

On April 13, 12, 1983, at the gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors in Washington DC. And I'm going to ask Dr. Schwarcz first what his mother's maiden name was.

My mother's maiden name is Ilona Bokor, B-O-K-O-R.

And where were you born?

I was born in Szikszó, Hungary, which is in the county of Abauj-Tolna varmegye.

And when were you born?

April 26, 1930.

Can you tell us a little bit about your life before the war, and where you were when the war started?

Yes. I was educated-- I've been to four years of grade school, all Jewish school. And then, after four years of grade school, when I was 10 years old, I started high school. I went in high school, which is also a Jewish high school, or Hebrew high school, in Miskolc-- a large city, population of about 12,000 Jews.

And just about 1944, before graduation, I was supposed to have graduated in June, the Nazis of Germany took over Hungary in March, the end of March of 1944. And that was all the education before the war.

My father was a businessman. My mother was a housewife, also helping in the business.

What kind of business was it?

And we lived in a town called Forró-Encs, F-O-R-R dash E-N-C-S, Forró-Encs, that's about 15 kilometers from Szikszó, 20 kilometers from Miskolc, which is a very large city. Or in the opposite direction. It's about 60 kilometers from Kassa, or Kosice, which is Slovakia.

And my father was in-- he had a grocery store. And also, we were selling-- he was a wine merchant. And this was his business. That's how he made his livelihood.

And in 1944, around March, the end of March, April-- April, mostly in April-- they gathered up the Jews of my hometown. And we were taken to a ghetto in Kassa, or in Slovakia, name is called Kosice. And we were there in the ghetto for about-- I would say, about four weeks, five weeks, maybe. And then--

Who in your family was that?

That was my mother, my father, and myself. I was the only child. And all three of us were in the ghetto.

And we were transported from Kosice to Birkenau, concentration camp Birkenau. And of course, my mother was separated from my father. I was only 14 years old, very small and skinny. And it was in the evening, getting dark, when we arrived.

And they sent me over-- I remember it now-- they sent me over to the side where I would have been gassed and cremated, because I was a young boy, and probably they felt that I'm not going to be used to them as a workforce. And later on, I was told that the one who was selected us was Dr. Mengele.

And since it was dark, behind his back, I turned around and I saw my father going in the opposite direction. So I followed him. And that's how I stayed alive at that moment.

And this was in Birkenau. We were in Birkenau for about four weeks. And after the first week, I was in a man's camp,

which was very close proximity to the women's camp. And somebody yelled over from the other side to recognize me that my mother is right in that camp. And I didn't know the consequences-- I took a chance and snuck over into the women's camp, and that's the only time that I saw my mother until after liberation.

And then, from this camp, my father and I, due to the bad conditions, terrible conditions, and people dying so rapidly, we volunteered to work in a agricultural place, which was a few kilometers from Birkenau, called Babitz-- Landwirtschaft Babitz. And this is where we stayed, which was also a terrible camp. They tortured people, shooting, and beating up.

And that's what happened to my father-- he was beaten so badly that they took him into camp Auschwitz, where he was in the-- where he wasn't able to work, so they took him to a hospital. And then after I was beaten very badly, they took me into Auschwitz, also. But I knew already what the score was, so I snuck away, and I didn't go to the hospital.

Later on, I found out, I went to visit my father several times, from the window I spoke to him. And then, one day when I came to visit, which was around September, around the holidays--

1945?

1944, 1944 September, which was around the holidays of Sukkos. And then, that's when I was told that all the inmates from the hospital were taken to the gas chamber, and they were killed. And I never saw my father again.

From Auschwitz, I stayed in this camp until 1945, January, when the Russians were coming and were taking over the camp. And just very briefly, the Germans would not let us be liberated, but they took all the 20,000 people, the inmates of Auschwitz, and they marched us to Gross-Rosen-- day and night around the clock.

And in my estimation, from the 20,000, we arrived no more than about 2,000 or 3,000 people. And we arrived to concentration camp Gross-Rosen. The camp was so saturated with inmates, that we had-- this was January, which is very bitter cold, and a lot of snow. And we had no barracks to be assigned to, at least to stay out from the cold.

And they kept us outside for days and days and days, in Gross-Rosen. And the people were just dying like flies. It's just unbelievable what went on. They were frozen to death by the morning.

And I was trying to hide among the corpses, the warm corpses, as they were dying to keep myself warm and keep myself alive.

After about January, February, and around the end of February, beginning of March, from Gross-Rosen, they took us, those that survived, the Russians were coming also, followed the Germans. And as they were approaching Gross-Rosen, they took us to concentration camp, Buchenwald.

Here, when we arrived, again, the camp was saturated. They gave us a number, which was 126,279. In Auschwitz, my number is 10,561. My father was 10,560.

So as we arrived to Buchenwald, we just very briefly, again, we had no barracks. So they took us into the bathhouse, which already we knew the score, you know, what the showers mean. But luckily, they did not gas us, but they just kept us there naked there-- neither prisoner's clothes, nor barracks to keep us. So they kept us naked for about seven or eight days, until finally we got clothes.

And as the people were dying, and the barracks were emptied from the corpses, then we were assigned barracks. And we stayed there until about the end of March-- end of March. And as the troops, the liberating troops were again approaching Buchenwald, I was very unfortunate-- they put us on trains. And they were taking us to another camp.

However, to the camp, which they had intention to take us, they couldn't take us because the railroads were constantly bombed by the Allied forces. And so we were on the train taking back and forth, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, and all over. Until finally, finally, we ended up after two weeks of voyage, in concentration camp Dachau.

But by that time, we were all so exhausted, and so starved and so diseased, that most of the people, the inmates in the cattle cars, the open cattle cars, died. And I was told later on by the American liberators that I was also unconscious when I arrived to Dachau.

And a few days later, after my arrival, the American troops came into the camp, liberated the camp. But they were wonderful, wonderful people. They came to the cattle cars, even though we were all in typhoid fever, and we had all the infectious diseases-- they searched for people-- they searched for people whose heart was still beating and whoever was alive.

And wherever they felt heartbeats, they took them out from the train and took them to the hospital. And I was one of them, among them. And they saved my life. My hand was-- I was in typhoid fever. I don't even remember, probably about 20 or 21 days, I was told, I was completely unconscious from the disease.

And also, I had my hand-- my left hand was infected. And after I got a little bit better, they had to take me to emergency surgery to operate my hand.

And that was--

This was in concentration camp, Dachau.

Was the hospital also in Dachau?

In Dachau, also. But this was already after the liberation. And I was kept in the hospital in the month of April and the month of May. And the end of May, I was released from the hospital, feeling a little bit better, putting on a little weight. And I was assigned to a barrack where I was kept until September, until they really brought me back to health.

And then, the wonderful American, the US Army, sent us back to Hungary.

Who was tending you in the hospital? Who were the doctors and nurses?

The doctors and the nurses were mainly inmates, those that survived. And mostly those mostly were Polish, because they were the longest in the camp. And all those that survived, they sort of had an in position with the troops. And they also had some American doctors who came with the troops.

So they tried to utilize everybody, because, of course, there was such a shortage. And with so many inmates in the camp, that whoever had any background in either nursing, or orderly, or medicine, or even dentistry or pharmacy, they tried to utilize to help-- anybody who could help anything.

And then, of course, the American army knew that Hungary is occupied by the Russians. And they also knew that the Russians were themselves in a terrible condition. They had no food and no clothes.

And we had some belongings that we have put together while we were in Dachau, so they took us all away into Budapest and gave it over to us to the Joint Distribution. So that nothing should befall us and no harm should come to us. And then, that's how we returned to our homeland.

Of course, while I was in Dachau after the liberation, I was asked-- I was given a choice whether I would like to go to Israel, I would like to go to the United States, or I would like to go to Hungary. But of course, I was very young and very inexperienced, and as I was looking, I knew that my father is dead, but I hoped that my mother is alive.

So I went back to my country from where I was taken, and thank God, I found my mother alive.

How did you find your mom?

When I went back to my hometown, and she was already home. She was liberated earlier than I did, and she came home earlier. And so she was home.

And then, it was already too late to-- well, sort of, we didn't go back to the displaced person camps, from where we could have immigrated into any other country much easier.

Can you tell me about finding your mother? And what that was like that day?

Oh, it was a big jubilation. It was an unusual-- it was a very emotional getting together. Was a-- [CRYING] we cried. We were happy. We were-- we were very sad, also, that we lost my father and many members of the family.

And finally, we pulled ourselves together, and we started a new life all over again.

How long had your mother been there before you arrived?

Over in camp?

No, back home.

Back home? No, she arrived-- well, I arrived the end of September, and she came somewhere around August, she came home.

She probably thought she'd never see you again.

Never see me again. And that's about the end of the story. Of course, we had relatives-- you know, my mother had several sisters, and a brother in the United States. And one brother who was studying medicine in Vienna. And graduated in 1938, and last minute, was graduating from Vienna medical school.

And he came back to Hungary because of the Anschluss. He couldn't get an internship in any one of the hospitals, as a Jew. So he was forced to leave the country, since saw no future. And Hitler caught up with him in France. And of course, thank God, he was able to hide, and he was alive, and he was searching for us in our hometown.

He, from France, and the other relatives from the sisters and brother were searching for us from the United States. Sent letters to our hometown, and telegrams, to the officials. And the officials brought the telegrams that our relatives are looking for us.

And then, of course, they tried everything to bring us here to the United States. That's why, although I was a Zionist, and I would have liked to go very much to Israel, but because of the relatives, I came to the United States.

With your mother?

With my mother-- my mother came a little bit later, because we couldn't leave the country together. It was a very difficult situation to leave a communist country. Couldn't get any papers, exit visas, to leave Hungary.

You came in 1949?

I left Hungary in 1948. And it took several years. I made a mistake-- I should have gone back to displaced person camp. But I was so afraid going back to camps from the past memory, that I tried to do it on my own. So first, I went over to Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia, I got caught, and I was sitting one week in jail.

And thanks to the rescue mission of the [NON-ENGLISH], which rescued so many Jews in Europe, they took me out from the communist jail. After one week, they rescued me. And then, I was given 30 days to leave Czechoslovakia.

And meanwhile, with the help of the [NON-ENGLISH], I was able to get myself a visa to France, which was already a

Western country, thank God. And from France, I had difficulty coming to the United States, because I would have-- I wouldn't have come here as a displaced person, but as a Hungarian citizen. They classified me as a Hungarian citizen.

So I had a cousin-- my mother had a cousin in South America, in Venezuela, who figured he's going to rescue me from Europe. So first, I went to Venezuela. And six months later, I came to the United States. I was able to come in from there to the United States.

My mother came-- I came in 1949, my mother came to the United States in 1951. She came with the HIAS-- she went back to camp. And the HIAS brought her over to the United States.

And that's about our story.

You were greeted here by your uncles and aunts?

Uncles and aunts, and the family-- they were very good to us. Since then, my mother's sisters and brothers died. And we have nobody else now, just the two of us left.

Is your mother still living?

Yes. She lives with us in Far Rockaway, New York.

Are you married?

Yes.

Do you have children?

Five children. And five children, beautiful, two married daughters. And we started a new life.

And with the help of the family, I went back to school in 1949, I finished high school in the United States. Got my diploma. From there, I went to college, to Brooklyn College, graduated from Brooklyn College with honors. And from there, I was accepted to New York University, College of Dentistry, which I finished.

And after finishing dental college, I felt that I owed so much to the United States. Excuse me. I volunteered to the United States Army. I served two years, from 1961 to 1963. And then, when I left the army, in 1963, I came back to my hometown, to Far Rockaway, and I opened practice of dentistry. And ever since then, I'm in Far Rockaway practicing dentistry.

Is your mother here today?

My mother is not here today. I'm very sorry that I didn't bring her along, but I didn't-- I thought that it's going to be too hectic, and would bring too difficult. But seeing what went on here today, and getting the experience-- and I wasn't able to go to Israel the last time when the gathering was, I hope that the next gathering I'll be able to bring her along and she'll be able to tell her side of the story and her experiences. Which I don't know when it's going to be, whether next year, or two years from now, but we hope to be here, the whole family.

Today's gathering, I brought along my wife and my oldest daughter, married daughter, who lives in California. She came to visit us for Passover. And I made arrangements for her so she should be able to come here with us. And she's a second generation survivor, and she should experience and share the experience with me. She is here today.

But she is very happy that she came. It's quite an experience.

Would you like to say anything about your children, and how your experiences have affected them?

Yeah, my children are very beautiful. The oldest daughter is now-- she was born in 1957, she's 26 years old. She's a very smart girl. Graduated also from Brooklyn College, and then she was accepted to Rusk Institute, physical therapy, which is part of New York University.

And she graduated. She's a physical therapist. She married a-- that time when she got married, my son-in-law was in New York University College of Medicine. Today, he's a medical doctor, he's taking his residency in Long Beach Memorial Hospital in California.

Do they have any children?

Not yet, they are two years married. They just celebrated their anniversary. My other daughter, since we are all very Zionist-- Zionistic, and all my children spend time in Israel, my second daughter married an Israeli, young man, a very nice family from Tel Aviv. His name is Mordechai Kraus.

And they settled in Israel. At the moment, they are in the United States trying to finish-- started their studies and finish up their studies. My daughter goes to Brooklyn College at the moment. I think she's majoring in accounting. And my son-in-law is in New York University, he's on the computer program.

He served three years in the Israeli armed forces as a paratrooper. And as soon as they finish their schooling, they hope to go back to Israel. And hopefully, someday we'll be able to join them there.

Our third children is a boy, 21 years old. He's also finished courses in computers in New York University. And he's at the moment looking for a position in the computer field, and also, he's going back to school, trying to finish up his studies. And maybe to further his studies.

Our second son is in Yeshiva University finishing up second years-- second year college. And he's contemplating to be a pre-med-- trying to go for medicine.

And then, our fifth child is a girl, who is going to Yeshiva in Cedarhurst, Long Island. And she is 15 and 1/2 years old, very beautiful girl, very smart. And I hope she's going to have a wonderful future.

And all our children were reared and educated in a very Jewish way. They all went to Yeshiva. And we instilled in them the love of Israel. And we hope to settle there someday in Israel. That's our story.

Thank you very much.