

Mrs. Konrad, reel 5.

This small room that you've mentioned, were there medical staff or medical facilities?

There were hardly any. There were two medical students-- one girl and one man-- who looked after us. There was a dentist, a lady dentist, who was so-called medical staff. But there were hardly any bandages or medicines at all. There was one woman who got diphtheria. And she was, of course, immediately separated from the others.

And we heard that one of the medical students actually operated on her throat with a penknife because she was suffocating. But I don't think that she was-- she came out of it alive. I quite honestly don't know. And there was this scare of diphtheria. And two or three people got in.

And they were taken away. What happened to them, I don't know. We were said that they were taken to hospital. But we never saw them again. So we just don't know. They might have been cured, might have been shot. We just don't know anything about it.

There was hardly any medicine at all and hardly any medical treatment. I know, I had one slight problem with me. Obviously, from malnutrition, I got dreadful boils on my leg-- maybe four or five at a time. And nothing was done about it, nothing at all. It was cold. So I had-- when I had to go outside, then I put my stockings on. And when I took my stockings off, I ripped off everything with it. It was disgustingly horrid and quite painful. But one just had to put up with this sort of thing.

The medical staff you mentioned, were these fellow prisoners?

Yes. Yes, they were all Jewish. Yes, there was nobody-- no outsider. There was no outsider. We haven't seen anyone else, only the guards. Some of the guards were elderly men. And they were quite decent. I mean, when I say decent, they did us no harm.

Do you mean Arrow Cross guards?

No, no, these were Germans. These were ordinary German soldiers, ordinary men who were probably not fit for front action. And they were there guarding us. But they did no harm. It was the Oberscharführer, and he had one or two of his SS henchmen.

And they were the ones who treated people very, very badly and cruelly. I mean, he just walked-- when he came into one's room, we had to stand to attention. And we were very weak by then. And anyone who didn't stand to attention was hit immediately on the head, on the face, wherever he could reach people.

By this Oberscharführer?

Yes. Yes. He just lashed out. Once, he hit my cousin who was standing next to me. And she collapsed. And when I was trying to hold her or lift her up, somebody said, don't touch her. Leave her. Because I couldn't have helped her. I mean, she was on the ground. And probably, if I would have tried to lift her up, he would have hit me as well. It's incredible, really, when you think back, that this can happen to people.

You mentioned the severe boils you had on your leg

Yes.

Did you try to go and get some sort of medical help or advice? Or did you try to stay away from the medical room?

No, I did tell somebody. But they couldn't do anything. They had no way to help me. By that time, they had nothing-- no-- there were no antibiotics in those days anyway. And there was just nothing they could give me. We arrived in

Lichtenworth end of November.

And I must tell you about Christmas. Because that was a most peculiar Christmas. The Oberscharführer decided that because we are Jewish, we don't have Christmas holidays anyway. And the best way to celebrate for him would be if he's going to do a roll call. So he herded everybody into one room out of the two. And he wanted to keep his records straight in some way or other.

And he grouped people, everybody with the name of-- is beginning of A, B, C-- in alphabetical order, more or less. Now, Hungarian names are pronounced so that the surname is set first and the Christian names after. So my name was Weisz Judith and not Judith Weisz. In German, of course, it's the same way as it is in English.

And he, of course, wanted us to say our names in the German way, which is not very difficult. But when people are confused, frightened, and very hungry, and sick, they made mistakes. Every time somebody made a mistake and said their name as you would say it in Hungarian, he started all over again.

And we had to stand to attention. And we were standing there the whole of Christmas Day without food. He was sitting there. He had his dinner, he had his drinks right in front of us. And we had to stand to attention. People fainted, people were sick.

And there was no end to this. Every time somebody said something wrong, not the way he wanted it, we had to go back to a-- my name starts with a W. I was standing there for two whole days and the night. And I seem to remember that was I think that was just about the worst time.

That was his Christmas treat to himself?

That was his Christmas treat, yes Yes. Apart from this, there is very little to tell because nothing happened.

Was there any sort of celebration of either the Jewish Sabbath or any Jewish holidays? It would have been Hanukkah just near Christmas.

Yeah, well, I don't remember this at all. I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think we knew much what day of the week it was. I don't think so, that we celebrated anything. I know, sometimes, in the evenings, some people sang. We had one girl who had a very beautiful operatic voice. And we always asked her to sing and she sang to us. But there was very little else.

After I came to England, and when I saw films about prisoners of war, or Colditz, or stories like that, it always seemed like a holiday camp to me, compared to where we were. It was so cruelly basic, and so very little happening, and so very little hope, really.

You said you played word games to pass the time.

Yes. Yes.

What sort of games, can you remember?

Well, somebody might have thought of an object or a person. And the others had to guess. Or we selected a very long word, and how many words can you make out of these letters? And we had no pencil or paper. But probably, it was a very good thing to keep our minds going. I think it must have helped a lot.

And then we were telling each other, what will you cook when you are free? And funnily enough, I never, ever thought of fancy-- party dishes, but always very basic, like boiled potatoes with a bit of butter.

Or I used to say, when I go home, I'm going to cut a two kilo bread, which is a huge, enormous, big loaf of bread. I'm going to cut it in half. And I'll spread it with a packet of butter. And I shall cut up a whole salami. And I'll put it in there

and eat it as a sandwich.

I mean, we were dreaming of food and a white lavatory. That was-- actually, I dreamed about this very often. I dreamed that I'm sitting on a white lavatory. Because that was just about the biggest dream I could have. I really think that was even worse than hunger. The sanitary situation was worse than being hungry because after a time, you are really not hungry anymore. But you get dreadful stomach pains.

And unfortunately, one still sees hungry people on television. And I always remember-- I feel for them. I feel for them very, very badly because I remember these pains. And probably, the only reason I'm here to be able to talk about it is because I must have been very well-fed in my younger years. And I must have had a lot of resistance.

But so many of them died. Somebody I knew very closely, I used to be in elementary school with this girl, she was there in Lichtenworth. And she was in a different room from me. And occasionally, we used to see each other. And I thought to myself, oh, my god, she looks dreadful. Do I look that dreadful to her?

It's difficult to imagine that you yourself-- because you see your face. We had mirrors. You see your face every day. So you don't notice it. You get used to it gradually, I've got terribly thin. So I was a plump child. Probably, that was, again, something that saved my life. I was a fat little girl.

And I got terribly thin. I could hardly keep my skirt on. It was so loose on me. And my legs were just like matchsticks-- and my fingers. And then I looked at that poor old friend of mine, I thought, well, she looks hardly human. I can't be as bad as that.

And unfortunately, she did die. And then I thought to myself, I shall have to tell her parents. How am I going to tell her parents? She was only 16, same age as I am. And this was on my mind for such a long time. And actually, when I got back to Budapest, I didn't have to tell her parents because they didn't survive either.

You said you dreamed of the white lavatory. What were the facilities you had? You said there were latrines, do you mean--

Yes.

--earth, not water closets?

Yes, earth, earth, a sort of-- maybe 10-meter-long ditch. And there was a wooden plank over it. And it wasn't covered in any way. There was-- there were planks in front of it. But the back was all open. So there was absolutely no privacy at all, no privacy at all, and no lavatory paper.

What did you use?

Well, some people had old banknotes that they used because money was totally useless to them. And leaves-- if you could find a leaf, then we used that. But it was winter. And of course, there were no leaves. And then we used nothing, I mean, just nothing. But as we had very little to eat, the question didn't arise only for people who had dysentery. I mean, that was dreadful. That was terrible. But then people with dysentery didn't live very long.

How were the latrines kept clean or sanitary?

They had-- oh, I can't remember-- the thing that they used for whitewash.

Lime?

I think lime, yes. Yes. I think that was buckets of lime was poured over it--

And who did that?

--from time to time. That was-- all these things were done by appointed people, who were told, if they do this sort of work, they get double rations, which they sometimes did and sometimes didn't get. And these were the same people who had to collect the dead and take them out, what happened early in the morning, after a bad night. These people were kept very, very busy to take the dead bodies out.

I mentioned earlier on that in medical staff, there was a dentist, a young woman. And one night, she committed suicide. She obviously had the means. She had some tablets and she committed suicide.

But we were there in the Lichtenworth from the end of November until the 2nd of April, when we were liberated by the Russian Army.

Yes. We'll talk about that later. When people died, did the other people-- their friends or the people who were near them-- try to come and take their things to get a bit of extra clothing or whatever for themselves?

Yes. Yes, I think that was quite understood that the person next to them sort of got whatever they had. But I must say, we had very little-- very little, indeed. I mean, we started off probably quite decently dressed. But because there was very little opportunity to wash yourself and your clothes, I mean, things got very dirty.

And we did wash with-- we even washed. I remember washing my hair once or twice in cold water, soap and cold water. But we only had the soap that we took with us. And when-- once that was gone, it was gone. There was no more. We never got any supplies at all.

Some people whose shoes were torn or maybe disintegrated altogether were given wooden shoes, like the Dutch wear, that sort of wooden shoes. I mean, they were highly uncomfortable. And they were sort of hobbling around in those. But I was fortunate. I had had my own boots still.

And I had change of underwear. And I had two blouses. I had a pullover. And I had a coat, but I used my coat as a blanket to cover myself because I didn't take a blanket. At least, I don't remember having a blanket. We had straw underneath.

You mean for bedding?

For bedding, just straw, not straw beds or straw mattresses, just straw. And of course, that became very powdery and very, very dirty. And it became infested with fleas. And then, of course, the lice began to appear.

And I don't like to go into details like that. But there are two different lice. There are head lice and clothes lice. And it's the clothes lice that are more dangerous. The head lice are uncomfortable and irritating. But the clothes lice are the ones that carry diseases. And that was the more dangerous.

But as it happened the lice have eaten the fleas. So at least we were rid of those. And then--

Did the authorities try to do something about the lice? Because of course, it could cause a problem for them if there were too many lice on you.

I don't think they did. I don't think they did. That's when the ScharfÄ¼hrer talked about disinfection and a bath outside in tents. So we thought, maybe they will do something about it. But it never came to that, never came to that at all. And then, of course, more and more people got ill. We didn't know what it was. We only knew later that it was typhus, which is carried by these clothes lice.

Did you organize amongst yourselves to try to do something about the lice, picking them off?

Well that's what-- that was the only thing we could do. And we had our heads shaved. So that was more comfortable about head lice. Because once you had no hair, they-- you could keep it cleaner yourself.

You had not been shaved initially?

They were not shaved initially, not like in some other camps in Germany. We didn't know then, but this disease, as-- they call it hunger typhus as well. The first symptoms were that you felt something bitter in your mouth. Everything tasted very, very bitter. And then you couldn't eat at all and had very high temperature.

Some people were unconscious. And most people who had this illness died. And that was towards the end of our stay there. And we just couldn't understand why it happens that people die in larger and larger numbers.

When people became ill, were they taken to the small room that you mentioned?

They were taken-- when they were as far gone as unconscious, they were taken to that small room.

Before that stage, while they were conscious, but possibly too ill to walk well or something, did other people look after them?

Well, we tried to look after people as long as we could. And everybody who still had a little bit of life in them resisted going into the sick room, the small room. I mean, I remember people screaming out, no, I don't want to go in there. I'll be all right. I'll be better. Because everybody knew that was the end.

Did you ever go in there yourself?

I've been there once, when I had my head shaved. And I saw some people in fever actually covered in lice. These clothes lice are white, little-- tiny, little white oblong things.

And obviously, they go for heat. And if a body was in high fever, then they just-- you couldn't see the person. You couldn't see their face. It was covered. And they were too ill to do anything about it. And nobody wanted to touch them. And it was a horrifying thing to see. And one just knew that this was the end. My main feeling was just to get out of here as quickly as possible.

How did you feel having your head shaved? You said it was more comfortable. And I'm sure it was. But what's the psychological effect of having no hair?

I think I was past that psychological feeling. I think I was past any sort of psychology by then, somehow. I just felt that it was a relief not to have hair. And I didn't look at the mirror very often. I think it's dreadful if a woman is bored, really-- or a girl. But I think one looked so dreadful, anyway. I mean, with my legs covered in boils and probably my mirror's dirty. And I just don't know. I think I must have looked dreadful.

Anyway, so it had no special effect on me, really. It was more a relief than anything else. It-- the terrible thing is that they called us dirty pigs. And they called us all sorts of names. And reflecting back, we were very, very dirty. And there was very little sign of being human anymore. This is the dreadful thing. They make you what they want to make of you very, very soon.

And when I think back, I was there only for a very short time. I mean, to what Polish Jews had to endure over the years must have been much, much harder. And how they-- some of them came out-- I know very few came out alive, but some did-- I just really can't comprehend. Because to me, what I suffered was more than enough.

Quite. But your incarceration, your whole incarceration was a matter of months.

It was only a few months, yes. Yes.

Can you tell me a bit more about the accommodation? You've explained that there were two very large rooms, A and B.

Yes.

And were these divided some way inside?

Yes. Yes, they were. They were separate rooms. They were separate parts of this disused factory. And the room we were in, room A, had pillars. And on these pillars, there were hooks. And that's where we kept our belongings. And apart from that, everybody had just enough room, maybe, to turn around. There was very little room. And because it was cold at night, we just slept huddled together.

And there were rows of straw. It was back to back double rows. And then there was a gap where people could walk, a sort of walkway. And then there was straw again.

I remember very, very little about the people around me, strangely enough. I know there was my cousin and my friend. And I remember two or three others neighboring us. And I remember a few people who were opposite me, divided by this gangway.

But I've met people afterwards in life in Budapest-- for instance, I had a dressmaker, who, when I got to know her, told me that she was in Lichtenworth with her two sisters. One of her sisters died there. I can't remember. I couldn't remember her at all. And she couldn't remember me.

Somehow, everybody becomes just faceless, just a body, really. Maybe because we wanted to forget, we forgot each other. But I don't remember names-- for instance, people's names.

In roll calls, were you referred to by name?

Yes. Yes. We had no numbers, we had names. That was another way to torture people, when they marched us out into the yard for roll calls.