

All right. This is the Holocaust Oral History Project on January 20, 1997. This is part two of our interview with Mr. Sam Genirberg. The videographer is Maurice Harris and the interviewer is myself, Rick Levine. We left off last time of talking with Mr. Genirberg about his experience in Trier. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

Yes

And how would you spell that?

T-R-I-E-R. And it's situated on the Mozelle River.

And this is in what we would now call West Germany.

Yes. Yes, it's near the French border. You were describing to us at our last conversation your weeks in this concentration camp. And you were explaining that you faced a daily ritual of a nude inspection.

Yes.

During which you felt in considerable jeopardy. And on one occasion, a Ukrainian about your age threatened you that your identity as a Jew was no longer safe and you had a bit of a pushing match.

Yes.

Can you pick up there and--

Yes. Sure. So when this boy told me in a threatening manner that I won't be able to hide out anymore, we know that you're a Jew and some ways are threats, like you said, we had the shoving match and we walked away. But I was frightened. I was in a grim situation because I was locked in. There was no way for me to escape. Escaping was tantamount with suicide. As a matter of fact, a couple of days before they assembled all the inmates on the parade ground and we walked by and in pairs to watch two men who were dead, lying on the ground, who tried to escape and they were shot dead. So I had no options and alternatives, and I was I was very frightened that time being locked in.

Was the perimeter of the camp barbed wire?

Yes, barbed wire and guards all of over. And two layers of barbed wire. It was highly secured. And so by the time we went to sleep, I didn't sleep very well that night. The boys of 18 sleep very well, but I couldn't fall asleep. And also I was not desperate. I worried what's going to happen in the morning because if this boy carries out the threat I know that they will pick me up. And will send me to a concentration camp or shoot me.

And so as we went to bed and I was lying there, I was 18 years old and I remember 12 years of my life, and all these years what kept sort of churning in my mind. I remembered when I was five, six years old and was playing in front of the house when my parents were building a new home. I remembered when I entered school at the age of seven, entered Polish elementary school, and I knew only a few words and Polish. And this Polish teacher took me by the hand and would take me over to a window and point out, this is a window in Polish, and this is a ceiling in Polish. She was a decent Polish middle-aged woman, a caring woman. And I thought about that. She was with me for four years. She was from the first to the fourth grade. And she taught me reading and writing, and arithmetic and a number of other subjects.

I remember the time when I was chosen to participate in the school play and I was playing a clown. And the same teacher, same Polish woman, would make a suit for me. And she invited me to the house to fit. And I remembered other things. And I remembered joining the Zionist organization and the debates and the political lectures that we had about politics and nationalism and about social issues. I remembered all that. I thought about my mother and father and how hard they worked all their lives and they never lived to enjoy the joy of raising the children and all that.

And by that time I must have fallen asleep because the next thing next thing I heard was the shrill whistle to wake us up.

And these guards were yelling, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. And we would get up early, like 5 o'clock in the morning, and we would go to wash and we had to make our bed very thoroughly. They were very precise, very strict about that. Bed had to be very tight. If you didn't make your bed properly, you were beaten up.

I went to wash up and then I went for breakfast. We would all eat in the same large hall. A rather good breakfast. They gave us enough food. And all the time I was looking for this boy. And I didn't see him and so I asked my other friends, did you see this boy. I believe his name was Volodya. And nobody saw him. And so we went to work that day and I still didn't see this boy. My job consisted of loading clay out of a mountain on railroad lorries. And other people would push them up the kiln plant where they made bricks. It was very hard work and you had to work very hard. You couldn't stop. And I worked very hard that day to get rid of my frustration.

I remember working with a Polish boy. And this Polish boy thought he could outwit the German guard. And so whenever the German guard looked away, he would stop working and lean on the shovel. And I remember one time the guard noticed him and he beat them up so badly I thought the boy would die. And they would yell out all the other people working, why don't you work like Andre here? I worked hard and I obeyed the rules. I didn't want to get into trouble.

And afterwards we returned to the barracks. So we had dinner and I still didn't see this boy and so I didn't know what happened to him. But that evening after dinner and after the examination, the usual examination in the nude, I saw my friend who was a kapo, if you can call it a friend, and he invited me and we talked. And I asked him, do you know what happened to-- A boy is missing. But I didn't tell him what was all about. At first he didn't know. Then he remembered, yes, he said that he heard there was some commotion. They took out some boy who got very ill. And I began to talk about it, continued the conversation about it and he got angry. He said, what are you worrying about him? He's probably dead by now. I've never saw that boy again. That was another miracle.

And let me break for a moment and ask you. You were not wearing eyeglasses last night. What do you think? You're better with or without? I'm wondering about the glare and the camera. Without is better. Are you comfortable?

Yes.

Yes? You can see OK?

Yes.

You say I asked my other friends. You're using the term friends very loosely, or did you make friends in this place? Did you have a feeling of some comradeship with some of the other young men?

Not really, no. I use the term friends as acquaintances or knowing someone, a loose expression.

You didn't have the kind of bond with people whereby you might confide your identity, for example. No one throughout this period knows you're Jewish.

No, no one. No, I didn't want to risk to tell somebody, to reveal my identity. It was too much of a risk. And I never knew how these people would react to it.

This is the case even in those situations and the situations that occurred where you felt some trust in people, you enjoyed some friendship with people.

Oh yes. Yes. Yes. Yes, I always tried to find comrades and colleagues and people with whom I could talk. But I never revealed my identity to anyone.

You speak of making the beds. Did you each have one bunk or was it double deck?

Triple deck. Triple bunks. But each one of us had to make the bed and we had the linen pillow cover.

The work day. You have breakfast then you're working and then you mentioned dinner. Was it two meals a day or did you have a lunch also or some snack that you brought to the job site?

I don't remember whether we had two or three meals. But we had good meals. Whenever we sat down to eat they give us enough food. As a matter of fact, we could have seconds. So food was not the problem over there. We weren't hungry.

Do you recall how long you were in the camp before this event happened with this young man?

I would say about a couple of weeks, about two weeks, because I remember after that I stayed another two weeks. But at the time I didn't know how long I was going to remain at this camp. It wasn't like you went to a court and they meted out the sentence. We were sent into this camp and I thought, I'm going to be there forever-- until not forever, but until the end of the war.

So the days continued. After this boy disappeared, I continued to do the same thing. I worked, hoping that someday they're going to release me. I didn't get into any trouble. Throughout the time, a lot of people were beaten up terribly. But I usually obeyed the rules and I worked hard. And throughout the time I was slapped, I was beaten up one time. One of the kapos, for some reason beat me up a little. Not terribly.

And then and one night I had a dream, and it's a remarkable, remarkable, a remarkable event occurred. I was dreaming that we were in Dubno and it was a party. And a lot of people were milling around in the carriageways with drinks, wine and cakes and cookies. And in came this old man whom I knew from Dubno. He was a prominent individual who was president of the great synagogue the last years before the war. His name would have been Zion. He had a long beard. He was a pious man. And later on the scene shifted to the premises of the SS camp that I was in and all the German officers joined the party.

and this old man, this Ben Zion, looked over to the chief officer who was an SS officer and began to talk to him. And he put his finger, he pointed his finger at me and he said, I want him. And they talked for quite some time. And the officer responded, go ahead and take him. And at that point I woke up. I was drenched in sweat. I was wet completely wet. And I knew at the time when I woke up that morning they're going to release me. And I knew it absolutely.

And as soon after that was we woke up there was the whistle to wake up, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. And we assembled every morning. After making the bed and having breakfast we assembled in front of the office for roll call. And I knew they're going to call me. And they called two other boys, and then they called my name, Andre Trag, to be released. And that morning I was released.

Ben Zion. This is B-E-N Z-I-O-N?

Z-I-O-N. Ben Zion.

This is now the late spring of '43?

Yeah, this would be the end of May, beginning of June of 1943. Yes.

Do you have any idea what the machinations are behind the scenes that result in your being released?

No.

No idea whatsoever.

No idea. No. No, they didn't tell you anything. They would order you to go one way or another, one place to another. They never told you any details. But I was very, very pleased to be released from that. It was a terrible place. And I knew that if I would have to stay in this place for the remainder of the war I might not survive. It was very bad.

How many men were in the camp?

I don't know exactly. But there were a lot of men. It could have maybe 500.

And no women.

No women. No.

And when you're released, released means what?

Well, we went to registration again and the medical examination. Evidently that they conducted some experiment because they weighed us and they weighed us in. They put us on the scale when we came in and the scale when we went out. And we were put into a room, and we were three people, three boys who were released that day. And later on we were transported back to Coblenz. From Trier to Coblenz to a police station. And they took us in a room and told us to wait.

And before long came in a man whom I knew from Hagen. When I worked and Hagen I knew he was a minor official in this residential camp. And I was not happy to see him, although he was a decent individual. I didn't have any problems with him but I realized they're taking me back to Hagen. And going back to Hagen to the [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE] meant that I would meet again this man who was my boss before leaving Hagen. His name was, I believe, Netzel. But I had little choice in that. And this man took me. I signed all the papers and he took me to the train station and we went from Coblenz back to Hagen.

I remember he was very tired, this German official, and I didn't have handcuffs or anything. So he told me, and he was afraid that I'm going to escape again, so I had to give him my word of honor and say, Andre, don't run away because I'll be in big trouble if I do. And I had to give him a word of honor that I'm not going to run away. Although I had some thoughts about escape, running from the train, because sleep he was sleeping all the way from Coblenz to Hagen. But I didn't want to cause any trouble.

And so we came back to Hagen. And they didn't need me anymore as an interpreter, so they gave me a job working in a factory. And worked the night shift and I remained in Hagen for a few days. And I noticed when I came to have them to send me back to the same room that I used to stay before. And I noticed the relation with the boys, there were 16 of us in the room, was cool. I mean, before we had a warm, close relation. We would talk to each other. And this time was sort of cool.

and one boy said, this man came here, this Ukrainian official came here from the Ukrainian National Committee, and he was looking for you and asked, where is that Jew? Where's the Trag, Andre Trag? See what happened when I was in Hagen the Ukrainians who came from Western Ukraine had a special relation with the German government. There was a Ukrainian National Committee who had offices throughout large German cities to protect the rights of the Ukrainians from the Western part of Ukraine. And the Ukrainian who came from that part had special privileges, were getting better rations and all that.

For some silly reason, I sent a letter because my people, the people that were from Russian Ukraine, didn't receive all the privileges. I had a silly notion to send a letter to the Ukrainian National Committee in Essen to complain about it and told them to straighten this out. So for some reason my letter didn't sound like a letter written by Ukrainian peasant, so they suspected me of being Jewish.

On whose behalf are you writing the letter?

On behalf of all the Western Ukrainians working for this factory when I lived in Hagen.

What was motivating you? You call it a silly reason, but what was your rationale at the time? Why would you advocate for these people?

Well, we live together and we work together and I was Russian Ukrainian too. And so I felt that these people should get the privileges that they were entitled to. Like I said, it was a silly notion. I was young and-- So what happened, by the time this man from the National Committee came to Hagen to investigate, I wasn't there anymore. Because at that time I was working in this lead foundry away from Hagen, somehow they didn't pursue it. They weren't sure, but since I wasn't there they dropped the notion. But just the fact that they investigated and suspected me of being Jewish, it bothered me.

In retrospect, what might you think would tip them off that this letter was written by a Jewish person if there are syntax and grammar? Or if it only a Jewish person would complain in this way?

No, the form of the letter. Because I used to see the letters written by my friends and they would start with Christ and the letter would always begin with some reference and some phrase about Christ being not good to you or helping you or something like that. Of course, I didn't enter this in the letter.

Was there mention of writing a letter or a document that you didn't use?

Yeah, you didn't use those phrases that other Ukrainian people would use. It was a letter written in the proper Ukrainian language and grammatically, which didn't help either because most of the boys didn't write the language as grammatical as I did.

And if I may, let me take you back a little bit and then return to this point back in Hagen. I'd like to take you back to Trier and have you again to describe if you will the daily ritual of a nude inspection. Did they have a doctor in the camp?

Yes, they did have a doctor, more than one doctor, in the camp.

And is it a doctor sitting behind the table, perhaps? What do you recall about the specifics of the setup? When we last spoke, you mentioned you'd go through like a turnstile.

Yes.

Is there In fact a turnstile that each one goes through?

Yes, there was. Not exactly a turnstile with a wheel turning, but it was a narrow passage that yet had to go through. There was no doctor, no. There was a Kapo. One of the kapos was sitting there.

Does he have a pen and paper is he writing down? Does he know your identification?

Nothing.

Is he looking at you or is he distracted, doing other things?

Well, it was an unpleasant job I imagine, and this young man, this kapo was sitting there with the pencil and sort of picking up a penis and he didn't ask names.

He actually touches you with a pen.

He had a pencil or something like that.

Do you remember this with this much specificity being touched with a pencil?

Yes. Daily. All this time.

And there's no explanation you have in your own mind for how this person could overlook the fact that you have

circumcision.

Well, I believe what happened he was sitting there daily and looking at these hundreds of men coming through there. It was an unpleasant job and I imagine they didn't even think about it. And it never occurred to them there would be a Jewish boy in these camps. So he never gave it thought. That's my own explanation how he couldn't see because there's a big difference. I could tell the difference with looking at the penis of the other boys.

And do you recall thinking about some way of hiding the fact of the circumcision, or walking in a way that you wouldn't see you, or trying to-- Or you really have no choice and make no effort to--

There was no choice. No, I had to go through and you're walking very fast. You kept moving. The line was kept moving because you inspect this many people they had to do it quickly. So I doubt this boy ever even paid attention.

I'd also like to ask you, this very profoundly rich and meaningful dream that you had, were you in the habit of noticing your dreams? Were dreams of some importance to you? Do you have a pattern of dreams throughout this period that you might have some recollection of, or this particular was just so striking?

No, I didn't remember any dreams of as particular and poignant as this dream. Yeah, being a young man I'm sure I dreamt. I don't remember any of the dreams that I had. But this dream was so timely and how can I say? It was like a mission. Like this man was on a mission from some higher force to come and take me out of there. For a long time whenever I was telling people about this dream I was getting shivers in my skin.

Such a dream, I think, for a young boy in such very dangerous circumstances could convey to you a sense that you are under some protection, that your community, your family, or your religion perhaps are looking out for you.

As a matter of fact, at some point in time I began to think that I'm a special case. And also about that time and prior to that I got into a habit of asking God before going to sleep, before retiring, I would ask God to let me live one more day. And also when I left the ghetto I was not religious, but when I came to Germany my views changed somewhat. Then especially after going through all these trials and tribulations and all these miracles, you're right, I began to think that maybe I'm a special case. And then I thought, why me? Why all my friends were killed, my parents were killed, my whole family was killed, why pick on me? But you right at some point in time, I didn't know why. First this boy disappearing, and a few weeks later, I had this dream. And it sort of gave me some things to think about.

When you would invoke God in the evening to protect you for one more day, would you do so--