

OK. OK, today is June the 6th, 1991. I'm Sandra Bendayan, and I'm here interviewing John Steiner. This is part 2 of our interview. And we have Brian Paris as the second. And also with us, who may be talking, is Carol Hurwitz, a colleague of John's.

And I just want to start today asking a few questions that relate a little bit to what we talked about in the interview part number 1. And really that is with focusing on the details of, say, your transports.

You're talking about the-- from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Blechhammer.

And also what it was like at the very first, going to Theresienstadt.

Uh-huh. Right.

Whatever details you can remember of--

Well, I mean, the interesting part, in terms of starting the specifics, on August 3-- well, let me just start earlier with that.

In '42, and that started just in the spring, there was the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. And that affected us all by virtue of the fact that all houses were searched by German army and other military formations.

I have not seen actually any SS searching the houses. But they also came to us and searched. But they are quite nice, actually. They were quite pleasant. Although, I think they were told by the house manager that this was a Jewish household or whatever that was. And so they searched and all that, but nothing unusual had happened.

But many of the friends who were accused of being co-responsible or members of the underground-- which also related to us directly, because we were accused of having done things before. And my father and my mother was interrogated by the Gestapo and all that. But they tried to keep all these details from me for reasons which really escape me now.

And I was, at that particular time, still a member of the Boy Scouts. And I had a group until the time we had to have stars and all that. And then, of course, they disbanded the Boy Scouts, which I led a group of people. And we just tried to have this sort of kind of resistance thing, which just-- very childish meaningless stuff. But still, there was some--

What sorts of things did you do for resistance, childish as they may have been?

Well, I mean, they're childish in terms of, say, well, what can we do in terms of sabotage or resisting? Maybe we should learn to use arms and weaponry and all that, which we, of course, didn't have. And just talking about how we could sabotage things. And it was all very naive.

The only thing is what indeed we did, we-- before actually the war with Poland-- because Czechoslovakia, then, was still-- was already occupied and under German rule-- we met friends and all that. And so people who were sought by the Gestapo. So the contacts we've had and friends of ours simply were used in order to get them into Poland-- escape and go over the borders to Poland and just have this sort of escape route. Which, at that particular time, was used very frequently of people who were desperate and had to get away. Otherwise, they would have been in very, very serious trouble.

So that's something which we did. And I was [INAUDIBLE]. And we just thought, what can we do in order to-- what do you expect of a kid? And so that's what we did.

And because of some of the things, my mother was interrogated by the Gestapo. And my father was sent, as I mentioned last time, in this second transport, which was to build up Theresienstadt as a ghetto in '41, which was kind of relatively early.

In '41, other people were sent to Å  Ã³dÅ° and other ghettos from Prague. And these were primarily people who had

money-- who had quite a bit of money. And the Germans, the Nazis, wanted to get their possessions, because that was substantive. And my uncle and all that was part of that.

And so I tried to rescue whatever they had left and give it to friends for safekeeping. And that was, in itself, a very interesting sort of thing, because all people are very eager to take these things. But after we-- some of us had returned, and survived obviously, then they said, well, if we had known that you come back or that you want it back, then we would have not taken it.

And these were very serious disappointments, which-- in that way, we also lost fortunes. Because the entire collection of my uncle's paintings were in safekeeping-- were taken into safekeeping by-- by his landlord of the apartment he had rented from. And then when I came back and said, you've got all the things, and so they denied everything and said, well, who are you? We don't remember you, because the only person who's like you was kind of small and now-- he said something. Very, very flimsy sort of excuses.

And they still-- so many people have changed their lifestyle by virtue of the fact what they have stolen from those poor people and not returned. And that was called Aryanization. And some people, of course, were very nice and returned. And some people didn't. So there are this sort of mixed thing.

But anyway, so I've tried to rescue things for my uncle and my aunt. And by the way, the interesting thing, that's where it started. In some way, interesting sort of psychological situation in terms of the breach of the-- severing of bonds, human family bonds is, my uncle, when they were sent-- and aunt, when they're told they had to come to the assembly place in Prague and be shipped to a ghetto, they've asked me to volunteer and go with them. And that could be done for practical purposes. And so I talked to my mother and said, you can't do that. And I kind of felt very guilty that I would not do it.

Why did they want you to volunteer with them?

Well, because they felt I was young and I was very -- And I was kind of son-like to them. They didn't have any children. And it was a just very close family relationship-- very, very intimate bonding. And so they asked me very specifically, and I didn't do it. And I had guilt feelings about that. And I had to discuss with my mother.

And when I went myself, later on, my mother didn't volunteer, and I never would have asked her either. So it was quite a thing to ask. But see, that's when it happened, when it started to crack, you see? Because people then became increasingly dependent on themselves and lost their support system, even if the bonding was very closely-knit.

And to me, that's a very important-- very important insight which I've gained in terms of human relationships. The transitory temporariness of human relationships when the-- when the going gets tough. I've seen it throughout life. People will abandon you. People will be for themselves and renounce.

Did you feel, in any way, that your aunt and uncle were asking too much of you?

Not at that particular time. I thought he was asking quite a bit. But you see, you mustn't forget that we didn't know all the things we know today. And since most of the people-- of course, all the people-- had a very clear conscience. They said, what on Earth are we getting into? We haven't done anything. They can't really do too much to us.

And that's something which really should be stressed, because many people went into death without really knowing that-- they didn't-- they didn't know, of course, what was going to happen specifically. They knew that it was not going to be milk and honey for sure. But anything which it turned out to be, people didn't know at that particular time.

And I think it is psychologically extremely important for us to tell that and to make that very clear. Because so many people still have this sort of very naive and unrealistic notions about why people went like sheep and all this sort of idiocy, which actually is very annoying to me-- very annoying to me. And because these people are not any different than anyone else.

And because of it-- and it's something which I've talked about just recently back at school, when we had our last session in the Holocaust lecture series-- that the trust into-- fairness of authority still was inculcated in us. We still had the notion of authorities, in essence, fair. They always can deviate a bit and be different. But in essence, people are fair and will not do things to you which-- so there was no real precedent, in more contemporary times, as to treatment of people.

Even under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. And otherwise, they could have-- Jaroslav Hašek wouldn't have written *The Good Soldier Schweik*, where you just-- authority and all that. But you don't take it too seriously, because there is always a way you can circumvent and all that. And that was the end of that, because you couldn't be Good Soldier Schweik. It just didn't work anymore.

And so there was a new precedent. And most people don't understand it. For that, you really have to really have a more social-scientific perspective in order to really appreciate it. That's why I say that. Because the chances are, the survivors probably would not be as specific as I can be. All right.

Did your mother not want you to go for her personal reasons? Or because she foresaw some political things that--

Well, so I started with my father and all that. And then the assassination of Heydrich. And then as they searched and all that. Many people got arrested and-- certain people-- and were accused of harboring the people who-- or whatever, collaborating with the enemy or whatever and committing treason-- whatever the things, idiotic things, and shot en masse.

And so that part I was very conscious of, because I was in the midst of it. And friends of ours, who'd just taken out and accused of things they obviously had not done, and then shot. And so that was after the Heydrich situation. So I was apprehensive.

And then there was my birthday on the 3rd of August. And I woke up and told my mother, something terrible is going to happen. I really feel sick something. I have a premonition of something terrible. And said, have you eaten something bad and all that?

It was my birthday. And I said, no, I just have a churning feeling in my stomach, so to speak, in my guts, that something terrible is going to happen. And I kept on repeating. It was just almost compulsive-- kept on repeating, repeating, repeating. And she didn't know what, you know? And said, well, you must have had something bad to eat and all that. So had no idea, because there was no--

And on the 10th, in a week after that, then I get the notification that I am to appear at this assembly place and all this and that, by myself. So my father went first. Then came all the other relatives-- my uncle, aunt, and what have you, and my grandmother and some other-- and my aunt, the other-- my father's sister and what have you. And then I came. So we all went separate ways for reasons which still escape me.

So you had no relatives with you, then, when you went.

No, I was just on my own. I was just totally by myself.

And so that particular-- going to the assembly place in a streetcar with 20 kilos or 30 kilos of belongings was, in itself, very bad. Because I sat down, and then the Czechs, who were not known for their philo-semitic attitude, said, you can't sit. And then kicked me out of the seat while I was on my way. Because we couldn't use any taxis and all that. And I just couldn't walk, because it was too far. So that was the only way to do that.

And the interesting part is that there was a person called Fredy Hirsch, who's being quite well-known in the history. And he was a very close friend of mine, and I worked with him-- talking about resistance, because I need to get that in before I get into Theresienstadt. Fredy and I were very close friends, although we were totally coming from different walks of life and perspectives. But we had a very, very unusual rapport.

And so kids of my age, under the leadership of Fredy, who had unbelievable courage-- profile in courage, just very

unusual. And he just had a way to deal with SS authorities, which was just singular. I don't know anyone else who was a Jew and a Zionist who would have behaved in this sort of manner, which impressed them unbelievably. So he understood their psychology and used it. So Fredy--

In what way? How did he--

Well, I'm just going to talk about it. So Fredy understood the tremendous trauma of all the people who had the notification to go to the assembly places and be without any sort of support system. Because so many people are old, didn't have any relatives, no one to help, and how did they get there?

So under his leadership, and with the help of kids like myself, we had special permission from the Gestapo to pick up these places-- to pick up the people from the places where they were to be deported and help them to go to the assembly center and see to it that they would come there in one piece.

Well, that may not have been viewed, in retrospect, as a great favor, you see? But on the other hand, we tried to avoid that the Gestapo would come and use force, you see? And instead of that, we just helped them and assisted them and were supportive of them.

And that was a tremendous important act. And I'm very proud of it. I really should get some medals for that, because old, poor Fredy didn't survive it. He committed suicide.

He was just-- he was something else. I mean, he's one person I really-- perhaps of all the people I came into close contact with, I respect most. And so we helped these people. But when it was my turn, the whole thing was already disbanded, because all the people were already gone, including Fredy. So I was without help, with the exception of my mother. And she, poor soul, was pretty helpless herself in that situation.

So I went in this streetcar up there and connected with some people. As a matter of fact, friends of ours-- his name was Gottlieb, I remember that, Gottlieb-- his son, who was slightly older than I, and so many other people, and I just connected with those because I knew them.

And not so just weeks before, the husband of this Mrs. Gottlieb and the son was precisely taken out and shot. For no reason. There was no apparent reason. And she, then, was deported.

And that transport I was deported was a special transport, which was called the Heydrich Penalty Transport. So that all the people were sent to Theresienstadt in that particular transport from Prague, where people who were sent there in retaliation, as a penalty, for the assassination with which these people didn't have anything to do whatsoever. But it was a penal sort of transport. OK.

Were they all Jews?

They're all Jews. All Jews. All Jews. Mixed, like myself-- mixed up and all that. But they all were Jews according to the Nuremberg racial laws. All right. So then we went into these sort of boxcars.

Well, first of all, there, there was a fellow called [Personal name] or [Personal name] [? Mandel. ?] And he was a rabbi. And he was a stooge of the Gestapo. And he was doing all the dirty work. He was kind of a Jewish kapo type-- [? Mandela. ?] I think it was [? Mandela. ?] [? Mandelo? ?] [? Mandela? ?] I just get it confused. [? No, Mandela. ?]

Anyway, and so the SS officers call, [? Mandela ?] here, come here, and all that. And then he was just doing the dirty work for them and just mishandled and mis-- not mishandled, but mistreated these people there and was just sold out. He was just one of them.

And that's where I started to be very apprehensive, because, my God, what is really happening here? Just people are turned around and do the dirty work for the SS-- the Gestapo. Not SS, Gestapo. SS Gestapo, but specifically, Gestapo. And that set me on a course of apprehension.

And then we had to stay there, on the floor, of course, under dreadful conditions. And that, of course, was the beginning of this odyssey, if you will, because there was no transition from a relatively normal life, which to be sure was full of suppression, repression, and-- and discrimination and what have you. But still, it was in a different ballgame-- of a different ballgame.

And so that's what I-- that was the first time I said, my God, we're just getting into a totally different situation. And the adjustment will be major, because then, already, I had to adjust with these people.

And they all then started to behave very differently. Everyone was beginning to be for himself. And I had no one there other than these Gottliebs. And they already said, hey, don't want anything from us and all that. So they distantiated themselves.

And that was a very interesting sort of thing. Which then, the tougher things became, the more this became apparent. So that you just totally sever ties with people you used to be very close to.

It would seem to plunge a person into despair.

Yeah. And that's the first time I really felt the despair and the foreboding of something very awful, terrible.

All right, so then we were at this assembly place, which was pretty much centrally located, relatively speaking. And we put into this-- we had to walk into this very quickly, under SS close supervision, into this [INAUDIBLE] boxcars, these cars. But, of course, knew that we were going to Theresienstadt. That much we anticipated, because that was what makes the deal.

So then because it was packed full, no provisions to speak of people taking out of their life situation into something totally different about which they had absolutely no inkling what would happen is sort of unbelievable uncertainty. And therefore insecurity, fear, angst, existential angst. It's extreme. And so, so many people panicked and became hysterical, and then virtually lost their minds because of the pressure.

And we arrived, because it's not that long a ride.

How long was it?

Three hours maybe or something, four maybe. And so we arrived in Theresienstadt, and getting out. And that was quick, fast, and all this. And take your things and all that. And who was coming into the car looking for me was my father. Because he had found out that I would be in that particular transport. And because of his position there and all that, he had to-- he had access to this type of information and came to-- to somehow take over.

And so what he did, because so many people panicked and were in hysterics, so one particular person, I remember, was really, totally mad and was just crazed. So he took that person and slammed that person, because he was afraid that undue attention would be-- would be drawn to that situation, which may bring into the SS people, and then some things would happen which would involve me and all that.

So he took that person and slammed them. He was a very strong fellow. He was not tall, but very strong fellow-- sport type. He worked out and was in very good shape, actually, in spite of the situation. So he then eased me into the situation and took over.

And the interesting thing is-- because our relation had been very strained, the father-son situation, virtually ever since I can remember. The interesting thing is that that all had changed in the concentration camp totally. I mean, we became exceedingly close. And the collaboration and cooperation between us was just getting more and more close.

And we just had a totally different relationship, which changed, again, after we were-- after our survival. But that was really unbelievable. We were very close and we had a tremendous relationship-- was just in harmony with each other,

very different from what it used to be.

All right, so then I adjusted and relatively quickly to the situation, because there are very many people I got to know and knew from previous life and relatives and what have you, including my grandmother, who was actually sent-- I said she was sent to a ghetto, which is not true. She was sent to Theresienstadt.

She didn't stay very long, because she was sent from Theresienstadt relatively early. And so the entire clan-- friends and distant relatives, relatives. So that was not too bad. And then Fredy--

You mentioned that you had 20 or 30 kilos of goods you took with you. What kinds of things did you bring with you?

Well, I mean, just the things which they're basics, you know? Basics and some things which were very important to me-- idiosyncratically important, not really objectively. For example, my pillow, small pillow, because I wanted to have a small pillow. I even took, I think, a teddy bear and things of that nature, which was still in at an age like that.

So things which were just bare necessities-- clothing and whatever. No luxury stuff or whatever. Just the bare necessities we considered to be the most important, because weight was limited. So that's what we've had.

And I was able to retain it. And then I was sent with-- and then it was Fredy Hirsch and some other man called Gustav Schorsch. So they then arranged that people whom they knew and had worked with before, they would get into some special places where there were only kids-- kids of that age. And then they did lots of things with them.

Fredy somehow was able to arrange work for us and-- which was relatively pleasant. And he looked after us and gave us massages and consulted about our growth and well-being and all that and was very supportive. And then I also got to know people I didn't know from previous times.

So we've had discussions and the kind of university-level discourses with a person who almost finished his doctorate, a man called Gustav Schorsch, who was a writer and playwright and all that. Very well-known Czech. He would have been a very famous person had he survived. So a very closely-knit relationship and a support system, which then developed.

And my mother was in one place, and my father was in another. Because they all were separated because only women and only men and all this and that. But my father, because of his connections and his work, was able to always get us some additional food, which helped my mother very much and me and all that.

So somehow that life in Theresienstadt was very superior to any other place, in comparison, particularly after I had experienced other ones. But what I wanted to say, that the relationships which developed there were exceedingly meaningful, because we could go to tremendous performances and lectures and meet very distinguished academicians and people who had made major contributions.

And there were Catholic priests and monks and anthroposophies, and it was just a center of culture. And I've learned more in Theresienstadt and I've been-- so I was able to associate with people of tremendous stature more so than perhaps in my entire life, because it was so concentrated. And that is something which really should be stressed, because--

So it was irony.

Yeah. And also, the human relations were-- as terrible as the conditions were, and as cruel some of the people were, they're very unique and somehow supportive, so that one didn't feel-- but the young people, particularly, were still able to-- they didn't feel that they-- didn't feel that they lost.

Well, so--

Would you think that your parents had kind of a reunion in [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, I don't know a reunion. My parents, yes, in a way. And also the relationship between my father and my mother was very different. And they were much closer than before, because they had divorced.

That's what I meant.

That's right, yeah, when I was 13. And so that was-- yeah, it was very unusual. And my father's humanity was just astounding-- astounding.

And then, of course, I met with many other friends. And I said that it was just a source of tremendous learning and new impulses and insights, which otherwise never could have been gained in such a short time and in such a concentrated fashion.

So I'm not, by any means, idealizing things, because they were terribly tough and dreadful cruelties happened. And there are some SS people who got-- took pleasure from just simply running over people in their vehicles and all that and mishandling them. There were also Czech gendarmes there who were in charge and behaved in a very cruel manner.

So I stayed in different places with young people. And then the interesting part was also, the people who were-- they're from mixed marriages, but were Jews of first-- first grade-- not second grade, but first grade. That means that they were counted as Jews, although came from mixed marriages. Some of them were very enterprising and left the ghetto over the weekend and came back. I don't know whether I mentioned that last time.

We talked a little bit. But any repetition is not a problem.

Well, all right, so the interesting part was that they are able to do that, the Friedman brothers and Tausig and some other people. And they caught up with Tausig eventually. He was caught doing-- he looked very Jewish. He looked like a [NON-ENGLISH], just like a Jewish-- looked very Jewish.

But somehow-- and he got caught and was totally-- was immediately isolated, and then separately deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which he didn't survive, because they probably sent him to the gas immediately. Anyway--

Was that the usual punishment?

I don't know. I really don't know, because there are not that many. I know that he was put in very particular cells from other people as a punishment. And the Friedman brothers, they never were caught-- two-- one older and one young-- younger brother. And they did it all the time. And they didn't look Jewish at all.

And the last thing which was important is that people were very creative, produced a lot of cultural things-- poetry, some of which are published, because I was able to put my hands on some of the things, in Czech actually. And the creativity and the thought processes and the human relationships which are very stimulating, were just very unique, particularly for us, these young kids. So that is one thing which I wanted to stress.

Another thing is that there was this person-- I mentioned it before-- this Kurt [? Steuer. ?] And he was half-Jewish, blonde, blue-eyed. Just looked like an SS men, for all practical purposes. And he decided that he wanted to run away, worked out the thing, and said he needed my support. So I supported him and covered him and all that. And he left.

And then after the war, I met up with him again in Prague. I mentioned that before. And that, to me, was a very important thing because of my part in his escape, which was successful.

And I'm dreadfully happy that I did what I could do, which was-- which was not only keep my mouth shut, but just being supportive, preparing the thing, until the time he really could do it. And then covering for him until he was discovered, so that by that time he was already far away and all that.

So that, to me, is very important, because psycho-emotionally it was important that one resists. Just don't take it. After

you could see what happened, you just do something, you see? And the more you could do something, the more active you were, the better you could cope.

All right. And then there was an interesting episode specifically, which was a different week. I was in a detail, which was to-- which was to collect items from people who had died and put it to the-- give it to the-- being transported to the people who were in charge of that, which means they all stole and gave it to the Jewish elite.

So we took soap and all that, and someone saw us. And then they-- they told the authorities, and I was in deep trouble. And Fredy Hirsch stepped in and intervened on our behalf. So the penalty was that we had to clean the toilets for about a week. And that was not--

What style did Fredy use in dealing with the authorities, that he was able to--

Well, I mean, he was a very athletic individual. And being German himself, he understood the German-Prussian sort of military type. And he just confronted them without really kind of fear or just kissing their legs or whatever. But he just simply responded to them as equals-- kind of superiors, but equals. And that was his style.

And because he was athletic and had a tremendous physique and looked good and was so forward in his manners and unafraid, they just were impressed. Even the people who were just killers, just-- and that helped him that he was, at all times, until the last day of his life, when he committed suicide prior to being gassed, he maintained a privileged position on that basis. Because he was able to handle the most vicious of the SS in a way which they could respect and treat him accordingly.

So when all the other people didn't have anything, he always was able to organize and have access to situations which made a significant difference to those people who he was able to help. Which he did, because there was all he did. And then when we get to Auschwitz, we'll talk about the resistance.

Anyway, so then came the day when I was supposed to go and was ordered to go to Auschwitz-Birkenau. And that, again, was some sort of special-- I don't know-- transport, which I, at that particular time, didn't know. So some people accompanied me to the boxcars, which happened to be also closed ones-- covered ones, not open ones. And so--

Did you take your personal things with you still?

Well, whatever I had, I could take with me, and I did. Wasn't much, to be sure, because there was just less and less.

And by that time, many of our group-- some of the kids who belonged to that particular group-- we had 13 people, as a matter of fact, in that group-- already had been shipped to Auschwitz prior to my coming. And one of them was Hans Fischer, son of a very well-known Prague psychiatrist, a professor at the university of psychiatrists. And he was there already and some other people were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Other people are sent elsewhere. But he was there already.

So this Auschwitz-Birkenau thing was, of course, very different, because lots of my cousins came and gave me his-- some sort of talisman and said goodbye to me. He stayed, and my aunt stayed, my father stayed, my mother stayed. And it did not occur to me to ask them, why don't you volunteer? I never would have thought of that. So I went just by myself, totally, just without any sort of people I knew.

Did you know you were headed for Auschwitz at that point?

Well, I didn't know. I just-- we went someplace else. And someplace else meant it would be a much worse place. That much we knew.

You already had rumors or whatever back--

Well, I don't know these rumors. Yeah, that's going to be awful places, yeah. But, I mean, gassing and all this, forget it.



You don't want to deal with that.

And so some of the friends that accompanied me, they're just like brothers, like my brothers. And we said goodbye, and we just, whatever, embraced, all these sort of things. And that was all dreadfully traumatic.

And so then the bucket for all the things we've had in that particular carriage-- not carriage, in the boxcar-- and hardly any water and all that. And then people just really fell apart. And it took a long time. It was days, days, many days. Deprivation, stench, people who were sick and all that. It was just like in a haze, a terrible thing.

We had no idea where we were going. I remember that very well. Because we just tried to get some orientation looking out of these small holes, which we-- no idea. No idea. No idea where we were going.

And so then we finally arrived. People were absolutely in dreadful condition when we arrived at the ramp at Auschwitz during the night. It was late night. It was dark, late night. And all the-- the lights were on the-- reflect also what you-- the-- what I'd call the--

The floodlights?

Floodlights. And that was terrible, just out. And so we had these people. They're from-- Canada people and all that coming out. And they said run and all that.

Were there dogs?

Huh?

Were there dogs?

Dogs, whatever you have. And then they searched through the place. And a lot of Russian kick, and they can run and all this and that. Which is the kind of typical thing, because all the people had been there.

But this was particularly awful because it was nighttime. You didn't know the floodlights and the fear and the uncertainty and the cruelty and the kicking and the beating and all this sort of thing-- the pushing and all that. It was just more because you just couldn't orient yourself. You didn't see anything. It was all pitch dark, with the exception of the floodlights.

Anyway, so then we got sent to the various places. And I don't know whether it was even a selection. I'm not even sure that we went through a selection. And sent to the sauna, which was next-- close to the gas thing. But, of course, we had no idea about gassing anyway.

And so we went through a Canada thing. And then they shaved us. And then they gave us-- they shaved us everywhere, but did not cut our hair. And that was a very strange thing. They didn't cut our hair. They shaved it.

And then they made fun of, because I'm uncircumcised. So they said, what are you doing here? And they just kind of laughed at the fact that I'm uncircumcised. And they shaved everything here-- all the armpits and all this and that-- and laughed at me. Put powder on my penis and all this sort of thing and all this sort of thing.

And I just, to me, it was not terrible. But I was a young kid, naive, all these sort of things. Hey, what's this terrible stuff? And so I was embarrassed. But it's not really cruel, except I was a target, you know, because what are you doing here?

But there are some other ones who were very helpful and said, you do this and that. And then I took some things which-- and that was-- took some things and was able to hide them in my behind. For example, a knife. A beautiful, beautiful very expensive sort of kind of Swiss type of thing. It was not a Swiss type, but a lot of things in it and all that. So I put that in and all this.

And that's when I started to develop this ability to organize and play the role of a survivor.

What else were you able to hide?

Well, I took a lot of books and all that. And there, someone came in looking for me or someone else. It was Hans Fischer, one of my closest friends, who was part of the camp orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau, because he was a well-known musician in Prague, very accomplished in Theresienstadt. And was older than I and was just like a brother to me.

And he was the son of this psychiatrist and his very beautiful wife. She was a beauty, a well-known Jewish beauty. She was just a beauty. She was just out of the world. Even I knew that in my young age. She was just terrific.

And he wasn't. The father was just kind of a small, bald-headed, very-- not that really good-looking fellow. But a very, very intelligent, very resourceful.

Well, so he said, anything you have here, just give me and I'll be able to take in the camp. So I gave him books, I gave him this and that and that-- some of the things which I still had in my possession. And he took it to the camp and gave it to me there. That's the type of friend he was. Just unbelievable.

The loss, you know? And I've said just recently, when I gave a-- a speech back at the-- the Lincoln Park Memorial there was something, and I gave a speech. Neighbors asked me to give the speech thing.

So I said, and I still say, there's one thing which came-- actually, I just assessed it just relatively recently, not-- on several occasions, that the best people, the most valued people as far as I remember, friends and acquaintances, relatives-- the best people did not survive. It is the ones which I considered to be of lesser human value, if one can put it that cruelly, who have survived.

Why do you say that?

Well, because I remember Hans Fischer. All these people would have been-- they towered over me intellectually, emotionally, gift-wise and all that. These were the people who were the elite, the crÃ©me de la crÃ©me in terms of their talents, in terms of what they were able to do. And these people are just simply out of this world. I mean, these people would have really made major contributions to humanity if they had been allowed to-- to live.

And I'm reminded of that particularly when I see some of the survivors, whom I have no reason to respect whatsoever, not only because how they survived under what circumstances and what they are now. And to say that is just a hard, harsh thing to say. But I say it, because that's my conclusion based on many years of interaction and observation.

Do you think that some [? weak-minded ?] people survived, say, by luck?

Oh, yeah, well, luck played always an important role. But somehow, the people who did not survive, they behaved in a way which would not be injurious to others. And by virtue of that, they had a better chance to survive. And that is something which hasn't been said, because it's not a very popular thing to say.

And these were precisely people who were giving of themselves and sacrificing themselves. They're altruists in so many ways. Jewish rescuers so to speak.

Hmm, a good point.

And so therefore, they were not necessarily obsessed with survival as so many other people, including myself, up-- in certain situations, obsessed, driven. But somehow they are not that driven, and therefore were not as circumspect as some other people in terms of their own survival. And I think that contributed, to some extent, to their demise.

Mm-hmm.

All right, so Hans Fischer was there and helped me a great deal and helped me to adjust. And then you have these sort of changes from one ball game to one-- one-stage phase of horror to another one, increasingly getting worse.

So the first shock was Prague, Theresienstadt. And the other one, which was double that, was, of course, Auschwitz. Because from that very moment, you heard-- you wanted to survive. You had to guard-- be fearful of your life every second, every minute, in terms of every step you took. And that was, of course, very different in Theresienstadt. So you just went from bad to worse.

You must have learned that instantly, then, is that --

Oh, yeah, because they already-- we went to the block, then we went through the whole thing. And then went to-- we went to the family camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was B2 next to the A camp-- B2 camp.

And so we got into a barrack. And the barrack senior-- the barrack senior then immediately told us, you do this and that. And then just let us have it-- merciless, talked about the gassing, killing, all this sort of thing. So we were totally all just--

And then the whole thing changed from a very conscious state, where you're just really present and in touch with reality. Everything became just, like, that instant is a nightmare. It was no longer a reality in the real sense of the word in terms of the way some of us, and I, certainly experienced. It became a dreamlike nightmare. So that you responded to the reality as if it'd be a-- it would be a nightmare.

Do you mean [INAUDIBLE]?

And that gave you some sort of a feeling of just numbness-- numbness. So that you try to deflect the pain by protecting yourself due to this state-- the response, the reaction. And so then it was just 100%, 24-hour harassment in the worst possible sense.

What was daily life like?

Well, daily life, like, was just being harassed. And going up early in the morning and be counted twice a day. And trying to get the minimal food and do this and that. Work details of all sorts.

And trying to interact, because then-- with the friends and trying to organize and all that. And the books, which were saved by Hans Fischer, circulated. And I always got them back. Because they're the only books which existed. So everything was read. Which one was a medical book, and the other one was the Bible. And some other things were anthroposophic writings by Rudolf Steiner.

Would you have been punished if you'd been found with the books?

I don't know. I didn't care. Besides, he took the risk to smuggle it into the camp. I didn't, you see? He gave all these things to me which he was able to take.

But had you been found with the books, would that be a punishable act?

I don't know. I don't think it was-- it was an issue. I don't think it was an issue at that point. But I was one of the few, if not the only one of thousands, who had these sort of books. And they circulated and always came back to me.

What work details were you on?

Well, that was an interesting-- one work detail-- well, just all sorts of things. Some of them I remember, some I don't. Just odd stuff, nonsensical things usually to justify some sort of interaction with the SS so that they could do some certain things which gave them an opportunity.

Just give you an example, they just rounded up and said, you have to, whatever, carry bricks or something and in some sort of totally different camp. So the camp was-- I don't know which one we went through. And then we stopped-- given the order to stop-- the SS. It was not just kapo. It was not-- actually, I don't even know where we had kapo. It was just an SS.

And then he met with some sort of female SS. And then they started, in front of us, just if you will not exist, talk sex-type of sort of thing and say, let's go and-- go and screw. And so they went, and we waited. They did their business, and he came back. And then we went again into the women's camp.

And that is something which we discussed and had problems discussing, because then we went to the women's camp, and I had a chance to observe. And I thought it was bad in B2, the women camp. The cruelty was just unbelievable. Also because, of course, you anticipated women-- the sort of prejudicial notion that women would be kind of nicer and more kind. The contrary was true. They were just absolutely 10 times more vicious.

Meaning the kapos and the--

That's right, what had happened there. And we were just absolutely shocked. And we came from hell, and went into another hell which was even worse than the hell we came from. And that was very hard to take, because also because of the sort of notions in terms of how women are. They're kinder, more gentler, all this and that. Hell no. The cruelty was just unbelievable.

For example?

Well, the beating and the kicking and how the SS women behaved towards the other-- the kapos behaved to each other and all that. It was just unbelievable. It was just unbelievable.

And so all these sort of things we saw. And then we returned. That was one of the work details. I don't know what we did. We didn't do anything, really, any work.

But I think he used it as an excuse to get to one point where he would meet with the female SS, they'd do their business, and then go into the women camp just for an excuse or something. We're here and all that. We've done-- I don't-- there was no real work. We stood around and walked most of the time. And then we returned. So that was one thing.

Then, I had developed jaundice. And then I was yellow. Did I talk about that already?

You talked about being sick in the camp. As I say, it doesn't matter. Just keep going.

Well, anyway, so the jaundice happened and all this and that. So and then, for some reason, SS responded to me in a way which most of the time was favorable, for whatever reason. And so he wanted me to have in the kitchen detail, peel potatoes. And they said, look, he's sick, you can't take him. And he said, I want him.

So then I really Couldn't last very long, because I got so sick that they had to put me in the sick barrack and all that. And then I was rescued from the sick barrack, because then a friend of ours, who was this pediatrician, he came and said, you have to get out-- I was much better then-- because there's going to be a selection tomorrow. And if you're here, they will send you to the gas.

All right, so I got out-- selection. And then I got-- then I had pleurisy and pneumonia and went back again. And I got a little medication they had, only because of the contacts-- sheer luck. Because of the pediatrician was one of the most intimate assistants of Josef Mengele.

So it sounds like you didn't have any severe work details that you can remember.

No, no, no.

What about the food that you ate?

Well, the food was just-- just the typical sort of thing. Just occasionally, during the-- during the weekend, we occasionally had some pea soup. And that was a feast. That was just like you win a million bucks.

And most of the other time, it was watery turnip. That's exactly what it was, without potatoes to speak of. But the more substance you had, so you had to-- and that was the difference between older people, young people. Young people being still more alert, having more vitality.

So you could adjust. You had to be as alert as possible in order to survive. And that, one way, is to be the last, in case of soup, so that you get from the bottom of the barrel and not the beginning, where there was pure water. And then there you had some little bit more substance. Or when there was some danger, you were the-- you would just immediately avoid it and went the other way, became-- became invisible so to speak. And I've learned that.

And I can be-- for example, I still have that ability, and I still train it. I can go to movies without a ticket, because I've learned this. I can make myself virtually invisible. So that when I need to be invisible, I'll just blend in and, you know?

And I still train that. For some reason, I don't know. I have this sort of strange idea. I still train that, because I don't want to lose it, because I think I may get into hard times. I'm in hard times already in one way or another. So that was the art which you developed-- the organizing--

And it sounds like there's hypersensitivity to other people.

Hypersensitivity, where you have tremendous alertness, where you can see where these dangers were something to be had, so that you're there and take advantage, or you're just out of sight when they is killing-- beating.

And then someone, for example, escaped. And then, we still had the long hair. And then we had to stand for an entire night, and people collapsed and died like flies. I got pneumonia and had to get into the sick barrack again.

And then people came and visited me as much as they could from the window. And there was one friend of mine, a relative, distant relative. And Dr. Peter Schleisner was a very gifted-- again, talking gifted person-- biologist and chemist.

And he came, too, wanting to know how I was, very concerned, just like a brother. And came one day, the next he doesn't come. And said, what happened to Peter? They said, he died. He had just an infection of the nose. Overnight, he was dead.

So all these sort of things happened. Fredy Hirsch came and brought me some food. And there we had this sort of organization, which he had young people talking resistance, what we can do all throughout the Auschwitz-Birkenau. Just all laughable stuff, you know?

But yes, we did it, and he did it, until that time, where we could do something and all this. And so there was the preparation of resistance, absolutely, except with means, which to me, in retrospect, were laughable. We took it very seriously.

You mean, you talked about it and this kept your spirits up?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

But did anybody act on all--

Oh, well, I mean, sabotage and all this sort of thing. But I said, just waiting for the moment where we could take over. And that was Fredy Hirsch very, very effectively trying to do that and prepare us. And I was part of that group, until the time Fredy Hirsch and the old people who had-- had come before me, for some reason, there was an order. And I've

tried to find it from the SS people myself. I was not able to find out, but I've tried-- out after the-- after the war-- find out what--

All the transport which came before us, for some reason or other, all the people had been there for a while. All with a certain number, regardless of their state, were sent to the gas chamber. And among them was this friend of mine, Hans Fischer, and many other brothers and-- were identical types. And another, Alexander [? Lipen ?] and a lot of people I knew, close kids my age. And they were rounded up and sent to the gas chamber.

And then Fredy Hirsch committed suicide, because he didn't want to go through that. And was not able-- that was the only time when, because of an order from Berlin-- must have come from Berlin-- and they said, round them all up, these particular people, and send them to gas chamber, for reasons which I still have not been able to ascertain. And I'm sure there was some sort of reason, but I just don't have it. I have not been able to find it out.

Anyway, so that was the time when Fredy Hirsch was unable to really prevail. And because he couldn't prevail, rather than being sent to the gas chamber, he committed suicide proud. And it was a terrible sting.

Well, the interesting thing is there was no problem in killing you, officially. But if you killed yourself unofficially, then there was a big investigation. So in the barrack I was in, for example, one person decided to-- to hang himself, successfully. And the SS came in with cameras and all that big hubbub and all-- because he-- big investigation.

Why was that? Why did they investigate [INAUDIBLE]?

[CHUCKLES] Search me, you know? I mean, official killing was terrific. It was condoned. But if you unofficially killed yourself, that was not to be-- that was not to be. And then therefore, it was--

You took control of your own life.

Well, you have no right to do that. You had to wait until you were killed.

Was suicide common or uncommon?

Well, I mean, some-- sure, some people just went into coma. And I don't know how-- I think it was very rare, relatively speaking, because, yes, I've seen people just threaten and go and run through the electric wire. That's what you did. But this fellow did it. During the nighttime, he decided to hang himself in the barrack of a bad thing, a bad thing.

And well, there are some sort of freak sort of things. One comes to mind. There was one horny fellow from another camp, the neighboring camp, A camp, into which I was-- we were moved after we were selected to go to Blechhammer.

And he, during the night-- and there was one-- Eva [? Steinhardt ?] was-- Eva [? Steinhardt ?] was a block leader, one of the women's block. Very attractive woman who was-- in Theresienstadt, I knew, was just unbelievably active. And I looked at some of these acts, sexual acts. And my mother got wind of that and said, you can't look at that. And just took me and was very protective-- you can't do that. And she--

You mean you looked-- not pictures, but the sexual act?

Oh, yeah, she would have affairs. And I just happened to be in proximity, so I looked. And my mother didn't just go for it. I said fine. And she didn't like her, because she was just very promiscuous. And she continued to be that in Auschwitz because she had the means to function, which we didn't have, because-- because we're-- because of malnutrition.

So she was a beauty, no question about that. Eva, Eva [? Alverastein. ?] And she kind of liked me and all that, but my mother hated her. [CHUCKLES]

So there was one block leader in the A camp. And since he couldn't get into the B2 legally in order to spend the night with her, he decided to get himself just under the fence, barbed wire-- electrically-charged barbed wire. Just dig a hole

beneath it and just squeeze through it.

Of course, they had towers all the place, with watchtowers with SS. And for whatever reason, he had some understanding or he was able to be out of sight so that he was-- it was not noticed, the way he did it. I don't know.

He came to spend the night, and then they discovered that he went back and all that. Didn't have any proof or anything that someone came over and all that. And there was a tremendous uproar. SS came and all that. But they were very impressed somehow, impressed. Not punitive, but they were very impressed. Say, hey, my God, that's quite a thing to do.

Some of these sort of acts, they respected. They had some, say, hey, this is something unusual, I mean, just-- you're not cowards this and that.

Initiative.

And they respected that. Yeah, initiative and all that. So that was-- she was the one. And he had a good time with her, and then he returned. Nothing happened. No one got caught.

Well, it was different in terms of when someone escaped, because that was serious. Why? Not because of the fact that the person escaped, not business to escape, period. But because what could be spreading about Auschwitz-Birkenau, you see? Gassing and all of that. And people succeeded and all that.

So then we were rounded up, and we had to stand in the middle of the winter, just ice cold. I had this pneumonia and all this and that. And then our hair was cut as a penalty. And all the privilege, we had no longer-- were gone.

And so that's when the hard times began. That was in 1943-- 1942, or '43 actually, yeah, winter. It's still January, something like that. Of course, in other things, time was only-- you only knew time because of the seasons. Because the days you didn't know. You had absolutely no time-- feeling for time, because there was no way you could measure it.

All right, so--

So the hair removal was punishment because someone escaped.

Was the beginning, that's right.

And was there other punishment for that escape?

Well, I mean, yeah, some of it became much tougher, in general speaking, of course. It may have also changed without it for what I know. But and then they brought in Polish people, Polish inmates, who were searching the whole camp in a most ruthless fashion.

Were you still allowed to live as a family?

Well, we never-- you see, it was a family camp not because people lived as a family in one barrack. Female barracks and male barracks. And so the only time we could see each other was during the day, on the main camp road. Or we just could get close to the barrack. And that's what I've done.

I've looked into that-- looking for a friend of mine. And I was with my mother, as a matter of fact. And I looked into a barrack, just one you peep through, if I could see some-- and an SS man saw me, an older SS man, small fellow.

And he just took me and-- and-- slapped my face several times, in a way which was no big deal. But it was terrible for me by virtue of the fact that my mother was seeing it, and she was terribly upset about that because he slapped my face and all that. And I could have gotten into trouble. I didn't see him. I was not alert, then, obviously. I didn't see him. But that was all. So that was relatively--

And then, in contrast, you had some SS person who stopped me when I was with a senior. As a matter of fact, the camp senior was not a Jew. He was a German professional-- professional criminal and-- a professional, what you call a-- professional-- habitual criminal. And he was there because of that.

But he was senior and was a nice guy, nice guy in terms of-- and he defended himself, at that particular time, against some SS people who were there. And he said, you can't do that to me, I'm-- I'm an Aryan. You just can't talk to me like that, I'm an Aryan. And I was terribly impressed. And I was watching nearby, listening to it. And there was an SS man, and said, hey, come here. I said, my God, now I've gotten-- I'm in trouble.

Well, you couldn't, you know? He just came in and said, are you hungry? I said, what are you kidding? Of course we are. We're starving to death. Come with me. I said, OK, come with you. Nice, nice kind of thing. I'm looking at the soldier, my God, that's the beginning of-- that's the end.

Well, so I just came with him. And he just went into the kitchen and said, hey, I mean, I want him to get some special rations. These sort of things happened also. And yeah, they gave me some special--

Acts of kindness.

Act of kindness, because the man saw the errors of the way. And he was in it to play the game by the rules. Couldn't get out. And yet, tried to do things, whatever he could, in order to ease things. And that is something which also needs to be mentioned, because it existed. And more should be written about it. I haven't read anything.

Were certain guards known for being kind if they could?

No, because, you see, if they were known, they were in trouble. Couldn't do it. And I talked to some people who were-- who were at Auschwitz-Birkenau whom I did not know personally in the camp, but after when we were in prison life-- in prison. So we talked about that-- very meaningful, all on tape. I have it all on tape. And we talked about this sort of thing.

And they explained to me, you just couldn't. You had to do it on the sly. You just simply couldn't do it. Because if you had the reputation or if you were caught, you were in-- and said, well, we could have exchanged our uniform with a striped uniform.

So they, too, were-- and that is something which people don't realize. Because you have to know that-- most survivors don't understand the rules of the game because they don't understand the organization of the Nazi structures. And I made it my business to learn about it from the people who are in it.

Yes.

In addition to all the documentation which I read. But that's incomplete. You really have to talk to people to get a more fuller picture. And that's why Hannah Arendt is to be commended for coming, that Eichmann is in all. She didn't go into the final sort of situation as she could have gone, as far as-- but she recognized that we all have Eichmanns under certain circumstances. We all have Eichmanns in us. And she's absolutely 100% correct.

I have expressed it in some of my writings differently. I say we all are sleepers. And that means that we have the good in us, as well as the bad in us. We are capable of-- depending on the situations. Those situations trigger certain responses which may be totally out of character.

Yes.

And that we all are capable of certain things. And that's what we've seen, how some kapos, Jewish kapos, or people who were the stooges did things which other people never would have done.



And I pride myself that I've never been in that position where I would have done anything of that nature, because I would have not done it as a matter of principle and a matter of morality. In spite of the stress and the pressure I was in, I never would have assumed the kapo situation.

And there are kids of my age who were in charge of-- of barracks, and they're a few years older than I. And they didn't shy away from kicking and mishandling their father, if need be, in order to assert them. And I remember that very vividly.

One of these people was a young kid, had a father, and he just-- he physically abused him and called him names and behaved towards him in a way which was unbelievable. It was very cruel. He was just a very cruel, miserable sort of person.

But, I mean, so some people-- they found plenty of people to do the dirty work which they needed, because that saved them a great deal of personnel. And that whole structure was dependent on that collaboration of people who were-- collaboration of victims.

So are you saying that the role that the person is cast into will draw on either the good or the evil, depending on what the role demands?

Well, the role, how do you get into the role, you see? You get into the role either because you volunteer, and then you have to have some sort of idea in terms of the rule of the game.

But forced into the role, let's say.

Huh?

Cast into the role or forced into the role.

Well, if you're cast in the role, you can't be cast in the role of a kapo if you don't want it, because there was always a way to say no without any sort of penalty. So you volunteered. You assumed the role because-- because you wanted it, and you were given that role.

We were cast into the role of inferiors and subhumans. There you were cast, because we couldn't defend ourselves. That, yes. But in terms of the responsibilities which some people roles-- which some people assumed by way of volunteering for it is a very different thing. Because that was their decision. That's what they wanted. Because they felt that, in that role, they had a better chance to survive, and they would ease their predicament. Which they did in most cases, at the expense of fellow inmates.

So you could refuse, as you say, to be a kapo--

Oh, yeah, you could refuse. Yeah, you could refuse.

--without punishment.

Oh, yeah. You could refuse, or you just could escape it. You could avoid it and all that. But most people wanted to have these jobs. And therefore, they did all they could in order to endear themselves, in order to-- when there was a competition or when someone say, who's going to, they say, I will do that. They volunteer. And then among those who volunteered, then they selected those people who suited them best.

Doesn't mean that you were in a situation where you automatically received that job. But you had to be OK'd by those who had the power to give you these roles. So the assumption of that role was predicated on the basis that they felt that you were qualified. And then they watched you. And if you didn't do what they wanted you to do, then you were out and in deep trouble. So--

Other things, though, did you-- were you aware of any increases, say, in suicide or madness when the--

Well, madness, yes, you see? I could see quite a bit of people who just simply lost it, and they became what you call muselmanners-- muselmanners. And so you could see that.

But the interesting thing is that I didn't see an increase of suicide at all, because suicide was very rare. And that led me to the conclusion that the more your drive of self-preservation is stimulated by external situations, the more you will want to live rather than die, even if the predicament of such nature that you don't even know whether you'll be still alive tomorrow. And that's the amazing thing.

And that is my conclusion. I wrote about that, too. I wrote about that. I published that, this particular notion, that the harder you're pressed, the more your drive for self-preservation will prevail.

And so most of the suicide I remember occurred prior to deportation. So I knew plenty of people-- relatives, friends, associates, and all that-- cases I know where they committed suicide prior to deportation. Yes.

In the case of, as we were saying, madness, insanity, was becoming a muselmann the typical route this would take, rather than, say, an hysteria or--

Well, I mean, you just simply couldn't cope anymore. You couldn't resist. You couldn't resist by way of survival. You couldn't survive if you didn't function, if you were not alert. Because then you were killed sooner or later, either by a kapo or your block senior or by an SS. I mean, you just couldn't do it.

And it was a question of, if someone was a muselmann, you just could count the days of the person. And that means that you physically, you still may have been OK. But if you mentally could not function, that was the end. Physically or mentally, that was the end. And that was the muselmann situation. You could pretty much say-- predict how long that person would make it before he would be dead.

For example, how long?

Well, a matter of a week at the most, or sooner.

Did the situation come on quickly or gradually?

Well, it was a gradual deterioration of health or whatever, emotional thing. For example, this friend of mine, Alexander [? Lipen, ?] was a tall fellow, very gifted intellectual. So before he knew that he was going to, they knew that-- and I was present in that situation, in that barrack-- and said all the people in certain numbers have to assemble and will be taken out and all that. And here you are looking and all that.

So these kids, this one of them, said, you know, they were apprehensive, because they knew exactly-- at that particular point, already, they knew what that-- what it meant. And he knew it. So he escaped into mathematics.

And he had a piece of pencil or something to write and a kind of scrap. And he started to write down complex mathematical formulas. Still remember that, still today. Just unbelievable. It was just unbelievable. And that's just-- totally everything else was in -- He just escaped into the world of mathematics.

Now, the other ones were desperate and showed their desperation. But somehow stood their ground, if you will, or whatever you call it, and waited for their predicament, just their push to whatever-- because there was no escape. There was no escape.

There was no way. Except the only escape, as I said, Fredy Hirsch had the means, because he apparently had access to poison. We didn't. And then, of course, maybe people would have done it, too. But even that somehow not-- was not necessarily viewed as a viable alternative, because of-- but it was terrible to watch all these people.

And by that time, when they went, I still had this sort of reluctance to accept that, as a reality, that people were gassed en masse and all that. And then I remember the father of this Hans Fischer, after they had been put and he couldn't prevent it in spite of the fact that he was working with Mengele-- the psychiatrist, he was working with Mengele-- survived of course. Was liberated at Auschwitz, this psychiatrist, Fischer.

As a matter of fact, I saw him in-- in Prague after-- very shortly after-- after I came back from Dachau, in military uniform which he was put in or whatever. It was kind of a survival tool. The Russians made him an officer, too. It was just unbelievable stuff.

Anyway, so he came to me and said, well, you see, you're still alive, and they gassed my son Hans. And Hansy was gassed and you are still out. And so that was the end of all my illusions.

How bitter?

Which I didn't have any, because at that time, I just-- I just didn't want to accept it. But yeah, so many people like myself who refused to accept the fact that this existed. But you saw the chimney and everything.

But in a way, that's almost helpful, to not be--

Well, I don't know. Well, maybe. It's a psychological mechanism to--

All right, and so then the last stage was this terrible situation, which became worse and worse. And then the food problems and the starvation and disease and people being sent to gas chambers. And then they came in '44, again, and the liquidation of B2, in a way-- beginning of the liquidation of B2.

And so they are looking for slave laborers. And now we're coming to Blechhammer. And so there was an SS. I don't know whether it was Mengele or not, because I really don't know. But we had to be naked and run and all that. And on that basis, we knew that we would be either selected or not selected, which meant death.

And so I was saying, which was true, that I was an electrician and all that. And they looked for certain occupations. And I had this type. And my father, too, said something which apparently was needed or whatever. And of course, you lied and adjusted to whatever they said that. Well, so we had to run, my father and I, naked in front of the guy. And we were selected, yes, to go and all that.

You were together when you went to the selection?

Yeah. And so we were moved to-- to the A camp.

Did you worry that you might not be, because of your physical condition?

Oh, yeah, absolutely. And so therefore, you just-- absolutely. So you just really-- which was kind of X-ray, you know? X-ray, trying to be athletic. An X-ray, walking X-ray, running X-ray, being athletic. And I mean, it's absolutely ridiculous.

And your father had to run.

Oh, my father-- my father was-- we were, of course-- but my father was in very good shape. So relatively speaking, we were viewed as still capable of work.

And so then we were rounded up and put into the A camp. And that was the last time I saw my mother. And through that fence, A camp-- where the A camp and B camp, which the one-- which this block, whatever he was, earlier, just dug his way through. So that's just about where I saw my mother.

And we still talked over the fence. And there came a Jewish kapo, who was not only a Jew, but also had a black triangle,

which means he was a saboteur of some-- or was some other sort of thing, was sent there.

And so he saw that. And he just really let me have it. Just slapped my face [INAUDIBLE]. And then I didn't take much. Then I fell on the ground, just again, in front of my mother. And so it's not what hurt me. But it was just terrible. And she was just-- it was awful, while we were talking and saying goodbye to each other.

And so that was terrible. And I just really could have killed the man. Not because of what he had done to me so much, because there was no justification for that. But he was just a real sadist and a miserable creature.

But how it must have pained your mother to see this happen.

That's right. And that is something which really upset me most. That really upset me most.

You know, I remember you once alluding to the fact that you thought your mother had some kind of connections to which, if she had struggled, she might have--

Yeah. Well, after the war, I stayed with the survivors-- with survivors of this Dr. Otto Heller Dr. Otto Heller was a pediatrician in Prague, who kind of was a deputy to my more permanent physician, who happened to be a distant relative and a professor, university professor of pediatrics.

Well-known, famous individual. Was very fond of my mother. And they had World War I experience together or something, I don't know what, in terms of the war. And he was a physician, my mother was a nurse, during World War I.

And so they had a-- apart from these sort of relative ties, and they're very fond of each other. And he was my physician who came to the house, house physician and all that. When he was unable to because he was some sort vacation or not in Prague or-- then he had a deputy, and it was Dr. Otto Heller who was a pediatrician. And Dr. Otto Heller became the right-hand man of Mengele, too.

And so he was able, because of the influence he had. And that is a very interesting sort of thing, because he had enough influence with Mengele to save his wife, his daughter, and he got killed by a stray bullet during the time of liberation. Otherwise, he also would have survived, because Mengele protected him, the whole family.

So when I stayed with them, we shared the apartment with his widow and daughter, Helen, she told me if-- and they are formed-- they are friends-- they were friends from Prague. If your mother-- that is Ilsa-- if Ilsa would have come to see me or Otto, we could have-- we could have helped her and saved her. And why didn't she do it?

And I don't know why she didn't do it. And the only thing is, what I remember, that was the last time. And of course, we always had hope. But the chances are, all the people who were left behind were all gassed.

And just recently, we read again some things from the documents and said-- from Hoss, what Rudolf Hoss said in his reports, whatever, that in '44, the people were just-- about 500,000-- some up to 500,000 people were gassed in '44. And she was one of them.

And that was a terrible thing. But because Otto Heller for all practical purposes, saved my life. Because they gave me-- when I had pneumonia or jaundice and all that, they saved my life by giving me the information to get out and giving me some sort of injections and things, which were just-- no one really was--

So I got the attention of physicians, whatever they could do. It was nothing, virtually. But they gave me something to just stimulate my heart, whatever. Otherwise, I would have kicked the bucket then and there. And so, yes, they could have done a great deal. No question about that. Because they've done it for me. Because I made it known that I was in trouble.

And my mother, for some reason or other, didn't take advantage of that situation. I don't know. I just don't know. And

she was very confident. When we talked over the fence about, we'll see each other in Prague, and-- very confident-- very optimistic, very confident, and very reassuring and all that.

And I felt that her premonitions or whatever, her feelings about the whole thing, she was very-- kind of had these sort of special gifts in a way. And always highly intellectual and a terrific human being. Not only that she was my mother, but I was very-- I was very lucky that I had a person like her as a mother. It just was a privilege, a tremendous stroke of luck. And personally, I don't know what would have become of me without her influence.

So you [INAUDIBLE]?

I really felt-- I really felt that her notions-- that she had some sort of good-- and she didn't. She didn't. And that's how I found out that she didn't take advantage of what she could have done. And then came to that end as she is. And there's no question about that fact, because she was healthy, you see?

The funny thing, she was-- she was usually-- she looked kind of sickly because of psychosomatic problems with my father and all that. You do that. She always had some problems-- the kidney, this or that or nerves or whatever. And so she went to get cured some place, some sanatorium place, this and that. And was kind of on the frail side.

Ha, ha, and at Auschwitz-Birkenau, she was just as sturdy, as tough as anyone and just unbelievable. Just tough as anything and in better shape than all of us.

Why do you think that happened?

That just beats me. It just absolutely beats me. It just absolutely-- unbelievable. She was in better shape than any of us. Small woman, you know? Very small and slender and very nice, strong, little body, but firm and all.

She used to tell me, when she was naked with other women, and say, oh, these terrible people, you know, they're just bag-like things and all that. And they said she was kind of beautiful figure still, in spite of the age. She was in her late 40's.

All right, so then very shortly afterwards, then we were put into open trucks, SS, and driven to Blechhammer.

How long did that take to get there?

It was just a few hours, two hours maybe. Just a relatively short time, because you're not talking about not too far a distance.

Were you with your father?

No, no, no, separate. And yeah, because you're talking quite a number of people.

And so then the reception in Blechhammer was that-- the few things which I've had, which I was able to save and still had-- talking about books and things and all that, the knife, and all these sort of things-- I don't know about the knife actually. I may still have saved it. I'm not sure.

Anyway, so I virtually lost everything. Just nothing very much I was able to keep, because they took everything and went through the same processes and shower, whatever, this and that, and different thing. And then we were assigned to the barrack. And then had to march and were--

What was the barrack like?

The barrack, like, was not very different from Auschwitz-Birkenau, except maybe it was slightly more bearable. And so then we had to get up at 5 o'clock or something in the morning, every morning, and coming back fairly late in the evening or afternoon.

Did you have the appell and all that, too?

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. And so, but these was a little bit more freedom and more to be had-- more resources you could organize in a way. And so--

For example, what kind of resources?

A mountain of cabbage brought in for the SS or for the-- for the inmates. I don't even know. So what I did is just learned to steal. Never stole from fellow inmates, because that was a capital crime. I never would have done it anyway.

So there was a mountain of cabbage. And so I just-- and I was very fast and in good shape, relatively, and was very fast. Unbelievable runner. I used to be an unbelievable-- very fast, very good in sports. And so that helped, because I really had a trained body.

And so I just rushed to the cab-- took a cabbage, put it under my striped thing, and ran. And they after me. And they saw it. Because I knew they would see it and all ran after me. But I was so fast, and I ran and knew the camp. So then I just went into my block and then I just-- this sort of thing you had to do.

You were never caught, obviously.

If I would have caught, I would be dead.

Were others-- in this kind of instance, do they punish others or make people stand in long periods [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, no. But what was there, if for example, there are air raids or things. And we had these sort of canvas boots with not leather soles, but wooden things. And you had laces. Laces never lasted or whatever. They were just all substitute-- erzats type of substitute material.

So during air raids, we were not permitted to go into-- into the-- into any shelters which were open to the prisoner of wars and the Germans and all the other ones. We are not permitted. So we could only go into the cellars of certain buildings we worked at and all that.

Anyway, so after the-- many people got killed that way, simply because the bombs. And whenever the thing functioned well and all that, there came an air raid, and they just destroyed the whole thing. And then it was to be built up again. And it was just a game which never-- never stopped.

And so a lot of things were to be had. And I just-- some people took-- I didn't-- took wiring, which was then used it as shoelaces. Now, one fellow was caught, for example.

You took what?

Wiring.

Wiring, oh, OK.

After the air raid and all that, because lots of things were lying on the ground and all this. And so I took that, put it into my shoelace-- into my shoes. And one fellow was caught.

And every time someone did something which was-- during the weekend, we had to witness the hanging. And these people were hanged. And so we all, the whole camp, had to come and witness the way that we can be hung, too, as a kind of-- preventing that other people would do it.

And so you just could do all these sort of things, because they're accessible. You couldn't let yourself be caught. And I

said, I think last time also, I just picked up a book, and the whole thing-- picked up a book during the winter, which was a code book, and I've talked about that I think.

No, go ahead, tell that story again. Tell it even if you told it. Go ahead.

Well, this code book. And because we wanted-- I didn't have, at that time, anything to read anymore, because everything was taken away from me. So I was after reading material and all that. And so there it was after the-- after one of those air raids, whatever, there was a code book.

And I put it in my striped thing. And then because of the cold and frozen and all that, it just dropped out. I was just simply-- because everything's cold and frozen, so I just couldn't really keep things as well, control it as well. And so it just fell out, and while we were on the-- while we returned to the camp.

And then an SS man picked it up, and then we all were then stopped. And they searched us when we came into the camp. And it was just terrible, just hours and punishments and all this sort of thing, beatings, whatever. And so that was a consequence, simply because I was careless. I actually described it in the other thing.

Well, and similar things happened. And whenever you read something which you're not supposed to do, and the same thing with the shirt. It was your shirt. If someone stole your shirt in the washroom or whatever, you came out without the shirt.

It's not only that you could have caught the worst possible pneumonia or whatever, but they would kill you because you didn't have your shirt. So they'd beat you to death. So you would not even have time to develop any sort of disease, because by that time, they would have beaten you to death.

So what do you do? So we just try to get away with it, just taking another shirt from someone else. And that's what I did. And so the last person in the game is going to be the fall guy. And then you had these kapos and all that, who some of them more cruel, some people were very nice, depending on that. And so you had to play the game and deal with the people.

And then, of course, I had a lot of-- tried to have contacts. And I've met people who were there, sent also as slave laborers, except it's free-- kind of more free slavery, not SS convicts as inmates. And made contacts, and one of them was Czech.

And I've asked him to, and he was very cooperative and helped me to get messages to my friends when we were there still and get packages, which he then brought into that. And I was caught once with an SS man who was known as-- as Tom Mix. That was his nickname, Tom Mix.

Why was that? Why was he called that?

Well, because he was shooting and all the time. He was just trigger-happy and killing people and shooting at them and killing them. A trigger-happy fellow. And so he caught me while I just had come from this contact I have, this Czech fellow, and gave him-- he gave me the contraband, which was medication and some money, but primarily food stuff, medication, just unbelievable things. Just like if someone would have given you a million dollars.

And so my knapsack which I had organized after an air raid, which was also a stroke of luck, because one British POW had not taken it to the shelter with him. And I was there, so we stole what we could.

So there was a knapsack full of powdered milk and goodies and things of that nature. So I took it. I had a British-- [CHUCKLES] --British knapsack. And so I had that and filled with the contraband which I had received from this cooperative Czech.

And there comes the worst SS in the camp, the most cruel, vicious, SS camp, who was like an eagle-- he saw everything. You couldn't get it-- I mean, he was-- so the only thing I could do was just put the knapsack out of the sight.

So I put it behind me.

And said, what are you doing here? Well, I said, well, foreman so-and-so. And that helped me a great deal, because my perfect German without an accent, without sounding Polish or Yiddish or something. So they hesitated.

The interesting thing is, it was a threat to them to behave in a way to certain people who were like them, or who resembled them in terms of whom they felt related to. And say, hey, you know, he's like me, like me.

And somehow, subconsciously at that time-- I was not as psychologically aware as I am today. But somehow, I must have been aware of it subconsciously. So then I just, precisely, like this Fredy and all the other-- I knew what sort of psychology you had to use with SS people.

And I said, so and so, I've done that and-- and so he slapped my face and let me go without searching me. Because if he had searched me, it would have been my death. Because for just transgressions of minor-- just like the wiring and all that, they hanged you. And this sort of thing would have been just much worse.

Was the knapsack having a strap like [INAUDIBLE]?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

He didn't notice the strap even?

Well, I don't know whether he did or not. He just simply didn't bother. Because, you see, I distracted him saying-- whatever I called him, rank or whatever, I-- whatever-- I report to you that I've been sent by this and that to do this and that.

And then there was a German foreman, and I was-- which was kind of a lie anyway. So they just slapped my face. And said, I don't want to catch you. Next time, I'll kill you or whatever. I don't want to catch you again, because if I do, I'll kill you. And let it go by that.

So these sort of things. So after the air raid, just sabotaged a great deal and destroyed things, which were not destroyed. It was very important equipment, instruments, and all that.

So that it looked like it had been bombed?

Oh, yeah, yeah. And I did that, because there was no one around, and I was very alert. Or just a situation, which I also described in the-- in this booklet. After an air raid one day, we just were working on some sort of a detail. And there was a tank, large, where they had this natural, whatever, gas, or whatever, which was used. And all of a sudden, I can see sparks and all that. And I said, the damn thing is going to explode.

And I was sitting there with a buddy who was in the same work detail. I said, run, run. But he was kind of not as alert. And I was. And that's what really was one of the most important ingredients of survival. And just that I, in spite of all the conditions, I kept on being alert-- alert. Responded with tremendous-- much faster than I could today. Although I still have a little bit of it left, but not as much.

And so I said, run, run. And he-- he kind of, what, what, what, what? And I ran because I could see. I couldn't explain to him. I ran. And the damn thing exploded. The man was just fried-- fried chicken. And the big thing, of course, and he didn't survive a day. He died. Of course, didn't-- wasn't dead, unfortunately, not immediately. Totally fried. Just unbelievable. Totally fried.

And I was still feeling the heat, but I was a safe distance so that nothing would happen. So these are some of the--

What kind of work were you assigned to do there?



Well, I was doing electrical work instead of just doing all the electrical wiring and all that in the various places, which were essential for the manufacturing of synthetic fuel, syn fuel. And so I was kind of slow and all that. Not the most efficient person, I guess. So they punished me. The German foreman was a man called [? Homan. ?] I remember his name. And his boss was called a fat man, [NON-ENGLISH], a fat man.

But [? Homan ?] was not too bad. And so he said something which I didn't do right, so he just takes me by the nose, just like that, and presses me in. And all the the juice comes out, out of the thing like that. And he said this sort of thing.

And then the fat man comes, and I don't respond in a way, or I haven't done something according to his liking. So he come down and just slaps me and all that. And so these sort of things happened. But it was nothing serious, except--

Were they particularly lenient? Or was that--

Well, I mean, in comparison to the SS people, they were lenient, because they didn't take any sticks. They used their hand or something else, some sort of instrument to beat you because-- and they didn't beat you where they really would injure you. They beat you just simply just like they would beat someone who doesn't obey or whatever-- behaves in a way.

And what he did with my nose, I remember that. And he said, I'm going to squeeze the juice out of your nose or something. It was just perverse sort of stuff, whatever.

And so there were lots of incidents which were inappropriate for people of a certain age and all that, including some sort of advances, homosexual advances.

A British prisoner of war was there with my buddy and said, OK, I have this chocolate and all that, if you let me stick it into your ear and all-- it was just kind of dirty, filthy, lice-ridden and all that. He must be pretty desperate to want contact of this nature.

So this buddy of mine, he just felt it was a good idea. And as I remember, it was more so a fellow prisoner of war, a British fellow, just a cockney type, whatever. And so I, of course, wouldn't have anything to do with it. But he-- just he did, and whatever he did with him, I just-- none of my business.

What about in general, in your other camp experiences, about sexual abuse of men, women, children?

Sexual abuse? Nah. I mean, it never happened to me. But I know some after the war, and I know some kids who were known as the Pit Bulls. And they're considerably younger than we were. And they kept by camp-- inmate camp dignitaries for sexual purposes, because sexually, they functioned. And there were no women available, so they used kids. And they saved them even from being gassed.

And now, I know some people, now, here, got to know some people who survived on that basis, simply because of sexual abuse by some of the people in inmate-- inmate dignitaries, inmate function holders. And so they're usually considerably younger than me-- three, four years younger, who otherwise would have been for-- somehow they were saved by these people from being gassed.

And that's something which is a chapter which also has not been written. Lots of things have not been said, simply because it's not socially acceptable or simply would introduce a certain element into the survivor situation, which would not be morally or otherwise acceptable.

Yes, another one that's sometimes very obliquely alluded to is cannibalism.

Yeah. Well, that's an interesting thing. Because when we were on the transport, two weeks from-- after the death march, from a place called [Place name] we didn't have any-- hardly any food anymore. No food whatsoever for days or a week, whatever. I haven't seen any of it myself.

And I haven't seen any situation where this would have been practiced in all my camp experience. I haven't heard of it, only afterwards-- or witnessed it, of course. Haven't heard or witnessed it. Or even considering that as an alternative, I don't know anyone who would have even suggested it. So that's not part of what our--

But I think it's interesting, you mentioning things that happened that wouldn't be socially acceptable to look into as --

Yeah, right. But cannibalism is something which somehow is more excusable, understandable, because these people were not killed in order to be-- they're usually dead probably anyway. But, I mean, that didn't even occur. I don't know anyone in my own observations or environment or whatever, all the camp-- throughout the camp time, where this would have been viewed as a viable-- as even an alternative, not even viable-- as an alternative, period.

All right, so then Blechhammer was another situation where you could have had a privileged situation because of the air raids and unexploded bombs, that you could be in a special work detail to-- to uncover these unexploded things. And many people got killed that way. And I volunteered, because of special rations which you were getting and for that. And then I found that this was not a very safe thing to do, of course. But I didn't care at that point.

And then they come-- they came-- the camp senior was in charge of the camp Jew, whatever that was. And he said, you're an intelligent fellow, I don't want you to be in this. So he just came out of his own volition or somehow and said, I don't want you to be in that. You shouldn't do it. Just get out of it.

And I didn't-- because he simply made the arrangements, whatever, I just-- so that it wouldn't continue or whatever. Well, and so many people did that, and we were simply-- they used inmates, because-- because they didn't want to use their own people. Always under supervision, of course, of the SS. But still, they didn't want to use their own people. So instead of their own people, the inmates were expendable and got killed.

So you could volunteer, but then you could unvolunteer?

Yeah, yeah. Well, I volunteered, and then I was told, you know, I don't want you to do that anymore, because you shouldn't. So these sort of things. And then, for example, other--

So this person helped you, then, by getting you out [INAUDIBLE].

Oh, absolutely in a way. Except I didn't see it. I resented that, because I felt that it prevented me from having access to extra food, extra rations.

And so one day, for example, I wake up, and there was another thing. Just kind of one day wake up for some reason, another also kind of subconsciously [INAUDIBLE] all night. By the way, I just got shoes also from Prague with this connection I had there, this Czech.

By the way, what was their name, the person who received the packages and the person who sent you the packages?

Well, I didn't send any packages from the camp, for sure.

No, the person who sent the packages from Czechoslovakia, that person's name.

Well, [CHUCKLES] this was also a pediatrician. I don't know why I'm just surrounded by pediatricians. But--

[CHUCKLING]

This was a family who were what were mixed-marriage. And they also belonged to the same church as we did, in a way. And the wife of this physician was a German, Sudeten German, was an anti-pacifist and a very close friend of my mother's.

And because of his connection this German pediatrician had back in Prague, Nazi connection, and because of the

doctors who were not brought up in the Jewish-- so they were viewed as half-Jews, second grade, and therefore, not sent to camps-- were exempted, didn't have to wear the star and all that.

So they stayed. But they, of course, were very intimately concerned with our fate. And they went into a great deal of trouble to find out where we were and all that, because of the-- and that went up to Hoss or something, real connections. I'm talking big connections they had.

And so to cut a long story short, these were the people, and their name was [? Levochik-- ?] [? Levochik. ?]