

What would the word be? Aw.

[LAUGHTER]

At the end, you can do that if you're good, if you do everything they say.

[LAUGHTER]

The big sister. How much older?

She's not weak. Believe me. The big--

A half hour older.

I mean, you can't tell she's older? Her recollection is much better than mine.

I absolutely can. But was just thinking, jeez, that half hour really-- that was a lot.

For my mother, I'm sure it was a lot.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, if we could go back and if you could again, Rene, describe the opening of the doors of the train and what you remember feeling from that scene.

When we got to Auschwitz and the train doors open, slid open, there was a cold rush of air coming in on us. Extremely cold but extremely refreshing, as I recall it. And at that point, people started going out. They had to almost fall out because there was not enough room in there to contain everybody.

But there were officers outside. The German soldiers shouting raus, raus and schnell, schnell. Schnell I think means "quick." Raus, I think "get out" or something like that. And it was refreshing, but that's all I recollect other than dogs barking occasionally and people just pouring out, out of these cars.

Did you have any sense of relief, like you had gotten to some place-- like the worst part was-- did you have any feeling or recollection of, Thank God, the worst part is over and now we're going to be OK again? Or did you have any sense of that? Irene?

Sorry, I hear my cat. [LAUGHS]

Do we need to let the cat in?

I think might.

We can do that.

We can do that.

OK.

Sure.

Too bad.

Too bad! [LAUGHS]

You don't like Oscar?

He does like--

I don't like the cat. I don't like to live with animals. That's my thing. I don't. And because they put too much pressure on you. It's not worth it, really, because "but he loves me." Baloney. I don't believe that. [LAUGHS]

I know the feeling because we have a dog. And my son lives elsewhere and we have joint custody.

Oh, right. You do everything.

Right. But it's like when he goes away for the weekend, it's like the kid's going away for the weekend. It's like, oh, OK. Now I don't have to get up and walk him and do all this stuff. Somebody else can do that for one day.

I know. Well, I was willed these cats. My kids left them for me. It's very sweet of them.

That's right. Lucky you. But so what I was asking was did you feel like this was the end of the journey and that you were-- there some relief now, or?

I can't say that I felt any relief. As I said, when the doors first opened, everybody kind of came tumbling out. Again, it was at night. And there was a lot of shouting. There were dogs barking. And it was a sea of humanity, really. And again, my vision was, again, only the bottoms of people's legs. And I do remember following an entire crowd with our mother and Rene to this house where we were-- barrack, barn, whatever --where we would be spending some time.

I don't think as a four-year-old I had any concept of what was going on. This was my life and it was just playing out. I did not anticipate anything horrible. I didn't anticipate anything good. I didn't know, really.

I must make a correction on that. We were five years old, almost finishing our sixth year. Because our birthday was December 21, and I know we got there a couple of days before. So we were five plus. We are almost six at that point. Right? So at least five, we were. Sorry to do this to my--

Older sister.

--older sister.

[LAUGHS] You said you went into the lager. What were those conditions like? What kind of a place was it? How many people were there, if you can describe it?

It was just like a big barn and there was--

Can you start--

[LAUGHS] I knew you were going to ask me that.

And tell me, when you say "it," rather than say "it"--

Right, I understand. The lager was like a big barn. And there were beds in two or three tiers worth of beds. We were together with many, many other people. We were with our mother. And it was a mixed lager. In other words, there were other families there with mothers, fathers, other children possibly.

And as it turned out, we later on found out that this was a very special barrack, special for the Czech families. And it was called the Czech family lager. And there we were with our mother. Again, I remember having some kind of

drawing and learning some Hebrew songs, learning something about Israel. I don't know from where, or?

But I also remember very unpleasant things. I remember the guards hitting people. And I distinctly remember seeing one person kind of hanging. But I didn't know. I didn't put it in any context. I really didn't know what was going on.

Unfortunately, somebody was honking their horn. Tell me again that one image that you recall, having seen somebody?

I remember seeing, I think it was a man and he was naked and he was hanging from the, I guess the ceiling, the roof. But I didn't understand or comprehend what exactly was going on.

How long were you together in the family barracks?

We were together for about four months, I believe. At which time there was an action called. And a few twins and perhaps some doctors and nurses were separated. And Rene and I were at that time separated from our mother. And I can only recall a soul piercing cry from our mother. And I know we didn't want to let go, but we were forcibly taken from her. And then we were also separated from each other. It was only later on that we learned that that entire lager, about 3,700 people, were all killed that night.

Your mother among them?

Yes, our mother among them?

Do you recall this separation as well?

Yeah, that seems to be the point where I awoke again and began remembering this emotional scar or hurt that took place when we were separated. And from that point on, we were apart. And I'd start-- I now by myself in a men's lager, in a men's camp. And I start-- I'm now awake sort of and I'm remembering things that happened there.

What do you remember?

Well, a roll call was one of the things. Early, early in the morning-- the sun wasn't even up yet. It was dark outside. And they would line us up and took some kind of a roll call. And every once in a while, somebody was hurt. You know, shot with a rifle butt and dogs barking if they didn't respond properly or they weren't standing straight enough or something like that.

Later in the morning, as I recall towards the end of our stay there in the mornings, some prisoners were taken out of the group and lined up against the ditch and shot. So and that was it. Once the shots were fired, that was it. Everybody went about their business, whatever that was. Myself and some other kids, boys, we were curious about this. So we went close to the pits to see what had happened to these people that were standing and now were-- and there was life still in their bodies. So you could see twitching, movements.

Some were really moving. There was one case I remember that the prisoners pulled this one man out because he wasn't dead. He had a huge swelling in his head. Which I assume, now, is was a bullet lodged in there. Not deep in, but just. And they brought him in. I don't know what happened to him. But that was a frequent occurrence in the mornings at the end of our stay there.

Do you recall feeling afraid or feeling numb or feeling-- I mean, how did you get through it?

It was just curiosity I felt. I don't think I had a mature fear that I would have if I saw something or today. It was curiosity. I remember having my kids, my children today, had the same type of curiosity. Which I'll explain the surrounding of that. We were on Fire Island. And when the fishermen came in with their catch, they would take these flopping, live fish and skin them and behead them and whatever. And this was a little harsh for me. But they looked at it and they felt nothing. They just-- there was curiosity. And I can connect it to something like this. I'm not sure if it's valid, but that's my feeling on it.

Do you recall in that lager you were with just boys? Were you with men? What were you eating? How did you sleep? What were the conditions there?

The barrack was tiered with bunk beds on both sides of the length of it. Through the center was a stove or some kind of a heating. I think it was a stove. I was mostly with, I think, a special group. Because we were twins and we all stuck together. We were put there together. And the older ones-- and all of them were just about older than I was --were taking care of me and other younger ones than them. So we sort of stuck together.

As far as food, I'm sure I ate. But my only recollection really of doing something with food was going on to some garbage heaps and pulling out potatoes. And they were sliced and put on the stove to bake. And I remember that. I still like potatoes or fries.

So this-- did you know that you were in this barracks because you were a twin? Did you have any idea why you were with these people and not with other people? Or were you too young to understand?

I didn't know that. I just knew that we were somehow a little special in the sense that every time it was, let's say, time for me to go to the infirmary, I was sort of spiffed up, readied, cleaned in whatever sense that I was made presentable. And somebody would take me there. This was some boy, younger man, or somebody from the group would take me there.

And so that was special because the rest of the camp, I mean, that that was different. It was totally different. And I did get a pair of boots once. I remember a pair of brown boots from some older, I imagine it had to be a twin. That was special in that setting to have a pair of shoes that not necessarily fit, but were dry on the inside.

What happened when you got to the infirmary? What sorts of procedures did you go through?

Well, mostly what I recall is getting undressed.

I'm sorry. Could you start by saying when--

When I got to the infirmary, mostly what I remember is you always had to get undressed at least up to here, maybe further too. And being put between two cold plates, which I know were called rontgen machines. I think that's X-ray. And measured and weighed and poked and pushed. But nothing much more than that, nothing much more than that.

Do you remember any of the doctors or nurses in that place?

No. Oh, they were there. There were figures dressed in white coats. But not specifically, no. Not faces or anything like that.

Irene, what about you? When you were separated from your mother and your brother, where did they take you? And what kind of conditions were you in?

Well, when I was separated from my mom and Rene, I found myself in a lager full of women, only women and young girls possibly. I do not recall that I was with other twins, but it's possible, other twin girls. But it's possible that I was. But I only recall older women. And the barrack was very much like what Rene described, both sides of a large barn with tiered beds. And a large brick oven running down the center.

And though I don't remember a whole day in sequence, my memory is rather sporadic, but the things that I remember are indelibly etched on my mind. I do remember being hungry. And I do remember that all there was to eat was some black bread that was handed out towards the end of the day, and some-- I don't know if it was a soup of some sort --I guess soup.

And I remember that I thought I was being rather clever, that I would save some bread for the morning when I was

hungeriest. So I wouldn't eat all of it. And then in the morning, the bread would be gone. And I-- it's only subsequently I figured out we had rats in Auschwitz that were probably as hungry as I was.

I do remember being very cold times. I was very lonely. I thought about Rene. I knew he was alive. And in some way, I think that gave me the will to just continue in whatever this was. I had no comprehension of what was really happening. I just, by this time, I was beginning to understand that bad things were happening. Because I could hear the older people whispering about this and that, and people dying, and people being gassed.

And I remember myself going to the showers and having to stand outside naked in the cold waiting to be inspected by the Germans. And also, by this time, understanding that sometimes you never came back from the showers. So it was always a question of would I be coming back? Or was this-- whatever --the last time?

But I was also a little brazen child. And I, the very first time that we were lined up, I had a locket around my neck from my mother. And I knew that if it was found, I would probably be punished severely. Or I really had no concept, but I knew it was not-- it would not go well for me.

And so like a six-year-old I said, OK, I'll take it off my neck. I'll hide it in my hands. And that's exactly what I did. And I remember I got into the showers with it. But I guess I never came out with it because I imagine it fell out of my hand or-- but I thought I'd put one over on the guards. [LAUGHS]

What about-- what medical procedures or quasi-medical procedures do you remember? Do you remember being taken to the hospital or infirmary or?

Well, I remember going to Mengele specifically. Actually, the very first time that we went to the doctor was when our mother was still with us. So we were still in the Czech familienlager. And I remember it especially because I was only concerned that Rene would cry. Because he was a cry baby when it came to doctors. And I was scared that he would cry and something terrible would happen to him. But he got the message. He was good. He didn't cry. And that was the one time he went with our mother.

After that, I do remember going to the hospital, being in the hospital because I was sick. I don't know if I was sick with just some childhood disease or whether I was sick because I had gotten an injection of something that made me ill. But I have recollections of blood being taken from my neck and my arms. I remember many x-rays and injections. And I hate doctors. I hate hospitals.

Do you remember whether these procedures were painful or just uncomfortable? Or how did you react to them?

The blood from the neck was extremely painful, extremely painful. But I knew I couldn't cry, and I didn't. I never cried.

How did you know you couldn't cry?

I guess instinctively. Or it could have been something our mom told us we were to just behave and be good and go along with the flow.

Do you remember specifically-- you say you remember specifically meeting Dr. Mengele?

Well, I know it was Dr. Mengele. I had heard the name. That's, you know.

Do you remember him or what he looked like or how he sounded or how he acted?

Not really. I think that one time he did give me a lollipop. And I think I was just tickled to death. You know, I said, oh, wow. What a great guy.

But specifically, you don't remember any of the other doctors or?

There were other doctors, but not specifically that I can remember at all. No.

OK. How much time do we have?

We have about three minutes.

OK. Did anybody tell you, did anybody ever try to explain why this was going on or what was happening to either of you? Or was it just that you did what you were told and that was it?

No one explained anything. I know for myself, I just did what I was told. I also discovered that if I could hide behind things or behind people and if I wasn't seen, then that would be a good thing. And I did always try to be behind somebody taller at roll call or stuff. I tried to be invisible. If I could have been, I would have wished myself.

What about you, Rene?

I remember I must have been questioning what was going on, but not exactly in what sense. But I questioned who was in charge? Who's in charge here? Who's? And I was told, Hitler. That meant nothing to me, but that's the answer I got. And I'm not even sure why I wanted to know. But I guess it was confusing to what was going on. And I guess I want to know who was directing traffic. And that's the answer I got.

I want to mention one thing, what Irene mentioned before. That I also was motivated to keep myself going by the fact that I knew that she was somewhere out there. I saw her once. I think we saw each other once through a fence or two fences. Nothing was said. We just saw each other and we knew we were alive. And always had that feeling that she was alive-- always. That never left. And everything that happened afterwards was just done basically so I could meet up with Irene.

Did you know already that your mother had been killed at that point?

I think we knew it when we were separated, right then and there, that that was the end. At least that's how I felt.

What about you, Irene? Do you think you know that your--

I knew I would never see her again. If you're asking did I know that she was dead? No. But I knew that I was not going to see her again.

What--

So yeah, OK yeah.