

Ready? Relax, Rene.

The tape is rolling.

Your name first?

My name is Rene Slotkin. This is now April 9, 1992. I was born Rene Guttman in 1937 in Teplice-Sanov, which is in Czechoslovakia.

What's your specific birth date?

December 21, 1937. And I'm not sure how long we actually lived, or how long I stayed in Teplice-Sanov. But my first recollection is living in Prague. Irene, you have something?

Oh, sure. My name is Irene Hizme, and I was Renatta Guttman. I'm born the same day, but I'm half an hour older than Rene.

I remember-- I don't remember Teplice-Sanov either--

Sure.

--whatever. But I do remember Prague that we lived upstairs in an apartment. We had a terrace the overlooked a yard. I don't think it was a very big apartment. I kind of remember a lot of things being in one room.

Our crib, we slept in a crib, and it was in the room where our parents' bed was as well. And some place down away was a table. That's all I remember. But it was a long flight of steps to get upstairs.

Yeah, the staircase. I remember that, too.

A very long flight of steps.

The stairs, I remember, because I remember falling on the stairs once and cutting my chin and having a burning sensation full of-- when I was treated for it. And lo and behold, years after-- after the war when I first remembered this, I looked and there's a little scar there.

And you recently took a trip where you recalled a certain streetcar or trolley?

Well, after the war, I returned to Prague because we had some friends who had some documents and pictures of us when we were much younger, before the war, with our parents. I do remember then seeing a trolley car with the number 22. I didn't know it was 22 at the time, but the images are 2-2.

And we followed the route of the tram at that time of 22, and I was somehow able to locate this particular apartment building. It turned out to be the right one, so that was very exciting. But even more exciting was being able to, at that time, to get-- this must have been in 1948 just before I started my trek to the United States-- to be able to get actual pictures of myself and Irene and my parents together. It really gave me some roots for the first time ever, something tangible to be able to look at and know that I had a beginning and parents like everybody else.

Right.

I have very sporadic memories of our childhood, but I do remember that we were beautifully clothed. We had beautiful clothing, matching. It was always-- I remember, particularly, we had these-- not [INAUDIBLE], with bells on them so our mom could hold us with a leash? Not a leash. Do you know what I'm-- I don't know how you-- how do you call those?

Harness.

Harness.

Harness.

A harness. And they had these little bells on them. I remember that very clearly.

I remember also very often going to a park which must have been near our home with our parents. And most vividly I remember one time there was a huge storm, and we went to the park afterwards. And all these trees had fallen down, and we were climbing, you know, like kids do on them, walking along the trees. And it was really a lot of fun.

The pictures are of us, our parents, and ourselves--

We even have pictures--

--in the the park.

--in the park.

Yeah. And I remember-- this is just something that came to my head. There was a candy that we used to get. It was like a marmalade-- it was like the Passover candy they make. You know, those jelly--

Jelly.

--jelly kind of candies. I remember that for some strange reason.

Do you remember what they tasted like?

Yeah, kind of orangey.

Mm-hmm.

It's so weird. I just--

Now, from that time--

We also had-- we had a certain number of toys that we used to play upstairs in the apartment. And one specifically I remember, we had punchers like conductors on a train, and we would play train a lot. We'd punch tickets.

And I also remember having a doll which Rene very nicely threw down from the balcony and smashed to smithereens. Yes.

Is that one of those celluloid dolls from the time, or--

Yeah.

It was big.

It was a big doll.

It 's a big doll. From that period, what I remember is being in the yard of this building and being-- stepping on bee--

Yeah, he was bitten.

And I was bitten by a bee. And even now when I think about it, my foot starts itching.

It was right on the bottom of your foot.

One of those, yeah.

I remember that so clearly. That's funny.

Were you taken to a hospital or just taken care of at home, do you remember?

I think it was just taken care of the way you would take care of a bite today.

Right.

And the other thing that I remember so clearly is when our mom used to put us to bed, we played a game. She would put our hands in a certain order, and we'd see if we could wake up in the same position. Do you remember that?

No.

Yeah. I remember that.

So you shared a crib?

Yes. We shared a crib. You were on-- right.

What have you learned now about your parents, in terms of what your father did, what his occupation was?

My father was in the export import business. And I think this somehow led to his accusation of being a spy, because I imagine he had dealings with foreign countries. He was originally from Germany. The whole family's from Germany. So this is what he was accused of, and I think on the basis of that he was jailed and sent to the camps.

My mother, I don't know.

Our mom, she also worked. She was very good in math, and so I think she had something equivalent to possibly an accounting job. Which, of course, once the laws that you couldn't hire Jews came about, she was laid off. But she did have a good job.

Do you know if you were a fairly well-off family or middle class, typical middle class, or--

I can only judge by the clothing that we wore from the photographs that we have. We could show you.

We seemed very well-dressed

We seemed well dressed, and our parents also-

By that time, well, our parents had fled from Dresden to Czechoslovakia where we were born. But I think our aunt in Dresden kept sending us clothes. It was our aunt who sent us--

Really?

Yeah. Because our parents could not buy anything, because by then our father was out of work and so was our mom.

Or in other words, after when we left Germany-- when they left Germany, that was the whole down--

They no-- right. They no longer had any source of support and it was our aunt who sent.

When did they leave Germany?

Well, we were born '37, so it must have been around then.

I see. Hmm.

There's a series of letters between their father and the aunt in Germany, about 10 letters that we have, describing the children's behavior and how they--

Yeah, that's terrific to have.

Their worries for the future

That's terrific to have.

I bet.

Yeah. They're wonderful. They're in German.

You don't know specifically what your father imported and exported? No? But he was arrested in Czechoslovakia?

Mm-hmm.

I see. Do you have any recollection of his being taken, or--

I do

You do?

I definitely-- there was-- again, not clearly, but one night there was a knock on the door, very loud knock. And there were soldiers who had come, and they came to take our father away.

I remember our mom was crying. We didn't know what happened. It was late at night. And we never saw him again after. At least, I don't-- that was--

I just remember what she's saying now is a disturbing event that did happen, but that's about it.

About how old were you at that time?

I would say four.

And you're the only children of your parents? No brothers or sisters?

Any other memories that you'd like to talk about?

Something in the letters maybe?

I can't recall the letters. I do remember at some point that we used to stand on line to get food. I sort of remember that.

In Prague or was that later on?

No, in Prague. The people stood on line.

Do you know if your family was religious?

I have no recollection.

None at all.

Did relatives ever come to visit you in Czechoslovakia that you recall?

Not that I know of.

No.

I do remember once, though, we went in the summer-- must have been summer time. I don't know when. We went someplace where there was water, like a beach. That's all I--

It'd have to be lake, most probably.

Maybe a lake, I don't know. But I remember-- yes. I remember being at--

I don't remember that. See what 30 minutes makes? Big difference.

Yeah, right.

One of those memories [LAUGHING]. Well, you have good recollections of being injured. What do you recall about changes in Prague or changes in your life once the Germans occupied? What is the first significant memory you have of a real change in your lifestyle?

Well, my first significant memory is waiting to get on this train to go someplace. It was a nice train, though. I mean, it was like a sleeper or some-- it was a-- with windows.

I think that was Theresienstadt that we were going to. That's what I remember, too. Chronologically speaking, that's the next--

That was the thing.

--memory after. Because the previous memories, we all-- we lived in sort of-- it wasn't good existence, I don't think.

It was-- I think I sensed-- as a child, I sensed something was not right.

Right.

But I--

Yeah. Right, that's what I'm saying.

--that our mother was rather sad.

Right. Because we I don't remember my father, but I-- obviously, my mother, she would have to have been sad.

I remember certain sadness. But the next thing, as I said, is really this train ride to someplace else to live.

That was Theresienstadt.

That was Theresienstadt.

Do you remember taking anything with you in particular?

Well, we did have some stuff. I-- this is-- I don't-- the only thing I recall, I had a locket. I had a locket that I-- a heart. And I remember having that for a long time, even when I arrived in Auschwitz.

And I was very brazen, because we would stand on line for the showers and you had to strip naked. And I had enough presence of mind to know that I had to take this thing off, and I would hold on to it. And I don't know how I did that, but I did it. I lost the locket, however, at some point.

What did the locket look like?

It was a heart-shaped locket.

Did it have pictures inside of anyone?

I don't recall.

It was a gift from your mother or-- yeah, probably.

Must have been. Probably.

You don't recall taking a toy with you, or--

The only thing I remember is my mother's shoulder and the texture of the dress that she wore--

On that day?

--on-- not on that day, but from Theresienstadt, that's one of the things-- since you asked for something tangible, this is what I do remember. And I think we were-- there was a picture taken.

You remember that because a picture was taken of us

A picture was taken of us at that point in time. And--

We have the picture.

Yeah. We got the picture [INAUDIBLE], and it confirms this shoulder which I was leaning on. We have it right here. And-- but I don't remember taking anything with me, like a personal toy or anything like that. No, I don't.

Do you remember how her dress felt or--

Yeah. It was coarse. It was--

But I do remember that our mom did have-- did carry a bag with something, that I remember. But I don't know what was in it really.

Do you remember anything about the train journey itself and getting to the station outside Theresienstadt?

Actually, the train ride was kind of-- I don't know. I enjoyed it. I think it was maybe our first train ride. We were like, it's a pretty nice train ride. Wasn't bad, as I recall, to Theresienstadt.

I'm a blank on that.

You do? You don't remember the march to Theresienstadt or no? What are your first memories of Theresienstadt?

Unfortunately, I think I have very minimal memories of Theresienstadt. Again, only-- I remember cobblestone roads, pavements, brick buildings.

Brick buildings. I always see these bridges over water. I don't know if it's from there, but I don't know. But that comes to mind.

Were you staying with your mother there? Were you still with her?

Yes. Yes. I remember you being sick there.

It's possible. I was sick a lot.

Over there. I do remember you being ill.

Was she taken away to the hospital in camp?

To some infirmary, but she didn't stay overnight or anything. She would just go there for, I guess, medication and come back.

And then Theresienstadt, I also remember standing on line. And I remember carts with dead bodies.

Yeah. On the cobblestone

On the cobblestones.

Yeah

It just-- yeah.

Hard pushing. The wheels would get stuck between these rocks and everything would come to a halt, and they'd have to get everybody on the side to get this thing started again rolling. And they lost a few bodies every once in a while, slid off.

Yeah.

What was-- do you recall your day to day life was like there? Did you-- there was an underground school. Do you recall ever--

I can't recall it. I think we were too young for the school. I'm not sure we attended, but I don't know.

I don't recall.

I don't recall it at all.

Well, recently there was a film made about Theresienstadt, and in the film footage, which we saw in the village just this year, there was a kindergarten. And on the bottom steps, I spotted Rene in the film. So they were part of a kindergarten group. Whether they were active or not, I don't know. It was part of the Nazi propaganda film footage.

Oh, I see.

I don't recall.

I don't recall either. It's possible.

It's possible. And I don't know if you recall this, and I don't know if it's mixed up in time for me. But at one point, do you remember standing in a field just for hours and hours and hours on end for-- I don't know for what. No? I don't know. That's just something that kind of flitting in and out of my head lately, but I can't exactly recall where.

I remember something. I'm not sure it was fields. It was dark. it was dark. I think it was-- we were waiting for the train to take us to Auschwitz.

No, that's a different--

That's a different? Because I remember taking quite a walk towards that train.

Oh, yeah. I remember that, too, but no. This was just a lot of people were there and we're just kind of standing around, waiting.

That did happen. There was an occurrence like that where many people were taken out of the camp and held in a field in a forest outside of Theresienstadt.

Really?

Yeah.

Oh, my god.

This is what I've read and what I've heard from other survivors.

Really?

Yeah.

And what was the purpose of that?

Well, actually last night, Inge Auerbacher talked about it, too. From what she remembers, she was she was an older child--

Yes.

--that it looked as though they had plans to kill everybody. She put Babi Yar style, shoot people in mass graves. But that it didn't materialize for some reason luckily, and everyone went back to the camp, go back into Theresienstadt. So that might have been-- might be that that you recall.

Well, on occasion that's how they handled epidemics. If there was some kind of disease running through the camp and they couldn't handle it, well, that would be their medical solution.

Right.

And actually before the film they did deport many people also before they filmed that-- the propaganda movie, because they knew it was too crowded. So do you remember if your mother was with you all day, or did she leave you during the days as if to go to some kind of labor detail or--



I don't think she was with us all day. But I--

I do remember running wild in the place. I do. And throwing things into windows and from windows down. And I'm sure that that happened while I was unsupervised.

Do you remember if you were with other kids?

Yeah.

Yeah?

Yes. War games, I guess you'd call them.

Don't you remember drawing? Some inkling of memory in thinking of what's mentioned to me.

I don't know . It doesn't come to me this moment.

The head of the children's school was in your transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. And his name, I forgot, but it'll come to me in a minute. Very influential person because he kept such a wonderful spirit among children there.

And I think when I mentioned this to you once, you remember-- you did remember drawing.

Maybe.

Do you remember any thoughts you had about these wagons with dead bodies? I mean, did you think it was interesting, or as a child, do you recall any thought you had then?

My thoughts were that I didn't understand it. I just didn't understand what it was. I looked but I--

I don't think it made the emotional impact that it would to somebody a lot older. Because it was just something-- we were learning new things, and I think it's just-- another thing for something for us to learn.

Part of life, whatever it was. That's what happened to some people.

Do you have any memory of wearing a star?

I don't.

I do.

What do you recall about that?

Do you recall getting it or do you recall just remembering it--

I just--

--that you were wearing it?

--had it. I don't know where even. I don't know. Where would that have been?

Probably in Prague.

In Prague, yeah.

Yeah.

It was very small, but it was there. I-- Juden. I remember people pointing to us because of it, but it's the first time I ever-

You just mentioning Prague, I just remembered something. And probably maybe this didn't even happen, because Prague was never bombed, was it? But I remember sirens. I remember sirens, and I remember we would go downstairs. Must have been Prague, because where else would i have gone downstairs?

Was this a large building you lived in? Many apartments, or do you know?

Not terribly. I would think maybe like seven-- six, seven story. Right?

Yeah, something like that.

So during these sirens, you remember--

Going down

--going to the basement--

Yeah.

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes.

Something.

And all the other people in the building went down, too?

There were other people there, too. Yes.

Was there food down there or any provisions?

Could this fit?

It could, yeah. I don't know. I don't know offhand, but it might.

That's very vague. Very misty.

In your home, did you speak German Do you remember?

I think we spoke German. Because I seem to understand Yiddish after the war, and I couldn't figure out how so had to be.

Right. An early implant.

An early implant someplace. See, the grown ups thought I didn't understand what they were saying, but I understood.

Yeah, seemingly we understood, but I don't remember what language. But whenever somebody spoke, especially the Germans, we-- I knew exactly what they were saying. So that would have to be.

But I'm sure since we grew up in Czechoslovakia, we must have learned that, too, the first few years. oh, you don't think that we were out all that much?

I don't think we were out. And I think you learned Czech after the war.

Yeah? Because I have no recollection of Czech at all, but German, yes.

Well, I don't remember the language. I just remember understanding it.

Do you remember you have any memories about any of the SS guards or the soldiers, and what they looked like or treatment of other people or of Yourself

Well, the first recollection I have of the SS-- I guess-- or soldiers or whatever, was when we were-- took this very long walk in Theresienstadt to the train that was to take us to Auschwitz.

There were dogs there.

And they had dogs there. It was a long column of people were marching. It was at night.

There was snow on the ground.

Mm-hmm.

It was very bitterly cold.

Mm-hmm

And if people didn't walk quickly enough, they'd just shoot the people. There were shots that rang out and then I just saw bodies falling. I don't know.

Again, I don't think I really understood that they were dead or they weren't going to get up again. And there were dogs. And I remember I was tired. I didn't want to go on this trip. But my mother was--

Our mother held us by our hands. She was pulling us.

And held us so tightly. And was pulling us--

I remember that.

--to--

You were being roused awake, or--

Well it was at night.

No, it was at night. But it started in the evening, most probably. It wasn't an arousal in the middle of the night. It was something that was ongoing in the evening.

And it seemed like a very long--

It was, yeah.

--walk. But then that might have been because we were so little, and--

Little legs.

--little legs.

It seems that the transport card, which was posted on the wall and Theresienstadt and that was when you knew your time was-- had come to go. We've recovered these transport tickets. They're in a museum in Israel, in a kibbutz.

Givat Chaim

Givat Chaim.

Yihud.

Really?

Givat Chaim Yihud. They had a whole slew of things about Czech-- all the Czech families who were in Theresienstadt. And that's, in fact, we are, Rene and I, found an affidavit that indicated that our mother had died in Auschwitz.

And our names and our--

And our names--

--our dates of birth are there, everything is there.

And what transport-- the numbers we had on the transport to Theresienstadt and then from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and the dates.

December--

It's all there.

December 15th.

--15th to Auschwitz 1943. And to Theresienstadt it was--

It's about a year prior to.

August 9, 1942. Or September 9th. I'm not sure. I always get confused.

It was-- August is about right.

Yeah. I think August.

So it was a little over a year.

There's also another artist who was on that same transport, and he's drawn account after account of what happened that night. And you can see in his black and white drawings the pitch black of night, the entrance into Auschwitz, the spilling out of the prisoners from the cattle cars and all. And it's a very clear image of what they actually went through. Bernard-- I forgot his name.

OK.

This photograph of you two and your mother, where was this taken? Do you remember?

Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt. Was there-- do you remember why it was taken, or was there just happened to be a photographer in Theresienstadt?

They were doing these things.

Doing these things, and I think they sent it out to family members to say, we're fine. Everything's great.

Do you think this was probably done early? Do you recall-- did it happen shortly after you arrived in the camp, or--

I couldn't say. We were there over a year, Empirically knowing this now, I don't recall.

It's hard to tell.

Right.

But looking at us, I would say we look pretty good there. So it might have been early.

Do you have any memories of the clothes you were wearing?

No. I remember her-- my mother's outfit, though.

You remember the way this--

Yeah.

--felt.

But I remember my hair.

Oh, I remember your dress, that dress.

I remember that dress.

Colors.

Yes.

Sort of a reddish--

Purplish.

--purplish, right.

Right. Yeah.

Unbelievable.

And I remember--

And those are yellow lines, right?

Yes. Yes.

So these squares were purplish?

Yeah, basically a purplish background, but they were like squares. And this is yellow.

Mm-hmm.

See that?

But obviously, this is just the first time ever that I'm remembering this.

But I remember my mom always made me a thing on top of my-

Yeah, right. The long--

And long hair.

Yeah.

And she always had-- and-- right.

What was your mother's name?

Ita.

Ita. And so you recall walking to the transport, to Auschwitz, and the dogs and the guards shooting people who were straggling, I guess--

Or beating them or yelling, and the dogs barking. We just had to get the trains loaded.

It was horrible--

Yeah. It was the first real-- display of real force against the people there that I remember.

It was horrible.

And your mother was pulling you along?

Pulling us, yeah. Yeah.

Had you by the hands--

Yeah. Which means she had two of us, she couldn't carry much of anything else, right?

But she also did-- she still had something that had to be carried, yes. A small parcel of some sort.

What do you recall about the transport itself?

That was horrible.

That I remember.

You had the floor.

That I remember. We were absolutely jammed into this car. I can smell the stench of what went on in there.

Everything went on in there. We were there for a very, very long time. People were trying to faint and fall down, but they almost couldn't because they were-- there was--

It was so crowded--

The cars were so crowded.

--you couldn't turn around or anything. It seemed like an endless journey, just an endless journey.

You were all together in a car?

Right, with lots and lots of other people. There was nothing to eat. I remember being very thirsty. I remember biting my hand.

What did biting your hand do?

I don't know. I wanted to cry, but I knew that-- I didn't dare cry. And I think I--

There was really a strange environment. We really didn't know what was going on. This was so unnatural.

I totally didn't understand what was happening.

Heard the clickety click of the train rolling just on and on and on.

Do you remember anything about your mother during the transport, anything she was doing or saying to you?

She was up there. I was down. She was up there somewhere, and she was holding us close. That's all I remember. Wasn't any contact.

I kind of remember hanging onto her leg.

Yeah She was-- yeah, right.

I remember I wanted to sit down. i wanted to sit, but there's no space. I couldn't turn around.

Do you remember other children on the transport?

No.

No.

Did your mother have any food with her? Do you recall her passing any bread to you or potato or--

I would think she must have had something, but I--

I don't remember.

--don't remember.

So this journey took quite a while, several days.

At least a day, I would think.

You arrived December 18th.

Oh, so it took several days.

Three days.

This is our historian.

I think there were people who died on that ride.

Oh, there were.

Because they were lying when they opened the doors, they were lying there. there was no movement there.

You remember that?

Yeah. There was-- the stench was unbelievable. That I can smell every once in a while, actually. Raus. Again, there was German, again, and the dogs and schnell.

Mach schnell.

Mach schnell, right.

And again, your mother had you. You were thrown out of the train.

And miraculously, in Auschwitz we stayed with our mother. There was a whole Czech Lager, special family Lager for the Czech families that everybody stayed together, men, women, and children. There was a special--

From December to March, they stayed together.

So other twins have recounted hearing them yelling for twins, Zwilling, Zwilling.

Yeah. Yeah.

Do you recall that?

Oh, yes.

You do?

We heard that also, but it didn't mean anything-- well, maybe it did. But I don't-- because I remember that we went with our mother to the hospital to be, whatever, to be checked out.

And the reason I remember this-- Rene, I love to tell this story. The reason I remember this is because he was such a crybaby when it came to doctors, and I was scared that he was going to cry and that they were going to beat him up or hit him. Because I was such a stoic.

So they-- so somebody examined you two and your mother?

I remember she was with us one time. She was there with us. So that might have been when they knew that we were



twins.

Did you two-- did you know you were twins? Did-- it might sound like a silly question, but I was just--

I don't think so.

No.

We just--

No.

Yeah.

It had no meaning. That took on meaning later, I think, when we were separated, when I first got into the group of the male twins that I realized I was a twin. Even then, I wasn't sure that I knew-- it was different than being just a normal kid, what it really meant

So after it was "raus, out of the cars," you were taken directly to this Lager?

This barrack. Yeah, this Lager where all the other Czech families were. And my recollections of them are really-- again, we were with our mother. There was very little food.

I remember we used to get a piece of dark, black bread and some kind of slop to drink. I don't know. Something that tasted awful. But I recall seeing people beaten in that in that Lager. I don't know why, but--

Were there just women and children in that Lager, or did they seem like whole families were together?

I think it seemed like whole families were together. But I'm not-- I think, yeah. What do you recall?

I don't have any recollection of any of this til we were separated. Then I start to pick up memories, because I was totally on my own by then. I really had to-- see, it's like we were really guarded, or I just don't remember any of the outside things that happened.

I remember sometimes we had to stand outside in the mornings or something or other. I don't know where our mother was there. I don't know what-- roll call.

The Appell?

I don't know. Don't know.

Any other recollections of your day in this Lager? Do you think it was just-- you were in there the whole day, or until these-- possibly these Appells came about?

I have no-- I don't--

Not in that period. I only-- I start remembering after we were separated. Then I have day activities. Then I start remembering our morning roll calls.

I remember the bigger and the older were taken off to work.

Where were you taken, then? You were removed-- you were-- at some point, I think it was in March of that year or April or whatever--

'44.

Maybe in June-- no, it was '43.

No '44. We got--

Oh, right. December '43, and it was-- right. So sometime in 1944, I recall one particularly terrible day when I just recall that we were like ripped away from our mother. And I recall a loud scream. And I knew something had happened, something was happening that was terrible.

Was it your scream that you heard, or--

I think it was my mother's.

I think it was my mother's, too.

She was trying to hold on to us, and we were just--

Pulled away from her.

Pulled away from her. And--

This was within the Lager?

Yeah it was inside. And then the next thing I knew was that I was in some place different with just other women and girls, and Rene wasn't there anymore and my mom wasn't there anymore.

How were you taken to this new place, do you remember? Were you walked, or did they put you on a truck or--

I don't recall.

Are your recollections about--

Same? Same. Very same. And then I was just there in this new surrounding. It was very close to one of the ovens, the crematoria. Because I saw people walking in constantly. One way.

And that's where I started remembering how my days were, hunting through garbage for potatoes and seeing these daily beatings on the roll call line in the mornings. Also, very vividly I remember prisoners. The Russian soldiers and the Polish soldiers, they were shot. They were lined up against the ditch and they were just shot.

And then as children, I was just six years old, we would look over the pit and see some of them still twitching. And I remember pulling-- not me, but some of the other older boys, they pulled one fellow out who was obviously still alive, but he did have a big swelling in his head, which had to be a bullet, most probably. And I remember they took him into the barracks and put him on one of the bunks. I don't know what happened to him.

But these things happened almost daily, the shootings. Somebody was always being shot. There, I remember also, the sirens.

That was a very-- more frequent occurrence as the war grew, the sirens and the--

Airplanes.

--hum of the airplanes above. And always an SS trooper staying in front of the barracks at the time outside.

Let's pause just for one second.

So Rene, you were taken from mother and brought this to Lager B2B. How were you initiated into this new Lager? What do you remember first about coming there? Did anybody show you--

Yeah. There was concern by older people who were like me in that they were twins. This I know now. And one of their big concerns was getting me a pair of shoes.

You were barefoot at the time?

I must have been, or I needed-- or maybe they didn't fit or something. I needed shoes. And somehow, they managed through the black market to get me shoes for a loaf of bread. I don't know.

I remember the color of the shoes. They were a yucky brown up to here. They covered the knee-- not the knee, the ankle. And they were like a caramel color brown, but they were like almost like brand new.

And so I felt like I was being taken care of, but it was a totally different existence. That was really-- my eyes were opened. I questioned a lot. What's going on?

Is this-- who's the master of this, I remember asking. Who's in charge here? Like, who can I ask? Who can I talk to? And all in the background, always, the mornings, the call, the hunt for the potatoes in the garbage, and the endless lines of people walking into this-- in--

Would you go around with other twins or the other people in the-- the other children, looking for scraps, or--

I always remember being alone, totally alone. I know they were there, but it was always-- the hunt was always alone.

Do you remember a time when you were especially successful in finding something to eat? A substantial piece of bread or a whole potato?

These moments happened, and I had to go inside and have it cut up so I could warm it on that stove inside.

You'd warm a potato?

A potato, yeah. Yeah. There were moments-- I mean, there were wonderful moments when you found something that you could really eat. But nothing really substantial, like finding a box of anything like that, no. It was just maybe a big potato that wasn't totally rotten. That was a find.

You mentioned that you were questioning many things. What did people tell you or what did you ask about this procession going into the gas chambers?

I never asked that. That was just something that was happening. But I asked who is the master of this-- who's the master of the world, I think I asked.

I was told Hitler. OK. I mean, that was satisfied. It was an answer, and I'm just--

These were other-- other prisoners answered you?

Yeah.

And part of, I guess, daily activity, I have to retell is the sleeping thing at night on these bunk beds. And that was so close to the wood, smelling it, and also getting pushed. And many times just being able to squeeze in some place to have a space. But alone. Alone.

Did you always sleep in the same approximate spot, or--

I was just asking myself the same question. I don't remember if I did. I don't recall.

You remember anything about that in your--

Well, again, my memories are a little different than his. But we did have bunkbeds as well, and there was this long oven down the center. And I think we were somewhat assigned to beds, but I'm not sure that everybody always went to these same beds.

I particularly remember one night having to get out and having to go to the-- well, bathroom. Not that they had bathrooms, but outside in the back. And then coming back and getting totally confused on which side of the barrack my bed was on.

And I really got into a state of panic, but I knew I had to get into a bed. And I kept going over-- I would go over and ask somebody if I could just come in next to them. And I remember being pushed away, saying, this is not your bed.

And the more this happened, I just was panicking. So then I remember climbing over the oven and saying, well, maybe I-- I was so confused. And finally somebody had pity on me and let me come in with them. But--

Was anybody-- take-- did anybody adopt you or--

No. There was just no of organization of any sort. It seemed to me that most of the girls were older. I didn't really see too many-- certainly not younger than me, I don't recall.

And no one seemed to be in charge. And I remember particularly being extremely, extremely lonely. That was the worst thing. There was no one.

And I remember we would receive bread and some soup, and I tried to save my piece of bread. Because I figured if I held on to it longer then I'd have it for the whole day. But then I-- somebody always stole it from me at night.

Now I don't know if it was somebody else or if it was rats who ate it, or-- but I never had it in the morning. And did I learn? No, I did this-- did I learn? No.

I remember there were two girls there with me, and they had little pouches. And they used to hid their bread in the little pouches.

It was a separate pouch?

Yeah, a little thing-- and I said, oh, I wish I had one of those, but I didn't. I vividly also remember going to the hospital. I was one of them being sick.

And I remember saying-- that's when I remember standing for roll call. That was in Auschwitz in the mornings, almost every morning.

Once you were in that Lager, you remember standing?

Yes. Definitely. And I remember it distinctly, because I always tried to hide behind somebody big so that I wouldn't be seen so I wouldn't be chosen for anything. I was beginning to-- I didn't question. I hardly spoke to anyone, but I was beginning to comprehend from what I was hearing that terrible things were going on. Or that whatever was happening was terrible.

Although, to me at this time it was still-- this was life. I didn't know any-- i don't-- didn't remember anything else, didn't think this was wrong, right, or otherwise. I just knew that if I wasn't spotted, I wouldn't maybe get chosen for something.

And I remember that I could-- out of the door from my barrack, I-- at some point I learned-- I remembered that I had a brother. And I remember that he was to the right, this way. If I looked at this way, then his barrack was there. And I remembered this on a night in particular when there was some kind of an explosion and there was a big fire. And I was terrified that his barrack was the one that was on fire.

I remember often seeing people run into the fence and get electrocuted. And I remember on one particular-- and there were dead bodies on the ground there. I remember one time trying to hide among these dead bodies.

I don't know exactly why. I don't know what I was scared of. I think I just wanted to disappear, and I thought, well, maybe this was a good convenient way to do it.

These are bodies outside the barracks stacked up?

Yeah, yeah. Just-- right. And I thought that this way I could hide somehow and it would all be over. And I don't really know what went through my mind. It was a child's idea. Be still like everybody else. They'll never notice me.

What about other children in that particular Lager?

There were some older children, but I-- again, it seemed like they hung around with each other. And so now, I mean, later on I knew that they were either twin girls, so I guess they hung around with each other. I didn't have my twin because he was-- we were not of the same sex so it was a little harder.

But throughout all the time in the hospital and through experiments and through horrible times, I always felt that Rene was alive. And I said, I have to stay alive to take care of him. This was like my mission in life.

And I very clearly remember standing on line always-- it was always cold, of course, and we were going into the shower, standing naked. And, again, I bring up the locket. For a long time I was able to miraculously hang on-- hide the fact that I had this locket and always put it back on after I came out of the showers.

But I also remember that somehow I also knew already that not everybody came out of the shower. So every time we were lined up like this, I remember that fear like, oh my God. Is this the last time?

After the shower, you'd be lined up?

No, before.

Before the shower. I see. What happened when you got sick?

I was in the hospital.

Did you get yourself to the hospital, or did--

No, I think somebody must have. Periodically, I was taken to the hospital because I had certain medical procedures, I guess, done to me. Again, I don't remember exactly why or what for and the very detailed specifics.

But I can remember that at one point, they I had blood taken out from my neck. I don't-- but it's vivid because it was extremely painful. And another time, I was strapped to a table of some sort, and there was a doctor. He was in white and he had a scalpel. Well, I didn't know it was a scalpel then. I realize now that it was, and he cut me.

And I remember also being X-rayed. I remember a lot of X-ray stuff, and, of course, being measured and stuff like that. But I also, I remember-- and I don't know what this has to do with anything-- but wires, wires attached to me and something to the left. I don't know.

And I remember seeing in one room-- in some room, I don't know, there were eyes. Don't ask me.

Like just independent eyes?

Eyes.

In jars?

Don't know. Don't know.

I also remember getting injections that made me very sick, because then I was-- then I found myself in a hospital bed or something. And I remember throwing up a lot and having diarrhea And I was extremely sick. And I remember, though, that there was some nurse there who looked after me.

And I think there was one point when they were cleaning out the hospital. I don't know. Again, now it was probably to just kill everybody. I'm not sure.

But there was it was a very hurried kind of thing. There was a big commotion, and this person grabbed me and just stuck me under her skirt. And suddenly it was really-- it was all dark, and she just said, be quiet. You don't have to tell me twice.

And I think she saved me. I think she saved me from something. I don't know.

When the doctor cut you, do you remember anything else about that?

I just remember I must have fainted, or-- I don't remember anything else after that except waking up in a lot of pain. I don't--

And during any of those examinations, you were never with Rene?

No. No. Just that only time I remember being with him was when we went with our mom that time. I don't ever remember being there again with Rene, because I never saw you again after that. At least I don't remember.

I was there a couple of times, but nothing like-- at least, I don't recall anything. The only thing I recall is being measured, the touch of the very cold instruments, and Rontgen, the word Rontgen. That's X-ray, I think, in German. I remember that, so there was a lot of that going on, but that's about all.

What were the measurements? Were they--

Around the head, I remember.

Everything.

Body.

Body, everything. Because they were sort of trying-- they were putting you in between something to see how, I guess, how big that is.

Caliper of some kind.

Yeah. I mean, it wasn't like they were taking a tape measure. They put against something cold, steel--

It was steel. It was always cold.

It was very cold.

Who was the person doing the procedure? Did they talk to you or ask you anything?

I just remember being terrified, and I knew that I had to just not cry and just do everything I was told, no matter what.

When you were-- how was it that you knew or were taken to be examined? Did one morning somebody-- a soldier came in and took you, or did you know on a particular day you were going to go, or anything like that?

I was walked over by one of older boys. I'm sure i was the youngest kid there. I was walked over by one of the older boys and that was it.

Do you have recollection of the twins' father, of the gentleman--

Spiegel.

Spiegel? He could have been--

Could have been the one?

--the one, but I know of him only-- 1995 I've learned of him. And I met him in Israel, Mr. Spiegel, and--

Did he remember you, specifically?

No. I think his mind was sort of on the blink at that point. But there was somebody else in 1985 who remembered me which was very heartwarming.

And he was part of Spiegel's group.

And he was part of that group, so obviously I was there.

Some of the other male twins have described seeing other-- seeing the Soviet prisoners in the next half of the barracks. Do you recall any older men there?

Yeah they only-- the Soviet-- soldiers, I remember, they were periodically shot. They were the ones that were always taken and disposed of, the partisans and the-- but the--

Do you remember Otto?

No. The only one I would remember is that young kid, that one other one that I met in Israel.

Peter Greenfield?

Yeah, Peter, very vaguely. I met this man in Israel. And he was the only one that would have been my size.

Yeah, he was about a year younger.

And that was extremely young, because I don't think the older boys would even-- socially, they wouldn't associate with us, because I think the next step was at least three or four years older. And at that point, that's a big difference. So we were all alone, except I was told that I played with him. And looking at him, I sort of-- it starts some memories, but nothing specific, nothing specific really.

What I was going to say as you were asking about who did some of the experimentation, the museum at Auschwitz now has documents, which we've got copies of, of our names and-- both our names and numbers, matching, and all that.

Then Irene has a document where there's a signature of blood testing and Mengele's signature on the bottom of it. So he could have been one of the gentlemen who participated in this, I'm pretty sure.

They took blood from you as well?

I don't recall them take taking blood from me, no.

But you recall some X-ray procedures?

All X-rays and measuring, I remember. Them, I remember. The other things, Irene remembers.

Would these X-ray procedures take a long time? Or--

Time didn't have much meaning to me. It just happened.

You both have numbers?

Yes.

You're both tattooed?

Yes.

What do you recall about receiving those numbers? Was that when you first entered Auschwitz? Or was this when you were transferred to the separate lagers?

Since our numbers are so different, I would imagine it must have been when we were separated, because we're not-- we have totally different numbers.

Yeah. My number, I remember it being put on. It hurt. There was an awful stench all around me. It was muddy. And it was a needle pricking me. But in terms of time, when they put it, I just can't put it anywhere.

So it was muddy. It was done outside?

It was muddy when I walked up to where-- yeah, it was done outside. Yeah. Yeah. Whoever it was, they were sitting at a desk with a cover over it. But I stepped through it from the outside.

My number-- want to see my number? I have a very clear number. Reads this way, 169061. And that's confirmed by--

Some of the records that--

--the records. When I first saw that number with my name next to it-- also only in the last few years-- that really gave me the chills, again confirming dreams, memories of long, long ago. It still affects you, I guess. I'm sure they do.

Did anybody tell you that you had to be accountable for this number in some way?

Well, after the war, which is really, for children, I think, the hardest part of-- this is like another Holocaust starting for us. That's how I look at it. I took an awful lot of beatings because of this number, because it identified me as a Jew in Czechoslovakia. This is after the war when everything was supposedly very nice and good.

Right.

There was no relief to children who-- here I am, seven years old, all alone. Parents could appreciate this sort of thing. And when you become a parent, you'll understand.



Right.

Irene, your recollection of receiving a number?

I draw a blank on that. I do remember just vaguely this needle jabbing my arm. But I didn't make anything of it. I just figured everybody had one of those. So I wanted one also. I wanted to be like everyone else.

All right. You described an explosion you heard.

Yes.

Do you recall this explosion of fire? No?

No. No. But my feelings about Irene being alive, the way she felt, I felt that too. And I do remember seeing her once through the wires. And I knew it was her. It had to be.

Some time had elapsed since we were separated. I think it was towards the end. But I knew that she was alive because of that. I just knew that she was alive.

That just confirmed the whole thing for me. She never died in my thinking. She was always alive in my consciousness until we met in the States many, many years later.

What are your next memories about Auschwitz?

Well, just prior to liberation, there was this incident of us being taken and almost done away with by another officer, other than Mengele. And very clearly do I remember this incident.

Another doctor this was?

I don't know if it was a doctor.

I see.

Just some--

An officer?

An officer. And I remember Mengele coming in just in the nick of time in his green convertible and stopping this whole procession. And I also remember-- and Irene, I guess, had that feeling many times-- I knew that this was going to be deadly. This fear instinct, I guess-- I had a feeling this could be the end for me. And it's a horrible feeling. So Mengele stopped this.

And also, towards the end of the war, there was this march that we all went on. They marched us out of-- I mean, the last week or so, weeks-- again, time is meaningless. But I do remember a lot of excitement among the German soldiers and distant artillery fire coming, getting louder and louder, and them taking us out to this march. And that was a pretty gruesome type of affair, because they again shot anybody or just-- anybody who wouldn't, couldn't continue, they just--

This was January '45?

This was January. Right. And that was a long, long haul, if I remember. I can't put it in terms of hours. Then, all of a sudden, the German soldiers were gone. And the Russian soldiers were around us in white uniforms.

I remember one officer being on a horse. I still remember. I think it was a pink horse, a very big, huge animal. But they

were all dressed in white. And that was the liberation.

No, no, I think so.

So you were en route on the march. You hadn't reached anywhere in particular.

No.

I see.

No. No.

And you realized that people were being shot if they were straggling behind.

Yeah.

Do you remember making a conscious effort to--

Oh, yeah, had to keep going. And she was my strength, because I knew I had to make it for her, as was the case for many of my other hardships that came about later. She gave me the strength to keep going.

Did you have a blanket with you or anything?

Don't recall.

Do you recall getting any bread rations before the march?

Nothing. Nothing. I do remember the Russians marched us into a warehouse of some kind after this happened, and a tremendous scramble for food. And I wanted to get in on this.

I do remember getting a can of some kind and rolling it. And then I finally got somebody to open it. It was sauerkraut.

Oh, really?

That's my memory of this thing-- a big, yellow, golden can. It was huge to me then. I don't know how big it really was. But I had to roll. I couldn't lift it.

Surely, you ate it.

I had something of it. A lot of people really didn't do so well, because they overate, I understand. That was liberation from Auschwitz.

And for you, Irene?

I went-- I must have been at a different camp. Towards the end, before liberation, as I know it now, I sensed something had changed. Suddenly, there wasn't this order in the day anymore. We weren't being put outside. We weren't standing. Somehow, there was no water anymore.

And I, at that point, was-- I must have been quite sick, because I remember just I was on the ground. I couldn't get up. I couldn't get up. And there were other people also lying on the ground. I don't know if it was we were hungry, or sick, or what.

But I do remember something had changed. I wasn't quite aware of what. But there seemed to be people who were a little bit saying that we're saved, or were-- I didn't know what that meant. And the next thing I knew was I was picked

up by some Polish lady. And she took me. So that--

Within the camp? You were still within the camp?

I was in the camp. But she took me out of the camp. So I was not part of this march or any of-- that was not me. I was already gone. And I was with her for awhile.

Where did she take you?

It seems she lived in Auschwitz in the town proper. And she took me to her house.

And for how long did you stay with her?

I was there until Rescue Children extricated me.

This is--

It must have been--

--an organization?

Yeah, an organization to get back Jewish children.

I see.

I remember Christmas very vividly, so--

So at least a year.

--I was there at least a year, because I remember her telling me, Santa Claus is going to come and bring you presents out of the moon, she says to me. I believed her. Yeah, right.

Did she have other children?

No.

No. It was just her? Was she married? Or--

I think she was married. But I was the only child.

I guess I suppose you learned Polish.

I learned Polish, yes.

And when did this relief organization find you and take you?

I guess about a year later. And I first went to Prague to an orphanage. And then I went to France to an orphanage, and then a different orphanage, and blah, blah, blah-- a lot of orphanages. I got shuttled around a bit.

And Rene, after liberation and the warehouse, what was your--

Next recollection I have, I understand I was in a hospital in Bratislava, so I am told. And I had some--

TB.

--TB, tuberculosis, a touch of it. And next memories for me really began in Czechoslovakia in a town called Kosice, Kaschau, in an orphanage, big orphanage in a hospital complex.

Is this a specifically Jewish orphanage?

No. No. No. There were nuns, mothers around, taking care. And there was an administrator there, a Dr. Kalina who, after some time, took me out with his wife.

They had no children. And I lived with them. Subsequently, they had a child. Did they have a child? I'm mixing up with the other one.

They didn't have any children.

They didn't. No, they did not. I'm mixing him up with his brother. So I lived with him for a while. And they had to flee, because somehow the communists-- somebody made some statements regarding this man. And he just got wind of it. And he had to flee. So he left me with his sister.

And that's the family-- the Mann family. And I lived with them for a good number of years. They're the ones that had those other children, Bebe and Otto. And they treated me very well.

And there, I went to school in Czechoslovakia. But again, I was the only visible Jew. And they were waiting for me every day after school with stones.

The other Czech children-- yeah.

There was one other Jew, I remember. But we both had to run for our young lives at the time. It's a good thing that we were still young, and the people that were waiting for us couldn't do all that much harm. They were still youngsters also.

But they were serious. And they were mean. So we had to run. I mean, after we were let out--

Sprint home?

--sprint home very fast, sprint a long way too, because I lived very close to the school. And I almost-- they knew-- they blocked my way. So I had to go somewhere else.

It was always a big circle. Sometimes it led into the fields. It was a small town, one main street at the time.

What was the name of the town?

Kosice.

Kosice. And the family's name?

Mann.

M-A-N-N?

M-A-N-N yes, Joseph Mann and-- what's her name?

Edith.

Edith, yes.

This was the--

The sister.

--sister.

Sister.

OK.

Sister.

Of Dr. Kalina.

Dr. Kalina.

This is an interesting point that, later on, we found out from people in New York City here, that the search for the Jewish children that had been taken for a million reasons into Polish homes, Christian homes-- the way they discovered who was Jew in these homes was that the rescuers would go to the town bishop, or whoever was the religious cleric in the town. And they'd ask for the baptismal certificates of all the children. And if there were four children in one home and only three baptismal certificates, the fourth one was a Jew.

And they exchanged moneys, or whatever the town needed. And the bishop, I'm sure, was paid also. And these children were rescued. So because of that, the American Jewish organizations were trying to raise funds to have monies to pay for these children. And through one of these organizations, called Rescue Child, they were having dinners after dinners.

It was called Rescue Children.

Rescue Children--

Children.

--right, Incorporated. One of the prime movers of this was a gentleman from Long Island. And he went into Europe to one of his orphanages that had been set up from all these rescued orphans. And he found Irene in one of them. And he said, oh, you would be perfect to come back to America and just help us raise funds.

This is your picture perfect orphan with beautiful banana curls and a sweet face. And somehow, he convinced her that she should come to America with him. And subsequently, she was made part of this Life Magazine article, November 17, 1948, all about these--

1947?

1947, right. That's how Irene was taken out of the Polish home, by the way, one of these emissaries of Rescue Children, Incorporated.

Well, I'm not sure. There were other organizations that worked in Poland. I think Rescue Children came in to the forefront later on when many of these children were in France and they were trying to find their parents here in America, find relatives for them, or else ship them to Israel, or whatever. And I think that's what--

But when I was in Poland-- Renee, talking about school. I was in-- she was obviously a Catholic lady. And of course, I was enrolled in Catholic school. And I went to church.

So did I. I went to church. I had to go.

Did you know you were Jewish?

Yes.

But I knew I was--

I knew. I went to the end of the line.

I knew I was too.

Many times, I snuck away when they went to church. But many times, I did go, and went through the whole-- whatever they went through.

I went to church. And I knew I was Jewish, because I had this number on my arm. I also was-- as Rene said, I was also in the beginning very sick, because I think I lay in bed. I remember doctors coming and vague flitting in and out of fever, or whatever. And she was a very strict lady.

I had to feed her bunny rabbits. She had rabbits that she would then cook. I couldn't eat them, because I was taking care of them, so they were gross.

And in the summer, she had family that lived on a farm. And I remember she would-- it was a very long walk. It took almost half a day to get there. And there were other children there.

And I hated going there, because they made fun of me, because I had this number. And nobody defended me. And I had to-- I cried. I cried a lot.

What would they say to you?

They made fun of me, because I had this number. That I'm a prisoner of some sort, they kept saying. I cried a lot.

But with everything, when the Jewish organization, which might have been the Joint Distribution-- I don't know, Distribution, whatever-- came to pull me out of that home, I had really come to like being Catholic. I thought it was nifty. It was pretty, the church, the whole bit, rosary beads. And I didn't want to leave. I really did not. I was very upset.

And I remember, the first orphanage where I came to, I met somebody who I'm still friends with to this day. Her name is Miriam. She lives in Israel. And she was about seven years older than me.

And she became my mother figure. But she also was from Poland. And we were both sitting there with the rosary beads, plotting our escape from this orphanage, because we wanted to go back.

Back to Poland.

Right.

This is when you were in Prague?

Yeah. Yeah.

So they removed you to Prague. And then, from Prague, you were taken to--

To France.

In Paris? Or--

Yeah. I was outside of Paris. It's close to Blain. And that's where I was selected, actually, by Herbert Tenzer. He used to be a congressman from here.

And he chose me to come. And he promised me he'd send me back-- promised. He didn't keep this promise.

So you came to New York at that time?

Yeah.

Yeah. And Rene, your exodus-- you had an exodus out of Europe also?

Well, my exodus is really tied to--

It's related to me.

--related to her being taken in by somebody who lived out here on Long Island, a friend of Herbert Tenzer, was widely active in the organization. Mayer and Dina Slotkin-- which is my name now, Rene Slotkin-- they took Irene in. And that had to be, maybe, '48.

Yeah. It was at one point, before I came to them. I was with the Novicks. And at one point, they dragged out of me that I had a brother, because I'd never spoken about it. And--

So they took Irene in to their homes, right here in the Five Towns. And then they start to search for missing Rene. And it's a long and fascinating story, but take hours.

It takes a long time. But anyway, Life Magazine was--

Life Magazine was somehow instrumental in locating me, because this Dr. Kalina that I mentioned, that had escaped, he had gone to Israel. And somehow, he--

Was he Jewish?

Yes. Yes. And he had gotten hold of this Life Magazine.

That Life Magazine.

And in it, he saw Irene as--

He put two and two together.

--Irene Guttman. The names clicked. And he put it together. So he got in touch somehow with somebody here in New York and told them that I was living in Czechoslovakia with his sister.

And they, the Slotkins, sent somebody over into Europe to get me out. And there was a lot of red tape. I had to go through Germany and documentation. And--

And you were in Switzerland for awhile.

Switzerland for a while. I had to take a-- not a direct route.

Circuitous route.

What?

Circuitous route.

Circuitous route. And I finally ended up, in--

1950.

--1950, March 29 in Idlewild Airport, rainy night. I'll never forget that. Then we were reunited on that evening.

So you remembered your last name. There was no reason why you should remember your last name was Guttman, but I suppose you did--

Well, why?

--or somebody told you.

He remembered it, I guess.

That was my name all the way through until--

I guess he remembered.

Yeah, it was always my name. I knew my name.

The Polish lady changed my name from Renatta to Ivanka.

Ivanka.

This is-- yeah.

So that's how Irene came.

That's how Irene came to be.

Zvi Spiegel also reinforced everybody's identities in the camp for the boys. He would have the boys-- a newcomer come in right away. And they'd be greeted in a circle. And everybody would introduce themselves. So their names were constantly being reinforced, and who they were.

It's the end of the tape.