

Why don't you a little about your experience before liberation took place?

Immediately before liberation? Is that what you're asking for?

Go back a little bit.

Well, I'll just touch the highlights. The Holocaust began for me exactly the day that World War II started, which is Friday morning, September 1, 1939. Our house was bombed Saturday morning, September 2, 1939, and we were on the run since then. We finally returned to our hometown of Radomsko in Poland, where we stayed with friends.

And soon after that, the ghetto was formed. We stayed in the Radomsko Ghetto through 1942. In 1940, September of 1942, my parents were taken away from us and sent to Treblinka, where they perished. My two sisters and I then remained in the ghetto, but we stayed there until the liquidation of the ghetto.

I was able to escape the march to the railroad station, having sent away my other two sisters before. And I was hiding. I was hiding for a long time, and then I couldn't hide any longer. I was able to find my way to a large ghetto in Warsaw. I stayed in the Warsaw ghetto until the uprising, and then just before the uprising I was able to get out of the ghetto. And I was on so-called Aryan papers, which was false papers. In the meantime, I was caught and worked in a labor camp but then was released and was taken back to the Warsaw ghetto.

I was liberated in Poland February 17 of 1945 and tried to find my two sisters. We were able to reunite after a long, long search, and then the decision was made that we could not stay in Poland because we lost everyone. We lost everything, and there was no reason to stay in Poland, mostly because the atmosphere was not very inviting. People resented those Jews who have been liberated and resented the fact that some Jews survived. And we had some personal experiences which persuaded us not to stay in Poland.

Tell me about those.

Well, for example, prior to us leaving for the ghetto, we had some personal possessions that we took when we fled, and we entrusted these possessions to a so-called friend. And after we returned after the end of the World War II to claim these positions, they wouldn't recognize us. They wouldn't give them back to us, and they just totally dismissed us.

So we decided that this was not a very favorable atmosphere to stay at, and then it was much too painful to stay in Poland. Poland was not very hospitable, and it was very, very painful. The memories and the experiences connected with living in Poland were just too devastating.

We were contacted by some people who told us that there is a group of Israeli young boys who formed an organization called Bricha and that they are helping survivors of the Holocaust to rehabilitate themselves and, possibly, to find a way of taking them to Palestine. Now, Palestine was a place we knew about because our father was a great Zionist, and he had purchased land in Palestine in the 1930s. And he had traveled to Palestine several times.

So we knew that, eventually, we would like to reach Palestine. Parenthetically, as a matter of fact, my father had signed me on the list of a higher education institution which later became the Rehovot Weizmann Institute in Rehovot in Palestine. So we decided to put our lives in their hands because there was no real alternative.

We were contacted by them, and we were told just to follow their instructions. And they took us on a long journey over the Carpathian Mountains. And we found ourselves on the Czechoslovakia side of the mountains. In Czechoslovakia, we were met by another group of young boys who took us through the countryside, and we finally arrived in Bratislava.

In Bratislava there was a kind of a camp which was actually in a square surrounded by buildings, like a large apartment building complex, and we arrive there. And there were many, many, many people meandering back and fro, and everyone was in the same situation as we were.

Well, we were staying there for a certain time, and I really don't recall how long it was. But I remember that we were walking through the streets of Bratislava, trying to find people who looked familiar. As a matter of fact, we did find some friends who came from our hometown just by sheer chance, and we were very delighted to have found somebody we have known.

And then we were told that we were going to go on a journey and that journey is going to take us into Austria. The object of our journey was to go out of the Russian occupation zone, leave the Russian occupation zone, and go to the American occupation zone because the conditions were much better, and there were some displaced persons camps formed already in Austrian territory of the American occupational zone.

We were met by two or three young boys who told us that, from now on, we have to shed our identity, that we are no longer Polish Jews, that we are Jews who are trying to return to Greece simply because it was felt that no one, really, in Austria would know the Greek language, but people knew German, or Czech, or Polish, or Russian. And they could always find somebody who could be the translator for us.

So we played the role of Greek Jews knowing full well that we cannot communicate in the language. So one of the young boys told us that, since we cannot be numb all together, that we have to make an appearance of being able to communicate to one another, that perhaps we ought to use the Hebrew prayers because very few of us really could communicate in Hebrew.

So we actually did communicate by gesticulating and using the prayers that everybody knew in a very conversational tone so that we would give some kind of an indication that we are communicating with each other. When we were traveling, the International Red Cross would meet us at different points of the journey and try to help us, and they actually tried to find somebody who knew the Greek language to be able to speak to us.

OK. We have to put another roll of film [INAUDIBLE].

Now? So we had to communicate in some kind of a language, and because we didn't know the Greek language, we used Hebrew prayers by simply using them in a conversational tone and gesticulating as if we understood each other. Well, we were taken by different modes of transportation, either by train if we were not worried about going through stations and being met there by some officials or by trucks.

Eventually, we reached the shores of the Danube River at night, and there were little boats waiting for us. And we got onto the boats, and we crossed the Danube. And then we found ourselves on the other shore, which was already in the American sector. From there, we were taken by foot and then later by some other conveyance, I remember-- it must have been trucks-- to a camp past Mauthausen concentration camp, which was Wels in Austria.

And there, the experience of a displaced persons camp began. This was our first displaced persons camp, and it was a very depressing experience. First of all, the camp had a fence around it. Secondly, it was guarded by American military police, by the MPs, dressed in the white helmets that say MP. They were wearing the MP uniform, and they were always carrying guns.

We had to register, and this is the first time that we registered. We got food rations, and I remember that the entire experience for us was very depressing and very devastating. This was supposed to have been the liberating aspect of our situation, but it was not.

I remember the anguish, and I remembered the thought processes that went through my mind. And I remember asking myself, what am I doing here? Where am I going? Who is going to be waiting for me? How am I going to begin my so-called new life? What is in store for me?

I remember one night we were awakened about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and the MPs stormed in and told us to get off our bunks. And our banks were just that, bunks, with burlap sacks filled with straw. This is what we slept on. And they said that they were there because somebody stole a can of peaches, and they searched all those straw sacks for the hidden can of peaches.

I remember that the following day we gathered together, and we tried to think, my God, what is this all about? Fortunately, we didn't stay very long in Wels. I really don't recall how long. I believe that perhaps six weeks or so, maybe two months.

Were you locked in?

We were not locked in, but we were surrounded by fences. And we really couldn't get out because, number one, we didn't know where to go. It was a very isolated place. And secondly, we were really guarded for whatever reason. I don't know.

They took us from Wels to Linz in Germany. Linz was another displaced persons camp, but when we arrived there, it was full to capacity, and they couldn't receive us. So we were waiting there on a temporary basis. They couldn't accommodate us there.

And finally, they told us that we have to go back on those trucks, and they took us to the south of Austria and to a beautiful place called Bad Gastein, which was a resort in the Alps. And the accommodations were absolutely phenomenal. They put us up in hotels, and we had nice beddings. And we didn't have to use outhouses any longer. We had bathrooms, and we had indoor showers. In Wels, we had outdoor showers.

And that was a tremendous improvement. This camp was under the auspices of UNRRA, the United Nations Refugee Rehabilitation Administration, and the conditions were much improved.

There was a certain aspect of that camp which was different from any other. First of all, we were freer to think about our future. There was a free movement of people in and out, and we were aware of what was going on in the world. So we knew that there was such a thing as exodus.

We could leave. We could go by way of Switzerland to Italy, and we could sign up to go on those boats towards Palestine. And we could dream, at least, of a certain kind of an objective, certain kind of a goal, certain kind of a future that was in sight. It was concrete. It was achievable. It was doable.

So those of us who had dreams of going to Palestine did so. We signed up. I believe that we arrived in Bad Gastein towards the end of September, probably beginning of October 1945. The International Red Cross sent us packages, and we were able to find some decent clothes to wear. With the approaching fall and winter, however, we didn't have much winter clothes. But we were satisfied that we could at least have some decent attire, not too much of it, but we were wearing decent clothes.

When winter approached, I remember a very fine young Lieutenant from Dayton, Ohio-- I remember his name, Lieutenant Kyle-- approached me once and asked me if I had a winter coat. And I said, no, I didn't, so he brought me a GI blanket. And I remember I cut a hole in the middle of the blanket, and I wore it as a Cape. And that was my [? winter coat, ?] and I was very grateful for that.

In the camp, I was able to work in the office because I spoke fluent German, and it helped us to know the German language to communicate with the rest of the population. The population was not very happy with our presence there, but we did the best we could not to aggravate them and to stay out of their way.

The life inside displaced persons camp was very interesting. First of all, we tried to gain awareness of what the potential-- what our future opportunities may be. And we got together quite often, young men and women, to discuss our situation.

The first thing that we did and that was a very determined act-- we were told that if we are of a certain nationality we will be given the opportunity to return to the country of our origin. and if we made that choice, we had to sign up, and we would go to our respective countries. The other choice was, the other alternative was to declare ourselves stateless and then leave it to whatever fate there is going to be available to us.

We have to re-load.