

Yeah I'm fine.

--rolling, and give us about five seconds, and we'll go and start now.

OK. OK, this is interview number three with John Steiner. This is Sandra Bendayan, and he has his colleague, Carol Horwitz again here, and today is the 22 August 1991. And as we were just saying, we we're going to begin today with you talking about your leaving Blechhammer and the death march and having to leave your father behind.

All right. So prior to our leaving Blechhammer, it became very obvious in terms of the turmoil and some of the things we could hear, war, war. Well, noises that the Soviets were closing in, and that, of course, in one way or another, was raising our hopes and stimulated our ability to fight on and struggle, continue our struggle.

And it's an important thing that so many people said that there was no resistance against the Nazis on the part of the inmates, and Jewish inmates in particular, because they were there without really being aware of any particular reason. They had not done anything.

They felt innocent, and they have not committed any crimes, but they are there simply because they were either religious Jews or cultural Jews and what have you, because most of the people, of course, never understood the reason why they should be there by virtue of the fact that the definition of Jewishness was something which the Nazis were totally haphazard and unscientific fashion related to a race, which of course, is totally unbelievable ridiculous. Particularly when we think in terms of the fact that you may have originated from a Jewish family which went back generations and centuries of Jews, religious Jews.

And then they're considered to be racial Jews for reasons which never were properly defined were laughable. Even the SS and other people just never really could quite take it seriously, because the scientific hollowness of the whole thing was just simply not proven in any shape or form. And so people were bewildered, and say, I'm not racial. We're not a race. Jewishness is not a race.

That's something which has not really been properly reflected on, I think, in very many interviews and discussions with survivors. And I think it's very important to establish that somehow this notion of a race, a Jewish race, was imposed by the Nazi ideology. It was very typical for the Nazi ideology developed by Nazi ideologues and foremost by Hitler himself, who had learned it back in Vienna.

And so people were confused, so the struggle, which I was initially talking about before I went into this ridiculous notion of race which was accepted by serious academicians for reasons which probably escapes them now if they are still alive, made it very difficult to really find meaning in all that struggle and the resistance. And that's why, for example, psychologically people said, what do I resist with and against because I'm not guilty of anything?

And I think that's a very important momentum which pose a problem for many people to find meaning in their suffering. Well, now, that then depended on the individual to come to terms with that particular predicament in which they found themselves in the camps. And I've had no problems with-- difficult problems-- with finding meaning in it, except I could see the unbelievable cruelty and lack of reason in all this. But you see, that also gave me some sort of a, how do I come to terms with this sort of fate, with this sort of situation I find myself in?

How did you?

Well, simply by using my resources, and if you will, philosophies and notions which gave me strength, and that maybe of religious, philosophic, humanistic. And that helped me, and then very much along the lines explained by Viktor Frankl, which I really, totally identified with, because the man was absolutely right and independently much younger than he, of course, and not at all having gone through that schooling at that time because I was a teenager.

I pretty much reached similar conclusions, and I think that's a very important thing to mention, which we haven't done before. Because I'm not just interested in describing their horror which has been done so many times, but how do we

interpret that? What do we learn? And that to me is the most important thing. What can I learn from it? What can we learn which we can pass on to future generations? And that's my professional interest.

At that time, are you referring to your belief in the anthroposophy?

Yes, well, I think anthroposophy certainly was a great help. There's no question about that in terms of thinking in terms of reincarnation, thinking in terms of previous lives, thinking in terms of how do I deserve it, or what is the meaning of it all. How do I get into the situation merely by some sort of a chaotic occurrence, or is there some sort of verse and rhyme to it, meaning which really can be. And I ponder all that, and somehow, I thought about that, and I was very fortunate because my encounter with my family, at that time, two points.

The Theresienstadt and then Auschwitz-Birkenau and then with my father being in Blechhammer together. So we certainly discussed that and helped each other in order to accept that situation and accept it not in terms of accepting it and say that's fine, but say, hey, how do I make sense out of all that? And what is the meaning, and how do I survive? And this gave us-- and that's why I'm talking about-- this gave us some sort of additional motivation to struggle and not to give up, because so many people gave up, because they didn't have any-- they couldn't find meaning in their situation. Only the dreadfulness of it all.

And I have a profound understanding for that. Particularly, in the Jewish circle, because if I am a political person, which we did too, by the way, very actively against the regime. So we didn't just sit back and let it happen. No, we were very active, proud of that. All of us, actually. My mother in so many different ways. And nothing profound or major perhaps, but still something when I was a boy scout, and we had my group.

It was the leadership where we were just a boy scout. And we did the Mickey Mouse stuff, or we helped people to escape, which we did very specifically when it was still possible to escape over the Czech borders to Poland when Poland was not-- prior to the invasion of Poland, and then also meet with other people who were like minded and reflect on things and oppose whatever could be of opposed.

So some of that certainly had been done, so that was a very good start to speak of. But most of the people found themselves in a predicament without having done anything to break the law and just went like sheep, so to speak. That's what they are accused of. And just closing the circle, saying that the will to survive was indeed resistance, and that's something which people have not understood properly.

Just living from one day to the next.

That's right, and to resist by struggling on and saying, I'm going to survive. Not how so many people to say, which is kind of ridiculous and ex post facto, and I'm absolutely opposed to that and say, to bear witness on all. That it's just something which people thought of only after the fact, and not during that, because they're preoccupied with other things. Just one of the most ridiculous things I've heard. And that keeps on coming, keeps on coming, and people say that, and the claim this totally absolutely-- I've had other problems which were more immediate than bearing witness.

But anyway, this every day struggle. And now, when there was very little hope, because obviously, the information we received was very minimal, if at all available. So when the Russians, Soviets, closed in, and we've heard the music of the war. Let's put it that way. Poetic. And then it gave us hope, because you see, the situation as we found it in terms of our situation was very hopeless, because we had absolutely no idea that we had a chance of survival or for political purposes that Nazi Germany would lose the war.

That was not at all clear at that particular point, and certainly not to people who were isolated from any sort of news and information. And so there was no external information which would give hope, but all right, so during that particular time when the Russians were closing in, there was an additional sort of momentum of hope.

I remember that was just around New Year's Eve and Christmas time, and then we suddenly, for reasons which still escape me, got tremendous soup which was pea soup with bacon in it and some special rations and all that, just absolutely beat me. I said, hey, all of a sudden, all this.

And then very soon afterwards, we were just told that we had to leave, and we could hear there the cannons and all that in distance. So the question was, are we going to stay? And I've discussed that with my father, but my father was physically in no condition, although he was, at that time, he was 44 years old, a relatively young man.

But all these sort of things were distorted, because anyone was over 30, so to speak, in a concentration camp was just like an old man, just deteriorated so quickly. So that's why people of my age had much better chance to survive physically than people who were older. More resilient.

How was your father's health then?

My father, he was a very sport-minded individual. He was into sports and all sorts of things as a young person until the time he was virtually taken to the camp. So he was physically, exceedingly active. He was considerably smaller than I am, but he was an exceedingly active and robust, muscle-bound individual who won prizes in whatever sports activities, what have you. So he was in good shape, but still because of the age and all the other things, he just deteriorated and had bad cases of dysentery and what have you.

And that weakened him to the extent that he then was susceptible to some other disease type of things, which to be sure, were not constitutional but were based on the situation in which we found ourselves. Because, indeed, people who were older were less resilient, and even those diseases I've had, developed an unbelievable resilience, which I still can't explain.

Because where you have the resources, where you got the resources under the circumstances without proper nutrition and all that sort of thing, which I think should have been studied by medical people much more than-- it has been totally neglected why people have survived on what basis without all the things which we are told today.

You have to do that in order to be healthy and all that, and yet people survive things which under normal circumstances people don't usually survive. Certainly, I have. No question about that without all that. So that is something which people really should have studied, and they neglected to study that.

Good point.

So then the discussion was, am I going to stay with my father, or I'm going to move out? Now, all the able-bodied individuals were forced by the SS to move out. It doesn't mean that you really have to abide by it, because there are ways and means to stay.

What was that?

Well, it was just too high, because you talk about a tremendously large plant which was the Blechhammer which was the synfuel plant. And so there are ways and Means to either hide in the camp and all that or the plant and all this sort of thing. So there are possible opportunities, but for some reason or another, my father decided to stay because physically couldn't move on. And I decided for whatever reason to move on which turned out to be the biggest mistake I could have made under the circumstances.

Because very soon after we had left, because when we were marching, the Russians were even closing-- the Soviets with closing in all the time. So actually, the distance between them and us, in spite of the fact that they were on the move, became closer.

And so my father was liberated within a few days, and if I had stayed, I would have been liberated within a few days and would have survived the whole thing, physically speaking, virtually unscathed or minimally unscathed. Because he recovered in a very short time from all the various things he had, because the conditions changed.

So was the guard detail left behind for those who could not go?

Well, the guard details were then more and more increasingly more interested in their own survival than the survival of the inmates. And that is something which I'll be talking about in just a moment. And so to be sure, to begin with, they tried to round up all the people-- able-bodied people-- and put them into this death march situation, moved them away from the battle ground Russians captured. But then some of them who stayed, or most actually stayed, and they are not killed or whatever, wiped out. And I don't even know where they anywhere.

I don't quite remember, because I wasn't there, and my father just was not that fully aware of all these things, or we discussed it, and he told me quite a few things. I don't think there was a great danger that there would have been killed. He certainly wasn't and most of the other people knew were not and whatever. All right, so those were able-bodied, most of my friends with whom I had worked and all that, they moved out, because they were just about my age or older. Not necessarily younger, but most of them were just my age or older.

And so the death march was one of the worst possible things, because not only were trails of dead people who were in similar situations killed by the real guards, because they no longer could march on, because it was-- you're talking January, 1945. And the very cold, brutal winter snow and with our striped pajamas, we were certainly not at all protected against the cold. And we've had our wooden-sole shoes with canvas tops without any proper stockings to protect us against this freezing weather and in the snow.

So within a relatively short time, people-- and then of course, bare hands were out. So most of the people incurred frostbite within a very, very short-- relatively short time, within a week and so the same thing happen to me. I had a pair of mittens which I was able to get from the contacts which I've had in Blechhammer with the outside, and the distant relatives who send in all sorts of interesting, important, survival materials like medicines and money and food stuff and what have you and mittens and shoes and all that.

So I've had mittens which were unbelievable because most of the people actually did not develop their frostbite of their feet to begin with. Most of the people for reasons which still escaped me, and I'm not clear about, developed frostbite in their hands. And so they became black and blue, and then the flesh fell off. It was just terrible, just like third-degree burns, just a similar situation.

So that did not happen to me by virtue of the fact that I-- and I still remember that it just very strange color, just kind of University of California color, black and gold. You know, black and yellow and-- Missouri actually. It's black and blue, isn't it? Anyway, so one of the university had black and gold. Whatever that means. Missouri or California. Who cares?

An omen.

Yeah, at that time, of course, literally didn't know that I would wind up in the United States, because I didn't have any-- rationally, I didn't have any particular hope to survive even then. But then, for some reason, because we had to walk, and we slept in the snow and very rarely were we able to sleep in some sort of a hay stack or when we are very lucky, with pigs. But I remember there was an SS man in charge of that particular area, a local one and in uniform, and he just said, you could infect the pigs.

So you have to get out, and the pigs were very important to me, because they're fed with potatoes you see. And so we ate the potatoes for the pigs, and that was a feast. And actually, also those who were able to get it, survived. And before we got to the pigs, we were thrown out of the place where they've had cattle.

Cattle, hay, and also so when we would stay in this relatively warm situation that was just like today if I have a chance to stay overnight in one of the most fancy hotels, you know. I mean, and even that is not proper comparison to be sure.

I always took advantage of that situation and made the best of it. And that was a very important thing, because I-- at all times-- was able to make the best out of a miserable, terrible situation. And that is precisely what we could do. The older ones are no longer as flexible and no longer as alert.

And this type of alertness came with age too, and some measure of intelligence which most of the people had anyway. Because if they had not that type of minimal measure of intelligence, they would have not survived up to that point

anyway, and that, I think, is an important point.

So yes, whenever there was grains, we ate the grain and all that. But very frequently, we had to stay overnight in the snow and all that, and that meant that people had just developed a dreadful disease, pneumonia, pleurisy, you name it and dysentery and all that. They could not control-- most of us could not control our bodily situation. So that we didn't have any underpants anyway so everything was soiled and all that which then crusted and all that sort of stuff. It would just be awful, and you had to walk virtually 24 hours a day almost. Not quite, because, yes, there was rest.

Now, the interesting part was also that as that situation increased, the SS, the guards, started to suffer also. And what they did, they took all their belongings and put them on some sort of carts and privileged, quote unquote, inmates then had to simply take the cart and push them or whatever. Drag them. Let's put it that way. Drag them.

And for that, they got some sort of food, whatever. But then even though it says guards were differently equipped obviously and had all the proper clothing to protect them against the freezing cold weather, they started to develop symptoms, and they dropped out.

So the more people dropped out, the less guards there were, and the more free we felt. However, that was very deceptive, because there was always a rear guard, which I personally never quite experienced myself. But anyone who stayed behind, and that's what we could see what happened to other groups of people who when we talked about-- we are talking about over 1,000, easy 2,000, people in this particular-- our group. So those who came before us, then we could see where they went, because that's where they dropped all the bodies. We could see the-- where we walked there, so it was lined up with bodies who were shot.

Because they were slow?

Well, simply couldn't walk on anymore or were too slow or whatever and then dropped out. And so that's one thing, and then we could see a staff car with SS people, because there was a point that we were encircled or something and then would stop. And then they came to tell those who were in charge of our group say that we had to march on, and we had high hopes that we would return or that we would stay and that we actually would be overtaken by the Soviet Army, and we were not because we were told to march on. And I remember the staff car with SS officers coming in and giving the order to continue.

Did you know to where you were marching?

Oh, well, we had no idea at all. At least, I mean, there were some rumors, but we didn't. I mean, some people said, Gross-Rosen, and all this and that, but which, indeed, was the place they marched us. But so many people dropped, and they just died and what have you.

So coming back to the mittens, we were sleepwalking, could not control our bowel movements, and all this sort of thing. Totally exhausted, so in this sort of half sleep walk, sleep type of situation, I was one with my mittens, and I knew what that meant. Because I already felt that I was not feeling my fingers and all that, and discoloration was already there in spite of the mittens.

So I said, if I don't find it, I'm in deep trouble. I'm going to lose my fingers as so many friends of mine already had. And some of the much stronger ones said, well, I'll come that you are in such good shape, and I'm so much stronger than you also during their work.

When we worked together, they were just the ones who really did more physical-- were able to do more physical work than I. And then they were falling apart and dropping out and all that and said, well, you are actually probably the weakest of us all, and you just are able to continue, and we're not. So that was a discussion. I just couldn't quite understand. Well, I still don't understand. There were no constitutional differences whatever.

At any rate, then I decided that I had to find it again. Obviously, someone, and I went back by the comms. There was not enough SS to really see that necessarily. So I went back and looked who might have picked it up, because I could

see that person who had it on, because it was yellow and black. So I said, you've got mittens. Here it is.

Of course, he was not willing to give it up, so I took it from him, and then I had recovered my mittens, and I just continued. But by that time, my feet were getting very bad, and there was no question about it that I had that I had a dreadful case of frostbite which became worse and worse. And I remember also, for example, and that is an important thing which I want to mention during that death march, because it remained in my mind. We went through, of course, townships and little villages and what have you. And the response of the inhabitants and even animals was just really unbelievable.

And there was one particular large-- well, it was a small township. It was not a village. It was a township, and we went through the Main Street, marching through the main, and before we actually entered the township, there was a dreadful howling of all the various dogs and animals just instinctively apparently responding to this dreadful army of skeletons and half dead. And it was dreadful howling and people in the streets, which of course, were pretty empty.

Some of the people just broke down seeing us, and some of the women also shouted to us encouragement-- not Germans. And said, don't give up. And then, of course, some people on the other hand came from buying some food stuff or whatever, or someone had some-- I remember still-- in these sort of made out of canvas bags. Just simply these type of bags made out of canvas ropes. And so they just simply jumped. Some inmates, and took off what they could. And the SS came, and it was a big struggle, and they were shooting stuff and what have you.

And I didn't do it, and other people, then of course, there was an outcry and all that. But then there are some people who really showed encouragement also the women, particularly women. We didn't see any men, because men were not around. They were all in uniform and what have you. And then, of course, we also saw the retreating Germans, and when they saw us, they just spat at us and shouted obscenities and all that, because they viewed us as their enemy. And particularly, since they were retreating and all that.

So this sort of thing became worse and worse. And one night, this small group, one of us, were able to stay in a haystack, and then I found out that-- took off my canvas whatever shoes I've had, and I could see that my toes were totally rotten and all that and already bone sticking out and all that. And I just took part of the rotten toes and threw them out. Took them off and threw them out there and just couldn't walk anymore. It was just-- couldn't put the shoes on anymore and all that.

So then, I said, that's the end, because now, the rear guard will come in and take care of me, in other words, shoot me. But the interesting thing is, are we going to hide and all that, but we didn't. And indeed, the SS came and all that, and they're relatively civil. No big deal. How come they don't shoot us, because that's what I anticipated, that we would be shot just like we have seen who stayed behind. And so they say, you stay here.

We'll come with some sort of carriage, and they'll put you in it, and we'll take you to some-- well, that happened, and then I understood, because we were in a place very close to the relatively unknown concentration camp called Reichenbach, which was a woman's camp. And that was primarily women who were employed, were just slave laborers in the war industry. And so they were very close, so they took us up there. And so there was a horse carriage as they have of the farmers. But it was covered actually, and then I remember there came a Major with a drawn Luger pistol.

I still remember that. He said, you swine. We'll show you what the Russians do. Whatever they've done, and they just started to really call obscenities and all that and with a drawn Luger as we could. Crippled people. So they kicked us into and threw us, kicked us into this sort of carriage and beat us in a way. It was not nothing. We just simply-- the degradation was worse than actually what they did, because they were calling obscenities, and we'll show you what the Russians, about the Russians, you swine. You're responsible or whatever they saw. And he was military police. I don't know what it is, but it was a military police person. A Major, I think, in terms of the rank as far as I remember.

Anyway, so we got into that, and then they drove us to Reichenbach. And then it was then all the people could not march on or somehow were around and got stuck somehow. They were sent to this particular camp, and that's why they didn't shoot us, because they just removed them. The chances are, I mean, that's my conjecture. But otherwise--

Why didn't they shoot you too?

Well,

because they just-- there was an assembly camp and from there on, they shipped other people further into some-- distributing them elsewhere. Now, those people continued to march, whoever were left. And people just died by the hundreds, so that you had, out of 2,000 people, you know, you probably had a couple of hundred who actually survived, or 300, you know.

So then when they came to the Gross-Rosen destination, which was a death camp-- was not just a concen-- it was a death camp-- so those people hardly ever survived, you see. Some may have, but very few I personally met. But so those of us who came to Reichenbach-- and there were very many movements, not just from Blechhammer, but from other camps, too-- so that was a camp where they just put us. The men still were there, but they were on the move. They moved them out.

And so we are the ones-- we were the ones who stayed for a few days, and then the whole structure started again. People had kapos, and they took over, and they were responsible to the SS, and they distributed the soup, whenever we got soup, and some bread. And all that was very, very little, but still, there were some. And people died like flies because of frostbite, and infections, and disease, you name it.

And then there were couples who take advantage of that situation, not only to get more food for themselves by assuming that type of leadership situation and play into the hands of the SS, who enjoy that situation, and structured it so that it would become that way. But they also killed fellow inmates cruelly and all that.

And one of them was a green type of inmate. Green, that is to say he was a professional criminal. And he was particularly bad, and he just simply-- people who did not quite respond to his whims. He just came and just killed them. This is bad, so to speak and just killed them. And for reasons which again escaped me, he liked me for his idiosyncratic reasons. And so I had some sort of period he gave me extra food, and I could, whenever I had these sort of containers where the soup was in, so I was able to scrape it out, and some remnants, and all that.

And then he came back and said, why are you still alive? Some other people, all should really-- should be dead by now, and just finished him off. And totally unpredictable. But with me, he was pretty consistent because he always had been more supportive for reasons, again, which rationally difficult, too.

Well, and from then on, and we stayed and met some few people, and talked. And people died, and I could-- whatever they left, you know, I took. It was to use, blankets, whatever there was, and all that. But apparently they had some food still available in that particular camp.

So when we finally were moved to the ramp up there-- the kind of railway station and kind of lorries-- but most of us who couldn't walk-- I was one of them, you know, couldn't walk on. So they put into this sort of strange type of lorries, about four people in one lorry, which they then on rails, and then just pushed them and downhill in a way to the open cattle cars, open boxcars, railway cars.

And I've had, with some other people, because they threw us into these sort of lorries, and so that you sat on the limbs or parts of the bodies of the other person. And one had a terrible leg injury, and he shouted. And then the SS came and looked at me and said, be quiet, don't give any attention. But he couldn't help himself. Don't draw attention to yourself.

Well, anyway, but he couldn't repress, and shouted in agony. So this one SS man, I still remember, had a kind of iron bar in his hand. And he came and saw him, you know, and just killed him-- just simply over the head and killed him, you know.

And so these sort of things happened all the time. And then we just came, finally, to this sort of open car. And then they threw us in. And then that was another ordeal which was something which-- I don't know whether I gave you the--

Yes.

--which I described in my writing. And so that you had several layers of people who were, first of all, thrown in. And then you had second, you had three layers. And the first layer was suffocated by the second and the third layer if they could not really struggle up. And that was the precise situation in which I found myself. I was in the middle layer, and was being suffocated by the third layer. And I just simply felt that was the end, because I couldn't breathe anymore properly and all that.

So for reasons which, still, enough, I just had absolutely no hope, rationally speaking, I said, I can't make it. But I struggled on nevertheless, falling up. And so I got myself up out of this sort of situation so that I was on the third layer. But anyone who became the third layer caused the death of the second and the first layer. So that was this awful situation that your survival meant that fellow inmates beneath you, in a different layer, were going to be killed.

And that continued up until time. And we just went through about 10 days, two weeks because time situations are very difficult to pinpoint. Because time experience was very different in concentration camps than under normal circumstances. So we finally--

Had you been issued any food?

Well, we had a very-- that's an interesting thing, that because, as I said before, there was obviously food available. So we were given two loaves of bread, and some margarine, and some marmalade, or whatever it was, I remember. And I was able to get more, and so instead of two loaves, I had about three or four loaves. I think I had three loaves, and was taking under my shirt and all that down. And I was able to get two blankets rather than one blanket and all that.

So I was what we called at that particular time the skill of organizing, which means that you just simply took whatever you could, as long as you didn't take from an inmate who was still alive. And that was morally unacceptable, although people still did it. But I never did, and I'm morally in a better position, because so many people survived at the expense of others.

And that is, I think, a reason-- and I keep on emphasizing that in my lectures, or in my writing, whatever-- that people who have survivor guilt do not feel guilty because they've survived. But they feel guilty because of how they have survived. And that's an important thing which is not being discussed very much because it's a very sensitive area. But I understand it, and therefore I mention it, and I specifically emphasize it, because there is no such thing as survivor guilt as such. I don't feel guilty because I've survived and some other people have not. Because I have not caused it. It was not my doing.

But if I've survived at the expense of someone else, then I've got a reason to have more problems. And so many people who are survivors indeed have survived because they have taken advantage of the situation of people who were weak or couldn't defend themselves, and done things to them which caused either very serious injury or even their death. And they should feel guilty on that. I don't have any problems, philosophically speaking, problems with the fact that they feel guilty. But that's the reason, not by virtue of the fact that they merely have survived.

You don't think that that instance is possible. I see what you mean about people who have done things they would feel guilty about, but just merely by the ritual of surviving.

I don't see any reason for it. I don't see any reason. If they do, that is highly idiosyncratic, and I'm not ruling that out as a possibility. But, I mean, there is no rational reason for it. Because they've done what they could to survive, and they should be praised rather than faulted.

And I should feel good about it rather than bad. Doesn't mean that I don't regret the fact that so many other people have not. I mean, that's obviously a tragedy. And I think we should feel sad, and sorrow, and whatever, but not guilt.

All right. So by virtue of the fact that this sort of boxcar situation that people survived, they survived only in terms of that indeed they took up space which made it impossible for other people to survive. And from that point of view, I am,



in a way, guilty, too. You see? But the interesting thing is-- and that's not necessarily a deduction of cognitive dissonance or, as we put it, rationalization, self-justification.

But the fact is that there is such a thing as-- which I've never understood before because I never experienced it-- drive of self-preservation. And under extreme stress situations-- and I talk about total, total situations-- the drive of self-preservation will take over. And you just can't help yourself. You just survive, even if you have absolutely, rationally, no hope to survive another minute, another hour, another day. Because I certainly did, but I fought on, because of the drive or self-preservation to go on.

So that meant that brothers killed each other in order to survive, or-- directly or indirectly-- buddies, friends, whatever, then struggled for space because they were just like sardines packed in this sort of-- talk about over 100 people in one open boxcar. So these were the situations so that people kept on struggling.

And to begin with, then, there was more space by virtue of the fact that people are still alive. The more dead there were in that particular boxcar, the less space there was, because dead bodies have a nasty habit to bloat and expand. So they're not permitted to throw them out, because they didn't want, on the railway tracks, to have these sort of nice calling cards.

Then what about all the dead along the roadway?

Well, but you see, that was something which was on the roadway, but not railway tracks, you know, that was in the midst of wilderness. And there were no other alternatives. They didn't see any other alternatives, because there was no way of putting someplace because they're running from the Russians. I mean, they're closing in.

But there, the situation was slightly different, because there still was a "civilized," quote unquote, world. And you just don't leave any traces of that nature. So they're not permitted. And even those people who tried to escape-- and some of them in their despair jumped off because it was moving very slowly. The train was moving very slowly. Or in their despair, they just-- or it had stopped-- they jumped off. Then they're ordered to come back. And in the car, they're shot, but not outside. And that happened.

And even some people who moved, and the guard came and-- particularly I think in terms of an Ukrainian fellow who couldn't hardly speak any German in just SS uniform. And that's one thing which I forgot to say. Interestingly, because there was a shortage of guards during the last march, some of the people who looked kind of more Aryan, or were non-Jews, inmates, were given SS uniforms and asked to be guards. And that was the irony of it all. It was just absolutely absurd. Bizarre.

And so I could see-- I saw it. It's not just hearsay. That's something which I actually-- young kid who was still able-bodied, said OK, you German or whatever you are-- Germans. At least learned to speak perfect German, or good German, whatever. Young kid. Someone said, now we appoint you an SS. So they gave him an SS uniform, kind of. And now he's-- and they did it because they felt it was going to be-- not that they did anything against their fellow inmates. But they said, well, maybe I'll have a better chance to survive.

And some people tried to escape, but that was a very bad thing, because most of them were rounded up, and caught, and then killed. One of my close buddies did, and I've never heard of him. I would have heard of him after the war, one way or another, but I never heard of him again. And he did it in a town. In a township-- well, actually it was a proper town. And he-- which was easy to escape, because we are not that closely guarded, because more and more SS people dropped out. So that was in a relatively busy street of a city-- actually a big town or city, in upper Silesia. I think it was Oppeln, actually, to be very specific. Oppeln. Oppeln. And so he just jumped into some doorway.

And we discussed it even before. He said, I think I'm going to escape, and all that. I didn't know what-- encourage him. But I felt-- I had my doubts about to do that, to what extent it would be saving one's life. I had my doubts about it, and therefore I didn't do it. Not that I couldn't have done it, but I decided not to. He decided to do it. I've never heard of him again after the war. And I don't think he survived. He just didn't make it.

And then also, you just supported bodies and all that, when they just no longer could. So you supported them until you

couldn't carry them anymore, just support them anymore. And they said, well, don't you drop. And we dropped them. Of course they were just chucked in the rear guard, and you never heard from them again, of course.

So and coming back to the boxcar situation, so first of all they organized some leadership and said, well, we really have to help each other. And why don't we collect all the food stuff, and we'll distribute it so that those who have more will share with others. And it was some sort of democratic faction. So one fellow, and he had these lieutenants, and they did it for a few days, and then they ate it all. And then they had the power elite and all-- just like in real life, you see.

And then you had this democratic leader then turn into a Stalin, you know, and left it all. And all the people rebelled against, they just beat up, or kill, or whatever. And the lieutenants, of course, helped them. And they lived for a few days like kings on whatever the rations they had taken from their fellow inmates, safekeeping and to be distributed.

Well, but you see then, as we see now in more recent developments in the Soviet Union, then they turn against each other when they are under stress. So they were in the process of killing each other. So the lieutenants killed the fuhrer, the inmate fuhrer, and all that. So they came all to a rather bad end, except the two lieutenants survived. And they arrived in Dachau, and then they came and visited me, say here we are, your buddies. Some buddies you are. And I said, just get out, because I-- you bastards, you know.

In the boxcar situation, you had the top level, finally.

Yeah.

Was it a constant struggle to remain--

Constant struggle, yeah. Because those who were alive because of the space-- because of the bloated bodies and all that, so there was less and less space. And so where people encroached upon you and all that, and they took over your space, and just pressed on you and all that, so there was blood circulation stopped. You couldn't breathe anymore and all that.

And that happened to, particularly in this situation, with one of my buddies, who, mind you, for a very long time and actually since, I think, Theresienstadt I knew him. And so he had dysentery, and his, particularly his one foot-- it was his left foot-- was just hanging on some piece of muscle and whatever, piece of skin. It was totally rotten. The whole foot, not just the-- and so he was in agony. And he had also a dreadful case of dysentery. And I helped him as much as I could.

And then as space became more scarce, he just started to take over and lie on me, use me as a sofa. Not sofa, but just lie. I said, I can't breathe anymore. You have to go. I have to push you, because-- talking about drive of self-preservation. And he couldn't. He couldn't. So I pushed him. And I knew that, when I pushed him, it was either him or me who would die.

And then, when he was pushed in the middle, so no one wanted to have him on him. So the only thing which still had some degree of strength were the feet of the inmates. So they kicked him from one situation to another until they kicked him to death.

And that was a normal occurrence. "Normal," quote unquote, "normal" occurrence. It was an everyday sort of situation. And if you did not defend yourself, you were in the center. And once you were in the center, all the feet were on you and you were pushed to death, virtually kicked to death.

And then meanwhile, before we actually arrived to Dachau, I was-- more and more people, and more and more people were dislocated. And the people who were close to the walls of the boxcar, then, of course had something to lean against, and therefore could use their feet more effectively. Now, I was not leaning at any time against the wall. Therefore, I was much more at the mercy of all the other ones who were pushing me around.

So finally I was also dislocated, to the extent that I was in the center and being pushed around. And some friends of mine said, well, if you get in the center, you know what's going to happen to you. And there was no question about that.

And I used my teeth, my nails to defend myself. And everyone did it, used whatever they could, defend themselves to be dislocated.

But meanwhile, there was virtually a pyramid of dead bodies, who already just looked like a glassy type of thing, smelly, rotten corpses. And so in the last stage-- and it happened to be also the last stage of our journey. Because very shortly afterwards, we had arrived at Dachau via Prague, and I recognized that.

And then people were getting food from some workers. And then the SS then pushed them away and with all the weapons, what they've had, and all this. And when they got some water or some food, a bunch of people just tried to take it, and spilled it, and all this, so that no one actually had anything. And it was just a terrible, tragic situation.

And so when I was then-- during the last stage of the journey when I was dislocated, no longer I could hang on and defend myself sufficiently against all the pressure which I received, that I was in just a struggle and being kicked about-- so then I was able to climb up this mountain of rotten bodies, and simply put my heel into one of the bodies. And it happened to be, I think, my buddy who had died because of it. And was able to remain in that particular situation, where I was out of reach of feet and other people, because I was up on that thing, and arrived in Dachau.

And also, one of my buddies who was next to me, just pressing against me and all that, was this Ukraine SS man-- which I didn't finish to tell, I think-- came, and just looked at him, and he just he was moving, trying to get adjusted because of it.

And for-- somehow he just drew attention of this SS person to himself, and he just took his Luger-- I remember the Luger, it was a Luger pistol-- and just simply looked at him just like, you know, no kind of hatred or something, just matter-of-fact type of thing, just looked at him with his Luger pistol and shot him in the vein. And I could see the surprise and the light went out, that eye light went out. It was terrible. I was next to him, just like that. Could have been me.

So these sort of situation are just examples of what one had to be-- so that was actually one of the worst experience, worse than anything else I--

OK, so then we--

How did you get into the boxcar, when you went into the boxcar?

Oh, they threw us in. Some of them could climb. And those who simply could not climb anymore, so they were just heaved in, just simply thrown in. And I was put up and the other ones between those who could-- inmates throw in. But, you know, first come, first served, so to speak. Except first come, first served was the death.

How did you manage to hang on to your food through that?

Well, I mean, I hung onto my food because some of them, I just simply didn't give up. And they simply didn't-- so I've had some. Some I gave up, and some I didn't, you know, because I didn't trust them.

I don't mean willingly. I just mean in the struggle. You were in the middle, and you were struggling to get up to get air.

Oh, well, yeah. Well, you just simply pushing and struggling and all that, I mean from the second layer to the third layer. Well, I was in such a situation where you struggle for your life, and that gave me some extra strength, apparently.

And you held on to your food, also.

Oh, yeah. Not only that, but also my blanket, and some medication, which I still had, against pneumonia and all that sort of things. Because these relatives, or distant relatives, friends, happened to be also physician in Prague. And so they had access to medication, to medicine.

And they send that along, too, which actually saved my father's life. Because they sent-- I asked them what to send, what the problems were, so they sent this type of medication against dysentery and pneumonia, and the sulfonamides at that particular time, what they used sulfonamides and all that. And I took what I needed, and gave my father that, which saved his life, for all practical purposes.

In talking about many of these things, you have a wonderful sense of humor. Was your sense of humor alive still from the camp days?

I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think I've had much of a sense of humor. You didn't see many smiling faces, for sure, particularly during these situations. But I think it's a very important question. And I don't think-- it was perhaps more subtle, you know, that I simply took advantage of situations, sabotage when I could, and was alert. But it was not really ha-ha funny sense of humor.

Some did, and that is something important. I think it's an important question, because under certain circumstances, you could afford to have a sense of humor. And many of my inmates did. And that's something which, to me, was a very profound experience in Blechhammer when some of my friends, close friends, staged a kind of play, kind of a-- what was it?

Satire?

Well, satire-- cabaret. That's the proper designation. A cabaret, a satire on camp life. All the SS came, first rows. And it so impressed that one stood up, and that's something which is very important because it had very specific consequences after the war when there were trials against the perpetrators. And I was involved, too, as a witness and things of that nature.

And so this was so impressive. I will never forget it. It was just so professional, because, yeah, because there were professional actors among these people, too, one mustn't forget. And somehow they had props, and they found props, and all that. It was just parody on camp life, which included SS, and couples, and the dignitaries-- what camp "dignitaries," quote, unquote. These people were inmate functionaries.

So it's so successful, that these people, SS people, just, you know, just behaved like human beings, dropped their role as an SS. And one, after it was complete-- and that's something which I wrote in my book, too-- stood up and said, we were told that you are subhumans, and this and that, and that you're parasites, and vermin. Anyone who under those conditions can stage a cabaret or play of that nature is everything else but that. Stood up and said that in front of all the other SS people, and said that's going to be the end of it.

And then I lost him out of sight. And I said, well, maybe something happened to him . But nothing happened to him at all.

Why?

I don't know why. But I mean, he just survived the war, and then was accused with all the Blechhammer personnel, in which I was a witness and was also questioned here by a Nazi-- pseudo-- neo-- no, by a Nazi consul general in San Francisco, as a matter of fact. Behaved like a pig, this fellow, too. Just absolutely the way he behaved. And he had to do it. But you could see that he resented it, and he wished me dead. Son of a bitch. I only can say that this way.

And so then in my research, I went to Ludwigsburg, where these things are being done, where this is being legally organized and investigated. And looked at the file in the presence of the man who was in charge of Ludwigsburg, now dead. Very interesting and, I think, very upright and good person. Older generation, too. Older than I, considerably old. And very upright person who really did what he could in order to get these people to bring them to justice.

And so then I came across this fellow, and apparently some other people who were survivors of Blechhammer, when they were witnesses, when they witnessed these things and said this and this. They mentioned the fact, which I thought I was the only one who noticed, or maybe all the people, other may have died or forgotten. And he got off the hook. And

nothing happened to him. He was not sentenced to any sort of. It's kind of interesting, simply because he stood up and opposed.

Was he known to be a kindly--

I never know. I never encountered him personally before. So I had no dealings. I had no, absolutely, knowledge of his other activity. I had not come across him. Some other ones, I've had, yeah. But I've described that in some previous situation.

So anyway, so that's kind of interesting sort of reflection based on-- so I was very interested in the SS response. And when we came to Dachau, out of the 100 people-- about, approximately 100 people who were in one of the boxcars, and we talked about thousands in 10 boxcars or 12 boxcars. I don't remember exactly, 10 or 12, just about. Out of just approximately on the average, out of 10 to 15 people survived out of 100 people, maybe 20 at the most. The other ones were dead.

So we came, and this dreadful stench of rotten bodies and all that, we all were saturated with this. When we came, the SS guard, which the reception, and they just said, we've never seen anything, and treated us humanely because they were moved. They just said, it's terrible, awful.

They were moved.

They were moved. And treated us humanely. I mean, not necessarily kindly, but properly.

Do you think they might have been afraid now that the war was ending and--

I'd say horrified. By the sight. That's my very distinct impression. Because we've never seen something like that. We've never seen anything so horrible. I mean, they verbalized.

All right. So then a group-- and then I became a spokesman at Dachau and had to register, fill in forms, register and all this sort of thing. I had to do that, and talk about Dachau and all that. I still have, as a matter of fact, now when I was there some few years ago, three years ago, I went into the records in there, found my name and all this sort of thing, register.

So then for reasons, whether it was some sort of a SS captain came. I don't remember his rank. I don't know what they were. And someone started to talk to us and said something. And we said, what's going on. Receptive to some sort of a dialogue. And I was a spokesperson, not because I felt so inclined or whatever. Most of them were in worse shape than I was. That's why I was still in a position to even speak up and be conscious of what was happening.

And I said, hey, I mean, we are in such a bad shape, because I had nothing to lose. I didn't give a damn. And either you help us to survive or you just better have us shot. Because we are in a situation, we can't further endure this sort of situation. And

The way I talked apparently, of course-- and again, that was very important when it's impeccable German. That made a difference, you see, because how you can't see a person who is just so like you or similar to you, then you're just all of a sudden subhuman, all that.

That was very important in all cases. And that was a very important momentum as to in extremely dangerous situations which somehow got me off the hook, in a way. And that was very important. Because you don't crawl and all that, but you're just upright and speak up to them, and just like equals. And that impressed them. But if you came whining and all that, then they just finished you off. That was the tendency.

So I talked to him and said, that's the choice. And he ordered that we would receive-- that these people need to get special rations. And we did for about a week or two. And then it just-- he didn't enforce it, didn't come again, never saw him again. And then it stopped. But that was decisive in terms of survival of so many people. Because if we had not

received that sort of thing, we would have had no prayer in that particular state we found ourselves in.

What was special rations?

Well, just special rations. They gave us white bread. They gave us more margarine. They gave us soup and things of that nature, so more than just the normal average sort of person would receive. And we were sent to the sick barrack. And that's where it is. But this sick barrack was made up of so many Belgian, French, and Dutch. And Luxembourgiens were there, and Germans, and all sorts of-- and Russian prisoner of war was there also, a young kid.

And the interesting thing is that once we were there at the mercy of those people in charge of that particular part of that barrack, or that barrack, was interesting that there was a tremendous-- especially among the French, and even the Dutch-- and antisemitism was just unbelievable. So that was later on. Some people still got rations. You still could buy for money if you had some. Apparently some inmates had money and got money sent from their relatives from home to buy special rations, which you could buy for money.

And there was one German fellow. And he came to me and said, and we started to talk, and said, I've got a lot of money. I'm going to see to it that part of my money is going to be transferred to you, and you can buy some provisions. And so I was able to-- at that particular stage, you could buy some-- I bought some bloodwurst, blood sausage.

Just from his kindness, he did this.

Absolutely no reason. It was a German inmate.

And then Czechs came, and then they said, what can we do for you? We have books. We can make some books available. And so I got to know many Czech inmates who then after would play a very important role, including the Archbishop of Prague, a man called Josef Beran, and some other dignitary people, important politically and otherwise in very important organizations. And one of the witnesses at Nuremberg, a surgeon called Blaha, who then operated on my frozen feet, and he tried to save me as much as he could then.

And so these sort of things were just you made contacts. But in that particular barrack, I was-- if people didn't come from outside, those people who were actually in charge and all that, really tried to do us in more than support us, and called us "juif" and this sort of awful stuff.

And then an interesting point-- then all the Jews in Dachau were to be sent away. Just so they took them out and shipped them already. And for some reason or other, they didn't take me. Whatever reason, something, what happened. I had some people who protected me or whatever, I was not shipped. Because then they found these people killed and all that in boxcars.

What month are we in at this point?

We are in--

About.

I would say March, March '45.

Were you the only one to stay behind?

I don't know. I mean, I was the only one who-- yeah. I guess so.

Then there was an interesting thing. Around March, or at some time, they also distributed Red Cross parcels. Terrific things-- sardines, chocolate, you name it, all that. I didn't get a single one. All of the French, Luxembourgiens, the Belgians, the Dutch, they got them, for reasons which escape me. The Czechs, I don't remember got any. I certainly didn't get any. And they wouldn't share. They gorged themselves. Well, there was some justice in their gorging because

they died, many of them, because they no longer would digest this type of rich food.

That was a very interesting thing. Because after we were liberated, I had no understanding of that at that particular time at all, the cause. And so after we liberated, a person who just had been promoted to American medical person-- in uniform, of course-- just had been promoted to major, and was in charge, medically speaking, of the camp, which they had liberated, understood that, and therefore rationed our food. Which we didn't understand. We resented it. We've starved under the Nazis, now we are starving after liberation, under the Americans. And that was precisely because he understood that we just simply couldn't take it. And that saved many people's lives.

What are the symptoms of eating rich food after you've been starving for so long?

Well, the symptoms were that simply you had a terrible case of this dysentery which couldn't be stopped and other symptoms.

Terrible stomach cramps?

The stomach cramps, whatever, vomiting, whatever. And you just simply dissipate, totally dissipate and die. Within a very short time. It's deadly. It's like poison, if you would eat poison.

Sometimes there's kidney failure because your body can't process protein anymore. So if you give it too much protein, your kidney's going to go.

OK. And so then, again, these two brothers, actually, were the lieutenants of this. So they came for a visit-- they could move around and all that-- and said, here we are. We're your buddies. I said, some buddies, and just kicked them out. I said, I'll have nothing to do with you. Bastards.

And so you developed some sort of situation, relationships. And poor Soviet POW escaped. And if they escaped, they caught them, and they didn't send them again to a prisoner of war camp, but they sent them to concentration camps, apparently. And that's how he wound up in Dachau. And the interesting thing is that he told me about Soviet camps. And said the difference between these camps and Soviet camps-- which of course I didn't know, because we had this very idealistic notion about the Soviet Union. It was all BS.

And so he came for the first time and told me about all this. Said the difference between it is that there is more food in these camps. And my god, wide eyed I listened to him. I said I didn't know the other camps. Nazis learned from the Soviets quite a bit in terms of camps and all that, because the Soviets had camps before the Nazis came into power.

Anyway, so poor fellow, he was kind of simple fellow, and was starving and all that, and so he stole from fellow inmate, food. And that was the end of him because they just beat him to death. So he was not around for a long time. Because that was viewed as a capital crime. Capital crime.

So there was, of course, a whole other morality going on.

Well, yes. Yes. But the morality of stealing, lying, or cheating authorities, that's fine. Great. Then you're really crafty and you're doing the right thing. But if you do that to a fellow inmate without having the power to do it, that is to say when you're not a inmate functionary, an inmate functionary who did it.

And there are some people I remember, even here in San Francisco-- some survivors-- say, well, I was in a post office, big fellow in the post office in Auschwitz, and worked under supervision of an SS. And we were in charge of the post office, incoming parcels. Because we could get parcels. I got, even, parcels to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is just really something unbelievable. But we did, yeah.

And I got from Prague and all that, and some of it was partially rotten, but who cared? Bread and all stuff, and within all old bread there's some other stuff in it, which they-- and I got it. I don't know how many I did not get. But I got it, you know, actually delivered into the barrack.

All right. So this fellow back in Auschwitz-- it was Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau, who is here, and who was quite a prominent sort of person, just talked to me about he lived in luxury. Because before he gave up, when the inmates came to pick up the parcels, they had to open it. And then those who were in the post office just took what they wanted.

And if they didn't get anything, they took the whole parcel. And he said, I had a better life than if I had been outside. And he was proud of it. And that was the end of our relationship, because I said, hey, my god, I don't have anything to do with you anymore. No part of it. Very prominent. Very prominently in San Francisco well known.

So as you say, it was the understandable morality of anything against the authorities is OK.

Yeah. But if you were in charge, and if you had the power-- if you were a functionary and stole, then you could do that with impunity. But if you were just a muzhik, just one of the many, and did that, it was a capital crime.

Because you were literally taking another one's life by stealing food.

Yeah. But if you were in charge, then you could do it with impunity.

So obviously when you got to Dachau, Dachau had become a collection point for all kinds of slave labor, prisoners.

Yeah, who came in from the East. Whoever they shipped, the smaller the Reich became, because they encroached upon it from all sides, the more they concentrated in the center of still Nazi-occupied Germany. And so then you got people from all directions.

Was the news growing as to how the Germans were failing?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Because some of the people also worked in certain situations-- the air raids, which we've heard. And they came back from a slave labor situation, or industry, and terribly injured, and rocket things they were involved in, and all that. And some people came with torn bodies and that whole situation, air raids and you name it. No, so then, of course, it became obvious, because we could hear it all. There was no longer some sort of hearsay, but we could actually hear the action. But still, we had no specific idea.

And when they came and liberated the camp, I was virtually giving myself just about another week, if that, before I would have died. Because I couldn't see anymore, I was virtually blind and all that, couldn't move anymore.

Couldn't move.

No. No. Not off my bunk. Not off my bunk. And so they came just in time, because I counted the days until I would die. I was actually in a state of almost virtually coma.

When was the liberation?

What was it again? 28th, 29th of April '45.

About how much do you think you weighed then?

I was just a skeleton. I mean, skin and bone. That's all. And I was trying to-- 30, 40 pounds.

30, 40 pounds?

He was very skinny in person, anyway.

30, 40 pounds, though, is the weight of a small child.



Just the weight of the bones and whatever internal organs. That's all. And there was nothing, no fat, nothing left. Just like you'd see a walking X-ray. Well, in my case, I wasn't walking. I was a lying X-ray. A lying-down X-ray.

How did the operation on your toes go?

Well, it was just twice. First of all, actually, one of the Dutch people who happened to be a butcher, and also very antisemitic. So he took me-- in that particular barrack, there was a bathtub. And he took me to the bathtub, and took a knife, and just cut off whatever remnants there was. And I was shouting and say, hey, you know just come and-- because he didn't care. He was a sadist. And I said, hey, help, whatever I shouted. Just come and finish me off. And he was mad at me and said, why don't you shut up, all this and that, and started just cutting off the thing.

And then some apparently some Czech-- that was fairly during the initial stage. And then the Czechs became aware of my presence. I'm talking particularly about a man called Dr. [? Franz ?] Blaha, who then became a friend of mine after the war, and had some contact with. So they found out about that it's a Czech kid in the barrack. So they then took and did a proper-- whatever proper what they had in Dachau-- but that was a proper, and it was a surgeon. And so he did what he could.

So I had two things. First, this Dutch butcher cut my remnants of the toes and all that, blood all over the place, in a bathtub. And then he took me, and that was so, and I have some anesthesia. So I mean it just wasn't, you know. But that all was infected because they didn't have any medication. It was all infected and was full of pus, and all that decay, whatever, because they couldn't control it. They didn't have the medication. So that continued, and all they did is just paper bandages, made out of just paper. And they put it in nothing else.

And so it was rotten. And it was sapping me, my strength. And I was in bed. That I didn't die of blood poisoning, I still don't understand. Sepsis, general sort of sepsis, I just don't know. Because there was nothing which would have prevented it.

And the special rations had stopped already, so--

Oh, they had stopped a long time ago.

Yeah.

Because we only had them for about two weeks.

And what kind of food were you getting in the cells?

Oh, just nothing, virtually. Very little. Some bread and watery soup. And whenever there was-- that's why I said in bad situation, this German inmate just said, well, you know they came with a kind of, just like they have in some-- just a small cart with food stuff. And they came through all the barracks and sold the damn thing.

You didn't have money, but everyone had an account. Those people had accounts. They could buy it. Didn't give it to you, but you had an account actually for money. And that's why this German fellow came and said, hey, I have-- and he made arrangements, which was very difficult, and was able to do that, because he apparently had the proper contacts so that I would have an account, which enabled me to buy that food.

And that's what sustained you.

Oh, yeah. Well, all these sort of situations-- sporadic situations of support, of unsolicited and unexpected support, they made all the difference. And so they postponed your death, so to speak.

Do you remember his name?

He never told you. I never had an idea who he was. He didn't introduce himself, I'm so-and-so, this and that. ? Fully

kind? There were many other people. Actually, the nicest were the Germans. Actually the German inmate is much more human, certainly, than the Dutch or the French. And the French, juif here and there, and it was awful. Real bastards, they were, particularly in a situation like that. And their political thing, I don't know just why it is. It's just unbelievable. I still have problems with that.

Well, I don't know if this is the place. But the whole question of the hierarchy within the camps, within the prisoners themselves. That whole question. I know you've talked about, at times, that the same hierarchy exists.

Well, yes. But I mean, these people didn't-- their power stemmed from receiving Red Cross parcels. But they didn't have any special functions to speak of, these people who are antisemitic, or they were just very, very antisemitic or espoused some sort of fascistic ideologies.

They didn't feel compassionate with you, though.

No, no. But they're very compassionate with each other and very supportive of each other. The various Dutch groups supported each other. The Czech support-- except I was the only Czech in the barrack at that time-- and the support I got was outside of the barrack. People happened to find out that I was a fellow Czech there. But I was totally ostracized, and I didn't get anything, and other people gorged themselves and died eating the Red Cross parcels. And I didn't get a single thing. No one gave me anything.

There was one person who had some sort of lentils, or some sort of dried food, or whatever he cooked himself regularly, some sort of food. And whatever he had, lentils or whatever he had, peas or whatever. So he gave me the warm water, which he took out the peas and gave me the warm water. And that was a big thing. And that was the only time I remember.

And one Dutch-- there were a lot of ministers, too, Catholic priests, whatever. And one Dutch Protestant minister, he was one who actually gave me things from his Red Cross parcel, and tended to be concerned, and share some extent. He was the only one. He was a-- and I stayed in touch with him after the war. And he continued his studies and was a minister. And then he just switched and studied medicine. And then he died, died of some disease or whatever. But I was in contact with him after the war all the time. And he was a person who was an exception, and he gave me things, shared and all that, and was very concerned and kind. But all the other ones--

What was his name? If you think of it later.

I think something like, started with M-- Matthias, Martins, something like Matthias.

Did you ever find out why the Czechs never got Red Cross parcels?

No. No, no. No, that's something I never, never, never, never did.

So you were saying you were barely conscious at the moment of liberation. Can you remember that?

Oh, yeah, I can remember the liberation all right because it came to me as a total surprise. I mean, actually, I had given up on me. I said, I'm not going-- I'm just ready to go. And although, of course, it was in the end. Many people already anticipated. But we were not sufficiently well informed. We had no specifics, to be sure, except, of course, we've heard more and more the noises by virtue of explosions and all these sort of war situations.

So all of the sudden, they came into the barrack, and ran through it, and looked at us. And all the people in uniform, and then later few-- after the civilian people, politicians, whatever, some people who came, because Dachau was a very important place, and high military officers and all that. So I can remember how they-- actually, it could have been Eisenhower and some other people, too.

But I just, at that time, I didn't know them. I know the high officers, and they just they didn't stop. They ran through. And some, too, some stuff, some cigarettes and all this and that. But none of them really stayed. They also were

horrified that they just ran through it. It just was too much for them, for all of them.

I have some sort of documentary which I've got, and I could see Patton and Eisenhower after liberation, seeing some camps and you can see that it just kind of--

And so then we got some Red Cross people in. And I remember they said, you have to drink wine. So they just gave me wine. Drink wine. And then--

You had wine given?

Yeah, wine. They said, you have to drink wine. I'll drink wine, OK.

[LAUGHTER]

Or maltine and all this sort of thing, or maltine.

Ovaltine?

Ovaltine, yeah.

The chocolate.

Yeah, and these sort of things. And so that was distributed by Red Cross people. And then the Americans gave us some rations and all that. And then the medical people came and looked at us. And then I found out that I had a case of active tuberculosis, and X-rays, and all that. So we had people with tuberculosis. They had to have some special designation. And at that time, tuberculosis was just treated like, comparatively speaking, like AIDS today. And so you're a leper, leper because it's contagious.

And so I was very upset because they still used me as interpreter, you see. I was an interpreter. And they said, well, you know you can't really continue. You shouldn't because of this and that. And you've got that. So our beds, they had designation and some sort of red ribbon. And I think we also had to just-- anyway.

So there was obviously no treatment. And the food was so that we wouldn't die, so that it was meaningful. And I stayed many weeks before I actually could be moved back and repatriated to Czechoslovakia, which I was only back in-- what was it? June or July, actually, after April.

What was your feelings when liberation finally came?

Well, I don't know. I was in such a state that it just didn't move me that much. I mean, I was relieved. Perhaps that's maybe the best way to put it. But there was no ecstatic joy which I felt, because I was not capable of it in the state I was in.

May I ask how old you were when the liberation happened? How old you were?

18.

Wow.

So that's-- of course, later on, somehow, I fell into this sort of situation, a novel situation. And when I started to move about, then I was this interpreter, looked around, and went into surrounding bases to explore and see what I could find, and all that. Went into SS houses, which were the house, just looked for things, and searched, and was interested, and talked, and made friends.

Well, what kind of things were you looking for?

Anything. I was always interested, whatever they have. I found a number of things, and books, and Nazi stuff, and all that. And yes, and then of course Dachau was also one of the major warehouses for SS things, weaponry and all that. And that was guarded by GIs. And so I went inside. And they said, you really should get out. You shouldn't be here. Well, who cares.

Some people took out things, and they played with it, and killed themselves, because there were explosives, which they were very, very intensive, very high-charged things. And so some of them killed themselves playing with that. And after that, they became very strict so that we were not supposed to go in there anymore. But it still could be done.

And then you had different responses from the GIs. They said, well, can we do anything? And I said, I'd like to have something to read. That was very important. So they brought me something to read. And they're supposed to not really communicate openly with the inmates, the American personnel, for some reason, some of them. So some of the communication took place in toilets. And then they started to talk to them about anything, you know, talk to me, which was very strange.

And then there was a sergeant I remember. And he enjoyed teasing inmates. And so he had these cigars made out of rubber and chocolate and which squeezed, and it squirted, and all this. And people are starved, and their disappointment was much more than under normal circumstances. And he got a charge out of it. He just really enjoyed that, fooling inmates, and then were terribly disappointed, fooling them and all this. Really cruel, you know.

And another one said, I'd like to do a favor for you. So he came and took me out in some sort of-- and there are some cubbyholes with doors and all that sort of thing. And then he took his machine gun and sprayed it, and said, I've killed a few SS people for you. Because they're locked up in there. Sprayed it. And he just thought he was doing me a favor or something. I was not into it.

Was it true that they were SS?

Oh, yeah. And I said that after the war. I've had interviews, reporters came, and I said that and said, well, we're not going to print that. It's not a popular thing. We won't print it. You see that already sanctioned things, already started. And these are some important things, actually.

Then after a while, that is after about over one month or something like-- not even that, then they moved out, because there was still war with Japan. And they needed personnel, army personnel so they moved them out or elsewhere, whatever, for occupation purposes, anyway. So they moved out, eventually, all American personnel, with very few exceptions who were in charge, and brought in German prisoner of war and put them in charge of us who stayed there.

And that was the last straw. And I had tremendous problems with it. And I fought it tooth and nail. But they were officially put in charge-- and just unbelievable-- to save American personnel, which I can understand. But this sort of boo-boo, to put in German prisoners of war in charge of liberated inmates. And that was simply because I was still there and in a state of health where they felt that I needed to stay there before they could ship me. And then finally I was shipped and all that.

How were you able to get around? Were you able to walk?

Oh, yeah, Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because eventually I could walk. I didn't walk quite normal. I just kind of hobbled around. But I did. And then it improved, and the healing was relatively fast because I got medical attention. And nutrition improved, so that I mended fairly quickly.

Your vision came back?

Oh, everything. That was very fast. Yeah. Yeah, that came back, and then I could move and all this.

Were you suffering other things, like nightmares, or--

Well, not so much in the camp. But then later on, after liberation, quite a few years afterward. Then particularly in connection with the fact that we were supposed to meet all in Prague again, and we discussed that in camps, that should we be separated, which we were-- my mother stayed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. And I didn't want to accept the fact that the chances were, you know. Although I didn't have any great illusions about it. But still, my hopes were very high that she would have survived and that we all would meet, my father would meet. And we did-- my father met. He was already, of course, in Prague long before I did because he was liberated virtually days after I left Blechhammer.

But my mother, of course, I expected. So we just went back in Prague. And that is something which I should-- because they brought me to Pilsen. And an American personnel in an American lorry open kind of brought me to Pilsen. And then I was given some sort of paper or something, so that I was still in my striped pajamas. And so from Pilsen-- and oh, that's something.

Then we were in this open lorry coming back from Germany, and there's some Czech woman or something. And her response to when we were just driving by, said, oh, well, you shouldn't have come. We don't want you back in this state. We don't-- some terrible stuff. And so then railway wagons went just from Pilsen to Prague, which is not too large or too great a distance, so there was no great support or something.

And then I went back to the house, which was very close to the main railway station. Very close. I wanted to go back and see our apartment in the house, one of the major streets. And of all the places, this was hit by-- during an air raid and destroyed. So I had no place to go.

So I went back to the railway station and slept on a bench up there until the next day. It was terrible.

Yes. In your pajamas, in Prague.

And no great support, nothing, you know? And some of the dreadful disappointments, what we did very frequently is some valuables that you gave to friends. And then I went to some of the friends, and here I am. And they looked at me, disappointed, and said, well, I guess you want your things. And had we known that you would be back again and asking for the things, we wouldn't have taken them to begin with.

Hm.

To hear this sort of thing was not exactly very encouraging. And some other people were very nice and gave me shelter. But the reception was muted. Was not exactly open arms thing. Bad conscience, didn't know what burden after the war and all this sort of thing. And I didn't particularly feel that the reception was a very warm welcome.

Sounds like it.

And although people, when you talk to them now, they just see that in a light which they have adjusted to the morality and whatever that things they wouldn't like to see.

When was it that you got back to Prague?

Well, it must have been sometime in July. I forget. I don't know the dates. Up to that point, where it just something which you didn't register at all, or very rarely, even then.

What did you do after you spent the night in the railroad station?

Well, I went to various people whom I knew were there and were friends. And they then gave me shelter. And I went to some people I knew and who relatives, tried to find-- none. But then they told me, your father is back. And that, of course, was a great thing because we understood each other. As a matter of fact, our relationship between my father and myself was the best in the camp for some reason or another. Because prior to that and after that, it was very rocky for some reason or another. Differences, whatever, personality conflicts.

And so of course I was overjoyed. And he already had pretty much, because he had been back for such a long time, he had adjusted more. But still, the interesting thing is whenever we just-- after losing our people, friends took care and just supported and all that. That took place, but there was no great enthusiasm. Looking back at it, I didn't particularly experience great enthusiasm on their part for us having survived and returned.

And so then we adjusted gradually and did a lot of things. And the first thing I did is just help some of my German friends who were now in the same situation we were in, or similar situation because they were persecuted and all that. And people were decent people who also were very supportive of us when we were in there. So that was one of the first things I did, just helped those to get them out of jams, and prisons, and camps, concentration camps, and being supportive-- jails. And I did that. And that was one of my first things I did.

Were you staying with your father?

Well, no. Actually, he stayed-- you know, my father was quite a ladies' man. A womanizer. So he just stayed with some sort of friends, and all these ladies, and who took care, and all this and that. So I didn't exactly fit into his amorous sort of situations.

[LAUGHTER]

So later on when he then established, he made a choice and stayed with one person, then she reluctantly also took care of me. But very reluctantly, because I was not her choice. She was more interested in my father, and I was kind of a burden to her. And she kept on telling me, I'm doing this for you and you should be grateful, and [KISSING SOUND] and all this and that.

And I was not really up to it. But we didn't exactly-- she was very cold faced. She had sex appeal, but otherwise she was a cold fish.

[LAUGHTER]

And so we just didn't get along too well. We didn't have much in common. And the only thing is she kept on telling me, how much I do for you, I cook for you, and all this. So she expected me to kiss her feet, which I didn't. And she never forgave me for that I had not kissed her feet.

Why do you think your relationship with your father changed after you had been so close?

Well, because he was pretty authoritarian, and very impulsive, and impatient. And he was right, and all the other people were wrong. And if they didn't agree with him, they were just bad, and lost souls, or whatever. And I simply didn't feel that I agreed with him, because I just simply didn't submit.

And we had a conflict all the time. He said, you shouldn't study. You should go and learn something and get into something where you can earn a lot of money and all that. And I was interested in catching up and finishing Gymnasium, things so that I possibly could study it and all that. I was very interested in that. Why don't you waste your time, you're stupid, anyway. You're not very intelligent to begin with.

But I didn't let myself be influenced. But these were some of the conflicts we've had. And I persevered, and I just went through all that. And then, of course, he was always very proud when I did exactly, and achieved, attained exactly what he had told me I couldn't. So then he just was very proud, tell all the people, my son, and all this and that.

But when I then said, I'm going to get a doctorate, he said, oh, come on. This was a bad joke, and never should study. So that was the bone of contention, which continued until his very death, which only was different in the camps, where we cooperated in a very harmonious and very strange sort of situation.

With my mother, it was very different. Because my mother was-- we were so close that we virtually didn't have to talk.

We just looked at each other and we knew what we thought.