

Start. Just back up and restate that you had a choice between repatriation.

While in a displaced persons camp of Bad Gastein, we were given two choices. One, to return to the country of our origin and become repatriated or to remain in the camp. In that case, we have to pronounce ourselves and declare ourselves stateless, without any right of belonging to any country any longer.

And that was a choice that many of us decided in favor of becoming stateless. At that moment of our decision, I think we suffered a very tremendous anguish. Because the decision has to be made on the basis of what is there for us in the future.

We knew we can not go back to Poland because there was nothing to go back to. We knew we have lost all the ties to Poland. And we knew that the situation in Poland was really not favorable to establishing any kind of a life for ourselves. So the decision to become stateless was the better decision and perhaps the more promising decision for our future.

And it was at that moment, I remember, that my thoughts and my feelings ran the gamut. It was a period of feeling tremendous anguish, even despair. Liberation was a very bittersweet concept for us at that moment. And as much as we longed for being liberated all these years of the Holocaust, the situation of having been liberated did not hold very much promise for a better life for us.

Our thoughts went back, obviously, to the past, to our childhood, to our youth, to our families, to our parents. And there was a tremendous emptiness in our souls and our hearts. There was no jubilation, there was no happiness, there was almost depression. When we talked, when we met, we were always somber.

And we couldn't really understand whether or not we made the right decision. We just felt in our guts that this was the decision, the decision that we had to reach, knowing full well that we are not the masters of our own fate. We just had to leave everything to those who would direct us from then on.

So many of us decided to be as positive as we could. We would gather together and we would attend some kind of lectures. I remembered many of us decided to learn English. We decided to find some books or some resources that would allow us to get acquainted, at least, with the language so we could communicate with the people of UNRRA, most of whom were either American or British.

And I remember getting some kind of a book with verses, with little ditties, little poems. And we were learning them and trying to understand them, and I still remember a couple of them. But we tried to be as useful to ourselves as possible.

Another aspect of our activities, I remember, were political activities. We have found out that the British did not allow the boats to land in Haifa and they did not allow-- they did not receive the refugees into Palestine.

I don't recall whether we learned about the camp of Cyprus at that time or not. But we heard that some of the boats were returned. And we organized protests. And we were marching and protesting. And we were very vociferous, very vocal against the British actions. And we were trying to influence the International Red Cross to express our protest.

I know that we had a number of visitors who brought us all this news of what was going on. And we tried to inform ourselves the best we could.

And we tried to help people who were in need. There was a hospital nearby in Hofgastein. My sister, who had some nurse's training, was working in that hospital. We tried to obtain as much medication as we could to save the health of a number of people who were placed in that hospital.

We tried to be as helpful to each other as we could. We tried to be as social with one another as we could. There were very many kids who didn't have any parents left and who didn't have any siblings. So we tried to sort of form extended

families for those who didn't have any families left. We tried to boost each other's hopes. And we tried to help each other.

The International Red Cross came there to try to find some of our families. We had families-- we thought we had families in England. And we gave them the names. And they tried to research it for us. They did research some of the names for us.

We tried to communicate with people we knew who lived in Israel. I had family in Israel, and we contacted them. And we established communications with Israel.

What we were very surprised is that we were not very much helped by any Jewish organizations in the United States. I don't recall that any of these organizations came forward with any help for us.

As a matter of fact, I do recall that the US helped with my ticket from Bremerhaven to New York City. But I also recall that I got a bill for them from them and eventually I had to repay them the fare of the transport from Bremerhaven to New York. I was very surprised.

And in retrospect, I really cannot understand the fact that when I arrived in New York, nobody gave a hoot what has happened, what would happen with me. I was not given the opportunity for education.

Nobody cared about my psychological well-being. Nobody ever asked, how in the world is it possible for a young person who has gone through 5 and 1/2 years of persecution and the kind of personal tragedies that we had to go through and not worry about their psychological well-being?

This is something that has always dumbfounded me. That when the Holocaust survivor came to the United States, he or she embarked immediately onto the process of acculturation, of trying to adapt oneself to the way of life of America.

To try not to stand out like a sore thumb. To try to meld into the culture and the life. To try not to show that we were different. To try not to act the victim. And to try to develop a certain modus vivendi, certain kind of a life, which would establish us as a normal human being and part of the society.

Learning the language, for example. I came here and I didn't know English. And I remember my first act was to buy a dictionary. I couldn't find a Polish-English dictionary. I bought a Polish-- a German-English dictionary. And I would buy the New York Times and I would read it with a dictionary.

We have to reload.

Now, would you--

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So for example, the language-- if you could just back up to there and coming to this country.

Well, oh, I didn't really know English at all. And what I did was I would buy the New York Times. And with the help of a German-English dictionary, I would read it. And I would try to understand it. And then everyone that I would meet, I would ask them to please correct my pronunciation, to correct my language as much as they could.

Because I was very, very intent on learning how to speak English. I never learned a word unless I knew its spelling so that I knew how to spell it, and then I would learn how to pronounce it.

And the pronunciation, of course, was very difficult. Once you are more or less an adult, it's very, very difficult to forget the idioms of a language that you were trained in and translate them into a different language.

But you really don't want me to talk about my time in America.

Tell me, going back to Wels, a little more about the day-to-day life there. Was there a lot of standing in line? Was it organized? Was disorganized?

I thought it was pretty well-organized. But of course, there was always standing in line for the food. There was always standing in line for the showers. There was always-- well, standing in line, of course, for registration.

But this was a very, very well-organized system because they wanted to have everything under a very, very strict control. This was actually the first time that we registered, the first time that we declared ourselves as any kind of a living person to be dealt with. But it was very depersonalized, very cold, and very, very officious, I would say.

We didn't get the impression that anybody really cared for us as people, as a person, as a human being. But they had a job to do and they did the job. And it was all on a very temporary basis. We knew that that was the place, that it was sort of a transit place. And we were hoping we were not going to remain there for a long time.

At the time that you were there, were there many nationalities? And also, were there any non-Jews?

I don't remember whether there were any non-Jews, but I do remember many nationalities, many Czechoslovakia, and many Hungarians, many Romanian Jews. I don't remember that there were very many North European Jews. But I do remember Central and Eastern European Jews.

Do you think there was a lack of understanding on the part of the administrators or the employees because many of you were from countries that they didn't understand why you couldn't go back?

Well, I really cannot remember the exact conduct of the people. But I have the impression that is so lasting. As a matter of fact, I spoke with my younger sister about it the other day. And I asked her what kind of impressions she took out of there. And she confirmed with me that she felt the same way.

So it's not a personal aversion. It is something that was a general atmosphere, a general feeling that we weren't cared for as human beings. We were just cared for as an entity to process, more or less. It was a processing feeling rather than caring feeling.

And now, going back to liberation itself, can you tell me?

Yes, the process of liberation was a very interesting one in my case because I was sort of liberated twice. I was at that time living on false papers, on Aryan papers. And that was after we were wandering from place to place, trying to hide, and trying to establish ourselves.

Let's--

Five.

My liberation was really a very curious one because I was twice liberated. I was then under false papers, and trying to hide, and trying to emerge. And at one point, we heard rumors that the Russians are very near. That was very close to the Russian-German front in Western Poland.

And when we heard that the Russians were very close, we decided that maybe we can emerge, and finally act as ourselves, and say, well, here we are, and we can be liberated. Well, the Russians did come, and we emerged, and we were elated.

And they at first could not believe that we were Jewish because they had encountered, prior to that, Jews coming out of hiding or coming out of camps. And sure enough, we were euphoric, absolutely euphoric.

The Russians are very friendly, although they were a little bit rough. But they were very friendly. And they offered to

share some food with us, which was very much welcomed. And then they went ahead and we were just left there in a very sort of atmosphere of nobody's land.

And we didn't know how to act and how to relate to the people we have met. Whether to blow our cover or not because we really didn't trust the Polish people. So we decided not to show our elation and to take it with a low profile.

And that was a very lucky choice for us because sure enough, somehow or other, the Russians had to retreat, and the Germans came back. When the Germans came back, we really were very frightened. We thought that we are going to be denounced by the population, who may have sensed our elation with the Germans.

And we decided to go east, to move east, as far east as we could. But we really couldn't get very far because the front moved, kept moving, from one kilometer one way to the one kilometer the other way. So we went underground. And then we heard fighting. And we just didn't know what to do.

So we hid in basements as much as we could. Until about a few days later, when we heard total silence, when we didn't hear any shooting. When we sent somebody out to find out whether it was safe to come out.

And when we came out, indeed, the Russians were there. And they assured us that they were there for good, and that the Germans retreated for good. And then we really blew our cover. And we felt that we were free to be ourselves.

And then of course, the bittersweet feeling came upon us. We made the decision to return to our hometown, to see whether we can find anyone alive. And then we confronted the rubbles, the physical rubbles, and the psychological rubbles of the aftermath of the war.

And so order emerged out of the chaos very slowly.

I wouldn't call it order. Chaos was continuing, people were wandering about. People were trying to establish stations where we could notify others about the fact that we are alive and try to find people's names.

There were on any-- well, we had kiosks in Europe, where all kinds of proclamations were pasted. On any such kiosk in every town, you could see rows and rows of names that people inquired about. And those who were alive would put their names and their whereabouts so they could be contacted.

It was no order. It was chaos. In Poland, especially, there was chaos because the government was in exile. And they had to form a new government, which was, of course, now being dominated by the Russians. And people could not understand where to go, and what to do, and how to establish their new existence. And there were people just wandering about looking for others, trying to make sense out of the chaos. Order was far, far away.