

My name is Henry Lustiger Thaler, and I'm here today with Mr. Irving Roth. This is an interview that is sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the Amud Aish Memorial Museum in Brooklyn.

Mr. Roth, if you could tell us the year you were born in and the town and country.

I was born on September 2, 1929, born in Czechoslovakia in a town called Kosice. Although, I did not live there, per se, neither did my parents. But I was born there, and I'll tell the story about why my mother decided that she had to give birth in a fancy hospital.

That sounds like a wonderful place to start. Why don't we start there?

I was a second child. And my mother, when she gave birth to the first child, was at home. And a midwife came along, and she was bleeding and bled almost to death. And my grandfather got into his horse and wagon and quickly got a doctor and fortunately were able to stop the bleeding, and she was fine.

She decided if she's going to be pregnant again, give birth again, she's going to give it in a hospital where there are doctors and facilities. And so I am born in a hospital in a large city called Kosice. Today, the population of Kosice is probably a couple of hundred thousand people.

In a relatively modern hospital-- of course, being born in a hospital in those days, mother stayed in the hospital for 8, 10, 12 days after giving birth, unlike today, which is 36 hours. The problem becomes that I'm a Jewish boy and my mother and I are both in the hospital. What do you do about the brit milah on the eighth day? Well, I have the distinction of having a brit milah in a very fancy kosher restaurant in Kosice.

Very interesting, very interesting.

So moving forward from the brit milah in this--

Yeah, let's do that, quickly.

--unlikely place, so tell me about your family, your parents, your grandparents. And you moved then, I believe, to the town of--

Humenne.

Humenne.

Yeah. A little background on my parents, my father came from a small village near Kosice, it turns out. And at age 18, which was 1914, he was in school, and also went through something called-- what we call today ROTC. And so he graduates in June, and the war begins. And so he winds up in the Austro-Hungarian Army as a second lieutenant.

Fascinating.

Now, in 1914, winds up on the Russian front for almost four years. He is a heroic-type figure, fights well, understands tactics, I suppose. And by the time the war is over, he's a major in the Austro-Hungarian Army, a decorated soldier, a religious and observant young man who puts on tefillin every morning in the foxhole, who needs permission from his rabbi to be able to eat. Why? Because it's not kosher. In those days, the army did not provide kosher food. And gets permission from the rabbi because he has to sustain himself and survive.

Fortunately, survives, and of course, World War I ends in 1918. And there is, of course, a parade for my father. Why? Because he is a decorated soldier. In fact, one of his medals was pinned on his chest by none other than the Emperor Franz Joseph. And not only that, my father told me he not only shook hands with the emperor, the emperor kissed him on both cheeks. There are very few people in the world who can tell you they were-- their father was kissed by the

emperor.

And also in the Jewish world.

Certainly in the Jewish world--

Franz Joseph was a great man.

--while he's an observant Jew. And eventually meets this young lady, my mother, and they get married and have children. And they're in-- eventually, they wind up in a place called Humenne, which is a city of about 7,000 people in 1935. And it's a family of three generations. My grandfather and grandmother, my parents, and my brother and I live in the same house.

And from my perspective and my recollection, that was fabulous, because I learned very early in life that parents can be difficult. They often say no-- grandparents, rarely. So if one really wants something, and you know there's a possibility of a resounding absolutely no way, you don't argue. You go to your grandfather, you tell them how much you love him, and the rest of it is history.

Now, one additional thing about my grandfather, my mother's father, he was child-oriented. I was able to play with him. He played with me. He did projects with me. In fact, one of the things that I recollect early in my schooling is that the projects that I did, I always did very well. The reason for it, because my grandfather did them, and he was good at it.

How nice. How nice. What a nice connection. What a nice connection to a grandfather.

Absolutely. If I-- as children often will tell you, I am bored, and I would say the same thing, no different. And so he would figure out how to occupy me. He would even play cards with me. And my grandmother used to tell him, you play cards with everybody, including children. And she used some adjectives like, you old fool, or something. But I love my grandfather.

And what did your grandfather do?

My grandfather, by the time it's 1935, 1930s, he's semi-retired. But with the semi-retirement, he's also in the business together with my father. They were in the lumber business. The basic product they were involved in is railroad ties, making railroad ties.

How do you make a railroad tie? You chop down large trees, you use the trunk as a base for it, and you have people come in, take the trees down, shape it into a railroad tie. And then you ship them all over Europe. On an average year, they would ship 50,000, 60,000, 70,000 railroad ties all over Europe, including England. So it was a profitable business.

It was a Jewish household, which means that all holidays were observed. There are some nice things about remembering those holidays. Why? Because particularly, Shabbat. On Friday nights, everybody, every man, goes to shul. But there are orchim; there are people who are traveling through town, people who don't really have families. And so on almost every Friday night, we would have one or two or three people that grandpa would bring with him to dinner. So it was always-- Friday night were always, you might consider in some sense, a party.

The other thing, which was very beautiful and very vivid in my mind as a child, my grandmother and my mother both lit candles. Now normally, women light two candles. But for every child that my grandmother had, she lit a candle. So she had seven children, so at the end of the table there were nine candles lit.

That sounds like a very, very, very nice household to have three generations there. And the high holidays must have been--

Oh fabulous.

--very, very--

Fabulous.

--important.

It was really a very Jewish-oriented house. Friday afternoon, things moved quickly to make sure that for Shabbat everything is ready.

Now, there's a couple of other odds and ends. One of the things we had, when I was born, I was the second child. And my parents evidently must have read Dr. Spock or some other book.

A little bit too early, but it's OK.

Too early for Dr. Spock, but something similar to it. And so they were concerned that my older brother, who was three years old-- who, of course, was the first child and therefore the king of the house-- how will he take competition? And so when I was born, I had a nanny, a Catholic woman, a young woman, who lived in our house, of course, and knew more about Judaism and how to have a Jewish household than most many Jews today.

What was her name?

Her name was [Personal name] And I loved her and she loved me. She was Catholic. And as a result of that, she lived in her own room. And for Christmas, she would have a Christmas tree. So me, as a Jewish child, I would get presents on Hanukkah and other times, but I also got presents during Christmas. So I had the best of all worlds.

Nice. Tell me about your brother, as the sole sibling, correct?

Yes, my sole sibling.

What was his name?

I was a very-- I was always a very physical child. I would play soccer, I would climb fences, I would get into trouble. My brother was not interested in any of that. His interest was studying, but not just secular studies. He was mostly more interested in the Talmud, even as a fairly young person, and very observant. He also played the violin, and for that I need to explain to you how he got to the violin.

What was his name?

His name was Andrew, but he was really not called Andrew. That was his name on the birth certificate. The nickname for Andrew in Hungarian is Bondi.

Bondi.

And so he was Bondi.

One year, I was-- I used to visit my cousins in another village, maybe three or four hours away. And I had what is referred to as a kvater, which is a godfather, I guess. He also lived in the same place. So when I would go and visit my cousins, I would also see him, and I would stay with them one or two days. He had no children. He was married, but no children. And at the end of every vacation, which was maybe a week or two weeks that I would stay with my cousins and him and all that, I would get a present.

And one year, I was about to leave, and there is this present. It's a black box, a odd-shaped box, and sits on the table. And he says to me, it's for you. I flip it open and there's a violin in there. So here I have like seven, eight years old, I got a violin. I'm off going home, take the violin with me. I come home and my mother decides since I have a violin, maybe

they ought to hire a gypsy violinist and teach me how to play.

And gypsy violinist comes to the house, tells me to pick up the violin and the bow and do something. I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing, cannot get any sound out of it. He looks at my mother and he says, I could try and teach him, but he'll never be a violinist. He has no ear for it. I ask him to sing, he can't carry a tune. Forget it. I was crushed, of course.

But then he says, you have any other kids in the house? And my mother says, yes, I have an older son. He says, come over here, kid. Tells my brother to pick up the violin, and lo behold, he gets beautiful sound of it. He says, him, I'll teach. And so my violin becomes the reason that my brother was a very good violinist.

So your brother was a study [? komplet, ?] and so he went to a yeshiva?

No. He studied with the rabbi, the private student. The rabbi and his son-in-law, who was also a rabbi-- which is an interesting story. The rabbi in our town, who was the rabbi-- there are a number of rabbonim -- but "the" rabbi, his name was [Personal name] And I remember him quite clearly.

And many, many years go by, a gentleman, who is also a rabbi here in the United States, writes a book on the Shoah. And there's an opening, a signing, and in the conversation he finds out that I am also a survivor as he is. He is from Romania. And we talk.

And he says, so where do you come from? And I tell him, I'm from Humenne. He says, Humenne? He says, what kind of place was that? I say, why do you ask? He says, well, it sounds to me like it's some kind of backwater town. But how is it possible that it had this huge scholar by the name of the Rabbi [Personal name] I say, how would you know that? He says, I'm still using some of his writings today at Columbia University to teach Talmud.

Interesting.

So your education-- so I imagine that in a Czechoslovakian school, it was public education.

It was public education, yes.

But you went to an after-school program, or--

Yes, into a cheder, the after-school program, six days a week. Friday, we didn't go.

What's your memory of that?

What's that?

What's your memory of that?

Oh, pretty good, mostly. I had-- my first teacher, I remember quite clearly, was a very gentle soul in our class. He rarely used his hickory stick. And I actually enjoyed it. There was something novel. And I learned many things, of course.

But as time went on, rather than continuing in the cheder, my father decided that maybe a more intensive, private education. And so there was a gentleman who was a melamed-- he was not a rabbi-- had a number of students. And we would go there every day, six days a week, for one or two hours. And there we spent time doing various aspects of study.

One of the most interesting parts looking back, was the fact that at a very early age, or really, maybe eight years old or so, one of the things we did, we spent 15, 20 minutes each day translating the siddur, and understanding what it is that we're praying. And I found that later in life, of course, I--

We're back with the second segment with Mr. Irving Roth. And when we left segment one, you were speaking about the 1,800 Jews that were taken into the main synagogue. And then after a day and a half, they were taken to the railroad station for the deportation. So if we could just start there again and finish off your thought, Mr. Roth.

So now you have a synagogue, which, of course, was occupied for a day and a half by 1,800 people. And as I pointed out, no bathrooms and so on, you can imagine the state it was in, and summer of 1942. So you go into to the synagogue on Monday morning--

Yes.

--and of course, it's a mess. And so the synagogue has to function, and so it gets cleaned up. And very soon, Rosh ha-Shanah comes along. There are still about 200 Jews living there from out of more than 2,000.

Now, why are they there? How did this happen? There are people who are essential for the running of the city. There were some essential businesses that still need the Jews. Now, for instance, the chief engineer for the town was a Jew, and therefore, he was kept there. He was exempt. My father was running a business, and I want to go back to that and tell you about that issue.

So in 1941, or thereabouts, Jews could no longer own a business. So my father decided that this is not good, and he came up with a scheme of try and save his business. And the way he did it, he asked one of his Christian friends to take over the business on paper. They signed the papers transferring the business to his friend, Albert. And my father continued running it the same way he did before.

But then things change. Here's a friend who does a favor for my father. He rescues my father's business for him. But a few months go by, and one day he walks into my father's office and says, Joe, we're partners, because, after all, my name is on the business. I think as a result of that, I'm entitled to half the profits.

A few more weeks go by, and one day he walks in and says, Joe, I like the way you are running my business. I'm not going to fire you. You can continue managing, and I'm going to pay you. But the business is mine. An ordinary, God-fearing, churchgoing man is transformed.

And that's one of the major aspects of this. How do you take ordinary people who wouldn't hurt a fly, who wouldn't cheat, who wouldn't steal a candy, take everything away? Because it doesn't apply to the Jew. That demonization of the Jew is very, very important to understand. And through propaganda, through education, through demonization of the Jew, you can convert people who are decent, law abiding, taxpaying, churchgoing people into murderers. And that's what we need to understand, then and now, and now.

So we have the deportations, and what went on in the town, in Humenne, from that point on for the Jewish community? What happened to your family?

We are still in the same house. With all the restrictions, we continue living there. A few months go by and my-- one day, my parents, my brother and I, and my grandparents are exempt from this deportation. But a few months go by, and one morning I am in shul with my grandfather, and as we walk out of shul, a policeman arrests my grandfather. And simultaneously, another policeman goes and arrests my grandmother.

So of course, we go into panic mode. And we begin to make phone calls to people who we know, people who are involved in all kinds of stuff, and we manage to get them out. But we know we're in trouble.

And so we actually leave Slovakia, because where my father was born is now Hungary. And therefore, my father gets back his Hungarian citizenship. And therefore, he and his family get a Hungarian passport.