

What's your name?

Josef Kreitenberg, spelled K-R-E-I-T-E-N-B-E-R-G.

And where were you born, Mr. Kreitenberg?

Was born in a small town, Tacovo, Czechoslovakia.

In what year?

1929.

What was happening in your life-- what were you doing at the time that they came to take you to Auschwitz?

Well, in the beginning, first, we were not permitted to go to school. So we just had to stay at home. Then after a while, we were restricted to our homes. And a short time thereafter, they formed a ghetto in our town. And it was-- stayed in the ghetto for a brief time, perhaps a couple weeks only.

Your whole family?

My whole family. We were three brothers and a sister-- three sister, actually, and both of my parents. My oldest brother went away with a workforce of the Hungarian Army at the time. So I remained with two other brothers and then my twin sisters. And so we went-- we were taken to camp together.

To the ghetto, you mean?

To the ghetto, and thereafter, to Auschwitz.

OK. And what happened when they came to take you to Auschwitz? Did you know what they were coming to-- to take you away?

Nobody knew. We did not know, actually, where they are going to take us. There was the-- perhaps now, of course, the biggest surprise that nobody knew what was happening or what was going on.

Was anybody guessing at where you were going?

Was some-- they said to Poland. But nobody knew. And we didn't think that they have such camps, although we did hear that they are killing a lot of Jews over there. But we thought, perhaps, they're going to take us to some labor camps. And nobody really imagined what type of labor camps there were over there.

What were the conditions like in the train?

Well, they loaded us on the-- perhaps-- I don't know how many people exactly. It was full capacity. And you could hardly move. And were closed trains, boxcars, not really passenger trains.

Were you allowed-- I'm sorry.

Yeah, go ahead.

Were you allowed to bring anything with you?

Yes. They allowed us to take probably about 50 pounds. That's about all, and nothing else. And they just-- and the order just told us within a short time to pack up and to leave. And the Hungarian-- actually, my state was at the time under

Hungarian rule. And it was the Hungarians who really put us on the trains up to-- and they were with the trains up to the borders. And at the borders, the Germans took over from the Hungarians.

What did the-- you talk about on the train?

Mainly, the people were just concerned they should take them to-- that they were always hoping that they were just take them to some labor camp, and eventually, things will work out. They were always hoping.

What happened when you got to Auschwitz?

So when we arrived to Auschwitz, as soon as we got off the trains, of course, they separated those who were the able-bodied people, those who were able to work, and those who were not-- and also, men and women. Since I was there with two other brothers and my father, even though I was young-- I was only 14 and a half-- somehow, some reason or other, I decided to go with my brothers and my father, even though I was young.

And also, the fact that they did mention when we arrived there-- they called out those people who are twins could go to another side because they-- for some reason or other, they took twins and they placed them in a separate camp. And of course, we just found out later, it was mainly to-- they were conducting some experiments. But I did-- I just did not go. And many times, perhaps, I think about it, maybe if I would go, perhaps--

Your father and-- you and your brothers weren't--

So what I was saying-- perhaps if I would have gone with my sister, maybe she would have been alive, perhaps.

Did your sister go into the twins like?

Because my-- no, my twin sisters went with my mother. So then I decided to go with the working people, even though very few children, really, in my age did go with the labor force. And I was. So as soon as we arrived there, we had to be lined up.

And the SS men used to walk through to check who is-- out of the people who did line up to go the labor force, whether they were actually capable of working, for some reason or other. Because they did take out still-- they made a selection. And they took out some elderly or children who they felt could not work.

But for some reason or other, I decided to go. We were lined up perhaps 10 in a row. So I decided to go with my father in the center, since I was short. And I took a-- somehow, it occurred to me to take-- pick up a stone, to stand on the stone.

So that you looked larger than you looked, yeah.

To look taller.

Where did you go from there? Where did they take?

So after we stayed at Birkenau, this was really the arrival camp, we stayed there only a couple days till they processed us through.

What did the processing involve?

The processing consisted of-- well, we had to go through a-- first of all, of course, they put us a tattoo number, which was-- which is 101810192. And then they took us to a public bath because they took away all our clothes. And we had to go-- well, they shaved us completely. And they gave us-- issued a clothing with striped clothing.

Did the clothes they gave you fit?

No, it did not fit. We were-- tried to select whatever is closest which would fit you. And after that, we were taken to Auschwitz, which was the camp where they are-- the labor camp into the real Auschwitz, not the arrival camp. And at that-- over there, they separated the people into various workforce categories.

And somehow, they called out who would want to volunteer for-- it's called in German [GERMAN]. Since I spoke Yiddish, we didn't know. In Yiddish, [YIDDISH] means a mill. Perhaps, we thought we would be going to make flour. So at least, we thought, we would go-- we would have to eat, something to eat.

But instead, actually, it turned out that in German, [GERMAN] means altogether different. It means to make fertilizers. And so that's where we ended up, at the-- working at this-- was actually like a public dump.

Your father and your brothers?

My father, one brother. My other brothers did not come with us. He went with his friends somewhere else. And he did not return. It so happens that he was actually the strongest of all yet he did not return because he was very selective in foods as to-- at home, this what I know, but he was eating. So I presume, perhaps, maybe this would have had some effect as to why he did-- he couldn't just last a little more there.

How long-- so were you barracked together with your father and brother?

So I was together, yes, with my father and one brother. We were there together until about October. And at that time, they made the selection, where they made us again-- made to go through everybody, the entire camp a public bath, stripped naked.

This was done after we came home from work. And it was at that time that-- when I went through that that my father was selected-- he was not-- and taken away from us. And of course, those who were selected, they just took them away to Birkenau and they were burned.

Did you realize at the time that you would probably see him the last time?

Yes, I did. So I remained there with my brother in Auschwitz. However, to go back a little bit, as it turned out, the-- this dump site where we were working at was not altogether the worst.

Because what they did was bring out from the trash or old-- from the transports that they brought out the Jews from Poland or Hungary, they brought through certain luggage that-- with food, cookies, with dried-up bread and so forth. So that suddenly, we had a-- so some of the food was still edible. So that actually sustained us.

Right. Without those--

So without those, who knows whether we could have really lived through.

So all the belongings went to the-- went to this dump where you all were working?

Yes.

And then you were separated again.

And then, well-- so we stayed there in Auschwitz until-- it was the middle of January. And that's the time when the Russian Army's advanced towards Auschwitz. So all of a sudden, in one evening, they called us all out and told us, we have to leave the camp. And it was in January. In Poland, it's very cold at that time.

And we all had to pick up whatever we had. And they lined us up. And we had-- we marched to another city in Poland, to Gleiwitz, which, actually, Elie Wiesel went-- in his book describes very well that march. Because we were actually

going through that in the same time.

I have-- before leaving Auschwitz, as we were getting ready to leave, sort of-- my brother had a knife and he cut his finger by accident in order to get something out from a cabinet. We had a little bit of sugar stored and a piece of bread. And of course, we could not go to a doctor ever since that finger did not heal for him. And he just-- and he was just-- he lost that finger.

But while it was really a very difficult two days, we marched from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz, I remember, people we were just falling right and left because some people just could not walk. They just could not make it. And the ones who stayed behind, of course, they just shot you. And luckily, I had strong feet every time.

And as we were going, it was during a cold night, so the front were going up a hill, I used to fall asleep. Or my brother used to-- we used to trade off. My brother used to hold my hand or while we were going up, and on the way going down, I used to wake up. We marched all along. We were--

What happened when you got to Gleiwitz?

It was for-- that was perhaps the most difficult of all times, the Gleiwitz. So in Gleiwitz, they-- again, they loaded us on open boxcars. They put so many of us on these open trains that you couldn't move. It was just unbearable. And being so short, everybody tried to get to the end, to a ledge to be able to hold on.

Otherwise, somebody just moved you over, you were just squished and you couldn't get any air to breathe, even though the boxcar was open. And we were on that train, as I understand it, for about eight or 10 days without any food except what we brought along, that little bit of granulated sugar. And the conditions were so bad that when people-- some people really got insane.

People got insane on the train. How did the other people react?

They used to imagine all kinds of things as to where they're coming at and what-- where they're taking us. It's just unbelievable what they were imagining and thinking up-- making up stories.

Did they do anything that caused the Germans to recriminate against the group? Or was there any fear of that?

We were inside the boxcar. The Germans didn't even know what was happening. Of course, on the way, sometimes, they stopped. And we used to just throw out the dead bodies. And this made more room for the rest of them.

See, the only thing, really, what we had over there to eat was the snow. So sometimes, we used to-- as soon as we had the sugar, we used to mix up a little bit of sugar with the snow and eat that, from the snow that was snowing on the ledges of the-- within the boxcar.

And in order to be able to stay alive, one had to watch the other. Because if you just sat down, some other person could just step over you and bend over you. People were very, very tired and sleepy. And people just suffocated. As far as water, since we didn't have anything to drink, it was so bad that we used to have to drink our own urine. Of course, that was the most difficult to.

Perhaps, out of all, very few were-- by the time we arrived to the camp, to Dora, it's called, very few people really survived and that's it. And it was there that when we got off the train, we could hardly walk. One had to-- well, one had to hold on to the other to be able to walk after not walking around for so many days.

And as soon as the people got off the train, many of-- my brother as well as others, they-- we were so hungry. So they ate. They started eating snow and drinking the cold water. And as a result of that, they got sick. And they got dysentery.

Luckily, I just could not get to the-- to it, couldn't walk. And I couldn't get to the cold water. And I was really lucky. I did not get sick.

And after staying in this-- in Dora for a few days, my brother got very ill. He was very sick. I had to-- when we had to go outside to be counted, I had to hold him up because he couldn't stand on his feet. So eventually, I had to leave him over there. And I did not know where they took him.

And I remained over there in Dora. We worked in a underground factory. And it was completely underground. As I understand it, they were making some kind of weapons over there.

And after being there a short time, so I finally remained by myself. The Germans-- apparently, they still did not give up. And they took us further, put us on trains again. And we ended up in Bergen-Belsen. And I was-- it was there in Bergen-Belsen that I was finally liberated.

What happened on the day you were liberated? Do you remember when they came in?

Well, when we arrived to Bergen-Belsen, the conditions was already done so bad that they really did not feed us any longer. And here, again, many people got sick from typhoid. And that's why they had to dig the large graves for thousands of people who just put into it because they died from-- of typhoid.

And somehow, again, I somehow could not eat dirty potato peels or water. And instead, I was-- of course, got very weak. But in the end, it paid off. And I was-- I stayed well as a result of that.

Do you remember when the soldiers came in?

The soldiers came in as we were just standing in the morning, when they were counting us. And this just happened all of a sudden. And we just didn't know what was happening.

Did you realize that you all were being liberated?

As soon as the news spread fast, and everybody, of course, just broke the ranks, and we saw the jeeps coming in to the camp. And that's why we knew we were liberated.

I have to get one more important thing. I don't know whether there is-- in 19-- just last year, in 1982, a lady by the name of Lili Meier published an Auschwitz album. And it so happens that she also comes from a town not far from me. Although I was out of town at the time, and my nephew of mine happened to read it in the LA Times. So he went out and bought.

And as he was-- my brother was looking through these pictures-- first, let me perhaps go back a little. She happened to find these pictures. She was transferred to a German barrack.

And she was looking in a cupboard and happened to come across these pictures in this camp, Dora, where I also happened to be. So this-- looking at these pictures, she happy to find-- see a picture of her own rabbi from that--
[AUDIO OUT]

So as my brother was looking through the pictures, he came across pictures of our entire family-- myself, and himself, my father, and my mother, and sister. And this perhaps was the greatest shock to me ever since then, to find the pictures of my father, and my sister, and my mother since I had no pictures of them at all. This was perhaps the-- since this is after 19-- after 39 years, this was the way they still--

And you said, you had no pictures or anything.

It's-- yeah, I suppose you carry around a certain vision in your mind if you don't have the pictures. And then, all of a sudden, after so many years, to see a picture, and you see exactly how we looked at the time we arrived there, we have a different picture, a different view of your parents and sister.

You said, your brother had found these. Now, your brother, when he went to the underground factory, he had been ill. So he didn't go down there with you. Is that correct? How had he?

Oh, I left that out. Perhaps when I-- on the way going home from camp, I met my brother, whom I left in this camp in Dora. He was very sick. I met him in Budapest.

After liberation?

After liberation. I didn't think he would be alive still. But I found him.

What happened directly after liberation? Where did you go?

After liberation, I went back home to same town where I come from to see if anybody's alive. So on the way, I found my brother in Budapest. And I also found my brother who was in the Hungarian labor force. So I have two brothers in the United States. And of course, I lost one brother and a sister in the camps.

When you were-- were you in a DP camp? Had they-- where they turned Bergen-Belsen into a DP camp?

No. So after staying a while at home, we realized that there is-- I realized that there is no future for me there either. I did not want to stay under the Russians. The Russians took that part of Czechoslovakia back. So we went back to Czechoslovakia to live in Sudeten. And I lived there from 1945 to '46.

Did your brothers go back there too?

Yes. And from '46-- and we left to a DP camp in Germany, with the ultimate goal of going to Israel. But since that-- at the time, they did not allow Jews to go to Israel-- Palestine at the time-- and also, since I was young, so I was under 18, I had an opportunity to come with the children's transport to the United States. So that's why I came to this country.

Did your brother's come also or did they stay?

One brother came. That is in 1947. And one stayed in Germany. And he came later.

What was it like trying to rebuild your life? Did you have to choose a name? What happened when you got here on the children's transport?

Yes?

Did-- were you-- I'm sorry, shouldn't ask the questions fast. Were you sponsored by the American Jewish Congress?

We came through-- I think it was through HIAS. I have it under the children's-- they did have a special quota--

Where did you--

--for children. They gave us special preference.

Where did you live after you came to the US?

I arrived to New York and immediately went out to Los Angeles.

How did that work? Did they have somebody in Los Angeles that you would live with?

Yes. What happened is-- was that they tried to send, especially children, to somewhere where they had some relatives. And I did have a-- in Los Angeles at the time an aunt. And that's why we went to Los Angeles.

Is there anything more that you want to talk about?

Perhaps the only thing-- I might just add, the reason I came here is perhaps, what we have to do is remind the world the fact that it did happen. And so unless we do, it will be all forgotten in a short time. And we must do-- I supposed to do next-- maybe I should say, for the past 2,000 years, the Jews have been living with the Torah alone. I think we have to, for the next 2,000 years, live with the Torah and the gun to defend ourselves.

Thank you.