

OK. This is the Holocaust Oral History Project interview of John Steiner, undoubtedly number five, taking place in San Francisco, California, on December 2, 1993. My name is Sylvia Prozan. I will be doing the first part of the interview.

John, how old were you when you were taken to the camps?

I just turned 17. Just turned 17. And I was born on the 3rd of August '25. And as a retaliation of Reinhard Heydrich's-- SS General Reinhard Heydrich's assassination in Prague, a number of people-- Jews and non-Jews, but particularly Jews at that particular point in my case-- were rounded up and sent to Theresienstadt as a special transport.

And that was on the 10th of August '42. And I was born on the 3rd. And the interesting part was that, on the 3rd, I woke up, my birthday. And my mother came to congratulate me. My father was already in Theresienstadt. He was one of the first to build up, actually, Theresienstadt. He went there in 1941.

And I woke up, and she came and congratulated me to my-- my birthday. And I said, I'm really-- I have a terrible problem. I just feel awful. Something terrible is going to happen. And I kept on repeating that and all day.

And said, well, are you sick? Have you eaten something or whatever? What's wrong with you? I said, something terrible is going to happen. That's all I could say. And on the 10th, they came to pick me up. And just myself-- my mother stayed until later that year, for whatever reason.

So we all were taken to Theresienstadt separately. First, my father. And that is to say our family, not the extended family. Extended family was taken before us, actually, to Lodz Ghetto, because my uncle and my aunt were very well-to-do. And people with money were taken to the camps before those who had lesser money, which is an interesting sort of thing. Certainly, in terms of Prague and Bohemia in general.

So that was the beginning. And before that, of course, I was a member of a group of people, primarily Jewish people, who helped those who were deported to come to that assembly place and assisted them. And that is something which was a voluntary-- voluntary activity.

We had passes so that we could walk around freely, because some of the streets we are not supposed to enter during the day, during certain hours. And some of them we couldn't enter permanently. So we had special passes. And helped those people who were deported, primarily older people, to get to the assembly places and somehow psychologically support them. Which, in itself, was exceedingly difficult.

But we at least saw to it that most of their belongings which they're permitted to take with them, they had with them and so that they didn't go barehanded and totally-- because some people were very old.

How long were you in Theresienstadt? I was-- from-- we arrived, I think, on the 11th of August. And I was there until just about early-- early autumn, '43.

And then where did you go?

And then I went to Auschwitz-Birkenau, again, on my own. My father stayed, because he was in a particular situation, which is unusual for those people, who build up the ghetto. He was protected from being deported to destruction camps, strangely enough.

And so my mother was still there. My father was. But I went by myself. I was singled out for whatever reason and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. And then eventually we met there, again, by accident. Because it was designed-- by design, obviously, because we had no control. But by accident, that my mother and my father came.

The interesting thing is that my mother also was sent without my father, because my father had this exemption, as I've said before. He volunteered to go with her, which-- which is really incredible. Because at that particular time, most people were pretty well-informed that some terrible things happened in the places to which they were deported.

But we didn't know about gassing, obviously, at least we didn't. And most of the people I know didn't. But we knew that it was much worse, much worse than Theresienstadt. And Theresienstadt already was not the best place to begin with. But it was one of the best places of all the ghettos and all the concentration camps.

So we met at Auschwitz-Birkenau. And I was informed, because I had very good contacts and also belonged to a group of people under the leadership of a man called-- young man, Fredy Hirsch, who was a Zionist, a very, very unusual person. Very athletic and very bright and very-- a very compassionate individual, who was just organizing that particular group in Auschwitz-Birkenau which was to be developed into a resistance group.

But I feel that was all pretty much Mickey Mouse and premature. Because they then were taken, including Fredy Hirsch, to be gassed, while they were at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the family camp for quite a while. But they were supposed to be taken out. And they were taken out. And Fredy Hirsch, instead of letting himself be gassed, committed suicide. One of the few people who committed suicide.

Because he understood that they would be gassed. By that time, of course, everyone knew that people who were taken out were going to be gassed. And that was an entire transport. And there were certain numbers which were tattooed on the arm, certain numbers which was, I think, 148,000-plus something. All these people with that particular number were taken out to be gassed at the orders-- on the orders of-- of Berlin.

You knew your parents were coming to Auschwitz.

I had some inkling, yes.

In what circumstances did you meet them?

Well, I met them when they came to the family camp. And before, I, at times, could get out of the camp on some sort of work-- work group, which could get out of the camp. And so we had access, at times, to go out. And I've done that on several occasions. And I got to places and other camps and the family camp in which things happened, which were very different from the family camp. Because the family camp was, to a large extent, protected.

And what did you say to them?

Well, I mean, I prepared them for the worst. And I told them that this was-- this was hell on Earth. As one of my best friends, who was part of the group of musicians who played music-- he was a very accomplished musician-- a pianist and a harmonica player-- he came, and he already knew that I was coming.

And he came to tell me that I should give him all the things, all my belongings, which I would like to keep. So that he would take them and prevent that I would-- that they would be taken away from me. So he came and warned me, and said, give me all the things which you want to save, the things which he could carry, and brought them into the family camp. Because otherwise, I would have lost them. And he told me already, prepared me.

So in a similar vein, I prepared my parents for what was to happen, except I couldn't help them to the extent this friend of mine helped me, because he was in a privileged situation by virtue of being one of the camp-- a member of the camp group of musicians.

And what happened to your parents?

My parents? We were all, for quite a while, in the family camp. And the interesting thing is that my parents were relatively physically doing very well, relatively speaking. My mother, who used to be very sickly, occasionally, was remarkably well under those circumstances.

And so one day we were asked to-- by one-- one of the SS officers-- I don't know exactly-- some kapos and officers, SS officers-- to volunteer for work. And they wanted only specialists. So they wanted to know whether we had any skills.

And I had quite some experience as an electrician, because that is something which I learned when I no longer could attend school. So we went to special schools in Prague to learn a trade. And that's exactly what I did. And I completed that particular course in that trade. So I, with good conscience, said, I'm an electrician.

And my father said that he was a gardener or something like that or-- or some sort of a building specialist construction person. And so we are asked to strip naked. And then we had to parade in front of either Mengele or some other medical person, but I think it was Mengele. Naked, run.

And so then we, of course, tried to appear very healthy and all that. And, yes, we were selected. And then were sent to a next camp, next to us, the so-called A camp. And from there, we were shipped to a place called Blechhammer, which was an industrial complex, war effort. In that place, they produced synthetic gasoline.

My mother stayed behind. And we still talked over the fence, electric-barbed fence, and said goodbye to each other. And she was very confident and said we'll see each other again soon and all that. She was very confident, very optimistic. And I think she was authentic about it. She was genuine. And I was much less so.

And while we were talking, one of the block seniors came in which I was, in the block I was, of which they sent me to, where I was to stay for a few days until we would be shipped to this place called Blechhammer. And he saw me. It happened to be a Jewish block senior.

And he saw that I was conversing over the fence with my mother. So he-- that was one of the few times he just really slapped my face hard so that I fell on the ground. It didn't take much for me to fall on the ground, because I was very emaciated.

But anyway, so in front of my mother. And that really-- not that it physically hurt me so much, but my mother was very upset about the fact that this big, burly fellow came and just really slapped my face hard so that I fell on the ground, while we were saying goodbye to each other. So that was a lasting impression, which was the last I seen of my mother.

And then we parted. We just said goodbye. And he just immediately took me into the barrack. But nothing else happened to me personally. And from then, we were shipped to this other camp called Blechhammer.

And how long were you there?

I was there just about, I would say, close to-- close to a year, probably. Close to a year. And until the Soviets came very close, and because the Germans were losing the war at that particular time. That was in '44 already.

And so they rounded us up. And we had two options. And I was there with my father. We were very close and supported each other and helped each other and really helped each other to survive. We were very close. At that time, we had the closest relationship we ever had as father and son.

And so when the Russians-- we already could hear the noise of the battlefield and all that coming closer. So they rounded us up and said, all abled bodies-- all able-bodied have to leave the camp. And those who are not, they can stay. But somehow, the notion was that that was a very dangerous thing to do because the chances were that they would be shot.

And so we discussed it with my father. And my father was in such bad health-- although, he was usually a very athletic and healthy person. But he was very deteriorated and had a terrible case of dysentery and so forth. He just simply couldn't. And he stayed.

Now, and I decided to go on that march, which was a major mistake-- major mistake. Why? Because we discussed, well, what's the better chance? And so we decided that I would go and he would stay.

So nothing happened to him. It was very shortly after that he was liberated by the Soviets, by Soviet troops. And we had

to go on a death march, middle of the winter, which was in early January '45, and-- and marched for about close to 10 days. And many people died.

Thousands of people were on that march. The majority died-- frostbite, other disease. We were not permitted to stay in other places other than in some sort of peasant huts and whatever, haystacks and what have you. And then frequently also slept in the snow.

So and that was, of course, so-- so dreadful that very many people died of frostbite, or just limbs fell off. And that's when my right foot and left foot was frostbitten. And I had a hard time continuing the death march.

Where did you end up?

Well, I ended up-- finally, I ended up in a place called-- which was just a farm and in one of those haystacks where they've had hay and all that, in this farmer's place. And then I found out that I just simply couldn't-- I just took off my shoes, and it was all black and bloodied and infected. And I could actually take parts of my toes and throw them away.

And so I knew that there was, for me, no chance to continue. And we knew, and that we knew, that people who were left behind were frequently shot by the SS, by guards who just simply followed all the transport and saw to it that it was all cleaned up.

And what happened to you?

And so they came and found us. And instead of shooting us-- which we anticipated, we expected that-- they took us and put us on some sort of horse and buggy, covered horse and buggy carriage, and moved us to a very nearby concentration camp called Reichenbach.

And that's where there were some other incidents. Some other people came, and officers, and said, we'll show you, you swine, you bastards. The Russians are advancing. We'll show you what that means to you and all that. So threatening with pistols, drawn pistols and all. All ridiculous, because we could only crawl at that point. So, I mean, we were no threat to anyone for sure.

Anyway, so they put us on another carriage. And then they took us to that place called Reichenbach, where all the people who no longer could walk and all that were sent, brought in. And we were lucky why we were not shot.

It was a relatively simple explanation, simply because we were so close by to that concentration camp, that they'd rather brought us in than shoot us. And said, well, something is going to happen to them there, so we might as well put them there rather than to mess up the place. And because if we had been in some sort of wilderness in between townships or villages, the chances are that, as they have had done in other cases, they would have shot us.

Anyway, so we came there to Reichenbach, and there we were assembled. And from there, we were shipped, after several days, without, of course, any treatment, without-- we got some food, which was relatively speaking, for concentration camps, superior to what we had received before, apart from the fact that we are marching for about a week or so, or 10 days-- difficult to be exact as far as the time is concerned-- where we received exactly nothing.

We ate the snow and didn't receive any food. Or, if we were lucky, in some farmer's place, we were able to get some grain. And we were-- because we are not permitted to stay in the stables with cows, they put us, at times, into stables with pigs. And so we, at times, shared the food of pigs. And that was, of course, the best we could have. So the food which we received in Reichenbach was, of course, superior to what we've had for the last 7 to 10 days.

And after Reichenbach, where did you go?

Then, we were put on open lorries, small lorries, because there was some sort of industry there which-- which had a-- small lorries and on rails. And these rails went directly to the-- to the small railway station, open railway station. And we were thrown in into open boxcars, because we couldn't climb in.

So those who were more able-bodied were-- were forced to simply help us or throw us into the-- those who were not able-bodied-- throw us into these boxcars. And so that they were just about at least 100 people to one open boxcar. And so while we were in the lorries-- of course, some people are very badly injured-- we were transported to the open boxcars from that concentration camp, Reichenbach. They're just small, open lorries, like miner lorries, you see, like, for miners.

The SS came when people were crying out in pain and all that. So instead of somehow helping them, they just killed them. And that lorry I was, there was one person whose foot was badly mangled, frostbite, broken, whatever. And because we were about four in one of those open lorries, so obviously, we sat on other people's legs and injuries. And so the pain was terribly excruciable.

And so he was crying out in pain. And I've told him, the SS are coming, why don't you try to be quiet? But he couldn't do it, because he was in such pain. So they heard him and came. And one of them had a steel bar or whatever, a piece of steel, and just simply killed the man.

And then we proceeded to this open boxcar. And then we were thrown in. And there were immediately one, two, three layers of bodies-- bodies, at that time, of course, live bodies. And so the first were covered by the second, the second by the third, so that so many people suffocated in a very short time, because they didn't get any air. And all the bodies lying on them, they had no other way to go, because we were just packed like sardines.

What month of the year was this? What month?

I've said, January. January of '45.

[INAUDIBLE] in January.

That's right.

And where were you transported then?

And from there, we were finally moved to Dachau via Prague, Pilsen, Bavaria, Munich, Dachau.

Did you arrive in Dachau in January?

That's right. Just about end of January.

And what happened to you there?

Well, there we were in such a state that, out of the 100, just about 10 were still alive. And there were just about 10 railway boxcars, roughly. Just about 10. So that was just about the average, that 90% of the people-- 80% to 90% of the people in every boxcar were dead.

And they are not permitted to be thrown out. They had to be there. So we were just mingled, the live ones, with decomposing bodies for that length of time, which was just close to a week.

And what was the state of your health?

And my state of health, I was a total wreck. And so when we arrived, even the SS people, who received us there, they're making remarks, which reflected even compassion and said they haven't seen anything like that ever before. And they're absolutely horrified and expressed that horror, which was very interesting, very helpful. Were not cruel and were supportive, actually, more than cruel, which was very unusual.

And so there was an officer. And I was-- most of the people couldn't even talk, or they couldn't speak, because they

were so exhausted, just absolutely in a state in which they simply couldn't-- couldn't function. And I was still able to talk.

And because I'm fluent, perfect in German, when this SS officer came to look at us, I said, you just have to do something with us, because either you shoot us and-- so that we can stop-- we can't continue like that-- we just suffered something, you can see that-- or you help us to survive.

And apparently what I said impressed him to such an extent that he-- he ordered that we would get special-- special food. And that helped the group, to some extent-- not all survived. But it helped us to survive for-- for quite some time. Because otherwise, we wouldn't have made it. None of us.

Were you aware about the progress of the war during this time?

Well, not really, you see? Because we are so isolated that we never received-- at least the group I was a part of-- never received any-- any news. We only heard, of course, that they are losing the war, simply by virtue of the fact that they are moved out and that the Third Reich was shrinking.

And the allied forces were simply pushing them back into the Reich. So that much we knew. And that was, of course, a very good sign. But specific news or any sort of-- I never received any of that nature.

Other than, when in Dachau, there were frequent air raids, particularly nearby industries in which inmates had to work. And some came back dreadfully injured because of the-- because of the air raids-- torn limbs, whatever, you know? I still remember that. And so that-- that is the only thing.

And we also heard the-- the consequences of the air raids and always could see when the inmates came back. So that much we knew and understood that, apparently, the Nazis were at the end of their-- their reign. That much we could guess. But specific news, no, I never did.

What happened the day that you were liberated?

Well, the day we were liberated, I already counted my days, so to speak. And at that particular time, I was virtually blind. I was so weak and-- and ill, primarily because of the frostbite and-- the infected frostbite. They worked on my foot on several occasions, once in a bathtub. And the second time, a Czech surgeon, a well-known Czech surgeon, heard about me or found out about me, and he performed surgery on my foot.

But still, they didn't have any medication, so it was badly infected. And there was just the kind of beginning to be a general sepsis of the entire organism. And so I counted my hours-- not just days, hours. And I gave myself about 24 hours when we were liberated.

And what I found out, how I experienced the liberation, I was just half conscious. I could see allied soldiers, officers, rushing through the barrack, looking at us, and being horrified at what they saw. And that was the-- that was my impression.

People were rushing through the barrack. And some of them threw cigarettes or chocolates at us and all that. But didn't stop. They didn't stop. None of them stopped the first day. They just rushed through, because they couldn't stand the sight of us.

Were you aware of who they were?

Well, I knew that they were American soldiers.

You could see that?

Well, that I was-- faintly. Yeah, sure. That much I knew.

Did you have any sense of elation?

The funny thing is I was very flat at that time, very flat. My feelings, you know, I was so exhausted, I was near the end. So that I don't think I felt any sort of elation, because I was totally drained at that particular point.

And only after a few days, when we got individual attention, and the American forces brought in the nurses and physicians and cared for us, and we are moved to some other better quarters and all that, and were given medication and were examined and what have you, then, at that particular point, of course, I felt that it was unbelievable I survived.

To me, then, then I really could appreciate what has actually happened. And then I responded to that. But at that particular time of the liberation, I was too drained to respond with any joy or elation, because I was too far gone.

And so they really took care of me. And they gave us very little food, which I resented, because I couldn't understand that. But they were sophisticated enough to understand that-- and they apparently had some previous cases of that nature-- that after years of starvation, the body couldn't digest or-- just normal quantities of food, or just normal food. So they gave us very little. And we couldn't understand it, because we still were starving. Until much later, we understood that they actually saved our lives by not giving us more food.

Were the others who were with you, were any of them happy? Showing it?

Oh, yes, of course. Some of them were in much better condition. And they, of course, were overjoyed. And they dragged in some SS people and killed them and-- and did things-- all sorts of things. And these people, of course, had a totally different response, because they were also mobile. They're much more mobile than I.

At that time, I was immobile. I just could only lie, because I couldn't-- until the time I got-- I got proper care and treatment. And within a very short time, I was able to move and walk and go about the camp and-- and then became interpreter. Because I went to an English kindergarten. And my aunt and my mother were totally perfect in English.

And my mother actually even translated *Gone With the Wind* into German. And so I was surrounded by-- by English, because they always talked English together, my aunt and my mother. Especially when I was not supposed to understand what they're-- but later on, then I understood. And then, of course, they stopped, because I could understand.

You were an interpreter for whom?

For the Americans. And Americans, because most of the people, the inmates who were liberated, did not understand English, of course. And so the people who were treated and needed to be dealt with, they had to communicate with them. And so they couldn't do it, because most of the people didn't speak any English at all.

Do you feel that you were almost dead the day of liberation?

Well, I thought I made it perfectly clear. Yes. I thought that I was going to die, yes. I gave myself about 24 hours.

So I stayed in the camp for another month, actually, before-- many people were shipped out very quickly after the liberation. But I was-- they wanted to keep me there longer because of my injuries, and also because I was useful to them. But primarily because of my state, my condition.

And so until I was in a better shape, then-- then we are brought to-- in an American truck driven by American soldiers, we were brought from Dachau to Pilsen and left there on our own. And I took a train from Pilsen to Prague.

And then I wanted to go back home, because I understood that the apartment which we've had was confiscated. And as I found out, the Germans moved in, the Nazis. And so I wanted to go back into my family, only to find out that this was one of the very, very few houses which were destroyed during one of the very few air raids.

So then I had to go back to the railway station and stay overnight at the railway station on a bench. And that, to me, was a disaster, because I was looking forward to move back into the apartment, to our apartment, only to find out that the house was destroyed, completely destroyed. Which was just an unbelievable accident, because there were very few air raids in Prague. And that house, especially that house, of all the other places to be destroyed, was just an unbelievable coincidence. Bad luck.

So you were devastated.

About that, yes, sure. And then I wasn't sure who had survived or not. Did my mother and father and all that, because we all, then, had been separated.

And when did you find out [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, my father [INAUDIBLE]. I just went to friends and distant relatives [INAUDIBLE]. And they said, oh, your father's [INAUDIBLE] from friends who stayed until the very last moment in Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was gassed in '44.

Was there a time when you said, now I'm really liberated, I'm really free, it's over?

Well, I think that's a really important question, because you're really free when you are-- stand on your own feet, so to speak, and self-sufficient. And it took quite a while until I adjusted and became self-sufficient, because I was totally dependent. I had no place to stay. I depended on friends who gave me shelter. And then I had to get some money and work and whatever.

And so until that time, of course, we had lost everything. We just came just-- just in my striped-- I came back in my striped pajamas. You know, the one which we were given back in Dachau. And that's what I came back with, and some memorabilia, which I took from raiding the SS places, the houses in which the SS lived. So some-- but worthless stuff. At that time worthless, but, to me, interesting stuff.

And so that's all I've had. So then we depended on friends and people who supported us until we could earn our own living and were in a position to take care of ourselves. And that took several months.

Do you feel that you are liberated now? Do you have that feeling?

I think I'm liberated now. I mean, I'm responding to conditions, prevalent conditions of the times. But, yes, I'm absolutely sure, of course. Oh, yes.

And I know others are going to be interviewing you soon. I just wanted to ask one or two questions about what the-- going back and interviewing the German officers, what that meant to you psychologically.

Well, my motivation to really respond to injustice and unfairness of that magnitude, of course, was totally novel. And I was outraged that this can become part of a reality. That this actually was a reality. And that, to me, I was preoccupied in the camp. And I'd say, how can people do that to other innocent people?

And that was a big question. And I needed to find out how people-- in what sort of position people need to be, what sort of state do people have to be until-- when they do things to other people of that nature. And so that was the motivation which-- which I had in order to go back to SS officers and find out what made them tick, so to speak.

What made them do these things, under what conditions, and how they understood what they actually did, and to what extent they felt accountable, to what extent they understood the consequences of their acts. And so that was my major reason why I went back and said, I have to find out what sort of people are these people who have done what they have.

And to a large extent, I have satisfied my curiosity. But I'm still working on it, because obviously this is a very complex question. But psychologically, also, it was very helpful to me, because I needed-- I had an urge-- I had a need to better



understand how these things can come about, what produces situations in which people behave to each other in a way which was so destructive and inhumane.

And did finding or seeking this-- this information give you any more peace when you were at your-- had interviews?

I think so, yes, certainly. It certainly did something to my hatred, which always existed to begin with. And it appealed me in a way, and said, ask general questions about human nature and under what conditions human nature will be responding to situations which produce these extreme situations.

What did it do to the hatred? You said it did something to your hatred. What was that?

Well, I think that I just simply don't hate anymore. I dislike, but I don't hate. And that certainly-- and also, I can better understand these people. I have a better understanding and a better insight under what circumstances people-- any people-- will behave the way they have. And that somehow reduced my emotional turmoil.

Have you any idea why?

Oh, yes, I have written books about that.

Could you just--

Well, I mean, it's very difficult to say that in one sentence, you know? I think that we all participate in creating situations which are either constructive or the other extreme, destructive. And if we are not vigilant, and if we don't understand the interdependencies which produce the situations, which somehow imprison us so that we will behave in a way which we may not even know that we can behave, then we are out of control.

And once I'm threatened or feel threatened for real or unreal reasons to the extent that I'll defend myself, or feel that I have to defend myself, I will primarily protect myself at the expense of the well-being of other people.

Thank you very much.

[INAUDIBLE].

OK.

OK. We're here on the same day, continuing the interview with John Steiner. His colleague, Carol Hurwitz, is here, who may also ask questions later on. John Grant is our producer. And I'm Sandra Bendayan.

I'm going to continue a little bit asking you just a few more questions related to liberation, because I remember, in the past, you talking about a kind of loss of joy in living.

Mm-hmm.

That you felt your Holocaust years robbed you.

Mm-hmm.

I was wondering if you could talk about this more.

Yes, I think that's a very important topic actually. Now, one has to remember that people were taken to camps during different stages of their lives. And so we have about three-- roughly three, four generations-- three, four generations, taken to the camps. And I was one of the people who was in an age where they were not killed in destruction camps, because we were still deemed to be useful. People who were a few years younger than I were gassed with their mothers. So that, I think, is a very important thing.

Also, in terms of survival, it was very important-- the age was very important by virtue of the fact that we were-- the young ones were more resilient vis-à-vis all the extreme pressures which we encountered. And where survival was directly linked with being alert. And if you were not alert, and young people are more alert than the older generations, we were able to survive.

So there was a positive aspect. Because when people were older, they-- when they were 30, 40, they were already very old people. In a concentration camp, people aged much more quickly. So that people over 40 were like people over 60 and 70 today. That's how they looked. They just simply deteriorated very rapidly. So being young was, in the camp, an asset.

However, after the liberation, having lost the entire family, namely those who were actually older than you and were less resilient and had lesser chance of survival, meant that we were deprived of a support system, which at that time, in our psycho-emotional development, we still very much needed.

And because of that loss, and because there was no one else who would take their place in most cases-- exceptions to the rule, of course-- but in my case, I don't think there was anyone else who could possibly take the place of the lost immediate, as well the extended, family. I felt it very acutely, and still feel it to the present day. And I probably will feel it until the very day I die, especially because some of us are not lucky to-- enough to find someone who would fill the void.

All right. So because of that loss, I think-- and because of this-- the pain and the lack of psycho-emotional sustenance, I think much of the joy which other people experience some of us have lost.

And I won't say that I've lost it. But I think it has been-- it has become diminished. It's not as strong as it would be under normal circumstances. That's my finding. And I'm speaking for myself and those people I was in a position to observe. Does that--

Yes. Did you feel this diminishment right after you were freed? Or has it gradually diminished?

Well, that's again, a very important question. I think after the liberation, I had tremendous hopes. I think I was inspired or whatever happened-- what had happened. I was still very optimistic. And the less my expectations were satisfied, the more I've lost my optimism.

So that finally, when I wind up in the age I am now, I've seen what do I have to look forward to and what I have lost and what I have gained. And I would say that I still have lost much more than I've gained. Because life by itself, without affection, love, and family, is very barren.

And that's exactly what I-- what I experience, especially those of us who were not lucky enough to find or form a substitute family, which as I said before, filling the gap which has been created by the loss of the family.

Now, for older people, it's different. And that's why I say, it's very important to consider the age of the person who was taken to the camp. What was their age, and in what state, and what were the circumstances in the family and all that.

So some other people who were older, of course, were more self-sufficient already. They already had cut the umbilical cord. I had not. There's no question about that.

So you're talking a lot about the loss of your mother, the murder of your mother.

Well, certainly, but not just the mother. It just so happened that mother and I were very close. And she was just, to me, a very ideal mother in anyone's book. And she was a very unusual person. And I had the privilege to have a mother like that, because not many people have the luck to have a mother like that.

So at that time, when I still had her, I appreciated it already. And I was very clear about what I had. I was very mindful

of the fact that I had a very unusual mother. And I consciously appreciated, even though I was very young, where most kids, nowadays, are just not conscious of the fact whom they have as parents, unless they are bad parents. If they are good, they usually just simply accept it.

Where were we?

Talking about the loss of your mother.

Yeah, well, so, yes. My mother played an especially important role in my life, because we very close. I mean, we didn't have to talk. We understood already the thoughts we had. And we just looked at each other and we knew what we are thinking. So we were especially close. So that, of course, was the greatest loss.

But it just so happened that the extended family, also, were very unusual people, and we were all very close-- very civilized, cultured, warmhearted, compassionate individuals, who were very humane in whatever they did. And so their loss exacerbates the loss of my mother in many ways.

And the only person who survived was my father. And we were very close in the camp. But before the camp and after the camp, we were not close at all. We are not really on a very similar wavelength in most of the things and didn't-- didn't understand each other too well.

And then I had-- then my aunt, my father's sister, survived. And we were very close. And she was a fabulous person. And she-- I tried to take her out of Czechoslovakia, but she wouldn't go. And she said she wanted to stay in Prague, although the circumstances under which she had to live were exceedingly humiliating and-- and meager in terms of socioeconomic lifestyle and what have you.

So we were very close. She was also a very unusual person, and we're very lucky that she survived. Because she stayed in Theresienstadt because she was given a job in some sort of a war industry which she worked. And these people were-- these people were protected from being deported to destruction camps. So she stayed in Theresienstadt until the time of liberation. And that's how she survived.

So she was one member of your extended family that did survive.

That's right.

What experience did you have--

And that's it, because no one else is.

I was thinking about what the reaction was when you found that you and your father were no longer close after liberation.

Well, my father somehow projected his notions as to who I am and what he wanted me to be in a way which didn't fit me whatsoever. And he saw me in a light which I, first of all, didn't feel that I should be seen, because I didn't identify with what he saw. And I don't think he really knew me too well.

I don't think he had the talent to really understand people too well. I don't think he went into all the trouble or had the capability to really understand people in greater depth. So I don't think I was an exception. But then he projected pretty much what he wanted me to become and would want it to-- what he wanted me to be in a way which didn't fit me at all as a personality, as far as my talent's concerned, and all that.

So that we still, I would say, loved each other. I don't think there's any question about that. And there is no question that he meant well. But at times, he simply couldn't help himself and behaved in a way which didn't help our relationship whatsoever. And estranged me from him.

And when I succeeded in so many things which he didn't expect me to succeed in, because he wanted me to be in business and all sorts of things for which I didn't have any interest whatsoever, and I don't think any talent to be quite clear about that, and when I succeeded in my academic career, he just bragged to all sorts of people about what I've achieved and what sort of a son he's got.

But when we got together, he never bragged to me and say, hey, you know, I'm really proud of you. He gave me some presents when-- for example, I completed my doctorate, he gave me some money. But he never said, hey, I'm really proud of you. I'm really happy about your accomplishment. He didn't-- he never, ever said that.

Did you expect that your relationship would continue close, as it had in--

Well, I hoped, you see? I hoped. But we needed each other. And somehow the times-- and that's very interesting, the situation brought us very close. And we were really on the same wavelength. I mean, we had tremendous love for each other, very supportive of each other, and very kind to each other. And that changed abruptly-- or that was very different before the camp and very different after the camp experience.

And I hoped that it would continue, yes, of course. And but it didn't. It didn't. So until the very last time, we were not close at all, because we were in conflict with each other for most of the time.

What about your physical health in relation to your [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, my physical health is quite interesting actually. Because after the liberation-- and that is something which needs to be recognized, and I don't know to what extent it has been talked about very much.

After the liberation, the American forces brought in physicians into Dachau, brought in nurses with long, red fingernails, which I saw at that time, for the first time, which was very interesting. Very, very kind of paradoxical in that particular situation. Didn't fit at all.

But they really took X-rays. They cared for us, gave us medication. And they had problems in communicating, simply because most of the inmates, as I said before, didn't speak any English.

So I became one-- the one major interpreter at that particular point. And was, therefore, able to help people who were actually in a stage of dying to communicate some of their problems they've had to their physicians. And that may have made all the difference.

And one of my very close friends, who unfortunately is living in the East Coast, I saved his life that way. And he recognized-- gave me recognition for it. A Slovak-- a Slovak-- a young Slovak Jew. And so I was very glad that I could do something constructive, even though I, myself, was still very hurting.

And so they really took very, very good care of us. And during that particular time, when they took X-rays, they found out that pleurisy-- I had pneumonia. And during that time in Auschwitz-Birkenau, apparently when I've had this, I developed active tuberculosis. And they found that out.

And so then when they found out that I had active tuberculosis by way of X-rays, they put a red tape on my bed. And from that particular moment, they are much more careful. And I was not as frequently consulted any more, because they felt I was contagious.

Which I was not, because it was not an open one. It was an active one, but not an open one, as it turned out later on. And that healed up and everything. But I was in a sanitarium after the war in Bohemia because of the active tuberculosis.

And it never became positive. I never became positive, but I was active. And then it healed up, and I haven't had any problems since. But even in Australia, I was under control when I was in Australia.

So and as far as my frostbite is concerned, of course, all these things were being treated properly. And therefore,

strangely enough, in spite of all the-- in spite of all the deprivation which I had suffered for three years, things healed up very fast-- very fast.

So just the loss of your toes was the only permanent physical damage?

That's right. As far as I can tell. I mean, it was all-- I've had some other things, what I don't want-- some sort of mental things which-- [CHUCKLES]

Did you feel that you suffered any emotional, spiritual damage?

Not at the time, no. No, no, not at that time at all. No. Because I functioned very well.

Now, looking back?

Well, I think it's not mental, but psycho-emotional. I think I've suffered, because of the psycho-emotional deprivation related to the loss of family, I think I'm damaged. No question about that.

High blood pressure?

Well, Carol is also mentioning high blood pressure as a possible--

Well, I don't think so. I mean, I don't think so. Because I don't think that is necessarily-- it could be, but I don't have any indication that this-- there would be a relationship. Could be, but, I mean, who knows?

There were many other things-- many other things which happened, which had nothing to do with a concentration camp. You know, a bad marriage and all this sort of thing. And that has-- I don't think that that is directly related to that. And I think the bad marriage has more to do with the immediate consequences than the concentration camp.

When you were in the camps, did you think that the liberation would be the total solution to your problems?

Well, yes, because, you see, seeing from that particular predicament in the camps, liberation was a true liberation from-- from excruciating suffering, hell. And therefore-- and it's particularly interesting in connection with your question-- that very frequently in the camp, I said how nice it would be to be a beggar in the street rather than an inmate in a concentration camp. Because in my mind, at that particular situation and looking into relatively normal civilian life, for me to be a beggar would have been a deliverance.

And these are the times I looked at it, because I had a lot to do with beggars back at home, because I felt very strong compassion for people who were deprived and lived a different type of life ever since I can remember. And it hurt me. It pained me and-- to see them in this sort of a situation, in this deprived state.

And so I was very clear in terms of how beggars lived in the streets or what-- what deprivation they suffered. So that I was realistic about it and said, hey, that would have been absolute El Dorado to be a beggar instead of being in this. It would be terrific.

So, yes, to me, it was-- when I came out, I felt very, very, very, very much liberated and-- and satisfied, just like a tremendous burden is taking-- is being taken away from your shoulders. Millstone around your neck is being removed. And that, to me, was the first response after the liberation.

Later on, of course, life became a struggle. And in order to achieve what I wanted to achieve, the goals I set myself with the help of the ambitions my mother had for me-- that's an important thing, in contrast to my father-- I had to struggle in order to achieve these things, without much help. Only in terms of what I could attain through very hard work and in some-- some part of what has been given to me by way of talent and whatever.

And so I struggled. The times I have not struggled and really enjoyed life-- and we're talking about enjoyment-- have

been very fleeting moments, and they've never endured.

Did you have any expectations of how the world would greet you as a survivor?

Yes, yeah. That's, again, a very meaningful question. Yes, I thought that we would be-- we would be welcomed as heroes. And the interesting thing is, when I talked about leaving the camp and being posited on a truck driven-- American army truck driven by American soldiers, we went into Bohemia.

And there, some individuals then said, look at them, we don't want you back. Actually shouting, they said, we don't want you! And that, to me, was a very rude awakening. It was just really terrible. And I know that all the people, of course, most of them, all these people were Czechs on that truck, because, yes, we were repatriated to Czechoslovakia-- then Czechoslovakia, free Democratic Czechoslovakia after the war.

And to us, that was real-- just an absolute trauma. It was just shocking, when this-- and it was a woman actually who shouted, we don't want you! Why don't you go back where you came from? And that really-- that was a terrible thing.

And then also I found that very many people who-- with the exception of the authorities-- the authorities gave us all sorts of privileges in terms of certificates and ID cards and all that, which virtually got us into any other place a normal person never would have been admitted. That were the privileges. But the people themselves were not dreadfully happy, necessarily, seeing us again. And that is something which we discussed earlier in [? the ?] [? car. ?]

That many of us had friends, and they took possessions which we didn't want to-- for safekeeping. And we called it Aryanization. And for safekeeping and when we would come back to-- if we would come back from the camps, that this would be returned, because it was just for safekeeping. Many of these people were very reluctant to return that and didn't like to see us, because some of the things were really valuable things which they enjoyed having. And they're not happy to see us. And we were told so.

I said, well-- and one person, I remember-- it was one of a part-- a member of the Christian community-- a person-- I belonged to, said, well, if I had known that you would come back, I wouldn't have taken these things. Can you imagine that? And he actually said that, and I'm verbatim. I'm just actually accurate in this. Shocked the hell out of me.

And so, yes, there are some other people who were very supportive and very kind. But many people were just in between. Most of the people were in between. They're not necessarily happy to see you, but they're not unhappy. And they're supportive to some degree.

But very few really provided you with the needed support after we had arrived back, quote, unquote, "at home." And the home after the concentration camp never was the home which you idealize and which you really feel as your home.

And so that very frequently, in some of my dreams, I feel displaced. I'm still searching for a home which I have never found. Because the home which was home to me was taken away from me. And again, I'm talking about particular people of my age, because people have different needs during different stages of their life.

Do you have any other thoughts or comments on liberation? Its expectations? How it was carried out?

Well, all these sort of things I found out after the fact, actually, when we had-- the American-Japanese. Many of the things, I don't know. I really had hoped, and to some extent believed, that they came to Dachau to liberate Dachau, liberate us. Only to find out that it was just an accidental thing. They were on their route to Munich. That was not at all their intention. And I think that is something which we didn't know until much later.

And then the incidents also in the camp while I was there. And as I said, I was there much longer than most of the other people, who were then shipped home to the Soviet Union, to Poland, to all sorts of places. Lots of Germans, Austrians, what have you. They all went home. Most of us who just-- who stayed were very much in the minority.

And I remember that one day there was an American soldier. And the funny thing is that also some of the American

soldiers who understood and seen this sort of thing-- and let me start with-- let me start with this, because that was also a shocker, not because of the--

There was one sergeant, a master sergeant, I remember. A burly fellow, well-fed and all that. And so one day, he comes and-- and offers us chocolate and a cigar and all that. All this stuff was plastic and rubber. And it was a tremendous joke, because we, of course, grabbed it and so-- and he laughed his head off. He thought he was dreadfully funny under those circumstances. Can you imagine that? I'll never forget that.

And some of us-- these people had strict, of course, strict orders not to give us extra food. And I remember there was another sergeant, an older fellow, very compassionate fellow. And we met at the toilet frequently. And there, they could talk unobserved. And said, what can I do for you?

I said, well, I'm hungry. So he gave me some-- a little bit more food. And another fellow said, well, just-- well, I just would like to read. And the way I said it, he said, you would like to eat? No, I said, I would like to read. And then he gave me some things to read and did it. And these people existed also. And I want to be very clear about that.

And then there was-- one person said, come with me, I'm going to do you a favor. And then he took me out the direct camp, from the camp premises, direct-- just immediate camp premises. Took me out, and there are some sort of kind of barracks with doors in it and all this. Just kind of cubbyholed type of doors. And he took his machine gun and started to spray these doors. Said, you know, SS people are in it, and I just killed a few for you. And I was horrified.

Were there SS people in there?

Well, I've never-- I've never been to see, but that's what he claimed. He said, I've just killed some SS in there. And he was unobserved. No one was around. He was the only one. I don't know what his rank was. I don't remember that. But I was horrified. And he said, I'm going to do you a favor.

So all these sort of things happened. And I remember that I was interviewed by some reporters in the camp and told them. They said, well, we don't-- I don't think we should-- we won't write about that, because that doesn't fit into the-- fit into our way of thinking at this point. So many of these things which happened were simply repressed, or suppressed, whatever.

And so that experience was very interesting. Also, things which-- we were, of course, fairly free to move about, obviously, at that particular point. And Dachau had the largest SS magazines with all sorts of material in them, including ammunition, including all.

And some of the kids, some of the younger people, naive people, just played around with things and killed themselves by using-- playing with explosives. And I've seen that. Just caps, you know, which explode and all this sort of thing. Because that was the major magazine for the SS, Dachau, that it was part of. Not the direct camp, but the vicinity of the camp.

So we went there and just played there. And then they finally, after so many people got hurt and even killed, then they put posts there. And even that was not enough, because we could sneak in and do all sort-- because we didn't have any sense. We didn't really have any-- we didn't know much about all these things.

We just-- now we felt free, and now there was-- these things were symbols of power for us. And now we had access to them. And that's how I think we responded, subconsciously.

Now, I didn't do anything that stupid. But I certainly was naive enough to have done that, except I was more careful. That's all. But I was not more sophisticated about that.

Well, I think-- well, we can move on now to start to talk about your work. Can we stop for one minute?

--specific questions. It also helps me to make associations.

OK, good. And then feel free to go [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, and that's what I'm doing. That's exactly what I'm doing. So that we just-- but then you have to be sure that I also close the circle again, that I come back.

Well, yeah. But, you know, I--

OK. I'd say anytime.

OK. OK, so to proceed with how you came by your life's work. When did you first decide to study the perpetrators?

Well, I mean, it started very early in life actually. And it's very much to do with, I think I already mentioned before, my early-developed notion sense of justice and fairness. And that is something which developed very early when I was a child. And I could see that the-- the disparity between people's standard of living.

And we had a house manager, a family of three, who lived in the basement. And not like in the United States. Were exceedingly deprived financial or otherwise. It was just about the lowest menial type of job you could have had.

So the husband, who was also a manager, a house manager, worked as some sort of an unskilled laborer. And had his wife who cleaned the stairs-- janitorial sort of work. And then the daughter just simply-- and they lived-- lived under those circumstances, went to school, was considerably older than I, but still very young.

And so somehow it didn't make any sense to me at all that-- that we would be living in a very nice apartment and have everything we needed and more than that and all that. And these people were in the basement living this type of deprived life. And that somehow concerned me. And that's the proper way to say it.

And I spent a great deal of time with people who were-- who were deprived, whether I saw them in the streets, I somehow was attracted to them for whatever reason. If I saw a blind person, so I tried to be helpful or something. That is something. And I don't know where I got it from. Certainly, my mother was there. But not to that extent that she would-- still was upper-middle class and all this. And so that's how it started.

And then at school, I noticed that-- that people had prejudices and they're antisemitic. And one day, I remember very clearly, an incident which stayed in my mind. And that was in 1938, when I was about 12 years old.

Mother and I were in a bus. And they just had arrived at our destination, just a few steps from our house or apartment. And children, or just 12-year-olds, just like they are, just didn't wait until the bus would stop. So I just went down to the steps and wanted to jump off.

And my mother, who was a little bit overprotective at times, cried out in German and-- stop and all that. And there was one person in that bus-- I didn't-- I didn't jump off, but I stayed on the steps because because of that.

So then a person in the bus responded to this. And that was the first time I really became aware of the problems which more or less we had to anticipate in a very childish sort of way, just a 12-year-old would.

And this fellow said, in the bus-- well-dressed, middle-class type of person. He had a hat on and everything. Just didn't look any unusual. Sort of typical middle-class person, who blends into middle-class society. And he said, "Only Jews, only Jews, Hitler, Hitler," in order to-- and the message was very clear. What he meant to say is, too many Jews, all we need is Hitler to clean up the Jewish.

Now, my mother was very dark and didn't look Jewish. But she looked very-- she very frequent was confused being Indian, East Indian. Interesting, very dark-- so very dark-skinned. But he was very right on. And he was obviously a very antisemitic sort of person. And that brought a -- and my mother was terribly upset. And I remember that she went to a policeman and reported this sort of thing, which was a joke, because the man in the bus was gone long-- just in the



very moment she talked to him.

But she was very upset about that. And I was upset, not because I really understood the-- the consequences of it all, the meaning of it all. But the fact that this could have been said and that my mother was responding to it the way she did. And so that really set me up, so to speak, to expect things in a very childish sort of fashion.

And again, I felt, how can a person say what he said? And Hitler was, to me, at that particular point, already an entity I was very much aware of. Because when I was much younger, my grandfather had just bought a radio, a wireless set. A typical old-fashioned radio set had come out. And I still remember the brand name, which was called Standard-- Standard. A radio called Standard. And so they listened to speeches. And there, for the first time, I heard Hitler.

And I was very small then-- very small, just a real small child. And I was horrified, not because I understood what was said, but the way it was said. And that I remember very vividly.

So there are a lot of things which, then, somehow accumulated. And then incidents which also happened at school, for example, when I just had, in our art class, worked on a-- worked on a castle out of this plasterine type of stuff. And I was very proud of it. I wanted to bring it to show it to my mother.

And another boy came, who happened to be an orphan, a Jewish orphan, living in an orphanage, Jewish orphanage. And he was very aggressive and very disgruntled for psychological reasons which I can better understand. But at that time, I didn't understand why he would behave so aggressively.

And he tyrannized fellow students. He happened to be very strong. The monster was not that tall, but very strong, athletic build, a lot of muscle. And he came and smashed this beautiful castle which I built. And I was so upset that I started to shake. And I said, why would you do that?

And when I asked him that, he became even more aggressive, and we got into a fight and all that. And that's what, you know? And I said, why would people behave towards each other in such a way which is totally uncalled for? So--

Can you remember--

This developed this sort of sense of fairness and justice, the need for-- and I, today, still have this sort of very principled attitude, which gets me into conflict with even well-meaning people, that I just simply cannot give in. Not because I am not able to give in, but I can't give in in terms of what I have experienced in life. Because I would be selling out. I can't do it.

All right, so because what happened in the concentration camp, which of course exacerbated all the things, all the feelings of injustice, it was an absolute must, a need for me, to find out about people who were in a position and did all these terrible things of which we-- which we had to experience.

And that is why I had this urge-- and it was an urge-- to seek out, not only to study the documents, to begin with, in order to better familiarize myself with the National Socialist system, the structures, and the-- the infrastructure, if you will.

And so I wasn't satisfied. And when I was not satisfied, studying these documents in various archives and with supervision of people who were eminent historians. At that time, already a very, very well-known historian-- but was just in the process of becoming really well-known-- somehow took me under his wing. And he was not that much older than I, but he was older. And was very supportive of my work, my research, of the SS in the archive which he was the director of.

So we had always very frequent-- frequently discussions about what I found out my ideas and all that. And he responding very, very nicely and very-- so I told him, OK, I've done most of the work, paperwork and studying, and I'm not satisfied. I really have to interview people in order to really get at the core of things and see what makes them tick.

And he suggested that I-- he was very helpful in doing that-- he said, there is-- I was in Munich-- there is a fellow with your namesake who is known to be very accessible. And why don't you go and see him-- call him and see if you can get an appointment and interview him. And I've done it. And this man was very helpful. He said, oh, yes, of course. Well, we might be related and all that. The same, Steiner.

Was this person Felix Steiner?

Felix Steiner, SS general, full general. And so he was very, nice, very interested, and very encouraging. And so we made the appointment. And that was the first step.

And then, of course, went there with a great deal of trepidation. And said, my God, now I'm going through this. Because, you see, at that time, I lumped all the SS people in one pot, not understanding that well-- well, ideologically, of course, and otherwise, I understood that there were very many different departments within the-- the SS and with different functions and all that. But to me, all these people were SS, which they were. And I felt they were all pretty much the same.

So I felt that I'm going to interview a monster, you see? And then I--

Were you afraid?

I wouldn't say I was afraid, but I was very apprehensive. I don't think I was afraid. After the concentration camp, I don't know whether I know fear anymore. I have fear of suffering, that I have-- I fear suffering. I fear to be hurt. And I get plenty of occasion to be made to be hurt. I've been hurt many times. And that, I would say, I have a fear of. But I am not feared to, let's say, get hurt, other than physically or that-- I don't care. I really don't.

So that was not an issue. The issue was, there I'm going to see a monster again, a person who will behave as a monster. And so I come to his apartment. And that was in '60-- I think that was just early '60s. And the doorbell and his name-- well, he didn't even have a nameplate. It was a piece of cardboard on which his name was. And not general, but author.

Well, as I found out, the man had written a number of books, some of which I helped him with. As a matter of fact, one of which I helped him with, in terms of research and all that, which was interesting because I was very interested.

And so anyway, he opens the door, well-dressed, and a very robust person. Just about shy of almost 6-- what-- 6 feet tall. Very friendly, welcoming. I mean, bringing me to the dining hall, where there's just a beautifully prepared table with coffee and whipped cream and cake and all this and that.

And I was just absolutely perplexed, because I had totally different expectations. There, I get a red carpet treatment of someone who would have probably not done anything if-- if he would have seen me being shot under different circumstances. So I had to readjust. And said, my God, a very confusing situation.

How did you decide to deal with the fact that you were a survivor? You still have a tattoo.

Well, first of all, that's a good-- good question. What I did is, first of all-- and at that time, I very rarely, if ever, wore short-sleeved shirts. So I had always long-sleeved shirts. And so that was no issue.

But it became an issue at other circumstances, when they asked me, why don't we go for a swim and all this and that. And then I had problems. And I really had to find excuses, and it was not easy.

Or when I stayed overnight at some of the apartments, and they-- they didn't mind undressing. Because I was looking for their tattoo, which was a blood-- blood group which they had tattooed on them. And so I'd say, why don't you show me? I talked to SS gentleman and say, hey, show me. And he showed me and all this. So, yeah, I had to be very careful and very alert.

Now, especially-- I didn't lie. I never lied when they asked me things. I told them the truth. But they didn't ask me

whether I was in a concentration camp. And I didn't volunteer. In some cases, I volunteered, when it was useful for all concerned. I volunteered, and they knew.

What would you have done if the person asked you if you were in a camp?

If I was what?

If you had been in the camps. Did you think what you might do if you got that kind of question?

It never actually happened. But the chances are, I would've said, yeah, I was in camps. See, because I always said that I'm a researcher. At that time, I was at Berkeley. And that's what I said, I'm a researcher from UC Berkeley, and I'm a sociologist. And I'm doing this research on the SS, because I have a need to find out what happened and why you behaved or what happened-- why you behaved the way you did and all this, what is it all about.

Did you have any particular obvious negative feelings toward the Germans at that point? I mean, what about your own anger, rage, left from your experiences?

Well, that is an interesting thing. And that is something which needs to be mentioned and perhaps emphasized.

After the liberation and after my return to Czechoslovakia, I was so preoccupied with injustice and unfairness that hatred, for me, was not the issue. So what I did instead, very consciously, including my father-- including my father, who was perhaps less aggressive than I in these things-- I went around to help all my German friends who were into deep trouble.

Some of them were killed, murdered. Some were put into prisons, and I got them out. Particularly those people, of course. And I only knew people who were decent Germans-- quote, unquote, "decent" Germans. Because I was very much aware that you simply cannot generalize, merely because-- not merely, but because you had SS people and because the German-- many Germans were National Socialists and behaved in a way which was inexcusable. Doesn't mean that all the people are swine.

And so therefore, my, again, feeling of justice was, I cannot let people who are innocent be treated the way I was treated. In that, I had my full support of my father, who was just on even keel with me.

And so what we did, we helped our German friends, who were numerous. I even helped and saved the lives of people, my schoolmates, who couldn't care less about what happened to me. And certainly didn't give me any or render any support. But I felt it was my moral responsibility in view of the fact what had happened to me.

And I even, for example, in certain parts of Bohemia, the northern parts of Bohemia where I lived to begin with and was clerk in-- the town clerk, actually, and had lots of responsibilities. And we had lots of Germans which we had to deal with. And anyone who-- and that was an interesting thing, because that was patterned after the German model, that anyone who was a Czech was now superior. It just turned the table, so to speak.

Anyone who was a Czech and fraternized with Germans will be fined 1 million crowns and punished, whatever. And I still have some of the original handouts on that-- still have them at home in my-- in my files. So to me, that didn't mean anything at all.

And then so people came to me for help and even offered me their daughters as kind of a reward if-- they'd say, why don't you take her to bed or something? I mean, people were desperate.

And I had understanding for this desperation. And I'm not going to-- I was not going to-- they bribed me, wanted to bribe me and give me money. I never took a dime. I never took advantage of my, at that time, power position. But helped these people as much as I could, and even took people over the border, so that they would-- could get to Germany unharmed. And I'm proud of it.

So for all practical purposes, what is defined today as rescuer, I was a rescuer.

Yes.

And it was not a question of the-- I didn't-- that was something which came natural, because I didn't feel that I was doing anything special. I just simply behaved in a way which I thought I had to, morally had to, because that was my responsibility, after what I had suffered.

And I'm still preoccupied with these things. And I'm very sensitive on that. And many people don't understand it, why I draw lines. They don't understand me. They think they do, but they don't. And therefore are offended when I draw the line and say, hey, I'll do it.

I see that you do not want to act out the prejudice toward Germans which had been acted out against you.

That's right.

But did you have any other feelings towards, say, the particular perpetrators? The SS?

Well, I just felt very strongly about what they did. And I felt that it had to be brought to justice. I really felt that they-- and that's why I was very much in favor of the Nuremberg trials of major war criminals, or minor war criminals. And I played a part in it. I was a witness and was interrogated as a witness against Mengele and some other people. And I did that very consciously and felt very good about it, because I felt I had to do it.

So I really think that these people had to be brought-- I still have the documents, by the way, of an SS witness. I had to go to German courts. And in one interview, I had here in San Francisco. And the consul general interviewed me. He was just antisemitic to the hilt and as unpleasant as he could possibly be. And I couldn't understand it.

Just as unpleasant as he could be. Just really-- just awful. And I made it very clear to him also. I just hated that person's guts, the way he conducted himself.

Anyway, so this is-- this is the consequence of my experience. And that's why I'm obsessed, preoccupied. And that's when I'm treated unfairly, what I consider unfairly, I respond to that, and I say, I can't take it. And people can stand on their heads, and they can be infuriated and say, OK, I'd rather part company with you. If you, you know, that's it.

So when you began interviewing the perpetrators, you had some apprehension. Did you feel that you might get actively angry with the person?

Oh, yes, and I did. Because there were situations, for example, when I was asked to be present during one of the rallies or-- with the assembled former members of the SS-- assembled, which they still can do legally. Just about, I would say, 1,500 maybe or something-- just a very large number.

And I was invited. And then it turned out that I was also a guest of honor, which that was-- I was, at that time, on a Fulbright fellowship and already teaching and full professor at that time. I just had been made full professor at Sonoma State.

And so they invited me. And I had to address them and all that. So it was just a terrible thing and a tremendous strain to say things which would be truthful on one hand, and also would make a difference. So it was very difficult for me, because I didn't expect it.

They didn't tell me that I would address a crowd of 1,500 former SS people and their family. That includes their family and because-- and that was a very-- kind of a very-- I sweated blood sitting with SS generals at a VIP table.

So I just-- it took a lot of concentration and adjustment for me to do all this. But I did it for a purpose, namely to really be a participant observer and see, how do these people behave and conduct themselves in different situations, which

gave me clues and insights, which otherwise I never would have been able to get. See?

And so the upshot of it was that, at times, I got into arguments, where you're-- for example, at this particular mass meeting. I was then socialized-- we then socialized after all the lectures-- lectures-- not lectures, speeches and whatever. We socialized, and then I was asked to socialize, sit with some SS people at one table.

And one person started very racist, antisemitic talk and all this. And then I said, well, you objective people are prejudiced against you, because you were a member of the SS. But now you do exactly what you object to. How do you account for that?

And we got in a terrific row with the man and the other SS. There were just about five people at that table, five or six. And the interesting thing is the other SS people really supported my arguments.

And what I found is that-- that we prevailed. The person who came out with these antisemitic remarks is the person who left the table in a huff. So, yes, there are situations where I just simply got into arguments, because you draw a line. You are an interviewer. But you have to draw the line at times where something is being said which needs to be responded to, where you can say, this is irresponsible.

Did you ever-- while you were in the camps, did it ever occur to you then to observe the behavior of the SS or any Germans that were in charge?

When I was in the camp?

Yes.

Well, obviously, because I couldn't get out of my way to do that, because that meant that I was risking my life. But I could when I had a chance to observe it. And then I also could respond to them. And when I got into an interaction with them, which I always-- or in most cases, 99% cases avoided-- then I had to respond in a way which would be least harmful to me, which I did.

But then, of course, all these sort of things, like in this case, a little bit of a photographic memory. And then this remained in my mind. And I drew from that experience, which-- which was helpful in my research.

How about your friends, family, colleagues? Did they have any reaction to you wanting to conduct research with the perpetrators?

Well, I find very little understanding for it, because-- particularly in Jewish circles. They say, how could you do that? That means you must identify with the stupid sort of stuff which people say. You identify with the enemy and all these things. Which is totally inappropriate, in some cases-- may or may not be.

Even when I read something which I wrote about in my book about that particular thing, because some psychologists claimed that-- and I know exactly-- I forget the name of the person who came out with this notion. And then I explained in my book that these people did not identify with the enemy, but they identified, at times, with their power position, with their power.

And they wanted to have their power. So in order to balance the power, they behaved in a certain way which was symbolically similar, but did not identify with the cause of the SS at all. But they only identified with the way they conducted themselves in their overt behavior, demeanor.

So what I'm saying, to put it differently, is that they did not identify with the-- with the goals of the SS, namely to destroy, but they identified with the power in order to survive. So they used the means which they thought were similar which would-- which would counter the power of the SS by simply relating to their power values which they would recognize.

And one of which, which I used, was immaculate German. And it worked every time. My immaculate German, for very many reasons, saved my life-- saved my life, particularly when I had encounters with the SS. Because then they said, my God, I mean, this person doesn't fit the stereotype of a "Jew," quote, unquote. He's like us. And then they're more reluctant to hurt me.

And every time I was in a situation-- not that many occasions-- but every time this happened and I behaved in a way which I knew was, to them, familiar and they respected, I succeeded.

So are you saying that identification with the aggressor would more entail the identifier [INAUDIBLE] abuse.

The means.

Yeah, that's right.

And those kinds of things.

That's right.

But what you're describing is where you pick out certain values--

That's right, exactly.

--and embody those.

Yeah, and that's what I explained in my book and said that, this is certainly what took place. For instance, kapos tried to look like SS people. Of course, many of the kapos were in for themselves and didn't care about fellow inmates and at times killed them without any reservation in order to survive, in order to have a better life. Again, it's understandable. I never would have done it. And I know quite a few who never would have done it.

And there are also some kapos and people who were inmate functionaries who, indeed, did not misuse their power position. In fact, they used it to save other people's lives, fellow inmates' lives. And that happened also.

But I've never been in a power position, because I wouldn't have liked to have it, number one. And it was not-- I was not offered one. But I never would have done anything. If I would have accepted, I never would have hurt anyone, I'm sure. I would have played the game.

So there were some kapos, you're saying, who you would describe as falling into the trap of identification with the aggressor in their behavior?

Well, they did not-- still, they didn't identify. But they did not identify necessarily at all with a cause of SS. But they identified with their power to be sure. And they identified with the means to stay alive and to succeed, which meant to be brutal, which meant to kill people. But they didn't do it for the Nazi cause. They did it for their own personal cause in order to-- in order to have a better life and survive.

So they didn't do it because they identified with the cause of the Nazis. And that needs to be clarified, because very many people, or most people, really don't understand it.

Maybe this would be a good place, if you would, to describe what is the difference amongst the SS, the Waffen-SS, the Gestapo, all these different perpetrator groups.

Yeah, so the SS was a very-- was not at all a-- a unified organization. It was an organization of many functions to be sure. Most of the people, that's what they had in common, identified with National Socialist ideology.

Because one should under-- forget that, until 1943, when people were recruited into the SS, still had some sort of a

choice, but not much of a choice. They volunteered. So the SS was made up of volunteers. And that is a very important thing for us to remember.

So if they volunteered, so they had to identify with something which appealed to them. And the dominant sort of thing was, of course, Nazi ideology. And you can't say that you disagreed with Nazi ideology if you became an SS member, because then you were a part of it. You become an integral part of Nazi ideology, namely to put Nazi ideology into practice.

And that I think we shouldn't forget, because then-- so that they had in common for sure. But their functions were different.

So when I, for example, talked about the people of the Waffen-SS, so primarily, the Waffen-SS was supposed to be something like the US Marines-- a superior combat elite. And Steiner was one of the people who was a co-founder of the-- that is to say, he built up-- he really was one of the major senior instructors who really built it up, along with some other people, all of whom-- no, one exception-- I got to know-- two exceptions-- and interviewed.

Now, so, they were soldiers. But the question is, whom did they serve? And there is no question whom they served. They served their country. That's exactly what I asked him-- whom did you-- did you serve Germany or Hitler?

See, but you see, and that's why it is important to understand that Hoess, the deputy leader in his introduction of Hitler, said, you are Germany, and Germany is you. So what they tried to do in the Nazi ideology, they tried to fuse Hitler with Germany and Germany with Hitler. And to a large extent, they succeeded.

Is that what the SS would answer when you asked to whom did they--

No, no, no, they didn't think that clearly, most of them.

Did they think they were--

They all claimed that they were-- that they were serving Germany, that they were patriots. And that Hitler was a patriot. And that he meant-- that he really meant-- just wanted the best for Germany and all that. So that was this-- usually this type of question which they answered.

But you had people in the Waffen-SS who were not necessarily members of the Nazi party and were not Nazi ideologues, particularly the older ones. The younger ones, of course, were very much-- very much indoctrinated with Nazi ideology. They went through the Hitler Youth, for example. Or just about that, actually grew up under the Third Reich or the beginnings of the Third Reich up until '43, and very much affected by that, because they didn't know anything else. They really indoctrinated successfully.

And so they had a different attitude. And therefore, the conflict between the older generation of the SS and the younger was-- was visible, except they couldn't do very much because the older ones were their superiors. That only came out after the war.

How was it that the older ones weren't full-fledged Nazis when you had to join from a [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, Steiner certainly wasn't. And some other generals didn't like Hitler at all. Hitler didn't get along with them at all. But they felt that they are military people who fought a war against the communists, the Soviet Union, who were their arch enemy, hoping that they would align themselves with the West against the Soviet Union. Which, of course, never happened. But that's what they hoped.

But they didn't like Hitler. And they didn't particularly-- felt very strongly about him. But they didn't do anything against him.

Well, Steiner, for example, knew quite a few people who were-- who were active in the 20th of July. And he knew

about some of the things. He disagreed with what they did, not because he loved-- and I had discussions which-- with him, which are in my book, which are appended in my book very specifically, verbatim, because immediately after that, I put things down.

And so he said, well, if you want to kill a dictator, you have to have enough courage to do it personally, and shoot him and personally, rather than leave a bomb and then leave. And that's an interesting argument.

And so he said, well-- he disagreed with the killing of, at this point, because he felt that it would have created greater chaos and more people would have--

Let me put it that way. This is a rebellion that took place, as I understand.

Yeah, well, the 20th of July '44. And so many people knew about it, but did not participate. And some knew about it and participate against these people-- of the 20th of July people. And some people knew about it and didn't do anything about it. Just simply swept it under the carpet, didn't get involved. And Steiner was one person who did not get involved and had some inkling in terms of what was happening.

This was a plot--

A plot to kill Adolf Hitler. But that was already five to 12:00. Why did they wait that long, because they could have done that much-- of course, he was also lucky, because many of the attempts to assassinate him, he avoided successfully.

But there was that much fervor in a group to eradicate him that late into this [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, but the interesting thing is that all these people became generals. And then what did they-- they must have done something towards supporting Hitler, otherwise they would have not become generals. So all these sort of things are highly questionable things. And it's not-- it's a very complex question, which by no means has been resolved.

And I don't necessarily see great heroes in these people, because they waited that long. And also, they became very high-positied officers, including SS.

Why did they want to kill Hitler at this point?

Well, to get out of the war and not be totally vanquished, because it was purely pragmatic-- purely pragmatic. And some--