

[TEST TONE] Get that, Irene?

Yeah.

Not them. What's a no-no? To look into the lens? The light? I understand.

We'll direct your attention. You don't have to be riveted to me. But you can just-- your attention in my direction. But actually, you're right. This is the big test. I am going to ask you your name.

Oh, no.

I am. It's the hardest question of all, I'm sure. But just for the record, for the beginning of the tape, they want you guys to identify yourselves.

Well, just, it's not such a simple question. Which name do you want? A birth name, middle name? I mean, I've had lots of second names from the beginning.

I'll tell you what--

I'll give you the whole--

--give me the whole litany, starting with your first name and moving forward.

OK.

OK.

So I assume you want me to go first?

Sure, go ahead.

OK, my name is Rene Slotkin. I was born Rene Guttman. And then in the middle in between those two names, I had a name called Mann, a second name Mann. And also one other name, which I can't recall right now. I can't-- Kalina, Kalina.

So I really have had four second names. Rene was the original, which stuck with me, even though I took a little bit of abuse for that name. But that's my name. And I was born in Czechoslovakia, December 21, 1937.

Great.

There goes my phone.

Saved by the bell. Should we get that or let the machine pick it up?

Yeah, just let me. OK. I can go?

Yep.

OK. My name is Irene Hizme. I was born Renata Guttman, same time as Rene, in Czechoslovakia.

And you two took the name Slotkin?

Slotkin, yes, I was adopted by the Slotkins. And then I got married, and now I'm Hizme.

I'm going to sort of go right to the hard stuff, which is-- and you can decide who wants to answer first. But I'd like to hear from you both on everything, pretty much. Do you remember when you were deported from Prague to-- and I'm going to mispronounce this-- is it pronounced Terezin?

Theresienstadt.

Terezin. Oh, it's Theresienstadt. And Terezin was?

Terezin-- I think Terezin is the city. I'm not sure.

OK. So do you remember that trip or how that came about?

I personally don't remember going there. I just found myself awake there one day. Not that I remember getting up and oh, here I am. I was just there. And I don't know what Irene really remembers about it. If she does.

OK. I remember going on a train. And it was a long trip. Or to me, it seemed like a long trip. I was little and that's all I remember, was a train ride.

If you can describe it for me. Do you remember before that where you were living? And did you pack up and go? What were the circumstances surrounding your leaving?

Well, we were living in Prague at the time. And I don't recall that we packed or anything. Probably our mom did. But I don't recall that. But I do remember definitely taking a train ride. It was a nice train, not a cattle car or anything. And we were, I guess, even excited about where we were going. That's it.

And do you remember arriving?

Specifically, no. We just-- we were someplace new, that's all I knew. But our mother was with us. And so that was OK. And Rene was-- we were all together.

And what were the conditions like there?

I can't say I remember anything much about Theresienstadt except cobblestone walkways and bridges. Well, not bridges but--

Archways?

--archways.

Did you have enough food to eat? Did you have-- how many people? Did you live in an apartment? If you can describe what the living--

I'm not sure what we lived in. I don't remember.

Rene, do you remember any of this?

The archways connected buildings that were more than one story high. I remember they were at least two or three stories high. Well, to me, they appeared tall. They were red brick. The inside, I really don't. I do remember the streets. And I do remember, on the streets, there was traffic.

And one of the things that I remember was a cart with two wheels. And there were bodies on it covered with, I guess, a huge cloth. But you could tell because there were parts sticking out. So I do remember that. On those streets, cobble streets. Because I remember how you had to shift the wagon. Whoever was pulling it, they had going to get over one

hump and then like that. I remember that. I don't know if I remember this, anything like that.

When you saw that, were you curious about what had happened to those people?

No. I might have been then. But I don't recall trying to explain it in any which way.

So you don't recall asking?

No.

Asking anybody what?

Were you living with other families? Were you living just the three of you in a room? Do you recall any of that?

No. I remember the indoors was clean in the sense that it was painted, I think. It was light colored. Some reason, light green comes to mind. I don't know why, but that's what comes to mind. But no, I don't recall the specific place, or bed, or anything like that, room.

Irene?

Now that I heard Rene talk about the carts, I do remember seeing that as well. I don't recall that they were covered bodies. I thought they were just bodies in a cart. The one thing I do remember is sometimes having to wait on line for food. But I'm not sure exactly how aware. And I remember music. Music in Theresienstadt. Again, I don't know.

What do you mean you don't know?

I'm not sure in what context. I don't know if we went to hear music, or they were playing music, or there was a show. I just remember music. Is your memory of your time there, which I realize you were very young so the memories are very sort of sparse and fragmented-- do you recall it being a good time? Do you recall that it was a difficult time? Were you scared? Were you going to school?

That's really a hard question. I don't know. It seems-- I don't get a feeling today that I was terribly scared. We were with our mom and we seemed to have things to do. Possibly drawing or crayons or something like that. And again, I'm going to go back to the music and learning songs. So I don't know.

What about you, Rene?

I more seem to now recall doing drawings on paper with other kids. And I also remember playing in the outdoors with friends. We were throwing things, I think mischievously at second-story things. That's how I remember the buildings were tall. Into the windows.

But on the whole, the question of whether we were-- whether I was frightened or anything like that, I don't seem to recall. But it seemed like a very organized kind of setting. Things went on according to schedule. Nothing was out of the ordinary that happened.

But I do now recall this. I don't know when it happened, but the taking of a picture that we have of my mom, and Irene, and myself, being set up into-- I had to be a photo shop of some kind. Because we had to be in front of a camera.

And I do recall from there my last contact with my mother. I remember. We have the picture here. You could see my hand is on her shoulder. And I remember the feel, the coarseness of that wool garment. I think it was wool. And also the odor of it. But that's vivid. But that's.

It's amazing what sticks with you. Smells.

Yeah.

Where was your father during all this?

My father-- and we only know this now-- was deported to Auschwitz in '41. We had gotten to Theresienstadt in '43. And he was killed in Auschwitz in '41, December also, 18th.

Do you remember asking your mother-- I get it, at that time, I'm sure, again, as you say, you know this now. At the time asking or wanting to know from your mother where your father was? Or did she ever talk to you about him?

I myself don't. I think maybe Irene will. But I myself have absolutely no recollection. Because '41-- and I think he was taken a little bit before the end of December-- so he had to be taken probably in the middle of that year. If you figure out how old I was, I don't recall anything. I really don't.

Irene, do you recall?

To answer your question, whether our mom spoke about where our father was, I'm not sure. The only thing that I definitely do recall is when the Gestapo came to take him away from us. That it was in the middle of the night and it was a very scary ordeal. There was just something so final about them taking him away.

You felt that even then?

Yeah.

I'd love to know. Where was I at that point? Because I don't recall this at all.

You might have-- you know, it was at night. And it's possible that you were even sleeping.

And in the years after that, in the couple of years after that, did you-- how can I put this-- did you question his absence in terms of talking to your mom about it, or wanting to know where he was, or when he was coming back? Do you recall? Do you recall him not being there and how that--

I recall him not being there. But I don't recall asking our mom questions. I think we intuitively knew something not good had happened. And I do remember my mom crying at night. So I wasn't going to ask anything.

I do recall now on at least two occasions, we wrapped a package, which was meant to go to him somehow. I don't know how, but we wrapped. And I think we even went out to deliver it to a place. And that's all I seem to recall.

And this would have still been while you were in Prague? Yes. Yes, from Prague, right. Before Theresienstadt.

So when you were in Theresienstadt, did you have any sense of being prisoners?

I don't think so. You know, it's like, we were what, three or four? You know, we had our mom. And as Rene said, there were other children. I don't think that they thought about it.

What about-- what happened next? Where did you go next after Theresienstadt, what happened?

Well, after a while, there was one night. It was in December. And it was a very cold night with snow, and there was snow everywhere. And we were marched. We marched together with our mother and many other people. We were marched to a cattle car train.

And on the way, we, Rene and I, were like clutching to our mom and holding on because it was so cold. And there were gun shots. And we saw people falling to the ground.

And our mom just kept urging us to go on. Because I kind of wanted to not go any more, I was so cold. And our mom just said, we have to go, we have to. Just urged us on to go. And that's when we boarded the cattle car. And that was a horrible experience.

On that same night, I recall dogs barking, German shepherd dogs. And also, I remember, I think my mom had a suitcase of some kind. And because of the height of the snow, and the fact that we were two of us, and she only had two hands, I think she had to grab us one by each hand. And I think the suitcase spilled out. And it was just left.

What happened when you got aboard the car, the train car?

I don't know if it was right after we got on because I think it was a little bit later. It was extremely hot in there, even though it was cold. I think we were just totally squished. It's not an English word. But I think you know what I mean by bodies all around us because very tight, tight fit.

The odors I recall from there were a real stench. It was just not good. Sounds of agony, you know, crying and whatnot. And then some people who could maintain the upright position would fall. And that was really bad.

What would happen if somebody fell?

There was really no way of helping them. It was just added to the chaos of the place. And usually, if they fell, they were quite ill, I imagine.

How long were you in the car?

I don't know how long the trip was. But it seemed like it was an endless ride. It was dark.

And light.

And all I could see was like the bottom half of people. Legs. And we were squeezed very tight. We could hardly move. There was no food. There were no bathrooms. And I wanted to just cry. And the smell was so horrible.

And the train, just the wheels of the train rumbling. It was dark. It was like we were going nowhere, I mean to some oblivion. And I wanted to cry but I was afraid. And so instead, I remember I just bit my hand. And I squelched my cry.

Do you need to take a sip of water or something like that? Would you?

Yeah, I'd like.

OK. And when you got to where the train was going, do you recall what happened next?

Well, when the train doors were opened, it was a sea of humanity just falling right out of the train, trying to get out. And it was just a lot of people. And we were just marched to a Lager, a house where we were going to be housed. That's all I remember. We were with our mother, and it was a long walk.

I don't remember that part at all. But when the doors were opened, I can almost feel the pool, the cold air coming in and the German officers shouting, [GERMAN]. I can hear it. I can hear it. And then, I guess, what Irene said happened, which I don't recall.

When you felt the cold air, when you felt the fresh air, was that a relief to you?

Yes. It was great relief. You know. Yes.

Should we-- do we need to take a break?

To the [INAUDIBLE].

I just hear this.

We're hearing this saw.