

Were 5 foot in diameter, because I could walk in the middle without bending. Tall people had to bend a little, stoop a little. And they put a long pipe under the plant, you know, a long pipe, maybe, I would say, 800 feet long.

And in the time of the alarm we used to go in. And a guard would stay on one side and a guard another. And that was they-- the protection. If bombs would fall, I don't know if it would break the pipe or not-- you know, the heavy cement. But there we were. We would leave the plant.

And for months it was going on. We used to have the alarm. And for us, the alarm-- the Germans used to fear of the alarm. For us, it was-- first, we interrupted working, we could catch on our sleep. And it was a pleasure to hear that they are getting beaten.

And but usually it would last sometimes an hour, sometimes 20 minutes, sometimes a little longer than an hour. The alarm would be called off, and we'd go back to work. Oh yeah, in time of the alarm, they would shut off all the electricity to darken the place.

And one time-- I think it was in April-- that was already next year of April. The first was '44, that was '45 in April. I think it was the 11th of April, the alarm lasted from about 11 o'clock to 4 in the morning.

And we knew it is-- in fact, the pipe would vibrate. We knew it is-- the town was bombarded. You see, our plant was on the edge of the town. It was an industrial site. And we knew it.

Oh yeah, there were still with us Germans working. So they started to run away. And only the guards remained at the end of the pipe-- you know, the SS, we were under the SS guard. The SS were the storm troopers, Hitler's faithful garrison.

And about 4 o'clock-- and it was never a call-off of the alarm-- we got out. And 4 o'clock in April, it's still dark. We come out, the sky is red. And we could see, because the city was about 7 miles away. Everything is burned. And the Germans were so sad and disheartened, even the guards.

And they said, we are going to the barracks. We come to the barracks. And the barracks from the plant was still about a mile away or more. There was no water and no electricity. And when daylight broke, they said, who wants volunteer-- we have to bring water with buckets, do with a bucket.

And in those days, I was young and strong, and I wanted to see it. So I volunteered, too, among others. They had probably 20 buckets or 30 buckets. And we went.

And they had near-- again, near the edge of the town, but you could see a lot of the buildings-- there was a hand pump. And Germans were in a line, too, to water. And people are pumping. And then out of our line came, and we got the water.

But I was observing the Germans. And the Germans were looking at us, and some with pity and some with rage, because some thought that-- Hitler told them that the Jews made the war, you know. So they thought-- and they knew that we were Jews, and here they are.

And some knew, and some were with pity. We looked terrible in those days, because we didn't have enough food and clothing, nothing to wash and nothing decent-- it was torn.

So we got the water. And we could see buildings collapsed and were smoldering and some were burning with a flame. And we came back to the barracks. And from the water they warmed up coffee. They used to give us black coffee with a piece of bread. That was our breakfast.

And they sent us to the barracks. And we sat down there and waited. The next day we didn't go to work either. After the next day, they started-- they were telling us that the plan is we can't work, because there is no water and electricity.

So they started making it in columns of about 100 or so. And beside in that plant and in that place where we worked there were other people, non-Jews. There were about 1,200. But the Jews, they start sending on fortification work.

What was the fortifications? About 4 or 5 miles away, they made a line over meadows and fields. We were digging holes and putting in parts of rails. And they was digging this way and that way across and very close together, about 2, 3 feet. And it was supposed to hold up-- back tanks or-- and we were doing that. And at night, we used to come to sleep.

Oh yeah, food was a little better, because we were fed by the Wehrmacht. Wehrmacht was the German army, not the SS. Before we were guarded by the SS. And one time like that, being in the field, there was a big alarm.

And on the field work, a lot of SS men used to guard us. And some were young or some were even boys. But in the uniform with guns there were 13 or 14-years-old boys, and some were tall.

There was an alarm. And all the guards, they knew already something They ran and left us like that. So somehow, we find out that the Front, that the Americans broke the Front through, and the Germans are running.

And we were always-- we Jews, we were always, at that time when we see the war is at the end, we were afraid. What will they do with us, because we knew how much they killed, and they didn't want anybody to survive.

So we knew the war, it won't last long. But what we were afraid-- at the end, these SS men will open fire on us. And if they run, so we thought we are free. And evidently, a few said that you are free.

So we start crying and hugging each other and thought we are free, we are alive. And oh yes, and so we started to go to town. And hungry we were. And there was a-- this order to get some food. And some went in bombed out houses, in cellars. And some found some food or something.

But and that happened about 11 o'clock in the morning. Towards evening when it started to get dark about 6, 7 o'clock, German civilians came and said we should go all and we'll have it-- they'll-- we should go all in, back to the barracks. They'll take us home. They'll feed us.

So we went. Because we are in a strange place, we couldn't escape. We couldn't hear what happened on there. We went there to the barracks. And on the evening, the SS came back and took us over. You know, the civilian were without guns.

The SS are at this, and they're mean. And we didn't-- we thought, oh, we made a mistake to releasing to them. And maybe now, they'll take us and kill us. But we are already in the barracks, we are surrounded with barbed wire and guards and that.

And here-- that what happened. The Americans came to one side of the Elbe. And all the bridges-- they did not, evidently, by order from the German leadership, not to explode the bridges. It was ready for the Germans to come to Magdeburg to-- like, going over from Bellaire to Wheeling.

And they didn't go. So the Germans evidently found out. And they came. guarded that. However, in those days, the Front were moving. And the Russians were pressing, and they didn't want to let us fall in in Russian hands.

They started to march. And Jews here, all the Jews or all non-Jews were marching. All the foreigners which worked in Germany-- and there were millions of them, French and Italian and Hungarians they brought in as workers to replace the Germans-- they were marching.

So they start to march. They march us, too. And here comes a very interesting episode. And we marched, and we never came back. We went forward. We used to sleep in barns. And they used to feed us in potatoes. In each little town, they had already arranged.

Before a little town, there used to be big bales of tomato-- potatoes, you know, cooked potatoes with the peeling. And they would give three or four small potatoes, three or four potatoes-- eat, march.

Towards the evening, again, we would come to a small town, and then potatoes. And we were marching several days like that. At night, in a barn. And one time, one marching, they let us rest in a tennis court. You know how tennis court is? The ground is plastered to here or here with a fence, usually, not a high fence.

And they got us in. And it was April. And the sun-- April in Germany at daytime, it's like the climate here-- not severe winters and not too hot summers. And in April, it's nice. So I'm tired. We are-- usually were. They let us rest, and we lie down, sit down on the grass or there. And we fall asleep.

While we sleep, all of the sudden, a bombardment without warning. Until today, I don't know-- and the other people don't know-- who was shooting. At the beginning, we thought Germans were shooting. And we thought, here is the place what they'll mow us down.

Some say that there was a lot of bombardments going on, that enemy fire, their enemy, German enemy place-- you know, Allies. So a gathering of people, they threw down some bombs.

And in the place-- for me, first, it-- something fell, a grenade or something. It covered with mud, you know. And it fell just like that. And I felt pain here. And I take a look. My coat was open, but there was no time.

And I touched if it's blood-- nothing, it's dry. And it was everything happened so fast. And I look around. There was screaming. Women we had too, you know-- blood and this. My gosh, and it was-- I thought that's it, that is the Aktion, the Aktion what we used to call it, the Aktion, you know-- that the killing off.

And but screaming, and the guns are from outside. And everybody was pressing towards the gates. Everybody wants to run out. And I think the guard made it. They ran away. The gates, people could go-- come out.

But we were many. And I thought as fast, my gosh, if the Germans are doing it, they'll throw a bomb here, where there is a big crowd. And somehow, I start running in the other end. And there were two more boys which run after.

And we come, there was a little, a door. These were, with two guys you could go in with a car or a truck. But there was, like, a door from wire to-- and it is open. And the three of us run. And from far away, you could see is it was a park or a woods, you know.

And as tired and as weak and as-- notice to where, somehow, we got so much strength. I remember the way I felt-- it is now or never. And we started to run. And I was the first running on-- to the other boys. And I-- it was I said, let's run, let's run.

And like in the army, where we were zigzagging. And they-- and I didn't hear and didn't want to hear. I thought if they'll shoot on us and get us, it's better this way as to beat them. And we ran, and we ran. And pretty soon, we felt that we are-- they had rifles, but we are out of range with the rifles. And it was over meadows, like pastures.

And we slowed down. Before it was running. But I remember the chest started to hurt. And we slowed down. And then we came to a thicket of trees. And we come therein. We saw there were trenches dug, like for soldiers. And we came in, we jumped in. And nobody was there.

And we came in and we tell we're alive. And we thought, what are we going to do from now. And we decided we should do nothing-- stay there, because if-- while it is fresh, if they will see us, if they want to gather us-- or even civilians-- they'll turn us in.

Were the other two boys with you Jews?

Yeah, yeah.

What were their names?

One was Kovnak, and the other was Baron.

Did you know them before?

Yeah, yeah

Were they from Riga?

One was from Riga, and one was from a little town-- in fact, where my grandparents were born, from Dankere. And we decided to stay there in the dugout-- what do you call the trench. And we stayed there. And we don't know what happened with the others.

We stayed there overnight. And you know, April, the days are nice, but nights are cold, again. But we were together, pressed together to keep each other warm. And we fell asleep. And I remember about when it started, the day started to break, we woke up, cold and like ice, teeth and damp.

And we thought the best would be to come out. And the sun started to-- and get what the sun is shining-- it was shaded. And we stay. And we don't know what to do. And again, we wouldn't be-- we would stay to steal. People would have food.

And another thing, for example, today, if you don't have food for a day or two, you can fast, easy. Our organism was so run down that it really-- we needed food. The hunger was terrible. But we don't know what to do. We're-- we think to go, and maybe we'll run in the house, in a German, and ask for food, a bit.

And here, what happened-- while we were thinking, we debate, and we-- what we should do-- a German soldier came over, an elderly man in a uniform, an elderly, about 40, 50-- not from the SS, but the Wehrmacht. And he comes, and he said to us, oh, you are from the-- yesterday's raid. And we said, yes.

So he said, you go this way, go this way-- and then gives us directions. He said, there are guarded, the people are guarded, and they'll be led away. And here, again-- and he walks by. Oh yeah, first he asks, are you wounded, are you wounded-- do you need medical help?

And he said, if you are-- medical help, he said, there's ambulance, a field ambulance is there, not too far, and you go there. So we tasted already freedom. We thought, here we are away, but we are away from the SS people. And we decided, as soon as we'll be out of his sight, instead of going there, we'll go in the opposite direction. And so we did, and so we did.

And again, our main problem is how to get food. And we walk. We go by homes. We are afraid to go in and ask-- we'll be reported. Oh yeah, from the camp, they had-- we could wear hair, but they cut out with-- as far as clippers are-- here, we looked like Mongolians, you know, so we could be recognized. We didn't have hats.

And we walk, and we walk. And we-- finally, another German run into us, a uniform. You see, on the Front, we're very close. And he said, if you are from the escaped people from the foreigner or this, then we have orders to bring you to the commandant of that little town-- I don't know the name. And he brings us there.

And he brings us there. And he bring us in, and some of the people said, here, here is a guard. They takes a soldier with a rifle and keep them there outside near a road. And he said, he'll call. The SS will come and pick us up.

So we thought, again, we are in the lion's mouth, again. And here what happened-- we stayed there. And he said, within an hour or so, that SS will be here. The SS didn't come for an hour, two hours, three hours.

And that soldier who was-- he was a young soldier who was guarding us called-- and we are, I think, near the City Hall or somewhere. It was a big building-- called another soldier. He said he should change him up, because he has to go on and have lunch or breakfast, and these remain.

Then it was when the SS didn't come. And about 3, 4 o'clock, then the guards started to change regularly, every two or three hours. And we waited. And we asked for food. We told them we were hungry. We didn't eat since yesterday. My gosh, they brought us out food, and it was the best food we ever had. It was a soup thick with meat, with beans or peas and a piece of bread.

And we wait like that. And it was 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock. And a German who we could talk, and we were talking-- maybe we should tell him we are not Jews. And because they had other foreign people, Christians and these. So here what it said-- what we tell that one soldier-- we said, it was a misunderstanding, we're not supposed to be with the SS, we were here, foreign workers.

And it was a bombardment, and we escaped. And here we are, we are not Jews, we are Latvians. Oh, he thought, oh, if it's so he's going to tell the commandant it was a misunderstanding. So sure enough, he goes in, and we were called in.

And there sits a German. And he was an amputee with a uniform, a young German, about 35, but from the Wehrmacht, not from the SS. With the Wehrmacht, we were much easier. The SS were the real indoctrinated haters, ignorant haters. But these were Germans, or some were-- in fact, some maybe had sympathies with Jews, with us or with anybody and had an antipathies to Hitler, you know.

So he called us. He said, if you are not Jews, how did you get there? And when we were passing by, we saw Latvians were working under a bridge, some doing some work. We recognized Latvians. We said we were working there, and it was a bombardment, and we--

How could you recognize Latvians from Germans?

And you can. [LAUGHS] You can. If you come, for example, in Ireland, and you'll see Americans, you'll recognize Americans.

But I couldn't recognize an American Jew from an American--

No?

--regular person.

Well.

You could recognize a Latvian from a Latvian Jew?

Right, right.

Did you wear any kind of badge or anything?

No, no, no. And then we talked. And we heard them talking the language. They were talking Latvian. And we said, we were working there and there. And then the land came, and we got lost and this. And even he said to the guard, take him over to that school. There are gathered Auslander, you know, foreigner.

They took us out, three off of the door. There's we see-- and there were Auslander-- French and Italian, Hungarians-- everybody who were marching. Everybody was marching Auslanders away from the Front.

But there were no Jews there?

No, no Jews.

Did they recognize you as Jews?

No, no, no. Here were there-- some maybe did, but we never got together. We-- that was our-- we should be spread among them. When here that was trouble started for us, but not as big. They let us in. And they were--

Oh yeah, and I think that school, they decided that they left him. The Germany got small, because the Allies were coming from one side, the others from-- and there were no marching farther. And they were settled until the war will end.

And it was probably in the end of April. In May, May 15th was the end of the war, the middle of May. So here what happened-- and they let us in. And we used to come-- I think, well, I think we are saved, they won't shoot these people. You understand?

We still thought that the Jews, they'll annihilate us. and I thought, it looks like we are safe. They let us in and with this-- and it was a big crowds. And I said, they won't shoot these people. And we are with them.

So when time came and everybody was sleeping on the floor, in a corner. We didn't care. The main thing, we thought we'll be alive. And we thought we are the only one. We didn't-- the only ones. We didn't know what with the rest will happen or happened.

And these foreigners, they had rationing cards for food. And the next morning, there was a field kitchen. And everybody was coming with this card. They got bread and this. Then they cooked coffee. At lunchtime, they had, like, a soup-- everybody with a card.

And we don't have it. And to go to press in, we were afraid that we'll be recognized. And you don't know who what's what. So again, with the hunger. What it did happen-- what, how did we do? First, sometimes at lunchtime-- in fact, the first lunch, after everybody got this, his portion, there were, it's called a nachschlag. They were giving anybody who wants a refill, they were giving without the card. We were first.

Then when they were preparing the food-- peelings, potato peelings, or a half a rotten carrot or half a rotten-- they would throw out, and there was a, like, a garbage pile-- we would go and pick out.

Could you stay together?

Together, yeah, together. And we would go out. And it shouldn't be suspicious that we managed. One by one, we would pick out. And there was a big pile of thrown out vegetables, so would pick out some potatoes and hand held the peelings. And we had, like, from a coffee can, like, jars. And they, too, they had jars, some of them, plates-- the foreigner. And we used to bring it, the peeling, put in in a coffee can.

And outside they had to-- they used to make fires, because some used to organize baking. And we would cook these peelings and fill up our stomach. So we were pretty happy about that-- and wait until after they would feed these, wait for the nachschlag. You know, if there is leftover, they did this, we would be the first in that. They would call out if somebody wants that.

So we lived like that till the liberation. Till the liberation we lived there in school. And I think we did move to other schools. They moved us around. But it was the same, and we had already a modus vivendi.