

This is Lisa Korn. The date is April 12. I'm here talking to Mr. Lee Potasinski. Would you please spell your name?

Yeah. P-O-T-A-S-I-N-S-K-I.

And where were you born?

I was born in Bedzin, Poland.

In what year?

In 1932. And to start off, to tell the story how we were taken to labor camps and then eventually to the concentration camp, I was taken to a labor camp at the age of 9 and 1/2.

What events led up to that?

Well, what led up to that was the constant degradation of the human being, actually, while you lived in your own hometown. Life was made impossible. It wasn't so much, you know, whether it was a matter of food. It was a matter of being able to exist. In other words, one week you were told you can't walk through certain streets. Another week you were told you had to wear a Jewish star. And a third week you were told you had to wear an armband with a Jewish star on it.

And little by little, of course, they started taking people into slave labor camps, starting with people age 20, up to about 30.

What did your father do before the war?

My father had a retail and wholesale business, ladies wear and piece goods.

Was that taken away from him?

Yeah. There was no question about it. It was-- matter of fact, it was understood as soon as the Germans came in that everything seized. The business and everything was taken away.

As far as family, they said people that were at the age 20 to 30 to 35 were, little by little, taken into camps. And what remained within the town were elderly people, young children, and women, and wives of people that were taken prior to that into labor camps.

How did it happen in your family?

My family-- my mother's uncle was the first one to be taken to camp.

Did he live nearby?

He lived in the same building with us. And my mother's sister was taken to labor camp. She had a small child, and the child was taken away from her. We don't know what happened. We know the child was killed. How, we don't know. But we imagine.

And this continued, of course. And--

What did people do? Did you-- were you given any notice that they were coming to take you away?

No. There was no notice at all. They used to come in the middle of the night or middle of the day because it didn't really matter. They had complete control, not only control of the town but the complete control over the physical human being.

They'd come in and, at random, and pick people out and take them away. And they'd take them to a gathering place. And once that happened, we knew what the eventual outcome would be.

OK. Was the gathering place near the train station?

Yes. Most of the gathering places were near the train station. In our town they used to gather near the train station. From there they took them to another town nearby, which was a much larger gathering place. And there they pulled together people from four or five other towns. And of course, from that point on they were sent into camp.

Eventually, as I mentioned, all the so-called able-bodied people were sent to camp. And what remained were, again, women, children, elderly people. And one day-- and that was the only time we did get a notice-- we were told that, we were told one day in the morning that the next day at 7 o'clock everybody had to assemble in one single place.

Was that your--

That was--

Was your immediate family still together at that point?

At that point, my mother and my sister, which I lost, of course, my grandparents, and the rest of my aunts, one of my uncles, all my cousins, we gathered at that place. The entire town gathered. And they made us sit there all day and all night.

Were you allowed to bring anything with you?

They told us it wasn't necessary. They said the reason for the gathering is to issue new documents, new papers. And whoever will not come to the gathering place and will not have these new papers, and it will be found either at home or on the street with their old papers, will be arrested. So of course, everybody was afraid, and everybody went and gathered.

Did people believe that, or did they think they'd be taken away?

They did not believe it, but they had no choice. There was no other way because either way you did it, you were on the losing end.

So you took-- basically, you took nothing with you.

No, not at all. We sat there, as I said, all day and into the night. And we sat-- and in the early morning hours--

And that was when you were 9 and 1/2?

At that point, no. At that point, I must have been about 8 and 1/2.

What were the adults talking about while they were sitting and waiting?

The main talk consisted of trying to save the children. Parents or grandparents used to look in different directions, trying to see which way they can get out with their children. But they knew that there was no way of getting out.

What were the children doing? Were they playing or were they talking?

No. Children were just sitting quietly. If I remember correctly, I think I remember the thoughts that went through my mind were, well, you're lost. There is nothing you can do about it. And the only hope you had was in your parents, in other words, that they will save you. But they couldn't.

And then after that day?

They gradually started calling people up towards the front. And there was a line of SS lined up. And as you came up, they decided-- as families came up, the SS decided whether the family will be divided. That is, whether the mother, if she is able enough to be sent to a camp, will go to a camp. And the children were sent to Auschwitz.

I personally, I sat with my mother, my sister, and myself. And I recall my mother was looking back and forth, trying to decide which was the right moment to go up and present herself. For some reason or other, she made us get up. We both got up, and we started running towards the SS. And she screamed out, and she said that she's an able-bodied woman, that she can work, and that she can take care of her children.

And somehow he said, well, if that's the way you say it, we'll let you go. So he let us out. They gave us new papers, and they let us back into town. But through that process, of course, thousands of people were already eliminated because as they were called up, thousands were automatically sent to Auschwitz and to the gas chambers.

We went back to town. And we were just waiting around because we knew-- and I saw my grandparents were sitting there, same gathering place. And we didn't know, will they come back or won't they come back?

After about an hour or so, my grandparents showed up. And again, life continued the same hell. There was no change. People were, of course, again, picked out into camps. Whether it was once a week or twice a week, whenever they felt like it, they came into your house and-- or picked you right off the street.

While in our hometown, everybody tried to get work because whoever was found not working was immediately sent into camp. And I remember at that point, my mother worked in a factory, a night shift. And she, once in a while, used to take both of us along, my sister and I, to work, hoping that that way she'd be able to hide us, that in case they do come at night they won't find us.

What did you do while your mother was working, if she didn't take you with her?

If she didn't take me? Just sat home because everybody was afraid to walk out. And any little noise, any little movement that you heard on the street or in the building, you figured, well, they're coming to get you.

Did they just shut down the schools when they came into the town?

Yeah. That was completely-- you know, especially-- well, they didn't shut down the schools as far as students of-- as far as Gentiles, in this case Polish Gentiles. But as far as Jewish, the kids could not go to school because those schools were located in certain streets where Jews were not allowed to walk through. I personally never had a chance to go to school in Poland, until I came to the United States.

So your mother had been working in the factory. And--

Until one day, for some reason or other, she couldn't take us along that night. At that point already, they had gathered all the remaining Jews in town. And they put them all together in one area, which was a ghetto. And that particular night, I stayed with my grandparents.

And in the early morning hours, we heard a lot of noise. And we realized that they came to-- that they came with trucks to round us up. My mother, of course, was at work. And I couldn't get to her, and she couldn't get to me either.

They rounded us up. And they took us again into an open field. I was sitting there with my grandparents, my sister, my two aunts, her two children. And I did not see my mother because my mother was at work. But we did see people that worked night shifts were brought into the same area.

As I was sitting there, they started a selection again, in other words, able-bodied people to be taken to a concentration

camp and children and older people into extermination camps.

At that point I was 9 and 1/2. And my grandfather told me, he said to me, look, he says, you see across from you, there are those people that look healthy. And the only way you'll have-- no, the only chance that you have to get out of here is to run across on that side. Otherwise, you're finished.

I didn't want to go, of course. He pushed me. And I picked myself up, and I ran across on the other side. From that moment on, I did not see my sister again. I did not know where my mother was.

And they took my particular group, and they started marching us toward a railroad station. And they make us sit down. And matter of fact, I just mentioned this a while ago to my daughter. At the age of 9 and 1/2, I was-- of course, I stood out in a crowd. And that was very dangerous at that point because I wasn't supposed to be there. And they told everybody to sit down. And so I figured out, if I sit down I'll be-- I'll stand out.

So I knelt all the way, figuring that I will be at least level with the grownups that were sitting-- sitting down. And as I was sitting down, it must have been a matter of a few hours, I saw that they were marching through all the remaining people, which meant the people that were going to-- automatically being taken to Auschwitz. I just wanted my sister and my grandparents and the rest of my family, all those cousins and uncles and everybody.

We were taken into, at that point, into a labor camp. It was not called a concentration camp yet.

Were there any uncles or male cousins or anything, any members of your family in the transport with you?

No. Nobody there. And in fact another thing I just mentioned to my daughter, when we came into the first labor camp, I looked around and I was wearing short pants. It was summertime. And I started crying, I want to go home.

Somebody told me, he said, look, either continue crying or you shut your mouth. Otherwise, you're dead.

One of the other prisoners?

No. You know, the SS guards were standing right outside. And as soon as they heard any kind of noise, they came right in.

What was the name of the camp?

The first camp was Markstadt. That was on the border between Poland and Germany.

What happened once you got off the-- well, you just said that you were crying when you got off the train. What happened then? Was there another selection made?

No. And usually when you get off-- got off the train, you were lined up, either in lines of three or-- three deep or five deep and counted, the number of people that were there. And you marched into camp. There was no selection made.

That camp, we must have stayed there about six or seven months. And it was a working camp, where they took you out to work. You worked in construction or unloading sand, cleaning bricks, and so on. It was mostly construction work.

And you were there seven or eight months?

I'd say about six or seven months.

What kind of food did you get while you were there?

The food consisted of coffee in the morning and a piece of bread and soup at night.

What happened if somebody got ill? What happened if someone got ill?

If someone got ill it was as if you were condemned to die automatically because there was no medical care, of course. And everybody was afraid to get ill. You knew as soon as you get ill that they'd take you-- they took you out of your barracks. And you were put into the infirmary, so to speak. And you were just lying there.

So either you were recuperated on your own for some reason or other, or a person died. I remember, not in this first camp but in my fourth or fifth camp, I had typhoid fever. And I was put into the infirmary, into one of the bunks and just lay there. I don't know whether it was three or four days passed by until, somehow or other, I came out of it.

What-- OK, you were there seven or eight months. And then--

Right. And then we were transported to another camp. This continued until we came to a camp by the name of Annaberg. In Annaberg we stayed about three months. And then one day they told us we'd be leaving next day, in the morning, everybody to get ready.

Next day in the morning, we were lined up and marched to the train. And the trains were, of course, cattle trains. And I remember it started out early in the morning. And by late afternoon, we came into a railroad station. And it was getting dark. And we tried to look out and see where we were, and there were no signs or anything.

Did you just think you were going to another labor camp?

Yeah. But for some reason or other, I happened to catch a glimpse, as we were coming into the station, of a chimney with this flame coming out. And seeing that and I-- there was a certain peculiar smell. And after a while, I realized that it was the smell of flesh.

I don't know whether we were in Auschwitz or whether it was another extermination camp. And--

So you had heard of Auschwitz by that time?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. At that point, I noticed that the guards that were watching us were automatically switched. In other words, there were special guards that we had in Auschwitz. And these guards were all SS because, up until that point, there was a combination of what they called Wehrmacht and SS guards, which was National Guard and SS. And once he came into Auschwitz, the guards were switched. And when I saw that, I knew that that is the end.

As we were standing and sitting--

How old were you at this point?

At this point? 10 and 1/2 approximately. At that point, as we were sitting in the train, I saw on the other side of the track they were unloading people. But I really mean unloading. They took bodies, and they threw them on top of trucks and took them away.

Finally it came our turn. They opened the doors. And they started chasing us out. And we were marched through different camps because Auschwitz was so tremendous. It was divided into different camps. And we were brought into a room. And they let us sit there all night.

We didn't know what was going to happen until, if I remember correctly, until the next day. They took us into another room, all tiled walls. And they told everybody to undress.

And at that point, I mean, people didn't care because, first of all, you couldn't help it. There was nothing you could do about it. And second of all, everybody was-- you were absolutely numb. You didn't know already what will happen. And you didn't care what will happen.

They held us in that room until finally they opened another door. And I saw shower heads in the other room. And one by one we had to go in. And they did give us a shower. And from the shower room we walked into another room, where you were given special clothing because the clothing in Auschwitz consisted of concentration camp uniforms, which meant, you know, the striped pants and the striped jacket.

We went out. And then a line formed again. And of course, as I'd mentioned many times before, my disadvantage always was that I was so much younger. And I was afraid that I'll be spotted at any moment and picked out right away.

Well, eventually I got up to the point where there was a table, and there was an SS man standing. And two inmates that was supervised, they put tattoos on every everybody's arm. And from there you were taken to a regular camp. And you were not safe yet. In other words, you weren't safe at any moment in any camp. But at least you were safe for that minute or for that-- for the next 10 minutes.

What-- you said that you were taken to another camp.

Within Auschwitz.

Right. What was-- was there a special duty or whatever of the people in that camp?

No. People were just walking around. There was not enough work for everybody. So consequently, they kept you within the camp and doing nothing.

Once, every so often, a camp doctor would come in. And you would have to line up for a selection. She'd pick out-- whoever he picked to go to the right was lucky enough to remain. And whoever he picked to go to the left was taken to the ovens.

So basically you were just sitting in there.

Just sitting and waiting. And you didn't know what to wait for, actually. But I guess everybody knew what will happen. They knew that nobody will get out. But of course, you always hoped that something will happen. Nobody knew what, but something will happen and you will be able to get out.

Was the food the same kind of thing, with soup and bread and coffee?

Yes. It was coffee in the morning. There was no bread. There was soup at night. And as a matter of fact, many people were killed or trampled to death when it came to distribute soup at night. People always tried to get ahead, you know pushing to go up front to be able to get the soup because, if you waited too long, they ran out of soup, and you couldn't get any soup until the next day.

There were many times when the SS people themselves used to take-- they used to bring the soup in these big drums with covers on it. And they used to take the covers off those drums and they let you have it right over the head with the cover like that. And nobody ever recuperated from that.

What did-- was there a toilet?

It was latrine. That was a favorite hangout. People, for some reason or other, felt more safe than walking around on the camp grounds. There were many times-- of course, you know camp grounds were surrounded by barbed wire, double barbed wire with watchtowers. And many times the Nazis themselves, they didn't have to use any excuse. They would shoot down. So that seemed to have been a favorite hangout.

People may have felt they were safe from selection.

Yes. For that particular day. Exactly.

What happened from there?

Well, from there I imagine-- I didn't know it then, but of course now, that the Russians were getting closer. We didn't hear any shooting or anything, but for some reason or other, they told us that within one day, that is, let's say, tomorrow morning-- tonight, you will all be ready. You'll line up. And you're going to leave camp.

They took us out of camp. And they put us on trucks and brought us over to a railroad station. Again, I personally had the problem of being so young, and I was always afraid, should I get on the railroad car? Should I get on it first? Last?

When I did get on a railroad car, and we sat there all night in the trains. And towards morning, I felt the train started moving. We didn't know where we were going.

We finally wound up in Germany and Bavaria. From there we-- they unloaded us, and they started marching us, I would say, for a period of about two weeks, until they marched us into Dachau.

Needless to say, on the way there were hundreds of people that died. You were shot to death just at random, or died from starvation or sickness. They brought us into Dachau. And Dachau was so overcrowded that they could not even accommodate us in the barracks. But they kept us outside.

You men in the camp, but not in the--

Not in barracks, only in-- they kept us in Dachau, I would say, for about two weeks or so. And then they started marching us again until they brought us into the outskirts of Munich. And there there was a makeshift camp. It had two or three barracks.

There were no bunks, I remember, just benches and tables. There was no place where to sleep. People were either sleeping on the floor or just sitting on a bench and sleeping.

How many of you were there at that point?

At that point, I would say about between 3 and 1/2 and 4,000.

In two or three barracks?

Yeah.

And what happened after you got to the barracks?

We stayed in the barracks for almost two weeks again, until we heard a rumor that this afternoon, for example, they are going to march us across where there were woods right across from the barracks. And everybody's going to be shot.

At that point, I had made up my mind that I will never leave these barracks again, that either I'll somehow try and hide or if they have to shoot me, if they shoot me, they'll have to shoot me in a barracks. But I will not walk out of here.

They started taking some people across. They did shoot them. And all of a sudden it became very quiet. And a friend of mine said to me-- he looked out, and he said, I don't see any guards anymore. I said, you must be crazy. You don't see any guards. They must be hiding behind the barracks.

A few minutes after that, I saw a Jeep pull into camp. And there were four soldiers sitting in it. I didn't know whether they were German soldiers or American soldiers. And I ran out. And one of them was a-- he spoke a little bit of German.

And I asked, first question, of course, was, are you Jewish? And he said, yes. It was sort of unbelievable to see somebody in a uniform that speaks-- that says that he's Jewish. I mean, it was beyond imagination.

And they asked where the camp commandant was. We pointed out where we thought he always was. And it seems that they did find him. They went around the barracks, and they found him. They took him along. And they told us, you're free to go. And nobody left because nobody knew where to go, how to go, or what to do.

The only thing we did is everybody embraced each other. And we started crying. But we still did not know what to do and where to go because, you know, you were trained or you became like an animal. You were told for so many years what to do and what not to do that you were waiting for somebody to tell you what to do next.

So it was the Allies that liberated.

Yeah. It was the Americans.

And what happened then? Did they send you to a DP camp?

No. At that point, well, everybody wanted the town, which was Munich. And we started looking for food.

Were you able to just walk into town?

Yeah. Yeah.

What happened to those not strong enough to walk into town?

They stayed in the barracks. And we walked into town, and we brought back food for people that we knew couldn't make it into town.

How did you get the food? Did the Americans give you money or--

No. It was a matter of you just walked into any store. And you just took. And of course, the Germans didn't-- the German population didn't dare ask, why are you taking it?

As a matter of fact, we asked-- at that point, we asked many Germans in town, in Munich, didn't you know what happened right outside? No. The answer was, no, we had no idea. We didn't know.

And so then you went back to the barracks with the food and all.

Right. And we stayed there, I'd say, for a good four or five weeks. Some people went on their own into DP camps. I stayed there for about four or five weeks. And then a friend of mine told me, well, there's no use hanging around here. Let's go to a DP camp.

So I went to a DP camp by name a Feldafing, which was also outside of Munich. And we stayed in the DP camp. Of course, life in a DP camp compared to what we had in a concentration camp was like living in a first class resort.

Did people get sick from the food at first?

Yes. There were a lot of people that died, either from overeating or from eating certain foods which were too rich. A lot of people died.

I heard that the Americans brought-- were giving chocolate--

Yes.

--to prisoners who hadn't had sugar in so long.



Yes. And they did a lot of damage. Yeah. They used to have very thick chocolate bars. And everybody was very anxious, you know. Chocolates, we didn't-- we didn't even know what it was. And of course, whoever overate, a lot of them died from it.

OK. And then you went to the DP camp.

Right.

How did-- what did you have to do to rebuild your life from there? Did you have to choose a name or choose where you wanted to go?

No, because it was every man for himself. You'd live in a DP camp, and you usually had a buddy with you. And you could get up one day in the morning and say, well, I think I'm going to go to Poland to see what happened in Poland. So you have no belongings. You didn't have anything at all. You didn't need any kind of money to travel because you got on trains without having to buy any ticket.

We did get on a train, and we said we're going to Poland.

They just allowed you to get on the train with no tickets?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. In fact, you know, the hatred within us was so great that we are waiting for them to challenge us. And they didn't.

I went back to Poland to try and see and find, you know, members of my own family. And I did find in my hometown my aunt and her children. My parents were not there. But then after about, oh, five or six months, my father showed up. A few months after that, my mother showed up.

As far as my sister, no, my sister did not show up. And many, many members of my family did not show up either.

You said there were Gentiles in the town.

Yes.

How did they react?

The Gentiles, after the war, were not any better than the Gentiles before the war. Though, unfortunately, I would say, tens and tens of thousands of Jews killed because of Gentiles. In this particular case, you know, speaking of Poland because the Polish Gentiles, tens of thousands of Jews.

Were people living in your home when you went back?

Yes, sure they were. And there was nothing I could do about it. It was either not walk in, or if you try to walk in, you'd be killed.

Were you ever able to locate any of your belongings?

They were all there. You couldn't get anything out because you were threatened. You were told look if you want to come in here, your life is going to be in danger. And we knew it, that you'd be killed.

How long did you stay in Poland?

About a year.

And what made you decide to leave?

Well, primarily the Polish people themselves, the Gentiles, the fear that something like that might happen again within the next few months. So we decided to leave.

How did you get out?

We went-- from Poland, we went to Germany again. We stayed in Munich. And at that point, my father decided that-- well, my father had a sister that came to the United States many years back. And she sent us papers. But my father did not want to come to this country. He thought he could establish a better life or perhaps an easier life, and so we went to South America. And we wound up in South America in November 1946.

And how long did you stay there?

I personally stayed in South America until the end of 1947. Then I came to the United States. I started my school-- I never went to school before, so this is where I started school. I started high school and then eventually graduated college.

Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you wanted to discuss?

Well, I tell you, at this point it's not-- to me, at least the way I see, it's not perhaps so much important to tell the story of what happened to the individual person or people. I happen to feel very bad, for example, for my own children, the so-called second generation because they themselves, they went through a certain hell being raised in a home of a survivor.

I also point out many times that Hitler and his people did accomplish their purpose, not only by wiping out 6 million people, but the people that survived carry with them scars for the rest of their lives. So psychologically he did accomplish his purpose on the living.

To point out, I've said it many times in my own home and I said it to my children, that if something like this would ever happen again, I will never again be taken to any kind of camp, as long as I live-- never again.

Thank you very much.

You're very welcome.