

Good evening. I'm Jessica Sheena. This is my grandfather, Alex Fishman. And this is my grandmother, Ruth Fishman. My grandfather will answer some questions about the Holocaust. Where were you born?

Hi, Jessica. I was born in Sighet. At that time, it was part of Romania. You would better known as Transylvania. But my father and my mother, the same place they were born-- were Hungarians. When I was born in 1917, it became Romania. So I was born in a town called Sighet, Romania. But ultimately, I became a Hungarian. I became a Hungarian citizen.

OK. Did you have a peaceful childhood?

Well, had a peaceful childhood. I had no problems. I grew up like any other boy. You used to grow up-- I went to Romanian schools. I graduated. And I had no problem growing up.

What did you do day by day?

Well, day by day, I was in school. And then, at the age of 21, after I graduated, I had to be in the Romanian Army. And I served in the Romanian Army from 1939 till 1941. At that time--

What was it like in the army?

At that time, the Hungarian government took over our city, part of Transylvania. And I became a Hungarian citizen overnight. But peace didn't last long because after a while the Hungarians became very anti-Jewish and antisemitic. They were always antisemitic. We had no peace at that time. We were afraid that they would haunt us as Jews.

Ultimately, my brother was called in to serve in a labor camp. And he was sent to Siberia. And he was married already. I was married too, at that time. But luckily, at that time, at least for the time being, he came back after serving in-- I'm sorry, not Siberia, in the Ukraine, while the Germans attacked the Russians.

And he had to dig trenches and work in the most unfavorable conditions. He came home broken physically, but not spiritually. He was strong enough. And he started to recover.

As soon as he recovered, suddenly I received a letter from the Hungarian government that I have to report to the labor camp. That was in 1942. And from 1942-- you asked me what I did. From 1942 till 1944, I was in a strict Hungarian, anti-Jewish labor camp.

We were working very hard. We had very little food. But luckily we were, in a way, free, that we had our own money and we could buy our own food. So to that extent, it wasn't too bad.

Wasn't that the place where you could bribe people--

Yes.

--for privileges?

We could bribe people for privileges. And I had enough money at that time. And there was no problem. But nevertheless, it was very hard.

Then, in 1944, on March 18, the German Nazis-- the German government took over Hungary. They marched in in Hungary. And it was just at a time when I was supposed to get a furlough for the birth of my second child. And that's when they marched, and I was supposed to leave on Sunday, March the 18th. And when they took over the city, I was cut off and I couldn't go anymore. So I never saw my second child. But I had no idea what they were doing.

And in the meantime, I learned that, as soon as the Germans took over our part of the city, Transylvania, all the Jews were put in ghettos. And my father, as a matter of fact, not only was he in a ghetto, but he was taken as a hostage

because the prominent Jewish people at that time were all taken hostages. The reason was that they had to give the government all their valuables, all their assets, all their money, gold and silver, whatever. But I didn't know about this at that time.

So anyway, I was in Budapest, in the outskirts of Budapest, in my unit. The Jewish unit was working in a beer factory. And we worked very hard. We had to carry ice, tons of ice and grain and everything over our back. And they were working us very hard.

Finally, the war came to an end. In the meantime, we didn't know what was going on. We knew that my family, the whole town of Sighet, was deported to Auschwitz around June. But we didn't know anything about it. We never heard about gas chambers. We never heard about killings. We were cut off, completely cut off.

We knew that they are killing Jews, but not to the extent what we learned after the war and during the war. People outside the German area, like in the United States and anywhere else in the world, they knew more than we knew about it.

Finally, around September, I heard that our unit would be given over to the Germans, and we would be transferred to Germany. At that time, three of us, two of my buddies and myself, had a safe house. And overnight we snuck out from the camp.

But a fourth boy suddenly realized that we are sneaking out. He came with us. We didn't have room for him, so we didn't know what to do. He said to us, if you go, I go. So finally we decided that two of my buddies were going to another safe place, and I will take him with me. So we went to a safe place, and we stayed there till October.

By October, his money ran out, and I didn't have money. But the woman and the family said to us, look, we are going to keep you. But for him we are not responsible. And unless he pays us for something, we will keep him. But he didn't have any money either. If that family would have been caught with us, they would have been shot on the spot because they were hiding Jewish people.

So we had nothing else to do. But I had a second safe place in a hotel, where a Gentile person knew about me. And we went to that hotel. At night we snuck out. And we lived there for several weeks.

And the Russians were already around Budapest. That was November, the beginning of November. And I remember the fateful Friday. It was November the 3rd, 1944. I went out to have breakfast or to have a shave-- I don't remember what it was anymore-- because in those days I didn't shave myself. I didn't have anything to shave with. When I came back, my buddy was still in his pajamas.

And in the meantime, it got late. And it was around noontime. And we had to go downstairs, across the street to a restaurant to have lunch. Naturally, we had all false papers. I Hungarianized my name from Fishman to make it a Hungarian. And it was called Halász. That means a fisherman.

But my friend still was in pajamas, and I got hungry. And he said, OK, wait for me for five minutes, and I will be ready. But I said, look, I'm going down, and I will order your food. You don't eat soup anyway, so I might as well go and eat my soup. And by the time you come, your food will be there. And I closed the door. And I still heard the words ringing in my ear. Wait for me for five minutes.

And as I went down the stairs-- because we lived on the first floor, we didn't have to use the elevator. So I came down the spiral stairs. A Nazi came up with a big Nazi band, a Hungarian who was my old schoolmate. And he recognized me. He was a Hungarian. And by the time I saw him, I knew that something is wrong.

So as I started to go down in the foyer, suddenly I hear he calls my name. And at first, I didn't respond. Then he started to yell louder. Finally, I stopped, and I turned around. And I pretended that I saw him for the first time.

Then he says, what the hell are you Jew doing here without a star and without a band of David? Instead of a star, we had

to wear a band. So I said, well, I'm here to look for my family and so on. He says, your family is already gone.

I said, what do you want from me? He says, I will take you in. And I promised him-- I told him, I will give you everything. Just let me go. He said, I have already everything. And at gunpoint, he took me over to the Nazi headquarters.

And finally, to make a long story short, the reason I didn't have a band here with the Star of David, I was sentenced to three days in prison. That was Saturday. I went to prison there. And it was a room like a football field, that prison. It was full of Jews. It was some 200 or 300 Jewish young people. Were men, children, women, girls, all bunched together and were all sleeping on the floors.

And when I came in, they all ran to me and asked me, what's going on? They didn't know what was going on. They were there for weeks. And I said, I know the Russians are already here around the corner of Budapest, but we are waiting for them to occupy the city.

But next day, Sunday morning, suddenly everything changed. The Germans, SS took over the prison. And they marched us to the main synagogue in Budapest, a beautiful synagogue. And they kept us there for two days. And they were desecrating the Torahs and everything, those Nazis-- the Hungarian Nazis, mind you. They were sitting on the bema. And they were taking out the Torahs. And they were lighting cigarettes from a fire, and they were lighting cigarettes with the Torah pieces.

Then Monday morning, that was March the 5th or the 6th. Let's see. Friday was the 3rd, 4th, 5th-- the 6th. They started to march us. And we marched from Budapest to the German border. It was some 200 miles, 250 miles.

In the meantime, while we were marching, they didn't give us any food for the few days. And it was in November. We marched for five days. We slept in football fields and soccer fields. That's where they put us in there, without anything. We were all together and freezing.

Children died. Old people died. Women died. And those who couldn't walk were left behind. And then we heard shots. And they were probably-- naturally they were all shot to death.

Finally, we arrived at the border. And those Hungarian Nazis were as bad, if not worse, than the SS. We arrived at the German border. The Hungarian Nazis finally left us. And immediately they put us in cattle wagons, and jammed. I don't know how many, but we couldn't even move. We couldn't move an inch.

Finally, after two days without food and without any water and without any sanitary conditions, we arrived at a camp called Neuengamme. At least 20% of the people who were in that cattle wagon were dead or near death and so on.

We embarked. And I remember how we embarked. Suddenly we saw people coming to us who were Jews apparently, Poles who had those pajama-striped suits. And they were telling us, you stupid Hungarians. Now you come here? The war is almost over. But we didn't know. We were so isolated from the world that all we heard is, or all we read, what the Germans told us, what the Germans wrote in their newspapers.

We arrived at that camp, Neuengamme. And those able people were put to right. And those sick people were told, you go to the left. And you will take a shower. And we will clean you up. And then we will put you in a hospital, and you will get strong enough to work for us. We believed them. We didn't know about gas chambers at that time. We didn't know about anything.

You weren't aware what was going to happen there?

We didn't know. We didn't realize it. But next day, we realized what was going on. We never saw those people. And that's when my ordeal started.

We were working very hard. They beat us to death. We had to witness hangings because they found-- with one boy, and

in his pajama pocket they found a piece of bread. And they couldn't figure out how he got the bread because it was during the noontime. And bread was given only in the evening.

What we had in the morning was-- we had to work 16 hours or 18 hours a day. We had in the morning black coffee. At lunchtime, for a half an hour, we had so-called soup. I don't know what the soup was-- for a bowl. At least it was warm. In the evening we had a slice of bread, a piece of salami or whatever it was. And that was it, nothing else. That was our food. And a lot of people were hungry.

I remember there was one boy. He was my age at that time. We had a bunk. I was below, and he was on the top. One morning, I wake up and he was still, not moving. In the meantime, the German guards-- the kapos, we called them-- started to come and started to beat us. Get up, get up. And that boy didn't move. So quickly, I started to wake him. He was dead. He died overnight, just out of exhaustion and out of not wanting to live and out of hunger.

Then one day, they took a bunch of us. I was one of them. And they marched us. Neuengamme there was a camp near Munich. And they marched us, some 50 or 75 people, to a building which looked round like a dome. And what they wanted to see-- they wanted to experiment whether gas will penetrate that building. But we didn't know at that time, and we had to go.

And I remember we were sitting out where they put us down on the floor. It was a round room. We were sitting at the wall and just sitting and waiting. But then suddenly, the sirens came because at that time, at 11 o'clock exactly, the American bombers came. No, at 11:00. That's right. During the day, the bombers came. And they started to bomb the city of Munich. So they postponed this experiment.

So we were lucky because we would have been dead within 10 seconds right there because they wanted to see whether some sort of a gas penetrates in that building. But it wasn't sealed probably enough. But you might have been alive and not alive. I don't know what happened.

So they took us back. And our whole camp was just burning of fire. People were dying. Jewish people, and even the Germans, were dead. And I had to help to put out the fire from the roofs, from the kitchen, from there, and from all over. And they were beating us with-- I don't know what kind of sticks they were. But they were beating if we didn't move fast enough.

Finally, I had to climb up to a roof where the fire was there and put out the fire. And there was a two-way roof. And I had to-- there was a hook ladder where you come from one roof to another. And that ladder where I was climbing was giving out, and I started to fall.

And I thought, this is it. But I fell in a big barrel. And there was a nail there which went into my foot. I found a piece of bread there, a big piece of bread. It was a week's ration. Quickly I put it under my pajama jacket. I had a pajama jacket with a string.

And one of the kapos, who wasn't German-- he was a Dutch. His name was Karl. He was one of the nicest, I must say. He saw that. And I thought, if the other German kapos would see that, they would take away the bread from me, and they would probably shoot me on the spot. But he didn't say anything about it. And I was happy, without realizing that I had an infection in my foot. So at least that bread kept me for a while.

But we had to work. And they beat us every morning. When the sirens started to ring at 11 o'clock at night, we had to go down the spiral stairs. And if we didn't move enough, the German Nazis were standing around at the corners and beating us with their belts. [SPEAKING GERMAN], they used to holler. [SPEAKING GERMAN]. And there was not a moment of peace.

Finally, that camp was bombed completely. And that was almost already in March. That was in March '45.

Alex, you didn't tell them what happened about your leg, though.

Yeah, about my leg, my leg started to swell. And there was a Jewish doctor there. His only medicine was jam, strawberry jam. So he really couldn't do anything. So that Karl, that Dutch kapo, said, why don't you go to the doctor? So I went to the doctor, the Jewish doctor. He said, I cannot do anything for you. At least you won't work. And within two days you will die, so it will be easier for you.

So next day, that Dutch guy comes over. He said, well, what did the doctor say? I said to him, well, he said he has nothing to give me. And I will just not go out for work, and I will die peacefully.

So he went to the doctor, to the Jewish doctor. He said, if that man dies, you die with him. So the doctor started to cry. He says, but I have nothing to give him. I have no medicine, nothing. What can I do?

So that Dutch kapo took me down to the German infirmary. And there, they cleaned out my wound because it was all from a rusted nail. But I lost more than 60% of my weight. So the camp, anyway, was all bombed out.

You weighed then about, what, 85 pounds?

Even less. At that time 85, but when I was liberated, it was less than that. They took us up to northern Germany, Bremerhaven. There was a camp. I really don't remember what camp it was because we were so weak at that time.

And we came in that camp. And as we marched in there, we saw dead people lying near the buildings, like animals, all over. At least 300 dead people were lying there. Some had even got pajama clothes.

And we were animals too because we saw a good jacket, we were grabbing it from the dead. We were looking in their pockets whether they have something valuable, a piece of bread or anything, or a string to tie our pants. And the stink was unbelievable, but we didn't realize that.

And we arrived there. And they didn't feed us. We didn't work at all. We didn't realize for 10 days or a week we didn't get any food, nothing. We were just browsing around near the dead people to see whether we can find some food.

Then suddenly we realized that they are gone. There are no guards there. Everything was gone. So then people were hungry. And I remember that people couldn't do anything, so they took the grass and they eat the grass. They boiled the grass, and they started to eat grass.

And I was to the point where I almost did that. But then I still said to myself, if I eat that grass, sure I'm going to die. Maybe I can wait for another day or so. And sure enough, next day, the British Army moved in. And they liberated us.

And I remember when I saw the first tank, I said, my God, five minutes. If I would have waited five minutes for my friend, I would have never been here. But nevertheless, I never realized what happened to my family.

Finally, after the war, the British put me to the hospital, and the Jewish organization helped me with food and everything. And finally I went home to Sighet. And then my sister was at home and nobody else. And she told me then the story how my parents, my family, my children, all were deported. But somehow, it was so fresh that I just couldn't grasp that. And I just listened to it, and it couldn't enter in my mind.

Finally, I lived there for a while. And then Sighet became again Romania. And suddenly the communists took over. And I was on their blacklist because I was considered a Bourgeois with my parents. So I had to flee now Sighet. So I went back to Germany. And from there, I went to Israel.

Wait a minute. How about the time when you went to Marseilles? And in Marseilles, were running guns for the Haganah?

I was working for the Haganah. And after a while, I said, I would like to go to Israel and fight. And in 1948, finally I went to Israel. And within two weeks, I was already at the front. And in 1949, I was let go from the army because the first war was over. That was what we called the Liberation War.

And after the war, I had nothing to do. The Israeli Army didn't provide for me any shelter, any food, nothing. Whatever money I had, it was gone. The only thing they could do for me is they sent me to a kibbutz, which was a very good kibbutz, one of the best kibbutzim. I was there--

Hulda.

Hulda, that's right. I was there for a while. And one day, as fate wants it, I met your grandmother. And that was the first time that I could talk to her about my plight and what happened.

Up to that point, I just couldn't talk about it. She was the first one who I was telling my story about it, about my children, about my whole family. And she somehow understood that. And this helped me a little. And this brought me out from my dizziness and from my-- I didn't even-- I wasn't able to think. I didn't want to think because it was so painful. And then, slowly I started to recover.

But still, the memory is still here. But I look forward. Now I have you and all my family, my grandchildren, Benjamin, Rachel. So you will carry on the torch. And I hope you will remember this story.

How about Rita? [LAUGHS]

Well, Rita-- you see, your mother-- I didn't tell too much to your mother because I was afraid, at that time-- maybe I should have. But I told her very little. I never told her these stories which I told you. But I told your grandmother. Grandmother knows all these stories. But I hope--

Jessica probably has some questions she wants to ask you.

Could you tell us about the time you went to the movies and you saw--

Oh, yeah, that was the first time I broke down. Up to that point, I never was able to. I didn't want to think. And I just couldn't penetrate. I didn't shed one tear for my family.

And one night, I went in Tel Aviv to a movie where they showed one of those Nazi movies where the Polish Jews were herded in wagons. And there was a little boy with his hands up. You probably have that picture. There were other pictures where little children were shown.

And the minute I saw those little children, suddenly a cry came out from me. And I started to sob, and I couldn't help it. That was the first time that I was able to get it out a little from my system.

But your grandmother was the first person whom I was able to talk about it. But that was the first time. And that was in 1949, when I first bursted in tears. And up to that point, I was so-- I knew it was so painful to think about these things, but I didn't. I ran away from it because the wound was still very fresh.

Do you have any other questions?

I want to thank you so much. Grandpa, could you tell me the story about the apple?

Oh, yes. Do you know what happened? One day we were marching. The German Nazis were marching us to sort of a field where there were a lot of fruits there people were selling. But it was empty when we marched through there.

And as I marched, I found a half a rotten apple on the floor. And I looked around to see whether other people found and saw it. And I was the first to see it. And I grabbed it. And I put it in my pocket. And I was so happy that I found a half a rotten apple. And I was eating that in such a way that nobody should see that because apples were my favorite fruit.

And I remember your brother once asked me, Grandpa, how come that you were so strong? And I used to tell him,

because when I was young, I used to eat a lot of apples. At bedtime I used to eat six, seven apples at night. And that was my favorite fruit. And that's what I used to tell your brother, Benjamin.

Grandpa, did your parents ever talk about [INAUDIBLE]?

No, not really. Our parents and all the elderly Jews who had some stature never wanted to talk about it. I remember a man came back from Poland. And he was telling us, not about gas chambers, but he was telling us about how they killed Jews and how they torture, they put in ghettos. And they are giving them the hardest work. And they are just dying of hunger and so on.

And we were telling this to our parents. And our parents were very angry, the whole family, my whole family, not only my parents-- my uncles, my everybody, you name it. And the head of the synagogue, the president of the synagogue, who was my uncle, he said, you cannot talk about such things. This is a crazy man. That's not true. And don't talk about it. Look, we have nothing here. We just have to keep quiet.

Naturally, we didn't know about these things. But the young people, people like me and others, knew something. And we were telling our parents, why don't we get out from here? But it was too good for them to stay there because they didn't want to believe it. And that was what happened. And if our parents would have believed what those people who were some coming back were telling us, maybe--

Maybe you would have migrated.

I would have migrated to Israel.

It's so weird to think that [INAUDIBLE]. They could have saved your life. If you had waited five minutes for your best friend.

Especially my uncle, who was the president of the synagogue, he was so adamant about it. Don't repeat such things because it's not true. And he didn't repeat it. But we knew that something is going on.

Could you talk about the Israeli Army and what it was like?

Yeah, after I had to flee the communists, I signed up to the Israeli Army in Germany. And from Germany, I was sent with a group of people to Marseille. But in Marseille, they asked me to stay there for a while to help.

We had a camp in Marseille. And all those people who were going to Israel at that time-- because the state was not declared as Israel, as a state. So they had to be trained how to use arms because they were immediately sent to the Haganah. That was before the Israeli Army was created. It was called the Haganah.

And it was a castle in Marseille where we trained there for weeks and weeks. And after two or three weeks, when all the people were able to carry an arm and how to work an arm, we sent them with a boat to Israel. Some were caught and sent to Cyprus. Some went through.

But anyway, this camp-- we had to buy arms for the Haganah in those days. We were three people who were buying arms for the Haganah in Marseille. But we had to have some support from people because it was very dangerous. So we hired the so-called mafia there who were protecting us. We were paying them nice monies.

And they were protecting us because the first time we bought arms, we were robbed from them. They themselves, the French mafia, were robbing us. So we thought, it's better to join with them than to fight them. And they were protecting us. And we bought a lot of arms, mostly Czechoslovakian arms we bought. And we sent them with the ships.

That was illegal then, wasn't it?

It was illegal because at that time Israel was not a state yet. Israel became a state in '49, and that was in '48. And finally,

after Israel became a state, I said, OK, I had enough. I want to go to Israel to fight. They send me to Paris for a week or two to relax a little. And after that, I said, I have enough. I want to go. And with a small, little boat, I went to Israel.

We arrived in the morning. And in the afternoon I was already in uniform. And then, after 10 days of training, I was sent to the Negev. I was at the Dead Sea. I was fighting the--

Jordanians.

The Jordanians at the Dead Sea. And after that, in '49, in May, I think, finally the war was-- it was nowhere. It was truce. And that was when I released from the war. And then later on--

Then you had typhus, remember?

Yeah. No, I had malaria.

Malaria.

Had malaria. I caught malaria at the Dead Sea, at Sodom. I was stationed in Sodom, Sodom and Gomorrah and En Gedi. En Gedi is a place where King Solomon had his mines. And it was a beautiful place, En Gedi. But Sodom was an isolated place. It was the mountains, were the salt mountains.

And then I caught malaria which-- I didn't know about it. But I got a furlough one day. And five days later, when I came back on the plane, they wouldn't let me on the plane because I looked too pale, and I was shivering and everything. And immediately they took me to a hospital in Jaffa. And they kept me there for a week or two weeks.

Tell them the wonderful story about how they shipped you out ahead of time.

Oh, yes.

[LAUGHTER]

We had to wait for the plane when the war was over to come back to Tel Aviv or to Jerusalem. But we had only a small plane. And only four or five people can be shifted at one time or another. And I was way down on the list.

So we had nothing else to do, and we played cards, poker. And I was winning every day. And people were-- and I felt sorry for them, but I was winning. Finally, they decided that instead of putting me on the bottom of the list, they put me on the top of the list to ship me out.

[LAUGHTER]

Because you were winning poker a lot?

I was winning a lot, and I was lucky. But that malaria really took a lot out of me. I was shivering at night. And only in the evening, I was cold and hot, hot and cold. It was terrible. But it was over.

Can you think of any more stories?

Well, as I told you, all these stories, even though they happened a half a century ago, they are still so vivid in my mind. And I can see, for instance-- one thing I will never forget, the last time I saw my little girl. Her name is Aniko.

I still remember, as I left, I said goodbye to her. And she was standing with her mother at the gate and waving to me. And her last words were-- and I'm translating it to you from Hungarian to English-- but Daddy, make sure you come back. And that was the last word. And those words are still in my ear after 50 years. She was born in 1940, October the 31st. She would have been 53 years old now.



And your daughter Rita named Jessica after Aniko.

You are named--

Because your name is Jessica Ann.

You are named after Aniko. And your mother is named after my mother. Her name is Rita. And your great-grandmother's name was Rivka.

But going back to your mother, I never told your mother these stories. She never knew about it as much as you know and your brother knows. And I hope Rachel, when she grows up, she will learn from you all these stories.

Grandpa, thank you so much.

Thank you for asking me.

I know how hard it is for you to talk about. It's hard for me to hear it.

It was hard for me, but since you are my granddaughter, it was a little easier to tell you these stories. You should know. As people say that, never again. And it is important that people should never forget what happened.

You know, that's what Elie Wiesel says all the time, that we have a responsibility to maintain the memory.

We do. You stood up for our religion. You were there.

Well, I suffered for being Jewish, but I'm not sorry. I was born Jewish, and I'm Jewish. And I will always be Jewish.

Grandpa, how did this affect your feelings about God?

Well, you see, Jessica, I grew up in an Orthodox family, especially my mother was very Orthodox. My father wasn't too Orthodox, but he was quite a religious person. I had to go to the synagogue every Friday, whether I wanted to or not, every Saturday. And sometimes even the morning I had to go. Somehow I grew up being Jewish.

But it was interesting. After the concentration camp, where I saw so many Jews, innocent young people who were hanged for finding a piece of bread in their pockets and so on, I said, where is God? Is there a god? If there is a Jewish God or any god, can a god let this be?

And I said to myself, well, I'm Jewish, but I'm not religious anymore. And I didn't believe in God. For three years, I was not able to even go near a synagogue. And until your mother started to go to Hebrew school because she had to be bas mitzvah, that was the first time I went to the synagogue because I just didn't believe in God anymore.

And yet, I never thought of not being Jewish. I was born Jewish. I suffered for being Jewish. And I would never throw away my Jewishness. But I wasn't religious. I'm not a religious person, but I'm a very Jewish person.

And being Jewish means a lot to me. Never thought my mind to deny my Jewishness or to say I'm not Jewish or have Jewish or whatever. And I hope you understand what I mean. But I didn't believe in God. And I couldn't go near a synagogue.

I remember when I was pregnant with Rita, I begged you to make your peace with your God.

I couldn't. I said, there is no God. And if there is God, then he cannot do anything for us. And I remember that I used to love to go to a Kol Nidre services. My office used to be in New Jersey. And we used to come home-- I used to leave my office early because I wanted to be home. And I listened to the radio, in QXR. I listened to the Kol Nidre services which

they had recorded.

And I remember when I came home, I used to tell your grandmother that, well, finally I listened to the services. But I just couldn't even think about it. Now I go to the synagogue, just because of the memory of my parents. And the first time when your mother started to learn for the bas mitzvah, that was the first time that I made peace with God.

What do you mean you made peace with God if you still don't believe in God?

Well, let me tell you how. I made peace with God through my parents because my parents believed in God. I felt that I'm going to a synagogue on the holidays and on the New Year's Eve and on certain occasions for them. And this is the peace I made with God.

I don't believe there is such a person. And if there is, he must be very old and not listen to us anymore. But the reason I'm going to a synagogue and I made peace with God is, actually, I made peace because of my parents, because they believed in God and my whole family comes from a Orthodox background. And I just feel that I owe them this much.

But I just cannot believe in God. If God did not do anything when 6 million Jews were tortured, innocent children, innocent people who had nothing to do with the war, who were quietly living and doing no harm to anybody-- so how could God see that?

You know, I read somewhere, Jessica-- in some of the Holocaust books I read that we had to stand in line for hours to watch how our Jewish people were hanged. And I read somewhere that in another place such a thing happened. And as they were watching, the three young boys were strung up the rope and hanged. And one says to the other, here, you see? God just was hanged. And somehow, just think of it. If God is there, why did he let this happen?

[COUGHS]

No, don't ask. Just another story. The first night we arrived in concentration camp Neuengamme, it was around-- after they gave us a bowl of soup, they put us in a room approximately 10 by 12. And there were 50 people. They jammed us in, or 60 people.

And one man was a very sick man. And they gave us soup and a piece of bread. And that man couldn't eat that bread. And he was dying there. And there was a cot there, and he was lying on the cot. And his bread was in his pocket. And all the people were standing around that bed to wait for him to die.

And I remember-- at that time, it was natural. But now, if I think back, it's like we were animals. They made us animals. And finally, that man, after three hours, after suffering-- I don't know what he died of, but he just died. And the minute he wasn't breathing, 60, 70 people were jumping on that bed to grab that piece of bread.

Well, you wanted to ask me about what I think about the United States and during the war. And let me tell you. I didn't know about it. But when I heard what FDR did, it just made me very, very angry, that he turned back a ship of German children, men, and women because--

You mean Jewish children?

Jewish children, Jewish German children. And when I read that, I just couldn't believe that FDR, who was such a democratic person, who cared, allegedly, and yet he did such a thing. And I don't think that I can ever forgive such a atrocity what he did. I don't know whether it was politics or not politics or it was the State Department, who was so antisemitic in those days, even more than now, against Jews. Now it's against Jews plus against Israel. And I think this blot will always be in FDR's grave, so to speak, as far as I'm concerned.

It's just like one part [INAUDIBLE] in your heart that you cannot forgive for what you were suffering. And people were just like, they knew about it and they didn't do anything?

I cannot forgive the Hungarian Nazis at all. I could forgive some Germans because after the war, I saw something more humane. But the Hungarians-- Jessica, let me tell you something. The Hungarian people are born antisemitic when they are in their mother's womb. They are born antisemitic. They live antisemitic. And they die antisemitic.

The Hungarians I could never forgive what they did because we were Hungarian citizens, and they gave us over to the Germans. The Germans had no responsibility for us. We were slaves. They sold us as slaves, and we were their citizens.

The Romanians were more protected than the Hungarians.

That's right. The Romanians were more protected. The Romanian antisemitic government said that if we have to kill Jews, we will kill them, not you. And a lot of people survived and so on. But the Hungarians were so entrenched in that antisemitic idea, that they looted and hated. They were killing Jews and throwing them in the Danube.

As a matter of fact, when my sister came home, she heard from friends who were with me together that I was shot and thrown in the Danube. She thought that I was dead. And I thought that she was dead.

But the Hungarians I can never forgive. And I can never forget. I would never go back to Hungary. I would never go back to Sighet.

Jessica, I wish you would write Elie Wiesel about a documentary he made called, Sighet, Sighet. He went back in the '50s, I think. And he made a documentary. And if I recall, he showed even my family there. He showed still pictures. And as I recall, what he said is, there's nothing else here but the cemetery. That is such a good documentary, that I think that that should be shown in every school.

I think part of that story that you didn't tell, Alex, that's important is that Elie Wiesel put the family pictures in because they stopped him from completing the movie, and they never allowed him to complete it.

That's right.

So his way of completing it was to gather from all the people that he knew family members' pictures that died.

Why didn't they let him?

They didn't want it publicized.

They're not publicized.

That was after the war.

That was in the '50s.

What do you feel like when people say that there was no Holocaust?

I feel that they are so ignorant. They don't want to believe it. They have all the facts that is there. And they are so entrenched in that anti-Jewishness and antisemitic, that they just cannot bring themselves to believe it. Although I feel that, deep in their heart, they believe it. But yet they don't want to say it. Do you think that those commentators, like who ran for president this time--

David Duke?

Not David Duke-- Buchanan. And he says that there was no such thing as Holocaust. He knows that it was. Or David Duke, and he said there was no proof. There is proof there is a Holocaust. They know it, but they don't want to admit it.

What about the memories all those people had? It's not enough to just [INAUDIBLE].

These people who act like this, you can never trust them. And that's why it's important for us, and for you, and for your brother and sister, and for all the Jewish children to go on with this story with the Holocaust, not to let it die. Because if we let it die, then they will win.

And Elie-- this isn't just a Jewish story.

That's true. It's not just a Jewish story. Not only 6 million Jews were killed and gassed. There were other-- Catholics were killed and gassed, gypsies, and non-believers or anti-Nazis. Everybody who was anti-Nazi was gassed or killed or sent to a concentration camp. There were over 10 million people who were killed by the Nazis. Out of these 10 million, close to 6 million were Jews. Russians were suffering.

Grandpa, some people couldn't-- I mean, I'm not trying to stick up for the Nazis, but some people, they didn't believe in Hitler. And they didn't believe in the Nazis, but they were forced to. Their parents had them do. They would have been shot on the spot if they weren't for Hitler.

Jessica, not at the beginning. At the beginning, it was free. It was a free choice. Hitler came to power by free elections. And if you will watch all those documentaries, you will see how those young people were raising their arms and hollering, heil Hitler, heil Hitler, sieg heil, sieg heil. Nobody forced them to vote for them. They voted. It was a democratic election. But then he became a dictator.

And in order to start the war, he had to blame the Jews because there was nobody else to blame. He couldn't blame the Catholics. He couldn't blame the French or anybody, but always the Jews. The Jews were the target for him without any reason.

You know, Jessica, you asked me a while ago, how come that we didn't know what was going on? Well, let me tell you why. Because first of all, in Hungary, where we lived-- at that time we are Hungarians-- you had no newspaper other than the German Nazi newspapers and the Hungarian Nazi newspaper, no magazines, no nothing. It wasn't a free press. Everything was Nazi.

As a matter of fact, I used to tell your grandmother that I used to buy all the Nazi newspapers. And your grandmother asked me, why did you spend your money on Nazi newspapers? I said, because I wanted to know what was going on. That's the only way I found out. At least I knew that half of it is lie or 90% is lie. But at least I wanted to see what they think of Jews.

There I was reading all the hatred of the Jews, but never a concentration camp. Always reading the Jews were resettled to camps where they had to work hard. That's all that was done with them. And that's why we didn't know what was going on.

As a matter of fact, Jessica, we didn't even know that V-Day, the June 6-- D-Day. I'm sorry, D-Day. We didn't know about June 6, D-Day. As a matter of fact, it was June the 6th or the 7th when my family was sent to Auschwitz and gassed. We didn't know about D-Day.

We had no idea what was going on. We didn't know that the Allies landed in Normandy. We didn't know that Italy was taken. We didn't know that Hitler was shot. We didn't know that Mussolini was captured. We had no idea because we were isolated, and the newspapers didn't bring this.

Jessica, let me tell you about a story, which I told you before, that when we took off from the Hungarian labor camp, remember I told you that one of the boys came after us. We were three of us. Another boy came after us.

And as we stood there out of the camp, suddenly we saw that this boy is there. And we said to him, hey, what do you want? He said, I'm going with you, no matter where or what or where you go. So we all said, come on, you go back. Where are you going? We have nothing to do with you. And he wouldn't go.

So finally, we took him aside. And we were talking, the three of us. And we said, look, what shall we do with him? They said, we don't care. I think he should go back. And I said, if he goes back, he is going to tell that we left. Or if he doesn't go back, what are we going to do? He's coming after us.

So they said, look, we have-- the two of them said, we have another safe place. And he will go with you if you want to. I said, I will take him. At that time I didn't realize they betrayed me, that those two had a safe place without knowing me. I gave them a safe place from my money and from my connections. In the meantime, they had their own safe place, which ultimately turned out they never went to concentration camp. They never were caught.

So he came with me. And I just felt sorry for him because I couldn't leave him there, and they didn't want to take him. And I thought, well, they have a safe place. He might as well come with us.

So we had to go in the outskirts of Budapest. And we took at night-- it was around 10 o'clock. We took a cable car out in the outskirts. And we had to walk through a big soccer field to find that house. It was a peasant's house.

And it was around 11 o'clock. And we were in an open soccer field. And the bombs started to come, the airplanes started. It was a strafe bombing there. And we had nowhere to run or to go. And we were just lying down on the field and just lying there for 20 minutes or 25 minutes until the bombers left.

And finally we reached the house. And the woman opens the door. And she sees us, and she says, who is he? I said, well, he is with me. So she says to me-- she took me aside and says, look, you gave us a lot of money. You fed my little-- she had a little girl. Her name was Annie, I think, [INAUDIBLE], Annie.

And she said, I will take you, but I have no responsibility for him. She said that if I am caught, I'm going to be shot on the spot with my child. And I take a chance with you, but with him? So I said to her, look, he has a lot of money. I'm out of money. I don't have any money. You don't have to take me.

But she was nice enough. She took me. And she said, but he has to pay me. He had silver. He had gold. He had I don't know what. He had money at that time. So she kept us until we had the money.

And then she said, look, I will keep you, but I don't want him. If he doesn't pay me, he should go. So we talked it over with him. And I said, look, I won't let you go because he had nowhere to go. And I felt so sorry for him. But I still had a plan B. I still had another place. So I said to him, if she doesn't let you stay here, I will go with you.

And early in the morning, finally we decided we are leaving. And we took a cable car back to Budapest. It was in a hotel called the Hotel Royal. And there we had a man-- he was a Gentile-- who knew about me through a friend of mine who was from the same town, who was with me. His name was Reiss. Lotsi Reiss was his name. He is now in Israel.

And we came to the hotel. And we said, we want to see this gentleman. And when he rang his phone, we picked up the phone and I gave him the code word. And he came immediately down. And he said to the clerk, he says, these two are my guests. Just put them down as I will pay for them. And we all had false papers. And we stayed there until that fateful November the 3rd, Friday.

Tell the story too about that man that you called up and gave your father's name.

Oh, that was before I was caught. I ran out of money. And if you didn't have money, you didn't have a safe place. You didn't have certain privileges in that labor camp, in that hard labor camp.

And then I knew a man who was dealing with my father, who was a businessman. And they had business together. And I looked up his name in the telephone book. And I called him up. And I said, this is Mr. Fishman. And I gave my father's first name.

Oh, he says, hi, how are you? I didn't know you were here in Budapest. I said, look, I don't want to talk too much, but I would like to see you. Can you see me? He says, yes. And we made a date that we will meet at the railroad station, a big

railroad station. He asked me how I will be dressed. I asked him how he will be dressed. And I told him, he told me.

And then I'm going to the railroad. And I'm standing there on the street, and suddenly I see a man that's coming over me. And he tells me, hello, Mr. Fishman.

I says, how did you recognize me? He said, I knew it's not the senior Fishman. I knew that. But I recognized somehow a Fishman voice. If you knew me-- I knew immediately when I saw you, you looked like your father. But I knew that, on the telephone, it wasn't your father. And I think he gave me maybe \$500 or \$600, equivalent to \$500 or \$600, so that kept me again. And so--

There were so many fortuitous circumstances that kept him alive.

Then one evening, I'm walking in Budapest on the street. And suddenly, in a little alley, I see that a group of elderly people with shovels on their shoulders are marching. And suddenly I recognized my Uncle Sigmund. And I thought, my God, if he sees me and he says hello to me, I'm dead. Because I didn't have my band on. I was walking with false papers, like not a Jewish person.

And as I stood there at the curb and he passed by, he looked at me. And he was so smart not to make a move that he recognized me. And I was so scared that he would say, hi, what are you doing here or things like that. I would be in trouble. How does he know me, who I am, and so on and on. But he was smart not to say a word.

And did you see him after that?

Oh, sure.

He lived after the war.

He lived through. He lived. He didn't go to concentration camp because somehow he was lucky to stay there. His group was never sent to Germany. He was in labor camp there in Budapest. It just happened that my company, because we were young people, were sent. And the Germans needed young people.

It was just horrendous. Children were crying for hunger. And we went through-- those peasants-- as we went through the highways, the peasants were standing on the sides. And they were hollering, dirty Jews, you deserve this. Again and again. They were so cruel to us. And finally, maybe one or two gave some sick person a little water or so on.

But we were dying. People were dying like flies. Hungry, no food. The minute they gave us to the Germans, at least the Germans gave us some food after three or four days. That's why I said that I can never forgive the Hungarians. They are worse than the German Nazis.

All the Jews had to wear a Star of David on their breast. But people like me who were in labor camp had to wear a yellow band with the Star of David and a military little cap. That was the sign that you were in a labor camp group. So the Hungarian Nazis, the outsiders, the police couldn't touch you. And if they arrested you, you immediately-- they called your commander, and your commander came and bailed you out. That's what happened to me once.

What happened to me once that I was in town. And I was with a family at a--

This was when you were in the labor camp?

In a labor camp, yes. As I told you, if you had money, you lived a little easier. So I got a furlough for two days. It was over a weekend. And I remember we went with a family. They had a daughter, a little girl, and father and mother. And we all went to a movie. And after the movie, it was too late. And they said, why don't you sleep over? So I said, OK, I will sleep over.

And suddenly, around 4 o'clock in the morning, we hear big noises. It was in a housing project with-- I think it's 10 or

12 floors with maybe 500 or 600 people living there, but mostly Jews. 90% were Jews there. And it was in the best part of the town.

Around 5 o'clock, big noises. So we wake up. And we see the Hungarian Nazis are all surrounding the building. And it was an atrium, a courtyard down. And they were having a microphone. And they were hollering up, all the Jews should come out, down on the pavement right here within 10, 15 minutes.

Within 10, 15 minutes, maybe one or two persons went out. And they're starting to shoot, first in the air. And people got scared. And so everybody went out.

Well, I didn't know what to do. And the family I was staying with went downstairs. And they were waiting there. But then they started to search all the floors, and starting from-- I think it was 10 to 12 floors. And I was at the sixth or seventh floor. And as they started to approach, I was still in the house.

I went in an armoire. Instead of built-in closets, they had armoires. That was a closet. And I was hiding there. And through the hole I see a 10-year-old boy who was maybe four feet tall had a rifle which was five feet tall. The rifle was taller than he.

And he opens the door. And he says, are there any Jews here? And he looks around. And I saw him. And he looks, he looks. And finally he left. If he would have opened the door to the closet, to the armoire, he would have shot me right there.

But then I saw there was no escape. So I went down. And suddenly, they started to march. When they gathered all the Jews, some 400 people-- children, men, women, you name it, just Jews. And they were marched out.

And that was on a main street, like here on Fifth Avenue. We had to march there, all those with a yellow star and I with my military cap and the yellow band. And as we walked, people were spitting at us. Dirty Jews, now we will get your apartment. You live too nice and so on. They were spitting at us and hitting us and everything.

They took us-- I don't remember-- to some station. And there they screened us out. They put us in cells. And then, when it came to interrogation for me, I said, look, I was just caught. I couldn't get home. I'm with this-and-this company. And you call. And you will see that I'm with them because I didn't have any papers with me.

So they called the company. And they said, yes, we have such a man here. We will send a sergeant. So the sergeant came, and he bailed me out. And he said, you're stupid. Why did you stay there overnight? I said, I didn't have a transportation anymore. He bailed me out.

Then there was another thing I almost got killed. I think I told your mother, Rita. We were working on a building for a big Hungarian Nazi, where we had to move his furniture from one house to a nicer and bigger house where Jews used to live. And we had to move his furniture.

And as we moved the furniture back and forth, it was noontime. And suddenly we were hungry. And we went across the street to get some food. And suddenly the siren started to blow up. And everybody was running back and forth. And I wanted to get back from one street to another, from one side to the other side, back to the building where my unit was working there. And I was hit by a car. Luckily it was a small car, and I was thrown to the pavement. I just picked myself up, and that was it. I told you this story.

I don't think so.

No?

[LAUGHS]

Yeah.

I remember even the street. It was a very elegant street. It was a big Hungarian Nazi, where we had to move his furniture to a big Jewish place where the Jews were thrown out from there. The same hit I got here when I was in the jeweler. But I had a lot of--

Near misses.

Near misses.

Talk about your papers when you got caught.

Yeah, I have to tell you another thing, Jessica. When that friend, so-called colleague of mine, who I went to school together caught me, he took me over to the Hungarian Nazi headquarters. And as we come in, he says to the man at the desk, he says, here, I caught you another dirty Jew.

The Russians were already around there, around Budapest, cornering every part, but they didn't move in. So the man, that Hungarian Nazi at the desk says, what shall I do with him? So one other Nazi says, send him to the police. So he says, OK.

So he and another guy were marching me. One had a gun-- and the guy who caught me with his pistol were marching me two blocks to the police station. And here I had in my pocket-- he knew my true name, which was Fishman. And I had in my pocket all kinds of false papers, which-- different names and different this. Everything was different.

And I knew that when they marched me to the police and they will ask me my name, I have to give my true name because he will be there and he will know if I give another name it's not true. And I knew if I will give my true name, they will check with the unit. And I was a deserter already. And they would have shot me on the spot there. I thought, well, that's my fate. And I don't know what to do.

And as they marched me to the police station, I in the front and the two with the pistol and with the gun marching in. And there was a sergeant, a Hungarian sergeant who was sitting at a desk. He was an elderly man. And one guy says to him, we brought you here another Jew who was caught without an armband with a yellow star. So he says, OK.

So the sergeant takes out a piece of paper and a pencil. And he starts to write. He looks up suddenly. And before he asks me what's your name, he looks up at those two. He says, I don't need you anymore. You can go. And they says, OK. And they salute, and they leave.

By that time, I knew I was saved because now I can give my false name because the sergeant doesn't know me. So the sergeant looks at me, and he says, how did you get caught so late? So immediately I knew that he's not such a bad man.

It was November, I told you, and it was a cold November day. And he had a little oven what he was burning to have fire because it was cold there. And he says, what's your name? I gave my false name. But he immediately knew that it couldn't be. I couldn't have such a perfect Hungarian name. So he said, look, I have to go here in the other room for a minute. If you want to warm yourself up near the fire, you can do that.

I knew immediately what he had in mind. So when he went out, I took out my wallet, and I burned all my false papers. And I took out the money which I had. I had maybe several hundred dollars. And I left myself with \$15 or \$20, and I put all the money on his desk under a little paper.

He came back. He looked under the paper. He took the money. And he said, I'll tell you what I will do. This afternoon the magistrate is coming. And I will tell him that you were caught without a band. And you will get a day or two, and they will let you go.

But then that was my misfortune that just that day, Sunday or Saturday, the Germans took over the jail. So there they would have released me, and I would have gone back to the hotel.



What became of the people in the labor camp?

In which labor camp?

In the labor camp that you escaped from.

Oh, they were sent to Germany. I don't know what happened to them. But they were all young and strong like me. They were all sent to a German camp. I don't know where they were sent because the whole unit, per se, with lock, stock and barrel was given over to the Germans.

So your biggest crime, at least up to this point, had been that you had deserted from the--

That's right, I was a deserter. And I have to tell you another story. While I was still in camp, one day the sergeant comes. And he says he needs 10 volunteers to go in town. Of course, I was the first one to say I'm a volunteer. He took the 10 of us. And we didn't know what for. We asked him, what for? He said, don't ask questions. Fine.

We went in town, marched with the yellow band here. And suddenly he takes us to a square where there are a lot of people there with chairs around. It's like a semicircle. And then he tells us why we volunteers. He had to take 10 people to witness an execution of a Jewish deserter, a young boy at my age.

We were standing there for an hour and a half, until finally they brought this young man. And he stood there. And all the Hungarian Army was there. And they read him his sentence. You are a deserter, and you are sentenced to death. You have anything to say? He said, I have nothing to say.

And we had to witness how he was shot. But not only that. After that, we had to go around and see how he looks. That's why they needed the volunteers, the 10 of us, to witness this, not to think for desertion. That's why I knew that if I would given my name while that guy was there, I would have been sent back, and I would have had the same fate. But this is the cruelty the Germans did, that you had to witness the execution to teach you a lesson.

But that young boy was so brave. He just went without mercy and without begging because he knew that nothing would help him. I can still see his face. Such things keep in my memory, that he just went erect without any fear or anything. He knew that nothing can help him. And we had to walk around and watch him as he was lying there on a big-- he was lying like this, right there.

There are a lot of such stories that I can tell you. But mostly when, in my camp, three Jewish boys were put under the rope because they found some bread in their pockets. And they couldn't explain how come they did. And it wasn't fresh. It was a stale bread. And they knew that it couldn't have been from last night because they gave us always sort of a fresh bread. And he couldn't tell them how they got the bread.