Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

Alexander Karp

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Could you tell me your name please and where you are from?

Alexander Karp. I'm from Hungary.

And the name of the town?

Baktaloranthaza.

And where is that, is that near a major city?

Eh, sort of. The largest city close by is Nyireguhaza and Kisvarda.

Kisvarda?

It lies in between.

Tell me something about your life before the war in Baktaloranthaza.

Um, it was a typical small town with approximately 50 Jewish families and, uh, each, everyone of us were going school in, that's Jewish school, and also the curriculum what it was, what it was actually by one teacher, so, the number of students approximately were roughly 40 or 50 people.

This is in the public school?

Pardon? We didn't go to public school. Because, uh, in that little town there was no public school. There was only parochial schools. Each religion had their own schoolings. Roman Catholics had theirs, they so-called "Reformatus" what it was the Reform Christian Reform at that point, you know, Greek Orthodox had their own schooling and, subsequently, the Jewish people hired one teacher and he's the one who was teaching every single class, first class, second, third and fourth. Each row, depending on how many people was in that class. First class was sitting in the first row, the second in the second, and so on.

And what language was this school conducted in?

Uh, Hungarian.

Was Baktaloranthaza part of Hungary?

Yes.

When you were born?

Yeah, no, I was born about, uh, maybe seven, eight miles away in a little town called Nyirmada.

But, was it near Czechoslovakia? Or was it part of Czechoslovakia?

It's not that far. Nothing was too far over there because we were up in the northeastern part. Um, but it was bordered by Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. They came together, that was approximately in between a 25, 30 kilometer radius.

But, you would have identified yourself as Hungarian?

Yes, yes.

How large was your family?

Um, I only had a sister. There were four of us.

And your parents, the grandparents lived there as well?

Um, grandparents from my mother's side. Yes, they lived there. And, uh, from my father's side, they lived in Kisvarda.

Which was close by?

Uh, it was 15 miles away.

What were your parents' names and your sister's name?

Um, my sister's, my sister's name was Martha and my mother's name was, uh, Marishka

and my father's name was Ignac.

And your mother's maiden name?

Klein.

Was your family religious?

It's, you would call it here probably as Orthodox.

What did you call it there?

Um, a little bit less than Orthodox [laughter]

Did you attend synagogue regularly with your family?

Oh, definitely, yes.

Daily or just on ....?

Not necessarily daily, but, eh, certainly Friday afternoon everything stopped, and then prepared for the Sabbath. Certainly and, uh, on Sabbath nobody, nobody worked. It was observed by each and every one regardless whether you were a little bit more religious or less.

What would, what would a Friday night be like at your house?

Oh, Friday night was the typical family Friday evenings. Uh, certainly we'd have candle lighting and the traditional Friday evenings, uh, with, uh, going to the synagogue and after synagogue having the dinner.

And Saturday? What would happen on Saturday?

Saturday the very same thing. In the morning we went to synagogue, approximately till noon or maybe a little bit after. And, uh, went home and had lunch and two, three hours later or four hours later, you went back to the synagogue. And, uh, summertime, of

course, Sabbath went out a little bit later. So you went back for the evening services. And basically everything has, uh, has, has been surrounded by the synagogue activities. Because there was nothing else to do.

What did your father do?

Um, my father had a couple of different occupations. First he was sales, he was a sales person for Singer sewing machine, you know, for several years, many, many years. And, uh, after several years, um, he went into the sausage casing business. And he was, that was his occupation into the time that he was, uh, drafted to the army at first. And later on, he was transferred to the, uh, labor camps.

This would have been what, 1940, '41?

Um, he was drafted in 1939, if I am correct. Uh, no, correction, it was in May of 1940 he was drafted to the army. And he was in the army 'till, uh, 1941. And in '41 he was transferred to the labor camps.

Had he been in the First World War too?

Yes. Yeah. In the last year. My father was born in 1900. And in 1918, he was drafted into the army.

So, he would have been in the Habsburg armies?

Yes.

Hungarian armies?

Yes. And he served in Italy towards the end of the war.

Did he ever tell you any stories about the First World War?

Yes, some. Um, the place of his draft was in Munkacs. You, maybe you're familiar with

that city.

This is in the Carpathian mountains?

Carpathia, yes. And he didn't want to go in the army. He hid. He had substantial family in Munkacs. And he didn't want to go. He was less that 18 years old and he was hiding for a couple of weeks. And, finally, he gave up and he went because, uh... no, for not going in, not honoring the draft, it was a very serious violation. And, uh.... so, finally, he was convinced that he should go. And he was taken to the Italian front and, uh, inexperienced, frightened and there was one, one particular episode what cames back to me what he was telling me. As they were marching in the Po valley, where big fights has taken place, big combats has taken place then. A fellow soldier who was walking with him, you know, a cannonball or... somehow shaved his head off, and the buddy in reflex was still walking several steps without a head. This I remember distinctly that he was talking about. And, uh,... no, it's shortly after that because he only was several months, it was in the spring of 1918 that he was drafted and, of course, the war ended, I believe it was in November. So he was roughly about six months.

Was he a Patriot? I mean, did he talk about Franz Joseph in fond ways?

Yes, of course, the identity of being Jewish, it was, uh, it was somewhat, um, to call it, it was almost like a partnership, you know. Even though they considered themselves ardent Jews, but nevertheless, they considered themselves Hungarians too. This took place during Franz Joseph's time because he happened to be very liberal and he was, uh, he was a good ruler. And they had high regards for him.

You said your father's family was originally from Munkacs? Part of Munkacs.

Yes, Munkacs did belong to Hungary before the First War and his family, his mother, his father, my grandparents, they were all from Munkacs.

What kinds of memories do you have of your mother? What was she like?

She was, uh, very lovely, young woman as I remember her. Because, uh, in 1944, when we, when we went into the ghetto, I was already close to 19 years of age. So, I do have vivid memories of her. And she was 43 years old at the time. She was born in 1901. And, uh, it's, it's very hard to describe, because, uh, in those years to be a mother it wasn't a very easy thing. In order to raise a family, to keep the house, and things, by 1943, '44, it has deteriorated. But, nevertheless, through hard work, you know, they kept the family together and, uh, she did the very best what any mother would do.

And your sister, Martha?

She was born in '29 and, uh, she was a beautiful young child. And, uh, it's, uh, somehow those very few years, what we have spent together, was her too, she was deported in 1944 at the age of 15, you know. And she was going to school. We had a lovely childhood. Of course, I was getting a little bit older already. And, it's, it was heartbreaking to be, to get into the situation that we got into.

What, what kind of youngster were you? Were you a rebel? Were you a good student? Did you play football?

No, as far as students, we are good students, because we had to be good students, you know. It was pretty well demanded to be a good student. With this one, I don't mean that everybody was a genius, but we certainly are, responsibilities were expressed to us and also demanded that once you go to school, you are going there to learn. And respect had

to be given to the teachers. If, uh, any problems should arise in the school, without any questions, the student was at fault. [laughs] However, as far as rebellious or to be boisterous, I am sure that we had our share just like any other young adult or teen, teenager would. And, uh, we actually had a very pleasant upbringing in a few years up to 1940's, '40, '41, when it started to deteriorate because of the German influence, even though Hungary was not occupied till 1944. But influence was very great and the population at large, they were very close with, with the German sentiments. And, uh, problems started to arise. We felt it in school, out of the school, even though in the school, physically we have nothing, because we were going, as I said, to Jewish parochial schools. But, still, we did have some contact with the other youngsters. And at that time, uh, it was, it was obvious which way the trend is going. And from the government army, the exception perhaps of some single people in the government, the atmosphere and sentiments were certainly leaning towards the Germans. And this had a great influence on our daily lives.

Before the, the war started, did you have any contact with non-Jews? Did you have non-Jewish friends?

Oh, yes, yeah. We did. I mean it was a small town and ???? we would be playing on the fields soccer together or any kind of play. We did have, we did have, uh, surely daily contacts.

Did they come to your house? Did you go to their house?

Yes, there was definitely there was inter-mingling.

And what about anti-Semitism, did you experience anything, say in 1935 or '30, as a child?

Well, in 1935, when I was around 10 years old, truly it's a faded memory to exactly to describe that which way anti-Semitism would have affected individually me as a person. However, anti-Semitism right after the war, and this came only through stories what we have been told, you know, it started shortly after the First World War. And it sort of, uh, grew on its own and it was feeding on its own. And as time went on, it just kept, uh, more and more accumulating in every facet of life. So, once I became closer to the young adult, such as 14, 15, teenage years, you know, it was more prevalent that anti-Semitism is there, even though in the earlier years, there was no physical experience as far as that goes. Now, we may have gotten into fights with, with Gentile youngsters who have also been influenced by their parents or by newspapers or radio. Of course, we didn't have television, nobody had that at that time. But, it was, it was spreading. It became like, uh, cancer. But it just kept spreading and spreading.

Do you remember there was an Arrow Cross party in Baktaloranthaza?

Yes, yes. It was very few little communities that they wouldn't have had, it, now, I don't know the numbers, how many of them belonged to it. But there was always somebody whose peer these things. And they were very vocal and even the ones who did not participate in it, they may have not opposed it. Because the fear became so great, that they didn't want to do anything against the trend that it took place at the time.

So this is the Hungarian Fascist Movement was growing?

It was going, it was growing daily, yeah.

Do you remember if you ever spoke about any of this in your, in your house with your parents even when you got a little older?

Certainly, it always came up.

Was there ever talk of Zionism?

There was a Zionist Movement in the '40's, 1940, '41, '42 and very few people, some of them even found their way to Israel at that time, you know. But it was very few, because you have to realize that in those years youngsters weren't as independent as we know it today, no. It was more like a closed community with close family life. Um, if somebody lived in a small town or in a larger rural city, the children married probably in between the surrounding areas. Now, with one word, everybody stayed together tightly, and even though we knew it, that things are getting worse, by the week, by the month, by the year. Now, very few of them had even the thought of migrating, because there just wasn't that much independence in a person and also the means, which way to do it. It was, ah, it was more difficult to exercise your thoughts into action than it would be today. So, subsequently, most everybody stayed right where they were.

Tell me, tell me about some of the changes that you saw in, in, ah, the '30's, well, I guess, '38, '39, is that when things began to change?

Yes, '38, '39. It was, uh, it was quite in depth it started to change, 'cause by that time, they started to bring, uh, new laws where it was affecting the Jews. Um, it was one law where it was instituted...it was called the, "the Jewish question", you know, and, uh, we had, at that time, one Prime Minister. I believe either he was a Prime Minister or he was a Int-, Minister of Interior. Bella Imrade, who supposedly had some kind of a Jewish heritage, too. Way back. This is the way the word went on, that he did have some heritage, and he was ferocious. He was, he was one of the worst, you know. And he

started to put across laws what it was affecting, whether it affected schooling, business, or anything, you name it. It was affecting the daily life of the Jews of Hungary.

You mean with the numerus clausus? Like the numerus clausus?

Well, the numerus clausus, I believe, that was even instituted before that. I don't exactly remember the date when. But it had to be in the early '30's or late '20's.

Can you describe for me what that meant, the numerus clausus?

Numerus clausus. That for higher education they were only a certain number of Jewish students would be admitted.

What kinds of specific effects? Did, did your father run a store, for example?

No. He didn't have a store.

Were Jews, Jewish businesses open on the Sabbath?

No. There may have been some in later years in Budapest or some of the larger cities. But, uh, I remember in Kisvarda, for instance, I had visited Kisvarda because I went to school there for several years, and my grandparents lived there. I visited them. The main street, it was primarily Jewish stores. That's where people found their way that they could make a living. Not too many people could be involved in banking or industry or somewhat mining and so forth. At one point, there was not one Jewish store open on the Sabbath. But towards the 1940's when some people even converted or led off for various reasons why, but there was one or two to the best of my knowledge who kept open on Saturdays.

But, as far as you know, it wasn't because they were forced to be open?

No, no, the government would not force you to be open. The government would force you to be closed on Sundays.

The, the discussions in your house, did, did it ever occur to any of the four of you to, um, to get out?

Um, not really, to the best of my knowledge. First of all, my father who's been drafted, as I said earlier, in 1940, the spring of 1940, he has been very limited time at home. Because in between, sometimes he would get a month or so that he was either discharged or give some time off being at home. Uh, he just [sigh] weren't even able, even if the thought would have been there. We just couldn't find a way. Because Hungary, first of all, was surrounded by the Germans by that time. Austria, uh, Yugoslavia, of course, to the north, Poland, and to the east, Russia, you know. The Russian front, by that time, by the four-, '41, '42, it was, uh, 2,000 miles from us closer to the, almost by the Vulga. So, it wasn't very easy for somebody unless you had some official papers. Very few people, very, very few. We have heard, it came to our attention that they were able to migrate, some of them went to Switzerland. A few of them may have gone to Israel. But, very, very few. And, there may have been something, uh, a, a disaster in disguise what, what transpired in Hungary. Even though anti-Semitic sentiments was very deeply engraved [??]. But, physical effect, we didn't have to the last, uh, towards the last years of the war. The Germans didn't occupy Hungary until 1944. And that's the time it came like a, like a lightning mid-day. Everything collapsed. There was no way of finding any exits. Where to go. How to go. And, unfortunately, because of these relative calm where it took place from 1939, '40, '41, '42, with all the problems what it has been caused. But, in Hungary, the Jews somehow felt a little bit more secure that it couldn't happen to the Hungarian Jews, what it happened to the Polish or so forth. Now, this wasn't a publicized,

uh, thought, you know. But, each and everybody felt, hey, as long as they are not chasing me, I am not going. And when the time came that they were chasing, there wasn't where to go. There was no way how to go, or how to do it.

If you'd had the opportunity, would you have left your parents, sister and grandparents?

There were some, some people towards the end when it was '44, '45 when the ghettos were, um, organized, that, uh, some of the youngsters who were in labor camp, because at age, I believe to the labor camp, they were drafting them at age 21, you know. And, um, some who left that camps and went up to Budapest where they got lost a little bit in the turmoil, you know. It was more frequent towards the end of the war that people split up. That whether it was young girls, or young boys, they would leave the parents. And, uh, but, primarily, they did go to Budapest where there was more opportunity to get, uh, false papers or forged identities.

Did you think of doing that?

Uh... No, no. Because I didn't want to leave my mother and my sister. My father, at that time, wasn't home for three years. We didn't know where he was. Whether he was alive or he was dead. Because in 1942, um, my father was taken prisoner in Russia. At that time, he was with the labor camps already. And, uh, we lost track of him. The only thing I know of him, that from a neighboring little town, uh, one of the person who was in the labor camp in the same unit with my father, and the commander for that unit was from that lower neighboring town. And, somehow through his influence, he had this person excused and sent him home, you know. And this person told me that I saw, I know your father was alive the day that unit fell into Russian hands. Now, he couldn't, he couldn't tell us

for sure whether he stayed alive. He just said that he was alive. So, we just had hope that he's, that he was spared. That his life was spared. But, we didn't know anything about him, till, of course, after the war. And my mother, who was taken into the ghetto and went to Germany, um, never knew that my father was alive or he's going to come back home or not. So, based on these, uh, circumstances, not knowing that, where we are going to go, what is our destiny once we are evacuated from the ghetto and shipped into Germany, I didn't want to part, I didn't want to separate from my mother.

Did he survive?

My Dad, yes, yep.

Um.

He came home in 19.., August of 1945. He came back.

What about uncles and aunts and cousins. Did you have a large extended family at this time as well?

Yes, in the ghetto we were approximately from my mother and from my father's side, we were in excess of 30 people, including my great grandmother who was at the time, over 96 plus.

This was your mother's grandmother?

Yes.

Um, of that 30, how many do you think survived the war?

Three of us.

You and your father?

No, my father I didn't include in the three because he was in Russia.

You and who else?

An aunt of mine and an uncle.

What was, what was the beginning of the turn? Did you notice serious changes? Was it when they instituted the ghetto? Was there a ghetto in Baktaloranthaza?

No. The ghetto was in Kisvarda. Kisvarda had the central ghetto where the surrounding were little towns, were placed into that ghetto. There were several ghettos in Nyireguhazo and, there quite a few of them. In the Kisvarda ghetto was approximately 7 to 7500 people.

How did you find out that you were to be moved to a ghetto?

Oh, it came through, it was brought down an order through the, um, through the authorities.

From Hungarian, this is, now, the Germans had already occupied, is that correct?

Yes, Germans occupied Hungary in March, 19th of March, '44.

And did they come to your town at that point?

No, not too many. There may... we may have seen some, some, movements. But as far as military, there was no military occupation of this little town. It was too small. But, there were movements going through and there may have been one or two soldiers in various capacities placed into the town.

So the rest was carried out by what, gendarmes? Hungarian gendarmes?

Yes, yes, Hungarian gendarmes.

What, what. Your father was gone already?

Yes. He wasn't with us.

What did you and your mother think? How did you feel when you heard the Germans had come, had marched into Hungary?

Well, it certainly wasn't a happy day. And, we couldn't comprehend that what is going to be or how swiftly things are going to transpire. But, quite speedily things have taken place. Uh, first thing what it came that you had to, there was an order given that everybody has to wear the yellow stars, you know. This was the number one order. And between March 19th and, uh, April, in between four weeks, the order came down that all Jews from various towns surrounded Kisvarda would have to report to the authorities in Baktaloranthaza and we'll be taken by horse and buggy, wagon to Kisvarda. And it was given what we can take with us. Everything else, had to be left behind.

Did the order come through Jewish authorities?

Um, the order came from the regular authorities but there was always one contact person, you know, who was named.

Do you remember who that was?

I don't remember.

Then what happened? What did you do? What happened in your household?

Well, certainly it was very somber and days became more, more and more gray because just, it, it, it became an unknown, unknown future what is going to be. But, nevertheless, we kept going with our daily chores. Stopped doing, as far as making a living, we didn't do, we didn't continue with that one, because we knew that sooner or later the exact date wasn't given the first day, but we knew that it will be in the next several weeks that we will all have to leave. And, uh, we put our house in order as best as you can and we

reported to the authorities. And sure enough, sometimes around, uh, mid, mid-April we were transported into the ghetto.

By wagon?

By wagon, yeah.

And when you got to Kisvarda...?

Yeah, we were placed over there. The ghetto was designated, a certain designated area and, uh, life became like, it's very difficult to describe. It was, uh, it wasn't by any means, uh, pleasant. It started to get on a daily basis, uh, certain atrocities.

Like what?

Um, anybody who did not follow the rules and the regulation, whether it was forth given, there was already physical punishment. They took anyone who didn't, not considered as mentally stable, they were taken out, you know, they were separated, and, uh, each and every day new and new orders came up what you can do, what you may do, what you may not do, and sanitation became a little bit troublesome. We were told that soon we are going to be transported to a labor camp in Germany. That each and every person whose got certain trade is going to be placed in between their trade. And, uh, it was a totally unknown. You couldn't even think because you were talking to each other and it's like, it's like guessing what is. And, nobody had any fact. No one had any contact with people who previously had been taken to Germany. It was so secluded. It was so separated from, from, from reality that I can't, in retrospect, I can't surmise it. I can't imagine it today that how intelligent people, you know, could be so ... hog-washed, or, no. But, they did a job on us, and, uh, we were there for approximately six weeks.

In that six weeks did you witness any of these punishments when you were in Kisvarda?

Yes, yes, in the ghetto.

Did any of those stand out in your mind?

Yeah. They were, um, it was, it was beatings. It wasn't like that every single person was beaten. But for any reason. If someone may have gone out of the ghetto, out of the boundary, and if he was caught, he was beaten. Uh, some, as I said, some of the unstable people, you know, they were isolated and it was a horrible sight to see what they were doing with them. So, we tried to be cautious not to give reasons, you know, that we should be at odds with the authorities. And, uh, it was still under Hungarian supervision with the exception that there were several, maybe, uh, three, four, may have been a half of dozen, German soldiers who have been placed in between the ghetto. And, uh, with them, we didn't have direct contact, 'cause they had contact with the Hungarian authorities. The Hungarian authorities did have the designated certain people who were the so-called, uh, ghetto commanders, you know. It was from these were Jewish people, these were inhabitants of the ghetto. They were trying to stabilize it between the people and between the authorities whatever it may have transpired.

So, there was a Judenrat, a Jewish council in between?

Yes, it was, we called it a ghetto command... commanders.

What happened to the mentally retarded group?

I don't know in the end what happened with them. I don't know. But, I have, uh-uh, unfortunately, I can only guess, and I believe it's a pretty accurate guess, they have not been taken to Germany. So, it had to be that they were executed.

That they were shot?

Yeah.

Were you beaten ever in the ghetto?

Uh, not in the ghetto, no.

And how long were you in Kisvarda?

Oh, till, uh, June, June, uh, I think the first, uh, it was ..., I don't know by calendar the exact date I would have to look it up, guess, I could.... We left, there were two transports taken out of Kisvarda ghetto. One transport, two. I was with transport two, but it left second day of Shevuoth.

Springtime?

Yes, it was either the end of May or the very beginning of June. Because I know that it was the second day of Shevuoth because we still observed the holidays.

What was the train like?

Well, the train it was, uh, treacherous. It was, uh, as we know it, animals should not be transported in that fashion. These were smaller cattle cars, um, and I would say, 100 to 150 people were packed into it. It was just, no water, no food. Um, there may have been a little bit of food what it was from the ghetto brought with some of the people. But, water was very scarce and, of course, for, uh, there were some dumps for, for human waste.

What was it like on the train?

Like a, the ride lasted, till, from Monday afternoon we were loaded and sealed about 5:00 Monday afternoon and we got to Birkenau, Wednesday, mid-morning.

36 hours?

We went, yeah, um, between loading the cattle cars and unloading them, it's roughly 48 hours, maybe 44.

When .... ther was, there was a train station then in Kisvarda?

In Kisvarda, yes.

What was it like at the train station when everybody was called all at once? I mean on the platform, for example, what was it like?

Well, on the platform and, there were a number of people who were designated to, uh, to occupy each of the cattle cars.

And you, with, you were together with your mother and your sister?

Yes.

And grandparents?

Yes.

And your great-grandmother, she was...?

Yeah, we tried to stay together.

Your great-grandmother was also ...?

Yes.

And you managed to get on the same car?

In the same car.

Do you remember anything about the trip, sites, sounds, smells?

Well, [sign] we started out, the trained rolled out about between 5 and 6:00. And, uh, we didn't know exactly the routing which way we are going or which way we are going to go. However, the next stop, we knew it was a little city, but it was on the border between

Czechoslovakia and Hungary. I ... that one was Hungary at the time chop. And we were able to follow it. We went through Kosice and through the night we didn't exactly know which way we are going, but by Tuesday morning we have seen some strange, uh, signs when we looked out on the small window. What it was available for us to look out and we could see that it was other than Hungarian writings, that it was Polish now. And, uh, it was very difficult to go through this. Everybody, nobody spoke much. Um, we didn't know what to speak about. The future was so, um, indecisive. You, you, you... didn't know tomorrow what is going to bring, where we are going, whether we are going to be together. Because by this time, somehow we got that fear that not everything is the way we were led to believe at the time that we left the ghetto. And, I remember through the night, I don't believe that anybody slept a half hour. I, I know that half of the night my mother was sitting on the floor right next to me and I had her head in my lap. And, and I can visualize it and I can feel it today, the way her face was in my, in my palm, and, uh, she was just crying. She didn't say anything. And my sister was right next to us and the whole family was most everybody out of the 30 people from our family was in this car. They were, uh, a few of them with some cousins, they were in another car. Um, but, uh, this was because the way the numbers came up. There were only either 120 or 150 who were put in into each car. Because these were approximately one third the size what we have today in this country, you know. So, it was packed practically like sardines. And, uh, the smell was bad. Um, people were, some of them were sick. Some of them were tired, and ages from, from, from birth to age 100. So, it was a pretty dismal sight. And, uh, it was, it was something that no human being ever, ever, should experience.

Let's stop for a moment now. Take a little break. **[Screen goes black for a moment and then resumes]**

You mentioned earlier that you, uh, observed the holiday, the Shevuoth holiday. You were telling me there was, last year there was a particular, particularly significant commemoration. Could you tell me that story again about the Shevuoth last year, the 50th anniversary.

Um, it was in '94, but it was commemorating actually the 50th anniversary of taken from the ghetto and shipped to Germany. Um, it, it was very emotional because, just somehow, took me back to the minute, 50 years, to the day, to the hour, and to the minute. I was in the synagogue and I related the timing to, to the time in Europe, a six hour difference. And it just came to my mind that at 11:30 here in the U.S., I was in the synagogue, to the to the minute 50 years ago at that time, what it was 5:30 in Kisvarda, the way that whole train rolled out. And it has changed my life, it has changed the lives of so many forever.

You were with most of your family you said? In that car?

Yes, most of them.

Did anyone die in the car?

No, no.

So, your '96 plus old grandmother survived the train trip?

Yes, survived it, she made it to Birkenau.

And when you ... when the train slowed down and stopped and the doors opened, what were your reactions? Do you remember?

Well, it was more confusion than reaction because, uh, as we got out, we tried to be

together and walking forwards to the gates of, uh, Birkenau. And, uh, I do recall, it was Mengele who was at the time.

Had you heard about Auschwitz before?

Um ... no, no. Never heard of Auschwitz, never heard of Birkenau. and, uh, as we were walking towards Mengele, and we got close to him and I can visualize the moment even today. That the way he showed one to the right, one to the left. And, uh, we were separated. My sister was holding my mother's hand and my uncle, who lives now in Haifa and who is one of the survivors out of the three of my family. Um, we went one way and my mother and, uh, the rest of the family went to the other way. Have never seen them after that.

Was there anything spoken between you and your mother?

Um, wasn't even so much spoken, but there is one thing, uh, what it stands out in my mind is she said to her brother, who is my uncle, who was not quite, but almost twice my age at the time, and she told him, "Take care of Alex."

She called you Alex?

No, she didn't call me Alex. "Take care of Shoney."

Shoney?

Yeah.

And did he respond to her?

And ... well, whatever he may have said, I don't know. The only thing I know is that, uh, he certainly lived up to this, to this request. Because, uh, without him, I don't know if I would have survived the camp.

When you went in different directions, did you have any idea what that meant?

No. Not at that moment.

What happened next?

Well... next, we were taken into a so-called bath and, uh, they took all our clothes. They shaved our head, shaved, uh, I believe at that time only our head was shaved, yeah, totally. Everybody's head, of course, was a haircut given and took a bath and we were assigned to a barrack.

You went through a shower first?

Yeah.

And, were you given clothes before ...?

Um, yes, we were just given those blue striped, uh, pajama clothes.

And shoes?

Um, yes.

And what was the barrack like?

The barrack was a [sign] wooden barrack with, uh, there were several levels. And, if I am correct, it was either two or three. There was a lower level, middle and then an upper level. And, uh, we took our place and everything was still very mysterious, unknown, until we started to talk to some of the people who were already from previous, uh, transports in the barracks. And, by that time, it started to, to reveal, it started to open up the whole situation that what is going on.

What did they tell you?

Um, first of all, when we were going toward the barracks, um, we saw some people

behind a cyclone fence and we couldn't understand. [pager?] We started to go in the, we couldn't understand that they had to be from some other countries. They were women, who were totally separated and some of them were saying loud in Jewish language, that don't believe anything what they tell you because most of the people are being cremated. And, uh, when we, so, when we heard these, these kind of things, all of a sudden the whole world crumbled because we knew by that time that we are, we are in the midst of something what is ... what it was unexpected. It was totally as a surprise. Not knowing anything and being so, so mysterious about the whole thing that it, it just, we couldn't, we couldn't even say anything. It was... so, we kept going further and by that time, we had, we had contact with the people who came from previous, uh, transports. [He puts away pager.] So, that was the beginning of the end. And ... so, certainly we acclimated ourselves with the, uh, in the camp. And we found out that there is a crematorium. At first, didn't even know what it was because we saw smoke going up. We felt a smell, what it was, uh, like you are roasting or, you know, it was, it was like skin and, and. We were dumbfounded. We just ... we said, what is going on. Until finally we found out that, that smoke and the fire really was open fire in an open pit. Because the transports were coming in with such frequency and, uh, in such great numbers that crematoriums could not handle all the people, all the bodies. So, what they were doing is they were either people are alive, or they executed them and they were just throwing them into the open fire. Now, this was in from June through, we were there July, August ... to the early part of September. And, uh, this kept going on because the people, especially at that time, the Hungarian Jews were brought in. And in between a few months, there were 600,000

people who came in. So, they had to resort to these kinds of things in order to eliminate the bodies.

Did you think about your mother and your sister at that point?

[sign] We, we certainly thought about them every single minute of the day. And there was only that one little hope that maybe, maybe, but that maybe never will materialized. But, as far as definitely, we didn't know what happened. We were only being able to guess. And, by that time, the way all the news came over to us, we knew that the chances are very remote that anybody would have survived other than the few youngsters who had been selected for labor.

The weeks that you were in Birkenau, you were in Birkenau?

Birkenau.

Does any incident particularly stand out in your mind? Did you see any people beaten, killed, hung?

Yeah, yes, over there. Hanging I haven't seen over there. Beating, yes. It was, it was not a daily routine. It was a constant routine. The only thing what we were doing is we were making like cobblestone roads and we were digging some ditches. Because there was nothing to do. It was no industrial complex and, uh, barracks were already up. So this is the only thing what they had us to do. And there were older people who couldn't bear the burden and they either fell out or they slowed down. And they were solidly beaten.

You would watch them? You would see the beatings?

Yeah.

What did other prisoners do while this was going on?

Well, other prisoners really couldn't do an awful lot because, um, even if you tried to go and help somebody, they wouldn't let you.

But, was it safe to watch? Were you made to watch?

No, there was... you didn't stop to watch it. You kept going and just with your eyes, you know it's like, uh, non-existing situation. Because no sooner if you stopped, then you were next.

And you were with your uncle?

Yes.

The two of you talked to each other. You said he helped, he saved your life?

Yes, he helped. It's, uh, not only that physically or physical help, but perhaps more mature then suddenly in as much as I was a 19 year old, strong and, relatively speaking, a stable man, but all of a sudden, when all these things fall into, fall into your lap, you know, you just, uh, your resistance collapses. And this is what he, he was very instrumental of, uh, keeping the spirit up and just to keep going, keep going. Until, after awhile, you know you got, uh, sort of, you lived yourself into, into the situation the way it was and hoped to go where the, uh, hope became more of an important thing than anything else because if you didn't have any hope, then you were lost. [pause]

At what point did you decide, at what point did you think you were going to be out of Auschwitz?

Um, we didn't know when we are going to be out of Auschwitz. The only thing we knew is that was, well again, I wasn't in Auschwitz. I was only three miles or three kilometers away. Birkenau, it was Birkenau-Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the labor camp. Anybody

who went there, they were tattooed and they were assigned to various different, uh, work schedules. Some of them in between the camps. Some of them outside of the camp, but Birkenau was truly so-called Vernichtungslager, that was the "camp of extermination". It was a camp for selection and a transit camp where people stayed there who were selected to take place in the labor force. Some of them may have been there a month, some of them two months, some of them three months, but subsequently, we were shipped out. And there was always new people coming in. So, it was like a revolving situation.

Did the guards ask about professions? Did they ask for skilled ...?

Well, it wasn't the guards, there was a, um, they had the administrative offices and you could and you had to report what is your background, what is your profession, what is, uh, what is your trade, you know. And once you did that, then they were compiling certain number of people for transports to ship them out somewhere else.

And what did you say your profession was?

Uh, we reported in as, uh, Metallschleifer, what is something like tool and die making. Cause we felt that maybe with the war effort being, uh... that perhaps, not even with the war effort, but we felt perhaps they may spare your life because they need tool and die makers or in that line there may be some shortage. So, you may have a little bit of extra chance. That, instead of throwing you in the crematorium, they may use you to work.

Did you or your uncle have any experience as tool and die makers?

No.

Did it work?

Yes, it did work in a sense, that we.. um, at first, we got into a group of 500 people was

selected. And there were various different trades people in that. There were tool and die makers. There were carpenters. There were shoemakers. There were all kinds of people in it. And we were transported in France to a little town close by Thiel Willerupt by Longue, not far from the Luxembourg border.

You were transported on a train again?

On a train.

Boxcars again?

Yes, yeah.

Was the trip the same as the one there?

No, it was different because these cattle, these cars were open cars now. It was totally open. And I don't exactly remember how long it took, uh, because this is by Stuttgart I remember we went through by Karlsruhe and we went further west. I believe that was west towards the Luxembourg border. And we were, and we were, we came into Willerupt that was where the train station was.

This is in France?

France. And all of us, all 500 people were taken to an area where there was no barracks whatsoever. But the material was there. And we were the one, you know, from these 500 people who really erected the barracks. It was like pre-fab. It didn't take long and for a, a couple of, uh, couple of nights we slept outside. Because there was no covered area. But it was still early part of, uh, fall, late summer. So, it wasn't too, too cold. After a few days, when the barracks were erected, each one of us was assigned over there and, uh, many people were selected to do various different work. Remember that my uncle and

myself, both of us, we volunteered to go to the railway station and to unload cars, load and unload cars, freight or whatever it was coming in. For, uh, two reasons, because some of the people were selected to go and work in a mine. And, uh, we didn't want to be underground so we were able to get into these work force, what it was roughly about 10 or 15 people. Every morning we were transported to the station and back. It was, it was relatively good, acceptable, because during those days we could get a little bit of extra food and still we had some of the strength what we, what we came in with because it was still only about four months away, and we weren't run down totally, you know. The invasion already took place.

The allied invasion?

Allied invasion. And in this camp we didn't stay too, too long because we could hear, the canons, could hear actually the war going on. And we had a very slight hope that maybe, maybe the allied would overrun the territory and we could be liberated. But, unfortunately, that did not, uh, take place. It didn't occur because sometimes towards the end of September, early part of October, we had the order that we have to leave. That we are going to be transported back to Germany. And at that point, we still had 499 person in that group. One person died of natural causes, you know. So we had 499 people. And, uh, over there, particularly for me, it wasn't, I was able to get into a Kapo, you know, into Blockältester, what it was the commandment of a certain barrack. And I became like his assistant, or caddie, or helper, or whatever, you know. And that helped me a little bit. It helped my uncle because I was getting some extra food.

How did you manage that?

Pardon? Well, they always, uh, choose, all of them choose one, one person they may have liked. Looked at you and liked you. It was shining his shoes or cleaning the barrack, you know, household chores.

Do you remember his name?

Pardon? [Shakes his head no]

He was a Jewish person?

Pardon? No, no. He was German. He was German. And, uh, I remember my number that I received over there. What I carried all through the rest of the time that I was in the camp. It was achtzehn nul vierzig, it was 18 0 40. That was my number. So, any ID that we had it was through this number. Nobody had a name.

So, what would a routine day be like, um, if you were the assistant's gopher, whatever, for the Kapo?

Well, it was just, uh, it was, unfortunately, it didn't lasted too long because he got mad for some- for something and he kicked me in the back and he says, "Heraus!" and you were out, you know. It was, it lasted probably about two, three weeks. But, that was better than nothing, because at least two, three weeks I had quite a bit of more food.

And this was still in Thiel?

Yes, yeah.

Were you beaten there?

Uh, no, I, I wasn't beaten other than that one kick, you know what, here towards the lower part of my back. And that hurt about, I would say several weeks, where it was, that bone what he kicked at. And I can't even tell you the reason why, why it was. They got mad

for any little thing quickly and he just choose somebody else.

What incidents do you remember besides that from Thiel? You were there for a few weeks?

Yeah, a few weeks. Probably six weeks, six to eight weeks. Um, there was nothing more significant, uh, that, there was another group of 200 who came, um, and they were separated from us. We had no way and we had no permission of even contacting them. Because that 200 was working on the, on the, on the atomic bomb.

On the bomb?

Yeah, in that ... yeah, in that area, yeah

So, was there an underground factory there?

No. They didn't stay there too long. They were only in transit. And how did I know that, uh, many, many years after already here in Canada where I befriended, uh, still a very close friend of mine, you know, he was one of the 200, and his father was in our 500, you know. And, somehow, they got to know that ... that each other, that one is here and the other one is with the other group and they were able to communicate. Now, all this came out probably 30 years after, here in the States we were together once and we're talking about places where we were. And I said, ah, I says I was in small little town, Thiel Willerupt. He said, "We were, that's where I was too". This is the way we found out and he is the one who told me that, uh, they were working on the atomic bomb. And, uh, so, after about six weeks or so, six or eight weeks, the Allies were ... closing in. So, we were transported back to Germany. Um, again, with open cars and, uh, at one time, we got caught in an air raid. And, uh, all the guards from the train, they left, they went into

hiding. We were there. But even though they left you, there was no way to go. If you would have gone anywhere, you are right in the midst of a German enclave. So, we just, we were hoping that, uh, something is going to come out of the air raid. But it didn't. Because our train was not damaged. So, we kept going and we came into Kochendorf, what it's a little town close to Stuttgart. It's closer to Heibrund in that area. And, uh, in, uh, in Kochendorf, there were already other inhabitants and, uh, it was a bigger camp and as the winter came in, our situation started to get a little bit worse. The war was going somewhat against the Germans by that time. It was October, November, December. Food rations were down. We, we weren't getting, uh, the kind of food that it would sustain us. And, um, things became worst by the day. A lot of people were dying - malnutrition, weakness, sickness. And, uh ... it's, uh, I became ill. I was put in the hospital for, I was there probably a couple of weeks, two to three weeks. And, uh....

Do you know what was wrong with you?

No, no. That's, uh, that's when really hell started, as we say, break loose.

Tell me about it?

Um, in Kochendorf, that's where we put to use a report being, a report of being tool and die maker. Because about five, six kilometer away, there was an underground airplane factory. We got into the group, what was designated to work there. And, that one, again, we choose and luckily we were able to get into it because we didn't have to work on the outside. Because winter was treacherous. It was snowy, windy, cold and with the kind of energy and with the kind of clothes that we had, I'm sure we would have not survived. This particular plant, uh, was about 180 meter underground in a salt mine, but it was

converted into an airplane factory. And they had two elevators. Each one of them held, to the best of my recollection, eight people. So, it took quite a long time until they transported the 200 or so persons in the work force going down and the other shift coming up. Because it was only one elevator was taking them down and it took a long time. And the other one was bringing up the one who was finishing their shift. But this, this really, what caused us to put in many hours. Because the shift was eight hours. But, in order to go down and to come up, that also took approximately two hours. Two and two is four and eight is already twelve. And to walk from the camp to this point and back so we had to put in daily anywhere from 14 to 15 hours. But, nevertheless, it was still better than some of the other work what it was available. And some incidence what came to mind, uh, the area where we were concentrating assembling for the lift to take us down, there was an, there was a furnace but it was heating certain buildings. And we always tried to be the last ones, everybody was trying to be the last one to go down to that shaft in order to be more above ground and we were lying down on this oven, what it was a brick oven. You know, the way a furnace is. And, it was nice and warm. And it, at least it was giving us a little bit of strength, relaxation. And, uh, we were guarded there by various different guards - of Ukrainian extraction, Rumanian and many guards who had been drafted or joined voluntarily the German army.

These were army not SS?

Pardon?

They were Wehrmacht?

These were Wehrmacht, yeah, yeah, yeah. One particular instance comes to mind, um. We were not far from a beautiful orchard, apple trees and pear trees and all kind of fruit trees. And at one time, I snuck out and, uh, went down to the orchard. I climbed up on a tree and I was picking the fruit. I was filling up my slacks, pants, what I tied by my ankles, I tied it with a string, so I would fill up both my legs with fruit. And all of a sudden, the air raid siren came on. And then when that happens, they immediately close and shut every single door. So, I got scared. I jumped off the tree. I don't know how in the world I didn't get caught by a branch or something. But, I landed on the ground and I started to run back. And, uh, of course, I was concerned that I should get back on time and the string broke and I was losing all the fruit. That was, that was even worst, losing it. But, nevertheless, I kept running and by the time I got to the door, the guard was just about pulling it in. And I just snuck through. And he said, I wasn't suppose to leave the premises to start with. He asked me, "Where did you go?" So, I told him. I says, "Look, I'm sorry, but there is this orchard and I went to pick a few fruit off the ground." I didn't even tell him I picked it off the trees, off the ground. He says, "Well, first of all, you know that what happens if you are being caught during an air raid, during air raid outside of the building." He says, "The order is to be shot immediately, without question, now. Second of all, you are not suppose to leave this premises." So I told him, I said, "Look, I'm sorry, but you were dozing off, I wanted to ask your permission, but I didn't want to wake you." This was the only thing what it came to my mind. Because if he, at that point, if he reports it to his superior, you know, then if I mentioned that he fell asleep, he's in just as much trouble as I am. So, thank God, I was able to get inside and this was

a very close call for being, uh, being today alive or being shot to death at that time. These kind of things, uh, happened down in the shaft as we were working. It was very damp. It was not, not so much cold as dampness. And once the dampness gets into your body, you know, it was like a shivering type of situation. The only thing what we found out to, to safeguard against that is by putting hard newspapers or soft card, cardboard, paper, like wrapping paper, and we covered our back, front, because that insulates quite a bit, you know. And, uh, many times if the guards would be gathering together having coffee or lunch, or whatever, would lay down lower bed and take a rest. And, um, and, once I was caught doing that, trying to sleep. I got 10 lashes with, I think it was an electric wire, you know. And I remember I put my hand behind my back and I remember once it cut, it cut my palm. It made it pretty bloody. But, uh, these things happened, and, uh, on a daily basis. Sometimes a little bit more severe, sometimes a little bit less. But, uh, it wasn't the ideal situation.

You mentioned several times that, um, your concern for food, all through Kochendorf, well, the experience, was there, was there other ways that you supplemented your diet, potatoes, whatever?

Yeah. It was, we use to pick up from behind the kitchen. Um, see, the kitchen was, was situated in, about, in the middle of the camp close to the wire fence, cyclone fence. And the guards had the towers on four corners, plus they had the in-between. And whoever worked on the kitchen and the, the, like if they were peeling potatoes, or carrots, or whatever it was, they would throw it out between the cyclone fence and between the building. It may have been, uh, five, six feet wide strip. But, at the end of the two, at the

end of the building, there was another cyclone fence too, so you couldn't go behind the building. The only thing what we could do is through the cyclone fence we would reach in, you know, with our hands. And we would pick up, uh, potato peels and whatever food it was thrown out and we would cook it. We would make a little fire and we would, uh, cook the peels, wash it a little bit and then that was a little supplement. And one incident what happened over there, not far from a neighboring little city, actually that today I believe it's on the Rumanian side, but there was one young man, um, and we were both reaching in, and pulling some of that, uh, potatoes or potato peels out and the guard noticed us. Now this depended, again, on the guard. If he wanted, he only chased you away. If he wanted to shot you, he shot you dead, you know. And that young man was shot right next to me. I don't think that he was further than two feet away, you know. He just shot him. When I saw that, and I heard it, I just pulled out and run away. Never again did I go back for, for food over there.

You knew this young man?

Pardon? Yeah, he was, he was one of us, one of the 500, yeah.

Were there any other scenes of murder or execution that you remember from Kochendorf?

Uh, yeah, there was, uh, one hanging that I had witnessed. There were ... these were actually Russians, because in this camp, there were several or some non-Jews too and these were a couple of Russians. They may have been Partisans. They escaped from this camp. They were caught and they were brought back and there was a public execution. Both, both people were hung and I didn't understand the language what they were saying but there were some Russian speaking prisoners there and they said, the only thing what they

said, his last words was, "Long live Motherland". I mean it was a very awful sight to see. Um, it was a makeshift hanging, uh, apparatus. They put the rope in his neck, and he was standing on a, uh, uh, wooden crate. They knocked the crate off and the way, this is the only time and previous to that I haven't seen it, and I haven't seen after that. But, you know, it's, it's such an awkward scene to see. The body just became, it's, it's lengthened, it's like, like a noodle. And, uh....

The rest of the camp was made to watch the hanging, a public hanging?

Yes, yeah. Well, that was for, uh, the reason they said that don't attempt to escape because this is what's waiting for you.

How did you deal with all of this? You were watching death on a daily basis sounds like.

It's not only, we were, dead bodies, we were burying them. We would take them either by taking them, you know, on a wooden flat with two handles on each one, or there was something like a, um, you rolled it in a, it, it became, we became immuned to it. It's the only thing what, what it was in people's mind to survive. And how do you survive? First not to give up. To try and get as much as possible food and, uh, and try to keep yourself relatively, relatively speaking, sanitary, which ever way you could. It wasn't too easy. But, all these things what it needed to be part of survival, you know, this is what, this is what kept you going. I know what we, what we did for an extra little food. Uh, in the barracks, in Kochendorf, we were very close to 500 people, you know. On three decks, three levels, and of course at night, you couldn't go if you had to go to the bathroom. You couldn't go. There was one area designated and it had these wooden containers. Sometimes they over spilled. The odor was unbelievable, you know. As you can imagine,

500 people. My uncle and myself volunteered. There were several other volunteers too. Probably we were four or six of us in this group. You know, to empty it in the morning, you know, this wooden containers. And the way it was carried, we had a stick and it was put through a handle and we were carrying them one on each side. And it was so full, that if the ground was solid and frozen, it was okay we were careful. But if you stepped to an area what it was a little bit soft or it wasn't solid frozen and you tipped, your whole side was spilled. But we did anything. We resorted to anything and everything in order to get a little bit of extra food. And maybe this is the reason why we survived.

Do you recall anybody in the group struggling to get extra food in other ways?

Yes, there was, uh, not only, there was daily incidents at night. Now, in the evening we would get one portion of bread. But it may have been, I don't know, half a pound or something like that, maybe a pound. And we would eat a little bit from that and the rest of them, we would save for next morning and for lunchtime, so we would have a little bit of solid food, because in the morning, we only got the coffee, Ersatz coffee. Lunchtime, it was just a little soup, liquid. Occasionally, if we had a little potatoes or carrots or something in it, it was, it was like, like winning something. And in the evening is when they gave you bread. And, as I said, many people would put it under the pillow, and there would be some stealing. But people would steal this one, and there were accusations, there was, ah, ah, I have seen it, father and son getting into an argument.

Over food.

Over food, you know. One accused the other one that you stole my bread, and, uh, you know, there were a lot of things that you could volunteer to go. For instance, burials. We

got something for that, too, a little bit. Maybe, maybe a little extra soup or carrying from the, uh, from the camp to the work force, work place. We had to carry the cans, you know, and that one was also voluntary, and it was an honor, and, and, and it was advantageous if you got it, because, uh, if you carry that and after, it was, everybody was given the one plate of soup, and before, they would portion the remaining, if there was some remaining. Now, the one who carry that, they got two extra plates, you know. So we did, we did all these things, and we resorted to anything possible where a little bit of extra food could come in.

We'll take a break here now.

You had mentioned earlier that you and another young man were at the fence, uh, and close to each other, and he was shot. Um, do you remember the story that you told me, your father told you about the first World War?

Yes.

Did you think of that at all?

From, similarities?

No. Is it just my comparison, not yours? [laughing] I thought that might have jogged the memory of what you've gone through.

The only difference was, uh, what my Father told me. It was extraordinary, because the, what he mentioned to me that the body still made without the head. You know, reflex, or so, several steps, where this one, when he was shot, just fell, you know, fell over.

And it seems the overriding concern was, was just getting enough food at Kochendorf.

Yes. Primarily, that's what it was. That's, that's the only thing what kept you going.

And your uncle was still with you?

Yes. Yeah, Kochendorf, yes. Um, truly, the conditions had deteriorated quite a bit in Kochendorf towards the end. It was January, February, March, you know. The war was going, uh, badly, thank God, for the Germans. And, uh, as far as rations, portions, no food, and anything what it could ever would have made life a little bit easier in the camps, it was deprived, because it wasn't of any importance whatsoever that any of those people should stay alive or should die, now, so as far as the fatalities, it was quite a bit in numberwise. It was excessively more than ordinarily. It was even just a few months before that. People were losing their energy, the resistance and sickness came quite frequently. No medicine. No proper care. So they were just, just dying off like flies. When fall comes, you know, the flies are keep dying off. This is what happened over there. And, uh, it was very cold. The barracks weren't heated, but even without heating, there was so many human bodies over there that, uh, the cold wasn't even of great importance except when you put five hundred people into, into one area, you know, and you keep them there for twelve hours, or thereabout, you know, all the human waste...what is, uh, what it accumulates through those hours, and, uh, one is hollering because it hurts, and this, the other one is giving [????] the son because of something else. It was like...it was like during the tower of Babel. It was little bit, with normal mind, you don't know, or we don't know that how people can survive and can cope with these things. But somehow, where there is that little hope and that little desire to survive, you know, that's what it makes it. So, as the winter was, uh, going by, we had the word that we are

going to be evacuating the camp at Kochendorf.

Before that, you said you had, you had gotten ill.

Yeah.

And you were in the...

In the infirmary.

In the infirmary. Did your uncle come to see you in the infirmary?

Yes.

Did he bring you food?

Yeah, Yeah. It was a little bit of food, you know, he brought, and there was, you know...once you were inside in the... in the infirmary, then it's, it didn't, you didn't even need that much, because genuinely, I was sick, you know...

Do you know if it was dysentery, that you had? Did you have dysentery, diarrhea...

Diarrhea we had so often that we didn't even pay much attention to it, you know. But there was something, uh, there was something truly wrong because otherwise, you know, they wouldn't put you in there, and, uh, what it was, I can't even remember. I can't recall. The only thing I know is towards the end when I was there, I was trying to stay in there as long as I possibly could, because, uh, I didn't have to go to work, and nights, you slept a little bit more and food took a little bit more effect, you know. But all these maneuvering, it was done for the purpose of, of preserving your life.

From your description of the barracks, um, there must have been lice.

Yep. There was, that was a constant, constant problem.

Just to add to the insanity of it all. It must have driven people crazy a lot. How did you deal

with all the filth and the lice and smells?

They were using, what was the name of it, inf- disinfection, they were disinfectioning the barracks and the people, themselves, and the clothes. It was something like a powder, you know, that's what they were using, but it wasn't totally effective, and I'm quite sure that, uh, some people got sick from that. And we were just simply lucky that, uh, that lice is the cause for typhus, isn't it, typhus, and then, we were just simply lucky that there just wasn't a break out of typhus but, uh, and, uh, we tried to keep it individually and collectively, you know, sanitary to the point to get rid of the lice and, uh, and hoping to keep it like that.

You said you were also on a burial detail. You and your uncle had volunteered for burial detail.

Yes, to carry the dead bodies, yeah, and to bury them.

How would you do, how would you do that? You wouldn't carry them...

No. Not by hand, but there was some carts, you know, and bodies were put on that. Sometimes one, two or three, depending on the numbers, and just rolled it. It was like a regular cart with, uh, one wheel and two handles, and it was just rolling them up.

And would you take it to a mass grave. It was already...

Yes. It was just above the camp. It was a playing field, and these was some, graves dug out, and we just put them in there and covered them.

And how did you cope with that?

You, know, it's a good question, and it's hard to answer it, because a dead body became to you like [pause] it was inconsequential. It just, you got used to it, and first of all, you

didn't know tomorrow whose body it's going to be. Maybe it's going to be mine, maybe it's somebody else's. We see it today, and, uh, I'm quite sure that there may have been some people who, who had a little more, or they weren't so resilient to these things, but, uh, in my case, I speak only from a personal point of view, you know, it just got, again, to use that word, immune, you know. It's, it became just...

How long were you in Kochendorf, do you remember?

Kochendorf, we were from sometime mid part of September to towards the, uh, latter part of March.

And then what happened?

In March, when the Allied Forces were closing in again from various different direction, we got word that we are going to be evacuated out of Kochendorf, and we are going to be transported to Dachau, and it was just outside Munich, and sure enough, one day came, and they said you better be, be ready tomorrow morning. Now, there were two phases to that. Some of us left by train, and some of the camp...some of the people were walking, marching. The distance wasn't really that great, but it still took us almost four days to get from Kochendorf to Munich.

Did you go on the train?

Yes.

You went four days by train?

Pardon?

Four days by train?

Yep. Because we had to zig-zag, you know, because some of the rail lines were, were cut

off by the Allied Forces, and in order for them to get us, they had to zig-zag. I remember we went, we stopped at a train station in Ulm, but it was out of the way, and many times we stopped, we couldn't proceed, because, uh, there may have been military movements on the rails and so forth, but it took us four days, and if I'm correct, the distance is only a hundred and twenty kilometer. It wasn't that far. And that was again, a really trying four days, because the cold was unbearable. March in the German Bayerische mountains. Cold can go down well, I don't know, well below freezing point, that's not even the word, but it could go five, ten below or whatever freezing, and there was no food. There was no drink.

For four days.

For four days. We were not supplied with anything. And I can say that, that at least half of the people died on the way going to Dachau, and that was from being exposed to the weather, no eating, no drinking, sickness and so forth.

Were there dead people in the car you were in, in your...

Yes. They were kept...over there.

So, some of the people in the same car as you were in...had also died.

Yeah, yeah. Now, there were, particular one father, one family, three sons and a father. Only one son survived that trip. Two sons and the father passed away. I remember their name, Jacob, Jacob, yep. That was their family name, and ironically what we did to shield ourselves a little bit from, from the cold, we used dead bodies, you know, to cover.

You covered yourselves with the bodies?

Yeah. And it was very unfortunate that my uncle where I was very close and fighting it

through the previous months...he, he didn't get onto the train. He was with one of the marching group, and after four days, we got into Dachau...took us in to get a shower, and in the hot shower, there was from the remaining people who, who was alive, half of them died right there, right on the floor in the shower, because, you know, you were so weak that when that hot shower hit you, whether it was heart attack or just, just being, being without strength, weak and fall over, you know, a lot of them, a lot of them passed away.

I mean, this is something I haven't been thinking of daily through past fifty years, but as I'm talking about it, the picture is in front of me. The shower heads were pouring all the water. People just falling, falling, falling. That's it. And, we were there for approximately four weeks in Dachau.

How did it feel to be separated from your uncle after...

Well, it was very sad, and it certainly, emotionally, it, it, it, it destroyed me, because figure that all these months, we fought jointly, separately to, to help each other survive, and here it is, and more so, when the group that he was in, came in to Dachau, and people who I knew from the camp, they were telling me that he is, he is not with the group. He's not with us. I told them, I says, "But he left with the group." "Yes, he left with the group, but somehow he disappeared." So, I had no other choice than to believe that he may have been, he may have died, he may have been shot. He may have, for whatever reason, that he is not alive, and about a couple of weeks later, um, I was told by someone who I knew that "Hey, I spotted your uncle. He is in the camp." Dachau. And we were reunited, and needless, needless to say, that, uh, I mean I was overjoyed, and I found out what has taken place. He was telling me he snuck away, he snuck out from the group as

they were marching, and he hid in a barn on a farm. He was there for a couple of days, and the farmers, when they found out that he is there, they fed him. They gave him some food, because this was already, I mean, everybody knew, including the farmers or whoever they may have been, except the fanatics perhaps, that the war is just a matter of time. That it will end. And they kept him there for several days, but then they told him, "Look, we can't keep you here, because there are still some roaming German soldiers. It could be the SS. It could be the Wehrmacht. It could be whoever it may be, and if they find you here, not only that they going to shoot you, they going to shoot us, too." So they asked him to leave, and he left. Um, he joined another transport where it was coming in the same direction. He just stepped into the line and then he kept coming...

And he came to Dachau?.

Came to Dachau. And Dachau, it was a total chaos. People were coming in, people were transported out. Other people were dying, because there was no crematorium. There was some built crematoriums in Dachau, but it was never used. They, they managed to exterminate and to kill plenty of people without the crematory in Dachau. And we were there until about, uh, towards the last days of April, and, uh, that time by train, we were transported...didn't know exactly where to, which way, but we found out that we are close to the Austrian boarder... And, uh, we were embarked over there, [pause] were we in, it was little town by the name of Mittenwald. There was a river going through that area, and we were kept, not only our transport...there were many other people, obviously. They came from different camps, and they were just concentrated and assembled along the river front on both sides. In April, early part of May, it was still pretty cold, snowing, you

know, and again from the people who came there alive, you know, more than half, if not three quarter of the people who were there, died. And from malnutrition, there was absolutely no food. I guess maybe we were eating, uh, grass and what, whatever came to our way, because we weren't in an area where it was residential. There were no people. It was simply bare field, and each morning, as we looked around, you know, the only thing you could see is you were covered with, uh, blankets. If somebody had a blanket, and the snow covered you up, and as we were getting up and shaking the snow off our blankets or clothes or bodies, you know, and we saw the faces who were lying there motionless, we knew that they were never going to get up. An awful lot of people from the ones who went there, died right there on that, on that river bank.

Who were the guards?

The guards were, again, it was a mixture from all around the countries, now it may have been some Wehrmacht. Primarily, they were the Wehrmacht. I don't know if there were SS guards, too. Maybe the Commandant was an SS guard, but there were Ukrainians. There were, uh, Lithuanians, and incidentally, some of the Ukrainians were worst, as bad, if not worse than the Germans, you know. Maybe they wanted to outdo the Germans. It was, uh, quite, quite sad the way some of those people who have struggled through, and the last moment, they had to die, but, uh, it, uh, they were with us until probably the 6th or 7th of May. I, I would say, I would say, 5th or 6th, and all of a sudden, one morning, you know, we got up, and we don't see anybody. The guards were gone, you know, so we didn't know what, what was going on. We just felt there was news that never came over, so, um, we waited for a few hours. Nobody came back, so we started to walk in

towards the town. The town was deserted, you know. We didn't see anybody, so the two of us, my uncle and myself, went into a house. We didn't find anybody in the house. So then in the kitchen, we found a little bit of food, so we took some food with us, and we went up to the attic of the house, and the attic had hay, you know, what they were feeding the cattle with. We buried ourselves in the hay up to our neck, and that gave us a little bit of life again, because it was warm, and, uh, we didn't get out from that till, a couple of days.

From that house you mean?

Yeah. From, not from the house, but from the attic. Now we were there, and we had a little bit of food, so we could eat somewhat, and we stayed there. We heard shootings. We heard language speaking. The second day, we still heard, uh ... um, the first and second day, we still heard some German discussions, German, and we heard the shootings. We looked outside through the cracks. There were some cracks that you could see outside, you know, and we could vividly see some German soldiers yet, and it had to be a house to house fight, so we waited one more day, and we didn't want to leave that place. Then, it quieted down. We didn't hear any shootings, and still we weren't sure whether we should leave or not, so we stayed one more day. One more night rather, and during the day, opened up the little attic door and just listened, and we heard some foreign language. We didn't know exactly what it was, but somehow, we picked up that it could be English, because we knew French, I could identify, and, uh, German I could identify, so we felt that it was English. Then we came down, and sure enough, in the town, it was quiet. There were no more shootings, and we stayed in the house, downstairs for about

four or five days. Then the owners came back. The people who owned the house, and we didn't want to leave. We told them, "You go out. We are not leaving." So they brought the MP's, and the MP's put us out, you know, because they said, "You can't stay in their house." And, and then we had to go to a designated camp area what they said that we should go to.

The DP camp? A DP camp?

It wasn't even a camp. It was more like a place of assembly. Because everybody was wandering. I mean, people had no places that this is where I'm going to stay. It was like, uh, wandering, uh, like in a forest, you know, where there are some foxes and rabbits, and everybody is going wherever they can find. But, they told us where to go, where is an assembly and from that point on, we went into a camp.

Where?

Um?

Where was the camp?

Well, we, it was not far from Mittenwald. They had some military barracks. It was full with all kind of scientific equipment, you know. And over there they were assembling the people. It wasn't a permanent camp. It was just where they were gathering and from that point on, people were going in different areas. Like, we took a train back to, uh, Munich. It was roughly about 100 kilometer, 100 to 120 kilometer. Mittenwald is not far from Innsbruck, between Salzburg and Innsbruck, closer to Innsbruck. And went into Munich, because were just going without any goal, without any zeal. We didn't know where we are going. Um, we ... at first thinking to go back to Hungary, to do. There was nothing

definite. And we were standing at the platform in Munich. There was a lot of activities, trains, coming, going. Not necessarily, uh, passenger. I think there was, this one passenger train who came by, and there were some liberated people and we started to talk to them. And says, "Where, where are you going"? "We don't know where we're going." He says, "Well, hop on the train." He says, "Where are you going?" We said, "We're going to Israel." This was the word. So, we got on the train. The train actually went back towards where Mittenwald was, went to Innsbruck. From Innsbruck, went down to Italy and we were disembarked in Modena, northern Italian city. We were placed into a military barrack. And, uh, we were there for a couple of weeks and that was sort of a sorting point for going further south to Bari.

Bari?

Bari, yeah. Bari. To go from where there was some freighters what was taking people to Israel. Mind you, this was still during the English occupation.

It was still Palestine?

It was still Palestine, yeah. And we didn't say it to, I don't even know if he called it Israel or Palestine at the time, either way. And some of those freighters were actually illegal transport freighters. So we were in Modena for, I said for a few days, a few, probably a few weeks and we started to talk. We got back a little bit more to our faculties that we could start in thinking a little better realistically and so forth. We gained back a little weight, a little energy. And we didn't know at that time, anybody may have or may have not survived. So we started to talk to among each other and we said you know we should go back to Hungary and see, maybe, somebody survived and came back. But, it wasn't

so easy to get out from that barrack either because the Bricha at that time, what it was the Jewish organization, they wouldn't let you because they wanted to take, for the people to go to Palestine and because that was already the ground breaking for, uh, for the independence. So, one morning, whatever we had, I think we were on the third floor, and we dropped it, to the street, we had a couple of luggages, something for our clothes and we had in that. And we walked out because you could go out to the city without luggage. We picked it up. We went to the train station and we got on it and we went to ... Venice. We stopped in Venice for a day or two and went to Trieste. And from Trieste, we went to Lubliana and back up to Budapest. And to the Jewish organization where they had the headquarters.

Is this the Joint?

Uh, yes, uh, they didn't call it the Joint because the Joint was really an American organization.

But was it HIAS?

Yeah, it's, at that time in Budapest, it was, now it was one area where they governed where they were taking the administrative building. The Joint and HIAS at that time, I don't recall whether it was effectively in operation already or not. But, anyway, in this administrative building, they already had names posted who they knew of that is alive. Who is, you know, exchanging of information. And, uh, there we found out that one of my mother's sister, who was my uncle's sister, was alive. And she is back in Hungary and my father was posted that he is on his way back from the Urals, from Russia. And, uh, and, uh, this is the ....this is sort of where it ended, that episode, before it started the

second phase of our life.

Did you stop hoping to find your mother?

Um, at that time, at that time, we knew that it's, nobody, nobody came back, other than these two people, my uncle and my aunt, plus myself. I remember I met up with my father in Baktaloranthaza, because he had to go to the place where he originally was drafted to in order to release him. Because he actually passed by Baktaloranthaza coming from the east and he was going to the south, southwest part of Hungary in order to be released. So, I went back to Baktaloranthaza and he came back about two or three days later. And, that's again, one episode that I'll never forget it. He was... it was Main Street, in a typical village, Main Street. I was walking and he was coming from the, uh, from the train station and the way when we met up, that was [pause] quite emotional. [pause] It's, uh, I remember the words what he said at the time. "The bandits killed my family." Well... and, uh, this was in August of '45 and from that point on, we sort of tried to put the pieces together and, uh, and, and create a new life even though we could never replace the life what you had before. Not in the same context but uh.....

When did you decide to leave Hungary?

[sigh] We, it was in 1948. We stayed there for about three years. In '49, my uncle, he went to Israel. At that time, he all...that was already after the War of Independence. [pause] He got married and they went to Israel. And I left about two or three months later. Went to Austria. I was there for several months and I did have some family in Canada. At one time, I had five uncles. Even at that time, there were all five of them alive who went to Canada in the 19, mid 20's. Early to mid 20's. And I, I was figuring,

I was trying to join up with, hook up with some of my family, with the existing one, and I wrote to them and got in contact. And, uh, they sent me some papers and I, I did go to Canada.

Montreal?

Pardon?

Montreal?

Um, Montreal, some of them lived in Toronto, some of them in Montreal. But, I did go to Montreal, but shortly after that, I went to Toronto because I had, eh, I had my friends over there, people who I knew, so, more or less, I situated myself in the Toronto area.

Was your father with you?

No, no. He was back in Hungary. He, he got married in 1949. To a lady who lost her husband in the Holocaust, no. They got married. She had surviving, uh, son and a daughter. In 1949, they left Hungary, went to Austria and a year later, they went to Australia. And I went to Canada at that time because of my family and so forth. And, uh, my dad, with my mother, he was there with my step-mother, he was there until 1955.

In Australia?

In Hungary.

Oh, so, your father stayed in Hungary ten years after the war?

Uh, yes, yeah...ten years..

Were there many Jews who came back, back to Baktaloranthaza?

Bakta-- No, no.

But he stayed there anyway?

No, he didn't stay there because she was from Kisvarda. He lived in Kisvarda. My father didn't stay in Baktaloranthaza only for about, uh, a year and a half to two years. And after that he moved into Kisvarda. That's where they got married. And they lived 'till '55 in Kisvarda.

And then, where did he go? Did he join you?

From Kisvarda?

Yeah.

He went to Australia.

In '55?

'55, yes.

When you were living, stayed in Hungary after the war, did you have any interaction with non-Jews, other Hungarians?

Yeah.

Anyone angry?

Yeah, yeah, No, at that time everybody was your friend. There were some selective people, you know, it's who, who even though they may have not openly spoken against or they weren't able to do anything, physically, but deep down probably everybody was uh, everybody was agreeing what was taking place. There may have been, you know, with due respect, there may have been some people who felt it's not right, I wouldn't do it. And, they couldn't do anything of helping to prevent it because, you know. So, once, uh, once we got back to Hungary in '45, you know with the population, it's Hungarian, non-Jews, but primarily, it was very few Jews came back. Inasmuch as some words were

spread, some ...that there were more Jews come back that had left, you know. So, you know, you picked up the pieces and you couldn't hold everybody responsible. So, if you wanted to be part of the daily life, you know, you certainly did have contacts with Gentiles. Some were persecuted who openly and deliberately, you know, did some things wrong. And then came the other phase of Hungarian, uh, history. It was in, I think it was in '47 or '48, when the election was, and the Communist Party took over.

Béla Kun?

No, Béla Kun was in 1918.

That was in World War I?

That was in World War I. It was Rákosi.

What was your father's and yours reaction to Rákosi? Were you supporters of him?

No, no. We weren't supporters for him, no. I probably would have to tell you that during the war I would have been a supporter for anybody who was against the Germans. Because, I am sure that you have heard that saying, it's, uh, "I'd rather be red, than dead." This was the saying. But, during the war there wasn't anything, this is a very interesting subject with the Jews in Hungary. For that matter, it may have been some other place too. Because, during German occupation and during the 20's, 30's and early 40's, all Jews were labeled as Communists. And they were persecuted. They were, uh, they were convicted. They were dragged through the mud because they were considered Communists. And the Communists took over, most of the Jews were considered as capitalists. So, from one angle, you fell into the other one.

So, you decided to leave?

Yeah.

Did you ever sit down with your father and tell him what had happened?

[pause] Yeah, in the earlier years. Certainly I, I had a lot to tell him because, uh, he wasn't home, he wasn't there since '42. I think it was May 10 of 1942 when he was last time in Baktaloranthaza.

And what was his reaction to what you told him?

Well, it's hard to describe. What can there be? Uh, it certainly took years and years, just in order to get, to get into the normal daily life. But, it could never be washed out from your mind, uh, because there is always a hidden picture. Even up today. I know to the last of his years or his days, he carried little pictures of my sister, my mother and each and every time he looked at that, I mean history just comes back and, and confronts him. Just like ...[pause] Just like, this is a picture what I always carry. One from my sister, myself, my mother.

Hold it up so they can see it.

[long pause] That's my sister. This is my mother. That's me and my father. This we got back from, actually from Montreal. One of my uncles sent it back because this was taken in 1929.

You were five?

Four years old. And she was about 10 years old.

Are there other pictures that you carry in your mind from day to day? Do things touch off? Showers?

Many of the events whether it was during childhood or, or, um, my teenage times and so

forth, you know, it takes me back towards that childhood. It wasn't that we lived in abundance, no. It didn't always mean that you had to have money, a lot of money, because nobody really did have an awful lot of money. But we had a quality of life. But it meant probably in retrospect more than if you had, uh, more physical, physical lessons. We were waiting for the Friday evenings to come. For the Saturday to come. For the holidays to come. Because it was, it was like a festive occasion, where in humble ways, families got together. Or waiting for coming the High Holy Days. And during those holy days, when you went to the synagogue, it was, we used to say it that even the air is holy. It was, whether it was a festive holiday, or a solemn holiday, each one of them had its own values. Each one of them had its quality and, uh, that closeness what it created. It's very difficult to duplicate. I mean, it's a good world as we know it today, what we live today. But, I really don't know which one was better. Where quality came first, ahead of everything else.

I think we should end there.

Let's end on that note that hopefully, never again, where anything even, even in a, in a small comparison happen to anyone, to any human being, to any nation or any race, or whoever.

Thank you.