIBLE]. This all comes from excitement. We have a lot of work.

Oh, Yeah.

You see? We don't know what's going to be next year. So when you are under stress like this--

Constantly.

--so many years, the times, for a long time, not just for five minutes, you see, it's got to do something to you. It's got to do something.

But you must feel like you're a strong person, that you came out of it, and you were able to love, and give love, and have a--

I came out normal, I think.

That's what I'm saying. That's really a gift.

Some people are nervous wrecks. And you can't really blame them.

No, you can't. It's almost amazing that a person isn't.

I saw someone with this-- I saw him from the last meeting, I saw a prisoner cut a throat to [INAUDIBLE] because they found lice on him.

We all had lice. We all have lice. Would you have lice if for months you couldn't wash up. You wore the same clothes. You cannot wash up. It was a little here, a little there. And you have no towel. You have no soap. Wearing the same thing all over. Sooner or later, you're going to have lice. I don't care who you are.

So they were checking on the death march, and this guy was in charge. He was a German. We were on the death march. It was maybe in March '45. And he was in charge. So he wanted to see who has lice. And he came to the guy, and he started picking.

And he found that he had a lice in his-- when you take a shirt off-- I didn't know how to look for this. I learned. You find, in the clothing, you find lice. It's not the kind of lice you see. It's in the clothing. And then throw away the clothing, or go through steam or something, you may get rid of it.

But he found it in the clothing. But we had no other clothing. And the guy gave him an argument. He took out a knife and slit his throat. I saw this with my own eyes.

Did you feel like, I can't believe what I'm seeing. I can't--

I can't believe. Yes. And there was nothing you could do about it. I was in Auschwitz-- the first time we were standing, while we were still in civilian clothing, in 1942. You saw the prisoners march up at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning.

We were staying in civilian clothes. They let us watch this. That's before they cut our hair and gave us the numbers, the night that we arrived. And this guy told me, it three days you're going to live here.

And I saw an SS man walking around with a dog. He looked through the prisoners. You know, they were they in striped uniforms, not further than 50 feet from me. Pulled one out. Maybe he didn't look good to him, or what it was. He pulled out a pistol and killed him-- shot him.

On the death march, the second day, on the 19th of January, in 1945, when we were in Gleiwitz concentration camp, that camp was already deserted. They moved us in on the death march on the way east. That camp already--

Well, you didn't save yourself one minute, did you?

Yeah, no. In that camp at night, we were looking for food. And there was no food. There was one prisoner that I saw with my own eyes, no further than this door you see here. He had a bulge in his pocket. An SS man--