

Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

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How far back in that town does your family go? That you know of?

1820's.

This was not Czechoslovakia then, it was...

It was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And uh, the family were horse traders. There were selling horses to the Austro-Hungarian Calvary. In the 1830's, my great-grandfather received special permission from the king. He was allowed, as a Jew, he was allowed to buy land. Other Jews were not allowed to own land at the time.

Was it because of the service to the army?

Because of the service to the Austro-Hungarian government.

So was your father, your family was what, would you say middle class, upper middle class?

Upper middle class.

Uh, were there synagogues in the town?

Yes, there was a...two synagogues. One, uh, Hasidic, the other one was an Orthodox Synagogue.

And did you belong, did you attend services?

Uh....my father wasn't a very religious person. He attended the synagogues, but not regularly. And uh, the children never went to uh, Hebrew school. We had a teacher coming to the house once a week, or twice a week. But...but, we didn't go to Hebrew school.

Did you keep Sabbath for example? Friday night, what was it like Friday night?

Yes, we kept Sabbath, yes. And we kept kosher, but there were no separate tables for milchik and fleishuhak [dairy and meat].

Would you say you were an assimilated family?

Yes, I would say we were assimilated.

Were you typical of the population in that town? Jewish population in that town? Was it an assimilated community?

Half of the population was like us, and the other 25% was extreme orthodox, hasidic, and the other 25% orthodox.

What do you remember of the cultural life? What kinds of things did you do?

There were two Zionist organizations. A right wing and a left wing. Uh...there was the revisionist, and the Hashomir Hatzair, which was more to the left.

Which did you belong to?

The Hashomir Hatzair.

What other kinds, we'll come to the Zionist groups, what other kinds of cultural life? Were there movies, shows?

Yes, there was a movie theater in town. Owned by a Jewish family. And uh, there were some very wealthy uh, Jews in town. The owner of the power plant and the flour mill was a Jewish family. And uh...very wealthy peasants, lived in the town.

Do you think there was any resentment or uh...anti-Semitism because of that? Or do you remember any?

Yes, there was anti-Semitism, yes. Yes, there was anti-Semitism.

Did you experience any specific incidents that you can recall?

It wasn't on the open until 1938.

Well, before that what, what did your family think about life in Czechoslovakia, what were your memories of?

No, my father was a strong believer in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. He, he...he considered me a communist because I believed in democracy.

What did you think of Masaryk, for example?

He was a very liberal man.

How would you classify the Czechoslovakian government?

Democratic. Truly democratic.

Was there a, an official position on the anti-Jewish acts, anti-Semitism?

There were no such acts. There was anti-Semitism. There were individual anti-Semites, but there, it wasn't uh...it...the government did not approve of it.

So any blatant offender would be, would be prosecuted under Czech law?

Well, nobody was prosecuted because a, uh..nobody uh...for making a statement, they did not prosecute anybody. Unless uh, someone committed acts then, uh, he was prosecuted, yes.

Did this uh..difference of opinion that you had with your father, did your brother also...was he involved in politics as well?

Not at all.

So it was just between you and your father?

Just between me and my father.

Was life difficult at home because of that?

Yes it was, for me it was. My father use to call me a communist villain.

Your father supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the empire was gone, so who would he have supported?

Well, he hoped too, that someday will be restored. [pause] Lived in a dream.

The uh, political events in Europe, in the 1930's, the, the uh, revolutions and civil wars, and whatnot. Do you remember hearing about them or reading about them?

Well, I was twelve years old. When there was a civil war in Spain and the Italian fascists invaded Ethiopia and uh...that's what influenced me to uh...be uh...leftist.

You read about them?

Yes.

In newspapers?

Yes.

At twelve years old?

Yes, twelve years old. I remember the cities of Ethiopia that the fascists invaded. I remember when Guernica was bombed in Spain.

With whom did you speak about these things if not at home?

I had a close friend in school and we always talked politics at the age of twelve.

And then the Zionist group, did you join the Zionist group then?

Yes I did. I joined the leftist Zionist groups.

Did you have hopes of going to Palestine?

Yes.

What did your father feel about that?

Was very much against that. He never wanted to hear about that.

What about your mother?

She was neutral.

And your brother was also neutral?

My brother was also neutral.

And your sisters as well?

My sisters didn't know anything about politics. They were not interested in it.

At what point do you remember changes in your daily routine? Let me go, let's go back.

What do you recall about 1938, which was a year that was maybe a turning point in the history of Czechoslovakia?

Well, I remember when, the western allies sold out Czechoslovakia in 1938, [pause] at Munich.

Tell me about that. Tell me about your reaction to that.

Well, I hated the western allies for that. [pause]The reason they did that, because Czechoslovakia had a Mutual Assistance Treaty with, with uh, the Soviet Union and France. And they feared that in the event of a German attack, the Army of the Soviet Union may march into Czechoslovakia, to aid Czechoslovakia, and that would be a communist imperialism westward, or Bolshevik imperialism westward. Which was a greater danger to the western capitalist nations as a, as a German imperialism eastward. So it was, for them, it was better to sell out Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany.

In the end of 1938, how did the Munich Pact effect your life?

Things have changed drastically. Umm....from then on, we lived in a fascist society. It was no longer a democracy.

What did that mean....

Slovakia became an independent state in March 1949, and the president of the country....

39, 39

1939, is that what I said?

You said 49, but that's all right.

1939, yes, and the president of the country was a Catholic Bishop, Tiszo. Most of the cabinet members were members of the Catholic clergy. And things have changed drastically in Slovakia. And the hometown of where I used to live was a half a mile from the Slovakian border. And our life has changed. The uh, Prime Minister of Hungary at the time, was Imredy, who introduced anti-Jewish legislation.

Such as what?

Land reform. Take away the land from the Jews. And of course, they had some anti-Jewish laws for many, many years in Hungary, like the Numerus Clausus Law.

Explain what that means.

Which limited the enrollment in uh, universities for Jews to 6%.

Was that extended now to Slovakia?

The accu, the territories that were occupied by Hungary, yes.

What did that mean for your father's land, the farm, was it taken away?

Not at that time. It wasn't taken away until 19...late 1943. They didn't come to that until late 1943.

How was your life directly effected?

Quit school.

You had to quit school?

There was no purpose of going to school. Get a high school diploma and I was a, if I recall, was in 10th grade. [Sighs] So, I had to quit school. There was no purpose. And my brother went to learn a trade.

Is this the time when anti-Semitic acts started to break out?

It, from then on it was open anti-Semitism.

How about some of your non-Jewish...

Most of the businesses, Jewish businesses in the town, were taken away from the Jews.

How about your non-Jewish friends?

The friend that was also a believer in democratic ideologies, he became a fascist. Some friends stuck it out with us. They remained friends. Others turned against us.

At what point did the...did you break with this friend. Was it over discussion, did he do something?

Immediately after the changover, he was no longer a friend. He doesn't, didn't want to be with me at all. No more.

What other kinds of uh, restrictions were there? Was there a curfew for Jews?

No curfew. Not until 1944, there was no curfew.

When the Germans came?

When the Germans came in.

You said that you went to Budapest?

Yes.

What made you decide to go to Budapest?

Well, there was too much anti-Semitism in my hometown. I couldn't take it. And I was able to acquire a job in Budapest, so I left my hometown and moved to Budapest.

Did you need papers to move?

At that time, um, Jews could move freely. Not until 1944, March 1944, when the German Armies marched in that travel for Jews was restricted.

What were you doing in Budapest? What kind of work did you do?

Working in a factory as a laborer.

Did anyone else from your family go with you?

No, I was the only one. My brother, by that time, was in the Soviet Union. He left in 1939 and came back in 1945.

He left for the same reason you did, anti-Semitism?

Yes.

And what was he doing in the Soviet Union?

Well, at first, he was taken to Siberia, to a camp. They were afraid that he might be a German spy. But, uh, when the war broke out with Germany, he had to join the Russian Army and later when the Czechoslovak Brigade was organized, he was transferred to the Czechoslovak Brigade.

And wound up in Poland, eventually?

Yes. Yes, he was,uh, he was stationed at the city of Veronezh at the beginning, with the Soviet Armies. And there, he was an interpreter. They captured a lot of Hungarian officers at Veronezh, and he was questioning the officers, the Hungarian officers.

Was it hard for you to leave your family?

[Long pause] No, it wasn't, I had to do it.

Your parents didn't object?

No, did not object at the time. In fact, they encouraged me. My parents were quite old, they couldn't go.

How did your father feel in 1938, when the fascists came to power?

Well, he...he was very disappointed, very disappointed.

Why? It was a conservative movement.

Yes, but it was an anti-Semitic movement also. Conservative movement, he didn't mind a conservative movement but not an anti-Semitic movement.

Did you see them again? When you moved to Budapest?

Never again. I used to receive packages from them for awhile, until 1944, and after that, [whispers] nothing.

Do you remember the last time you saw them?

1942.

Remember the farewell?

The date, I...summer of 1942.

What was that like, did anything special pass between you? Did you say anything?

They were still holding the land. They still had the land and the peasants were working on the land.

So there was no thought in your mind that you would never see them again?

No, no, I never suspected that one day I'll be deported to a concentration camp.

Do you know what happened to them?

They were taken to Auschwitz. First, they were taken to a ghetto and from the ghetto they were deported to Auschwitz.

How did you find out about that? When did you find out? Was it after the war that you discovered this?

When I met up with my brother, I found out about it. My brother already visited my hometown, when I met up with him. And my brother told me, that you know, um, father and mother, they are dead. There were taken to Auschwitz.

You moved to Budapest in 194-

42.

And you lived, what kind of life? Was it fairly normal life for two years?

Fairly normal.

You weren't in hiding or anything?

You didn't feel any anti-Semitism in Budapest at the time. Not until March 1944.

Tell me what happened in March.

Well, the German Armies marched in and started to round up the Jews. And take them to, the Jews to concentration camp. Travel was restricted, Jews were not allowed to travel. Uh...the yellow star was introduced.

Did you wear one?

Never. Never.

How did you avoid.....

When they came in, I right away acquired false IDs.

How did you get the false papers?

Through connections, friends.

So you were living as a non-Jew in Budapest?

Yes, starting 1944, as soon as the German Armies marched in, I was living with false papers. But I had the same job. And uh, my bosses knew that I had false IDs. But they were liberal people.

How did you get caught then?

There was a raid on the building one night, and uh, the uh, residents were screened, had to produce IDs. I did produce my IDs, and then they ordered me to pull my pants off. That's how I was caught.

They were checking men for circumcision?

Yes. You see in uh, Europe, in central Europe, it is not a custom to circumcise non-Jewish, not like in the United States. Circumcision was limited only to uh, Jews.

But what happened when they discovered then that you were Jewish?

I was taken to a camp, a temporary camp, and one morning we were all taken to a suburban railroad station, and from that railroad station we were deported to Auschwitz.

Before, had you heard of Wallenberg, at the time?

Yes I did. At that time, no. No, I heard of Wallenberg, of course, I had read about Wallenberg, yes. But at that time, I think he came to Budapest in June. By that time uh, all the Jews from the rural areas were deported.

When you were rounded up that night, was it by Germans or Hungarian police?

Hungarian police.

Were they brutal, violent, were they beating people.....?

They were. They were brutal, yes.

Were you beaten that night?

No. [pause] No.

Tell me something which you remember about the transport, the train.

Well, we were about 80 people packed in to each cattle car. About 30 cattle car, cattle cars rolled out of the railroad station without food, without water, without lavatory facilities. As soon as the rail, the train left the railroad station the agonizing thirst of the children began. And the cry of the children, and the wailing outcry of their mothers, where driving us crazy. [pause] We were traveling two days and two nights and finally, we arrived at destination.

What about, you said there were no lavatory facilities, what did people do on the train?

Well they, they had to....

Wherever they were.

Wherever they were.

The train didn't stop?

No, no. No.

Were people dying in the train?

Yes, the older people were dying. We, it was a great relief, when they, finally the doors of the cattle cars were opened.

Is that the first thing you remember experiencing was relief?

Yes, this was the first experience. And uh, then uh...prisoners in striped uniforms ordered us to step out, fast, and form lines, five in a row.

Did you know where you were?

Well, as I looked around, I saw high barbed wire fence with porcelain insulators. So, I knew that there must be high voltage in those wires. And, on the left side of the tracks was a big brick building with several chimneys. At the far end, smoke rising to the sky from an open pit. I approached one of the prisoners, I wanted to know where we are at. He told me that we are at the Auschwitz Birkenau, concentration camp. It didn't mean anything, never heard of the place before. I heard of concentration camps. We heard of Dachau, or Buchenwald. Those were created back in the early 1930's. We heard of those, but we never heard of Auschwitz.

What did you think would happen at a concentration camp? What had you heard about them?

We had no idea. Not until a few days later, while we working down the aisle, there were German officers at the end of the line, and were directing older people, women with small

children, to the right side of the tracks. All men, women, capable of hard physical labor, to the left side of the tracks. A few days later, we inquired from veteran prisoners. Wanted to find out what happened to our loved ones, to friends, our relatives. So they, one prisoner remarked, sort of cynically, "Why don't you know? They all went out through those chimneys." Pointed to a big building on the other side of the tracks.

How did you react to that?

It was unbelievable. In fact, while we were still in Budapest, we heard of atrocities committed by the Germans from the Hungarian soldiers returning from the eastern front. But those stories were so horrifying that it seemed unbelievable. We didn't believe it. [pause] I didn't believe in it until I was taken to Auschwitz. [pause] While at first, when I found out about it, felt horrible. After awhile, we got used to it. As long as it's not me. [lowered voice] It's a horrible thing to say, but that's the way I felt. [pause]

What happened, when, you were sent to the left?

Yes.

Do you remember the step by step procedure that you followed that first night?

First we were led to a building, a bath house. We were given showers and then a complete haircut, from top to bottom. Then striped uniforms were distributed to us, also shoes with wooden soles. A day later we were tattooed. I no longer had a name. I became to be known as A9556. [pause] And we stayed in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, for about a week. Then we were transferred to the Auschwitz main camp. I think I should explain to you that the Auschwitz concentration camp consisted of the extermination camp, which was in Birkenau, then there was the administration camp, which was in the city of Auschwitz, and there were

about 25 or 30 satellite camps. So, so from Birkenau, we were transferred to the main camp in Auschwitz, the administration camp. As we were marching in, we were greeted with music at the main gate. Above the gate there was an imprinted motto. "Arbeit macht frei" which means, "work makes you free". Unfortunately, freedom came to a very few at the end of the war. We stayed in Auschwitz main camp, few days, then we were transferred to a satellite camp in the Jaworzno.

While you were in Auschwitz, what did you do while you were at Birkenau each day, for that week?

Didn't do anything.

Nothing. What about the Appels? Was, were there regular....

Long Appels, yes, counting the heads, five times a day.

Did you witness any or experience any punishment?

Yes.

Do you remember?

Beatings. By the Kapos, especially. Kapos were prisoners like us, but they had authority from the Germans to beat us.

Were you beaten by a Kapo?

Yes. I was beaten by a Kapo.

Was there a reason?

Well, I wasn't quick enough to climb up uh, on the bunk bed. They were long bunk beds. In Birkenau there was no mattress or straw sack or anything, just boards. But in the satellite camp, they had straw sacks.

So you were beaten this once, at least by a Kapo once?

I was beaten many, many times. Once, I was beaten terribly.

In Birkenau?

No, that was in the satellite camp.

We'll get to that. Did you witness any, any hangings or severe punishments when you were in Birkenau?

No, not in Birkenau. No, I was in Birkenau for a very short time.

What about suicides on the wires?

Yes, that I witnessed, yes, yes. Um, the people at the time when we were in Birkenau, they were still terrified, they didn't know what was going on. [Agitated] They still...just, it was unbelievable that they were burning people in the pit and in the crematoria. It was unbelievable!

Did you ever find out what was in that burning pit? Did you ever get to the point where you saw what....

We were told by veteran prisoners, what was going on in the pits. Those that were in Birkenau for couple years, Slovakian Jews. Because the Slovakian Jews were deported in early 1942. We came there in 1944.

How were you selected for Jaworzno?

I worked in a machine shop in Budapest and uh....I uh, told them that I was a smith. They needed smiths at the Jaworzno.

So your name was called, or your number was called?

Yeah.

And then you were put on the train, a train or a truck?

No, on a truck and we were taken to Jaworzno, which was about 20 kilometers from Auschwitz, about 13 miles.

And what was it like in Jaworzno?

There were 3500 prisoners in this satellite camp. Most of them worked in coal mines, others worked on a construction project, building a power plant. That power plant had to supply electric power for I. G. Farben, a chemical company.

So you were working for I. G. Farben?

I was working at first, in the coal mines. They didn't need a smith, so they put me in the coal mines.

Do you remember what that was like, what you felt like?

I was extremely lucky. I got a job as a railroad switchman.

In the mine?

In the mine. And uh, didn't work hard. Then I uh, suffered an injury on my eye, and uh, I was uh, taken to an infirmary in the camp. I stayed there for awhile, then I was uh, transferred to a construction project, building the power plant. Well, the power plant was being built by Siemens. It was for I. G. Farben, to supply electric power to I. G. Farben, but the construction was conducted by Siemens Electric, a German electric firm.

Were there civilian engineers working on this?

Yes, all the engineers were civilians. And the coal mines, I worked together with civilians, uh, Bohemian, Czech, and Polish civilian miners. They were quite nice, they helped me a great deal. Wouldn't be here if not them.

Why, how did they help?

With food.

What were you given in the camp? What kind of food did the camp give you?

Well, we had nothing for breakfast; for lunch we had, had bowl of soup, turnip, horsebeet soup. I don't know, I think you can call it turnip. And for supper we had a slice of margarine, or a slice of sausage, and we received about a half pound of bread.

How many hours a day were you working?

In the summer months, as many as 13, 14 hours a day.

Why did you call it horsebeet? Had you seen these before?

Well, yes, of course. We used to grow it at home on the farm. We used to feed the horses with, with that uh, that type of beet. It's like sugar beet, but it's much, much, grows much bigger.

You fed horses with it?

Yes, we fed horses at home with it, yes.

But not people?

Oh no, people didn't eat it. Not even the poorest people, they didn't eat that.

And these Polish workers then supplemented your diet by....

They were helping me, yes. A piece of bread, a piece of sausage.

You started to tell me you were beaten at Jaworzno, severely beaten. What were the circumstances?

Well, after I was released from the hospital, after my injury in my eye, I was transferred to the construction project, and I worked outside. It was late fall, it was rainy, cold, so I

wrapped a blanket around my body and then I put on the stripped suit. And they noticed that I looked sort of big. So they examined me and they the, the blanket on me, and for that I was beaten terribly.

By an SS guard.....

I received an injury on my kidney, a bad injury. They stepped on me, they kicked me, they beat me with rubber hoses.

Did you go to the infirmary at this point?

No, I didn't, went to work.

With the injury?

With the injury. You could go to the infirmary only in the evening. In the morning you couldn't go.

How did you survive this beating?

I was bleeding for awhile, urinating blood.

Internal bleeding?

Yes. And then that stopped, I felt better, except that, I was suffering from another problem, a stricture, and it wasn't treated until I got back home, to my hometown. Until then, it wasn't treated at all.

Was this a consequence of the beating?

Yes.

What did that finally wind up with...

Eventually, created, you know, hypertension, which resulted in a brain hemorrhage and partial paralysis on the left side.

And this happened after the war was over as a result of the beating?

Yes.

You continued to work then with this, even after this, with the injury?

Yes, I did.

And didn't tell anyone? No one helped....

Well, friends I worked with, they knew that I'm, I'm ill. It was bitter cold in December, November, December 1944. It was terribly cold and I continued working. And beginning of January 1944, I was working on that construction project, building the power plant.

How long were you Jaworzno? 'Til, what until January?

Till January 1944.

Were there suicides there too?

Yes.

Do you recall any specifically?

Yes, touching the barbed wire fence.

So Jaworzno also had a lot....

Yes, a high suicide rate, yes. Especially the intellectuals. Not young people, not the very young; middle-aged people.

Any other kind of suicides? Did people uh...kill themselves in the barracks? Did you notice....

Not other kind of suicides, I don't recall.

What were the psychological, the attitudes of people in the barracks with you. Do you remember? Did you talk to anybody else?

One thing we had in mind, is how to get more food. We were constantly hungry [pause] and losing weight. Most of the prisoners did not survive more than 10 weeks. They either died of edema or pneumonia, [pause] or, they were sent to Auschwitz with the muselmanns.

Who were the muselmann?

Well, the muselmann were the human skeletons. That was the cynical name for the human skeletons, muselmann.

Those who had given up?

They didn't have enough strength to do any physical labors, or they were useless, and the German physician, by the name Mengele, use to come and conduct selections to pick out the muselmanns and send them to Auschwitz Birkenau for extermination.

Were you involved in any of those selections?

Yes.

Did he just walk through the barracks?

No, we had to stay in Appel, and he walked down, and he was picking out the people that looked like human skeletons. There was no use for them, for the Germans anymore. And they were always able to replenish the lost labor force by the newly arrived prisoners from Auschwitz Birkenau. [pause]

Was there any talk of escape?

There was no possibility of escape, but there were escapes, yes. It never entered in my mind because, uh, the probability of, uh, survival in an escape was practically null.

Do you remember any attempted escapes that failed?

Yes. There were hangings.

Did you witness the hanging?

Witnessed the hanging. Those that tried to escape and were caught, they were hanged. But some Russian prisoners, they escaped and they were never caught.

What about resistance? Did anybody talk about resistance?

Not at the Jaworzno. There was no resistance whatsoever.

In Auschwitz?

I didn't stay long enough in Auschwitz to find out whether there was resistance or not.

Under what circumstances did you evacuate Jaworzno? What happened that brought about that?

Around the middle of January, 1945, the armies of the Soviet Union were getting very close to our camp. In fact, uh, the camp was near a main road and we saw the retreating German armies. One day, we came back from work, back to the camp, and were immediately were chased on the highway on a death march. They were marching us inside Germany. Because Jaworzno was in Upper Silesia at one time, it was part of Poland. Today, it's part of Poland.

What do you remember about the march?

Well, those that didn't have enough strength to march they were shot in the back of their neck. And we had to throw the dead bodies on wagons and we had to push the wagons. When we filled up the wagons we had to bury the dead, start filling up the wagons again. [pause] The dripping blood from the wagons made never ending red lines in the white snow.

Any particular moments that stand out on that march?

Yes. Well, I recall someone I knew quite well, who was on that wagon, still alive, biting another prisoner's foot. [pause] Can never forget that, as I was pushing the wagons I saw

that. [pause] I get very emotional when I recall those wagons, that was horrible. [long pause]

When you saw this happening, did you say anything, did you do anything?

I couldn't do anything, I couldn't say anything, I was just pushing the wagon.

Did you also have to bury these prisoners?

Occasionally, we stopped when the wagons were filled up, we had to bury the dead, and then march again.

Were there any that you buried that you think may have still been alive?

Yes, not completely dead, yes.

Do you remember this regularly, these images?

Yes I do, especially in my dreams, comes back to me. [long pause]

What would have happened if uh, if you had tried to help one of those prisoners, do you think?

I would have wound up with them on the wagon. Couldn't do anything. [pause] All you had to do is march. In fact, you were afraid to remain behind because those that remained behind, they were shot in the back of their neck. So you tried to be in the front.

Do you remember any of the SS guards? Do any of them stand out?

Yes I do.

Do you know their names?

Don't remember names. Not at all.

What stands out about them?

Well, there was one SS guard that had a habit of just hitting prisoners for no reason at all. We were coming back from the construction project and he was standing at the gate, and he had a stick in his hand, and bang one, two, three, just hitting people, for no reason at all.

Was he on the march?

No. Many of the young SS men were replaced by the old home guard by January 1945.

Was this Wehrmacht?

Yes, older older, than 50 years old.

Yeah, and uh...that the first time I heard a German soldier call another prisoner, "mein liebe Mensch," which means, "my dear fellow". Never before.

Why don't we stop for a moment now.

Okay.

[BREAK]

Before we continue with what came on the death march, let me take you back for a moment to Jaworzno. Do you ever remember seeing any prisoners punished at the gate for stealing food, for smuggling food, or anything like that?

I don't recall because, when we came to the gate, we couldn't stop because a German soldier was counting the heads.

Was there ever an occasion where one man brought food in?

Yes, I uh, yes, in fact, this man lives in Oak Park. He was smuggling in vegetables in his a...was tied in his pants, and as he was walking in at the gate, it started to fall out. Uh...they

didn't know who lost all those vegetables. I don't remember him being punished, however, it's possible he was punished.

Is this Mr. Roth?

Mr. Roth, yes.

Are there any others that there were incidents like that, that you recall at Jaworzno or is that just the one that stands out?

That's the only one I remember that stands out. Of course, people were punished trying to steal food from the kitchen. Yes, severely beaten for that.

Uh, in Jaworzno, what kind of sanitary conditions existed? Was there running water, were there latrines that were relatively sanitary?

There were...no, just latrines, there was no running water. There were wells, but the water was terrible.

So no one drank the water....

Because the area was full of coal mines, probably for that reason. I think it was full of sulfur, that's what I think.

Did anyone drink that water?

Yes, we were drinking it. Many people were getting uh, dysentery from it, but we were drinking it.

Was there a...there were 3500 prisoners, was there a latrine in each barracks?

No. At night we had uh, big drums at the door and during the daytime there were latrines, not inside the barracks, we had to walk out. But at night, we were not allowed to walk out.

Was there a Scheißmeister in the latrine?

On the construction project there was a Scheißmeister, and prisoners were not allowed to be in the, on the, in the latrine for more than five minutes. After five minutes, the Scheißmeister came with a stick and chased the prisoner out of the latrine.

Were people killed in any of these places?

Well, the Scheißmeister on the construction project was a Greek. And he tried to help the prisoners as much as he could. A Greek prisoner.

Greek Jew?

Greek Jew.

You said there was dysentery....

Dysentery was very common.

Were there other diseases too?

Pneumonia in the fall.

And edema?

And edema.

Which is a swelling of the ankles...

Swelling of the ankles and the face, yes.

Just one other question, you had an eye injury and you were in the infirmary, was there a doctor in the hospital?

Yes, I was treated by a Czech doctor from Karlsbad, his name was Dr. Pauw. Very, very fine person.

Also a prisoner?

Also a prisoner.

Jewish prisoner?

Jewish prisoner, very fine person. He tried to help me as much as he could, really.

Alright, let's go back now to on the death march. Was there any point in the march that you stopped or just continuously march? How many days did it last?

Well, we stopped only when we had to bury the dead. Then we had to march again.

Day and night?

Day and night. Deep snow, because we couldn't use the main roads. The main roads were for the retreating German armies. So we used side roads and there was big snow on the side roads.

So you're pushing these carts through the snow?

Big snow.

How many days were you on the road?

[Sighs] About three days and three nights until we arrived in Blechhammer. But we had a rest overnight in a barn. Uhm...that was after the second day of march, and we were pushed into a small barn. We started out about 3500 prisoners from Jaworzno. By the time we arrived at this barn, I don't think more than 2,000 of us were still living. [Pause] And there was so little space, prisoners in this barn that sleeping was not possible. And we were so tired, so sleepy. Prisoners were killing each other for a little more space. The following morning, we always had to counted, we always had to count the heads. There were about 200 dead prisoners in the barn. We had to bury them again. They were all stripped completely naked. Prisoners put on an additional pair of pants or another coat to keep warmer. It was a bitter cold winter in January 1945.

Was there food? Did they give you food?

Nothing. Nothing, we received a bowl of soup once in three days from the Red Cross. No other food.

Where did the Red Cross come from?

I have no idea. All I know, that suddenly some men appeared and they were giving us soups.

After you buried these 200 men...,

Yes.

You were back on the road again?

Back on the road. And the Russian armies were so close, it was a bombardment. The bombs were falling close to us and we were forced to run. The Germans were afraid that the Russians will catch up with us.

Still through the snow?

Still through the snow. And now more people were shot in the back of their neck. They lost their strength, they didn't have the strength to march.

Approximately how many do you think arrived at Blechhammer alive?

I don't think more than maybe a 1,000 out of the...out of the 3500 that originally left Jaworzno.

What happened at Blechhammer....

But the last day, we, they had no time anymore to bury the dead, so we left the dead behind. We had to run.

Did anyone think that the Germans were just going to run off by themselves? Wouldn't you have thought that that was going to be the logical thing to do, with the Russians so close, just to abandon the prisoners?

Never thought of it. Not me. That they would just abandon us? [Pause] Noo. We suspected that they may kill us all-- before they leave.

What was it like when you got to Blechhammer?

Well, Blechhammer was already evacuated. We came there, the prisoners were Blechhammer were gone already. That was a huge camp. Must have had about 50,000 prisoners.

When you got there?

I.G. Farben used to have a synthetic rubber and a synthetic gasoline factory in Blechhammer.

So there were 50,000 when you arrived there or they had been before?

No, they were gone, they were evacuated already. We arrived, the camp was empty. There were no prisoners in the camp.

What do you remember, the procedure then that they followed when you arrived there?

Well, we were directed to barracks. We went to the barracks. About an hour later I heard some noise outside, so I went to see what's going on, and I noticed that people were running out of the food warehouse with bread and margarine, and when the Germans noticed that the people are carrying out the food from the warehouse they were start..they started to machine gun everyone.

What went through your mind then? What did you think about then?

Go and get some bread.

In spite of the shooting?

In spite of the shooting.

Did you do that?

Yes. [pause] Yes. And I walked out with three loaves of bread and I noticed a friend of mine, on the ground, dying, a bullet wound.

Did you stop?

No.

Did he say anything to you?

No. Carried away the bread. But the shooting was going on.

Had you made friends in the camps? Were there friendships in the camps that you can remember?

Not much. Real friendship...no, I don't think so. Everybody was for himself. They all had one thing in their mind, survive, and care nothing about the other guy. [pause] Sharing of food--- there was no such thing.

You had these loaves of bread, then went back to your barracks with them?

Yes.

Then what happened?

I ate. I ate. Filled my stomach with bread as much as I could eat.

Did the other prisoners know you had it?

No [pause] they didn't. I would have been killed by the other prisoners. They would have wanted some of the bread too.

When did the shooting stop, shortly after that?

Shortly after, the shooting stopped.

What's the next thing you remember happening?

The following morning the Germans were gone. We found out that the camp was surrounded by the Russians.

How did you find that out?

Somebody walked into the barrack and said uh, from reliable information, I mean from reliable sources, he has information that the camp is surrounded by the Russians. But it wasn't so. Because the German guards came back in the middle of the night and were chasing everybody out of the barracks, back on the road again. [pause] I didn't go. It was pitch dark, there was an artillery duel between the Russians and the Germans and uh, the bombs were falling in the camp and around the camp. I hid under the bed. I didn't go.

You spent the night that way?

Spent the night that way. The following morning...[sigh] I, uh, went outside, looked around, saw nobody, I went down to the potato bunker, there were no more German soldiers around, and there I found some Slovakian Jews in the bunker baking potatoes. About two days later, I went out on the main road to see if the Russians are in. Meanwhile, I suffered a bad case of dysentery, from eating snow on the road. Didn't eat anything, I had to eat, no water, no nothing, so I ate snow. When I went out to the main road I saw a truck coming full of soldiers. I was sure it was...they were Russian soldiers. When they got closer, I already noticed that they were Germans, not Russians. And I'm standing there with a striped

uniform. And the truck passed by, I was frozen. The truck passed by and they didn't even, they didn't look at me. [pause] They didn't even notice really.

Were these Wehrmacht soldiers?

Most likely. I went back to the bunker and then I told the guys, "You know the Germans are still here." About two days later, I go out on the main road again, but this time, the camp was near a little forest and the main road was a couple hundred yards away, but this time I was very careful. From tree to tree I was going. And as I got to the main road, I saw two soldiers coming on foot. And as they got closer, I right away noticed that Russians are here. So I asked....approached the Russian soldier for food. So he gave me some wine, he had some wine in his canteen. And uh....

Did you speak Russian too?

Yeah. Why, it's a Slavic language, I wasn't fluent Russian, but uh, they could understand me, they knew what I want.

Enough to get wine?

Yeah. Why, I didn't ask for wine, I asked for chlieb, which is bread, and he gave me bread and he gave me some wine. One was a Russian Mongolian.

Did they then take you in to their ranks?

No. No, they...the day after that, I started on, on a march back home. I was about 600 kilometers from my hometown. Maybe more, 700 kilometers. That is about 450, 500 miles. And I started out on foot. The first day, I walked about 8 miles in big snow. I arrived in this village completely empty. Nobody lived in the village. One house I saw smoke coming out of the chimney. I needed a warm place to stay, so I knocked on the door, the old lady

opened the door and I told her she should allow me to sleep there overnight, but she said, no, she's very sorry uh, she cannot allow that because Russian soldiers sleep there. But I was very tired and I needed a warm place, I forced myself in, I took out my blanket, I put it on the floor, fell asleep right away. Around ten o'clock in the evening I felt somebody was kicking me, waking me up. I look up, a Russian soldier with a submachine gun looks at me with this striped uniform and he ask me, "Where do you come from?" I explain to him, "I'm coming from the concentration camp." So he says, "Why do you sleep here like a dog?" Chased the old lady out of bed and put me in bed.

He chased the old lady out of the bed and put you in her bed?

[No answer] [nods]

What made you decide that you wanted to go back home? Was that just the first thing that you thought you had to do?

Natural instinct probably. There was no other place to go.

Did you expect to find any family?

No. No, I knew my brother was in the Soviet Union, that I knew. Because we received a letter from him before the war broke out with the Soviet Union. So I knew he was in the Soviet Union, but I had no idea that he was in the Czechoslovak Brigade.

Did you hope to find your parents?

I knew my parents were gone, that I, I already had the feeling that they were all killed, because from, the Germans deported the Jews from the rural areas of Hungary.

Did you talk of home in the barracks ever? Did people discuss...

We all did, we all talked about how good it was, about the food at home and what we ate and we always talked about food. That was the primary concern, more food.

What were the stages in this odyssey back home?

Well, the following day the same Russian soldier came back for me, took me out on the road, and stopped the Russian army truck that was going towards Katowice. And I was on this open truck in the middle of January for about 100 kilometers. By the time I arrived in Katowice, I was completely frozen. [pause] And I needed a warm place to stay overnight again, so I walked into a bakery. Slept in the bakery. Then I started on foot again. Walked out to the edge of the town, I was stopped by Russian lady soldier who asked for identifications. Could not produce any identifications. I walked to the edge of the town, 4 kilometers, I had to walk back 4 kilometers to the, to see the commander. Finally, the commander advised the soldier to take me back to the edge of the town and put me on an army truck that would take me to Kraków.

You are still in the striped uniform?

Still in the striped uniform. Then around the 20th of January I arrived in Kraków. When I got out that truck in Kraków and the people saw the striped uniform, they all surrounded me. They never saw a uh, free man from concentration camp. I went to a restaurant, people gave me money, I went to a restaurant and I ordered food. They served me and I wanted to pay. They refused to take money. So I stayed in Kraków for about 4 or 5 days, but I was sick with dysentery, but at the same time, I was hungry. I went back 3 times a day for breakfast, for lunch, for dinner to this restaurant. Then I walked to...I stayed in Kraków about 4 or 5 days, I started out on foot again, and I went to the suburb of Kraków, to

Płaszów. Here I was put again on a Russian army truck that took me to Rzeszów, about 150 kilometers, open truck. I arrived on a Friday late afternoon, and I found a Jewish family in Rzeszów. I had a Friday night dinner with them and I slept there overnight. The following morning I went to the railroad station. I found out that there was a railroad station toward the Czechoslovak border. So the train took me to a small village called Modrówka. From here, I had to walk again 8 kilometers to a town called Krosno. As I walked down the street in Krosno, I saw Czechoslovak uniformed soldiers. And I approached them and asked them, where you from? I didn't know there was a Czechoslovak legion created in the Soviet Union. And they told me that they joined the Czechoslovak legion in the Soviet Union and they asked me for my name. I told them my name is Schlanger. "Schlanger, we have a sergeant here by that name." "Where is he?" "He's in the barracks." So I go to the barracks, he wasn't there. He was a truck driver hauling ammunition to the first lines. He was gone. "So when is he going to be back?" "Next morning, tomorrow morning, he will be back." Wait, the following morning, he didn't show up. I had no idea who this Schlanger was. The following morning somebody walks into the barracks and starts yelling, "Who is here by the name Schlanger?" It was my brother. [Long pause] This is how I met up with my brother. [Emotional]

What did the two of you say to each other?

Well at first, we were very happy. He was very happy that uh, I'm living. We were very close even though we, I was uh...well he was non-political but uh....we were very close. [pause] And then we talked about the family. I asked him whether he knows where my

sister is, the one that lived in Slovakia during the war. And he said he doesn't know anything. But my sister also survived in the mountains of Slovakia with the Partisans.

And your other sister?

She also survived in Budapest.

Did the two of you discuss your parents?

Yes. Yes, we knew that they are not living, but we weren't sure about, uh, my sisters. He didn't know anything about my sisters. And I didn't know anything about them. All I could tell my brother, that my older sister was with me in, in uh, Budapest. I was caught, she wasn't.

Then what, after this reunion?

I went back to my hometown.

By yourself? Your brother stayed?

My brother wanted I should join the Czechoslovak Brigade. Of course, I didn't want to do that. I wanted to go back home. I found nothing at home. There were a few Jews already living in the town. Uh, so I moved in with them. No families, just single boys, survived in the mountains or they were hiding someplace.

None from camps?

None from camps at the time. I was the first one.

What about some of these old friends of yours that had turned to fascism?

They extend...they wanted to extend friendship again. [pause] But, you know, I felt strange when he came and uh...."Well, I'm glad you're back uh...how are you? You look uh, you

don't look very bad," or something like that. Some compliments, you know, but who wanted to make friends with them?

Did you decide to stay?

Yes. At first I wasn't interested in anything but uh, have enough food. That's all at first. And I went to see a physician for my kidney condition and I had sores in my mouth and I had boils on my body, and you name it, and I had it. And I had this uh, bad case of dysentery. I was weak.

Did anyone extend a helping hand to you?

Well, these Jewish boys that lived in the town.

No non-Jews?

I wouldn't think so. no.

Were any of the leftist still around?

Oh yes, the leftists, those that were leftist, uh, they came to see me and wish me the good luck and start a new life, and go back to school and yes, they were nice.

Let's stop for a minute and let me ask you if you had given any thought then or since as to why you survived through all this?

I have...I survived just for no other reason but luck. I was being helped by uh Poles and Czechs, and I was being helped. I was lucky. Of course, I had a strong will to survive. Was nothing but luck.

Do any of the events that you remember experiencing uh...haunt you? Are there memories that during the day seem to appear in your mind?

More in my dreams than during the day.

What kind of dreams?

I'm back in the camp. I'm trying to escape. I'm caught again and I'm brought back to the camp again. And I wonder how come I was such a fool and let them bring me back always.

This is the kind of dreams I have.

Did you have memories....

And quite often.

Still?

Yes, after so many years, I still have those dreams. I still have dreams about those wagons, and the bomb.

Do you have memories or dreams about things that came before, your life before? Do you ever dream about life in Vel'ke before the war?

No, in Vel'ke Kapušany, no, I have no, no dreams about it, but I think about it. How nice life was in democratic Czechoslovakia. I think about it a lot.

Do you think that the experience of living through the war that way uh...has interfered with your life since? Has it shaped your attitudes?

Well, positively, I...because of my partial paralysis I cannot move around like I, I used to when I was uh..before the war I was...I liked, uh, sports. I played soccer and ping pong and tennis, which I no longer can do, not since 1962. Even before 1962, I still liked sports. But since I suffered that brain hemorrhage, I'm partially paralyzed, I cannot move around. I can walk 100 yards and I get tired. My left foot can't take anymore. All it can take is 100 yards.

At what point did you decide to leave Czechoslovakia? Where you under a physician's care in Czechoslovakia for your kidney condition?

Yes. Yes I was under a physician's care as soon as I arrived back home in Czechoslovakia.

And it just kept getting worse until...

It was getting worse until November 1945, I had to be hospitalized with a condition which is called stricture. Narrowing of the passage.

At what point did you decide leave?

Well, at first, uh I had no interest in materialism at all. All I wanted was just a place to sleep and uh, have enough to eat. I didn't need anything, yes. But later on I became materialistic like everybody else. In uh, middle of 1945, I established a business, a hardware business. I didn't go back to school. I just didn't want to go back to school again. And uh, I was running a hardware business until 1949 when it was nationalized. Then I decided to leave the country. I wrote to my uncle. He sent me the necessary papers and I came to this country.

Where did your uncle live?

In Kansas. Small town in Kansas.

Did you go to Kansas?

No, I did not.

Came here to Detroit?

Came here to Detroit. I had a cousin over here and my cousin didn't want I should go to a small town in Kansas.

So you became an American citizen?

In 19...November 1954.

Five years after you....

Five years after, yes. Exactly five years after I arrived I became a US citizen.

Have you ever gone back to Europe?

Yes I did.

When did this happen?

Uhm..first time in 65. Second time in 71, 70 or 71.

In 65 did you go to Czechoslovakia?

Yes I did. I still have my brother living in Czechoslovakia.

Another reunion with your brother then after 10 years?

After 15 years, another reunion. And then the second time I went back, in 1970, I think it was 70 or 71, uh, I went to a trial to the city of Trier. I had a lawsuit with the German government for compensation for the injuries I suffered in the concentration camp.

Were they trying to reduce the amount?

Yes, yes. In 1963, I was recognized for 80% disability, then in 1969, it was reduced to 50% and I appealed.

Did you win the case?

I did win, yes. I did win and I made an error, I should have sued the German government for 100% disability, but in the appeal I demanded that I should be restored for 80%. Therefore, they agreed to give me back 80%.

There have been changes in your life in that period hadn't there? You were reclassified in a way is what you told me?

Yes, I was reclassified. Well, originally I was classified 80% then it was reduced to 50% and I appealed. And it was restored to 80%.

Based on your....

Yes, and I was reclassified because by that time, I had a BA and I was considered not as office helper but an office manager, or something in that order so my pension was higher than the previous 80%.

You had gone to Wayne University of Detroit?

I uh, had some college background for many years since the 1950's. And in 1962, pardon me, 72, I went back to school to get a bachelor's degree. I was at Oakland University for 2 years. And then I transferred to Wayne State and I got my masters at Wayne State.

In what field?

Economics.

Let me go back for a second to your visit to Germany. Well let's go back a little further.

When the war was over in 1945, how did you feel about Germans? What was your attitude?

Hatred. Hatred. At the time when I was liberated, if I would have had power, I would have killed Germans indiscriminately. Of course, today I wouldn't be able to do that.

And when you went back in 1970, what was your reaction?

I felt hostility towards the Germans. When I went back in 1970. Uh, but uh, I expected that I'm going to face a bunch of belligerent uh, people. But I was very much surprised, they were very nice. Everybody was very helpful. I was sent to a physician for an examination and he told me that it was in error to reduce my disability. Because uh, my disability should

be considered 100%, not 80%. Everybody was very, very helpful, very nice. I do not have the same feeling about the Germans I had prior to my trial in 1970.

Have you thought about the contrast between the Germans being so nice in 1970 and....

Yes, I couldn't understand it. Are these the same Germans that committed all those horrors? That caused me so much pain? [pause] It was a tremendous change the way I use to know Germans. Well, I recall in the late 1930's, the German people, they all backed Hitler and his ideologies. There was very little opposition to Hitler and Nazi Germany. None of those things start to go bad for the Nazi's in 19...43, then the German people woke up; they were trying to change. But until then, Hitler was backed by the German people.

So how do you explain this difference?

I don't know. I...well, nobody wants to be on the side of the loser. I think that's the reason why they were changing, because by...after Stalingrad and after the North African campaign, everybody knew that uh, that Germany lost the war, it just a matter of time. Even uh, Hungary wanted to make a separate treaty with the Allies, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France. They were even negotiating in Moscow and Lisbon.

In 43?

1943. They were negotiating for a separate treaty.

Now since you've come back, uh, you have children.

Yes.

Tell me a little about your children.

Well I have two daughters, one is uh, 25, the other is 23. My older daughter graduated from University of Michigan. She's presently employed by Rockwell International in California.

And my younger daughter graduated from Wayne State and she is uh, she majored in computer science. Is employed by the Whitaker Company as a management engineer.

Are you proud of them?

Well, they are both working for graduate degrees now and I think they all have the same amount of education that I have.

Before we finish, uh, is there anything that you want to add to the interview. Maybe a last statement or something you feel you ought to say?

Well, the only think I can say, that uh, [pause] that people should never let themselves be indoctrinated with hatred toward their fellow man. That's all I can say.

Thank You.