

Mr. Obuchowski, reel four.

We walked for about 2 and 1/2 miles. And many times, on the route where we were walking, the hatred towards the Jews was so great some of the Germans were standing in the roads, even that early in the morning, just to be able to ridicule us. And even, in some cases, where they even kicked us as we were passing.

Was this on the way to Rehmsdorf.

On the way to work. That was in Rehmsdorf. But once we got to the place where we were working, we were clearing the rubble. And we worked till towards the evening. And then we walked back to the camp. And that was going on for quite a few months. I was there, roughly, about three months.

And towards the end of my stay in this camp, which, as I said before, the conditions were terrible, really terrible. And there was also a lot of people dying from starvation there. But towards the end of my stay in that camp, one morning, I was pushing a wagon. And the wheel happened to come off. And I broke my foot.

And I managed-- I don't know how I managed, but I did manage to get back to the camp. When we were marching, some of the inmates were helping me. And I got to the hospital, such as it was, and they put a cast on my foot. And I managed to get up on the bunk, that sleeping arrangement, that we had, in that particular hospital.

And I wasn't interested in anything, really, because I was in so much pain. But in the morning, somebody came and literally dragged me, by my neck, out of that hospital, and made me go to work. And also, some other people, he dragged out. But we didn't know what it was all about. Apparently, the hospital had to be cleared to the gas chambers. All the people that were there, in that hospital, went to their death. And that particular fellow, I would like to put him on the record, if I may.

Yes.

His name was Meyer Hoffman, which later came to this country, with me, with our transport. He resides now. He lives in Canada, Toronto. He virtually saved my life and a few of the others, whoever he could. He forcefully dragged us out from that hospital to live.

How had he got the information?

That, I could not tell you. He must have had a rumour. He must have heard a rumor, somewhere. But many, many times, when I see him or used to see him, I always bring the subject up. I said you know, Meyer, you're the one that I owe my life to. You're the one that saved my life.

And he doesn't-- he doesn't-- he's a very humble man. He doesn't want any-- in plain language, he doesn't want no medals for it. He's just pleased that he's done it. He's a very religious man at the moment. He became religious. He comes-- I should presume he comes from a religious background. But he is religious now. Very nice person, not only because he saved my life, but he is really a nice person. And--

What was this work that you were doing? You said you were pushing a truck?

Pushing a cart picking up rubble, clearing rubble. Being a bombed place, all these bricks and metal and various other things, that we were collecting and clearing it out of certain places, that was our work.

Were there people of other nationalities working there?

I can't remember. That, I can't remember, not in this particular camp. There were other nationalities there. But I can't-- I wouldn't-- I wouldn't be right to say, yes, there was Poles, and there were other nationalities working with us. Our minds were only on one subject or one thing-- food and how to survive that particular day or that particular hour or minute. So

I mean other things didn't really come into our minds or interest us.

When we were at Auschwitz, yes, we did see. And we couldn't help but see other nationalities and other sort of different peoples to ourselves. But in that particular place, we were only thinking of one thing-- how to survive or how to try and survive that particular moment.

Did you ever see any POWs there?

There were. Of course, there were. But I personally didn't have much to do with anybody. I sort of kept myself to myself at most of the time. I remember quite a few instances that happened in that camp.

Could you tell me about them?

Well, one instance, I remember there was a man sharpening a spoon. He was sharpening the other side of the spoon to make it into a knife. And we were all wondering what he was doing. We knew that he was a barber. But we didn't realize what he was doing. And he had it in for somebody. And one morning, we woke up, and he'd cut somebody's throat, you see, with that spoon. You see?

So I mean, we didn't take a great deal of interest even in that particular case. You know, I mean, it was terrible. It was a horrific thing that that man had done. I mean we saw what happened. And yet the greater interest to us was, if we would have been able to get a piece of bread. Or a larger slice of bread, that would interest us a great deal more. Because we were thinking of one thing-- to survive.

Did anybody try to stop this chap?

I don't know. But I knew, when it was all finished, he'd cut that man's throat. I don't know the reason why he'd done it. I don't know. He had it in for him for some reason, maybe. For all we know, that man most probably stole a piece of his bread or interfered with his food. Or it was just he got caught hiding from the Germans because of him. But that's purely guessing.

Was he punished or just left?

I don't know. I don't know. I can't remember what happened to that man. I can't remember. I honestly can't remember what happened. I should imagine he got punished, he got killed for it. But on the other hand, I mean what did the Germans care what one inmate done to another? They wasn't really interested. And I should imagine, maybe, that made their job a little bit easier.

But one thing I must tell you, and that is true, to see, today, and to look around us, today, we behave towards each other absolutely fantastically well. I mean, if you see, today, a person that takes something off another person, he's willing to kill him for it in 1986.

I mean, we're talking about people that were starved for four and 1/2 years, without food, being beaten up every so often. And yet, we behaved towards each other fantastically well. There was the isolated case where I just told you now. But on the whole, I would say that we really behaved wonderfully well to each other under those circumstances and those conditions.

There were inmates, which were called kapos. Now, they were behaving very badly towards us. They were beating inmates. They were given the job, from the Germans, that the Germans shouldn't toil in whipping an inmate, a Jew. They shouldn't have to work hard, with the whipping part, doing their work, physical work, although most of them enjoyed it and took great pride in doing it.

But in some cases, and I would say in a lot of cases, where these kapos were doing the job, for them, just purely for a piece of extra bread, that they would receive for it, or a drop more soup or something like that, just for a very, very small privileges. And of course, they became sadists, themselves. You see, these kapos became very sadistic towards us.

I mean that didn't need much of a reason to grab hold of somebody and beat him.

But there again, from my own personal experience, I can say that I was one of the very fortunate ones, very lucky ones. Although I did get quite a few hidings, I didn't get as many hidings or I didn't get beaten up so many times as others.

Why was that?

I don't know. Maybe it's a matter of luck. Maybe I was just lucky enough not to be picked on. I was getting along with whatever I was doing. I tried my best, to occupy myself, to try and forget about my hunger, about my sufferings.

But now, when I'm thinking about these things, what I am really hurt about is that I'd forgotten, so quickly, about my parents, about my sister, and about my other sister, and about my other brother and my cousins and my whole family-- that I had forgotten. While I was suffering and starving, it put me off my remembering my nearest and dearest. You see? So I mean, that is the thing that hurts me now, that a person thinks of himself, first, how to survive. Because that was the absolute thing to do at the time.

But to forget my sister was only about half a mile away from where I was or half a kilometer even. I don't know the distance. But it was certainly not a great distance from me.

That was in Auschwitz?

Yes. You see.

You said that conditions were particularly terrible in Rehmsdorf. Was that because of the food situation?

Well, yes, the food, no water. We had very, very little water. And we were given a drop of coffee, as I said, in the beginning, which we didn't know what to do, to drink it or to wash our eyes or face. You know what I mean? That was it. And also, we were beaten up, now and again, as well there.

Well, as I said, this camp was, to me, the worst one. And then, when they started liquidating that camp, my foot didn't really heal up yet. Because I came back from that work day, that I had after I was thrown out, more or less, from that hospital to save my life. When I came back to the hospital, they put the cast on it again. And I can't remember quite how long I stayed in that hospital. But it certainly didn't heal my foot up properly.

And this camp was liquidated, again. And we were put on trains for a destination which we didn't know.

I think you said, before, it was liquidated approximately March 1945.

That was about the date, yes. The destination wasn't known to us. But after we'd been put in these cattle trucks, without food, water, or anything, we found-- we found ourselves amongst bodies all the time. People were dying there. And we were just using them as pillows, because we didn't worry about bodies or dead people, anything like that. We just slept amongst them, you know?

And that was going on for a couple of days, I would say. But then the train was shot up. Planes came low, and they started shooting the train up. And everybody was running in the direction of the forest.

There was an older fellow than me-- he must have been in the early 30s-- and myself. And we run the opposite direction. And we run towards a station. We go into that station. And we found a loaf of bread. I can still remember it to this day-- a loaf of bread, a packet of margarine, and a packet of chewing tobacco.

And I said to this fellow-- I didn't know him as a friend or anything like that. I just knew him as a man, an inmate. And I says to this fellow, I says, this is where I am spending the rest of my days. That's where I'm stopping. And he wouldn't have it. He says, no. We're going back to the transport. I says, but I'm not. I'd sooner die here, now, then go back. This is my lot. This is where I'll finish.

So he says, maybe we should try and run away. Maybe we should try and hide somewhere. Or maybe we should escape. Although I was very young, I asked him a question, I said, how can we escape? We wearing these clothes. You could spot us a mile away. We were so-- we were skeletons. If the Germans won't find us, maybe the Polish people will put their finger on us. Who would have anything to do? The conditions, at that time--

I'm saying about the Poles. I keep on talking about the Poles. They didn't behave towards us as they should, really. But, at the same time, maybe if they would hide a Jew or a survivor, one of them, maybe they would get shot as well. So I mean, although I am saying this about the Poles, I'm looking a little bit on the other side giving them the doubt. Maybe, if they wanted to, maybe they were frightened.

So there was no way of escape. There was, firstly, the way we looked, secondly, what we were wearing, thirdly, we didn't have a friend in the world. We didn't have nobody. We didn't have nowhere to turn. I mean, sometimes when you see vermin, and you say to yourself, they're no good to no one. I mean they've got to be destroyed. And yet you think twice. I don't like to kill that, because, after all, it's a living thing.

Now, we were even worse than that. Because, I mean, there was no escape for us. And I says, no, I'm not. I'm not escaping nowhere. So we were going out from that station. And it just shows you how fate can play with this life.

As we walked out, we wasn't but 100 yards away from it, the whole station went up in the air. A bomb exploded there. So it shows that it was fated for me to live. And we eventually went back to the transport.

Had you taken the margarine and bread?

Yes, we did. And of course, it didn't last us very long. Because we were hiding it to the best of our capability. We were hiding it. But, obviously, some people saw it. And we had to share. We had to share. And with the margarine, actually, it was funny.

Because somebody that came over with our transport, to this country, one of the boys, happened to spot that I had the chewing tobacco. And he drove me absolutely mad, I should give him a piece. And he chewed a little bit. And he poisoned himself. And the only way I could think of saving his life was by shoving this margarine down his throat. And that's where my margarine went.

To make him vomit?

Yes, or to do something. I didn't know what to do. But anyway, I gave him this margarine. I kept on shoving it down his throat. So I would have benefited by it. Unfortunately, I had to try and save somebody's life with it.

But when we got back to the transport again, they were rounding up all these people. And there wasn't many Germans amongst us. There was only a few old people that they could spare to sort of guard us and to take us to that particular place where they were taking us.

And we started off, according to Mr. Martin Gilbert's book, The Atlas of the Holocaust, we started off with a 2,770-odd inmates. And by the time we arrived to our destination, which it was Theresienstadt, there were 70-odd survivors. So over 2,700 perished.

We were on that death march. And it was coming towards-- well, we got liberated the 10th of May. And I would say that was about three weeks. No, that was about nearly three months before that, before we got liberated. That would be--

Three weeks?

No, that would be more. Because according to what I was told, we were in Theresienstadt about two months. And the march started about two weeks before that.

You have to excuse me about the dates, because, as I said, it's just impossible for me to remember any of those dates. But I would say, yes, we were at the march quite a few days. And we marched without food. And it was getting warmish.

I remember we got into one place, it was like a stable, and they gave us a raw potato, each. That was about three or four days before we arrived in Theresienstadt. And as we were walking, whoever couldn't manage to walk any more, he lie down, and the Germans shot him. And that was going on for some time. You could-- all you could hear is the rifles going off. Because people were getting shot all the time. They couldn't manage to walk anymore.

And I was walking along. And I was being held by some of my friends or people that I got to know in that camp. And as I mentioned before, my foot wasn't healed up properly yet. I can even feel it today. Bad days, I get-- the bad weather makes me feel that foot still now. But just a very, very few of us survived that particular walk.

And we got into Theresienstadt. And after a short while, I was taken into the hospital for my foot.

What was Theresienstadt like compared with the other camps?

Well, it was-- it was, to me, it was like a holiday camp. It was like a paradise. Because soon after I arrived, they took me into hospital with my broken foot. And I was in there. I was given food-- little, not too much. But it was food. Of course, I caught a stomach typhoid there.

And I was getting over the stomach typhoid. I don't know how long I was in that hospital. But I was getting over that stomach typhoid. And we could hear guns. And the Russians were nearing.

But there is a very, very important part that I left out arriving at Theresienstadt. As we were walking by, we could see two buildings there.

Mr. Obuchowski, reel five.

When we were approaching Theresienstadt, as I mentioned before, there were two gas chambers ready. And we could see it, ready to just to be lit for us, to sort of conclude or to finish the few survivors that arrived at Theresienstadt.

Of course, afterwards, when the Russians liberated us, I overcame my illness, the typhoid that I had, stomach typhoid, in the hospital. And the first thing that entered my mind was to get a sack or something that I could collect some food for the people in that hospital. And I did go out.

And as we passed, it was true. There were two gas chambers just ready to be lit. And if the Russians didn't come in, very quick, I should imagine that's what would happen to us. We would have been finished off in Theresienstadt.

Can you tell me what happened when the liberation came? Can you describe it?

Well, the Russians simply came in. The story went round that one of the Germans could see the end, very near. And he thought that he would save himself by getting onto the Red Cross to notify the Russians that, if they would go, according to their plan, which I was told that it meant for them to go to Prague first, that would be too late for us. Because we would have been finished off-- the last shred of evidence, what they thought. They would gas us there, kill us.

But according to that story, that German got onto the Red Cross. And he told the Red Cross. And the Red Cross got onto the Russians. And instead of going through Prague, they came through Theresienstadt. And that's how they saved our lives. And they liberated us.

How did the Russians behave when they got there?

Well, in my opinion, I think they behaved very well, because they certainly gave us freedom to go and do or take

vengeance on the Germans. But after all, we're human beings. We couldn't take no vengeance. Because it would make us be the same as them or worse. So the only vengeance that we took was to go and take some food off them.

But out of all these people that survived, I doubt if there was 5% that took vengeance on the Germans. Because, as I said, I mentioned before, human beings can't behave like this. And that's exactly why we didn't take vengeance. People ask me the question, what would happen so many years later? Would your attitude change towards vengeance?

Well, myself and purely my opinion, I certainly don't think that way. I would not take vengeance. But I would certainly not try to forget-- forgive maybe but certainly not forget.

And the whole idea or the whole motive of me making this tape is to prove to the world and certainly-- most certainly not to allow people to think and to write books that it never happened. That would be absolutely absurd. And that's the reason that I'm so strong for making this tape. That if, when the time comes, when the few, the very few survivors are gone, who would be able to tell the story?

What physical condition were you in when you were liberated

I, myself, I just got over the typhoid, which that was my second typhoid. First, I had the typhoid, in the L³dz Ghetto, and then in Theresienstadt, which I had the stomach typhoid. I was very weak. I also had problems with my foot, still. It didn't heal up, properly. I even feel it today. That is 40 years later. My foot still hurts sometimes. So I wasn't in a good condition.

But nevertheless, when I looked around me, and I saw the other people, I didn't complain too much. My mind was how to help them, which I did try. And I went out and got some food for them.

But as regarding the Russians towards us, they tried to help. They certainly tried to help. And they did help. It's just-- it's just a very, very unfortunate thing that they don't feel towards the Jewish nation, at the moment, like they should, from what we hear, at the moment, the way they behaved towards the dissidents. At the time, I would have never believed that they could be capable of doing that. I mean we hear a lot of terrible things that are going on at the moment in Russia.

But I was in contact, I should have mentioned, with the everyday person. I didn't get in contact with the politicians. So I mean the people that I came in contact with, the Russian soldiers, the nurses, the officers, I would say they behaved very, very nicely towards us. And they gave us a lot of help.

Did they seem shocked by the condition you were all in?

Well, that I couldn't voice an opinion about. Because, I mean, I couldn't really say how they felt towards us. All I can say is that they-- wherever they could, they tried to help us. And then, later on, when I came out from that hospital, I went into a proper hospital. And the Russian staff there were absolutely fantastic. They done everything for me. They helped, in every way they could, like in any other hospital.

I mean I was recently in the hospital. And I stayed in there for a month. But everybody in this hospital was absolutely fantastic in every way. Medically and the nurses and everything else that was going on in this hospital was absolutely fantastic.

How much did you weigh when you were liberated, do you know?

I'm not quite sure. No, I didn't weigh myself.

How did you get to England?

There was a transport going to England, at first, which I was approached by somebody. But it all seems like a dream to me now. I can't remember how I got to this transport or how I come to be there. But I remember, they took me in the

office, and they gave me a little-- like it looks like a passport, but it's not. It's a traveling document.

And all I know is we marched towards the planes. And we knew that we were going to England, which took us to Carlisle. And then, from Carlisle, we went to Windermere.

Now, could I ask you some general questions about the whole period?

Yes.

Did you think that you would survive or did you ever doubt it?

That was a doubt all the time. Since I arrived in Auschwitz, that was very, very doubtful whether I will survive. But I did think on these lines. I was just thinking of how to survive the day or hour or moment. But obviously, when you started a fresh day, the first thing came to your mind is how much bread you're going to get, how much water or whatever you're going to get. And then you're throw away the idea of how to get back to that camp, and how to start again, and to keep out of anybody's way, that you shouldn't get beaten up. But other than that, our thoughts were only for the moment.

Did you ever get any news about how the war was going?

No. Whether other people got any news about how the war was going, I couldn't tell you. But I, myself, no, I didn't know nothing. On the later part of the war, when it was coming towards the end, we did hear heavy gun firing. And we knew that it must be coming towards the end. But whether we survive or not, that we didn't know.

But earlier on, the earlier tapes, I was telling you, especially with me, it was a miracle, every time, because I had disablement. I was disabled, in certain ways, where the Gestapo could pick me out. Had they noticed my disablement, that, I can tell you for sure, I wouldn't be here to tell the story. Because little defects on people, that was enough to put them to the gas chambers. And in my particular case, it was more than just a little defect.

Was there any religious life amongst the prisoners?

Very, very little. There was one or two people that kept together. And they observed certain things but on a very, very, small scale. Because even the most religious, their motive or their idea was first to survive, which our religion tells us. When any human being is in doubt or there is any danger to a human being, you must break the religious vows. You must first think of life and then of the important things to them, which is religion. But the most important thing is life.

And at that particular time, to survive, and, in their opinion, to become religious afterwards, I would say, was more important than, at the moment, to observe religion.

Did people pray or hold services or anything of that kind?

Not very many. Not very many. No, there was certain people. Obviously, our religion tells us that we must pray first thing in the morning, noon, like afternoon, and evening. We must. That's the three prayers we must observe. That is the religious Jew has to observe-- well, actually, everybody should observe-- but at the moment or at times when there is religious and semi-religious and non-religious-- but the very religious or even the semi-religious observe these three prayers, rather, all through their life.

See, now I should imagine, when they got up in the morning, they said a prayer or they prayed. But they didn't have the facilities to what they should pray with. Because they should have a prayer shawl. And what we call tefillin, which they put on their arm and their forehead. That we didn't have, which is important, you see?

When a boy becomes a man, at the age of 13, the first thing that he has to observe or should observe is to put tefillin on, which is a part of Jewish life. And that is one thing which the religious or even the very religious couldn't observe in the camps. But I would say, the people that came from very, very religious backgrounds, they observed to the best of their

abilities.

They wasn't capable of doing what they were supposed to do, but they tried to observe what they could. But I, myself, I didn't come from a very strict religious home. But we observed, more or less, everything to the letter.

Nevertheless, when I arrived to this country, the first thing that pulled me was to go to a town, which was Gateshead, where I could gain a little bit of Jewish education and knowledge, because I lost it all during the war, you see? I even go back as far as Theresienstadt-- Prague, rather.

When we were in Prague, the first thing that we were looking for was the things that we need for prayer, like prayer books, tefillin, and other things. And I met two or three of my very, very-- now, very, very religious people. And I met them up at the loft. And we were looking for the same sort of things, looking, going back to our past and find something to do with religion.

At the moment, I observe the kashrut in the home. And as much as I can outside, the dietary laws, I observed that to the full or I try to observe it to the full. I don't go as much, as I would like, to the synagogues. It doesn't-- opportunities don't let me go to synagogue as often as I would like to, really.

But I tried to bring my children up as religious as I possibly could. And I just try my best.

Do you think that what people went through, in the hands of the Germans, strengthened religious belief or weakened religious belief?

That is a question that many, many people ask. Very, very few people had turned against the religion. I would say very, very few people. A person that believes-- a person that did believe will believe and always will do.

Our religion is one of the hardest. I would say it's very hard to be a Jew and to observe the traditions and religion. We're always looking for easy ways out, including myself. And that is one of the excuses that some people use. You know, why, why? My parents were the best in the world. They were good. Why did they have to go? And that's the excuse, unfortunately, we do use.

But we cannot question God's motives. We cannot go into these things. I mean, everybody, every individual has got their own ideas about beliefs and disbeliefs. But to make this an excuse?

Although how dear that was and how terribly, very, very terribly wrong it was to lose one's parents or one's nearest and dearest and to say, well, it was God's will. It's very hard. But at the same time, we mustn't say, because he took my parents or because he took my family, because of this or because of that, I disbelieve or I do believe.

Purely, my personal opinion is that people that believe in religion will not go away because what happened so tragically to our nation. Everybody believes. There's very, very few people that don't believe-- that disbelieve, rather. But as I said before, it is always easy to find the easy way out. And that's why some people take the easy way out, because it's very hard. The things that we have to do to observe our religion is absolutely hard.

Did the experience, at the hands of the Germans, strengthen Zionist feeling as far as you were concerned? Did it make you feel that Jews could no longer live with Gentiles after what had been done to you?

No. No. No. It made me feel, personally, very, very strong towards Zionism. But as for being a long way away from Gentiles, no. I would say, now, the time is coming where Gentile and Jew are getting closer than ever before. Whether it's to do with the much, much improved education or whether the churches are going out, really going out of their way, to try and bring us closer together. And also, the Jewish bodies are going out to meet the priests of the Christian faith and to get sort of closer.

The whole thing, from what we gather, from how it starts, hatred is like-- you hear stories going on, even today. In a school, children-- children don't realize what they're even saying. But they say-- a little girl might say to another little

girl, you killed Christ. And that little girl might not even know what she's talking about. She says, I didn't-- I heard it on the telly the other day. I didn't even know Christ. I don't know who Christ is. I didn't even know Christ.

And the learnings or the sermons that was going on in the churches, years and years ago, about Christ was he was killed by the Jews. And they don't even know that they say that Christ was a Jew. So I suppose this brought hatred.

But as for myself, no. I've got a lot of-- well, I'll say, very, very many Gentile friends. And we're getting on very well. And when I was in hospital, I could show you a card that I received from the hospital. People that don't even know me, they all signed the card wishing me well.

They made a collection for me. And they sent it to the hospital, which I didn't really want. I am funny that way. The card, I will treasure till I die. But the money, I didn't want. They made a collection. They send a few pounds. I didn't want to upset them. I accepted it. But I wasn't very pleased about that. It embarrassed me a little bit. But nevertheless, it proves that what I'm saying is, no, I've got no hatred or no ill feelings against anyone.

The only thing is I would have liked, in my lifetime, to see even a closer and friendlier atmosphere among some. Because there is some people that, when they see a minority group or a different person-- I mean, after all we are different. Jews are different. We look different. We've got different habits. Even some of us look funny. But the majority of people just look at us as people. But there is some that really ridicule us.

And while we're on this subject, I would like to state something else. A few years ago--