

Can you tell me about your brother's bar mitzvah?

Yes, I'll tell you. I was bar mitzvahed in the ghetto in 1942. I remembered the necessary things to learn. An uncle of mine who was still there taught me and I said my kedoshim, my speech, in the ghetto on a Saturday. But more vivid and more interesting is my brother's bar mitzvah, which came out in a sukkah. In the ghetto, my father, as much as he could, with the minimum possibility that they had, kept up whatever he could as far as the religious things to do. And we had a sukkah. The sukkah means we take a couple old doors and covered it up with some of the growth which that's the sukkah. And we had a sukkah in the ghetto.

My brother, who was born on Yom Kippur, had a bar mitzvah on Sukkot. And at that time, we had a few people that we did [HEBREW] praying in our house. After that, went into the sukkah, and my mother, whatever she-- where she took it from I don't know, but had a couple cookies and what they called something to say l'chaim on, and they had the celebration in the sukkah around the table.

At that time, one of the secretaries, the secretary for the committee, passed by and my father called him into the sukkah. And he begged off, not to want to come in because he was called for important meeting in the committee. Nevertheless, my father took hold of him, wouldn't let him go, pulled him in the sukkah, introduced him to the people. And he got pulled in. He was served also the refreshments, whatever it was, and he was told that this is the bar mitzvah of my brother.

He was amazed, and this Avraham Tory, writes in the book, he was amazed how the religious people can forget about all the trials and tribulations, all it was doing outside the ghetto and the Germans and still we're devoted and with such fervor to pray and to sing even so the song was something that expressed the hopefulness in the worst situations. We still the hope to God, the hope to Hashem, so much so that the man ends his book that he envies those that believe. And that was my father's character to make somebody happy.

I know of another story that somebody asked, what are you doing on this street? You don't live here. People used to go out to work for a long, long day from early morning to night. And that man used to pass by our house, say, you don't live here. What are you doing here? He's said, well, I was hoping maybe I would meet Fivel Zisman and a few words would enliven me, would condole me for the next day or so.

That was the character of my father. And that's what people thought of him. To speak to him a few words was enough to uplift somebody. And unfortunately, with all the hope some of them did not materialize. And he perished in the Holocaust like so many other millions. But the bar mitzvah of my brother was something special that other people in ghetto could celebrate together with him.

Was religion a form of resistance?

It was not a question of resistance. It is a question that we will not give up. That we will not surrender. We will do ours. Whatever happens, we will still do ours with hope and with prayer to God that somehow, hopefully, we will survive. And those that did, did. I did.

And the year that this bar mitzvah took place? When was this relative to the Kinder Aktion?

It was a half a year before the Kinder Aktion. This was in the beginning of the winter and the Kinder Aktion was in the end of the winter.

Did you know anything about partisans?

We heard about it through the grapevine. And as a matter of fact, I had somebody that came in to the ghetto that I knew from before the ghetto. And he used to come in, disappear, and reappear. And he used to sneak out of the ghetto somehow and he belonged to the partisan. He is alive now. What's his name? Yuzhak. I can't recall his name, but yes, he went to the partisan.

And can you again describe for me the hiding place? Did you help build the hiding place?

Yes. Sure, we helped dig that tunnel on all fours to dig a tunnel in the ground, support it with whatever we could. Pieces of lumber, pieces of wood to support. The only way to get in, as described before, is through that basement of that vestibule. And there was a slab of cement that when you took it out and from the inside you had a way to put it back in place, to pull it back in place, that when you looked at it you could see a crack in the cement but you would not recognize that this was something like a door.

And you had to go on all fours to creep into that, and the 10, 12 feet to go to that room that was dug out there in that room was made like a couple of beds like one on top of the other. And that's where people sat or laid down. And there was also a problem with air. So there was a pipe in the back of that shed. In the bushes there, we left one pipe for air so we'd have some air inside there.

And the tunnel was like a Y. It had a turn that it went to the well, and any time you wanted you could fetch some water with a pail and a rope. And from there it went back to the shed where underneath the shed, maybe two or three feet underneath it, was two feet of dirt on top of it. And underneath there, there was a bunker.

So yes, we built it and took us months to build it. Of course, this was done only at night. One night the well disappeared. Nobody knows there's a trace of it. We covered. We took off a couple of rings, covered it up and filled it with dirt, make sure that there was some growth on top of it like nothing before. And that was the bunker. While there, air was the biggest problem.

We had also made a couple of cans and the little food that we did have, so we spilled something and dried up, make what you called, "sakarinkes" [Yid, rusks] We made dried pieces of bread into cans in case we have to stay there for more than a day or two that we'd have something to nourish ourselves. This was also left in cans in the bunker. But when they came in and we knew that we are found out, they had no choice but to get out of there. Had we stayed there, they would have blown up the whole thing.

And what did you do with the dirt?

With the dirt, we put it aside and then put on top and spread it out and put it on top of the well where there was a hole. The dirt was a problem where we spread out of the gardens, especially if they did it in the time where it was not winter. And there was big lots around the houses. It wasn't just a house, it was a house and lot, so there were places to put the dirt and spread it out.

OK. Thank you. Have I not asked you anything of importance?

Well, I don't know what else you want to know. A lot of interesting stories that I have. For instance, in the ghetto, since I was bar mitzvahed I used to put on a tefillin every day. In the concentration camp, we only had one pair of tefillin and that was Barav Snegg. Many times, he used to work day shift, night shift. On the way we used to meet and pass by and as we passed by we pass over each other. All this was taking chances with your life because had you been caught, you probably they put you up and shoot you. To them it was the biggest thing to make you an example.

And you're telling me that, things that you saw

In the ghetto there was what they called a hospital. I don't know how much of a hospital it was, but children were there. I remember once they had an open truck outside and children were thrown out by Germans right through the window into the open truck, live children. It looked like one-year-old, six months, babies, right from the window in second floor, third floor into the truck.

The atrocity that I saw was-- By that time you were numb. I saw somebody just-- All the silver, all the everything, the valuables, should have been surrendered. A German went and saw a silver spoon in the dirt. He went out into the house and accused the woman that was there that he saw a piece of silver flatware. He put them up against the wall, took aim

with the left hand behind his back as if he's a real soldier like, and killed them while they are executed right there on the spot.

This was the Germans' idea of teaching somebody a lesson, you know, it's to make everybody obey. There was a systematic way from the Germans, the Gestapo, to make you believe that this is it and there's no way of escaping them. In spite of all that, people hid and people-- [INAUDIBLE] if it came to a concentration camp. Everybody was supposed to give up whatever they had-- any valuables, any money, anything bring it to front and give it up. People were scared. If somebody had money was scared to put it on the table because he'll be accused of doing something wrong. How do you come to the money? But they had no choice.

So there was a latrine, you know what a latrine is, the bathrooms. It happened to be new. But this is two days that there were a couple of thousand people in camp. And they used it. The latrine was full with money, with whatever valuables they brought along. They filled up there.

The Germans got wind of it. They sent down the people into the human waste, barefooted, took out every valuable thing, every dollar, everything to take out from the latrines. And that was the biggest joke to see the people in the latrine, in the human waste collecting their valuables. They enjoyed seeing somebody suffer. They made a game out of people suffering. They made a game of murder. They made a game of target practice, shooting people. That was the whole idea of the Germans.

And anybody telling me that this is just orders from above, they did 10 times more than the orders were given. In other words, they enjoyed doing that on their own, regardless what the orders were. And if anybody had said that this was only a segment of them, they knew very well what's going on. I spoke with Germans after the war. They knew what was going on and either they didn't care or who cares, this is it. If they had a chance, they would kill you.

I do not forgive them. And there's no punishment for that. So the thing you have to remember that there is no way to condone it or forgive it or to forget it. They are enemies. And as long as the world exists, the longer they exist they'll have to carry that burden of that guilt on the whole German nation. The Lithuanians were no better. Murderers to the last of them. This is from my experience and this is what I will never forget it, never forgive it, and tell my children to do the same.

In the ghetto at the beginning there was a hospital that was burned. Did you see that?

I heard about it. I did not witness it myself but I heard about it. I did see the children thrown from there, but I did not see it burn.

And when you saw the children thrown, when was that? Was it during the Kinder Aktion?

No, that was way before. It was way before. It wasn't in the last year. It was the second year of the ghetto or something like that.

So there were just random atrocities.

There were atrocities done constantly. And sometimes it was an individual act and sometimes it was an organized act, but there were atrocities in a daily occurrence. Here you heard this one was killed and this one killed. Every day something else was happening.

In general, in the ghetto did people help each other? Did Jews help each other do you think?

On a general rule, I would say everybody looked out for themselves. Self-preservation was also the rule in the ghetto too. But I would say definitely within religion, especially there's a lot of people that knew each other, and those families of course they helped each other. Everybody looks for their own family, which is normal. Everybody looks for their own children, for their own, and for themselves. To what extent, that's the question. How much--

Would somebody kill somebody else to protect themselves? In some cases, yes. Like the one that snitched on us. I don't think he survived the Holocaust. But at that moment he thinks that he'll get away with by snitching on other people, so he exposed maybe 20 people by trying to save himself. This happened, too, but not that often. I wouldn't say that that was the rule. The rule was to sacrifice more than to give out somebody.

Any other things that you remember in the ghetto that I haven't asked you about?

I had a moment to say all the instances I don't remember except that I remember a cousin coming beaten up from head to toe, black and blue. A German caught him, and just because he looked like a Jew, for no reason at all. I remember one cousin, Labal Means. He came once beaten up, and he was a religious, pious kid, and he said, well, somehow I must have deserved it somewhere. And with cold compresses, with all the things he survived.

But atrocities I remember seeing it as you would shivah. And after a while you're numb. You get used to. You can get used to anything. But this was the situation with what you lived through.

Did the ghetto progressively get worse and worse as it got smaller and smaller? Can you tell me?

It was more and more difficult to survive, to have food. It was more and more difficult. In the beginning you handled-- you got in from outside. You got help here, you got help there. Like I said before, here you got the potato peels and here you got the deal where you sold a pair of pants or a piece of jewelry and got half a pound of butter or something for it.

So as the ghetto progressed, it became more orderly in the sense there was working. You had to go to work, you came back. You know what you have to do. But to survive became even harder. It was harder to what we used to call to organize, to organize means to have something to eat or have something additional to do the meager ration that you get.

And how did you keep your tomatoes from getting stolen?

It happened to be in a corner of the house and there was some kind of a fence in front of it so it wasn't obvious. And I used to ripen it, I used to dig it up green and ripen it under a blanket. And that's how we got it through.

OK. Thank you very much.

You're welcome.