

Could you tell me your name, please, and where you're from?

Henry Krystal. And I'm from Sosnowiec, Poland.

Tell me a little bit about what you remember of Sosnowiec before the war.

Well, it was in a way a kind of a border town between the area called Zagłębie, which was more Polish, and the Eastern Upper Silesia, which was more German. And throughout the area there were coal mines and steel smelting, and other industrial plants. And there was a great deal of commerce, people coming to Sosnowiec to do their shopping from further west all the way to the German border.

And the population of Sosnowiec-- the Jewish population of Sosnowiec was about 30,000 and had a main synagogue and many smaller synagogues and a religious and secular schools. There was a Jewish secular Zionist gymnasium, too, which I also attended. And--

You were born-- I'm sorry. You were born in what year?

1925.

Did you attend public school besides the Zionist school? Or was it--

Yes, I attended public school until the fourth grade, and then I went to that private school from the fourth grade through the eighth grade. After I finished the eighth grade was the German invasion.

And what language was spoken at home?

My parents spoke to us Polish. Sometimes they spoke to each other in Yiddish. They were brought up on Yiddish, but they were both trying-- especially my mother was ambitious for our own-- for our preparation to go to as far as we could with our education. And that was one of the means of doing it.

So you would-- you would have had plans to become integrated into Polish society.

Yeah.

What was the curriculum like at a Zionist school in Sosnowiec?

Well, we had all the subjects that were taught in Polish in the public schools and the Polish state-sponsored schools. Plus, from the first grade on, we had Hebrew. And then as the time progressed, we had Jewish history, Hebrew literature, and one course on the study of religious laws. And both the Bible and these religious laws were two different subjects, and we studied them in Hebrew. We could speak in Hebrew, and we were discussing them more or less like a course, the Bible as literature and as history.

This was not a religious school, was it?

No.

I take it then your family was not a particularly religious family?

Well, not totally. My father still had attachments to Orthodox religion since that was the only kind that was available. But as he was growing up, there was a rebellion. His brothers rebelled, and his cousins and so on, from the Orthodox way of living and dressing. They shaved off their beards. They moved, went places. My father went to Łódź, where he learned to be an accountant, a bookkeeper-accountant. And his brothers also rebelled in certain ways, but the framework was still of the Orthodox Jewish religion, which he followed somewhat inconsistently, but he had an attachment to it.

What was your father's name?

Herschel-- Herman.

And your mother?

Dora. Her Hebrew name was Dvora.

And her maiden name?

Grossman.

Brothers and sisters, did you have?

I had one brother who was seven years older than myself. His name was Samuel.

And what about extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles? You said your father had brothers.

Yes. My parents' family-- families lived in the area of Kielce in more central Poland. We were right next to the German border, but they were in central Poland in that area. And my paternal grandparents lived in a village called Bialogon, and my grandfather had a country store and a piece of land on which he mainly he had an orchard on it.

And also there was a foundry in this village, and the crystals had a hereditary privilege that they were the painters. They painted the potbelly stoves and other things that turned out. They painted them silver or whatever they did. They had this kind of a concession, as it were.

How did they get that?

Well, the story was that my great grandfather, after whom I was named, found a purse filled with money. And somehow he returned it. He found somehow that it belonged to the owner or to the director of that foundry. And he returned it to him, and he was awarded. He got that job, and it became a sort of a tradition.

Which would have stopped with your grandfather, it seemed?

No, it didn't. It didn't it went on for three generations. For two generations. Because then my father had three brothers and three sisters. And they all left that village and went different ways, and they were of course not interested in staying there and painting. They went into various kinds of enterprises and so as I was growing up, they were just my grandparents living there. And--

[BLOWS NOSE]

Excuse me. My maternal grandparents lived in a shtetl called Bodzentyn, or in Yiddish, [YIDDISH]. And that was considerably larger and had a larger Jewish population. And my grandfather had been a rather well-to-do merchant of cloth that he sold. People then took it to the tailor, had a suit or clothes made, or they made it themselves.

And my mother was brought up in this atmosphere. She was the oldest of four daughters. And the youngest of them-- and the youngest of my grandparent's children was my uncle. One son, they had one son and four daughters. And my mother was brought up during the period of prosperity, and she was a very ambitious and interested person, especially in acquiring education for herself and sharing it with the young people of her age.

And--

How did she do that?

Well, for one thing, she apparently she organized some teaching, and she organized a library, and she had some activities that brought the people together outside of the synagogue.

And how did that sit with her parents or with other members of the community?

Well, not very well. Especially since they, at a very early age-- I believe maybe between 13 and 15, they were trying to arrange a marriage for her. And she absolutely refused to go through with it and had somehow the stamina or the stubbornness to make it stick.

It sounds like they were very Orthodox.

Yes. This grandfather was a Hassid, and he was a follower of the rabbi from Ostrowiec, Ostrovtzer rebbe. And he even had some Mr. Miracle stories to tell about what the rabbi had done for him. But during--

So my mother finally then prevailed, and then she married a man that she chose. And this grandfather fell on bad times during World War I. He was looted three different times. Every time the cossacks came in, they looted his store. And also during World War I, he developed some kind of ear infection, and he was-- from that time on, he was losing his hearing. So after that, he didn't do as well.

But this part of the family, they stayed together longer, and I remember occasions of visiting them.

Let me step back for a second. So you had 10 aunts and uncles. Did your aunts and uncles also have children?

Yes.

Could you could you estimate how large the first cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents might have been?

Three, five. About 10 on my father's side, grandchildren. And on my mother's side, only one of her sisters got married and had one son, and then my mother had two sons. So there were actually three only on my mother's side of the family.

13 grandchildren, 10, 20 aunts and uncles? Roughly 50 people? How many survived the war?

I had three uncles on my father's side that emigrated to Israel, and their children survived the war. Three brothers, who were the daughters of the sons of an aunt survived the war in Germany and went to Israel. And on my mother's side, nobody survived the war except myself. My mother's cousins survived. Some survived the war. From a much larger extended family, my second cousins once removed. And they were two sisters in New York and three brothers in Toronto.

But from your immediate family, you were the only survivor?

Yes.

Let me return for a moment to your grandparents. You said your maternal grandfather was a Hassid and that you remember visiting on occasion. What was his reaction to his grandson attending a Zionist school?

Well, we didn't visit that often, but the problem started when I went to visit my maternal grandparents and spent there the summer of 1939. And he objected to my whole appearance. I was wearing a school uniform, and this was shortly after my bar mitzvah, and they gave me the honor of being called to the Torah and reading the Torah. And I was trained in the Sephardic pronunciation, and the people didn't quite understand what I was saying. They were not used to it. Some knew what it was, but I overheard one man asking the other, what is he talking, jargon? Jargon was one of the words for Yiddish that was used in that area.

So I was not only by my grandfather but by the whole shtetl considered as a kind of an enemy alien. And I felt very

uncomfortable there. They did not-- they were not inclined to accept anybody like me.

Did they see you as a shegetz?

Yes, as a matter of fact, my name in Poland was Henryk. This was a nickname from Henry. But they sometimes referred to me as Gienek, signifying that I was not a Jew.

So you have less than fond memories of that. And that's where you were when the war began?

Yes, that's where I was. And I was about to go home when the war broke out September the 1st.

Before we begin with that, in general, what kinds of feelings you have about life before the war for you and your family in Poland?

Well, it wasn't very easy for us because my father worked hard, long hours, and we were just making it. And then we had extra expenses first because when I was five years old I had a serious illness, which involved more than our resources were at the time. And then when I was-- my brother being seven years older than myself, he graduated high school, and then he worked for a couple of years or maybe a year with my father as a bookkeeper and saved some money. And he went to study medicine in Italy, in Pisa and in Bologna.

And that, again, was really beyond our means. So we had financial hardship. And my father was a hard worker but not able to really, with the exception of some good years, to really make a good deal of money so that our life would be comfortable. However, we managed, and when I was going to the-- this was a private high school, but I was given a scholarship grant that helped me to pay.

And so financially we were rather tight, but we had a good life, and we did things for fun. Especially after my illness, I was told that I needed to be in the mountains every summer to avoid pulmonary problems. So the summer, my mother and the two sons, when we were little, we would go up in some mountain and rent a room from a farmer and spend the mountains-- the summer in the mountains. And in the winter, we did other sports, and we just-- and I had good friends in school, and my general recollection is that we were doing pretty well.

Did you have any non-Jewish friends among them?

No. Well, my father worked for some non-Jewish people, and we made some friends with them through the parents but not their children. And we were-- because of our separate education, we were isolated from the non-Jewish population and children. And the housing was segregated too. And I was living in the center of the Jewish part of Poland, and I never met any.

But there was a big field that originally they used. There must have been a coal mine there or a steel mine. They unloaded the waste products on that huge field, and eventually we were playing in it in the winter with sleds and the sum of various things. This was our playground.

Well, whenever we encountered non-Jewish kids, they would generally attack us. There was just no contact on a friendly basis that I can recall.

Do you know of any other personal or family incidents of anti-Semitism in Poland?

Well, the biggest one of all is that in 1938, two men came into my grandfather's store.

This is your paternal grandfather.

My paternal grandfather. And they beat him to death. He lived just a couple of days after that. My grandmother lived maybe a couple of weeks, and she was able to describe what happened at these two men came in, and she went to the cash register. And she said, what do you want, money? Here's money. They didn't want any money. They didn't take any

money. They just beat them and left them there. This was in a village outside of Kielce, where as you know, there were pogroms even after the Nazis left.

And how long had the Krystal family been there?

For as many generations as I have been able to trace back.

So they were not strangers.

No.

You were 13 then?

Yes, I was 13 then.

Do you recollect what happened when news came of this?

Well, we were bereaved and shocked. And it was terrible, but it was not that surprising because there were a number of pogroms all over Poland at that time.

And no one in the family said, let's get out of here.

Well, my father wanted to get out of there for a long time. And my uncle, actually one uncle who was well-to-do, he owned a sawmill. And he was able to get out in 1938 with his son and daughter through a system that the British set up that he had to deposit something like 9,000 pounds with the British, and they were supposed to refund it to him when he got to Palestine, but they never did refund it.

But anyway, he made it, and he saved his family. But we were not able to go that way. As an alternative, we were talking about coming to the United States. And my father had his favorite older sister lived in Detroit, and they were always writing to each other and dreaming of him coming here. But there were complicated, complicated things involved, and we just never could make it.

Tell me a little bit about the beginning of the war. You were away from home with your grandparents. How did you find out the war had begun?

Oh, I was on the newspapers and on the radio constantly as the things were approaching, and then even in the first days of the war. And then my mother came for me. I don't know how she came, but in going back, Jews were not allowed to use the train, so we went back by horse and buggy, which I think took us three days and two nights. We slept in barns and things like that. So she took me back home as soon as she could.

And do you remember seeing the Germans march in? Did they come into that shtetl?

Yes, they came in, first on motorcycles and then cars and just paraded around and didn't do anything in that particular shtetl, didn't stay there very long either. They had bigger places to secure, but they went through it. At that time, they didn't do anything.

And what was it like back in Sosnowiec?

Of course, Sosnowiec was occupied the very first day. And a couple of days later, they round up-- they took some Jewish men, among them my father, and they took them into a compound where they tortured them. They made them run up and down, all kinds of things, beating them. And they didn't know what was going to happen.

I think they took a few out, and they killed. And at the same time, they were under this-- I think they may have been organizing the Judenrat as well. And then they released my father.

So we were glad to see him home, but we were all-- we got the message that this was going to be something we couldn't even have imagined before.

Had he been beaten?

Yes, but not wounded, just beaten. And well--

So what did your family decide to do? Were they just going to wait?

Well, at that time we couldn't do very much because we didn't have the capital, you know? But just a short time afterwards, a matter of weeks, they round-- they called up something like 500 young men, and they were going to send them somewhere to a camp for labor in the East. And my brother was one of those that received a notice.

And so my parents decided that they were not going to wait for him to be taken there. So they got him ready, and he went and went across to the side that has been just occupied by the Soviet Union. So he was in the area of Ukraine.

And since it was certain that this area was going to be part of the Reich, my parents then packed some things that I could take. And there was a Pole from my mother's hometown who was working at the post office, and he was going to go back to Bodzentyn. So I went with him on the train, taking all that my parents could bundle up and send, even a bed. And we took it back, and I was sent back to Bodzentyn.

And then, again, while the border was still not that solid, my father decided to go across and join my brother. So he came to Bodzentyn to say goodbye to me. And somehow they felt that I was just a boy, so I would be all right but the men would be in greatest peril.

And I just-- I don't recall if I ever even asked him, take me with you although being in Bodzentyn was not my favorite place to be. So he went over too, and then so we were divided. My mother was still in the apartment, guarding our property, and lived through a terrible winter there. And then in the spring, in order to come to join me, she had to smuggle herself through a frontier, like a border.

Because that area was all part of the Reich, and I was in the central general government, Generalgouvernement. And she came in the early spring, and she joined me. She was in bad condition, emaciated, looking terrible. And I was not in very good shape myself.

Was it a problem with getting food, even in Bodzentyn?

Well, it was mostly very hard for her there. For me at this time, food was not yet an acute problem because things were not yet tightened up in the small towns and villages. But it was getting there.

Was that the last time you saw your father?

Yes.

And your mother then came to you.

Yes.

And what happened next?

Well, my mother and I took a room. My parents-- my grandparents had a store and a kind of an apartment behind it. And then they had another apartment upstairs. My mother felt bad. I probably contributed to it by telling her what had happened to me during the winter, which wasn't very nice. And so we took a room, and we moved upstairs, just the two of us.

Were there German ordinances passed at this point?

Yes.

Was there a ghetto already?

It was not a ghetto, but it was a Judenrat, and they treated the whole area as a kind of a Jewish ghetto but not walled in.

You didn't go to school.

No.

Food rationing?

Yes, I think there was food rationing gradually established. But most of the time, yeah, I'm sure that there was food rationing on the important items like bread and other things.

And how was it living there with the rest of your family?

Well, that first winter it was very bad because my aunt came home from Łódź with her husband and her son. And they became the favorites, and I was out. And so it was rather difficult for me. But in general, gradually they were establishing a pattern.

The area was apparently under the jurisdiction of some feldgendarmerie. That's like supposedly the equivalent of military police. But they would come at least once a week when there was a market place, and the farmers would come in and bring things, sell things and buy things. And they started increasingly to kill people and sometimes at random, sometimes at the flimsiest excuse, like if you were running or if you-- they started beating you, and they would just do it until they killed you.

And also they started taking people to various work camps and various work projects, and also the Judenrat then got organized, and they were trying increasingly to develop local work places so that the people wouldn't be sent away. And so they worked whatever they could figure out, various assignments on the roads and maintenance and things like that.

So there was increasing pressure for slave labor and for control and diminished food, and then they send in a transport of Jews from the city of Plock, P-L-O-C-K, which was in Northwest Poland. And that means that the local Jews had to take them in into their own homes. And we got especially squeezed with that apartment up there so that there were three rooms. And we were evicted from the large room into a smaller room which had a little kitchen, and the other people were going through it. It wasn't the kitchen. It was a stove, an iron stove.

And it was increasingly also dirty, and lice were starting, and then we had a typhus epidemic. And both my mother and I went through typhus. And my mother again became much weakened by this typhus.

Do you remember the lice?

Yes. Yes, it was-- it was a terribly humiliating experience. It was a feeling of degradation.

These experiences do you think were common to the Jewish population at the time?

To most, except the few very wealthy maybe.

People in the Judenrat?

Yeah.

Was a ghetto was created in Kielce.

Yeah.

Were you sent into the ghetto?

No, we were actually never sent into the ghetto. And the ghetto in Kielce was until fairly late not a closed ghetto. You could get in there, and you could get out. In fact, my mother sent me there once by horse and buggy. I was staying there with an aunt, and she had two children. One was my age, a daughter, and a son a little younger.

My mother sent me there, I think, because she felt she was coming down with typhus. And it took me a little while before I got the news that she was taken and put into the synagogue, where they established a kind of an isolation for the people with typhus.

And so I came back, and of course I was not allowed to go in. I just waited outside. And she survived it. She was hospitalized. There was a great-aunt who did not survive.

Had you already had typhus at this point?

No, I think I got it later.

So you came back to-- and what transpired there? I mean, how were your grandparents responding to all of this?

Well, they were also in big trouble themselves. Really, my grandparents and their two single daughters, for a while they were living downstairs. Then the uncle and aunt with their son came up for a while. Then they went back down. And by going back down, they were all compressed together so they didn't have to take any strangers in. They didn't have much room in there.

So they actually, from the point of view of the housing, did somewhat better, but they were just as badly squeezed financially and food-wise and with the danger of going getting caught and being sent to labor camps.

Now, you'd heard about the labor camps?

We had heard some things, and actually people went there, and some came back. And other rumors were going around about being sent East. That was a mysterious word. You were sent East, you don't come back.

What did you think or what did people talk about in terms of this entire experience? Did anyone try to figure out what it meant, where it was headed?

Yes, we were talking about it all the time. We were trying to find out what was going on in other cities, what was happening in ghetto Łódź, what was happening in ghetto Warsaw. We were constantly talking and worrying about it. And in 1942, we became aware that the ghettos were being liquidated and that they were being sent away East.

And you were still-- so you spent that period in the village.

In the shtetl, and I had a hiding place that I made. And many times when they were catching people, I was hiding there. On some occasions, I managed to run away. So I was doing some work under these local premises, forced labor but I did not get sent to a camp.

When they did these roundups, what were those like?

Well, they were just-- they would bring more German troops and use the Polish police and eventually also the Jewish police, go from house to house and take all the men and send them away.

Put them on trucks?

Put them on trucks, beat them, beat along the way living daylight out of some. If they found somebody hiding, they might just shoot them. They just-- they were shooting people and killing people all along, sometimes just for recreation.

And did you see any of that?

Yeah.

Being shot? Do you remember the first few times you saw that?

Well, I remember one time we were upstairs, and I was looking out, and I saw these gendarmes going around and shooting people. I got so scared. I was shaking. And other times, I was just becoming so horrified that I think that hiding in there-- I had a dark place where I was hiding-- was just as well as much for my safety as for my being isolated, so that I wouldn't be part of what is going on.

Had you heard of Treblinka?

Not at that time.

Or Auschwitz?

No, not at that time, not in that place.

We're still in 1942 at this point. What was the next thing that strikes you as being the most significant aspect of your experience now?

Well, then it became clear that they were liquidating the ghettos, and then that they were coming closer and closer to us. And we started to try to imagine what was happening to those people. And the idea that they were killing them was talked about a lot. And then, when the cities close by were part of that evacuation liquidation program, then we were sure it was coming this way. It was just a matter of when they were coming.

Now, we were close to a number of labor camps, like Skarzysko was one close by. There were a number of labor camps around in that vicinity because that was the central Polish industrial area, which the Germans converted many of to ammunition factories. And so they started coming with trucks. They just did it on two different days, taking people to somewhere, just to Starachowice.

And the first day, I didn't go. I didn't want to go because I didn't want to leave my mother. But I had a very good friend there whose name was Chaim. And he encouraged me to go, and my mother, the first day when I didn't go, she became completely frantic. She became practically berserk that I should go to the camp.

So the second day, I did go. And Chaim went with me, and some cousins were on the same truck. And as we were leaving, I was looking down, and my mother was standing there just dissolving in tears, knowing that this is a goodbye forever. And so they took us to the city of Starachowice. Wierzbnik was another name there. And they took us to work, and they gave us work cards. But then they took us back to the Jewish area for a few days, just three or four days.

And then on Yom Kippur, 1942, they surrounded that city, the Jewish-- the whole city as far as I know. And they--

This is not where you were-- where your mother was.

Where I was. In the meantime, they had also already done it where my mother was. My mother, I was told, was trying to smuggle herself out and to walk to join me where I was, to the city. She couldn't. She couldn't have gone to the camp to work, and she couldn't have joined me, really, but she tried.

And they caught her and put her in jail, but they released her on the day that they took all the Jewish population, loaded them. They requested the farmers, the peasants to provide horse and buggies, a kind of hay transportation wagons. And they took them to the railroad, and they shipped them.

To Treblinka?

Yes. And then on Yom Kippur, they did the same in Starachowice. The people with the work cards were marched away, and then the rest of the population was assembled on the marketplace and also shipped by wagon, by train, by those closed trains to Treblinka.

Did you realize this was the last time you were going to see your mother?

Yes. I couldn't-- I couldn't prove it, but I had the feeling. Yes.

And had you heard from your father and brother?

We had heard from my father and from my brother during the period that-- two periods. One was when the Germans and the Soviets got along. And then the second was after the Germans occupied all of Ukraine. Then they would on occasion send us a card, and I think on one occasion even a parcel.

And they were somehow thinking of how they could come back and join us so that we would be together . But apparently, it didn't-- nothing worked out.

Do you know where they were?

They were in the area, in the vicinity of Tarnopol.

So you were taken to Starachowice, to the camp because you had you had an Arbeitskarte. what were you going to do there?

Well, I was I was put-- there were two camps in Starachowice. The Strzelnica was one, which was the camp was on top of a mountain. And there was the another camp for craftsmen that worked for the Germans downstairs and of that same camp. And the water supply, a stream was there, and the kitchen was there. And I was taken up to the camp up, and in the process I was separated from my friend Chaim.

And I saw a line which the people said that there was a line to go down and to get some water. This was a very hot day, and I had thought maybe I could get some water. And really I wanted to see if I could find Chaim and be together with him in the camp down below the hill.

And it turned out that that was not the purpose of that line. They were taking that line to work on the night shift in the factory. So I was taken right that night to the factory, and I started working that night in that factory.

This is an armaments factory.

An armament factory, yes.

OK. That's a good place to stop, I think.

Before we come back to the armaments factory in Starachowice, let me ask you a question about Bodzentyn. Do you recall any specific gendarmes, Polish police, any individuals who were particularly bad killers?

I do as images of those gendarmes especially. But peculiarly, I have blocked out their names. I don't recall their names. But one that was one of the worst killers and sadists, there was such a fear of him that on one occasion, my friend

Chaim and I were walking down the street. We came to a crossroad off of the market, and he was coming up, and Chaim got scared and started running away, and he started running after him and hit him over the head with some wooden stick that he was carrying and beat him, got him down, and then put him to jail.

And this was already special that he didn't just take out his pistol and shoot him right there. But once they got into jail, Chaim's older brother was a very good friend of the head of the Judenrat in Bodzentyn. Because he was originally from Sosnowiec, but he was now living for many years in Starachowice.

And anyway, they interfered and probably bribed him so that he agreed for Chaim to be released. But there were many incidences where people were just attacked and killed and maimed. And again and again, all the time, the population was terrorized increasingly.

Was it the same in Starachowice, in the labor camp?

There were in the first place beatings. There was a long march a number of kilometers from the camp to the factory.

This is where you worked.

Where I worked. And that was-- the march was an occasion for beatings, especially since we had to walk at night, and they wanted us to be terrorized. And the beatings in the factory were just occasional. For instance, one of those early nights when I was working in the first part of the plant, a civilian came in drunk at night, and he didn't like the way that I was transporting those shells, and he started beating me.

And the more I was beaten, the worse he liked what I was doing. And he kept it up, and he was finally distracted by one of the women that was also working there. Otherwise, he might have killed me right then.

Did she do this deliberately, do you think?

Yes.

So she saved your life.

Yes.

Another prisoner.

Yes.

What kind of work were you doing in the factory?

Well, at that part, we were taking three kinds of machine grenades shells and loading them into this sulfuric acid solution and then taking them out and putting them into water and then taking them out and drying them or something like that and then putting them back on the stacks. That was this first part.

Eventually, I was able to get transferred to another assignment, where I was working with sandblasting on the same shells, but just two at a time, putting them in a sandblasting machine, taking them out, putting them back on the wagon.

And I worked there for a while, and then I got good at it, and I became the machine maintenance man. I kept the machines going, would repair them or fix them or keep them going, replace-- certain parts were replaceable, had to be maintained. And so that was another a reason-- and that was much better work and much less likely to be attacked than the other one.

So that's where I got the idea that being a mechanic or a machine maintenance man was safer. But this was a tenuous place to be because the step before that was that steel was heated to a very high temperature, practically orange. And

then it was put into a press, and then the press would then turn this block of steel into a shell. And we made three sizes, the middle of which was 105 millimeters, I think, and the other one was even larger, the largest machine grenades that I have seen even to date.

Did anyone sabotage this work? Do you know?

Not in my presence. I was not aware of any.

Do you remember the name of the company? Was it the Stalberger?

It could be. I'm not sure now.

Well, how did you get-- how did you move on then?

Well, there was a-- there was a Polish foreman there, and I talked to him. And occasionally, I was able to get him some money to buy home brew vodka and so on and bribe him a little, and he promoted me. He liked me.

And how long did you work in that particular factory?

Until they sent us to Auschwitz.

What are some of the recollections about that period? Was it about a year that you were there?

It was from '42 to '44. In the meantime, in the camp, there was an epidemic of typhus. And every morning when we came back from work, when I was still working the night shift, we and the people that were-- the other people in the camp were taken out, and they had to run. If they were sick and they couldn't run, they would be shot. And then we had to put them in mass graves.

So this was a selection that you were doing.

Well, it was a kind of a selection on the basis of how ill the people were.

Did you participate? Were you part of this?

Yes.

And did you also take part in the burying?

As it happened, I was not picked. They just picked some people. I was not picked for the burying.

But you saw this?

Yes.

Did you come down with typhus at this point?

No, I had had it before. Some people who say that they had typhus more than once, that's because towards the end they had typhoid fever.

So once you've had typhus, you're immune?

Yeah.

Was this the upper camp?

This was the upper camp, yes. And eventually, they liquidated that camp, and they sent us all to the other camp, which was called Majowka. And that camp was close to where the steelworks were, the high furnace that melts the ore. You have to feed it constantly with ore and coke and calcium carbonate, things like that.

And so this was a much better camp in many ways, and we were transferred there. Apparently maybe there were fewer people. And after a while, a transport arrived there that we were told that they had been in some camp, like some terrible camp out East, maybe even Treblinka. But we didn't know for sure. And I didn't-- I never did find out.

But they were very angry, and they were also hostile to the people that were running the camp, the Jews and the Jewish police. And eventually, Chaim's brother was the camp commander, like the Jewish one. And they were angry against him.

And when they finally sent us to-- when they were sending us to Auschwitz, they put these people with the leaders into the wagon in one wagon. And by the time we arrived in Auschwitz, the Jewish leaders were killed.

Including Chaim's brother?

Chaim's brother tried to run away the night before we were shipped, and he was killed, and one of his daughters-- and one of his daughters survived. That was a kind of a run the night before we were sent away. And one or two people managed to get away.

Do you remember if they-- if you talked to this new group? Did they tell you anything about what had gone on at this camp?

I never got to talk to them, and they never-- they were not willing to just talk.

So it's in retrospect that you think that they may have actually even come--

Well, that was the word about them.

Now, at this point, 1943, the end of '43, had you heard more about the East?

Yes. By the time we got to Starachowice, gradually the word came to us about what was happening in the East and how they were killing the people and how the people who had been sent there were now all gone. They were all killed, although the details of the killing machine that they had developed there were not known to us in detail.

But we knew very well that they had been-- they had destroyed most of the people that they took from the big ghettos, and they killed them.

The names of the camps, were they--

Treblinka was known to us.

But not Auschwitz?

I don't recall hearing the name of Auschwitz.

What were the circumstances of your family being shipped out of Starachowice?

Well, we had an idea that it was coming. We also had an idea. On occasion, we would get at the plant a newspaper or something like that. We knew that the Soviets were advancing and that the Germans were ahead of it, ahead of the progress of the Soviets, and they just loaded us into a train, a transport train. But in this train there were covered wagons and there were open wagons. And Chaim and I happened to get on an open wagon, which made the survival-- chances

of survival of the journey somewhat better.

This was 1944.

This was 1944, yes.

Summer?

Yes, summer.

Was it August?

August, yeah.

So you were loaded into a boxcar, an open boxcar.

Yes.

Then what?

Well, we were guarded very carefully. Every boxcar had a guard, and then there were general guards. And we were shipped. And of course the crowding was such that there was no room to sit down or to lie down. You had to stand. Or if you lie down, you were dead.

And some people, actually the weaker ones got killed that way, even in the open wagons.

Trampled, you mean.

Trampled.

And how long was the journey?

Three days and three nights.

From Starachowice to Auschwitz?

That's right.

Why did it take so long?

Well, they were sending us back and forth. Sometimes we would be standing still.

Was there any food in the train?

They don't-- I don't think they distributed any food or water. If you had it with you and if you didn't lose it, and if you could use it, then you were all right. If you weren't, then you could just get dehydrated, and that would be another reason why you couldn't stand up.

And what about toilet facilities, anything like that?

Well, there may have been a bucket. And since we were stopping on occasion, sometimes they would let us empty the bucket. But I don't know how they did it in the closed wagons.

People used a bucket?

If they could get to it. There was a problem. You couldn't just say, excuse me, I got to get to it, you know.

And if they couldn't get to it?

Well, they did what they needed to do. And that was part of the confrontation with one's excrements. It was another assault like the lice. It was a-- I remember once in Auschwitz I was looking at my hands, and they were dirty. The dirt was ingrained. And that was a blow to my self. Look what's happening to me. I'm becoming part of the dirt. I'm not myself.

All of these were part of the assault, and they were-- and many of them were calculated that way. Certainly the assault on the people's autonomy, and they emphasized this in Auschwitz, and they give us the numbers. They'd say, now you're just a number. That's your name. That's it.

They were destroying everyone's inner resources and self-recognition as a person and the capacity of caring for oneself and taking initiative. And one of the most punishable crimes was helping another prisoner.

What do you remember, given these dehumanizing, degrading circumstances in the train? What was it like? I mean, it couldn't have been quiet.

No. Although it was quiet, quieter than you would expect. Because the people were beyond being depressed. They were numbed already. This was obviously not going to be an improvement. We were expecting the worst.

We already knew about Treblinka. We knew what happened to our families, and we didn't know what was going to happen to us.

So do you have any vivid memories? The smells, the sights, sounds of that trip?

Well, yes. There were certain-- the wagon itself was not so terrible since it was an open wagon. But the confrontation with the dead bodies in our wagon-- I think that we arrived-- they kept us going back and forth, sending back and forth. But when they finally got us to Birkenau, I think it was evening. It was getting dark.

And I think they didn't do a regular selection, although they only took the people who could walk and looked all right. But it wasn't a complete organized selection as I had later. And so arriving there, one of the most shocking things were to see the old prisoners who were very cynical. Some of them were cruel, beating us.

We expected it from the Germans, but these prisoners were beyond anything that you could imagine. And they were saying the most terrible things to us, like, you're not going to come out alive here, so forget it. And there were certain smells.

One smell, that was the chimneys. They were predominant smell. Another smell was that when you went into the shower or into the gas chamber, they would give you a piece of soap. It was not a soap made out of soap, but it was a soap made with a clay base instead of oil base. And that smell for a long time bothered me so I couldn't use certain soaps.

But the sight of these sadistic people who were selected for this, and they were also the ones that made us then go and undress and leave all our properties there, and then shave us and put us in the shower. So I'm sure that there were-- that there must have been some kind of selection.

And in this process, I think we got some prison clothes, and they put us-- they took us to a camp, a barrack that turned out to be camp C and the gypsy camp. And they put us in one barrack, where we just had to sit one in side of the other in the crotch of the other. There was no way to stand up or do anything. We were so crowded in there.

And during that night, we heard trucks coming and beatings and shootings. And it turned out that we were in the gypsy

camp. And at that night, they took away all the Gypsies. The next morning, the camp was empty. And they were getting that camp ready for Hungarians transports. There were transports coming in from Hungary and Slovakia and so on, Greece even.

So you heard what kinds of sounds, shooting?

Shooting, screaming. The Gypsies were there with children, and there were screams of children and just like a liquidation of a city. It was an awful-- the whole night was a nightmare but beyond anything that-- we had been on this train all this time, also not resting or sleeping or anything.

And then we arrived there, and then this was the particular welcome that we had. The next morning, they took us out, and they tattooed us and gave us the numbers. And again, we were-- as usual, we were beaten. We were told that we were just numbers and called all kinds of terrible names and beaten by everybody that went past, whether they wore a uniform or a prisoner's garb.

What's your number? 19210-- A19210. Or actually 19270. It's funny. 19210 was my address on Coil. And I used to joke about it. And I thought it was 19210. I already changed it.

That's probably a good thing. Were you with your friend at this point?

No, we got separated. At this point we, got separated, and we were so overwhelmed there was no time to look for somebody, because they put us in there in the sitting, crouching position. The next day, we started looking for each other. But we didn't make contact the next day.

Did Chaim survive? Did Chaim live?

No.

He died at Auschwitz?

No. As I understand it, from what I heard, he died on a death march out of a camp to which he was sent from Auschwitz.

When you were sitting in that position in the first night, did anyone talk about what was going on? Did you talk to anyone at that time?

I don't think they allowed us to talk. You might whisper something to somebody quickly, but I don't think we could-- you could have a conversation. And I don't think that people were capable of it.

Were you-- you and the others you think at this point were numb?

Yeah. And you were wedged in between two people that you didn't know. And you couldn't go look for your family or friends or anyone.

And the next day, when you saw a panoramic view of Birkenau, how did you move through that day?

Well, it was very confusing and very terrifying. And all these barbed wires and barracks and the people moving like marionettes, the whole thing was further numbing and terrifying. The whole the way of interaction, the constant beatings, before you could figure out what it was about, you were into in an Appell. You were just standing there.

First, you were assigned to a barrack, and that is where we got separated. Chaim and I got assigned to one barrack. He got assigned to another barrack which happened to be the barrack of the Strafkommando, where they used to put people for some transgression and kill them in a few days through torture. Was not good enough to just shoot them.

And in this Strafkommando, they were not only beaten, but it wasn't actually a Strafkommando at that time. It was just the remnants, but they still had a work assignment. They were working on some kind of a canal, and so he had to stand in water while he was working. And finally, he found me, and he came. After work one time, he found me, and he came, and he told me what happened to him and that was very dangerous and how terrible it was for him.

And it so happened that I was able to smuggle in a diamond in a tooth cavity. I had a large tooth cavity, and so I gave him this diamond, and he was able to bribe his way out of there, and he was transferred to another barrack. And so he was not on the Strafkommando because he was not there for any punishment. But we couldn't get together in the same barrack in any way.

Were you sent to work?

Yes.

What were the conditions that they had?

Well, at first I was sent to work on the road, shoveling stones and constantly guarded and beaten if you didn't take a full shovel and keep it constantly and so on. And eventually, it may be because I had given my occupation as a mechanic. I went to another kommando which was called D-A-W-- or What we did there is that we were taking apart shot down airplanes, and we were salvaging good instruments that were in it. And that was a better kommando, and I was less exposed to the danger of being killed at work, and I worked there. And still we had the kapo, and we had guards, but once we got there, we would just go to work, and they would let us alone doing the work.

And I was there until I realized that I had a scabies infection, which is a mite that generally is very easy to eliminate. But in Auschwitz, there was nothing to treat for it. And so I decided to take a chance and to report on sick call. And they sent me to the sick bay. Actually, there was a hospital, which was generally just a collecting point of people who were getting ready to be sent to the gas chamber.

But I was lucky. There was a doctor there that was from my hometown and who knew my brother who also had studied medicine and was-- anyway, he I don't know how he did it or what he did. But anyway, in a few days, he was able to clear it up, and I was discharged before they took the people to the gas chamber.

This was a Jewish doctor, a prisoner?

A Jewish doctor, a prisoner, yes.

So you got out in time.

Yes. And so on the day that I was returned to Birkenau Camp C, they had called out all the schlossers. That is the mechanics, tool, diemakers, and others. And I think there were 2,000 of them altogether, and we all went, filed past a barrack where one of those meisters, one German foreman was examining us. And he picked me out, and it turned out that he picked out 16 Slovak tool and diemakers and engineers and me and sent us to Camp Bobrek, which was operated by the Siemens Company, Siemens-Schuckert.

And there were somewhere in the vicinity of 200, maybe 200-- between 200 and 220 prisoners there, who had been assembled from all over Europe. But a significant number of them were from Sosnowiec, from my home town, who knew me or knew my older brother. And when I arrived there, they assigned me to work at the bench, which is very specialized precision work with a file. You have to file things at an exact precise angle to 1,000th of a millimeter.

And of course I couldn't do it, and in the beginning, they took me under their wing. They started helping me. Then they needed to do-- there needed to be done a job on the outside. So they took me out and put me to work outside in doing some repair. This building in which this camp was, or the factory was operating, had been an old abandoned factory that the prisoners themselves restored. And during that time, they went through some hard times, and they had some epidemic, and they had some selections there.

But by the time I arrived there, things were relatively better than in Birkenau. And after working on the transport there, then I developed pneumonia. And I was hospitalized there. And there were two doctors. They had four beds, and they treated me there.

There were two other fellows who also had pneumonia. But it turned out that they had tuberculosis, so they were sent to Birkenau, to the gas chamber. But I recovered within a week or so, and then I was brought back to the factory to start all over to learn what they were going to do with me, what I could do. I was in great danger because I really couldn't do what they wanted me to do.

So you were among the youngest must have been.

Curiously, they had a small group of teenagers who had been in training to be tool and diemakers. And they accepted them, and they were already much better than I was, but they still called them juveniles. And so they were like apprentices, and they tolerated a few of them.

But you said they took you under their wing as if you were almost like a mascot for them.

Yes, well, they did, showing me how to file, trying to teach me how to do it, covering up for me, making a piece and giving it to me as if I had made it. They were helping me.

So they too saved your life. They saved your life too.

They did. Yes. And as did Chaim many times over. I really was helped a great deal by various people.

How long did this go on that you were working there?

This went on until the Soviets came close, and they were evacuating Birkenau and Buna, and we were marched to Birkenau to start with. And then we were put on the death march towards Gleiwitz.

In Germany.

On the German side of the border, in Silesia, very close to the border. And there we were put overnight in a factory. Not in a camp but in the factory. And the particular group that I was with, the next day they loaded us on-- well, again, I was on an open wagon. I think most of them were open wagons, and I was together with two Fellows from Sosnowiec who were also my friends, became my friends there, and we were helping each other. And that increased our chances of survival.

For instance, we were able to get a corner in the wagon. And this was a wagon-- this was a transport where I don't know how many days. I think maybe six days they gave us no food, but there was snow. We were eating the snow that fell on each other.

And when we went through Prague, the people were going over a viaduct over the train. And they threw down, a bread and I caught it. But before I could do anything with it, everybody that was strong in the wagon jumped on me and just tore it apart. I don't know who got what. It went by power, and I don't even know if I got a piece of bread or not.

And so this transport eventually ended up in Buchenwald. And in Buchenwald, they unloaded the dead bodies in a big, big pile. And they put us in a barrack. That was a huge barrack outside of the regular camp. And they just left us there. There was nothing to do except standing in transport.

I think on one occasion, I managed to get taken to work to Weimar to clean some rubble that they wanted cleaned up. And this went on for some time. And then it turned out that the Siemens Company was looking for the people on their list. And they managed to find a considerable number and took us to a separate barrack, and then they got a special train for us and gave us a loaf of bread and water and loaded us just maybe 10 people in a wagon, in a covered wagon with a

door open with the Germans on the other side of the wagon. And they were shipping us to a place they wanted us to work in Sudetenland somewhere.

And on the way there, we saw Dresden after it bombed out. It was still smoking. It was another awesome sight. But for us, before they evacuated us from Auschwitz, we could already hear the explosions of various things. We didn't know what it was. We thought that maybe there were cannons or something like that. We could hear cannons all the time.

So therefore, the sight of Dresden made us think that maybe the end is near. And also while on this trip, the Germans announced that Roosevelt died. Well, again, they tried to get us through. They kept sending us back and forth. And they couldn't get us through, so they sent us to Siemensstadt.

Actually, at this moment, I don't remember which was the proper order. I think that they took us from Buchenwald and sent us to Siemensstadt first. And we worked there in the Siemens factory, and we stayed in a special camp. Not a special camp but a separate camp, and we worked there for just a short time. And then one day there was a bombardment, and we went down to the basement. It was like the third basement for shelter. And when we came out, Siemensstadt, which was a suburb of Berlin, was gone.

So they kept us for a few days there, and then they tried to send us to Sudetenland. And then we came back. Thereafter they sent us everywhere, and they sent us back to Sachsenhausen. And Sachsenhausen was also a terrible camp at that time because they kept sending people in there just as they had in Buchenwald.

The things were as terrible as usual, plus disorganized. Now, there was Buchenwald-- Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald both had a structured old camp where the political prisoners were running things and so on. And maybe some of the prisoners of our transports were able to make contact with them, but I was just not up to that kind of standard by that time. I was really run down.

And so I didn't even know exactly what was happening. And after some time, they marched us out on a death march again. And this one friend that was with me on the train, and I somehow got caught in a column that was composed mostly of Russians. And with them, we started out on a death march westward, I presume.

And we would march all day, and then they would put us either in a barn or in a woods. They would surround the woods and put us in the woods. Sometimes, they would give us a couple of potatoes.

This was still in the winter? Now. It's 1945.

No, this was now in March. I know exactly. We were marched out of Sachsenhausen on my birthday, April the 22nd. And--

It's close to the end at this point.

Yeah.

And they kept still killing people. And then--

Were they still shooting people on the death march?

Yes, they were.

You said they were burying them along the way?

Well, I don't know. We kept marching on. I don't know what they were doing with them. I think they were leaving them there, and the local population knew of what was going on. And the column-- some of us, some of us, especially the Russians, started running to get potatoes because the Germans were getting out their potatoes to put in the ground. And of course, the Germans were shooting into the crowd and beating us.

And I ran once-- I ran probably more than once, but one time I was hit on the head with the butt of a rifle. And that day I also noticed that my legs were getting swollen, which I knew from way back that that was a sign of the being very near to death. It was the starvation death was preceded usually by swelling of the legs, and the swelling would go up, and it was just the end of it.

You were hit in the head with a rifle butt. Were you knocked unconscious? Were you--

No, no, just pretty sore and bleeding and so on. And I ran back. And so this lasted maybe for a day or two more. And then we were in another forest surrounded for the night, and we realized that the SS man had a truck, and we suddenly realized that they were not at the truck.

So the first thing we did is looted whatever was there, and I got some clothes. And then this friend of mine and I ran away. And when we ran away, we saw a group of German soldiers just sitting in the field. I don't think they had rifles with them.

So since they didn't have rifles with them, you can see we were dull enough. We went up, and we asked them if they had a blanket they could spare. So they gave us a blanket. And we went back into the woods and slept over the wood that night.

What were you wearing?

Well, the clothes that I got from the truck were actually German army uniforms but without any insignia. But what I was wearing was some form of prisoner garb.

You still had the prisoners uniform.

That's right.

And the next morning, we came out of the forest. And I saw some soup that somebody had spilled on the grass, and I ate it. Looked like German army soup rather than the kind of soup that we would be eating. And then we saw the German soldiers marching and giving themselves up. The British were there, and they were taking the prisoners.

And we walked on for a while. I don't know if the British told us. I could I could speak to them because all through the years in Bodzentyn I was studying whatever I could, especially English but also other subjects every time I had a chance and whenever I could get some help.

And so the British directed us towards a river. And we went into this river. And by this river, some Germans had left their suitcases with clothes and other things, and we somehow managed to shave, shave off all of our hair and get rid of the prison garb and put on these new clothes because we wanted to get rid of the lice.

And then we started looking for food, and then we were just going around looking for food. And eventually we walked to a city, and there was the city of Schwerin. And there they had already made a camp or a kind of a-- they put the people that came out of the camps into an army barracks of the Germans. And we managed to get taken in by a German family that put us on the attic. They had two beds on the attic, and they let us sleep there, and they gave us a little shed where we started to accumulate food.

We had to be very careful. I didn't realize it at the time, but many people died after liberation if they ate fat foods and a lot of food and so on. Or maybe they just developed the typhoid afterwards. Anyway, the folklore is that if you ate too much too fast, you would die.

The name of your friend, you said you were with a friend?

Yes, his name was Aaron Piltz.

Was he from Sosnowiec?

Yes, he was from Sosnowiec. And he was in-- one of the people that were in the Bobrek group. And later afterwards, we got separated again because he developed tuberculosis and had to go to a sanitarium.

Do you know if his father's name was Moishe Piltz? Do you know who his family was?

No.

I'm just curious because he was the first head of the Judenrat in Sosnowiec, Moishe Piltz. This might be a good place to stop for a moment. And then we'll come back and conclude.

OK.