

In April 21, 2009, interview with Richard Staar at Hoover, the traditional tape recorder. OK. First of all, just remind me, what was your date of birth?

January 10, 1923.

OK. And here, I wasn't quite clear-- when your family went to Poland when you were 12 years old, I guess, they didn't go to Warsaw right away, did they?

No, we lived in a small town, which was where the East Prussian-- was still East Prussia then, it belonged to Germany-- and Lithuania, and Poland meet.

So not far from

There's a little bump there. It's like if it looks like a wolf.

Right, right.

And there's a little-- like the ear or something. And then Vilna was off to the east.

Yeah. So between Konigsberg and Vilna, more or less?

Between what, Vilna?

Konigsberg or what's Kaliningrad now?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So you were in what was East Prussia.

No, no, it was Poland.

It was Poland, yeah.

Yeah.

But it was-- yeah, OK. So you were then in what would be north/northeast Poland then?

Northeastern Poland, right, yeah.

And it was a small town? Do you remember what the town was called? Yes.

S-U-W-A-L-K-I

Yeah, ah, Suwalki.

Yeah, and the L has a slash through it.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes, yes.

Suwalki.

Suwalki. I know Suwalki.

You know Suwalki?

Yeah, I know-- yeah, it's pretty well-known area there. It's very pretty part of the country.

Well, I was 12 years old. And I didn't know a word of Polish. Well, my parents spoke in Polish when they didn't want the kids to understand what they were saying. You have that situation in the United States. But so it was difficult because I would have been in probably the ninth grade of high school. Well, they put me in the fifth grade.

Well, at age 12, you would have probably been in seventh grade.

Put me in the fifth grade. So it was like I lost four years there. And so I never graduated from high school. The war broke out 1939. And there was no school. The Germans closed down the public schools. The Russians did the same thing in the east. And you weren't even allowed to go to German school-- not that I would have gone to one because I didn't know the language. So it was a difficult period.

And I was arrested by the German police. They had some kind of underground movement there. And I was never a member because my Polish wasn't that good. They never trusted me.

Yeah, yeah. But your father was, but you weren't.

But early on with this-- well, he was involved in that. And of course, I couldn't. When they were-- I shouldn't say torturing, they were just beating me. And even today, I don't hear out of this left ear here because this German policeman was standing behind me. I was sitting like you in the chair.

And he with his-- had a hand that was twice my size. And bang here. And I would grab it. And then this one, then he hit me there, when that was open, and vice versa. But anyway, then something popped here in the left ear. And it was my eardrum. So I haven't heard out of that ear since then-- long time.

Was this the Gestapo?

Anyway, that-- yeah, then they kept me in prison for, I think-- I don't know, I mean, it is so, so long-- a couple of months. And anyway, and then they told me-- they released me and told me to go to Warsaw because I was born in Warsaw. And when I got there, I should report, again, to the police, German police. Well, it took a while to get there because I had to use public transportation.

And I thought to myself, well, if I do that, if I register with them, they know where I am living, at any moment, they can come and re-arrest me. So I didn't go. I just never-- and of course, then I didn't get food stamps.

So I had to-- in order to survive, I was giving English lessons, lessons in English to Polish people who wanted to learn English. And these were private lessons. For example, there was a woman whose fianc had been a pilot in the Polish Air Force. And I guess, when they realized that the war was over, they were ordered to fly at night across Germany and France to England. They landed in England.

So now, he was a pilot in the Polish Air Force, part of the Royal Air Force RAF. And so of course, she wanted to go there. So she wanted to learn English. So I did. And she paid me for it. But then I taught children for a place where I lived, in order to have a room. Now, not food because food is expensive.

I taught-- I think they had three small children. And they were elementary school-level, beginning-- first, second, third grade. But they had textbooks. So I could teach from that. I mean, my Polish was good enough. I could never teach high school, for example.

Right, right, right.

And so for that, I had a room. And then of course, when I was interned-- internment wasn't the same as being in a political prison-- Germans were interned in the United States and Americans were interned in Germany. So they had to treat us decently. And then there's a Geneva Convention, things like that. And as a matter of fact, we also had visits from outsiders, I think, who were not enemies of Germany. And they were neutral. And they would come and interview us, and ask us how we were treated, and so on.

This is when you were interned already in?

Yeah, well I was in two camps. One was called Tittmoning-- T-I-T-T-M-O-N-I-N-G. And that was an old medieval castle, cold. You know what a castle is like, how thick those walls are. And so in the winter, it was cold. In summer, it was all right. It was OK. But the winters were terribly cold.

You remember when you were sent there? This was-- now, you were sent back to prison for a while. And then it says that--

Yeah, that said, that was about a year later--

Yeah, in late October--

--a year after I'd been released, yeah.

--yeah, of '42, I guess.

Right. And then I was there until-- first one was, as I mentioned, it was an old medieval fortress or something. But it wasn't heated at all. And then things looked up when they transferred us to a place called Laufen-- L-A-U-F-E-N-- which also was in Upper Bavaria. But there we were.

And the thing I think that helped us was the fact that the Brits were there. They had arrested. Let's say they were vacationing in northern France or maybe even on the Channel Islands. And the Germans overran those places. And they just interned them. And many of them were highly educated. And so they started little study groups, whatever their specialty happens to be. So I did as much of that as I could.

And then I was getting sort of a broad education. And then one day, the camp senior-- the senior American was called the camp senior. Senior Brit was the camp senior. The British were notified that the University of London would make available to us, both Brits and Americans, whoever wanted to take it, entrance exam to the University of London.

This is the war is still going on?

Yeah. I thought to myself, yeah, I thought to myself, well, I'd never go to England. But I have none-- I have no documents that I ever finished high school. And so here, at least, if I can pass that and show it when I get to the United States, that's the equivalent of a high school graduation certificate. And that's what happened, that I came to Dickinson. They gave it to me.

And of course, I had to make up things. For example, when I took that University of London exam, I flunked Latin. I passed everything but Latin. And I flunked Latin because I never had any Latin, never never had Latin in school. So they said, OK, we'll accept you at Dickinson. But you understand that you'll have to take two years of Latin. So I did. I took two years of Latin.

They accepted you at London, you mean, in theory.

Well, they accept, the University of London, right, the admissions letter.

But you were exchanged, though. Was this after the war ended?

No, no, this is before the war ended.

Before the war.

I think it was the last exchange.

Last exchange.

A last exchange. I mean, the Germans knew they were-- the war was lost.

Yeah. So this is '44?

It was '44, beginning of '45, even probably beginning of '45.

And tell me here, as you say, the internment was different, definitely, than the other camps. But you also describe in the book that you had-- the food was very-- it was only 600 calories a day. You can't really survive on that.

Yeah, the food. I think, if we had managed to stay on that diet for I don't know how long, maybe a couple of years, we probably would have starved to death. But they didn't have food themselves. You can't blame them. They weren't doing this-- I don't think they were doing it consciously.

Right, right.

No.

But there were some aid packages and so forth that--

No. But one thing that I figured out was that if a food package were sent, it would probably be stolen at the post office or even the mailman and his family. So I asked my sister, older sister, who was living in Michigan to-- if she would send me cigarettes. So she sent me a carton of cigarettes. It was a fortune. And what I would do is I would exchange the cigarettes for food. And of course, I didn't smoke. And then that was just a matter of survival.

But do you think it was the fact that you were Americans and Brits that made the difference or just the fact that your status was different than other prisoners?

No. You see, I was there in the first camp-- let's see, the first camp or the second camp-- first camp was only Americans. Second camp was larger. And we were there with the Brits. As I say, that was an extraordinary development because it did give me a chance to at least fill in all these gaps in my education. I never graduated from anything.

So you felt you really got a good education in that camp?

Well, it was-- the thing is that they didn't take us to-- we didn't do-- not a forced labor camp, anything like that. And so we were-- most people, let's say older men, had nothing to do, really, except if maybe they could find a book to read. Or somebody, now, relatives could send you things like books. They would let those through. I just asked my sister-- my sister thought that I was a heavy smoker.

Because you kept asking for cigarettes.

That was money. That was money.

Yeah, sure.

That was currency.

Yeah, that was a currency.

Currency.

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Yeah. That was a-- let's put it this way, this was not a death camp. Because you think of places like Oswiecim, Auschwitz, I mean, they took these people. And they just-- I read an account. The Germans will say, we never killed any Jews in Germany. That's true. But they were shipping Jews on trains as captives across the border from between Germany and Czechoslovakia. And I think it was in Czechoslovakia that they would debark.

And they herded them into showers. And they said, now, leave all your documents, your money here in little piles in this room. And you'll have to take a shower. It's just so you know that you are lice-free or something. These people went in there. And then, of course, they locked the doors, turned on by remote control instead of shower, it was poison gas. And they were just-- oh, no. And of course, I could have been in that. If I'd been Jewish, I would have been in that same group.

There, I mean, to be an American and the fact that you had American citizenship was really your salvaging?

Oh, yeah, that's what saved me. That saved me. At least, I think one thing they did well, the-- I think that the Germans, I guess they realized that the United States would retaliate if they did something like that because you couldn't keep it a secret, whereas who's going to retaliate, Israel? No way. And even if Israel wanted to retaliate at that time, there's no way of doing it. No.

So I guess of all the fates, you had a terrible time, but of all the fates, this was a relatively good one.

Well, I think back and I always think it in terms of that it could have been worse. It could have been worse. But I think I was fortunate that I survived. It wasn't due to anything that I did or didn't do. It was just a fate. It was my fate to survive.

And in terms of the guards at these camps, at both the first and the second camp, how did they treat the prisoners?

Well, the first camp, as I said, that was in that medieval--

Fortress, yeah.

--fortress or something. And they didn't really-- we didn't have any mobility there. We were in the cell, that's it. And they fed us there. They would open the door and hand to the-- whatever the room senior was, he would distribute the food and so on. Now, in the second one, it was much better.

And I think one reason was that we were not there alone. We had the Brits were there. And I guess, they weren't worried that the United States could retaliate against us because how many Germans were there whom they had interned? That's one thing.

And secondly, in terms of Britain, I mean, it was just across the channel. And it's not that the Brits were vengeful or anything like that. But they could have, I'm sure, intensified the bombing or something like that. And I'm sure that the Germans realized that. Germans were not stupid. They're pretty savvy people.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. OK. Well, that's great because the description is mostly here. But that just helps fill it out. That's wonderful, certainly. And your father-- it was incredible. Your father survived, your mother, and your sister.

Well, he mainly-- he had it Harker, because he was in a penitentiary. But when he-- what happened was-- this is interesting because he was in a penitentiary that was in then-called East Prussia, was part of Germany, East Prussia. And when the Russians started coming, toward the end of the war, they were advancing already. You could hear the guns and

so on. The guards, German guards, left the prison and just fled.

And most of the prisoners started following them in the same direction, going to the west. My father was the only one who went to the east. And he went to the east because he spoke Russian. He was brought up when that part of Poland was Russia. So he went to Russian schools and so on. I mean, at home he spoke Polish. But this was the official language. But he spoke Russian fluently. And he started walking toward-- right to the advancing Russian Army.

Anyway, and somehow, he made his way-- it's just miraculous. He made his way all the way down to the Black Sea, and finally by ship-- I don't know how he got it, talked his way out of the ship. But it went to Italy and stopped. That was just going to Italy. And he got off there.

And he stayed in one of these displaced persons camps for-- well, I think, several years until it was possible to get him out, until things normalized. You could buy tickets on an airliner and fly to Italy or fly back. But he had a rough life. And it was-- but the fact that he could speak Russian, that was-- I think, maybe, that helped him to survive, certainly.

I'm sure. Well, wonderful. Thank you so much. Well, we'll get-- I know you'll be heading home soon. I don't want to hold you up.