

My name is Henri Lustiger-Thaler, and today I'm representing the Amud Aish Memorial Museum and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as sponsors of this interview. We're here today with Mr. Baruch Gross. Mr, Gross. If you could tell me, please, your age, your date of birth, and also the country and town that you were born in.

I was born in 1928. That makes me about 92. Am I right? I was born in Czechoslovakia. In those days, it existed. Today, of course, this country has been split, and partially owned by the Czechs, partially by the Slovaks. And I have gone through the change in-- a political change while that thing happened. But this is not of great importance at the moment.

And the town that you were born in?

I was born in Humenné. Or Yiddish, as they call it, Humenné.

Mm-hmm.

It's a very Yiddish town. Most of the population were Orthodox. I would say a great part of our population was Orthodox. And it was a very nice, quiet town that people lived in and existed, in spite of the fact that there was property around-- I mean, poverty.

Poverty was common in those days. But there were different classes of people. Some were better off. Some were not so well off. But everybody lived in harmony, more or less. And-- except for the problems that we used to encounter often just by the Gentile population.

Mm-hmm.

It's common knowledge that the Gentiles in Europe, most countries in Europe, were antisemitic.

How far is Humenné from Prague?

I'd say about 100 kilometer-- more, 150 kilometers.

And your family was in Humenné for a long time, generations--

Yeah.

--in Humenné?

My family came from Humenné and settled there a long time ago.

Mm-hmm.

I don't know the exact date, time. I know that they lived through World War I in Humenné. So that gives you an idea of how old the population, the Jewish population lived there. We had a nice Jewish community. As I mentioned before, the population divided into Orthodox-- actually, everybody in the city was Orthodox.

But you--

There was no--

Was that overwhelmingly Orthodox?

No, there was no other official denomination there.

Uh-huh.

But there were different houses of worship. There was a shul, which was catering to an Ashkenaz community, and then there was what we called a [? kloze ?] that catered to the Hasidic community. And then there were other number of small places of worship. They were called midrashim.

Mm-hmm.

More or less, they're the same. More or less, the same, they did not particularly daven in the other shuls. The school system in Humenné was very typical of any school system in Slovakia in those days. There were Hadarim And Jews, Jewish boys, were assigned to go to Hadarim That was after the time that he had to spend in school.

School was, of course, a government institution requirement. Primary education, you were supposed to have a school. But eventually, in [INAUDIBLE] day, the Jewish managed-- Jewish boys managed to go into cheder. Cheder was restricted, since most of the hours was filled in public school.

And how was that experience in public school? So you had a very Jewish small city, and in a public school system, were the relationships between Gentiles and Jews, were they good?

Precisely. That's the strange relationship. The majority of the population, I can't say the majority were Jewish. But in a public school, most of the Jewish-- students were Jewish, because not all Gentile kids went to school, although they were required. But there were different groups.

But the breakdown was such that, officially, the school was Catholic, and we had to go to Catholic school. After certain hours around noon time, we were give a two-hours break, and we managed to go to cheder. Came back from home from lunch, went back again to school for a short while, and after release, we went to cheder again, spent about three hours there. So most of the hours were spent there in cheder.

And the cheder was very far from the public school--

No, no.

--or it very close?

Nothing was far from each other. It's a relatively small town--

Uh-huh.

--in distance. But in other words, what this indicates that we had to divide our system, our learning hours, public school to Jewish school. The Jewish school was actually more or less just tolerated, because the public school took up most of the hours.

But we learned on Sunday, and other holidays, we spent most of days in cheder. You can interrupt me--

[LAUGHS]

--actually.

I'm finding this fascinating, that you had these two different school systems, right threaded throughout the day. That's a very interesting way of--

It's not so unusual.

Uh-huh.

By Jewish divisions was thing of common knowledge.

Mm-hmm.

In the Orthodox community, there were also Sephardim and Ashkenazi.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

But I-- Sephardim, I don't mean the Sephardim that we have here, the real Sephardim from western-- from Spanish background. But we had people that were davened Sephard and we had people that davened Ashkenaz.

Mm-hmm.

The big shul-- the people in the big shul was Ashkenaz. And they were the majority in the community. And the other group down in the [? kloze, ?] and there was another one called bet ha-midrash Well, actually two more, bet ha-midrash.

So we had no problem with davening in each of these mi -- these-- in these shuls. We had the problem with davening-- we had a problem in going to school together with them.

Mm-hmm.

The Jewish boys managed very well with themselves. Most of Sephardim with Ashkenaz, no problem.

Mm-hmm.

But the the school system, we ran into problems.

Mm-hmm.

Was-- most of it was Catholic.

Mm-hmm.

And in fact, we had to pray. The school opened up with a prayer for the above in their language.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

But otherwise, the division of Jews and Gentile was quite obvious in many other respects, not just in school system, but in behavior.

Such as?

Antisemitism was very prevalent in those days. So we knew after school breaks, after school hours, like at 12 o'clock when we were released from school to go home for lunch and expected to be back, we could encounter a bunch of Gentile boys just attacking us for fun of it. And we always had to be very careful and watchful for the Gentile boys, because they knew one thing, a Jew has to be beaten. It's an unfortunate fact.

There was also the-- the republic was really democratically minded and run. Affiliation was a mixture of Catholics and Jews and other Gentile force of service. But the problem primarily reflected itself among the students. The schools knew, if they're Catholic, they have to beat up the Jew.

Mm.

This was just a common thing.

Mm.

Not that the Gentiles were any better, but the Gentiles were more sympathetic. If not sympathetic, they at

least had more sense, and they knew that, after all, the Jews have to live among them. But so we had antisemitism, primarily as kids, primarily from the schoolboys.

Mm-hmm. So if we go back-- let's go to into the cheder. Is there a teacher in your years in the cheder that really, still in your mind, was someone important to you, that-- a teacher at the cheder?

A teacher at a cheder?

At the cheder, a Jewish teacher at the cheder? Is there someone that stands out in your mind?

No. The teachers officially were not Jewish. They were paid by the government, and this was a government school. However, they allowed for a Jewish person, a clergy, to come in once a week and give us a talk about Jewish religion. And that was the extent of what they provide as far as Jewish--

I see.

Otherwise, the Catholics were the predominant--

I see, I see.

--religion. And the system was such. I say Catholic, but there were also some different religion Evangelics, but not much of importance.

Tell me-- oh, I'm sorry. You were about to finish?

No.

OK. Tell me about your family, about your father, your mother, your sisters, your brothers.

My mother and father, they're all of the same religion, kidding aside.

What did your father do?

My father was a businessman. He's in charge of enterprise that manufactures rubber products.

Mm.

It actually dates back to a number of years before, since I knew my father before that. My grandfather was established, a lumber business.

Mm-hmm.

Lumber mills. And eventually, my father took over the leadership, the directorship. So he was busy with school-- I mean, with running the business. And of course, the mother was in charge of the household, bringing up the kids.

Your mother's name was?

Fagi Gross.

Fagi Gross. And your father's name?

Herschel Gross.

Herschel Gross.

So the systems, as far as Jewish systems are concerned, all the Jewish upbringing and living, was strictly

Orthodox.

And you had brothers and sisters?

Yes. We were four chil-- we were five children, one sister, four boys. I was the youngest of the boys.

Mm-hmm. And what were their names?

Devora was the oldest, my sister. Then came my brother, Moishe, Peretz, Isohel, and I came.

Was there a big age difference between--

Yeah.

--your oldest sibling and yourself?

The difference between my sister, who was the oldest, and myself, maybe about 15 years.

Mm-hmm.

Wait a minute.

Mm-hmm.

I don't know the exact number.

So that's quite a number of years.

Mm-hmm.

15 years is quite a number of years.

Actually, oh, I would say maybe 12.

Did they survive?

Unfortunately not. One-- two. My sister survived. And she went into hiding when-- the hiding was important when people had to disappear. It's a whole kind of very different setup, complicated setup when it came to the point of hiding.

So I started with the basic school system, and we're now into a period of time that is actually 15 years later. But it's OK. We'll continue on that.

Oh, we can go back. We can go back. I was just curious how many had survived the war.

All right. Well, my sister is now-- my sister was the oldest.

Mm-hmm.

Then came my brother Moishe, who survived with me. And then came my brother Peretz, who did not survive, and a brother Baruch-- or Isohel rather, who did not survive either. And my father did not survive.

Your mother survived?

Mother died before the deportation, before Jews were deported out to concentration camps. And again, with the deportation, there was also a period of different periods, and deportations were prevalent in this year, or next year, or never know when it's going to happen.

What was the first sign that you had as a young boy-- and I imagine you were-- around that time, you were somewhere around the age of 13. Probably, you were somewhere around the age of 13 when you first started hearing about the war. What was your first memory of that?

Well, we went through a change of [? Roman ?] regime, and that was the beginning of the trouble or the problem. I was born in a country called Czechoslovakia in a very peaceful country, well run, I think, and democratic. People officially had all same rights. Jews had the same privileges as the non-Jews, up until a certain point.

1939, that's when the Jews-- the problem developed. Hitler overtook Czech Republic, and he acquired Slovakia also. Other than own country, but he became-- Slovakia became a sort of a vassal state running on a system of the Germans, say German system. And that was a source of the problem. We were exposed to a system that we never experienced before. Namely, until 1939, the government was run by democrats-- in a democratic system. Everybody had his rights. Jews may have been facing some problems eventually beforehand, but officially, there was no division.

Antisemitism was prevalent, but the Jew had his rights, until 1939. Again, we have to come back to this point. 1930, that's when the systems all over Europe changed, and Slovak system. Slovak system became sort of-- I don't know if I mentioned it, a vassal state of Germany.

Mm-hmm.

This went to Hitler, and he had ideas. And our leaders in the Slovak system asked Hitler to introduce-- to help him introduce the German system. He asked-- we did not have-- prior to that, it was an old democratic country. But once Hitler took his-- got his involvement in our regions and all the other regions of Europe, as you know-- ours was not the exclusive one. First he took Austria and interfered with other countries.

So the Slovaks became very enthusiastic with the Germans, so they wanted to follow the German system. They were eager to have a country established on the basis of SS system and adopt their customs. One of the things that they adopted very early in the season was to introduce the German codex, the rule of Nuremberg, which spelled out--

Jewish restrictions.

--oppression-- restriction and oppression for Jews, right.

Yeah.

And this was a killer. It didn't take long the Jews being interfered-- the poverty, when Jews couldn't involved in-- or not be involved in all the things that everybody had done before, namely. Prior to that, the system, the Jews still had their-- still maintained their ownership in certain. But then the codex came, was introduced, which meant the Jews were deprived of their livelihood.

And the intent of it was to gradually pass on the leadership, business leadership into a Gentile house, Gentile system. You see, the Slovaks were very enthusiastic about-- with the Germans.

Just out of curiosity--

I'm sorry?

Just out of curiosity, how did this change in society with the implementation of the Nuremberg laws, how was that-- what memory do you have of how that was felt in your family? How was that felt in your family, the deprivation of a livelihood and all the other restrictions? Do you have a memory of that as a child?

Yes, I do, because it started with restricting the Jews owning certain businesses or owning-- or working for certain companies. For instance, professionals, lawyers, doctors, engineers, were demoted. They couldn't

work in Slovak enterprises. So what did this mean? Depriving certain Jews of a livelihood.

And this is just an example. From there, the other phases of business were restricted for Jews. Namely, all this led to follow up again with this German system to deprive the Jews of their livelihood. Namely, a Jew could not maintain a business. At first he did, but he had to take in a Gentile partner.

And the Gentile eventually became-- he became the owner, not the partner. And when the Gentile felt strong enough, safe enough to lead his business that he had acquired from the Jew, he just said, let's kick him out. We don't need him. And that's how the deportations started.

So with your grandfather's lumber business and your father's rubber business, did you feel-- is that what happened? Is this, say, also something that you remember in your family, that they had to take on partners, and the partners eventually took over both businesses? Is that what occurred?

This is exactly what occurred, but under a different scale. My grandfather had a very complex business. He had forests all over. I'm not sure how many. At any rate, it was that kind of business that any Gentile could take up. Basically, the Gentile was not the one that had the same level of intelligence as a Jew. And it's kind of difficult to find what they called-- an Aryzator, we called them, one that Aryanized business.

Mm.

I mean, if I had a business, I was forced to take in an Aryzator to become a partner to me. Now he had to run in the business. And it took a while, depending how complicated it was. And fortunately in those days, a business lasted quite a long time afterwards without an official Aryzator. The Aryzator came in, but he was just there as a functionary. But he couldn't give or] control of the business.

So we managed to live a while. But this is only part of the relief that we had, because prior to the Aryzator phase, Jews were sent out to Poland. So when the Slovaks decided to get rid of the Jews gradually, it wasn't so gradually anymore.

They organized the community, the families, collected them, put them into a concentration spot in our country still, in Europe. And slowly, gradually, they were shipped off to Poland. We actually, at first, didn't know what goes on. All this was so well censored that we didn't have any idea. Nobody managed to send out a note or information. Very few information did we get out of there.

But eventually, things did come out, and we knew, again, to some extent, what's been happening to all the Jews every [? night ?] were deported. At first we didn't know.

How long did your family actually stay together in this long period of deportations in Czechoslovakia? Was the family more or less intact until the last deportation, or was it already broken up?

First let me correct you on something.

Sure.

You say, how did this family last in Czechoslovakia. By that time, Czechoslovakia didn't exist.

Mm-hmm.

Czechoslovakia was split into Czechs, Slovaks. The Germans occupied the Czech region completely. Slovak became a vassal state to Hitler.

Mm-hmm.

But they run their system like-- like Hitler. But the Slovaks copied their system through that. They wanted to get rid of the Jews just as well as the Germans. They managed, in most cases. Took a while, not as fast as the Germans. But again, there were some exceptions that I mentioned.

Not every business could be liquidated, like my father's could not be liquidated. But it was a small minority. What it really meant is that it created a lot of poverty among the Jews. Their own business. And now their business was taken--

Mm-hmm.

--and the Jews couldn't find an employment.

Mm-hmm.

At any rate, eventually, it came to a point where all Jews, without any exception. It took a few periods of time. They were sent out to Poland and concentration camp. They did it so sharply, so mysteriously, we didn't know what was on in Auschwitz. We didn't even know there was an Auschwitz for a long time. So but we knew to get caught is a bad thing.

Mm-hmm.

So we went into hiding most of the time when we knew that there is something going to happen. OK, we had paid agents to let us know-- who knew when there's going to be a period of getting together another transport. And this is what we are afraid of, not to get caught in another transport. Another transport meant shipped off. And--

So when you say hiding, so the entire family, still intact, where did you hide? Or were you hiding in the house in the-- where did you hide?

Let me explain something about that. Well, for one thing, the Gentiles were not eager to do so. Some would. The poor one who had a good basement would let us in there and hide for a while.

But otherwise, the system works in that fashion, that gatherings for deportation took a certain time, so we just had to find out when. So we had [INAUDIBLE] paid informers who would let us when they would try to gather some Jews and more Jews. So you knew that you go into hiding, but this was not a very fair or solid system.

Anyhow, that's how I got lost. I was. I didn't want to go out to my hiding place and to stay there. Anyhow, but gradually as I-- let me get back to this story. Gradually, the Jews were all shipped out, first, those that were deprived of their livelihood. The government said, what do we need these poor people for? To support who? So they were the first ones to go.

Then the others that had no means of living, even professionals who had knowledge-- who had the knowledge, but had they could do nothing with it. And they were of no use. And they were sent out.

We did, to some extent, partial-- at certain times, we were covered. We knew that were certain amount of-- certain number of people have been caught and made a transport and shipped out. And we were informed, and that's when we went into hiding. But this was not a safe system either. You never knew. Today I can walk around freely, and tomorrow I can't. And this is what unfortunately happened to many of us.

At any rate, we did sort of played hide and seek. Today I'm OK. Tomorrow I can't.

Mm-hmm. How did your parents explain this to all of you? How did your parents hold your hope up during this--

How did they what?

Give you hope during this incredibly terrifying period?

Well, you see, we depended on the trust of these paid men. They would inform us when it's no good. They



were officials of the leadership, and they know when there's going to be a period of time, and Jews were going to be converged.

You're speaking about Jewish leadership, a Judenrat?

No, no, no.

No? You're speaking about the--

The Jewish leadership didn't mean anything by then.

OK. But there was just informants, and we went into hiding for a while. And once-- and that's how it works. Once they had a transport, enough people to send them out, the transport was sent out, then we came out of the holes, so to speak. And we hope that the next time, we'll be able to survive, and again, try to avoid the next time, not to get caught. So--

When you were hiding, you were hiding-- I'm sorry-- as a family? Or you were hiding individually in different basements, or--

Both.

Both.

Yeah.

So your father stayed with some of you, and your mother stayed with the other? The split you?

Yeah. Unfortunately, my mother passed away before 1939. My father stayed with us, yes. But you see, the attack or the gathering of the Jews for shipment were also always in certain groups, first the youngsters, unmarried men, then unmarried women. Then started the families. When the families started, it was total, there are with some exceptions.

What are the exceptions? Like a case that I just mentioned to you. My father-- my business-- my father's business needed someone to run the business, help run the business. You can't close up an enterprise that have factories all over and not leave it in a qualified hand to run the business. So sometimes we relied on these people, and they had information. And they would inform us, now is a bad times to stick around. Go in hiding.

That was a very seldom case where you could rely on such information. But eventually, it-- the chances were always minimized, getting to be narrower and narrower, chances of survival, that is. Versus, I--

How long was this period that you're speaking about, as you were going into hiding and then coming back out? And how long was that period that you experienced that?

Period of freedom?

Yeah.

That's another thing that we had to figure out, or with the assistance of our informers.

Mm-hmm.

See, they had a rule. They had a requirement. They had to fill out their transport. And once the transport was filled, then we knew we can-- we came out of hiding until the next time. Once they disappeared, it took basically years.

The official deportations started in 1939. That's when the major transportation started, families, complete

families. Eventually, some of the important people that the government still could use were left alone, were not bothered. But like for instance, in my father's case, as I said, he had to run the business.

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

But then came a time when we were not bothered anymore about being out on a free-- the government was concerned about another issue. We lived in the eastern part of Slovakia, close to the Russian borders. And the government figured, Jews are not safe to live near the Russian borders. The Russians will come in. They'll-- they'll just acquire us, and we'll become instruments of them, for them, or we come join their armies or whatever.

So the rule was that the Jews had to be deported in a different section of Slovakia. But this is only something that developed in the last year of the war. And so, without any choice, we moved. Or at least we felt, if we moved, hopefully we will be safe. We're not going to be shipped like before. Before, we got a relief that lasted a short time. Now hopefully, the relief is going to last longer. So we moved into a different community in a different city.

And what year was that, if you recall?

1939. I'm sorry, 1940-- '43.

'43. So just in the middle of the war.

Yeah. And this-- so we finally moved to the community-- have you heard of Nachod? Not far from the--

Yeah, of course. [INAUDIBLE].

A city away from Nachod. And my father had a rabbi friend who was nice enough to provide us an apartment and then other people and other people. And we settled there for a while. So for a short while, we were functioning there, semi official. But even this didn't last long.

See, our deportation, or rather, our move to this new community started in April of '44. Yeah, our-- March in '44. So we were lucky we found a home, found a residence that we can find-- that we can settle. But then the political situation changed, and this is what we were always afraid of.

Political situation has changed to such an extent that the Jews were not being reliable in either case, whether they are for the government or against the government, or professional, not professional. The upshot was that we were-- a rule came. Government adopted a new regulation that all Jews, regardless of who they are, had to go. Can't trust anybody. Even though that friends who are friendly or economically important for us, no more.

So they all went into hiding. I'm giving you all in a nutshell, but this story is much longer than--

Of course, of course.

So as I said, we lived near Nachod and we knew the [? roof ?] for the rabbi of this community, Rabbi Schwartz. He had good connections with the police. So we were informed as to how safe we are, how safe we think we should be. But that was a mistake. There came a time when they did not allow anybody Jew in any hiding place, whatever they were trying to go, wherever they were trying to go.

You became more vulnerable.

I'm sorry? Oh, more vulnerable.

You became more

Vulnerable.

Right. So there came a day when we were told by Rabbi Schwartz, the one that brought us there-- he had good connections with some police. He warned us. Something isn't right. Something is fishy. Something is going to go on. And we went into hiding hole right away.

Mm-hmm.

So it was a Rosh ha-Shanah of 1944, in the second day of Rosh ha-Shanah in the afternoon. We were still under the impression that it's a sort of hide of seek that we were used to and enjoying. Sometimes you could come out. Sometimes you could not come out. Sometime you have to go into hiding. Sometimes no.

I said to my father, I don't look quite Jewish. I wear short slacks like they did. I was blond. Let me go out on the street and find out. I'll go to Rabbi Schwartz and find out what the score is. After all, he has contact with the police.

And I head out to Rabbi Schwartz. He wasn't far away. And I step up. His partner, [? his ?] [INAUDIBLE] sees me from a distance. He said to me, disappear immediately. Go into hiding. Turned around, and I thought, I'll make an escape and go back to my bunker. That's what we called a bunker or a hiding place. Turn around and go out to my bunker and be safe for a while.

Unfortunately, I did manage to get too many steps. I was stopped by a soldier with a gun. And that was the end of my freedom. Didn't manage to get to Rabbi Schwartz. Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, I did get to Rabbi Schwartz. I went up to his steps. And he says to me immediately, hide. Hide and disappear. But I didn't succeed.

So before I managed to get-- go back, I was caught by a soldier. And that's where the trouble, the major trouble began. First of all, I couldn't forgive me for going, for coming out here. I couldn't forgive myself for letting my father down. I go out and risk myself, and now how are you going to handle it?

Unfortunately, we never saw each other. I was taken to a gathering place where all the Jews that were caught at the time put in a schoolyard. Funny, I was only out a couple of hours in the afternoon. I had already found 30 people there.

I spend there a night, and I didn't know where I was going to go. Next morning, we were put on a truck, and the truck took us to a place called Sered. Sered was a concentration camp in Slovakia, not like they have at Auschwitz. But really, purpose was to concentrate people and from there, to send them off to Auschwitz.

I thought, my faith is tested. Can't help it. Can't run away. Spent in Sered 10 days. In the meantime, and it's during end of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur as, every day, new people were brought here. Sered is not far from Pressburg. So Pressburg provided a good field, a good place for getting Jews, so they brought them in.

I spent 10 days in Sered, and then after that, a tragic thing how we were caught. In Sered itself, Sered was a working camp at one time. It had bunks. And I thought I can go and hide in one of those bunks. Maybe they wouldn't recognize me or didn't find me. I tried one, and didn't take long, and this one I was discovered, too.

Mm.

So before nightdown, I was already seeing-- being facing the German general-- I mean, the officer who was in charge of this project. And we were-- I remember standing in line already. My hopes were so low. Where am I to go? Where can I go? Who do I know? I'm alone.

There was a lady there also in a line, and she begged the policeman, the SS man, do me a favor. Just let me go to my apartment, my place, and let me pick up some clothing. He says to her same thing. What difference does it make to you? Almost they are not, even thinking it. And then I realize that-- what's waiting for us?

Didn't take long. We were loaded on a train, and that was a Shabbos between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. It was Yom Kippur and Sukkos. And that's the end of my freedom. And came a new phase, beginning of a new activity, new event, beginning of Auschwitz. I don't know. You want me to continue?

I think we're going to take a break here.

All right.

And we'll start again in about 10 minutes. Thank you. We're back with Mr. Gross. And what I would like to do is I would like to go into the discussion on your family life in Humenné, which we very quickly passed over to go to Auschwitz. So if we can go back there for a moment, if I can just take you back there for a moment, and if you could speak to me about life in the family during the-- for example, the Yom Tovem, Purim, Pesach, a Shabbat night. What was that all-- what are your most precious memories of that time with--

Basically, I have very pleasant memories from those days. It had to do, to a great extent, to family life. We lived in a city in Humenné and a good number of my father's-- my grandfather's children lived there. So we kept sort of a united-- a great unity amongst ourselves.

But of course, Grandfather was the patriarch of the family. He was in charge. He had control, control of the business, but that also made him in control of all other events. But he was a very clever man. My grandfather never took advantage of that. He knew his position, and how far he could go.

But the fact is that it really paid off. He was a very respectful family around the house. He had, all told, about 21 grandchildren and sons and daughters. So the family was quite extensive.

Of course came on yontif. We would all move over to Grandfather's after supper, and we spent time there. He had a large apartment, all the conveniences. He had three sons that were excellent in music and singing and [INAUDIBLE]. One of them especially is very good about fiddle. And so that was an attraction, Grandfather's, being together.

And if not just for Grandfather's, but Purim, Purim night was another attraction. Balebatim from people from shul would come and say They have such things. He was respected in the community, and they liked him, and they had friends. So he would come, they would come, some of his friends would come and spend the Purim night with him.

And in the course of events, one of my grandfather's [? shalom ?] was a great [INAUDIBLE]. He would sing and entertain. So that also created a very nice atmosphere. Besides, of the other people that came were the shoctim. A shochet in the old countries had to be a [INAUDIBLE] as well, because at times, he had to act like a chazan.

So the shoctim were very pleased to come to my grandfather for another reason. He had what we called here a Victrola and play the records of Chazonim. Here today, you don't have that here. You're too advanced for that.

At any rate, my grandfather was into music, had a good collection of Yossele Rosenblatt records. So that was the fete. For a party, this is the entertainment. So either he entertained or the shoctim would entertain. And otherwise, I think--

It sounds beautiful.

What?

It sounds beautiful. How many people, would you say, on that Purim night would have been there?

On that Purim night would be the family itself, and grandfather had 20 or 21 [INAUDIBLE]. I don't think they

were all there at the time. Some of them were not there. But it was a nice home get together. And the entertainment was there.

Beautiful. Beautiful.

I remember distinctly, there were two of the shochtim. It was customary that a shochet in those days had a beard. Oh, it was a must, not a must but as a requirement. And the shochtim would come, and they were also inclined to listen to Yossele Rosenblatt. Yossele Rosenblatt was their favorite.

So I remember there was one with a long beard, Schmul [Personal name] was his name. And it was a long winter night, and he was listening to-- it was an old-- it was what you call a gramophone, an old--

Right.

--player. And he would go listen to music, and we'd go. And if he listens to Yossele Rosenblatt, to him and to the other colleagues, there was nothing better, no one equal to--

For many people at that time, Yossele Rosenblatt.

I remember he would go like this, [SINGING]--

[LAUGHS]

--and enjoy his music. Anyhow, so there was an evening of entertainment in my grandfather's house.

Sounds very joyous, very beautiful. Very joyous, very beautiful. Do you have a memory about Shabbat dinner with your family?

Yes, I should remember. Shabbat was a Yiddish Shabbat. Well, I mean, to begin with, this is a-- the community was Orthodox, and many of them were Hasidic. They davened there in shuls was a [? kloze, ?] we called it. It was a shul, which was Ashkenazic. [? Kloze ?] was Sephardic, semi-Sephardic.

And then there were the others, others, [? Shebrach. ?] But on yontif like shuls or Pesach or--

Mm-hmm.

I wasn't-- there's not a time-- there was not a moment where they would not come and join me in my grandfather's house, and be together and sing and enjoy and entertain.

Mm-hmm.

So and I was very young at the time, but it formulated my mind. And ever since then, I have a very close feeling for music.

Mm-hmm.

Well, such a beautiful and important association with your family life.

Yep. It's true. So--

I'm not surprised.

It was part of the fete, part of the event of Yontif, spending grandfather's-- house.

Nice. Very nice.

And entertained and listened to the [? war ?] music of [? chazzuras. ?]

Beautiful.

I just want to mention at this time that the-- I don't know if you know what a Victrola is.

Yes, of course.

Well, in the olden days--

Very old machine.

Old machine. That's what he had, a Victrola. You had to turn it on and play the tape and then put on the next tape. And this was the-- I didn't go to movies at the time, so you came to listen to music at my grandfather. And the get together was, in itself, very warm.

Of course.

A close relationship between all children and grandchildren. And that was Yontif.

Very beautiful. Very beautiful Yiddishkeit that permeates the story. So we shall then-- did you want to say a few other things about home life before we go back to where we left off? In the last segment of the interview, you were in the Sered concentration camp. Is there anything else you want to say about that before we move into this other area?

I may come back, but let me--

We may have an opportunity when we're going to be looking at some of the photographs later on after this segment. We may have an opportunity to come back to life in Humenné.

Mm-hmm.

So take me, then, to the Sered concentration camp, and you were then being deported, I believe to--

Auschwitz.

--to Auschwitz.

Well, when I got to Sered, it was like I lost everything, all my [? marbles ?] I have -- I'm alone. Looked around, no one that I knew, none of my family members.

And the most painful thing was that my father back there doesn't know what happened to me. And he must have been beside himself, and probably criticizing himself for allowing me to go out at a time, and here I am stuck. Who am I going to turn to for advice? Nobody. I'm a young boy. I didn't know anybody there.

But yet then I discovered that one of my uncles was also brought in, either the same day or the day before that, with his wife. So he had a little mishpucha there. But otherwise, it's a hard moment. It's like in a desert.

Mm-hmm.

If I want some advice, I have no one. I don't know anybody.

Mm-hmm.

And sleep, I remember, we slept on bunks. I'm worried about pajama. I mean, we had nothing. I had nothing on me except what I came with. And didn't sleep. If I had any thought, it's, how do I get out of here? But I know it's finished up. It won't happen. Can't get out of here.

So next day was Erev Yom Kippur. So I went to daven At Yom Kippur, I went to daven with-- there was a special bunk where they davened together. I went daven with them, since I knew some of them. At least I know about their [INAUDIBLE] yeshiva. There were some, machzorim, very few. So I joined. Otherwise it has been one of the most saddest experiences I've had.

Completely alone.

There I am and that lasted just a few days. All told, I was in Sered for a period of 10 days, I think. Let's see, but soon Shabbos, something develops. We don't know what their plan is. Don't know what the system is.

But Shabbos afternoon, no-- Friday night before-- the Germans wanted a little entertainment. So they made the people march around the circle. And as they marched, they were beaten with sticks by the Germans, by the SS. So, in other words, they made me force-- they forced me to go by in the inner circle where we're about to get hurt. Well, lasted a while. And that ended too.

That was Friday night. And this was some [INAUDIBLE]. The German soldiers want to have a little fun. They wanted the Jews go round and circle town here. And not being able to go, or if you do go by, you get slammed you get hit. So, this is a Sered of-- a sample of Sered. That's how the treatment was there.

The next night, Shabbos night, I think. Shabbos afternoon, of a sudden I noticed that trying to get together all the people. And put them-- line up people and getting ready for a march. But I didn't think there much for me to lose there, but I don't-- I'm not going to go there and look for a hiding place, if there is any such thing. I did go into a-- enter a camp. There were barracks.

Anyhow, I came to the barracks, and that was it. To go in there I saw a lot of-- saw other people go there too. So I said, we'll hide there. I'll hide there. Maybe they wouldn't recognize me, and they wouldn't notice me. And I would not be shipped out. That didn't help. Before I knew about this, we were there in this barracks for about 15, 20 minutes. All of a sudden, the door opens and in comes a [INAUDIBLE] general, well-known [Personal name] Oscar [Personal name][INAUDIBLE], whose function was to liquidate these camps. So they'd go to the camp and send them out to Auschwitz. And chases everybody out. In the process, gives him a beating.

That was the last hope. So we were marching to the train station. What else could be done?

Get to the train station. Then we see men. We meet some other acquaintances. Not that it helps me in any way.

And we just loaded, we were loaded and before we knew, the cars started moving. Train started moving.

Of course, we didn't know that, we didn't know where. And we knew that can't be a better place there are than Sered. Because in Sered at least, you get some food.

And they-- see, because they didn't make us work. Anyhow, so we were on a train for I think two days and one night. It was the night of Sukkos.

All of a sudden, and the trains were running mad, without a stop, as if they had a race. Finally, the train stopped. Then the wagons opened up.

And you hear the voices of the SS, all of you, raus. meaning all out. And in addition to that, if one was a little slow, he's going to get a beating before he stepped out.

You know, it was bright in Auschwitz. But it was dark at the same time. I just know I was in the dark. Where was, where am I? What is this here? Who knew? nobody.

Finally, I see there were some old timers who were assigned to unload the truck, unload the back of the car, cars, from near there. Only the content of the cars, of the trains.

These were people that they called Canadians. Which I find out later, Canada, anyhow. And we got a hold of one.

And I heard him speak Yiddish. And I said to him, where are we? What is it? What is this place?

And without any delay he says to me, you know, this is the place where-- I speak a very fluent Yiddish. This is the place where [INAUDIBLE] [SPEAKING YIDDISH]

This is the place where they choose your destiny. That's where you're going to end up. You know, it was a shocking, a shocking experience to hear something like this. I thought the man is joking.

Didn't find, didn't take long to find out how true this was. It took only one night to find out. So we all lined up for appell. Mengele, which we didn't know who he is. We found out later.

And you know, we see the selection row, of [NON-ENGLISH], you speak Yiddish, English, and Deutsch? [NON-ENGLISH], or another [NON-ENGLISH], can you work? One side, next side, and unfortunately, we see the women.

We came in with a group of women. I came with two uncles. They had their woman with them. And they had two child, two daughters also.

They were shipped over to another end. Separated completely. I didn't know the meaning of it all. I know in a shul, in a shul, we don't daven [NON-ENGLISH] together with the with the with the women.

But oh, so then gradually, we found out. We still didn't have any idea what's going to happen. These are people destined for a crematorium. And we were among the people destined to go to camp, to the barracks.

We stayed a few hours with Mengele. And after a while, just made us march off to the bunks, to the bungalow, bunk section. Oh, it was phase of terrible experience, looked around.

It's cold. September is very cold, and October, it was already, in Auschwitz. And there were the kapos chasing us around already. And giving us direction, where to go or not to go.

What was the feeling that you saw in that selection line? I mean, that everyone was terrified? Were people silent?

Were people screaming? What was that, waiting for that selection, as you saw the separation between the women and children and the men? What did you witness?

Well, I'll tell you, I don't think there was much screaming. Those women thought, women usually are separated. We're going to go to a different, maybe a different way, in shul. A man goes a different place.

And really, the Germans were very calculating. They figured out things very well for their benefits, and just keep us unaware of things.

Make it look organizational?

Right.

An organizational event?

Mhm. So the next time, that they third one, this is it. Or is it?

It was a cool night too. Auschwitz is cold in October. So we had to go through the machine, the-- the cleansing process too. And they gave us new clothing.



They didn't care what fits or what doesn't fit. They just gave you, threw a shirt, a pair of pants for you, and a jacket, and you go.

And the next day came another one again. There were the next day, the same. And we changed.

We were just waiting for something to happen. To wait for something to happen wasn't the best thing. Because things could always happen worse.

We found out about selections. Which we didn't know, at first. Anyhow, so the only one thing we knew. We were separated from our families.

Nothing to look forward to. And who knows what else is waiting for us? And every day something happened that made us feel worse.

First with the food. It was very meager. Nothing. A bit of soup that you got for a day, and a piece of bread.

And that's how things proceeded in Auschwitz. Day in, day out. And it was very cold. And it was October, already. So I remember, we used to form circles around each other, each other. Using the heat, the--

Body heat?

--body heat from others.

Did you, I mean, being in such a situation, something collective happens. And did you see Jewish rituals of putting on tefillin? Some sort of an action, a somewhat ritual Jewish action, occurring in these times as you were trying to understand where you were or what was going on? It's such a confusing and terrifying time. Did you find Jewish rituals, people practicing them, at that time?

The one thing I did notice, We were finally assigned bunks, where to spend the night. And now, it's not the first night, a few nights later.

And I discovered that there was a small siddur. Somebody sneaked in a siddur. So we davened. Let some other people daven.

Because actually, between the bunks, they were allowed to-- no, they were not allowed to, oh no. The kapo, if they were to see you, they would make you suffer. They would end your life. Nobody brought in a siddur into Auschwitz.

But there's something that I, was only unique in Auschwitz, that happened to me. First of all, and it's the most horrible thing, used to have selections. Selection meant after a few days, the SS would organize, setup the people and select, find, go around from bed to bed and from row to row, and select a person that is weak, there doesn't seem to be able to survive here. This is what you call selections.

So I had. The first selection, I survived. I didn't-- it took me a while to understand what it means.

And I was just quite cautious about it and fearful, as to what it is going to lead to? After the first selection, there comes the second selection. And again, I see, that they're picking more and more.

And we knew, by that time, you know that the picking is not a good sign. And just, making, you're just going to make sure, selections, that cannot survive.

So before, we usually knew when selection would come up. Usually before a High Yontif. And then became an order, just line up and raus, and sit us in the fashion.

So I always thought I'd be smart. I started running. I ran through a beyond. I thought I'll go and hide someplace. I was heading for the toilets. They had a name for it. Anyhow.

I thought I'd hide out there. I thought nobody would see me get in there, and wait, wait it out. I wasn't so fortunate.

It didn't take me long before a kapo comes in. And he saw me from a distance. So he gave me a nice little [NON-ENGLISH]. And he bend me over. And he gave me a good whacking.

Luckily, I had a spoon in the back of my pocket. So the spoon got bent from the pressure of the whip. And in a way, it's sort of minimized my pain.

So I said well, I succeeded this time. Who knows what's going to happen the next time, you know? So you always lived with that fear, if anything, if not, there's something else may happen.

And the other, the serious problem, was that there was no food. Very little, what you could get. And a third, it's cold. Staying in Auschwitz, in October, I wouldn't recommend. Anyhow, that's how things went into Auschwitz.

One, a great thing, happened to us, to me. It is that I made friends with a young man, happened to come from my neighborhood, neighboring city. And he said to me, what'd you want to learn? Said learn? How? Why?

And he started learning [NON-ENGLISH] with me. And he knew [NON-ENGLISH] And we made it as an order, we made it a daily routine. Every day, get together and davened and learned, and a very good [NON-ENGLISH] [INAUDIBLE] [NON-ENGLISH]. I remember his first name, [? Mechele. ?]

Anyhow, so this was our occupation. True, it didn't keep me much very warm, but see, the reason we were so cold, because they chased us out of the bunk. They never let us stay in a bunk.

Regardless of what the weather is. So at any rate, I stayed with [? Mechele. ?] And we learned every day, and I learned by heart.

How long did this go on for?

How long is it? Four weeks. I'll tell you why only four weeks. After four weeks, we organized, there seemed to be ready to organize, a group of people. They were going to send out to a factory.

Must've been a demand from some manufacturers, that they need support. And they need help.

So they organized one. And I was one of the fortunate ones to get on line with one. In fact, a little tricky thing, the-- when they line us up-- I had two uncles there. One, had an uncle with a son. And the other, had an uncle, didn't have a son.

So they one ended up in a line with a son. And I would have been in that group too. And I said to myself, this line is not good for me.

Because my uncle would have to worry about his own son. If anything he needs his son first, right? And he will not look much after me and. I was young man, I needed support.

So I skipped over a bunk there. And luckily, very lucky that I picked the other line. To make a long story short, so we ended up after a few, 2, 2 and 1/2 days of traveling, we ended up coming into a different area altogether.

Shipped us out of Auschwitz, directive. And we were set up for work into a factory, that manufactured planes, airplanes. Or rather, wings for the airplanes.

A large factory? A very large factory, I imagine?

Yeah. We were about 400 or 500 people there. And we were all very grateful. Why not? That place was

called Niederorschel.

There's no shooting, anything, no killing. So I said the choice was very good. And I stayed there till I was liberated.

But of course, until we got liberated, was a long way to go. But we didn't have to go through this selection that we went through in Auschwitz. This is what I was afraid of.

Mhm? So a choice and sort of a miracle, at the same time?

It was a miracle, it was absolutely. It was a miracle.

In the plane factory, did you notice, I mean, since there was a little bit more freedom, at least maybe less supervision, as with the appells in Auschwitz, did you notice that the prisoners were able to express their Judaism in some sort of a way of as you were learning? Or was there observance? A Shabbat observance? Was there?

Well, I think to some extent, it's true. For one thing, we managed to have a minyan every day. We had a minyan.

We got together between bunks. And the fellow that had a siddur was one of those that davened with us. So he could direct.

And of course, we didn't do it with the kapo's understanding. But we got along with that. And we had a minyan. We davened every day.

But the kapo knew what you were doing?

No.

He didn't?

No. I mean, a kapo there was not as brutal as the kapos in Auschwitz. No. There's quite a difference.

So to get out of Auschwitz, under such circumstances, I consider it to be a partial victory. Or at least, if not the whole victory, or it was something to be grateful for. I don't think some of the people, and I know they stayed in Auschwitz and were with me, didn't make it. So I was ready to make [NON-ENGLISH].

And your Jewish spiritual life during this terrifying period, how do you feel that took you to survival? When you think of your Jewish spiritual life, the miracle that happened, getting out of Auschwitz, and how do you associate that with your survival?

How I associate this with my survival?

The sense of hope, the sense of hope that having a minyan gives you?

There's no question about that. You felt that you were more and more among your own ranks, your own kind. The kapo was not exactly a Jew friend.

But he was not as brutal as the others were in Auschwitz. And we proceeded with our activities, to some extent, we davened every morning. We davened to the extent that we could.

That was sometimes larger than a minyan?

No. More or less, the same group.

Same group?

Yeah.

Do if there were other groups in the factory? Did you hear of other groups having the same kind of experience? That they were able to have minyans?

No. But I know that in our group, actually, I heard afterwards, somehow they managed to organize a matzah, to organize to bake a matzah.

Really, I don't know the details. I never remember. Must have had some assistance from a meister. You know, meister is one of the supervisors.

So he gave him flour, where'd he get flour? But the kapo was not as brutal. That was a help.

Of course. Of course. So speak to me about again, I just want to return to that issue of faith and Auschwitz and faith, and your imprisonment.

That you witnessed Jews. For example, in the group, was there a set of tefillin--

Pardon me?

--in this group that you were in?

In the group that you davened with every morning, the minyan? Was there someone who had tefillin? Were there other ritual objects?

No, no.

There was none of that?

No.

Mhm? Neither in Auschwitz?

What a risk. They wouldn't succeed. They wouldn't survive. If a kapo were to see it, he would kill you on the spot.

Mhm?

Here we had a kapos, but they were more understanding. The chief kapo himself was quite an understanding person. And that was a really good fortune.

I mean, the mere fact that he broke away from Auschwitz, and managed to go to the other camp, it was no picnic there either. But it was a place where we survived. The greatest majority of us survived there.

You would say the majority of you survived?

Oh yeah, all of us in that group.

So you already felt it. When you came into the camp, because the conditions were so much better, you felt that it was a place where you could survive, as opposed to Auschwitz, where you felt death everywhere?

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. As in Auschwitz, these chances of survival, I'll tell you, I know I mentioned to you I was hesitating actually, what line to go to, whether to go to this line or this side.

But and with my father, my uncle had a son with him. And I said I'd rather not stay with him. Because he is not good company for me. He'll be busy with his own son. They didn't survive. Neither he, nor his son.

Terrifying moments.

What?

Terrifying moments to recall, terrifying moments.

I must say that even our lot was not very lucky. But certainly, it's better than many others. We had a [NON-ENGLISH] in that hospital, in that.

That means that a person that was not well, they put them in a [NON-ENGLISH].

That means the hospital. But they had not too much medication to give to offer. But I know of two people that survived in the [NON-ENGLISH]. But others?

Was there in Auschwitz, in the period that you were there, and then in the airplane factory, did you hear that there were rabbanim there?

No.

That some sort of individuals that could be a guide, just where they sought out? Did you hear of rabbis that were on the work detail in the factory or when you were in Auschwitz?

No, while there, I did not hear. But afterwards, I heard there was a young man from Pressburg, there, who was the son of a rabbi. And he had organized some group, a small group of people, to bake matzohs. And it was very unusual.

In Auschwitz?

Not Auschwitz, in Niederorschel, was the other camp.

Uh-huh.

Well, how do you get the flour? How do you get the supplies? He must have developed some connection with the meisters.

Sometimes the meisters were supervisors. And they were not so brutal. So they must have made an arrangement with him, brought him some flours. And the rest, they can create fire someplace. And they did. I heard it after Pesach.

Mhm? Must have been very, very important in such a deathly place, both Auschwitz and in the labor camp, when you were able to experience a Yiddish practice, a practice around Yiddishkeit, a holiday, a Shabbat, a morning davening. It must have been very, very nurturing, I would think, for your own Jewish identity.

Yeah, quite true. But I think that among our group, there were more observant people that you could find in Auschwitz, at the time.

Or actually, Auschwitz was big. I never knew, didn't know how big or how many. But certainly has a better chance of developing something. And I did the matzohs, for instance.

I actually heard it after Pesach. It was a secret, well kept.

Of course. Of course.

You know, to have someone to bribe. What can you bribe someone with, in Auschwitz? What can you offer?

But he's evidently made a friendship with someone. And this friends had brought him some flour and water

and made matzah.

In the context of an environment that was so structured and so rigid and so deathly, when something good happened, did you see it as a miracle? When something good happened, did you experience it as a miracle? In a place that was so organized towards your death?

Even in the labor camp? Work you until you couldn't work any longer. And some good thing occurs and you experience it as a miracle?

Well, frankly speaking, while there, I did not see anything. But afterwards--

As you recall?

After I arrived, you see what happens, you see, we left Niederorschel-- I mentioned the name, Niederorschel, right?

Mhm.

That's the place where we were spending, from after Auschwitz. And we worked there for a period of close to nine months. And then, since Pesach was approaching-- no, since the front was approaching, the Germans, they didn't want us to get caught in the front line, together with the American Army. He moved us out, away from the Germans. Away from the front line.

So to some extent, the Germans were not successful. Because our group, our group marched from Niederorschel to Buchenwald. And we arrived at Buchenwald the day of their liberation. That means the American Army arrived just the same day.

If not for them, I would have-- we would have had to march further on. Their intent was to march everybody out from Buchenwald, whether dead or alive. And this is an unusual miracle, really.

Mhm. That's remarkable, actually. That timing is remarkable.

Yeah. And there, once we came to Buchenwald, two days later, Rabbi Herschel, Rabbi--

Schacter.

Schacter Rabbi, what's the name again?

Mhm?

Came, took over. And we were then delighted with him.

There's a beautiful picture of the first Shabbat in Buchenwald, by Rabbi Schacter.

Yeah? You see it? You saw?

You were there, in this room?

Pardon?

You were there, during that Shabbat, yes?

I was there.

Yeah, that's a beautiful picture. I would think--

I have a picture.

--hundreds, hundred of men.

Yeah.

Hundreds of men in that room.

I have a picture, sitting, we were a group of people, together. I can't recognize myself. But maybe I was there. When did you find out about Herschel Schacter?

Well, in our museum, we have an image of that first Shabbat in Buchenwald.

Oh.

I was referring to it's a very large room with hundreds of men. So I know of it from that picture. I know it from that picture.

Mhm.

What we will do now, is we're going to take a break and we will continue with after the liberation. And we will also have a look at some photographs that you have, of your family. So we can return back to your hometown. So we'll take a short break and we'll reconvene again in about 10 minutes.

Mhm?

Great. We're back now, for our third segment with Mr. Baruch Gross. And when we left off, you were on a death march from the labor camp to Buchenwald. And you mentioned that the American troops had arrived at precisely the same time that you were coming in from the death march.

So perhaps we can start there. And we'll move on from that point.

You what?

Yeah, we'll move on from that point, then.

Well, we arrived one evening, in fact, it was night. Nighttime, we arrived, at that point, to Buchenwald. After marching for a period of I think eight or nine days, from Niederorschel, to that place. Finally, after--

Would you say, if I may just interrupt for a moment?

Sure.

Would you say, how many of the men survived from Niederorschel to Buchenwald? The march. How many survived the march, would you say from your own witnessing?

I can't give you any statistics.

No?

But I'll tell you this, I can say with certainty, knowing what a march implied, having heard of other people who marched, I could see that this march was a relatively mild one. Very few, I would say very few people, died on our march.

And the reason being, I'll tell you why. The SS that accompanied us were more human. They did not really demand very strict orders from us.

And they just let us walk at our pace, more or less. They were not the SS trained one, you know? The

elderly, the elderly group, the elderly in the group, the officers, they were not the monsters. So I think nobody was killed on the road, as far as I know. Some died, yes.

So you enter Buchenwald?

Enter Buchenwald. Middle of the night. In fact, I was with my friend, Meyer Davidovich. He was my buddy there. Actually, we know each other from home-- from our hometown.

Meyer somehow disappeared from me. It was pitch dark. I come into the barrack.

I say, Meyer, where are you? He says, Baruch, [NON-ENGLISH], I am waiting for you. Where are you?

He got there earlier. And he reserved a spot on a bridge -- what do you call it? On a bed. Bed, what do you call it? On a bunk. And I spent the hour there, spent the night there.

And then, I was just wondering morning, how and what's going to happen. And turned out to be very well. We woke up, woke up morning hours.

It's quiet. Unusual. You know, we were with the SS.

You could hear a voice, and they let you know they're there. all of a sudden, why? And we thought we were in a state of uncertainty. And till about noontime, we had no idea. But we knew that something favorable happened.

Because we noticed that the SS, they were all over the bunk, all over the camp in big barracks, observing barracks. They were empty.

The guard towers.

Guard towers. They were not there.

Uh-huh?

So that was a good sign. And until early afternoon, we didn't know. All of a sudden, we got the news that a couple of American soldiers walked in.

[SIGHS]

We didn't need to hear more.

It's over. [SIGHS]

And then, we allowed ourselves to go out. And we looked and we saw American soldiers. Anyhow. so next day, they arranged for a celebration, a parade.

I couldn't go in that parade. I was so exhausted, sick, sick from the traffic, from the [INAUDIBLE] I says no, I'm staying. And then after this, I developed diarrhea the next day.

And the reason for that was that prior before arrival to Buchenwald, we passed another camp. A camp that was already evacuated. And we went into the camp.

And what did we find? Potatoes. Potatoes and onions. Cooked potatoes. So what I do in a case like this, I started eating.

You have a feast.

A feast. And that wasn't too good for me. Anyhow, that's why I couldn't go down the parade, mostly. Many



people had consequences from that.

My friend Meyer was a husky fellow. He maintained himself. So he could tolerate it better. And he went to the parade.

Anyhow, so this is the first day in Auschwitz, in Buchenwald, pardon me. And then we were waiting to see what happens.

Took us a few days before we can get proper food. And this was a problem. They, themselves admitted, the American Army, that they started feeding those people fatty foods. Which was absolutely destructive.

But I don't remember what I ate. But I probably had nothing, not much. But I was very weak.

But I missed, as I said, I missed the parade. But I regret to be, I didn't miss my bunk. Stayed there.

And then, slowly things open up. Opened up and we stepped out. And we made a friend here, friend there.

In fact, Irving Roth we met two days after we got to Buchenwald. He was together with another friend from [Place name] And they were searching for something in a officer's residence.

You know, they were the officers, the SS people, who they bombed their bunks there. So they were looking for something. So like too, that's where we met him.

I know Irving from before, he came from the same town. He comes from the same town. But this is where I met him after the war. So where do we go from here? What happens, the war over.

OK, so you were there when Herschel Schacter was there.

Yeah.

Rabbi Schacter. And that must have been a very important experience for you, having a Shabbat in Buchenwald?

Experience, think that's an understatement. I would say [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] We looked out to Herschel Schacter, like he was mashiah.

He came on a Friday evening. And well, he had a Shabbos there, put on the lights, the candle, and then davened with us. Taught us a new Shalom Aleichem already. And then it comes, the speech.

The words, [NON-ENGLISH], that came out of him, that really kept us going. Really, he was-- if he was not mashiah he was [NON-ENGLISH].

Anyhow, we always looked out for his arrival. He always came Friday afternoon, and we looked out. And he got an audience too, of course. And we had our share of gratification of finding a mensch.

Absolutely.

Someone that treats us like a mensch. I was there for about seven more weeks, a long time.

I understand some people got married?

What?

That Rabbi Schacter married people in Buchenwald.

I never heard that.

Yeah. Because we know the family quite well. I will speak to you about it after, we know the family quite well. So you were in Buchenwald for?

Seven weeks after liberation. You know, it's strange really, to me. I don't repeat these things very often.

In fact, the whole history of coming to Buchenwald, I didn't talk about that. Ever since I came out of Buchenwald. And just, it's just always just come back. And they overwhelm me now. You know, from the feelings that we had then, when he arrived.

Mhm? Well, let's speak about that for a moment. Let's speak about that. Because when Rabbi Schacter came in, and that was a first large group of Jews together.

Yeah.

For the last five years.

Hmm?

Last five years, for every Jew, every prisoner, that they never had such an experience of a large room filled with Jews expressing their identity, expressing their Yiddishkeit, their Judaism, that must have been so powerful.

I was going to say--

Because it reconnects you to the world.

Yeah.

To your Judaism.

As I said, to like mashiah. [NON-ENGLISH]. Anyhow, he was really something we looked forward to every time.

And he came every Shabbos?

Every Friday.

Every Friday, he came?

Yeah. And he must have stayed afterwards too, because I left after several weeks. Also a long stay. We couldn't get out of Buchenwald.

Because I was a Czech, a prisoner. Took me seven weeks before I left.

So what happened after Buchenwald? Where did you go after Buchenwald?

Well, after Buchenwald, the American Army was kind enough to provide for us a truck, a military truck, who were all those people from Buchenwald. And got the military truck, loaded us up. Brought us to Pilsen, the first large city in Prague, in Czech Republic.

But that's the extent of their help. And they marched back. They left back. They went back, to Buchenwald.

Then we were left alone, on our own devices. It wasn't the most proper thing for us. But you can't hold anybody responsible.

How did you get to Humenné?

Took me six weeks to get to Humenné.

Whoa.

Awful, yeah. Traveling was almost impossible. There was no railroad transportation. Hardly any, if at all.

The rails were all bombed. And the cars were not available, electric, the railroad cars. So we grabbed the one here, went a few miles, and then went further. And this is a kind of game we had played.

So you hitchhiked?

Hitchhiked, right.

Right. 'Cause you'd mentioned that Humenné about 150 kilometers from Prague.

Yeah.

So 6 weeks to cover 150 kilometers?

Oh yeah.

Yeah?

Mhm.

So you came back to Humenné. What was your experience?

Well, my return spot was not Humenne. I went back to [NON-ENGLISH]. That's the city that we left from. I had mentioned to you before, that we moved from Humenné.

Which was provided us, a new apartment. And we settled in a city called Hořovice. And we lived there for about four months. Then came the most crucial period, transportation out of [NON-ENGLISH] in Sered-- I mean, in Hořovice. and sent to Hořovice to Sered.

Sered was-- I didn't go back to Humenné. Then we had to wait another seven weeks before we could go back. Because we couldn't get our apartments back, our houses. They were all occupied by the Gentiles. So we stuck around in Hořovice.

And so you stayed there?

Finally, around wintertime we came back to Humenné. And we started resettling. Trying to rearrange ourselves.

So who did you come back with? Were you looking for family?

Yes. Well, one, the only survivors were my brother, Moishe, my sister, Rachel, and her husband, [Personal name]

And you found them?

In Hořovice They survived, either in Hořovice or around Hořovice.

So the general feeling was just to go back to the last town, where things were normal?

Yeah. In the process, we were waiting. Hopefully, maybe my father will show up. Never did materialize.

Because you know, we were close to Pressburg. My brother would go out to Pressburg, every day. Travel

with the train and wait for at the train station, maybe he'll show up. People who did come by train settled usually, in Pressburg, there. So he didn't materialize.

Did you ever find out where your father was sent? Some survivors have stories that their parents, they know where they were murdered. Did you ever find out?

Yes, just I found that out, just about half a year ago. I got a hold of someone at the US museum, that has all the records. It's another name for it?

OK, it's the Bad Arolsen Records.

Hmm?

The Bad Arolsen Records.

I don't know the name, Bad Arolsen.

The International Tracing Service. The International Tracing Service, is the official.

I have a record of it. And through them, I know.

Sure.

And he died in Zion Oder. And one of my brothers died in [Place name] And the other one, I have no record. They didn't have everything, but part of it.

They have a lot. They have a lot.

Yeah.

So you came back to Czech Republic? And then you stayed how long, before you left the country?

Yeah, once we go back to our home, hometown, we stayed close to a year and a half, until we got a visa. That was very difficult, to get a visa on a Slovak sheet, on a Czech applications.

So then we got somebody here, intervened for us in New York. And if I remember right, she gave us a visa, gave us a stay in yeshiva. Yeshiva [? 37, ?] [INAUDIBLE]

And so we got a visa out there, so we went. But that wasn't exact solution to us, because the government wanted check me out, if am I a reliable people, reliable citizen, to stay in the country?

The whole thing, this was a long series of exams and inquiries by the State Department. Finally, a new law came out. How President Truman has given order to let in 100,000. Maybe 100,000 in, visitors.

Refugees.

Refugees. And we were included in that part.

Yeah, that was a great act by Truman.

Oh yeah, sure.

That was a great act. Would never have happened under FDR.

That's right.

'Cause that was a great, great act by Truman. OK. So we're going to now, I just want to know if there's

something you would like to say before we close this segment. And now, then we will stop.

And we're going to set up the little stage, the music stand, for photographs. But is there something you want to say before we leave this segment of the interview? Just a reflection and reflection on both Holocaust Jewish identity, if you want to talk about faith? Is there anything you would like to say, as closing remarks?

Well, at the moment I would say, I was pleased to have this crowd-- this crew here, not crowd, to take pictures with me, and take down the details that I didn't want to know and have to know. And if I can be of any service, I'd be glad to be of more service. Because I know I am in the same category of people, talking to individuals who are either or other.

At any rate, I thank you for coming. And if I know of anything, I'll let you know.

Of course. And we're going to go now to the last segment, which is the photographs of your family members. So we'll just stop for now, a moment.

We're back with Mr. Baruch Gross. In this final segment, we're going to be looking at photographs from your hometown. And we'll start with these two images here. Mr. Gross, if you just want to identify these people?

This is my father, known as [Personal name] Gross, also known as Herschel Gross, who was also the [NON-ENGLISH] of the City of Humenné. And this is my mother, Fagi] Frankl originally. And unfortunately, she passed at a very, very early age, before the war started. My father unfortunately died during the war, just really in the last moments of war, practically.

OK. We'll continue. And here?

This is a rebbe. This is a picture of the Spinka Rebbe.

Hmm.

You know, the rebbes used to travel from city to city, in summertime. Either on vacation or otherwise, visiting kehillahs.

Here, the speaker rabbi is visiting actually, he's resting in a forest setting, in a spa in Slovakia. In [Place name] While he's resting in this shtetl, in this spa, he's also visiting, he's also accepting, you see, people that come, Hasidim that come to give what they call [NON-ENGLISH], asking for a berakha.

And here, my father, [INAUDIBLE], here's my older brother, Moishe, who survived the war. But he's not around anymore.

And he took my young, other brother, Peretz who did not survive the war. And these are his [NON-ENGLISH], I believe.

That's your father, on the far left?

And this is my father, there, yeah.

Yes, yes.

He gives him a [NON-ENGLISH]. As they say, that means, a request for a berakha.

Beautiful, beautiful photograph. Absolutely beautiful photograph.

Here's this picture of the Belzer Rebbe. Rabbi -- this other name, I don't know. But [INAUDIBLE], also known.

He came for a visit to our hometown, in Humenné. And that was in 1932. He is on his way to shul, as you

can see.

As he goes by, wears his tallis. Right behind him is my father's-- a picture my father, Avrum-- Avrum Herschel Gross, the one that you saw. And all the others are Hasidim, accompanying him to daven.

Hmm, beautiful.

That was a special event in our city, to have the Belzer Rebbe come through, to our city.

Absolutely. Fantastic photograph.

And it says here, [? rebbenim ?] arrive in Humenné. This is my father, in front of our house. He's writing notes, as part of his occupation.

Actually, he was a [NON-ENGLISH] in the city. And people would come for requests for support. And you would usually get a slip like this. And with this slip, they would go to the person that is in charge of giving out the money. This is, in other words, a [NON-ENGLISH] event.

Nice. Very nice.

This is a picture, this is the [NON-ENGLISH], [INAUDIBLE], is his name. He had yeshiva in our town. And debating with him is my grandfather, Chaim Gross. Next to him is another person, by the name Mr. Markovits. It's ironic that the date, the three of them speak together.

You know, yeshiva, [NON-ENGLISH] always needs money. Especially the yeshiva in our days, in our towns. They always needed support.

But here, the [NON-ENGLISH] is speaking to the biggest, [NON-ENGLISH] in the city, Chaim Gross and Mr. Markovits. Well, a conversation like this would probably begin, a little cash.

Of course. [LAUGHTER]

This is of [INAUDIBLE], head of the yeshiva [NON-ENGLISH]. As you probably all know, this is just a moment caught. The camera caught him. He normally wouldn't pose before pictures, I think.

Of course, of course.

Well, these are--

Beis Yakov?

No, no, unfortunately, these are not Jewish schools. These are our general schhols where the Jews, this one is general school where our Jewish boys and girls, we met together with general, all other kids. And this is just a picture-taking session, of this particular time.

Here, in this session, and this picture, there's only Jewish kids. There are only strictly Jewish boys and girls. It was after these, the segregation of Jews from Gentiles. Jews couldn't go to general schools. So this was taken by the Jewish boys and girls and their teachers.

Well, this is the oldest shul that has survived many wars. We used to call the [NON-ENGLISH]. In my days, there was no minyan anymore.

People did not daven there, because the minyan was not quite safe. So just, this new shuls had to replace the old shul. And this is the shul where we used to daven. Where the Ashkenazim used to daven.

When the Sephardim, like me and my father and I, davened in a Sephardic shul. But this was Ashkenazim shul. It's a different chavurah. And this is the same picture, taken from a different angle.

Right.

Now, again, this is a picture of my father, writing probably another note. No, no, this is from the picture that we saw, writing. You see the speaker Rebbe, and writing the [NON-ENGLISH].

This is my grandfather's house. Only one, one of the few that survived the World War, in all these years. And this is my uncle's house, Yitzhak Gross, who survived, that survived also.

And this is, again, my grandfather, Chaim Gross. You saw a part of the picture. This picture, you actually saw in a different one. This is just the individual one.

OK.

So this is the picture in detail, actually.

Aha, right. We have, now, we have a really fascinating, this is, I guess it's a chevra kadisha book from the town of Humenné.

Let me see if I can go on the other side. Can I sit over there?

Here, here.

OK. So this is very beautiful. If you want to just explain the pictures we're looking at here?

Well, this is actually written by the [? Chevra ?] Talmud Torah. And there's an introduction of the--

Beautifully done.

--[NON-ENGLISH]. And this is part of the other book, which represents. This is the one that was written by one of the rebbenim's sons. And beautiful handwriting too.

Beautiful.

But he describes it, a periodic, a bad event in the country, at the time. There was the Bolsheviks were penetrating. That's from World War I. The Bolsheviks, the Russians are penetrating down at Humenné. And he described the events of the invasion.

So this is a document from [NON-ENGLISH], describing the events around the First World War?

Right. And recent members of the [? original ?] [? rov's ?] kehillah. This is the rov, the original rov, we have Jacob Shapira, and his successor, And his other successor. And these were all rebbenim of the kehillah in Humenné.

And this is the last other successor. And this is [? Yitzchok Izik Friedrich. ?] He is the [? "Rov" ?] or the "Rav" of Oelbaum.

His grandfather was [? Rov ?] Oelbaum. But he doesn't remember him. But he passed away young. And he was a son-in-law here, of [INAUDIBLE]. See, it's just like in succession.

Mhm?

This is done by my grandfather, Chaim Gross, you have seen him in the picture. I think this book was incomplete, meant to be something else. It didn't go anyplace.

OK.

Beautiful. Beautiful document.

[SIGHS]

OK. [NON-ENGLISH].

OK.

Oh yeah.

Please. Mr. Gross, thank you so much for your time today. And for the honor of being able to take your testimony.

Saying it was my honor to have you here. And give me an opportunity to express my thoughts and my events that I have gone through in my lifetime. And let's hope that this will help me maintain some memory of events that we talked about.

Of course. And now they're recorded for posterity.

Right.

So it's all very good. Thank you, again.

Can I have your card again?

Of course.