

OK. Before we start, I have a question so we don't complicate.

Today is March 21, 2001. We are at the Temple Beth El in San Mateo, California. And this morning, we're interviewing Dennis Miklos. My name is Peter Ryan, interviewer. Elizabeth Ryan is also doing the interviewing. Anne Grenn Saldinger is doing the videotape.

Could we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

I was born November the 4th, 1928 in a little village called Ribnica in Czechoslovakia.

And how many people were in your family?

In our immediate family, there were six of us, two parents and four siblings.

Could you name the parents and the children?

My father's name was Alader, A-L-A-D-A-R. My mother's name was Frida, F-R-I-D-A. My sister, Kathy, K-A-T-H-Y--

Was she the oldest?

She was the-- well, no, my oldest was the brother, F-R-E-D, Fred, and then my sister, Kathy, K-A-T-H-Y-- they both perished-- and my twin sister, Eva, E-V-A, who's now living in New York.

So you had a twin.

Yes. She's still with us.

Right. What did your father do?

My father did a combination of things, mainly a farmer. He had a farm near Ribnica-- actually in the area of Ribnica. And he also had a bank, a small bank, assisting the agriculture population in our area.

That's a very unusual combination, farmer/banker.

Yes.

And mostly, the bank was for the farmers of the area.

Correct.

And had there been a family tradition of farming? Do you know?

I don't think so. But I really can't tell for sure.

Do you know how far back the family goes in that area?

No. The only one I know about is my grandmother, who had a vineyard. Of course, she had the vineyard with her husband.

But her husband died the year I was born. And then she maintained that vineyard in the area. I can't remember, nor was I-- I don't think-- ever told about my great grandparents.

Do you know how big a town it was that you were born in?

Very small, maybe 300 people.

And how many Jews would you say?

Now, probably none. But we lived after-- I was born in this little place. But then we lived probably from year one, my year one, in a place called Umgvar, U-M-G-V-A-R. That's where I spent my time.

Now, how far was that from your original birthplace?

Maybe 15 miles.

And what kind of housing arrangement did you have there?

Where?

In Umgvar.

In Umgvar, we had a big home, a big house. Yes.

Was that a small community or larger?

The total community was approximately 35,000. I would say at least a third of them were Jewish.

And your father was still doing farming there?

Yes.

And the banking?

Bank was in Umgvar. And the farm was near Ribnica.

Do you remember your early schooling?

I do. I do. In Umgvar, I went to--

When did you start? What age?

I believe I was six. I believe that.

Six?

Yes.

And what public school?

Public school, and they-- well, they were Czechoslovakian schools.

Right.

But in 1930-- well, I was six in I think '34. In 1939, the Hungarians came in. And they became Hungary. So from that point on, I went to Hungarian school.

Now, you started school at age six in 1934.

Right.

And that was a public Czechoslovakian school.

Correct.

And what was spoken there? Czech?

Czech and Hungarian, because the population was mainly Hungarian.

So number one, it was in close proximity to Hungary geographically.

Right.

And it had also changed hands a number of times.

Correct.

So there were many Hungarians living there as well as Czechs.

Well, very few Czechs-- very few Czechs.

Slovaks?

Yes, very few. And when I say Czechs, Slovaks-- probably no Czechs. Yeah.

So this would be in the eastern part of Czechoslovakia.

Correct. Correct. Scenario where Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and probably Russia or Ukraine met in the corner there.

What do you remember about your early schooling?

Well, I kind of enjoyed it. I went with my sister together because we were the same age-- mostly Jewish colleagues.

Now, it was a public school.

It was a public school.

But mostly Jewish students?

Mostly, yes.

Was religion taught in the school at all?

No, I don't remember. I don't remember having it. But I went to what we called the cheder.

After school?

Yes.

And this was for Jewish learning?

Yes.

And done in Hebrew?

Yes. And it was escalated towards when I was probably 11 to study for the bar mitzvah. Yeah.

What was spoken at home?

Hungarian.

Hungarian.

Yes.

And what was spoken in the public schools? Czech? No.

No. I think-- well, we learned from the teachers in Czech. But as far as when we were free students, we spoke Hungarian.

So it was a very heavy Hungarian influence.

Absolutely.

I wanted to ask a question. Do you remember learning anything in school about the crucifixion?

No.

Do you remember learning anything about the Inquisition?

No.

Do you remember learning anything about the Black Plague? No.

No.

Did they not have history? Or was the history only of that area?

Yes, only that area that we learned about.

How, when, where did you learn about the history of the Jewish people and the persecutions they had suffered over the centuries? Or did you?

I probably didn't.

You didn't?

No.

Don't remember that?

No.

Were your family a religious family?

Well, they were not religious, per se. We were Orthodox, but we not-- use a simple-- we were not Hasidics. Just we

followed the religion. We had dairy and meat dishes separated, went to synagogue on Friday nights and Saturdays, but not during the week.

I did not wear a yarmulke. Neither did my father. But my mother was more religious than any of us.

Had she come from a religious family?

Not really.

No.

But she emphasized it.

How close were you and your sister, because twins are often usually very close?

Yes, and we were very close. Yeah.

Did you think alike?

Well, we do-- we do now. We find that because I speak with her a couple of times a week. And it's amazing how she reads my mind and I read hers. So it's more evident now than it used to be when we were small.

If you had a problem when you were young, who would you go to?

Probably my brother.

Your oldest brother.

Yes.

Why did you pick him?

I don't know. He was my role model, I guess. He was--

How much older?

Seven years older.

Seven.

Yes. And my older sister and I were a five-year difference. She was born in 1923.

Now, if you had gone to your older brother about some kind of situation that was giving you a little difficulty, he would be sympathetic?

It's tough to remember that. but most of the time, he was. And most of the time, he told me to go see my parents about it. But I didn't have-- I didn't have too many problems. I don't remember having too many problems.

But sometimes, people just had a need to talk to someone older.

But it was my brother and probably my mother.

How about your father?

Well, I loved him dearly. And he loved me.

But it was not the kind of thing where you would talk to him?

No. It wasn't the kind of relationship that I had with my sons, a constant--

Say more.

Pardon me?

Say more. What do you mean?

Well, when my boys were growing up, my wife and I together were constantly following their progress, what they were doing, where they were. But my father didn't do that. No. He kind of left it up to my mother to be in control.

Was that typical, do you think, in those days?

I think so. I think so.

Did that make him feel more detached to you?

I don't know how he felt about it, but--

No, I meant the way you saw it.

No, he was not detached. No.

Even though he let her kind of run things and know where you were and so on, you felt that he was very involved?

Mm-hmm. Well, of course, he was away from the house every day. He was either in the bank or on the farm. And he left early and came back late. So I don't remember him ever asking, well, how was school, for example. He may have because it's been 60-some years.

True.

But my mother did and my brother did and so forth.

You do remember that.

Yes. Yes, because my brother used to help me with my schoolwork.

And your mother was the kind of person who would be asking how things were, how things went?

Right. Right. Right.

Did the family feel Czech?

No.

What did they feel?

Hungarian.

Hungarian.

Yes.

So how did they make sense out of now being a country called Czechoslovakia?

Well, I don't know. But remember, before the First World War, before 1918, it was Hungary. And my mother and father born in-- I guess my father was born in 1888. My mother was born in 1896.

So it was Hungary for them. And Czechoslovakia became-- we became Czechoslovaks in 1918 for those 20 years. So it was a temporary situation.

Right. So at the time that you were growing up, they had had many more years of being literally Austrian citizens than they had Czechoslovakian citizens.

Well, Hungarian citizens, Hungarian. It was Austro-Hungarian prior to the First World War. But we didn't speak German at home. But we spoke Hungarian. It was all Hungarian.

Do you think that it then caused difficulty to feel loyalty to the Czechoslovakian state?

I don't remember. I do remember that when we became Hungary again, there was joy in the home.

There was?

Yes. Your home?

Your home because it's our language and it's our culture.

Do you remember talking in the house of world conditions, dangers?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Before the invasion of Czechoslovakia?

No, not then. But it started in 1940, '41, when Hitler started taking the countries over in Europe. And we were just wondering when we are next.

Well, in fact, you had already been taken over by Hitler in '42.

Not until 1944. We were the last one.

But what was the arrangement between Czechoslovakia and Germany? Germany had occupied Czechoslovakia first in 1938, Sudetenland. And then in 1939, they took over the rest.

Not Hungary. See, we were Hungary.

Oh, OK.

We were Hungary starting--

It's not the Germans occupying you. It's the Hungarians reclaiming what used to be theirs.

That's right.

OK.

So for all intents and purposes, starting in 1939, we were Hungarians, not Germans and not Czechoslovakian.

And the Hungarians allowed you to continue life as you had known it?

More or less, yes. We felt very-- we saw very few problems-- some antisemitism, yes. But we were--

What do you remember? Well, somebody calling me Jew and so forth. But we were not prevented from doing what we used to do under the Czechoslovaks.

Violence towards the Jews?

No. No, very little.

They didn't interfere with your father's occupation?

No.

You didn't feel unsafe then?

No, we didn't. Now, was there talk that we might have problems later? Yes. But we kept going to school. My father kept going to his farm. And the bank was open. And so--

What were the problems later? What was anticipated?

Well, later was when the Germans came in 1944, spring of 1944.

Yes. But had that been something that people had been concerned about?

Yes, because the surrounding countries, like Slovakia, maybe 15, 20 miles from us, were taken over by the Germans. Romania was taken over by the Germans.

How familiar were you with what was really going on there?

Well, let's see. I was 15, 14 years old. I wasn't involved in the family conversations. But I was listening. I was aware of it. I knew that something was going on.

What did you know was going on?

Well, my father will listen to the radio. And he will tell my mother, this is happening in Stalingrad or this is what's happening.

Was it allowed, to have radios?

Yes. But we were not allowed to listen to BBC.

Did you listen?

Yes.

They evidently couldn't figure a way to jam that frequency.

I guess they were not so--



Because I'm amazed how many people were able to listen to BBC during the war in very faraway places, like Hungary.

Yes, we did. Of course, as soon as we finished hearing the news, we moved the dial in case somebody walked in.

And would you turn it on only at specific hours?

In the evening.

Would everyone in the family listen?

My father and my brother, mainly. And sometimes, a neighbor who didn't have a radio would come in and listen.

The men?

The men.

Not the women?

No.

Were they shielding themselves separately? Or were the men shielding them?

I think that was just the culture.

This is a man's business?

That's right.

War?

Yeah.

Did you have other relatives in Slovakia and now Hungary?

Yes.

Yes?

Well, it starts with my grandmother on my mother's side. She lived with us from the beginning of, I believe, 1935. Until '35, she had her own house in the same city.

Is this the grandma who had the vineyard?

That's right. And then she-- I don't know how old she was at the time, maybe in her 70s. She moved in with us. She had a little apartment in our building.

In 1935?

Yes. And she stayed with us till the end.

This was your mother's mother.

Right.

Were you close to her?

Yes, very much so. And then my grandfather, her husband, died in 1928 when I was born, in an accident. My grandparents from my father's side also lived in the same building. But they both died in the early '30s-- well, 1933, my grandmother, in '35, my grandfather.

Then we had aunts and uncles not in the same city, but close by, within 25 miles.

From which side of the family?

My mother's side.

Did she come from a big family?

There were three sisters and one brother. And my father had two sisters.

Was he the oldest, your father?

No. No, I think he was the youngest.

Would you have family meals every day?

Absolutely.

And would that be at the middle of the day or the evening?

Evening.

Because your father was away.

That's right. That's right-- about 7 o'clock. Now, my sister told me a few years ago that she remembers us having the main meal at lunchtime. And I did not remember that. All I remember is going to school and taking my lunch with me.

You remember taking your lunch to school.

Yes.

Not coming home.

Well, we came home about 2 o'clock.

Yeah, but that would be the end of the day.

That's right.

You didn't go back and--

No. No.

Was your mother a wonderful cook?

Pardon me?

Was your mother a wonderful cook?

Oh, yes. Of course, my grandmother was doing a lot of cooking, too, because she lived with us. And I failed to mention the schooling. After the elementary school, my sister and I went to a Jewish gymnasium, which was a high school in this town. It was all Jewish kids.

They had their own separate gymnasium?

Yes.

And it was not state-run?

I don't know if it was funded by the state, but it was all Jewish students and Jewish professors.

Could non-Jews go to that school? Do you know?

I don't think so. First of all, they probably didn't want to. But it was all Jewish.

Did you have friends who were both Jews and non-Jews when you were growing up?

I don't think so. I don't remember.

It was all Jews that you remember?

Yes. I don't think so.

And your family-- do you know if they had friends who were both Jewish and not Jewish?

Again, I don't think so. I don't remember them coming into the house socially.

What about your father's farm? Did he have employees? Or did he do all the work himself?

No, he had employees. Matter of fact, he had a manager who lived on the farm who handled the workers, hiring them.

And were they all Jewish, too?

No.

They didn't have to be Jewish.

No. No.

Interesting.

Do you remember experiencing direct incidents of antisemitism?

No.

No.

Well, I take it back because it comes back to me once in a while. And I don't know why, but it happened maybe 60 years ago. In 1937 or '38, when we were still Czechoslovakian and I was in grammar school, one Czech student-- now, he was really Czech-- called me dirty Jew or something about Jews. And I turned around and called him a dirty Czech.

And of course, he complained about me. And my parents were notified that I had to come in with my father and explain

what happened. There was no punishment, but it was a very unfriendly situation. I was concerned about it very much. But that was it that I remember.

You were concerned in terms of--

That they might expel me for this.

You defended yourself by saying, well, he called me a dirty Jew?

Oh, yes. And that's what--

Was that enough?

It was. It was, because I was not expelled. I was not punished. But that's the only-- it's a minor situation. But that's the only one I remember.

Do you remember how your father was about that incident? You had to go to school with him, right?

I don't remember whether he thought that I shouldn't have called him a dirty Czech.

Was he supportive?

Yes, he was.

That's what you remember.

Right.

And the principal-- did you have to talk to the principal?

Oh, yes.

And how was that received?

It was very calm. But I guess he had to do what he was supposed to do is follow up why I called him Czech. The question was not why he called me a Jew.

Because everyone understood that.

That's right.

But a dirty Czech--

Dirty Czech was not allowed. But I told the principal that he called-- of course, he was there also, this young fellow.

That's sort of funny in a way. It's like calling someone a dirty American now. That would-- it's a mixture of insult and not insult.

That's right. That's right. But you see--

But you were saying it coming from a Hungarian background. That's why--

I don't know that I was thinking that smartly at the time. But I couldn't call him-- I didn't think about calling him a dirty Catholic, because I didn't know whether he was Catholic. So the only thing I could think of was Czech.

But we had very little problems, as far as religion, in the early '40s-- '41, '42, '43-- although Hitler was roaming all over Europe at the time, taking countries all over.

But he wasn't bothering where you were.

No.

And the Hungarians were not.

No. Of course, people are still writing books about it as to why. And the closest thing that I learned about it, that the Hungarians said, keep out of here. And we'll take care of it.

And at the end, the Germans felt, well, they didn't take care of it because all the Jews are still there. So they decided in the spring of '44 to go to work on us.

Tell me how it was for you. How do you remember it?

How do I remember it? Well, that's when we heard that the Germans came into Budapest, which was the capital of Hungary. And they start--

Now, you would have heard that by radio or--

By radio or by telephone. My aunt and uncle lived in Budapest from my father's side. And they started rounding up Jews in Budapest. So we figured it's going to be very soon when it's our turn. I remember my-- I may go back and forth here.

That's OK.

I remember my father was thinking about moving the family to our farm.

That that would be safer?

It would be safer.

Than being in the city?

Yes. Maybe some of the people, workers there-- because he had a very close relationship with them-- would be hiding us. But he said that's not going to work because the regulations indicated that if anyone is caught hiding Jews--

It's their life.

But whatever, that's going to be too bad.

So your father thought, I won't be able to find people who would be willing to hide us in those conditions?

Correct. Pardon me?

He was afraid that he wouldn't be able to find someone that would be willing to hide them--

That's right--

Under that threat?

Now, I also remember him buying on the farm from somebody a certificate that we were not Jews. We were Catholics,

because it was a very popular thing to do at the time. And a lot of people got away with it.

And I remember him bringing the certificates home that he bought. And after a day or so, my mother and my father decided to tear it up and not to use it.

Why?

Because that-- if we get caught lying about it, that would have been the end of us. But the main reason for--

How was that for you to listen to that kind of talk going on?

No, it wasn't pleasant. We were worried. But I don't--

Did that frighten you to hear?

Yes, but my father and mother never called us together. Maybe my brother and sister, older sister, were involved. But my twin and I, we were never involved in the discussions.

But you were almost 17 by then.

No. No, I was 14. I'm talking about 1943 or something like that. I was 14 or 15.

Did you wish that you had been involved? No. No, because I don't think I could have added anything to the subject. Of course, the Hungarians and the Germans did a terrific job with the propaganda as to tell us that it's not going to be bad.

Even if we are taken to camps, we're going to be together. It's going to be a working type of environment. And none of us heard about Auschwitz, none of us, although Auschwitz was there from 1939. We didn't have the internet that we can look up what's going on in the world.

So all those death camps were really still secret at that point?

I beg your pardon?

All those death camps were still secret to you?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It was nonexistent to us, nonexistent.

Now, was it not true after Poland was taken over in 1939--

Which was close to us--

That Polish refugees would come to these different countries and they would tell stories about how they were being treated?

Correct. But we felt-- my father and mother and the rest of the Jewish population-- that this is not going to happen here. It will not happen in Hungary.

Why not?

Because they left us alone for four or five years. Why would they start now? We were naive. We were very naive.

On the other hand, the evidence each day said the way we're viewing this is probably correct. They are going to leave us alone.

Well, we started-- we started thinking about real deep trouble in January of '44, because we knew that the Germans are losing the war. And they're just not going to leave us. Or we didn't think they're going to leave us there and go down without us go down with them.

So your father was trying to make preparations. He bought certificates. He thought about hiding you on the farm. Did he have other contingency plans?

No, no, no. Some of the Jewish friends just took off into the mountains to hide. But my father was super naive, along with everybody else.

See, he was an officer in the Hungarian army during the First World War, decorated. And he was-- he was naive. That's the only thing.

Did he think that would protect him? Many people did.

Yes.

Sure.

Yes.

What did your father think of people who took off for the mountains? Did he think they were hysterical?

He thought they're making a mistake because they're going to get caught. And most of them were caught.

In other words, he saw it as more dangerous to do that.

Absolutely. Yeah, he took the easy way out. He says, listen, there are 10,000 Jews in this town. And we're going to be one of them.

Incidentally, he was also-- I don't know if I mentioned it. He was prominent in the Jewish community. He was the president of the Jewish Federation there. And he said, I can't do these things without letting down my people.

He didn't want to set a bad example.

Yes.

So he felt a considerable responsibility.

Correct.

How about your mother? Did she agree with him on his--

I think so, because we didn't hear any controversy about it.

So when did it become apparent that this was not going to work?

Apparently, it became apparent I believe in March of 1944, when we had to start wearing the yellow armband.

You would have to wear it on your arm?

Mm-hmm. On my jacket and--

Jacket.

Yes. There were restrictions as to how late we can be out on the street in the evening. And then I think in April, we were notified that they're going to put us in a ghetto in that city. And that's where we wound up sometimes in May, all Jews in that brickyard.

How many people you think were there?

Well, about 10,000.

All of your family?

Yes.

Your mother, your father--

Mother, father, sisters, and my grandmother. Now, it may have been more because there were a lot of Jews in the vicinity, in little villages around our city. And they were also brought into the same place.

And what were the conditions like there?

What can I tell you? It wasn't awful. It was not awful, because we had the hut, a big hut and beds, not real beds-- like you go camping.

Cots.

Cots.

Heat?

I don't remember. Of course, it was April. We were there April, May, June. I don't--

It might not have been that cold.

Yeah. Matter of fact, as I'm thinking here, I don't even remember us cooking separately. I think it was--

Communal--

A community kitchen there. I can't remember that.

Was there enough to eat?

Yes. Yes. It wasn't great food, but I don't remember being hungry.

Were you frightened?

You would remember, I'm sure.

I would remember. Yes. Not in a ghetto.

Were you frightened?

I don't-- I was not.

Were any members of your family, as far as you knew?



Frightened?

Yes.

No, because keep in mind, they played that game till the very end-- very end.

That this was going to be all right. We're going to keep families together.

Yes. Even when we were put in the cattle cars, we thought we're going to a camp where we're going to be working together.

In the east somewhere.

Yes.

That's what they told you.

That's what they told us.

Did you get worried when you saw that the train was not a normal train?

Yes. Yes. Yes. We were in the cattle car for I believe-- it seemed like forever. But I understand it was three days.

How long were you in the ghetto before you were transported?

Couple of months, I think. It may have been just six weeks. It may have been--

Was there any work there?

No.

People just sat and--

Right. Nothing.

What was that place where the ghetto was set up? They did bricks there, a brickyard I guess you call it.

In the town.

And outside of town.

So they just walled it off and--

Walled it off--

And brought in cots and said, you live here now.

Yes. And we heard later that in almost every city in Hungary, they used the same format.

And you left-- had to leave all your possessions behind?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

How much notice did you have that you had to go to the ghetto?

I believe a couple of days, three days.

And everything stayed behind. That must have been fantastically difficult.

And here again, I remember I was-- I want to emphasize it. Although I was 14, I was still a child, because I never had to-- my sons when they were 14 knew more about the world than I did when I was 14.

So you knew too little to be afraid?

Yes.

Is that what you're saying?

Yes.

Well, I'm thinking about your mother, just the ordinary things of life that you accumulate, your pots, your pans, your sheitel if she wore one, whatever it is.

It was all left behind in our home.

Was she very upset?

I don't know.

You don't remember?

I really don't know. I wish I could tell you. I don't want to say something that--

If you don't remember, maybe she wasn't. I don't want to--

Probably my father was most upset about these things, because he was very quiet throughout the whole time, very quiet.

Had they taken the bank away?

Oh, yes.

And they took the farm away?

That's right.

Before you were put in the ghetto?

Yes.

How much before? Do you know?

Maybe six months before. Yes

So for six months, there was nothing for him to do.

Nothing. Nothing. He was just going to the temple. And they had offices there and worried about who's going to do what, how are they going to organize.

This must have been a crushing transformation for people, huh?

Unbelievable.

Everything that you know how to do is taken away from you. And suddenly, you have all this free time. And you don't have anything to do.

No. And they did it gradually. They didn't just say, today, everything is fine. And tomorrow, it's going to be a different world. They did everything gradually. They were excellent in that.

I imagine for the adults who knew the implications or could imagine them, I imagine your father-- your father's silence, he must have been terrified and not wanting to frighten you.

And he probably had a guilty conscience that he didn't do something about preventing this situation. And here again, I'm just guessing.

As if he could.

I never had a chance to ask him later on.

So you were on the train for three days?

I believe it was three days from Umgar, which was the ghetto, to Auschwitz.

Now, how did you get from the ghetto to the train?

By buses. It was just like two or three kilometers. It was very close for the train station.

They didn't make people walk there.

No. No, I don't think so. But it may have been. I don't remember. I don't remember.

Do you remember anything about that trip?

You know that I just remembered something that-- since you mentioned it. I think we did walk there because we walked past our home, our house, in rows of rows of Jews. And I remember looking at the house. And some of the people who lived in-- Gentiles-- were out there standing and looking at us.

People had taken over your house.

Yes. Well, I don't know if this particular family took over our apartment. But that they were living in this building. It was ours.

Do you remember anything else about the trip?

A trip to--

On the train.

Well, yes. I remember there was a can of something where it was our bathroom. And I believe there were like 40 or 50 people.

Sometimes, I read that in some places, they have 200. I don't know how it's possible. But my grandmother was there.

We were all concerned about her.

Her health--

She was almost 80, I think.

Was there room to sit down?

There were benches.

You had benches, at least.

Benches.

Could you get any sense of where you were going by seeing maybe the signs in different towns or--

No.

No.

No.

So no idea where you were going.

No. They told us we're going somewhere in Poland where we'll be together and we'll be working. So after Umgvar, there were maybe three or four cities where this thing stopped. They probably picked up some more customers.

Paying or non-paying?

Pardon me? Yes. But perhaps after eight or 10 hours, it was no man's land. We didn't know where we were.

Can you describe the arrival?

Oh, I will. But I'd like to take a break for a few minutes.

Sure.

We were in the middle of discussing the train ride and wanted to ask if you could describe how it was when the train arrived at wherever the destination was.

Now comes the difficult part. We arrived in Auschwitz. We were told to separate men and women immediately. And then they told us under age whatever-- eight, 10, whatever, I don't remember the number-- to make a third group.

And I remember staying with my father and my brother, three of us, together. I guess my age or the way I looked, they felt that I can do some work. That was the emphasis, who can work and who cannot work. Of course, it turned out to be a lie.

How old would your father have been then? Do you know?

Yes. My father was 56 or 55, 55 or 56. Now, that's the last time I saw my mother and my sisters and my grandmother, because they went into another group.

And your twin?

Sister went with the women.

With the women.

Yeah. Then we walked into the camp. And I remember going into this huge, huge dressing room. They took all our clothes away. And they gave us prisoner's outfit and cut our hair. And now, we were prisoners of Auschwitz.

No tattoo.

No. No. Some did get tattooed. Some didn't.

Do you know what the criteria was for who got it and who didn't?

I don't know. I guess I asked a few people later on. Those who remained in Auschwitz for an extended period were tattooed.

We stayed there. We were there, I think, for three weeks maybe. It may have been four. It may have been two. When you have a good time, you forget about days.

Were you still together with your father and your brother?

I was together with my father and my brother. Then at one point, they asked for volunteers for a project. And my brother volunteered. Why? I don't know. But then we got separated from him.

You know what kind of project?

I don't remember. And I stayed with my father.

And what would the days be like there?

Boring. Now, that's when we start getting hungry.

[PETER SNEEZES]

Pardon me.

Bless you. There's very little food, very little food. And the barracks were not comfortable.

Now, this was summer?

This was summer, in early June of 1944.

Was it hot?

I don't remember it being too hot.

They didn't try to make you work.

Not in Auschwitz. Not in Auschwitz, just roaming around. Matter of fact, when we were told I believe in three weeks, after three weeks, that we're going to go somewhere, we were happy about it, because we're thinking, well, this is going to be something better.

Did you have any idea about extermination then?

No. And it was right there. No.

Was it crowded at that point in Auschwitz?

Mm-hmm.

It was.

Yeah, because I think we were if not the last transport, very close to the last one.

Were there prisoners there from other countries?

Yes, but mainly the Hungarians, mainly Hungarians. I remember seeing people that I knew from my town.

Were you together with other people who had already been there for a while?

Yes, but not for too long, perhaps with the previous transport, a week or two weeks before that.

Would they be reluctant to tell you what was going on there? Or were people reluctant to hear what they had to tell?

Well, when you say "they," we had no contact with them, except three times a day when they told us to line up because they're going to count us, the German soldiers. And there was no conversation as to what is the situation here. What are we doing? What are you doing?

So in other words, when you were free to roam around, you were free to roam around with other people who had come there when you had come.

Right.

Not with people who'd been there for some months or anything.

No.

So in effect, they kept you isolated.

Right.

Did you see people who were very thin from not having eaten for a long time?

I don't remember. I don't remember.

Did you see brutality there?

No. No.

So it looked better than one might have thought.

Yeah. But we knew that we're not going into a place where you're going to be together and we'll be working and the family's going to stay together. We knew there was something different.

Because you'd already been divided up.

That's right. Yes. And we had nothing left. Even the little things that we brought along on the train ride were taken away from-- we had nothing left, nothing.

Did you have a spoon?

Yes, from what we got from them.

They gave you a spoon?

Yeah. And the shoes-- I guess that's the only thing that we kept were the shoes.

They let you keep the shoes?

Yes. I remember they didn't last long. But we kept the shoes.

Did you get sick there?

I don't remember being sick. Now, you're probably going to be surprised from my story that-- and my wife every once in a while tries to bring up problems.

And basically, I didn't experience terrible, terrible things because I was-- they called us the [GERMAN], in the child camp. I spent a lot of time with other children. And they treated us a little bit better.

What age would that be?

Anywhere 13 to 16, because if you were under 13, you were put in a gas chamber. And if you were over 16, you went with the adults.

Now, I found out later-- just to make a little story-- that I was together with Elie Wiesel. See, he was brought to Auschwitz from Szatmar, which is Romania-- actually Hungary, but before Hungary was Romania. He and I are the same age.

He was brought there in June just like we were, Auschwitz for a couple of weeks, then Buchenwald. I'll get to it in a minute. And we were in the same building. I met him a few years ago, and we were talking about that.

Were you able to meet people that you say had come from home in the camp?

Yes.

And you could converse? You could commiserate--

Correct--

And support each other?

Yes.

Did anyone else that you were able to meet, people your own age, were they together with their father like you were?

A few of us.

A few.

A few of us.

Were you worried about how your father would survive?

No.

No.

No.

Somehow, you felt--

He was probably worried about me, but I was not worried about him.

The ignorance of youth, huh?

That's right.

You don't know what to worry about.

That's right.

Yeah. It's a blessing.

We took one day at a time.

So you didn't really see much brutality, not there.

Not in Auschwitz.

So how was it that you then--

Then we were--

moved--

Put on a train again into the Zeitz.

Into what?

Excuse me. We were first in Buchenwald, Buchenwald.

Were you told where you were going?

No.

No.

They may have been, but I don't remember. We just knew that we arrived there.

With your father?

Were you with your father?

With my father. And then we got separated.

There?



Yes.

Immediately?

Immediately because he went with the adults, and I went with the children in a separate building. And I saw him every day because he was just yards from where we were. And in Buchenwald, we were working out digging ditches and--

What were you doing?

I remember working with bricks again and cleaning the German-- there were a lot of German soldiers there, the so-called guards. And we were cleaning the houses. But it wasn't terrible. It was not terrible.

But before you ask me, there was brutality, because if somebody didn't do enough work or didn't want to work, they just beat them up right in front of us.

Would you witness some things like that?

Oh, yes. And that was basically their way of telling us, don't you try to do this, because this is what the consequences are. Now, we were in Buchenwald for maybe two months. And from there, we were taken to Zeitz, a place called Z-E-I-Z, I believe, not too far.

It was a huge coal factory. And the Americans were constantly bombing it. And then we would come and clean it up. And they would start working on it, and the bombs would come again.

It was a coal factory?

Coal, I think. Yes.

It was like a coal mine?

A coal mine. But they were also processing the coal in factories. But that was a short time, maybe a month or two.

How did you get from Buchenwald to there?

In train, in cattle cars.

Again.

Yes.

And you were with your father.

Yes.

And how was he holding up at that point?

He was holding up good. He was holding up good.

And you?

And I was holding up good.

All this time, did you have enough to eat?

No. No, not as much as we would like to. There were portions in the morning, then at night. My father started to feel ill. I remember his feet were always swollen, probably a heart condition.

And there were times when he couldn't go to work. So they left him there. So then I went by myself. But we were holding up together.

Did you see that as a sign of something to worry about?

Yes, I worried about it. But I kept asking if there's anything I can do. He said, no, everything is fine.

And the Germans were pretty tolerant about that, because I don't remember them saying, you must go no matter what. Matter of fact, a few times, I took him down in the hospital-- what they called the hospital for treatment.

And would they give him treatment?

Yes.

What would they give him? Do you know?

Don't remember. Don't remember whether it was medication or therapy.

Now, what time of year are we talking about now? July, August, September?

I would probably say it's the winter of '44. It could have been October, November, or December. Don't--

It's winter. Did they give you anything more to wear?

I don't think so. No.

Do you remember being cold?

Yes.

Cold and hungry.

No, this was Germany.

I said cold and hungry.

Cold and hungry.

Yeah.

Yes.

In the barracks also?

Yes.

And was your father continuing to get worse?

Not drastically. Not drastically, because-- maybe I'm jumping ahead of myself. He lived till the day before we were liberated. He lived till April.

And was working?

Working or staying in the barrack, working again. But he was not well. I didn't think-- here again, I wasn't thinking about him dying. But I just knew that he was in trouble.

Did you have some ideas about what had happened to your mother, to your brother?

None.

To your sister?

I feel guilty even saying it. But we weren't-- I don't remember thinking about them. I'm sure my father was.

Do you think what you're describing is what survival is like for people?

Yes.

That they just focus on surviving and everything else is gone?

Yes. Yes, it had to be. They didn't have the time or the energy to think about other things.

Did you see much stealing of food between prisoners?

Mm-hmm. Whether it was much, I don't know. But constantly, people were screaming and yelling. It disappeared overnight when they put the bread under their pillows. And people would come and take it away.

Were you ever tempted?

No.

That was a line you couldn't cross.

No. No.

Did you ever try to save food for later yourself?

Well, I'm going to separate now Buchenwald from the other two places. In Buchenwald, because I was in a children's camp, they treated us better than the others. So I had a chance to bring something to my father, something that I didn't need or I was willing to give up. But it was bread or soup.

I remember one of the prisoners, non-Jewish prisoners, someone from Holland, would come over and talk to us and give me chocolate and candy, because they were able to get packages from home. And I would bring it to my father, some of it. So there were some decent people there.

So there were people there who were not Jewish.

Oh, yes. Buchenwald was half and half, probably there.

A lot of political prisoners.

Political prisoners from Norway, from France, from Germany.

And they let you mingle with them.

Yes. Yes.

And there were Russian prisoners, too, weren't there?

I don't remember the Russians. But I know there were Czechs. There were French, Holland, Norway. Homosexuals were there. Priests were there.

Did you have to wear some identifying--

No.

No.

But we were in a prisoner's uniform.

But the children didn't have to have--

No. But we were definitely treated better.

Now, after you left the ghetto and started on these journeys and went from one camp to another, did you have any idea what was going on in the world? The war?

Yes.

How would you know? How would you find out.

We heard reports. Well, it started in Auschwitz, because I remember one of the other Jewish prisoners came to my father and saying, I just heard that the Americans landed in France. It was first part-- middle of June, I think.

So we heard that the Americans had landed there. Then later on, we heard that the Russians are in such and such a place. And the Americans are maybe 100 miles from us. So we constantly heard reports. And we were involved with it, because we're waiting and waiting.

Did that give you hope?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Did you think you were going to survive?

Yes. Yes, I never thought about dying. I'm sure my father did. But I didn't.

You never thought about dying.

Because I was never sick. I was never sick.

So the question was, could you hold out longer?

Right.

And that was out of your control.

That's right.

In the children's camp at Buchenwald, do you remember about how many children were there?

In our camp?

Mm-hmm.

Maybe 150, 200. When I say "camp," in our building.

So it was one particular barracks set aside.

Right.

Now, was Elie Wiesel there?

Yes.

Yes?

Yes. I read it in his book when he was talking about it. And then I spoke with him when I saw him here. And he was in a very similar situation.

In what sense?

Well, we were brought there about the same time from the same general area. He was there with his father, just like I was. He was in Buchenwald in this camp. His father died just before we got liberated. So did mine.

It was unbelievable when I was reading about it in his book. Matter of fact, I told my wife, if any of you want to know what happened to me, then all you have to do is read the book.

Did you actually know him?

Not there.

Not there. No.

No, he was not known at the time.

Were there any girls in this--

No.

Just young men.

Just young men.

Was there another building with young women or--

I don't think so. No. They were in different camps, different--

These were all Jewish children.

I don't want to say for sure.

There might have been some that weren't.

Yes.

Children of other kinds of prisoners.

Yeah.

When you were moved from Buchenwald, was that disturbing to you because you had been treated fairly well there?

It may have been. It may have been. But we were told, I remember, that we are coming back soon.

Oh, you're going, but you're going to come back.

That's right. And it did happen. We were back within a month, I think.

Really?

Yes.

And do you have any sense why you were going to be back?

I don't know. I don't know.

You went to this coal producing area. And you were there for a month?

It may have been six weeks.

And you were digging?

Well, what we were really doing is cleaning up after the bombardment. And within a couple weeks, the chimneys were starting to go. And the Americans would come. And we were maybe 200 yards from the plant. And we were watching the bombs come down.

Did you want them to bomb?

Don't remember. I don't remember. But I'm sure I was thinking, please don't hit us. But they didn't. It was amazing. It was absolutely amazing.

Did they come in low?

No.

High.

High, high, high.

So they had good bomb sites, huh?

Right. Matter of fact, I don't remember seeing the planes. We heard the noise, but then the bombs are coming.

So you could hear the plane and you could hear the bombs, but you didn't see them.

No.

They were too high.

And they were decent enough, the Germans, that once they learned that the planes are coming, they moved us out of there.

That was my next question.

Oh, yeah. Every time, they moved us out of there.

Did they come every day?

Not every day, but I want to say maybe six or eight times while we were there.

Now, was this-- would you consider where you were like a power plant? Were they producing power?

I don't know. I don't know.

Because I'm wondering why they wanted to--

It was important for them. Otherwise, they wouldn't have constantly come back.

That's what makes me think it was power producing.

It may have been. But evidently, the Germans finally gave up on cleaning it up. And they said, just keep it there the way it is. And we're going to send the prisoners away.

And so that's when you went back to Buchenwald?

Right.

And that was with your father.

Correct.

And did you get back into the same--

Same environment--

Same setup.

Yeah.

And you father was still right next to you?

Yes. Could I stop for a minute? I'm OK. I'd like to use the restroom, which is--

You had--

You're going to eliminate the part where I said I'm going to the bathroom.

It'll be edited out, not to worry.

You had just gone back to Buchenwald.

Yes.

But that isn't shown.

OK.

Could we pick up with your having gone back to Buchenwald?

Sure.

It was in the winter of '44 now?

Winter of '44. It may have been January. It may have been December or February. I do not remember.

Do you remember whether one loses track of days?

Yes. I had no idea whether it's Saturday, Sunday, Monday, or the second or the third or the fourth.

And the same thing with months? Did you know what month?

That's right. That's right. No, we didn't.

Did you know when-- was there any way to know when Jewish holidays were occurring?

Yes. Yes.

How?

Because some of the firmer-- not the Hasidics, but the ones that followed in the morning and noon, and they were dabbling without the book. And we knew when the holidays were.

Oh, yeah. They were fasting on Yom Kippur. And that was not a big deal because there wasn't much to eat. But they knew. I don't know how. I still don't know how.

They must have counted the day.

Yes. Yes.

Would you at this point-- your father was clearly showing signs of weakness.

Absolutely.

Were you trying to find extra food for him or give him some of yours?

Yes. Like I said, we were treated better than the others, the adults. And whether it was more food or better food, but constantly, every day, I brought him something.

Do you remember what you had to eat?

Bread, mainly, some margarine, soup. I don't ever remember eating meat. I don't. But basically, the diet was bread, margarine, and soup.

And was the soup really soup the way we think of soup?



No. No.

Tell us about the soup.

Well, I can't tell you how the soup was, what kind it was. But I can tell you that we spent probably half of our time, whether with my father or with others, talking about food. And I read later in books that it was the custom all over.

When you're hungry.

Yeah.

Do you remember any acts of kindness?

Like I mentioned a while ago, there were some other prisoners, Gentiles, who were, again, better treated than we were as children. It was different plateaus. They were getting packages from home. They had a better bed or a mattress.

So they came down to see us, especially the kids-- talk to us and bring us things. I remember that. But as far as kindness from the soldiers, the guards, no.

No.

No.

Somehow, the children represented a hope for the older people.

Correct. Correct.

That you were going to survive and be in this new world.

Maybe. But I still don't understand why the Germans--

Allowed it--

Allowed us to have a better life. I don't know.

It doesn't make any sense given what they were doing.

None. None.

It must have to do with the age. Clearly, they got rid of so many children.

They got rid of the little children. They got rid of the elderly.

And they didn't want future enemies. But here's this little teeny group, 13 to 16.

Yes.

You don't fit into categories for them.

No. No, they didn't know what to do with us.

So were you still doing work when you went back there?

Yes. Yes, I remember almost every day, we went on a project in the morning. I came back around 5 o'clock-- doing

things, cleaning up things, digging ditches.

Would they bring you into the town to clean up the bombing?

No, not the town. We're talking about Buchenwald now?

Yes.

No. Buchenwald was not a town. It was just a camp. The town nearby was Weimar, maybe six kilometers from there. Buchenwald was just a camp. There was no city attached to it.

Were they real work or were they-- I've heard prisoners sometimes describe make-work things, like moving rocks back and forth. Were they real projects or make-work projects?

A combination of them, a combination. Sometimes, we were building barracks for the guards, for the soldiers. Or we were cleaning up after somebody was building something. It wasn't heavy work, because I don't ever remember saying I can't do it.

What languages did you speak at that time?

Hungarian.

How much of a handicap was that in Buchenwald?

It wasn't much because I spoke a little bit of German. And so did my father. So with some of the others, the non-Hungarians, we spoke in German.

So you were able to understand the orders.

Yes. We were able to communicate.

Is that because Germany had a heavy influence in Hungary?

I don't know. They didn't have a heavy influence. But just like here, you have a second language. Sometimes, it's Spanish or French. But in Hungary, it probably was German.

That's what I mean.

Yes.

Was there any-- to your knowledge, anyone in Buchenwald who had a radio who could hear what was happening?

We had no knowledge of it because, obviously, it was not allowed. We would have been in deep trouble.

Sure. When you were being bombed, would you know who was bombing you?

Oh, yes. But it didn't happen in Buchenwald. It was at Zeitz, but not in Buchenwald. They were not bombing.

So there was not much bombing when you were in Buchenwald.

None at all. None at all.

In surrounding cities or anything?

We didn't know about it.

You didn't know about it.

So you really didn't have a way to follow the progress of the war while you were there?

Not in minute detail.

But you'd hear some rumors.

We heard rumors that the Americans or the Russians are X kilometers away. And I don't know how we got that, but probably from the German guards. Somehow, they would be telling some of the old timers what's going on.

Now, if I may jump ahead, we were really hopeful around March, at the end of March, because we saw less and less guard, the German soldiers, less and less. Instead of having 100 around, they were taken away. They were evacuating.

So we were really hopeful then. And of course, a few days before liberation, we heard a lot of shooting-- not bombs, but shooting, the fighting.

Cannon.

Cannons.

Tanks.

Yes.

Could you tell how far away? Is there a way to tell that?

No, but it was within earshot.

Oh, my.

Now, the day before you were liberated, your father died.

Yes.

How did you find out?

I went down to visit him. And they told me he's not here anymore.

He was literally gone.

Yeah. Day before.

Now, there must be a kind of a connection in your mind between his death and liberation? Or not?

Sure, there is. Why couldn't liberation happen a day earlier? Now, that doesn't mean that we could have saved him, just because--

Just that he would see it.

Yes, because he was in terrible shape. He was skinny and-- so I don't know what the American soldiers could have done with him. Maybe-- but anyway, it happened the day before.

That must have taken much of the joy out of liberation for you.

Oh, yes.

Could you describe the liberation, how it happened?

Yes. The first thing that I saw that the end is here-- look out the window. We were near mountains. And one side of the barracks was facing the mountains.

We saw a German soldier with his hands up. And he's walking. And there was one of our prisoners following him with a gun. So now, he was the prisoner, and the prisoner was a guard with a gun. And he's got his hands up.

So this must be happening right now. And within minutes, there were others. And so the German soldiers were just running, running. And again, within a half an hour, an American tank drove in.

What a sight.

And another and another.

You remember how you felt?

Pardon me?

Do you remember how you felt?

I felt good. And I could not understand how much preparation was involved, because some of these prisoners-- and when I say these prisoners were not the Jewish ones. These are perhaps the Dutch or the French.

They opened up-- in our unit, they opened up a door. And they went down and start coming out with guns. They had guns under our-- under the building.

Under the children's barrack.

Yes.

A safe place to hide--

Yes. They one after the other were bringing guns out. And they were marching the Germans into a prison camp. There were maybe 20 or 30 of them locked up afterwards who could not escape.

And then, of course, the first thing first off came to food. And the Americans were giving us chocolate. I remember people got sick. They started eating the wrong thing and too fast.

How about you?

Again, I don't remember getting sick. But I may have been subconsciously careful.

Did people know to be careful?

No. No.

That only came after you saw people get sick.

That's right. But then all of a sudden, every day was getting better, because now the so-called former prisoners were in charge. They were in control of the kitchen and the availability of everything.

We didn't have to line up for counting. And all of a sudden, there was music. So it was like a different world from one day to another.

Did everyone stay right there at first?

Yes.

Because they didn't know what else to do, huh?

That's right. That's right. We stayed there I believe for a good month.

And did the Americans help you figure out what to do next?

Yeah. Well, the Americans didn't stay long because they still had a war to complete. So they kept moving. But some of them stayed behind, the-- lack of a better word-- administrators.

They registered us. They asked questions. Who is from where? When do you want to go? Where do you want to go?

What did you say?

I want to go back home. Yeah. Now, don't forget, this was April, April the 12th. The war was not over yet, a certain part. So we had to stay there for a while.

Where you were going to go back to, had that been liberated yet?

Oh, yes. That was liberated in January by the Russians.

So if there was some way to get back there, that would have been safe.

Yes. Now, within four weeks, we were put on trucks and said, now, you're going back home.

These were Americans that were taking you home?

I don't know if the truck drivers were American. But the Americans arranged all that, because they were the liberators. They were in control of the camp.

Now, an interesting story in my head-- because you mentioned the Americans, maybe the third day, one of my friends came over. He said, Dennis-- well, my name was not Dennis at the time.

He says, you're from Umgvar, aren't you? I said, yes. He says, there's an American in a tank who's born in Umgvar. And he's wondering if somebody's here from Umgvar.

And I walked up to him. And he says, who are you? And I told him I was Miklos.

He says, your brother was Fred. I said, yes. We went to school together.

He had gotten to America. He came back in an American--

Well, he left with his parents in the early '30s to Pittsburgh. And he was liberating us.

That was sad for you, huh?

Oh, yeah.

Because now, were you starting to think about your family?

That's right. Who's going to be there?

I can't resist asking. What was your name before it was Dennis?

Dionys.

Spell it.

D-I-O-N-Y-S. It's a Greek name.

Dionysus.

Yes,

A beautiful name.

But I just didn't like it. When I got here, I changed it.

But the whole name sounded Greek. Miklos--

Yes.

And it's really Miklos.

I think to Americans, it might sound like that's a Greek name, but it really isn't, huh?

No, it's Hungarian.

It's a Hungarian name.

It's a Hungarian first name. In Hungary, 99% of the time, when you hear Miklos, it's a first name.

That's a first name.

Yeah. Very, very few times, it's a last name.

Does it have an American equivalent, Miklos?

Yeah, Michael.

Michael.

It's Miklos, with a--

I'm sure you heard of a musician, Miklos Rozsa. So that was a first name.

So when you went back to-- were you going back to Hungary?

Well, I was going back home.

Home.

But our first major stop on the way was Budapest. We went through Budapest. And they deposit us a place.

And they told us the next day to come to the Jewish Federation to get help. They're going to tell us what we're going to get and how we're going to get it. And I ran into some other people from my hometown who also were transported there from a different place.

And they told me that my sister is on her way. This was a lady. She said, now, your sister, I saw her just a few days ago in a certain place. And she'll be here. So from that point on--

Where had she been?

In a different camp.

This is your twin sister.

Twin sister. So from that point on, every morning, I came to the so-called building, because everybody was concentrating there. And one morning, just she was there.

What was that like?

That was awful because they rolled her in in a little wagon because she couldn't walk. Her toes or at least one of her toes was frozen. And she couldn't walk.

Of course, she got better after that. And it was very emotional. Then we stayed together. And a few days later, we went back to our hometown, Umgvar.

Did you get there by train?

By train. Yeah.

And what was that like?

Awful, because I remember walking up in our building, in our home. And there were some strangers there. And they looked at us. And they basically told us, get out of here, because this is ours now.

And I don't remember the words that were exchanged. But that was the only time I saw that, until later on. A few years ago, we went back there again. But we stayed in Umgvar a few weeks.

And from there, we left, because now the Russians were there. It became the Soviet Union. And there was no future there. So we left to a part of Slovakia.

Not too far were some relatives of ours who escaped-- not escaped. But they were hiding in the mountains. They escaped the concentration camp. And we heard about them.

And whether we called them or not, I don't know. But all of us, just here we are. And they were pretty nice to us.

Now, when you had gone back to your hometown, nobody from your family had returned.

No.

So that's when you found out who survived and who didn't.

Yeah. Well, my sister told me what happened basically to our mother and sister, because they were together. And then some others told us about my brother, that he died in the camp. And I knew about my father.

You had the task to tell your sister about your father.

Yes. But amazingly, I don't remember talking about it too much. I guess she didn't want to know too much. And conversely, I don't remember talking to her too much about my mother and sister.

Why did they execute your sister? Wasn't she useful as a worker?

Don't know. Peter, my wife can't understand it, that my sister never had-- sister and I never felt like we needed to talk about it. Someday, I hope we will. But just--

You do want to?

Yes.

Does she know you're doing this interview?

No.

Do you know if she has ever been interviewed?

I know she wasn't.

Wasn't?

No.

Maybe this will break the ice.

Yeah. I hope so.

Is it what you want to hear from her or what you need to tell her?

Both.

Both.

Both.

It's just-- it's been an impenetrable barrier up to this point.

Absolutely.

It's so important, huh?

Yeah. No, I remember years ago, we touched at the edges of the conversation. And whether I changed the subject or she did, I don't know. But it was changed.

And couldn't get back.

No. Nor have we tried.



Now, when you say that she hasn't been interviewed, you say that with conviction. How do you know?

She would have told me.

She would have told you.

Oh, yes. She would have told me.

So you're going to tell her.

Absolutely. I'll tell her this weekend.

She lives in New York?

Long Island.

Long Island.

Massapequa, Long Island. We're very close, very close.

Do your kids know this story?

No.

Do they want to?

I'm sure they do.

So it's really been your reluctance more than anything?

Yes. Yes. They haven't-- they never came out and said, now, dad, let's sit down and talk about it. But they dropped hints of saying, maybe you should sit down before it's too late. Or at least write it out.

Maybe this will make that possible also.

I hope so.

Would you have welcomed them saying, dad, we have to sit down and talk about this?

No.

No.

No.

So they were right to do what they did?

Yes. And believe me, it's not because I didn't-- I want to keep it secret from them. I just didn't want them to see me getting upset because I didn't know how I'm going to handle it. I think I'm handling this better than I thought I would. But had I-- had I been doing this in front of them, it would have been tougher.

Can you envision yourself sitting there with them watching the tape?

Yes. Whether I will or not, I don't know.

Well, they're sure to have questions. Do you think that'll be OK now?

Pardon me?

They're sure to have questions if they see this tape. I know they'll have-- I'm trying to imagine if I were your daughter and I was seeing this tape, I would have questions, I'm sure.

The one who had the question is my wife.

Would that be OK for you now?

Yes.

Your wife come from America?

No, from Germany.

From Germany.

Yeah. But they were fortunate. They came out in '41.

'41?

1941.

Wow.

At the end.

Before we got in the war with them.

Right. Just I think they were on the last ship.

That went from where to where?

From Holland or Belgium-- I believe it was Holland-- to New York.

Oh. That's very late.

Yeah.

You can tell her that we will be calling her soon?

I will tell her. She was, I think, five at the time.

Oh.

Yeah. Excuse me. No, she was eight. She was eight.

Amazing. So you think when your family sees this-- and I'm sure there'll be questions and questions.

Yes.

That'll be OK for you?

But what I'm afraid of, that I will not be able to be as open with them as I am with you.

Why not?

I don't know. I don't know. I'd probably give them a quick answer. I hope I'm wrong. And it will not be a complete answer. I don't know.

Is it because it's so hard emotionally to talk about?

Yes. And I just don't want to subject to my problems.

You think you'll cry in front of them and that'll be painful?

I think so.

Maybe they'll be relieved finally to know. I think they will. I think they will because they know. They know there's something in there that they don't know. They know that.

We'll find out.

They know that. I know that they know that.

Well, they also know that there's something in your life that has been very painful to you. So how can they not make the connection between the pain that you've been carrying all your life--

They will--

And the tears that you might be showing?

Maybe they'll be relieved to get it out.

Well, what I will do, I think, is give them the option of watching it by themselves or with me. I'll let them decide.

And you could also let them decide that maybe if they wanted to watch it alone, that you'd be willing to come and watch it a second time with them.

Yes. Yes.

Because I think that it will be the vehicle for being able to talk.

Right. I think so, too.

So how was that to go back and be told, this is our house now, go away?

Peter, here again, I wasn't devastated, because I expected it.

You did?

Oh, yes, because we heard already from people who were back home and came back to Budapest. So we had a pretty good idea of what's happening there. I don't think my sister and I walked in there expecting everybody to leave and say, no, this is yours again.

Were you allowed to look around?

Yes, a little bit. We saw the furniture still there.

Were there any things there that you wanted?

Maybe I would have liked the furniture again. But I didn't even ask for it. No, I just assumed.

So it's like everything has been taken from us.

Right.

And you just have to start a new life.

Correct.

And you went where when you left there?

Now, before I tell you where I went, I remember before my father told us that we're going to leave this place, we're going to the ghetto, he took me down into the basement. And he said, I'm going to hide our jewelry here.

And he showed he where he's going to bury it. And he did. And when I say basement, it was just a place in the yard. There are some steps down in the basement. Nobody was living there.

And when I came back-- my sister and I came back. And after our visit to the house, one afternoon or evening, I decided to go for the jewelry. And I didn't ask anyone. I just walked into the house, and I went down there. And I found it.

You did?

Oh, yes. Yes, it wasn't hidden deep. I just took it out. It was in a big jar. And I found it.

What was in there?

Well, my mother's diamond rings-- diamond earrings and rings-- perhaps a gold watch. Here again, I don't remember too much. It wasn't something that's worth millions of dollars. It was family. And of course, my sister was happy with it.

I'm so glad you found it.

Yeah. And then we went to see our relatives in Slovakia, stayed there for a few weeks, then went--

They had gone to the mountains and hid?

That's right.

So some people made it?

Right. Right. Now, don't forget, they were not in Hungary. They were in Czechoslovakia on the other side. And they left in '42 or '43. They were in the mountains for a couple years.

And after a short period of time, we went to another city, my sister and I. And an aunt that showed up, my mother's sister, came back from a camp.

Where had she been?

In Auschwitz and a couple of other places. I don't remember-- with women. And we stayed in this Slovak town not too far away for a few months. My sister had a new apartment with her.

And I stayed with another relative whom I found. And we were together for a few months. Then I became-- well, I got worried about the army, because now I was-- '47-- about 18. I was 17.

Well, the Czechoslovak army-- I was 17 I think at the time. So I was told that I should get out of there. And I went to Paris.

Who told you to go?

My uncle. Yeah. And I had to get a passport first and a visa as if I'm going on vacation or just a visit to France. And of course, I never came back.

That meant you were separated from your sister?

Yes. Yes.

She stayed on?

She stayed on in Prague with relatives. But I know I came back two or three times to visit her, because I was still as a visitor in France. But I was not bound to get into the army yet. So I still had time.

So what did you do while you were in-- there you are in France, all by yourself.

Well, I was having fun.

Were you?

Yes.

What kind of fun?

Well, an 18-year-old in Paris-- got new friends.

What were you living on? You were basically wiped out.

Not basically-- I was wiped out. But the Federation or they-- it was a different name for it-- Joint, I think. The Joint gave us an allowance every morning-- every month. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough--

To get by--

To get by. And a cousin, my mother's cousin from Youngstown, Ohio, found out about us. Or we've told them here to here. And he sent me some help every month. So I got by. I wasn't working. I wasn't allowed to work.

Could you speak French?

I learned French. Yes.

But you didn't speak it when you first went?

No. No.

Who could you talk to then?

Well, I made friends quickly, quickly.

When you have to, huh?

Yes.

So there you are in Paris--

People were in the same situation as I was. I learned German fluently because I was among Germans in this area. Played soccer-- I was a soccer player. And that was my--

Now, when you say Germans, what do you mean?

German Jews.

German-- oh, German Jews.

Who are also in Paris.

Yes.

So there was a whole enclave of you.

I called it a ghetto at the time.

Somehow, they had survived.

Yes.

Hiding?

Different ways.

Camps?

Either camps or in hiding.

And are they waiting to--

Many of them went to Belgium as Christians. So there are hundreds of ways of people.

And now, are they waiting to-- they're not in DP camps?

Some were.

Some were. And are they waiting to figure out where they're going to go live?

Oh, in France?

Yeah.

They were in limbo because some of them stayed there. They made France their residence.

And they were allowed to stay.

Oh, yes.

Did you consider that?

Pardon me? No.

No.

No. No.

What were you going to do?

I wanted to come to America.

You knew that?

Yes. Yes.

Why?

I don't know. My cousin was here. My aunt and uncle were in New York. I just wanted to get this other part behind me.

Suppose your sister didn't go.

Then I wouldn't have gone, either. But it was never a question that this is what we want to do.

She wanted it also.

She, too?

Oh, yes.

So how did you get from A to B? There you are. You're in Paris. She's back in Prague.

In Prague.

Yeah, in Prague.

In Prague with my aunt and uncle.

So what was the next thing that happened?

Well, the next thing happened. We were both registered at the American consulate for a visa for affidavits to come to this country on a permanent basis. But the quota for Czechoslovaks were just a few. So they told us it may take three to four years.

So when we registered in '47, I went to Paris. And she stayed in Prague with my aunt and uncle for I believe two and a half years. When they got their visas, my aunt and uncle, they went to New York. And my sister couldn't go yet. So she came-- she joined me in Paris.

Why couldn't she go?

Because her number didn't come up, because she registered the same--

With you?

With me. So she joined me in Paris for a few months and did a little apartment. And pretty soon, we decided that we're not going to wait anymore in Paris. We're going to make a little trip to Canada, a side trip, because we were able to get to Canada quicker than into America.

So we went to Montreal. And within a few months, we got our visa in Montreal and came to New York. Now, I didn't care for New York.

Why not?

I just didn't like it-- didn't like the hustle or bustle, the size, plus the fact somebody got a hold of me from San Francisco, whether I'm interested to come here and play soccer.

You were good?

Well, I wasn't great. But I was pretty good. And they heard about me. And I said, gee, San Francisco sounds like a lot of fun.

Did you know anything about San Francisco?

Nothing. Nothing.

Well, you knew it was smaller than New York.

It was smaller than New York. And they came to pick me up, these friends, by car. Before you ask me what happened to my sister, I wish I would have asked her to come with me. I guess I never did. And she never said, I want to go with you, because she was comfortable with our aunt and uncle.

Perhaps I didn't think it's going to last forever. Maybe I just came to San Francisco for a while. But it was permanent. So my sister stayed with my aunt and uncle for a few years until she got married.

How did you meet your wife?

I was working for Levi Strauss. And we had a picnic. And she was there with her brother, who also worked at Levi Strauss. I haven't been to a Levi picnic since. Yeah, that was-- that's how we met.

Was that the first job that you got here?

Yes.

Yeah?

Yes, first and last.

First and last.

Yes.

You stayed all that time.



Almost 35 years, I believe.

I heard it's a very good place to work. So I guess it must be true, huh?

Yes, it was a very good place.

Wonderful. And you have sons. How many sons?

Two sons. We got married in '54. David was born a year and a half later and then Robert probably three years later. Yeah.

And are they living in the area?

Both living in the area.

Has America been what you wanted it to be?

Yes.

Yes?

Yes.

In what sense?

In every sense. Of course, when you compare to what was in Europe during the awful years, it's a great country.

You mentioned before that you had gone back two years ago to this hometown.

More than two years ago. We went back in 1990.

1990?

Yes, 11 years ago.

Can you describe that?

Uh-huh. But--

Go ahead.

I need--

Let's stop.

Now, you don't have to go so fast.

I drank too much water.