

Mr. Greenman, reel 7. You were about to tell me something about Monowitz.

Yes. At either Monowitz or Auschwitz-- but I think it was Monowitz-- there was a barrack being put up, and they can put a barrack like that up in a few days. And in there, we heard, were women. Kapos, and some under-kapos, four arbeiter, they could get a ticket from one of the head kapos and they could visit women in that barrack.

And I remember standing there, watching this one afternoon, one late afternoon. And one of the boys next to me said, one of the men said, well, Leon, wouldn't you like to go in there? I said, no. I said, no, I hope my wife is not in there. You see, I hope my wife-- up to then, I still was thinking my wife was alive. It could be your wife or what it is with the prostitutes. And the women probably are forced to do that. No, I don't think that.

In any case, I myself, during my years in the camp, I was too busy with my mind, with my family, and how to get out and to stay alive, and fighting hunger and other things, to be thinking about sex. There that didn't trouble me. But somehow, towards the end of Monowitz time, one evening, when we all had to, we were in bed and the lights went out.

And I heard a few beds away, a kapo, or the under-kapo say to-- and I knew this man because we were working the same Kommando some time-- I heard this voice say to some young fellow, who had his bunk near him or in the same bunk, I don't know. He'd say, not like this, like that, in German. And then the lights went on all of a sudden. Somebody switched on the lights, so you could see. And there he was, standing up with a boy, busy with the boy. Then it came to my mind homosexual. Well, you let it go. You didn't care. It wasn't you. You see, it wasn't you. What was the question again?

I was interested to know how the prisoners got on with each other.

Oh, yes.

Not the kapos, the other prisoners.

Well, some of us, we didn't care a hang about one another. Life was such. For instance, my bread has been stolen more than a dozen times. If you could make friends with a good one, then it was OK, but often it didn't work out that way. First of all, I didn't talk Yiddish. Among the Polish prisoners, mostly Yiddish was talked, so I couldn't join in.

Did you speak German?

Yes. We were beginning to learn German.

Had you known German previously?

Very little. Very little. Only for songs and before the war. But I'll give you a for instance. There was a moment in camp that we were carrying, unloading trucks loaded with hundredweight of cement. You know, those big things? And there was one Hungarian-Jewish man there. There were some Hungarians working with us then, Jews.

And he carried two of them on his back. And we said, don't do that because we all have to do that. What? He says, I'm strong. I said, if you do it we'll kill. You don't do it because-- and I couldn't have carried it, too, and then he would have copped out. But he said, he's doing two. You do two. So we made him understand. At last he understood. We didn't let him. Then he only took one, the same as us.

What else? For instance, there was a young Polish Jew, boy about 18, I should think. Taller than me. And he was working. We were working the same Kommando, carrying things into a factory they were building. And I happened to receive from a British prisoner of war-- he must have seen it-- one cigarette.

I put it in my pocket and he said, Leon, Englishman, give me that cigarette. I said, no, I get that cigarette. Brings me soup in camp. He says, give me that cigarette and you get my piece of sausage. I says, no. I says, when I get tonight in

the camp, I feel like a little more soup, and I'll get a little bit of soup for the boys. He says, give me that cigarette or I'll take it. When he took it you got nothing. So I gave him the cigarette. I said, don't forget your sausage you just promised me. He said, yes. So two days later, when the day came to, we had sausage with our breakfast. It would be sausage.

I went to him. I said-- he's laying on this blanket. I used to lay my bread or something, and looked around and was gone. And he was eating. I said, how about my sausage? He said, go up it, in German. I said, look, I gave you a cigarette. That would have meant my bit of food. I said, you promised a sausage. He said, go away. I said, yes, I will. And I grabbed his sausage and I ate it in front of him. I swallowed it. So he tried to fight me. So one of the staff of the barrack came along and said, what's going on? I said, we're only having a joke. That's how we lived.

Or if I had a bit of bread in the beginning, I had my bread and somebody said, they stole my bread. I haven't got it. Give me a little bit of your bread. I said, how can I give you? I have a little piece like that myself. So he says, look, give me half of that and when I get my ration, you'll get yours. So I said, all right. I gave it to him. So when he got his bread, he said, now you cut it and I'll take. So he cut it and he took the biggest piece. That's how we lived.

Now, some of us, if we were very close-- I had some marvelous Dutch friends. One of them didn't come back. Several didn't come back. One came back and died, the Dutch. But the Polish, I didn't make any Polish friends. The Frenchman who saved my life I didn't meet again. I don't know his name. And otherwise, life was everybody for himself.

Can you tell me, please, what you and the other inmates were doing at Birkenau before you went on to hard labor at Auschwitz?

Well, it was more a quarantine to find out who would be still alive after the seven or eight weeks that I was there. The weak ones, of course, died and were done away with, and the strong ones were later on sorted out to go to the slave labor camps. So in this case, what we did, we got u-- let's say we got up early in the morning, 4:00, an hour past 4:00 or earlier. And we had to queue up. Sometimes we got nothing for breakfast in the morning but a little mug, a mug with some kind of sweet drink.

And we were chased outside in front of the barracks and counted for. We were drilled how to stand five at five, behind one another. And when we mastered that, which went with a lot of bullying and kicking and pushing and slapping, then we were drilled how to take off our beret in one call. For instance, if the kapo called out, if I translate it-- I'll just say it in German. "Mutzen, up." Well, the word "mutzen" is head covers, and in this case berets. And off is means off. It had to come down in one kind of sound.

You mean all the men together?

All the men, yes. If you mention thousands, they are queued up. Say of our barrack, I say 1,200, 1,400 inmates, standing there. Then the kapo used to say-- we all stood erect, and then he used to say, "mutzen," which meant hats, or berets in this case. You brought your right hand up to the head cover, a cap at that time. Some had berets. I had a cap at that time. We still had civilian jackets and trousers from people that had been exterminated before we came there. So then it was head, and then off, up. Then with one smack, the hands had to come down at the side of your trousers.

Now before we mastered that, that took some hours, so the sound of that one smack. And after then, we were accounted for. It was heads up. Again, you put your beret back. Then it was at rest and you stood there, nothing to do. You stood there for some time. And then the kapos made you turn your jacket the other way so that you've got a kind of apron in front of you. And you walked 20 or 30 meters to a heap of sand. At the site were then two of our prisoners with a shovel, and they shoveled one or two shovels of sand into your jacket. And you walked back and deposited, and you went back again. So you can imagine hundreds of us did this. And when that heap was full up, we had to do the same thing, going back again. We never understood what was really taking place because it just made you immune to anything.

Was the point of this to keep you occupied?

Keep us occupied, but also making us feel like little boys, I should think. Well, that went on for some time.

You mean hours, days?

Yes, hours, days. And then, because it was January in the wintertime, January getting on for February, we were chasing through the barracks earlier in the day, getting dark and all that. So sometimes it was, say, 3:00, 3:30, we were inside the barracks. Often we got our ration of potatoes and the peel, or in other words Jack potatoes, outside the barrack-- 3, 4, 5 small potatoes-- and then a mug of something to drink. And that was your ration.

What did you drink?

It was a kind of sweet-- it wasn't Quaker oats. I can't find the right name for it now. You know when people suffer with dysentery, you take something like that given by the doctors to stop dysentery.

A thin gruel?

That's right, something like that.

Rather than something like a tea.

Probably a kind of flour or something. Yeah. But of course, we were grumbling amongst one another. We were hungry, hungry, and we didn't like it a bit.

Does this mean that you spent all your time carrying the sand back and forth, or was there idle time as well?

Idle time as well. The idle time took part like that. We stood outside in the cold, rubbing one another's back and jumping up and down to keep feet warm. And it went on for hours, and you stood there just doing nothing. And then the command the kapo is giving, inside the barracks. And you went inside the barracks.

Now, inside the barracks in Birkenau, you had, in the middle of the barrack, a long brick-build kind of chimney. At one end you're supposed to have coals. We used wood, pieces of trees that were alight, and the warmth went through the chimney right to the other end, and that warmed the barrack.

You mean the chimney went horizontally the length of the back?

Yes. And sometimes you stood very near to it to get a bit of warmth out of it. I still wonder how that could have warmed the whole lot, but it did.

How effective was it?

Yes. There was warmth sometimes. Not very much. You could sit on it or stand up against it, all according to who or how much wood was being burned.

Do you know where the wood came from? It would be quite a lot.

From the woods around us, the trees and all that taken in, brought in.

Gathered by whom?

By the prisoners. Everything was done by the prisoners. Well, then you stood in the barrack. And then the command said, undress to seek lice. We did breed lice a lot in Birkenau, even in the cold weather. So you turned your shirt or your undie around, inside-out.

And then usually under, where the armpits used to be, then you found lice, or in the turn-ups underneath. Wherever the body was warm or so, lice was breeding, and you had to kill those lice. You got to hold them. I used to get a hold of

them [INAUDIBLE] and just kill them between the nails.

It was dirty in the beginning, but you got used to that. And then often it went with a good hiding, whoever had lice. The kapos went sadistic and they chased you around the barrack nonstop, having a stick in his hand. He drummed the stick on the chimney there and you had to run around.

What proportion of the men, do you think, would have had lice before they came?

Before they came into the camp? None. We all were clean. In my case, I'd just come from Westerbork and we didn't have lice. We were still clean. Later on, during my imprisonment, if a lice was found, one lice in a barrack-- the Germans are afraid for typhus-- the whole barrack had to be cleaned out. The man probably got a beating and everybody suffered for it, which made us to be very careful not to breed lice. If it did happen-- as it did happen, I know. It fell in front of me.

I saw a lice crawling. He had just finished looking for it. Put his shirt back on and I saw a lice. I touched his back and I said to him, you still have a lice. And then he took it down and he got out and he killed it, without saying anything to the kapo. You had to say lice is there, but a lot of us didn't dare to tell him because he got beaten up, whatever it was.

Can you continue to describe the conditions in the barracks at Birkenau, because I think they were different from what you had later?

Yes.

The outfits. So in order to make a comparison, can you describe them more fully?

Well, the barracks in Birkenau-- so the barrack where I was living contained 1,200 or 1,400 inmates. It were the formerly cavalry barracks of the Polish cavalry. I know that because on the front of the door, I read on the enamel plates, "Cavalry of the Polish Army," in those words. They were fairly wide.

So these were the cavalry barracks, rather than the horse stables?

Well, I dare say the horses probably went in there. The cavalry is horses.

Yes, but I meant men, not the horses.

Not the men. I don't think the men. They would not live in those wooden barracks. Soldiers, I don't think, would. So the former prisoners had been there before us. They cleared a lot out. And they build wooden beds. There were three layers, three beds on top of another, wooden bunks all along the barrack. And each bunk, there were eight of our prisoners laying next to one another. Above that, you had another eight and the top one contained eight. So the Dutch prisoners, we 50 Dutch boys, still alive then, always stayed amongst one another, with one another.

How much room was there in the bunks? Could you sit up?

You could just sit up. The top one could sit easier than the middle ones and the bottom ones. If you sat up, I mean, you would step outside, outside your bed, because what would you have to do sitting straight up in bed? So you got out.

You said there were eight men deep. Does that mean that for the people's numbered 2 through 8, it was difficult? They had to climb over other people to get out.

If the eighth had to get out, he had to crawl over the seven others and climb down, and do that carefully not to wake the others, and so on.

And how much room was there for people? Were you crowded in, touching each other, or was there room, as in a bed?

No, you weren't laying next to one another. Eight next to one another, just pointed out. You laid next to one another, close to one another. And in my case, I remember that I was asleep, or I was covering myself with a first-class beautiful blanket. And upon the blanket was sewn a piece of linen. And on that linen was a Dutch name and an address in Amsterdam, which made me think this belongs to a Dutchman from Amsterdam.

Where is he now? We didn't know that he had been murdered. So we had very good blankets from those people that had brought all those things into the camp. Later on, that was quite different. And I remember that when the command were giving, undress and get into the beds, you took your boots or shoes off. You put them underneath the bed at the bottom, but with the nose of the shoes exactly next to one another. Not one in front of the other. So there were 24 pairs of boots.

Well, in the beginning, we just put them down and they didn't care, but we soon learned that that was wrong. We were called out. 24 people were called out if it happened in that region of the beds. And we got beaten up and told that the nose of the shoes had to be one straight line. So if you stepped out of bed during the night, you had to go and do your duty, you were very careful to see that you didn't push them over. So you got to sleep then.

As I'm telling you this, a picture appears in my mind, that we had a Dutchman amongst us. His name was Sais from Amsterdam, a strong man. And he was called out by one of the Polish kapos, a big fellow. And he had to wrestle him because this Dutchman was an amateur wrestler. And I can see how he wrestled. Of course he went under. We were hungry. We weren't as fit as that Polish man. And probably, in his mind, the Dutchman had, I better not beat him because it might be wrong.

Anyhow, when we woke up in the morning, the kapo were called out. The lights went on and the kapo called out, "raus." So we all climbed down. And the space between the fire, the mantelpiece, the fireplace, and the bed was about not quite a meter. So you stood there. If you took the top bed, you could dress yourself. I was laying on the top bed. You could put your trousers on while you were laying still in bed and climb down, your jacket. That's all what you had to do. Some had pants, some had only an under-- what do you call it-- something underneath your jacket.

A shirt? A vest.

A shirt. A vest, yes. And then you stood there, close to one another, because there's a lot of prisoners there and you do your best to get dressed. But you had to see to it that your blankets were folded as if it was salvages, in which the blankets were beautifully next to one another, placed so as if it was a window dressing.

And if one of the blankets were out of position, well, 24 of us copped out, because the kapo went along the shoes overnight, called you out of bed if it was wrong. And in the morning, before you left the barrack, you looked at the blankets, and they all had to be beautifully placed like that. I don't know what the reason for that was, but anyhow, we were disciplined like that.

If you had to go to the back of the barrack, where there was a container or a barrel, which you use for your natural outings, you have to squeeze through all those men. Well, 50 Dutchmen and the rest were Polish or from other nations, and yet they pushed through everything before you got there, and some of them didn't like it. So life was not easy inside the barracks. But then came the command outside and you were drilled again, and you stood there.

Still on the barracks, what sort of ventilation was there?

Only the doors, wooden doors. And now a picture comes into my mind. I'm laying in the wooden beds, and in front of me, the Dutchman's laying there. One of the Dutchman is a man who used to live in the same street as I was living. And we were near the door. It was very cold, very cold. All you had was your blanket and your body next to you to keep you warm. And we said good night. And the next morning when we woke up, the man who I knew from my street, he was dead. Probably heart failure or whatever it was. He wasn't very old, probably about 30. But he was dead. He was the second one to go from our 50 men.

But also, say, a few days later, in the middle of the night there was a knocking at the door, and the knocking held on, and the door wasn't open quick enough. One of the prisoners who was to be the watchman during the night, who used to,

had this duty to walk around in the barrack and to keep an eye on everything.

There was only a little blue light shining in the barrack. He probably has fallen asleep and he wasn't quick enough by opening the door. When he got to the door, and the kapo was then awake as well-- the kapo lived in a little department in the barrack, built there with curtains. And they went to the door and opened the door, and in came an SS officer. A lot of silver on his uniform. A very big-built man. And he said, why wasn't a the open straight away? So what could kapo say? There was the watchman, one of the prisoners. He went to him and he said, why didn't you open the door? You were asleep. He said, no, I wasn't asleep.

And this SS officer, he had his gloves on. He slapped his face, one side. He said, you were asleep. No, the prisoner said, I wasn't asleep. I didn't hear you. He gave him a smack in the face on the other side. And that went on for an awful long time, what seemed to us. So often he smacked his face both sides, on and off, until the kapo said something. "He must have been asleep, so say yes." At last, the fellow, nearly sinking down to the floor, he said yes. And then the SS officer says, I don't want to see this man here again. We never saw this man, either, what they did with him. Those were the incidents in the barracks.

Did you have lighting in your barrack?

Yes, we had we had lighting. Electric lighting, yes. Also in the barracks, for the first three weeks, we had no-- we were not allowed to drink water. There was none. A lot of us had beards. Then a command came, who are barbers? Hairdressers. And some of our prisons were hairdressers, barbers.

And we were given a razor. Someone got a razor and someone got a shaving brush and soap, and we had to see to that we shaved the prisoners. For doing that-- sometimes, not always, more or less than often-- you got, at the weekend, if there was any soup left over-- but at that time, they were giving us a watery soup to eat. You got a little more soup for your trouble of shaving the people. I remember now that one of the Polish prisoners who already had razors given to him, he said, I want a few more hairdressers. And I was a hairdresser. In my time, I had been a hairdresser.

You had been a lady's hairdresser?

I was with ladies, but I started with gentlemen's head. I gents and ladies. I said, I'm a hairdresser. Thought to myself, I can do with a little extra food. And he said, go on. You're not a hairdresser. I said, I am. He said, are you? Yes. Why don't you believe me? And this is all going on in bits of German and Dutch. And this was a Polish prisoner.

And he said, yeah, pick up that scissors. And a hairdresser has got a certain way of picking up a pair of scissors. And I picked it up the right way. He said, yes, you're a barber. I said, why are you interested in me? He said, well, the way you picked up the scissors and it's right. That goes outside the scissors.

The little finger goes outside.

And that goes in. And if you were to pick it up like that, you wouldn't have been a barber.

The finger next to the little finger goes into the hole?

Yeah, the hole. And he said, yes, all right. If I would have done it differently, he would have said, you're a liar. Then he could have made me got a good hiding. That's what life was like.

Did this barbering take place within the barracks?

In the barracks. Yes, in the barracks.

Was there a supply of running water or did you have basins brought in?

Basins brought in. I didn't see running water in the barracks at all in Birkenau. And I'll tell you what, the first three

weeks we didn't have a wash. We didn't have a wash. And we were not allowed to drink the water, if there was any water, because the water was poisonous, they said. So we didn't drink water.

It was still January, cold, so I scraped a little piece of ice from the window shelf and let that melt in my mouth. A lot of food there wasn't, so whenever it was, and I saw the blue grass coming out of the frozen ground, I tucked on the bit of grass and chewed a bit of grass. Well, that was life in Birkenau.

Where did you get the water for the shaving?

They brought it in properly. They brought it in.

But you don't know where it came from?

No. But later on, when we had our wash, we were marched to another barrack, and in that barrack there was a metal container running right along where the horses used to stand and drink. I don't know the right word for it.

Trough.

That's right. And they said, go and wash. And I noticed it was all grayish water, not clean. Not clean water. And we washed first time after three weeks. And I did taste a little of water when I was thirsty.

How did it taste?

Not nice. I didn't have enough. I didn't gulp it down a lot.

You said that you were told the water was poisoned.

They told us.

Was that true or was that to keep the supply for other people?

It could be. It could be. If you drank water, probably the water wasn't good, and you became with dysentery and you went into hospital and you died. You went weak and you died. The whole setup, if I come to think of it now, was to get the strong men, to keep them going-- sort him out and keep them going, and they'd be all right for work, for slave labor. I remember we had a little hut at one part of the barrack. Just outside the barrack was a little wooden hut in which was a big barrel with chloride water. Chloride is poisoned, I think.

Bleach.

Bleach. Yes, a kind of bleach. And some of our fellows went out and got some of that inside. I drank some of that. I didn't, but they did, and they went into hospital. I was standing near it. I could smell it, but I never dared to do that.

Another incident in the barrack, which comes to light, comes into my mind-- so we had help in shaving the prisoners, and we got in the weekends a little bit of soup. And I remember that day I had been given to me our dish-- half of the dish with soup, which was, in this case, a lot to us. The Dutchmen were all gathered around us. And with a spoon, which we had, we doled out-- or I dealt out-- each of the fellows one or two spoons of soup. And there was enough.

You mean you gave yours to the other people?

Yes. Yes. Yes. And there was enough left, say, about four or six spoons. And I start eating that. And then one of the fellows said, oh, what are you doing? You're eating more than two spoons. I said, I'm sorry, but do you mind? It's my soup. I've been giving you all some of it. Do you mind if I have the rest? So was our life and feelings. And this man is still alive today. He doesn't remember, but I do.

Then came the incident that one of the fellows, who, in the beginning, had told us, boys, we're not going to talk no more about our wives and children. We'll see them sooner or later. He had done something and he had been given a good hiding, and he couldn't take it and he died. And I remember now that if you died in the barrack, you still had to be counted for on roll call outside the barrack. And we had to take him outside the barrack. And as we stood there, five at a time, his skinny body was placed up against the wall of the barrack. And he was counted and then written off as a dead man.

Was this first man to die, was this Mr. Borstroek?

No. No. The first man to die was Baruch [PERSONAL NAME]. [PERSONAL NAME] was a hairdresser in The Hague. And I mentioned this to his family later on, on liberation, but I don't know where his family lives now. Mr. Borstroek was the one with the incident with the soup, the spoons of soup.

How difficult did you find it to sleep? Or would you say that people slept easily just to escape?

It was a godsend to us, the only rest we had when we were asleep. But often, it was such a lot of noise going on for one thing or another that we had little sleep. As I'm thinking now-- this was during the daytime inside the barrack. One man was beaten up by the kapo. He's bleeding all over his face. And at the door, an SS, a young SS man, about 20, is watching. And as long as this SS kept watching, this kapo was kicking and beating this fellow up.

We got hardened to all those things. What could we do? So there were barracks, which had to be put in order for prisoners to live in. So the kapo, for one reason or another, he picked me out of the lot, and a very tall fellow. His name was Heinrich. He was a German-Jew. Escaped to Holland, but also now a prisoner with me.

And he said, get into the barrack and put the wooden bunks in order. So we went in there and we start putting the wooden bunks, which stood just anyhow in right order. And those wooden beds, there were no mattresses, just wooden planks. And I lifted one up from the ground, and there the sun was shining through the barrack window onto the floor. And I saw there something shining. I picked it up. It was a coin.

Had a good look, made me see. It was a 5 rouble piece with Tsar Nicholas II on there. Beautifully new. And I called out. I said, Heinrich, have a look at this. And he said, oh, that's good. He said, put it in your pocket and save it because I might be able to get some food for that. So I said, yeah, but if I keep it and they search our pockets, I'm for it. You're not allowed to have money and all that, not at all. And the 5 rupees is probably worth many a pound at that time. But to me, for a half a slice of bread, you could have taken it.

Anyhow, I put it in my pocket and the day went on. And in the evening, I still had it in my pocket. I fold my jacket to make a kind of a pillow of it and I went to sleep. And the next morning when I woke up, I tried to feel my pocket. It wasn't there anymore. So whether Heinrich got a hold of it and disposed of it, one way or another, I don't know. I was sorry because a piece of bread would have meant a lot to us. That's another incident how we lived.

Who would have exchanged the 5 rubles for bread for you?

Well, probably he. Being a big fellow, he probably knew some contact there, another prisoner or so, or somebody who worked near the kitchen, or one thing or another. But I never had that kind of contact or so. I wasn't clever enough. Some of our men were clever. They knew ways in and out, but I didn't. I just couldn't figure it out.

Though you may not have known ways in and out, as you say, you seemed to have avoided being beaten. How did you do that?

If I could avoid it, yes.

Was it possible to avoid or was it just luck?

Not always. Just luck, I think. And I dare say my angel that protected me, the various incidents in my prison life that I



escaped. But there were also that I copped out, and in no little way.

Was it also at Birkenau that you were involved in singing for the kapos?

Yes.

Would you tell me about that?

We had amongst our prisoners violinists, who had been violinists, as singers. And from time to time, the kapo fancied a little bit of music in his barrack. He used to call out, where is anybody that can sing or anybody can play a fiddle? So out came a Dutchman who could play the fiddle. His name was Dantzig from Amsterdam. He played a fiddle. Later on I know he went very thin and we didn't see him no more. But at that time, we were still a little bit of fresh, probably the third week, third or fourth week in our prison in Birkenau.

And he called out the singers. And there was another Amsterdam boy. He was a very light tenor. Shriver his name was, Shriver. And then myself, because I had started singing before the camp. And then the kapo used to say, well, all right, come on. Give us some singing. So we used to sing some songs and he used to play the fiddle. I can see us still standing on the warmed fireplace running through the barrack, and we stood there singing.

What songs did he want?

Didn't make any difference. We were saying, we hope we get some food for it. We just made up our own songs. Well, the night came-- a night came along and the kapo said, everybody into the beds. So we all went into the bed. And he said, good night in German. "Nacht." Night. Then we all had to call back, good night.

Well, probably because we were hungry or dissatisfied, one thing or another, not all of us called out good night. But at that moment, we did not know that. So we were all in bed, and about 10 minutes later, the lights went on. The kapo came out of his department into the barrack. And he said, where are those singers? I wanted to go, look, I've got to stand up and sing now? I feel like going to sleep. So I got up, and the other singer got up and the violinist, and we stood there on top. Well, boys, let's just sing. We might, we might not get something.

But to our surprise, he said, now everybody out of the beds. And it didn't happen quick enough. And he started, with his assistants, with the stick in the hands, hitting the sticks on the bed. Get out. Get out. And like monkeys, they had to climb out. And there we stood. I watched it all, in between the beds, all the men. And when they stood, he said, into the beds. Everybody into the beds. And they climbed up into the beds. Those couldn't do it quick enough, they were beaten with a stick. And we were all in the bed. He says, out of the beds. So we had to climb down again.

And this went on for a good quarter of an hour, 20 minutes. The men couldn't climb up. They couldn't climb down hardly, out of breath. And we were lucky we saw this all. I saw this all standing there. If I wouldn't have been a singer, I would have been doing the same thing. Then at last, he says, into the beds. And then he says, good night. And then the whole lot said, good night. He said, that's what I want to hear. Because we didn't answer him one call good night, we were punished that way, one of the kapos. So that's another incident.

Was it at Birkenau that you got diarrhea and tried to medicate yourself?

Yes. A lot of us got diarrhea. And if you went into hospital-- I was warned before by the young Austrian fellow who said, don't get into the hospitals because they'll starve you. So I didn't want to go into the hospital. I took wood, pieces of wood from a tree where I found them, and burnt them into black ashes. And I put that into my portion of soup. I did it several days to stop the dysentery. It helped me.

How did you know that making charcoal would help you?

Yes, because when we left Holland, one of the medicines we had to take along was Norit, N-O-R-I-T. It were black tablets, which you swallowed them, they stopped you from becoming dysentery.

Did the black tablets that you made work in the same way?

Yeah. Well, they told me that in those tablets, they only burned wood and burned bones. They told me anything, you know, the boys among one another. So I burned it and somehow it did stop my dysentery. Well, I think it was more God or the angels working with me. Anyhow, that was another incident then.

Was it also at Birkenau that you had trouble with your shoelaces?

Yes. The boots we had on, I had no shoelaces. And they took too long to button up in the morning, when you are standing on top of another and one pushing past you, to tie your boots. They were wooden-soled things. It was already uneasy to walk in. So I found pieces of wire and tied my shoes with wire, which was done in a few seconds, just tied the wire together and your shoe stayed on the foot.

Were there any problems with that?

Yes, because you walked and the wire touched the front of the foot, so it made a cutting effect. The shoes were bad, so I had open holes in the heels, blisters. And life began to become a little bad now because, well, in the barracks and outside the barracks, nothing was good. I remember now that in our early prison, when one had to get up out of his bed to do nature's call-- and there were only a wooden-made container. And if that was full, you had to carry it outside, trying not to spill it. If you spilled it, you had to smell in the barrack and you copped out. So I remember that evening I couldn't go on to that container. It was loaded. And I slipped outside the barrack and did my duty and crawled back again. And lucky nobody had seen me.

Because it was dark?

It was dark. But probably the man inside the barracks, he was probably sleeping or something, the watchman, wherever he was. I got back in my bed and fell asleep. And then I woke up because there were a lot of noise going on. And they had carried a man inside from outside who had been caught doing the same thing that I had done. And he copped out. They were beating him up. He had gone outside, and instead of waiting for someone to come and help him to carry that wooden container filled to the rim-- so in other words, I escaped that good hiding. It could have been me.

You had the one container for all the over 1,000 men?

Yes. When it was full, you had to carry it out. Yes, it was a miserable life in the barracks in Birkenau. Yeah.

You were in Birkenau until, would it be March, April?

Half January. End of-- no, no. End of February, seven or eight weeks. Say we arrived about 18th or 19th of January '43 in Birkenau. And I was there between seven or eight weeks. I would make it to March. Yes? Beginning of March, yeah.

Well, there comes the day, the evening then, that we were called into a barrack and everybody strip. There were a few thousand of us there. So we stood there naked.

Called into a different barrack?

Into a different barrack. In that barrack, the two tables on each table, an SS officer standing with paper in his hand. And we all had to file passing. And he looked at you, and it was up to him to say to the left or to the right. So the weak ones went to the left and the better physically looking ones went to the right. Those who went to the left, the weak ones, they said they were done away with. They were too weak to work, so they were finished with, the gas chamber or whatever it was. I remember queuing up, and for some reason the man behind me pushed me out of the queue.

By mistake or on purpose?

I still don't know why he did it. And an SS officer saw that. He jumped from the table, came to me, and kicked me between the legs, and there I lay on the floor. And I jumped up quickly. With all my pain, I jumped up quickly because I wanted to show I was strong. And I stood in the queue again. And then it was my turn to pass by and he put me on and told me to get to the right. That's why I'm still alive today. Well, that evening then, about 1,500 of us-- five and five and five and five, next to one another, give them one another, locked into the arms-- we were marched to Auschwitz.

How far is that?

I'd say about three or five kilometers, something like that.

Not at all a problem for someone fit and well. How did it seem? Were you well enough at this point?

We were well enough to do that march and gallop almost non-stop. I'm just thinking I left one of my best friends behind. He had a swollen inside of his mouth. He was a big fellow when we left Holland. I never seen him again. Eddy =Hamel is his name. Eddy Hamel. Yeah, a nice fellow. He was an American Dutchman.

Did you know where you were going?

No. No. We just marched. And marching, not 1, 2; 1, 2. No. Come on, come on. We were chased up, the guards with guns. And then we arrived in Auschwitz. And it was evening, late evening. And we all were put into a big room, but it was too small for all of us, where we stood. Belly to belly we stood, really, and all through the night. And what could you do? You had to do your duty. And you just tried to squeeze out and get into a corner or something.

I remember I had a piece of bread under my jacket. And I was standing belly to belly, face to face with a Czechoslovakian prisoner. Bigger man than me. And we were talking in broken German and wondering what's going to happen. And it was warm standing so close to one another. And he said, what have you got there then? And he pointed to the little bit of bark on my jacket. And I said, that's a piece of bread. So we shared that piece of bread. Well, they went on right throughout the night, and then the next morning we were chased outside. There we stood on the square in Auschwitz.

How had you got a piece of bread?

From Birkenau. Towards the end, they gave you a little piece of bread.

Did everyone have one?

Yes, everyone.

Why did you share yours?

Well, probably I didn't feel hungry. I didn't feel like hiding it any longer. I realized he was hungry, otherwise he wouldn't have asked it. So we shared it. There are several incidents like that with sharing food. Not often, but you could do it if there were circumstances.

So we stood outside that morning. And I remember one of the kapos standing on the truck and calling out professionals-- electricians, carpenters, and so on. And who else is a professional? So one of them said, professional hairdressers. I said, I'm a hairdresser. And they all start laughing. Later on I realized why they were laughing. I was pushed back amongst the prisoners. And of course, if you're a hairdresser in the barrack, if you're a chief hairdresser in the barrack, you need not go out to work. You're in the barrack. You're in the camp. You get better, more food. You get a nice, clean striped uniform. And you got somewhere to stay in the barrack, whereas in my case, of course, we were slaves. And we only had be a barber at the weekends to clean the men up by shaving and cutting the hair.

So that's why they had laughed.

They all laughed. And instead of being a hairdresser, I became a slave labor and I was dealt into a Kommando of 1,000 men.

Do you know what proportion of your 50 Dutchmen remained?

Oh. I lost sight of-- well, half of them had died already in Birkenau. I didn't see many of them. I think Borstrock was still with me. But I don't remember anybody. Yes, one or two more. One or two more there were, yes. Only about half a dozen, I should say.

So then with people, most of whom you didn't share a language with.

Yes, Polish. I couldn't speak Polish. Czechs. I couldn't talk Czech. So we did it all more in broken German, and in Dutch with those few. Of course, I remember now that day we didn't work, march out to work. We were dealt into a barrack. And of the Dutchmen that were still alive, there was very one tall Dutchmen, Rotterdam fellow.

A picture comes to my mind, that because I was a barber, we were giving them razors at the weekends to shave, the prisoners. And that morning, we're inside a barrack next to the bed. We put a wooden bunk, and the prisoner had to sit in there. And they were lathered by one and shaven by me.