Dr. Dobias, reel 1. Could you tell me where you were born, first of all?

I was born in Czechoslovakia, in the westernmost part, in Bohemia, on the border, ethnic border, between the Czechs and the Germans in the northern part of the country.

This is the region we call Sudetenland?

Yes, it was called Sudetenland only by the Germans. Before the war, the word Sudetenland did not exist. It was created. It was called after a range of mountains, Sudety, or in German, Sudeten. But it was not a region called like that until the Nazis realized that it was a political thing to call it that way.

What did your father do for a living?

My father was a builder of industrial chimneys. That was at the time when factories in that area started to be built, like factories for making ropes or factories for cutting imitation glass stones. All these factories required a certain heating furnaces. And for that purpose, chimneys had to be built. My father was one of those who built them and who maintained them.

So he was an employer?

He was-- no, he was self-employed. But he built, designed, and built the chimneys.

Was your family rich, or poor, or comfortable, or what?

Comfortable. I wouldn't say they were not rich, they were comfortable. My mother came from the country, from a farm. Her parents had a small farm not far from Turnov, the place where I was born. And they got married before the war. And I was born in 1913, just before the First World War.

And what about brothers and sisters?

I have only one sister, who still lives in Czechoslovakia. She married a professional officer before the war. And of course, during the war, he was very, very careful because otherwise, he would have followed my steps to the concentration camp. But he kept low and he survived.

What was the religious background of your family?

We were a Catholic family in Czechoslovakia.

Why-- were your parents regular churchgoers?

No. No, they were not, but they went only on certain days-- Christmas, Easter. They were believing people, but they were not very deeply religious.

But you were brought up to be a believer yourself?

Yes, I was brought up to believe.

Were your parents interested in politics?

Yes. My father was a nationalist, a Czech nationalist. I remember still from my youth that he was very much against the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. And he wanted desperately to join any group which would fight for the independence of the Czechs and Slovaks.

Did either your mother or father belong to a political party? Were they organized?

No, not to my knowledge. They were not politically active as such.

What about your schooling?

I went to the school, primary school, in Turnov, the place where I was born. After five years, I went to the technical school in Turnov called Realschule in German, Realka in Czech. But my feelings were more towards humanities. So after four years, my father sent me to the German-speaking town of Reichenberg, or Liberec in Czech, where I finished the so-called reform realgymnasium in German or equivalent of a grammar school.

What do you recollect from your young days about relations between the Germans and the Czechs in the area where you lived?

My first recollections were very, very friendly. I grew up on the border. And I had many friends who were German-born, German-speaking. And we were very, very friendly. At the time, my father insisted that I learn German properly as my second practical-- he called it my second mother tongue.

And when I went to Liberec to that grammar school, he insisted that I lived with a German family so that I could learn the language fluently and perfectly, which I Did I went home only for the weekends. It was only about 14 miles away from the town where I was born.

But did you ever get-- did you ever come across Germans who said to you that they thought they ought to belong to the German Reich rather than the Czechoslovak Republic?

Not during the early years of my childhood. There was no problem at all. It only started when in 19-- around 1935, '36, when Hitler came to power and when certain political factors started to work on the idea that the Sudeten Germans, called at that time, should belong to Germany-- not only emigrating to Germany, but that part where they lived should belong to Germany. But that was more or less theoretical. And we didn't give it much thought.

But did you find amongst popular attitudes in the part of Czechoslovakia where you lived that there was any kind of racialist feeling on the part of Germans towards Czechs or on the part of Czechs towards Germans-- an attitude of contempt?

Yes, it was. It developed, obviously, with the years. It didn't start like that. When I lived, actually, with the German family in Reichenberg, we were such good friends that we even visited each other even afterwards, up to the start of the hostilities.

I have a friend who now lives in Munich who stayed with us, and in Turnov, and who learned Czech as a German and who was, during the war, in the army, was sent to Russia and afterwards emigrated or was sent as a German to Germany. And he lives in Munich. And we keep in touch. And we are very, very good friends.

But what kind of typical racialist attitudes would you get by Germans towards Czechs and vice versa?

The Germans insisted in conversations that that part was part of Germany and that they wanted, as they called it in German, Heim ins Reich, that that part should belong to Germany, and unless it happened, that they did not want to remain friendly with the Czechs.

Do you remember the rise of a German nationalist party under Konrad Henlein?

Henlein. Yes, I do very well, indeed. Some of the friends I had at first hesitated, and afterwards, confessed to me that they had to join because there was a certain pressure by other friends. And they would have been ostracized if they hadn't joined. But they took it as far as I remember as a joke.

What did you actually see of the activities of Henlein's party?

Not really much. There were meetings, private meetings, secret meetings, as they called them, but I didn't give them much thought.

Can we talk a little bit about the Czechoslovak Republic as it existed between 1919 and 1938? And can you tell me what life was like for people living in that republic in those days, first of all, from the point of view of standard of living?

The standard of living was varied, as far as I remember. Obviously, there was poverty, like everywhere in Central Europe. That was not concentrated in one area or one country. There was poverty, but not any less or not any more that than, say, in Austria, which I visited in those days or the neighboring countries.

Generally, the living standards, as far as I can remember as a growing young boy, they were satisfactory, friendly, joyous, and above all, there was freedom in that country, even though I don't belong to the country anymore. I must say, going-- thinking back of those days, we had freedom in Czechoslovakia.

The Germans, for instance, had their schools in the German-speaking areas. They were instructed completely in the German language. They didn't even have to take as a subject Czech. They were absolutely free to do what they wanted. They had their representatives, they were absolutely free. They were Czechoslovak citizens of the German language.

Was the Communist Party strong in your part of Bohemia?

Not in the part where I was because it wasn't really industrial. It started to be, but it wasn't industrial to such an extent that there would be economic privations, which always bring up the question of reward or communism. In other parts, as far as you remember, in the mines, in the areas of mining or steel manufacturing, yes, I remember, there was quite a bit of propaganda for the Communist Party.

Did you personally know communists?

Yes, I did. I did, especially among students. When I was at the university, we had students with a background of-- not probably wealthy, but well-to-do people, who, from idealistic reasons-- for idealistic reasons, thought that the equality, which in those days was similar to the first Christian ideals, was the thing to do. And they really formed certain groups. They may not have been members of the Communist Party, but they certainly were sympathizers.

Did any of these men and women become important leaders of the Communist Party later?

Not from the people I knew personally because several of those died in the concentration camps. But I met people in Mauthausen from Czechoslovakia, very intelligent people, who were sent there as communists who survived and after the war were very high up in the communist hierarchy. For instance, the president of Czechoslovakia, AntonÃn Novotny, was a personal friend of mine in Mauthausen. At the time, we all knew that he was a strong communist, but we never imagined that he would become the president of Czechoslovakia after the war. He was a very friendly, very helpful person.

Can you say more about what he was like as a man?

He worked in a Kommando, as they call it, in Mauthausen, which was not really exposed to the elements like the quarry, Wiener Graben, where most people died. And he joined with all the activities ethnic with the Czechs. And he was a most enjoyable person to be with. There were others. For instance, I recall the name of Henrik, who became one of the top communist leaders after the war, and several others who got, due to the fact that they were imprisoned during the war as communists and that they were and survived-- they were in Mauthausen and survived, became very influential people in the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia.

Did the loyalties of the communists in Czechoslovakia in those days before the war seem to be towards the Czechoslovak Republic or towards Russia?

No. They were, as far as I remember-- they were for Czechoslovakia, but to form a certain type of government or influential political party which would assist the poorer classes in Czechoslovakia. As far as I remember, they never thought or discussed a possibility of joining Russia, or the Soviet Union, or being part of it, or being even subjected to the rule from the east.

What was your attitude towards communism before the war?

As a student, obviously, like all the ideas, I read about it. I read the books. I considered it. And frankly, I thought it was not a bad idea, except I was for freedom. And I gathered from the information I got that freedom was only secondhand. If you become a communist, you have to obey, and it's a dictatorship. And for that reason, I soon discarded the idea. I was playing with it, I must say. I was playing with the idea. I considered all the pluses and minuses. But finally, I decided that once you lose freedom, you lose everything.

So how would you describe your own personal political position before the war?

I was not a member, but I sympathized with the so-called Socialist Party, which was called in Czech National Socialist, obviously, which had nothing to do with the German National Socialist Party. They were middle class people who were nationalistic, and yet, socially-- not socialistically, very social-minded. There were very few wealthy people among those. It was the party of President Benes. And they were middle class, middle center, even though their name was socialist.

How were the leaders of the Czechoslovak Republic, like Benes and so on, regarded by the population, do you think?

In general, they were regarded very, very sympathetically. It's very difficult to say for me what other people did. For instance, in parts, as I mentioned before, where the communists were strong, I never lived there and I couldn't judge. But in the parts which was partly rural, the Socialist Party-- National Socialist Party-- was one of the four main parties in Czechoslovakia. And there was no animosity or no infighting among those four parties.

And Masaryk? How was-- how were the Masaryks?

Oh, yes, he was also-- he was part of this process of middle class National Socialist philosophy.

Was there any fascist movement in Czechoslovakia before the war?

Yes, there was, not very strong. It was more or less very strongly nationalistic. And it developed only at the beginning, just leading before the war-- excuse me.

After the occupation, certain groups, members of certain types of people who wanted to get ahead over the others and who wanted to get financial or other privileges formed a so-called Vlajka, which was a party, small party, which was definitely fascist. And they were very well thought of by the occupying forces. And they got certain privileges. But the number was very small.

What kind of historical, or ethnic, or racial things did they draw on for their ideology, the Czechoslovak party?

They imitated, more or less, the Nazism and fascism in Italy. They were antisemitic. They were militarily-oriented. But from what I gathered, the main thing was to get to positions where normally, they would never have come because of lack of education or lack of intelligence. But they-- it helped them really to get ahead.

Were they stronger in the Czech, or the Slovak, or the Ruthenian parts of Czechoslovakia?

Personally, I wouldn't know because I never lived in Slovakia or in the eastern part. And I had no contact with the people there. So personally, I couldn't judge.

What were relations like between Czech, Slovaks, and Ruthenians?

Frankly, they were normal. I would say normal because even the Czechs looked at the Slovaks as a nation of lesser education because the Slovaks were actually more linked to their neighbors in Hungary. They were friendly, but to a certain extent, and it wasn't a real brotherhood.

And the Ruthenians?

Ruthenians, I know anything-- I don't know anything about, they were just the part beyond Slovakia, where I've never been, and what you get only from the reports in the newspapers. We didn't hear much.

What-- did you have Jewish friends and neighbors in your part?

Yes. Yes. In the town where I was born, they were the small minority of Jewish people. And we were very friendly, indeed. I recall that when the situation worsened, I was approached by practically every Jewish family in Turnov to assist them by teaching them English. They saw that the danger was coming. They were hoping, in those days, that they would still get out.

They approached, as far as I remember, all the relatives, if they had any, in the West and tried to persuade them to help them in the States, for instance, by sending them affidavits. And I was helping them in translations or in writing letters to that effect, which I had a chance to send through Switzerland. They were very friendly, more-- most of them very educated, and considerable-- considerate people.

The only thing which some other Czech people in that town had against them is that they tend-- they had a tendation-- a tendency to speak German. They sent their children to schools in-- outside of the Czech-speaking part. But they all spoke both languages very fluently. And they were very, very charming people, as far as I remember, through my childhood.

Were they regarded as an alien part of the community, as they seem to have been in some parts of Eastern Europe?

Not in the part where I lived. I am sure they were considered just as Czech as we were. The only thing-- they were considered that they had a different religion, which, of course, even in the town where I was, was nothing special because there were Protestants, there were different groups of religions. And they were considered like one of those groups where they had, as I was told when I was growing up-- they had a different religion. And that was it.

Obviously, there were people who were antisemitic. We know throughout history that antisemitism exists in practically every country on the surface of the globe, I was told, including Israel. But that was-- that is exaggerated mostly by the so-called philosophies of the fascists and extremely nationalist parts or groups of any nation.

Did you witness any antisemitic acts or remarks?

Yes. Yes. From time to time, you overheard things like, oh, what do you expect? They are Jewish. But not in any bad way. I never recall in the town where I was any act of direct unfriendliness towards the Jewish people. If I heard it-- overheard it, it was usually behind their backs, not towards them.

Did you witness any antisemitic assaults against Jews?

By the Czechs?

Yes.

No, never, never.

By Germans?

Yes. When-- once, before I was imprisoned-- of course, I didn't live in that town very long until I was imprisoned. But before I was in prison, of course, the hatred of the occupying forces was obvious immediately. They were immediately ostracized. They had to wear the Star of David. And the attitude of the Nazis or the Germans who occupied was terrible.

We'll say more about that later. But can I ask you about your own attitudes towards foreign countries in the years before the war? Which countries did you regard as being particularly friendly towards Czechoslovakia?

Obviously, it was France. Czechoslovakia was geared towards France. In grammar schools and everywhere, French was the number one language, even though German was-- it wasn't obligatory, but German was important. But all the schools were preparing the French language. And everybody tried to speak French.

What did people expect of friends from the political and security point of view in Czechoslovakia?

They expected help from France in case of trouble. And they didn't get it. In my opinion, that was the beginning of the problem, where the occupation helped to change the minds of the Czech people and insisted on telling them that look what happened, the West never helped you.

And the Czechs who were hoping and who were so friendly towards the West after Munich became embittered-- and that's where actually communism started. They were told, you cannot depend on the democracies. You have to turn to the east. As it happened, Soviet Russia didn't help, either.

How was Soviet Russia regarded before Munich?

As a hope, also as a hope-- mistrust, but hope. I couldn't describe it otherwise.

Why should there be hope?

Because they knew that if the West did not help, that the Soviet Union might. And when the Nazis attacked Poland and subsequently the Soviet Union, the population of Czechoslovakia, as far as I knew it-- it's very difficult to generalize in any case-- was the feeling that the massive population and determination of the Soviet Union would finally break the back of the Nazis. And that was their hope.

What about attitude of people towards these smaller countries which were your neighbors, like Poland and Hungary?

Hungary was difficult because there were problems between the Slovaks and the Hungarians. But generally, there was no unfriendliness as such, but no friendly relations as far as I remember. In other words, there were no exchanges. So people did not want or tried to visit Hungary.

Poland was a little difficult because Poland is a Slav nation. The language is very close to Czech. And there was always a feeling of friendliness towards the Poles, even though they were mistrusted. And the Pilsudski-- they always thought that Poland was leaning towards fascism or towards dictatorial ideas. And in the real democratic Czechoslovakia, it was not well thought of.

Did you, before the war, pay many visits to other countries?

Not many, but I was always very interested in visiting other countries and to learn foreign languages. I started learning English at the time when nobody in the town where I was was interested. I took private lessons. I learned from books. And it was my ideal, always, to come to the-- [AUDIO OUT]

Dr. Dobias, reel 2.

I was always interested in visiting foreign countries, not only because of meeting different people, but learning different languages. I started learning English, I believe, when I was about 14-- 12, I would say, even 12. I learned from books,

from people I knew who had any contact. I remember, there was a Czech who lived for many years in the United States and as an old man returned to Turnov. And he was the source of my learning of English.

I went to different countries after the war, my financial possibilities permitting, every holidays in the grammar school, I spent in France, in different parts of France, like in Tours, La Touraine, in La Rochelle, in southern France. And I believe, in those days, it was the beginning of my studies, thorough studies of French, which I perfected throughout the years, and it helped me when I finally went for a year to the University of Grenoble to study part of my law.

What was the attraction to you of learning English if it was so uncommon in your part of Czechoslovakia?

First of all, the literature-- I enjoyed reading, at first, books translated from English. And during one of my visits to France, I decided to hop over the channel and visit London, which I did when I was 16. I just loved it. And that was the beginning of my thorough concentration on the English language, English culture, and the system of political freedom, which I admire.

At what stage in the '30s did you begin to regard the German regime as a threat?

Only when Hitler came to power. Once I started reading about what was happening in Germany, I realized that it was a beginning of a sort of dictatorial regime. I abhorred dictatorial political parties, wherever in the world, whether left or right. And I somehow felt in those days that Hitler was on the way to a political party which might be dangerous for the peace in Central Europe.

Did you have any personal contact with refugees from Hitler's Germany?

Yes, I did, but it was only towards the end of the state of Czechoslovakia as such, mostly when the Nazis occupied the so-called Sudetenland, when so many people from those parts escaped to the protectorate, to the remainder of the country, which at first was so-called independent, and after a while, became protectorate of Nazi Germany.

In those days, people came, and stayed in the town where I was born, and tried to establish new lives, hoping that after the occupation of Sudeten, that it would still remain an independent country, which it didn't. And so many of those, especially Jewish people, who escaped from the neighboring part occupied by the Nazis were finally caught, sent to concentration camps, and perished.

Did you have any conversations with these people from which you learned about conditions in Germany?

There were not many, really, from Germany proper. They were from the part which was Czechoslovakia before. So they didn't have firsthand information of what was happening. But on the trips which I made through Germany in-- during the time when it was already Nazi Germany, I could see and I could meet people. And sometimes, I even talked to them. And they spoke frankly. They knew the danger was coming.

Which particular parts of Germany did you visit?

Mostly Berlin, where I had friends. I had friends who were Czechs, actually, born already second generation. Their parents emigrated there before the First World War. I had a special friend in Berlin, who spoke both languages absolutely perfectly because he was born in Berlin. And he stayed there until the last moment when Czechoslovakia was occupied. He couldn't live anymore in Berlin, and returned to Czechoslovakia, and lived in the town where I was born with his mother, who was a widow.

What impact did Hitler's Germany have on you when you visited it?

Militarism, absolute militarism. And I could feel that it was terribly antisemitic or anti-foreign. The upsurge of nationalism and militarism was, of course, a sign for me that troubled times were ahead.

Can you describe any incidents which happened to you in Berlin?

Yes. Checks, for instance, of identity cards. I was stopped when I showed my Czech passport. There were sneers and remarks of Slav, which was the description of the race, as they call it, which was not as valued by the German supermen, as they called themselves. And they were very unfriendly. And I didn't feel well, even when they finally threw the passport at me. I wasn't feeling well. I knew there was something wrong.

You said, those people who would speak frankly to you-- did any of them-- any of the people to whom you spoke express fears or tell you what had happened to them?

Yes, they did, but only because they were common friends with the people I knew. Otherwise, they wouldn't have dared to speak freely.

What did they tell you?

They told us that they were afraid that there will be war, that Hitler wanted Drang Nach Osten. That means, the armies would go to the east to occupy more space for the Germans, who, according to the philosophy of the Nazis, they were restricted and they needed more space. And the space they could get only by aggression or occupying other countries, like parts of Poland.

Did you-- when you visited Germany before Munich, did you anticipate what actually did happen later when Czechoslovakia was actually dismembered by Hitler? Did you actually anticipate that?

No, I did not anticipate it. I didn't think that Munich would ever happen. I was sure that international agreements would hold and that Czechoslovakia would not be left alone. It was a terrible disappointment when I found out that we were completely left alone.

Can you tell me in detail, if possible, what your own memories of the Munich crisis were, where you were, and what you heard on the radio, and so on?

I recall that I was in Prague, in the capital. And I heard over the radio that the final agreement and the signature in Munich was such that the Western countries, with whom Czechoslovakia had international agreements, decided that they gave way to Hitler.

Did you get gatherings of people in the squares and streets?

Yes, in the streets, groups-- people screaming, shouting. And the disappointment was so evident, everybody could have seen it.

What exactly were they shouting?

Shouting against the West. We were-- they are traitors, they left us alone, that was the feeling, especially against France because France was their hope. Britain, they didn't know much about, even though Britain sent special groups of people, even the government, to investigate. I was very embittered in those days because the group of Lord Runciman visited Czechoslovakia.

What happened actually in Prague, I do not know. But when Runciman came to the Sudetenland, to Reichenberg, I was selected by a group of Czechs to represent them and to offer to go to Reichenberg and to offer the group any information they may wish.

And when I went together with two or three of others because I could speak the language, when I offered my help, I spoke to somebody British and who very rudely told me they did not want to see us. They had all the information they needed. So we left empty-handed.

What are your personal memories about the period after the Munich crisis? What happened to you personally then?

Was a disaster, absolute disaster, because we knew that-- should I say we? I'm speaking for the few friends with whom I could speak frankly, some people who were in the army-- like my brother-in-law, at that time, was a captain in the army, in the infantry. He was so depressed that it was absolutely unbelievable. And the only thing what we thought we could do is to form a resistance.

I was selected, again, because of my contacts with Britain to get in touch with my friend Charles Fish, who was, at the time-- or before the war whom I knew who was a senior civil servant in the Department of Health-- to get in touch and try to make contacts, either by radio, which, finally, we didn't because we didn't have the material. We were completely unprepared.

But I was promised through correspondence with my friend through Switzerland that he would offer any help to anybody, just asking his friends and as a group to either house or help people, especially military age, who would escape from Czechoslovakia and make it to Britain-- or at that time, even to France. Some of them made it to France and finally to Britain. But he was one of the most helpful British people I have ever met.

How did you first come into contact with Charles Fish?

Charles Fish was sent to Czechoslovakia. He claims that he always-- with a laugh or with a twinkle in his eyes, that he came to Czechoslovakia as a tourist. He came to Turnov, where I was born and where I was at the time. He wrote to a hotel in English. And the man did not understand any English and he turned to me. I answered in English and offered all the information.

And finally, Charles Fish, his wife, and his sister-in-law arrived in Turnov. We met them at the station and we became very good friends. I took him around. I served as an interpreter. I helped him in every information he wanted. And I knew at that time that it was not tourist information he wanted. So he came to Czechoslovakia first before the occupation of Sudetenland.

And the second time, he came just before the occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia. Obviously, it was-- it was obvious to me that it was not a tourist information he seeked. Then he came again right after the war. And we became-- I visited him in London. And we became contacts after the war with the War Office, where I wanted to give some information, which I showed you in the correspondence.

So what were his objectives regarding Czechoslovakia?

Frankly, he told me that he was ashamed of what happened in Munich. He was deeply, deeply touched and deeply ashamed of what happened. He was one of those British people who was as correct as they come. And he knew it was wrong.

During the conversation, I offered, after the war, the explanation that Britain had to stall for time, that they had no arms, that war was unthinkable at the time. He dismissed that, saying that after all, agreement is an agreement. And an agreement internationally is a question of honor. He suffered through what happened. And that was his reason why he offered services for anything he could do for Czechoslovakia.

So this was a purely personal thing on his part?

On his part, purely personal.

But he was trying to get information to support his-- the case that--

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. I know-- I have no idea-- he never-- I don't know whether, as being as correct as he was, if he was asked not to disclose the information he didn't. And he didn't, even to me. But the fact that when things smoothened out after the war, he was awarded MVE-- and when he showed it to me, he just laughed-- chuckled. And he said, well, it worked, but no results.

What was his official position in Britain?

He was a senior civil servant in the Ministry or Department of Health. That was his official position. What he was otherwise or what he did otherwise, I don't know.

Was he trying to wage some kind of campaign in Britain on behalf of Czechoslovakia?

Oh, he certainly was, from what I heard. He went demonstrating, and he spoke to all the friends, and he organized whatever he could. He certainly did it on the-- from the principle, deep, deep principles.

Do you know if he was in contact with other opponents of the Chamberlain government, like Churchill?

He may have been, but he would never speak about that, which I, at times, I was very sorry about. But I understood his position, that he was the type that was. He was asked not to say, he didn't. And that, I think, was at the back of the whole-- I wish he had told us. I always hoped that he would leave some letters behind.

But his wife, who survived him-- they finally retired. And they lived in Hastings. Both my wife and I visited them on many occasions. And when I asked about his notes and everything, he said, no, they will go with me. So I don't know. And his wife passed away about three years ago-- no children, no relatives, as far as I know.

Can you tell me what you remember personally of after Munich in March 1939, when the Germans actually moved in? Were you in Prague then?

Partly in Prague, partly in Turnov, where my parents still lived. And in a small town, it was easier for me to start organizing the resistance, which we did. My brother-in-law, who was an officer until the army was dismissed, managed to save some armament and some material explosive, which at first, I buried in our garden in Turnov.

But as things were getting very serious, and we couldn't trust even the neighbors-- we didn't know, but it was too serious to trust anybody, I remember that my father, at night, dug out all what we had. And in relays, we took it about, oh, half a mile away to the outskirts of the woods in the town where I was born.

And we buried it there-- and I think just in time because only several days later, the Gestapo came, searched thoroughly our house, searched the garden, searched everywhere, and were most interested in some patches which were still dug up. But of course, being It was a garden, so we always had an excuse, we were working in the garden. So I have a feeling that somebody still must have known something and tried to denounce us.

What are your first memories of German forces moving in into Czechoslovakia in March 1939? Can you describe it?

Yes. I was in Turnov at that time, visiting my parents, and in the morning, we woke up. I remember, the snow was lying all around. Radio everywhere said that the German forces occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. And we could see them marching. They occupied the barracks. There were barracks in Turnov. Those barracks were occupied. There were machine guns at all the corners of the town.

And the soldiers, they were not actually SS-- as far as I remember, they were Wehrmacht. We couldn't say anything personally. Again, they did their duty. Some of them even appeared to be friendly, saying that they were cold and joking.

But it was an occupation. And it got worse and worse ever since. Once the Gestapo had their headquarters in the town not far from Turnov, in a town called JicÃn, they had a part of the offices in Turnov. And from that time on, the danger started.

When you say they were joking, do you mean to suggest that they seemed to be embarrassed about what they--

No. No, not that they embarrassed, just they were cold, wind, smiling, laughing, nothing else. I really do not recollect anybody who, in those days of the German soldiers, would have been actually aggressive against the population. They occupied the town, and that was it.

Once the Germans took over, how did their regulations begin to affect everyday life from what you observed?

Well, immediately they started-- the Jewish people had a curfew. They had to start wearing the Star of David, the yellow star. And of course, the population tried, at first, to hide them. But that was impossible because they knew the dangers. There were people who denounced-- who could have denounced that other people were harboring them. And for that reason, nobody could do anything for them.

Did you personally have any knowledge of Czechoslovak people collaborating with them?

Yes. Yes, a few, even in the small towns-- not many, but there were a few people who never meant anything to the population, they suddenly started-- men started wearing the boots and became members of the new political party Vlajka. And they were very friendly-- appeared to be friendly with the Germans-- very few, though.

Was anything done against the collaborators?

No, no, the dangers were much too high. And it wouldn't have helped. A few wouldn't have helped. They were completely disregarded. Nobody talked to them. But otherwise, they didn't do anything.

What impact did the outbreak of the Second World War have on you and Czechoslovak people when the news of the German attack on Poland came through and the declaration of war by France and Britain?

Was sheer disaster, but a ray of hope. We still hoped that Germany as such, a single country, together with Austria, could not win the war. We thought it was impossible to occupy the whole of Europe, and keep them occupied, and yet have an effective army in the west, and obviously, in the east-- on two front.

The only ray of hope was that the Russian winter would finally break the backbone of the Nazis-- not the arms, but the winter. When we saw, sometimes, how the Wehrmacht-- how they were dressed-- they didn't have proper uniforms. Even in those days when they occupied Czechoslovakia, they were cold. They did not have the proper clothing. We thought that when they finally occupied parts of the Soviet Union, that the winter would break them, like it broke every invader before them.

If we can go back to your resistance activities, how did they develop?

Through friends whom I could trust completely. I took charge and I arranged that we met. And nobody could know more than three, for obvious reasons. And one of them, again, had contact to a group of other three. And we were spreading. But how many we actually had, we never knew.

First of all, it was highly dangerous because we knew that anybody would be either, we thought at that time, executed or they would be sent to concentration camps. But we were-- had very little to do. We really didn't know what to do. We had no contact. We had no arrangements with the West to transmit.

We were hoping to get a transmitter. I was trying, through Charles Fish still, through Switzerland, to ask him whether he could arrange for a drop where we could get some, but it never came to it. And we were never contacted. So we were left alone.

Our organization in the resistance, we liked to call ourselves resistance. We couldn't do much. Thinking back at it, it was highly dangerous and ineffective. We had no arms, we had no possibilities of actually hurting the Nazis, which we wanted to do originally.

How was this link through Switzerland organized?

I had friends, again, there who transmitted. All they did is changed the envelopes and sent it on to Britain. They had otherwise no knowledge of what was. They were just helpful. After the war, they disappeared. I don't even know what happened to them.

Did you conduct any kind of propaganda, such as circulation of leaflets?

No, we didn't. We couldn't. That was highly, highly dangerous. It was all per mouth. All we had-- a transmitter-- not transmitters, we had radios. And I could listen to the radios in different languages. So what I did? I listened and told the details what I heard-- not written, never written. That far, we were careful enough, but to pass it on to people.

And when I found out what happened, I was not happy either. Because if you say something to one person and he passes on to another one, by the time it reaches the 10th person, the story may be different. It's human nature, human failure. So the information was not as accurate as I would have wanted it to be.

But we knew what was happening in the world. We knew the political implications. We knew what was happening in Britain. And we listened to radio from Britain.

Did you trust the BBC?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Yes, I did. I knew that, finally, the thing came. We did. We knew what was happening.

Was there any particular political complexion of the resistance, people with whom you were in contact? Or were they of a variety?

Of a variety. At that time, everybody was equal, frankly, politically. Members in our group were communists, they were non-communists-- they were everything from all walks of life, most men, of course, and men at our age where they could risk something. If they had families, we always-- and they had children, we always asked them to refrain because we were afraid of the consequences.

Did you have any narrow escapes?

Yes, several times. My son-- my brother-in-law brought a revolver home still from his-- and the revolver had to be oiled and kept in order. While he was cleaning it-- [AUDIO OUT]