

--1983. This is an interview with Martin Water, April 13, 1983, at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors Mr. Water, can you tell us when and where you were born?

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, April the 3rd, 1921.

And how about telling us a bit about what you recall your daily life before the Holocaust.

Before the Holocaust.

yes.

Well, we were poor people. Father was a shoemaker-- so was I. I had three brothers and three sisters. We were seven, the family. Unfortunately only one brother survived besides me.

Whenever I talk to people or the audiences, I keep telling them that I paid a supreme price. I lost my family. I guess this is the highest price to pay for anything.

As I said, we were shoemakers-- struggled for daily life. Finally the war broke out-- never forget it. There was a general mobilization in Poland-- in Łódź, Poland

Our boss was taken away. He was taken to the army. He owed us money. My brother-- my brother and my mother, while ironing sheets and pillowcases, she said, as far as I'm concerned the war broke out already.

Now, this will ring in my memory for as long as I live, because they left us destitute. Then the war broke out-- 1939-- never forget it. On the eighth day, the Germans marched in into our city.

Were there apprehensions already, before they marched into the city?

Oh, definitely. Even before the war broke out, it was-- we were very apprehensive, hearing what's happening in Germany and in Austria-- annexed-- and also in Czechoslovakia, when they annexed the little towns or the country. That day there were atrocities. We heard about it.

Did you believe them, or did people try not to believe?

yes. We-- well, somehow, you know, you believed them, and then you tried to push it back into your mind-- say, well, it can never happen to you.

All right.

It always happens to the next person.

So there was no thought of attempting to run. No. Some did, but we could not afford, due to the fact that we were very poor. We couldn't move. Some people had money probably did and wound up in America.

Then the war broke out. And we were scraping for a living. Never forget-- my oldest brother, he was going out with a girl. He married her. And they went to Russia.

But before he went to Russia, he said to me he wants to take me with him.

How old were you, at that point?

Oh, I was a young man. I was 18 years old. So I said to him, Herschel, I'm the oldest now, from the boys-- because we had two older sisters. One sister had four little boys, and the younger sister had just gave birth to a young little girl. She was three months old then.

So I said, you know what? You better take the younger brother with you, because I'm the oldest and

somebody has to stay with the family. We were clannish. We were very family-oriented, just like most Jews in Europe.

So he took his-- he married and took his wife and my younger brother, and they went to Russia. The younger one survived in Uzbek. The older one did not survive.

His son lives in Israel. He had a son in April the 1st, 1941--

While he was living in Russia?

While he was living in Russia. His wife came-- his wife lives now in Canada. She survived-- and remarried. Anyway.

So there are all kinds of stories been told, right from the beginning, before even they closed the ghetto. Then I said to my father, you know what? We have a large family in Warsaw. Let's go in Warsaw, because here this is sure death. There's no way we can survive here. Even though there was a loaf of bread to be obtained, we didn't have the money to buy it.

So I went out-- hired a peasant to drive us to the border of the General Government. See, they annexed-- Łódź, they annexed to the Reich, which means to the country. This was part of Germany, outside of a specific border-- [POLISH]-- never forget it-- this was the border, and this was the German government already.

From there we took a train-- that's a story by itself, the way we went through there.

Would you like to tell a little bit about it?

Well, yes. We came to the border, and all we were allowed to have 10 Mark, 10 Deutsche Mark. And I had a chain-- my-- I had a girlfriend, and have had they gave her a gold chain. This was an heirloom, from way back. And he trusted me, he says--

He had one daughter and one son. He says, please take my daughter with you. I know she'll be safe with your family.

I was a shoemaker, so I made a hole in my heel, and I put the chain inside. And we smuggled it through. Then we hide-- we went on a train-- went to Warsaw. We had family over there. My father had sisters and brothers, so we stayed with them.

And all of a sudden, famine ensued in Warsaw. My mother, she was no slouch, so I sold that chain.

Yeah.

My girlfriend allowed me, and she took some money, and she went back to Łódź to bring some food. Well, she was a crackerjack, my mother-- may she rest in peace. She brought some food back.

Then she said, you know, to me, Moshe, there's plenty of food in Łódź. If you want to, you can go there with your girlfriend and buy some food. This was the last time I've seen my family.

Before that, my younger brother-- which I found out when I was in Israel-- was killed by the Germans-- kicked to death. That's exactly what my aunt told me. I found it out in Israel.

Was this during-- when he was in the ghetto? Or--

This was-- we were together in Warsaw. So he said to me, Moshe, you know what? If you'll be able to buy me some cigarettes, for resale, I can make some money. Because he was too young to go into a store. In Poland, they had a monopoly for tobacco.

So I went to a store, and I bought cigarettes. They came in round boxes like Maxwell House Coffee. I never forget it.

And he created a little board and put it on his neck and put his cigarettes and sold it. And I was sitting on the bus, trying to go back to Łódź. I've seen him, in the street.

I said to my girlfriend, you know what? When I come back, I'll say goodbye to him. I'll see him. Well, I'll check on him.

I didn't see him again, either. Can you imagine that? Seeing my brother outside, I didn't say goodbye to him? And yet, I could have at least embrace and kiss him.

He went back to that border line, [POLISH]. Now, this was a story by itself, again. He stopped. And the Germans caught us. And we had a-- actually, among us, we told them, if the Germans start interrogating us, we'll tell them that we want to go to Warsaw. So by going, want to go Warsaw, they'll send us back to Łódź. [LAUGHS] And that's exactly what happened. [LAUGHS]

Stupid Germans. You know, individually, they were stupid. Together, they're smart. Collectively, they're a smart nation. But individually, they're very stupid-- gullible.

You were very clever.

We were clever-- not "I"-- we were clever. I was very young, but there were older people there, and we arranged it.

Anyway then we walked. We walked to Łódź, and it was subzero [INAUDIBLE].

How far was it? How many hours' walk?

16 kilometer-- a whole day. We walked a whole day. We came into Łódź, and her father was still alive. So we went to this house-- not because, you know.

The first day, we came in on the 3rd of February. The 4th [INAUDIBLE] we went to a rabbi, and we got married-- to make it everything legal.

Then, all of a sudden, things were getting worse. They closed up the ghetto. And they officially closed it, May 1, 1940.

What was the reaction among the people that you knew, in town, when they realized the ghetto was closing?

Complacency.

Why?

Because there was-- there was no other choice. And to go to-- within 100 meters of the barbed wire meant death. They did kill people.

A man was walking with his child in a carriage. I guess [INAUDIBLE] 100 meters. He killed him.

So we were confined, trapped like a mouse trap-- no way out. Then the ghetto start to organize itself.

Yeah, I got sick. I went to the hospital. I had a appendectomy, meanwhile. And when I came out, I ate the first hamburger out of horse meat-- the first one.

How was your medical care, at that point?

[CROSS TALK] with the people.

[LAUGHS] Anyway--

How was the medical care, at that point, when you had the--

Well, the hospital was not bad. Dr. Jacobson performed surgery on me. Never forget it.

So things were still--

Yeah, yeah--

--at that point.

--actually, this was the first piece of food I had after I was operated on. Then I was released from the hospital. And the situation in the ghetto was getting from bad to worse.

Then the Jewish organization organizations start to organize factories in the ghetto. I was a shoemaker, so I had no problem. And I started to work as a shoemaker.

I worked in the ghetto as a shoemaker and lived with my wife, till August 4-- August 8, 1944. We went through trials and tribulations. If I should talk about, you'll need about 10 tapes, probably. So I'm going to just skip over it.

It's up to you. That's fine.

And then they took us to a way station to be deported.

We went into a train. They gave us a loaf of bread. Now, [INAUDIBLE] in the ghetto, our prayer, I should say, rather-- was, please, God, give us a time that we'll have a loaf of bread on a table and a knife, and we'll be able to cut as many pieces as our heart desires-- to be satiated. This never came.

And when they gave me that loaf of bread, and when they would put us in that wagon, like cattle-- 80 to 85-- for three days and three nights, I stood-- or, rather, sat-- near the opening, the gates, I should be able to breathe in. Now, do you imagine what's happening in a confined place where the only opening was about a square foot, with bars across it, and you have about 80 to 85 people-- men, women, and children.

The stench was unbearable. To give the ladies a semblance of decency, they took a blanket and we created a kitty corner for some privacy. The cries of the children were incessantly. They kept crying and crying-- naturally-- hungry or whatever. And the heat was enormous.

Finally, on the third day, they unloaded us. We disembarked in Birkenau. We met a young Kommando, a young-- a Kommando of young boys. For some reason or other, till today, I wanted to find out. I can't. They called themselves "Kanada Kommando"-- like the country Canada. It had the same spelling.

The first words I heard out of them-- which told me personally that this is a place of no return-- they said to the old ladies-- or to the young ladies with children-- mothers, give you your children to the elderly ladies. This gave me the idea that this is it.

Some women did. Some women did not. Those who didn't went with the children to the final resting place.

We marched. We heard voices, women voices, from behind the barbed wire.

Your wife was separated from you, at this point.

We still were walking together.

Oh, you were still together, at this point.

Still together.

OK.

And they said-- one woman yelled out, and she said, this is it. You won't come out of their alive. Another woman was trying to quiet her, [INAUDIBLE] said, they have to know. They have to know.

Anyway, we didn't pay attention, because we were in a stupor, probably.

You did not believe, at that point--

I honestly don't know. First of all, personally, all of us believed I'll survive. And I'll tell you why a little later.

And we walked. Then, all of a sudden, we walked and three men with gas masks came across us. And they were well-fed, big, and smiling, like the world would be theirs. And they identified themselves and said, you know this guy and so on and so forth?

This gave me also an idea, that-- why gas masks? That means it's true. There are crematoria. And those guys go afterwards inside and extract gold teeth and valuables-- whatever they had-- to take out.

Did you share your thoughts with your wife--

No, I did not.

--to yourself?

I kept it to myself. I was young, but I wasn't gullible. In the beginning, somehow, I was gullible-- but then I said reality. I had to be realistic.

Then we came finally to a place before the gates to walk into the camp. We walked towards him. And him-- he, with a nod of his finger, decided-- temporary life and sure death I didn't know, then, that I had the privilege-- or rather, I should say, the dishonor-- of meeting the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. That was him.

He was standing nonchalantly, with his beautiful uniform and beautiful, polished black boots. And with a nod-- he didn't even look. He just nodded his index finger.

My wife went to the right-- to his right. I went to his left. That's the last time I've seen her.

I still clutched that loaf of bread-- 2 kilo, mind you. 2 kilo was a lot of bread-- over 4 pounds. I was hungry. I couldn't eat.

When I walked in, a man came towards me. Today, I would say he was high on drugs This couldn't be further from the truth.

Then, this man was an intellectual. We knew each other in the ghetto. We played chess. We discussed politics-- even though he was twice as old as I.

And he kept ripping his loaf of bread, like a eagle with his talons. And he kept packing it in his mouth. He said, Moshe, eat, eat, eat. I said, gee whiz, this man is a goner!

I couldn't eat, because on my mind was my family. Where are they? God knows, because they were in Warsaw.

Then they put us into a camp. And we walked through different places. They gave us-- they put us into a public bath. They told us to undress.

This is the last time I've seen the pictures of our family, by the way. I had it with me. What I wouldn't give, now, to get it back.

Of course.

We undressed. Only three things we were allowed to keep-- those who need eyeglasses, your belt, and your shoes.

Was there a discussion going on, among you, at this time--

No. No. No discussion. Because I-- at least, I didn't talk to anybody. I was just thinking to myself-- thinking and thinking. My mind was racing.

So, there were officials-- also Haftlings, which means inmates. A "Haftling," in German, is an inmate of a camp or prison. So we walked through. Barbers-- or god knows who they were-- shaved all the vital parts of our body.

Then we had to step into a solution. God knows what the solution was-- probably a disinfectant. We had to dip our shoes into it. One had a rag and rubbed on our body, on the vital parts, with that rag.

Then we went to a barber, and they shave our heads. And this was torture by itself. Can you imagine that, a guy with a safety razor shaved my head. I have very strong hair. Torture, by itself.

Then they gave us our suits-- now, "suits." This is a farcical comedy. A short man received a long jacket. A tall man received a short jacket. They gave me a long jacket.

We were there every day. [INAUDIBLE] came to pick us up for work. I realized, in this place I'll die. So I wanted to get out of there. So I put myself on the line every day.

4 o'clock in the morning, they used to send us out for the roll call. Now, I have to tell you-- I have to backtrack-- the roll call.

They told us-- were never in the army-- to behave like a soldier, like a seasoned soldier. They put us in a line. And a man was in front of us.

Now, did you ever see a Western where they say "prepare to dismount"? They told us to do like this. [GERMAN]--

Now, [GERMAN] means "a cap." They said, when they said [GERMAN], we had to reach with the right hand to the head. And when they said "Auf"-- which means "off"-- we had to take that [GERMAN] and hit the right thigh. Now, this has to be unison-- a few hundred men. Now, can you imagine that?

So we were the soldiers, so, naturally, when a split second later or sooner-- so they used to say, it sounds like beans are rolling. [LAUGHS]

And they kept us undressed from 4 o'clock in the morning till the sun came up-- a scorching sun. They kept us there, until it was right. It was never right, but finally maybe they felt sorry for us-- let us go.

They gave us breakfast. They gave us breakfast, were ersatz coffee. You know what "ersatz" means? It's a substitute of coffee. They used to take the hops of corn and burn it. And this was the coffee.

And a piece of bread. If you would need glue as a substitute, this was the right thing.

[LAUGHS]

It was wet. So-- OK, at least for something in the morning. And then these guys came to pick up people for

the various factories-- like Krupp and IG-- that means IG Farben Industry, and so on and so forth. I put myself in the line.

Were you told by someone that had been there longer to do it? Or you just didn't [CROSS TALK]--

No, I just did it to get out. I said-- to get out of there. This was just a purgatory. So when I came to the head, they sent me away. I was not big enough for their needs.

But I was stubborn. The next day, I did the same thing. Finally, on the fifth day, they put me down.

They put me in a separate place. They gave me my uniform, in stripes. I'm sure you have seen that. This was my size. The cap is a little small--

[LAUGHS]

--but--

Nothing's perfect.

--nothing's perfect. I didn't complain.

And they marched us into a place, and they gave him my number. My number is "B6827." And my initial is W. I've just met a man-- the first time I met a man from the same camp. We embraced each other and cried like babies.

He was in same camp. He's got a number 11 numbers before me. He was in front of me.

He was in front of you?

Yeah. Because his was Warszawczik. And my name was Wassermann, so the S is after the R--

Yeah.

OK, just like the telephone directory, you know, in alphabetical order. They were very methodical. You have to give it to them. The Germans-- thank to that, we have proof, and documented proof, and films and so on and so forth, that actually a Holocaust did occur. Some people in the West Coast, like the Liberty Lobby, they try to deny it--

I know.

--or like Dr. Batz or Professor Batz admit of 6 million or so and so forth.

Took us a truck and put us into Gleiwitz. This was our next destination-- a couple hours by truck, to Gleiwitz. This was the camp I was till the liberation.

This camp was a factory camp--

No, it was not. It belonged to Auschwitz. Now, why did I realize it belonged to Auschwitz? Because they made a selection, a few weeks later, and a man was very weak, and he couldn't eat, so we were in a Stube-- which means a room of 18. And for some reason, the people, the leaders of this room, trusted me. They gave me his bread, to hold in safekeeping.

He never got his bread. So later, we divided among all of us this piece of bread. Because I've seen. And they took him literally like a dead cat and threw him on the truck. He couldn't walk.

I said, gee, this is it. But, for some reason, you know, I never-- in those days-- naturally, there's a book here on the market, by Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, The Power of Positive Thinking. Whenever I talk to an

audience, and people ask me, how did you survive, I say, the power of positive thinking.

I said to myself, I've got to make it-- not to-- only to myself, loud. I talked loud. I said, I've got to make it. If somebody would have been behind my back, he would said, gee whiz, this guy is off his rocker already. He talks to himself. And he start answering himself.

And I kept saying, I've got to make it.

Did you see others, in your camp, that had the same attitude?

Very few, and they didn't make it. They didn't make it. Those who gave up psychologically actually succumbed. Because the first sign--

Did you ever see a kangaroo with its pouch? Well, they walked around with a loaf of bread-- with a piece of bread they gave them the meager sustenance for the day-- they didn't eat. This was the first sign that this man is not going to make it. He's not going to survive.

And I ate my piece of bread, of course. I worked with some-- yeah. And then they put me into Kommando. I was the Kommando 8.

I didn't mind digging. I said to them, I'm a shoemaker. I would like to work at my craft. They didn't believe me. He said, you're too young to work as a shoemaker.

So I had to dig ditches. And he took a look at me. Even now I like a big man, in comparison, the way I looked then.

So I had my tools-- if I will carve the initials, I wouldn't know any better that they're mine, because there were bloodstains were on the handle of my tools, because all my fingers cracked. And every morning, in subzero weather, the minute I touched that handle of my tool, the cracked open up and blood spurted out. I didn't have too much blood even [INAUDIBLE], but blood came out.

And I worked. I had no choice. One day, a truckload of those poles came in-- the poles that you see the barbed wire was attached to, surrounding the camp. And there was a guard, an SS guard, and he was a SOB. He was very bad.

It was not their province to mix in into the business of our work, but he did. It was not his business. His business was to guard us, that we would not run away.

And they expected four guys like me, who weighed collectively maybe 300 pounds, maybe-- and a pole like that was probably a ton or two-- to take it off the truck and unload it. So the minute I touched it, told you, blood spurted out and let go and then fell down.

He took a 2-by-4 and hit me over the back. Just when a bull is being hit, you know, it goes down on his front knees. That's how I went down, on my knees, and my face hit the ground.

I woke up, a few hundred feet away. Two guys dragged me away. He would have killed me. He would have finished me.

They did drag you away?

And two guys-- they dragged me away. Then they changed my work to-- because there was an incident. And it's very interesting.

I'm no hero. I never was. One day, they decided, in the camp, that our beds-- our bunks, rather-- should look like a soldier makes it-- pretty straight, you know? So we worked close to the camp. When we worked close to the camp, we used to work, come in to eat whatever they gave us-- a little soup, which you couldn't find a potato in. Nor salt, by the way. Salt was a big commodity.



So they told us that, if our beds-- or, rather, bunks-- wouldn't look right, you're going to get 10 on our behinds. I'm going to be a little blunt. You're a lady.

That's fine.

Yeah. I'm sure you heard it before. So there was a young man in our midst. He was the youngest. The only reason he survived was because he was tall-- he was taller than I.

So his bunk was not right. So we said, let's fix it. By the time-- meanwhile, they already wrote down the number of the bunk. It was number 6.

And there were two Blockfuhrers. There was a difference between Blockalteste and Blockfuhrer. A Blockalteste was a man who was a Haftling-- an inmate. And a Blockfuhrer was from the SS.

There was a-- and he was actually a sadist. We called him [POLISH], in Polish. He smoked a pipe. He was a sadist. He enjoyed hitting people.

So he walked in with his entourage. He was in charge of Block 2, which was my block. He walked in with his entourage.

And there was the Blockalteste. His name was "Bruno." He was a good guy. He was a Volksdeutsche, which means he was a-- he lived in Poland, but he was German extraction-- by descent I should rather say. And he spoke fluent Polish.

And he was behind him. We have time, won't we? OK. So, the minute he called out-- now, this came by instinct-- he called out nummer sechs-- number 6-- you could see tears coming down this kid's face.

So I made up my mind. If he'll call him, I'll go to the German and tell him that I want to get it in his stead. I was a shoemaker. Pardon the expression, but my behind was harder a little than his.

[LAUGHS]

Because in Poland, as a shoemaker, you work in a sitting position. So I walked over to him. And I said, in German, can I lay down for this boy?

Now, he was twice as tall as I am. He looked me up and down and says, Ja! I lie down--

We had these tall stools, you know, with two fingers they go in there. I lied down. And with all his might, he gave me 10 on my behind. Now, as I told you before, I'm no hero--

What motivated you?

I don't know. I don't know. It was an instinct. Inside, I said to myself, this kid won't survive. And I was a shoemaker. You know, I'll do it.

And I did it. And he gave me 10 on my behind. I stood up. I didn't even wince. I didn't cry out-- nothing-- like nothing happened.

I was hurting. Yes, true. I was hurting. But I walked. And then I stood there, like a soldier. And I walked out, and he promised, tomorrow will be 20.

When he walked out, this Bruno, he was kapo and also Lageralteste, Lageralteste. He. Was a good guy-- very good. He came back to me. He said, are you his brother? I said no. Are you a cousin of his-- in Polish, by the way, he talked.

I said no. He said, you mean he's a stranger? I said yes. He shook my hand. He was also a tall guy-- very

handsome-- 6-foot-4 guy.

He said, I'll never forget you-- and he didn't! Whenever he could, he gave me a piece of bread. He gave me to scrape out from the bottom of the barrel-- because from the bottom, the soup was thicker. And whenever he could, he gave me a little Blutwurst you know? Well, it was something.

And then he gave me a extra job. What was the job? 4 o'clock in the morning, they chased everybody out for the Appell-- for the roll call. And a few guys were washing the corridor. This was something good, because I had a piece of bread for it. And I didn't have to go out in the subzero weather.

Then we worked-- you know, then before Christmas, the 23rd of December, 1944, they made a second selection. And I, like a fool, ran out from the other firsts. There were three guys, and I was a dwarf in comparison to those two guys. So naturally they wrote down my number-- B6827. So I said, well, this is the end?

I took it nonchalantly. Honestly, as I told you so many times, I'm no hero. But you see, there is a Hebrew word [HEBREW]-- "no choice."

They put down my number. The next day was Christmas. The 24th, the 25th, the 26th, we didn't go to work. But we had to do certain things, odd-and-end things, in the camp, like cleaning, go out for cleaning this and cleaning that.

I said to myself, well, after Christmas, through experience at the roll call, they call out my number, to go on the side, to be taken to Auschwitz-- to crematorium. They didn't. We went to work.

So at this particular time, we worked in the vicinity of the camp. So we walked in for lunch. Now, I say very [INAUDIBLE] "lunch." You can imagine.

So I said, well, now is the time they're going to call out my number and put it on the side; they didn't. We went back to work, and I came back 5 o'clock-- they didn't. In the morning, we had to go to work-- about 9 kilometers, so they took a truck. At the roll call, they didn't call out my number.

Now, Bruno, the same man, was my kapo. As I told you, he liked me because of what I did for this young man. So he always kept me with himself-- close to him.

He said, you know, Black Devil? In Polish. They called me "Black Devil," they called me. You know, Black Devil, I got good news for you. I heard, over the radio--

Now, how did he get a radio? The Oberscharfuhrer, the Kommandant of the camp, gave him a radio to fix. But he was a fox. He fixed it, all right, that fox, but he kept it and listened to the underground radio of Paris and London.

And he said to me, you know what? I just heard-- he trusted me, because, due to the fact that I did for somebody else, so he knew he could trust me. So I heard of the radio that they wouldn't burn any more people indiscriminately-- only those who died with a natural death. That was I survived.

And when I speak in front of a Christian audience-- and mostly I speak in Christian audiences-- I keep saying to them, if I were a Christian I would have been a good one, because I was reborn in Christmastime.

[LAUGHS] This is true.

Now, then we had a job to do, to cover a cable, a big cable-- a diameter I should say, about a meter, which is over a yard-- to cover this thing. And so nearby was a big-- a hill. So we had these little wheelbarrows, with our shovels, and we scooped up dirt from that little hill into the wheelbarrows. And we took it over there, and we covered it-- unloaded it and covered that cable. Whether it was a sewer cable-- whatever-- I don't know, but it was a cable.

And he didn't bother. He walked away. So I said to myself, I'll show you something-- to the guys. I'm going to walk back and forth, with an empty wheelbarrow, and they won't know the difference, those stupid fools. And then I put myself-- I was so tired, you know, walking back with the empty wheelbarrows--

[INAUDIBLE].

--that I sat back and I relaxed. All of a sudden, I see quiet around me-- quiet. I turn around, and Bruno stays there. You know what he said to those guys? "Do you want the Germans to win the war? [INAUDIBLE] Black Devil. He knows what he's doing!"

[LAUGHS]

He sensed this relentless. Because this guy always told us, please, try to find anything to read. If you can pick-- anything you can pick up in the streets, when you walk, pick up something to read, so your mind will be taken off of the atrocity that goes around us.

Was Bruno unusual--

He was unusual--

[INAUDIBLE].

--yeah. He was a political prisoner. See, there were three triangles-- markings. Our triangle was yellow. We're Jews. The political triangle was red.

He testified for a friend. He was a communist. So they put him in a concentration camp, because he testified for him in court.

And then was the green triangles. They were murderers. No. Let me backtrack, because everything is important for posterity.

Willy was the Blockälteste from Block 1. He had a green triangle. I found out why he was in the camp.

He was looking for a pair of cuff links once. And his brother used it. He killed his brother, he killed his brother-in-law, he killed his sister, and he killed his parents. So they put them in the camp. Naturally, a guy like that was very valuable to the Germans, you know? So they rewarded him for being in charge of a block.

I had a cap. It was always wet, because we were not allowed to sit down and warm ourselves up. So I told you, I had a pick-- a [GERMAN], it was called in German. And we picked the ground. If we succeeded in the leveling of an inch in a day, we were lucky.

Behind me was a pit-- oh, I don't know-- about 3, 4 meters deep. All of a sudden, again, quiet. I turn around, and this sadist, this-- Piper we called him, the Blockführer, the SS man-- was behind me. He was drunk like a skunk.

Now, why do I say that my cap was always wet. You know, when I had a chance, I sneaked away and I dry it out in front of a fire. So naturally it got a little singed, and it was burned.

And he looked at me front. It had to be in the front. He said, where did you get that burn?

So I told him the truth. It was wet, and I dry it off. So, as I told you, he was twice as tall as I am. He looked over my shoulder. I knew exactly what he going to do.

The minute he looked over my shoulder I, took my right foot and turned it around, facing that pit. And sure enough, he pushed me. Instead of falling in, I jumped in-- saved my-- Again.

You know, this is an instinct. We became so cagey, like a fox. We had to. To survive, we had to. It was not

because we were smart. We just had to become-- you know, always a step ahead. That was a chance of surviving.

Then, I could not-- I had a bad kapo. He was Jewish. Zaide was his name. I believe that the Russians hanged him in, I said that we hanged him.

He was bad. He beat me every day. He beat me because I did not sit still. He beat me.

So I said, I have to get out of this camp-- of this Kommando. So there was a commander, a guy in charge. His name was "Gustav." He was from the OT. OT was the Organisation Todt. This is an organization in Germany, and they had special bands with a Hakenkreuz-- swastika. And it was two initial-- O-T. Todt was the fuhrer, was the leader, in Germany, of the labor department. So it was called "Organisation Todt."

So, by luck, they took me into his Kommando. He was a bad man. If Zaide was bad, he was a killer.

Did anyone else go with you, at the time?

No--

You moved yourself.

I was-- you see, how did I get out? In order to get out, I always put myself at the end. In case they need somebody, at least I had a chance to be picked. Because we were only 12 people in our Kommando 8.

So I was picked this. I didn't know that I would go to him. But I was at it. I said, gee whiz, what do I do, here? From, you know, from bad to worse.

Yeah.

Yeah? I said, I'll find a way of getting out of there, too. So the very first day, a truck with cement came to be unloaded. The cement came in 50-kilo sacks, paper sacks. So they expected-- and a 50-kilo cement sack was very narrow. They expected two guys to carry it. And two guys couldn't even rip it!

So I went over to him. I spoke a fluent German. I walked over to him. I said, you know what? I have an idea, that we'll be able to do it better and faster.

He was a Bavarian, with a deep voice. He said, how? I says, look-- two guys are loading it. Let each guy of us walk up to the truck, and let him put on his shoulder. It'll be easier for one guy to carry 50 kilo than for two.

He said, let's try it. And it worked! He commended me for it!

Then I said to myself, gee whiz, I'm starving! I'm going to die! I'm cold! I would like to get out from here, into that tent of his.

So what did I do? I threw off-- I took a chance. When I was carrying that sack of cement, I purposely threw it down and broke open. He came over to me with a [INAUDIBLE] and I started to limp.

He said, what happened? I said, well, I tripped, and it fell off. And I'm limping. My foot hurts.

He said, go into the tent. Because he liked me, because I gave him a good idea!

[LAUGHS]

I come into the camp, and there sits a young man. And he's a watchmaker. He happened to be my neighbor, before the war.

He said to me-- and he was sitting there, warm and washing the dishes and everything. He wouldn't even give up little some water. I said, give me some! Oh, no, he said, I can't do it, because I'm afraid.

Then that fool made a remark to me that he had no business doing. You know? There was a shelf, and tobacco was lying there and drying. He said, don't touch that. [INAUDIBLE] to go to the front! I never smoked. I didn't need it.

Then when he just stepped out, I took two handfuls of tobacco. I put it in my pockets. And then-- tobacco is very loose. I made it loose so it wouldn't be noticeable! Because--

Why did I do it? Now again, I was never a selfish person-- never. This was not my nature. It still isn't.

Men gave away their little ration, that meager ration of piece of bread, for a smoke. And I didn't like it. So I gave them tobacco. I gave it to them.

And then I went over to the Germans, where they smoked. And they threw away the butts. So I-- please-- I asked them. Instead of throwing it into the mud, would you give it to me? And I'll give it to them? And they did!

They did. And I gave out the tobacco. This was not a time for people to stop smoking, you know? So I gave it to them.

Then I said, I had to get out of there, too. So I was put the end. And what happened? They put me back in Kommando 8. So he said to me, oh, you came back. I'll take care of you.

You know what I said to him? I don't care. [SPEAKING JEWISH]. That means, in Jewish, I had you deep, 6 feet under. It won't take long.

And that's what happened. Two days later, they evacuated us. But before they did this, there's a story to tell. And if I live to be 1,000, I'll remember it vividly.

There was an unwritten law. If you cross the street, you've been shot. One man was working with his pick-- starts talking. He says, I don't want to live. I can't make it. I can't make it.

A young man was standing there. He was from Wroclaw-- never forget it-- young man. He was half German, half-- he was Jewish, but he was born over there, so they-- you know, they could communicate in German.

So he said to him-- our only possession was an empty can, to pick up some food. You put a little wire, and you held it like a pot.

He said, this is yours. I want them to kill me. He said, what are you talking about? It won't take long, we will be liberated.

And he said, I can't take it. I can't take it.

And what was--

The man? Maybe was two, three, four years my senior, maybe. Because age didn't mean a thing, in those days. We didn't even know how old a person was, because there were no telltale signs. Now, we could see.

And he walked over-- there were two Germans-- walked over to them. It was a very windy day-- very cold. Those two Germans erected a little barrier, and they had a little fire going-- a beautiful fire-- in order for to save the fire from being extinguished by the wind. And they warmed themselves.

He walked over to them. There was one obese German, in his 50s. He was an SS man, with a scar on his neck-- a very fat neck. I have to be rough about it-- very German, fat, obese.

A bull. A bull.

A bull.

Yeah.

The other one was young, blond, with a scar on his cheek. For some reason, this was a badge of honor, to have a scar on your cheek, in those days, you know, those Germans.

He said to them, I want you to kill me. So the young German said to him, walk. So he worked. The elder ran after him, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and pulled him back-- and go back to work. Good. And we mind our own business.

I watched it, from the corner of my eye. This was a drama, a Greek tragedy. But instead, it was a Jewish tragedy.

He went back to work. Five minutes later, he started again. I don't want to live. I can't make it. I want to be killed. This is the can--

And the guy would start-- talk him out of it. He couldn't. He walked over to the Germans.

The younger one says, walk. He did walk. The elder one didn't run after him, this time. The younger one kneeled down on one foot. He kneeled down, and he took off his gun, his carbine, and leaned it on the barrier, that little erection-- that barrier-- and he fired. He missed him.

The man turned around, opened up his jacket, gave him a target-- his heart. And he fired again. And he fell.

He went over to him, and he gave him the coup de grace. This was-- I was witnessing. This was a few days before our liberation. This was still in January, mind you, 1945.

Well, they seen it. Then, the next day-- yeah-- yeah, the next day, they told us-- a man came into my room and said, we need musicians. The Germans want an orchestra. I play the mandolin. So I would do anything to get a piece of bread, not to go to work.

So this Willy called me over-- from Block 1-- that killer. He said to me, you play the mandolin? I said yes.

He gave me a violin. He said, play it. I said, a violin is not a mandolin.

He said, but I know it has the same strings. He knew it! G, D, C, E, A-- G, D, A, E! Same strings! But a mandolin has double strings, and a violin has single.

Anyway, I played a song. He said, like this. I'm going to go out with a German and bring you a mandolin. There were two guys. There was a French person, a young man. He also had to play the mandolin.

And if you won't be able to play it, I'll hang you in the middle of the court. He brought two violins. This guy fell away, because he couldn't do it. He couldn't hack it.

I was good. They gave me a waltz to study. There was an orchestra over there-- seasoned musicians. And I was just an amateur. I only could play a few songs-- that's all. I was never played, I never played in an orchestra.

Finally, I sat there a whole day in a room, and I studied that waltz, and I studied it to perfection. Because they gave me music to read. I read music. I wish I could read, today.

Thank god you could read it then.

Yeah.

[LAUGHS]

And I played that waltz to perfection. Next day, we started to-- for ourselves, to see how we're going to do. What do you call it-- an "exercise"? No, it's not "exercises."

Anyway, the whole group-- the brass came in to listen to us. They have a violinist. And one played the accordion. And I, little me, with a mandolin?

We started to play. [PERSONAL NAME] conducted it. I played three bars, and I stopped-- stage fright-- Oh.

--couldn't go on! One guy-- [KNOCKS THREE TIMES] let's start all over again. I played the first three bars. I stopped-- [KNOCKS] couldn't go any further.

Three times, and I stopped. I couldn't go any further. This killer, the tall guy with the pipe, the SS man, who was actually a sadist, he was in my defense.

He said to every guy, can't you see this guy has stage fright? [LAUGHS] Look at all of us. You know? So we stopped the date, and we never did it again. The next day, we had to evacuate us. They gave me a loaf of bread, and they gave me a quarter of a kilo Oleo margarine. And we walked.

Nine guys trusted me with their loaves of bread. I walked like Moses, with a sack on my back. Nine loaves of bread, and I was hungry! I didn't touch it-- like a fool!

They knew you were honest!

Yeah! And you know, and I had a stick. Why did I have a stick? I had a wound in my right ankle and a wound in my right side, in my abdomen--

From what?

OK. We want-- in order to move the cement wagons, we had to have tracks. The tracks were about, oh, I should say, about a yard wide. And we laid the tracks.

Can you imagine? The tracks were light, but 12 guys couldn't carry it. For some reason, we tripped over each other.

Again, I came like a stupid fool, and I gave an idea that three guys can carry it, instead of 12. It was true! One guy in the middle-- I was a smaller one, in the middle-- and two big guys in the back, and we carried it!

So one guy let it go sooner than necessary, and the sharp edge fell on my ankle and scraped off the skin. Naturally, with all the medication that we used to get over there, oh!

[LAUGHS]

--I never healed. It was running pus. Why did I have a wound in my abdomen? I had a boil. And there were two doctors-- one doctor was taken away. And he was a gynecologist, from my city of Łódź. And he was the doctor.

So I went over to him. I said, I have a boil. He took a plier and pulled it out--

[LAUGHS]

--just like that. He pulled it out. And he dressed it. But, the next day, pus was running, you know, and blood. I went to the doctor. We was in the course of evacuating.

I says, Doc, give me something. Take a look what's happening. He hit me.

Now, the same doctor, I helped. How did I help him? Right from the beginning, when we had to mix cement, my job was to take a shovel and throw in that-- it was called Kies, which was a mixture of sand and little rocks. And we used to throw it into that contraption. It was a receptacle. And this was working on kerosene.

And by a touch of a lever, it went up. We throw in this cement and water. And this was mixing it-- came out the other side, into that wagon, which had a trap on the end. We unload it in the-- we dig, we dug, you know, the foundations.

So I said to him, you know, Doc-- nobody will see-- you sit down, because you're not used to these things, you know? And I was a Schwarzen laborer. He was a doctor. I understood that.

And he sat down, and I did it for him. So he remembered. He hit me.

[LAUGHS]

Later on-- the guy that was guiding these wagons was very inept. He used to spill it on the tracks. And you know what happens to cement when it spills it. It gets dry. And he'd get the beating of his life every day.

So they said they will need volunteers. I volunteered to guide it. I became so efficient-- because you see, it wasn't-- it was a 90-degree angle, like-- is this a 90-degree angle?

Mhm.

Like a 90-degree angle. When we came here, it was not round. We had a turntable here, the tracks. I was so proficient, when I came to it, when I turned it around, it hit the tracks here. I was very good at it. And I was commended for it.

[LAUGHS]

And we unloaded the--

Many skills.

Oh, god, a jack of all trades but the master of none!

It worked. It worked.

It worked, that was it! Anyway, you see, I keep backtracking, you know?

It's fine

Those little things. So they evacuated us. And I was--

Did you know the purpose of the evacuation?

The Russians came close to us.

And you knew it.

No, we realized, something-- there must be a reason. We heard rumors-- unsubstantiated, but we heard rumors. So they kept. We kept. You know, so I pushed a wagon. We had no horses.

So they had syrup. And the syrup kept dripping. [LAUGHS] I caught it, you know? And I kept licking it. And I told you, I carried nine loaves of bread.



We came in a camp-- Althammer-- in the middle of the night. So the next day, this Oberscharfuhrer, he evidently was a humane human-- well, "human" I cannot call them. They were Homo sapiens, but very humane is a different story.

But somehow it worked out that he was right. So he took all this syrup. He said, my guys don't need syrup. They need bread. He went to a bakery and made an exchange, and he gave us again bread, you know?

So we worked the next day again. And I worked. Then the first day-- I have to tell you a story. A guy who was my partner to the bunk, his name was Spiegel. He was even smaller than I am.

And it was cold. And every so often, we heard a shot. Now, what was the shot? When somebody had to relieve himself and go on the side, they killed him.

So this Spiegel was working with me. And he was buckling, underneath. So I grabbed, with my left hand, his collar. I said, Spiegel, please, hold on. Please, hold on. Hold on, please.

He said, Martin-- he called Moshe-- I can't. I can't. Said, please, hold on.

Until today, if there is any guilt for me to feel, this is the only guilt I can feel. I was not strong enough to hold him. And he fell down. And a few minutes later, I heard a shot. They killed him.

So the second night, 2 o'clock in the morning, we came to that Blechhammer camp. I started looking for my friends, to give back their loaves of bread. I couldn't find them.

The next day, I still walked around with my--

How many were there, of you, total, do you think?

At this camp, there were hundreds or thousands who lives at camp--

When you marched.

We marched, we were about, I should say, about 150. We came out-- maybe 200.

OK.

We marched out. And a few guys left, because they couldn't walk. At the same Gustav that I told you that I was on his Kommando, he threw in a hand grenade-- I heard it later-- and killed them all.

One guy threw himself out into the pit for the dead. And he's still alive. He played dead. He threw himself out through the window and fell into the pit, and he was lying among the dead a couple of days. He survived. He lives in New York.

So, finally-- yeah-- all of a sudden, I felt, somebody is moving around. I turned around, and this Polack had a knife. He wants to cut open that sack. And I ran away. I found my friends. I gave them back their loaves of bread.

Now, there's one guy living in New York. His name is [PERSONAL NAME]. And whenever he has a chance, he reminds me-- you fool, you were hungry, and--

[LAUGHS]

--you gave us back the bread. I said, it wasn't mine, to begin with, to eat!

So we came into Blechhammer. And this was hell, a hellhole. They took us, the people who were there, inmates, they took them out to a different camp and then brought us in.

One night, they took out a block-- Block 25-- to Buchenwald. I didn't even know about it. And the next morning, we seen an empty block.

Now, on the premises of this camp, they were-- in Poland, we bury our vegetables underground-- potatoes and beets, carrots-- underground. They still would, probably. In this country, there's no need for it, probably, because they have better ways of keeping vegetables fresh.

So there was this German. Whenever he seen somebody digging out, he killed him. So one day, he was walking around with a gun and killing people. A Frenchman jumped on him with a knife and killed him, this German-- because there were not too many. So--

Then, all of a sudden, the bullets are flying, all over. The next day, quiet. Quiet, quiet. We didn't hear a sound of a bird even chirping. The Germans were not there, and the Russians were not there.

And we needed food. So, all of a sudden, there was a run on the food, where you kept the-- what do you call it, where they keep the food? You know, the--

Commissary or--

Commissary-- I said to myself-- there again, you know, that sixth sense, instinct, kept me from running. I said, no, I'm not going to run.

And what happened? On each corner, there was a machine gun with a German, and they opened up fire, and they killed people like flies. They were laying around there for two days. Snow was falling on them. I stepped all over them, you know, just didn't mean a thing-- dead-- you know? I wasn't callous, but this was the nature.

The next day, I went for food, to bring for my friends. Now listen carefully-- because we had a group of friends. You always had a group of friends, you know?

And at one, I went in the wine cellar. They had these big barrels of wine. And I scooped up some artificial flour and some seltzer water-- because there was no water. We used snow as water. That way do it, because your lips parch.

And all of a sudden, a Polack, again, said, you-- you know what I mean-- Jew-- and took a pick and lift it, and he wanted to hit me. I bent down, and it stuck into that barrel-- just like see in the movies. And I ran out, you know, the stone steps, outside, with two sacks of artificial flour, and I ran to my friends. And we took snow, and we melted it. And they cooked it.

Then I was inquisitive. I marched around the camp. How much do I have?

Very little.

OK. I marched around. And I see an opening, and I seen civilians. I went through there. They spoke Polish.

I said, I need some water. Where do I go? They told me there's-- 2 and 1/2 kilometers into the woods, there's a basin of water, like a swimming pool. But be careful. There's, you know, sometime Germans.

I took a chance-- took a pot. I went to there. And I scooped some water up. I didn't any Germans, just an old man and a little girl, you know?

And I came back to our friends. I told them there is water. I gave it. I shared with them the water.

Next day, I went again to this opening. And they were packing clothes on the sleds. And I asked them in Polish, where are you going? They said, going home. Where is home? Katowice. You've probably heard of that.

OK, so I went back to my friends and says, look, there's a way people walking out. So I took a group of seven, including myself, and we walked through the woods. And we came to an opening-- to a clearing. And where do we go from here?

So I have to tell this story, every time. As a kid in Poland, I read the stories of James Fenimore Cooper-- the Hawkeye, the Pathfinder-- I did the same thing. I lied on the ground. I look for [INAUDIBLE]. I said, this is the way to go.

[LAUGHS]

About 10 minutes, 15 minutes later, we came to-- from the Russians. They were camouflaged with white sheets. Their tanks were camouflaged.

I jumped up and said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]-- "I'm a Jew." I showed them I had the markings. And they took us into a camp.

One Russian took out a gun. He was a southpaw. He put his hand on the left shoulder of my friend-- killed the old man-- a farmer. He said, you collaborated with the Germans. And he said to the old lady, if you won't cook milk and noodles-- and he knew that meat would kill us probably-- for these young men, you'll be killed too.

And she did it, and she cooked milk and noodles. This was the real first warm food I had. Next--

In the middle of the night, other Russians came in and they changed guards, with guns and flashlights. Again I jumped up. I spoke Russian. I said, I got the markings. I came out a Jew out of a camp. And then this is--

We started working towards Tschenstochau. 14 days, I dragged a sled with a sick man. And the next day, actually more than two weeks later, I was in Łódź, back. I didn't find anybody. This is a story, in a capsule form, of my existence in it.

Thank you for sharing it with us, Mr. Water. It will be heard by many.

Thanks a lot.

You can be sure.