

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ernest Koenig
June 12, 1997
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Ernest Koenig, conducted on June 12, 1997 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Alexandria, Virginia and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

Interview with Ernest Koenig
June 12, 1997

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Answer: -- is Ernest Koenig and we are in my apartment in Watergate at Landmark in Alexandria, Virginia, and today is the 12th of June, 1997.

Question: Like to go back and ask you several questions about your family.

A: Yes.

Q: If you could give -- give a little background about -- about your family, your -- your immediate family --

A: Yes.

Q: -- their names, and -- and occupations of your parents.

A: Yes, yes. My family lived in a little town in southern Moravia, not far from Vienna, about 80 kilometers north of Vienna. I could trace my family back to the 17th and perhaps to the 16th century, and they probably lived there all the time. Perhaps they lived in Vienna, were expelled from there, and then they came back. And it is not impossible, but that's just a guess, that my parents and the Jews in this area were there in the Roman times, because the Roman -- the limit of the Roman empire was in Vienna, called *vie -- viento bona*. My father was a glazier, but he had a hardware shop and he was affluent. My mother and her family came from the little town where I was raised, but they were very Viennese. And the

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whole population there was oriented towards Vienna. Vienna was the great city from which all the good things, and perhaps e-even bad things, emanated. In 1918, this part of Moravia was annexed by the Czechs. The Czech Republic was founded in 1918, but my family, as well as the neighbors and most of the po -- of the population experienced a very strong affinity to Vienna and to Austria.

Q: Did you have brothers or sisters?

A: I had one brother who is still alive, who lives in New York City. I had no sisters. My family was very large and most of the family was destroyed during the Holocaust. The Viennese part and the part living in this little town, and the -- only two cousins and my brother survived.

Q: Is your brother older or younger than you?

A: My brother is 85, I'm 80.

Q: Was your mother a -- a homemaker, managed the home?

A: Yes, my mother was a homemaker. She was a very, very good cook. She was a very -- lady always of good spirit. She was -- she did many good deeds out -- spontaneously. She had poor people, or people who were -- who were in need, and she was a very warm person and also her whole attitude was Viennese. For instance, she would sing all the time, and would sing Viennese songs.

Q: Was your family religious?

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A: Well, in my time, only my grandfather was religious. He went every day to the synagogue, but he said it's nonsense what they are saying there. Yet he insisted to go there because he said one has to maintain the tradition. Not to go there would be a kind of betrayal of our ancestors. And the rest of my family was not religious. At the high holidays they perhaps would to the synagogue, but not otherwise.

Q: What about your family's politics, your father and mother's politics?

A: Well, you know, my father had the great experience of the first World War. And he, like all the grownups who lived in my time were against the war, were for democracy, were against the Hapsburgs. So now, as I read history, it turns out that the Hapsburgs were really protectors of the Jews. They were not against the Jews. They used the Jews and protected them, that is to say, at least in the last two centuries, as least since Joseph the second, who contributed to the emancipation of the Jews who lived between 1780 and 1790. He was emperor of Germany.

Q: When Hitler came to power did your -- was your discussion in -- among your father and mother ab-about what was going on?

A: Well, it was not only when Hitler came to power. My parents and the whole population was politically very interested, very interested. And I remember that as a little boy, six years old, I saw the Nazis marching with the red flag, with the swastika in their flag. But these people were not considered to be our enemies, because the personal relations with them were very good. So they were in

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principle against the Jews, but not in practice. And the -- when Hitler won a great victory in the elections of 1830 -- of 1930, then the Nazi wer -- Nazi problem and the Hitler problem became very acute because we knew very well, we understood very well that might affect us.

Q: Were you --

A: So let me say, we followed it very, very, very closely and although I was a young person, I didn't have much experience, I know a lot about the initial time of the Hitler regime because it fascinated us and we knew, we realized we have a vital interest in it.

Q: Were you close with your brother?

A: Yes. We -- we were very close, even though there was an age difference of five years.

Q: You played together, and --

A: We played together. Of course, he was the -- the model, the role model whom I followed.

Q: Is he still?

A: No, but it's in a different stage of our life.

Q: I wanted to jump way ahead --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- to your meeting with Elizabeth and your f-friendship with --

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A: Yes.

Q: -- with her and the first time you met her.

A: Yeah. Well, we met in Paris in 1939. We were refugees, and we were really at the lowest level of society because we had no country to protect us. The French didn't like u -- not -- didn't like us, not personally, but they had too many refugees, there was unemployment in France, and at this time I met Elizabeth in Paris, in the summer of 1939. She went -- she participated in a club of young [indecipherable] and I once came there and participated in this club, too. A kind of club, it wasn't a real club. And that's where we met. And that was before the outbreak of the war. That was in May 1939 and the war broke out at the beginning of September.

Q: And did you become friends then?

A: Oh, we became friends from the very beginning, right.

Q: What was it that was the attraction between the two of you?

A: Well, that's very difficult to say. You know, many great philosophers have th -- have thought about the reasons which attract men and women. I think it's very difficult to say. But it was also a tragic time. We met in May 1939 for the first time, the war broke out at the beginning of September. I volunteered for the army, so we were separated. I came back on leave in December 1939 and then again in -- at Easter time, I think in -- in May -- March or April 1939. And then the war

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separated us completely, but we met after the war by chance, in a little village in southern France and were for a short while together, but a couple of months later, I was interned in a concentration camp in France. That was after the defeat of France and so we -- we -- we didn't lose contact, because we were in correspondence, but in December 1941, Elizabeth and her family left France for America. So I didn't see her from nine -- from 1940 until 1947 where we met again in England and then we married.

Q: You also were -- you knew her mother and father.

A: Oh yes, I knew her family very well, yes.

Q: What was your relationship with her father?

A: Very friendly relationship. Her father was a very, very highly educated and highly intelligent person, so it was very nice and interesting to talk to him and she -- her mother was a very nice lady and a very friendly lady.

Q: And at one point in the video you said you couldn't stay with them, you had -- you went off --

A: I couldn't stay with them because when I was reunited with Elizabeth and with her parents, her parents -- her father was not yet demobilized and they had no money and nothing to eat. I remember the whole family, that is to say, Elizabeth's father, Elizabeth's mother, Elizabeth and for a couple of days even I ate the ration

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which her father got from the military. So one meal for four or five people. That made it impossible to stay there.

Q: Well now I want to jump ahead further, past --

A: Yes.

Q: -- the war, to liberation. And I wanted to ask you what happened -- if you could recount what happened immediately following liberation, where you went.

A: Well, my libern -- liberation is a very long story. I de-decided in -- to evade and not to go along with the SS on their hung -- on their death marches. I was in hiding and then the Russian army came and I went back -- I tried to go back to Czechoslovakia, but there was still war, you couldn't go back. So I very los -- slowly drifted back to Czechoslovakia and from there to my former home where there was nobody left. And I stayed another year in Czechoslovakia and that was the beginning of communism, but it was not the communists in power, but you felt it. So in 1946 I got a visa to go to England where I stayed another year and then I left England for America and came into America in February 1948.

Q: When -- when -- immediately after you were liberated, what did you have in your possession?

A: Nothing.

Q: Nothing at all.

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A: I had nothing. As a matter of fact, four months -- no, no, that's not correct, two months after my liberation, I got the first document which established my identity. Before -- and I still have it, I had proofs that I was deloused, see, because in Polish towns they tried to prevent the spread of lice, all of us had lice. So they gave you a paper that you have been in a place where they disinfected you.

Q: How was your health, then?

A: My -- I recovered very fast. I had the very good physically constitution, in spite of the fact that I was fo -- over four years in concentration camps, and I was over four years or even longer hungry. And in spite of the fact that wa -- I collapsed twice due to hunger, I recovered very fast. Very, very fast. And I -- my liberation took place in January 1945, and in May, June, I looked absolutely normal and I felt very well.

Q: Do you remember your first full meal after liberation, what that was?

A: Yes, there I got a little bit sick. We crossed the Czech frontier in February 1945 coming from Poland and we were received by chance, by a Jewish family which had been hidden in the mountains and had come back. And they had -- they came back to their own house, there was plenty of food and great comfort and they were extremely friendly to us. And sure, the first meals made me sick, but that was temporary.

Q: You ate too much.

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A: I don't know, but it made me sick.

Q: Had you been thinking when you were in the concentration camp what it was you would want to do when you -- if and when you were freed, or you got your freedom?

A: No, that was impossible, I mean, our main concern was not to be killed. And so what we would do afterwards was beyond us.

Q: So when you were li -- when you got your freedom, what were your plans, what were you thinking?

A: I had no plans, and most of those who survived had no plans, because the impact of the concentration camp was overwhelming and it was very difficult to find your orientation under these new circumstances. We had no plans. And if I had a plan it was later on my wish to be reunited with Elizabeth and to go to America. So if there was any element of a plan, it was America.

Q: Did you know the whereabouts of -- of your parents?

A: Oh yes, I know it very, very wer -- in great detail, for the following reason.

When I came back to Brno, to Moravia, there was a man who had been with one foot in the concentration camp. He had converted from Judaism and was Catholic, he had a non-Jewish wife. So he was always supposed to be deported but was not deported. He was a neighbor of ours and a nice man. And he called me and told me the following, that during the war a German soldier came to visit him and

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brought a message from my father which stated that my father -- my mother had been -- had been massacred together with 30,000 Jewish women -- women and my father and the husbands and the relatives had to look on. And this German soldier was behind where my father and his colleagues were. They were -- they formed a kind of outer chain, then there came my father and the men, then came the SS and then came my mother and all the women, who perhaps had to -- probably we -- had to dig their own grave. So that was one -- and as proof of the veracity of this story, my father gave to this man, who was a very decent man, who happened to be in the army, a picture of mine, a photo of when I was about 11 years old. A couple of days later I met a young man in [indecipherable]. His name was Spitzer, I still remember it. And then -- after he heard my name, he told me that he had been with my father in a concentration camp in Lublin, and he knew my father very well and he confirmed the story, my father had told him the story which I heard from this former neighbor of ours. And I said goodbye to this young man by the name of Spitzer and two days later it occurred to me, I have to see him again and talk more with him. I couldn't find him any more.

Q: And when you were liberated, you -- you knew that your father had -- had been killed.

A: When -- you know, I was liberated under very dramatic circumstances, the SS evacuated some 5,000 of those who were with -- had been with me in the camp,

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that was Auschwitz number three. And there were, however, other prisoners who had come into the camp, and many of them were massacred by the SS after the people who were originally with -- with -- with me in the camp, had been -- had left the camp and were on this -- on these death marches. And the camp was -- the SS set fire on the camp and it was very miraculous that I escaped and survived. And it wa -- it was from this camp, which happened to be between the German and the Russian front -- we were in between -- that I escaped into the Russian side and to Poland.

Q: And had you heard news about your father?

A: Oh no. I -- you know, I wasn't shocked when I heard the story about my -- I was shocked about the way my mother died, but it was self understood for me that my whole family is dead. That was --

Q: You had a feeling.

A: Oh, a feeling, a-a-absolutely sure.

Q: And -- and when was it confirmed, when y --

A: Well, it was confirmed when I talked to these men in -- it was perhaps in June, July 1945.

Q: And he also told you about not only your mother but your father?

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A: About my mother, my father, that's right, yes. Well, fo -- he didn't know about my father. He knew only about my father had -- th-the message of my father and di -- the death of my father was confirmed by this young man, Spitzer.

Q: And what about your brother?

A: My brother was in England.

Q: And did you know that?

A: Oh yes. When I was deported from France, I managed to send him a postcard saying I am returning home, I don't like it. He understood. I couldn't say exactly what happened. And it is -- it was probably a French policeman who mailed -- who mailed this card, because I couldn't mail it.

Q: Was he in -- in Britain for the duration of the war?

A: He was in Britain for the duration of the war, he came shur -- to Britain shortly before the outbreak of the war and he came to the United States in 1948.

Q: You -- how long were you in the town of -- and I don't know how to pronounce it, Chessikakowa?

A: Częstochowa, Częstochowa. Two days, three days. The Russians had confiscated -- the Russians had occupied this town and had confiscated a very big building of on -- an old building. I wonder what it served for before. And in this building to establish the repatriation office. And there were -- there were many with us, many French prison -- former prisoners of war, French prisoners of war, a

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few British prisoners of war. Probably also, but I am not sure, a very few American pilots who had been shot down. And then -- well, all kinds of people who -- who escaped the Germans. And the Russians tried to help us but they were very clumsy and very badly organized. So after two or three days I left Częstochowa. Częstochowa is a very famous town in Poland because one of the Catholic saints comes from Częstochowa.

Q: When you left there, were you with anyone, or were you by yourself?

A: When I left there I was with somebody and we walked, we decided to walk to another -- to hike -- I [indecipherable] to say walk -- to another Polish town Katowice. And we wanted to hike, but there were -- except for Russian military wagons, there was nobody on the road -- on the road who would take you along, who could take you along. So we walked. It was very cold, snow was very high and we walked to Katowice.

Q: And why were you going there?

A: Because I had the idea -- I knew the eastern part of Czechoslovakia, he -- has -- has been liberated, so I had the foolish idea to go east, east, east, and cross the high mountains in -- in winter and go to this liberated part of Czechoslovakia.

Q: And how long did it take you to get there?

A: Well, I can tell you exactly. I left the camp on the 26th of January, 1945, and we crossed the Czech frontier on the 14th of February, it was rather fast, relatively

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fast. But generally we were walking -- perhaps no -- not always. Sometimes we got a -- a -- somebody took us along. But somebody was always the Russian soldiers because there was no other vehicle on the road.

Q: What -- you had mentioned, I believe, in your video that in postwar Czechoslovakia there were -- arbitrary things were happening.

A: Oh yes.

Q: What was that?

A: Well, the Czechs were very badly treated and very badly oppressed by the Germans, and by the Nazis. And when the war ended, they decided to expel all German inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. Now that was certainly arbitrary and cruel, because not all Germans were Nazis. And so the Germans suffered like the Jews. Not quite like the Jews, but similar to the Jews, because this deportation of the Germans were under much better condition than the deportation of the Jews. Created not only hardship, many people died. But the difference was that when the Jews were dep -- deported, they knew it's -- it's a death march, th -- it's -- it's the end of life, whereas the Germans didn't have to fear that they would be bad -- that they would be killed when they got -- they were deported to Germany. And the Czechs were very chauvinistic.

Q: Was there much anti-Semitism in postwar Czechoslovakia?

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A: No. You know, the -- the czechos -- Czechoslovakia, the Czech -- Czechoslovak Republic was very democratic. Was founded in 1918 and [indecipherable] 1938 and there was no antisemit -- no anti-Semitism. One of the few countries where there was no anti-Semitism. It has a very humane and liberal government, there was no anti-Semitism. And the Czech government also behaved very tolerantly towards the refugees who came from Germany. After the war, they come -- as long as it was there the communists were very powerful, it was still a democratic regime, but they started to prevail. And I s -- as long as I was there I didn't -- I didn't notice. There was no anti-Semitism, but I do know that under the communist regime, shortly thereafter, when they came to power, there started to be anti-Semitism. And certainly it became stronger and stronger and in 1951, Czech communists who were Jewish were punished, and one or two were hanged. And they were selected because they were Jewish. They were Czech communist Jews.

Q: How long did you remain in Czechoslovakia?

A: I remained in Czechoslovakia one year. From '45 to '46 and then I got the visa for England.

Q: And y -- and during that time you were studying, you went to school?

A: Yes. You asked me before what my plans were. I really didn't know what I should do, but I went to school, I went to the university. Not -- not very

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enthusiastic, not very devoted to studying, but I went to the university. But I really don't -- didn't know what to do. You know, it was an entirely new situation and not only for me, for all those who came back and who were more or less in the same circumstances. Not only were our families destroyed, everything had changed. So you couldn't find your beer -- bearings very easily.

Q: Yes, you said you were disoriented, that --

A: Yes. And you know, if you read, you know, about the book, "All Quiet on the Western Front" by a German writer, Remarque, who describes the first World War in the west. He wrote a second book which is called "The Way Back." And in this book he describes the disorientation of former soldiers, German soldiers, they don't find their way in the German postwar society. And in a certain sense you find the same thing with the American Vietnam veterans.

Q: Yeah.

A: And still they don't find their way.

Q: W-When did you begin finding your way? When did you begin becoming oriented?

A: Well, I think only in America and only after I had finished my studies. When I gr -- I would say when I got my first jo -- not my first job, no, no, I had many temporary jobs, but when I got my government job. That was settling back on that -- into normal circumstances.

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Q: Did you ever think that you would live a normal life after that?

A: Oh yes, why not? But you know, you didn't see it.

Q: Can you talk about your reunion with Elizabeth?

A: Well, Elizabeth worked at a job in New York City in the New York Public Library and -- and not necessarily she, but her father scratched together enough money to take a trip to Europe, and they came incidentally with the Queen Elizabeth, which was a luxury boat, more or less. And we met in London after these many years, and she found that we love each other as we did before and we decided to marry, and so we married. And yesterday it was 50 years since we married. Of course we never expected that -- is that we would marry -- we met in Paris. We were both born in Vienna. We never expected that we would marry in the Royal Borough of Kensington, in -- which is part of London.

Q: Well, congratulations on your 50th anniversary. How did you first get word that Elizabeth was even alive?

A: I mean, I think in July nine -- the war ended in May 1945 and I think by July communications were possible, and I had a cousin in America, in New York and knew -- he knew Elizabeth and he knew my address, and I had written to him and so I [indecipherable] Elizabeth.

Q: And how did you locate -- how did you locate her? Did you write her?

A: Yeah.

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Q: So you were married i -- after -- a week after you were --

A: Right, right, something -- something like this, yes.

Q: And that was a surprise to you, or --

A: No, no, no, we intended to marry.

Q: Oh yeah?

A: Yeah.

Q: You knew that you were going to -- to see her and that you would probably ask her to marry you?

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Then, how long before you came to America?

A: I came to be married in June 1947, and I came to America in February 1948.

Q: And you had to remain in Britain for awhile?

A: I had, because you see, at that time American immigration was based on quotas and the quotas depended on the pla -- on the country where you were born. So I was not born in Czechoslovakia, I'm Viennese born, so I was in the Austrian quota. And because of persecution, and the Austrian quota was always oversubscribed, it was very difficult to get a visa. And I got priority because after having married, I was the husband of an American citizen. Elizabeth was already an American.

Q: So what was that like, coming to America in 1948?

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A: Oh, to come to America was very impressive and it wasn't very encouraging because you wondered how you can withstand all the institution tha -- I mean, not the institution but the way of life that you didn't know. It took some time. Takes every immigrant some time before he gets somehow settled. And that affects all -- all phases, all aspects of life. For instance, when I came to America, on the first or second day, I asked when we have to go to the police to register. I didn't realize and couldn't understand that you don't have to go to the police and register.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

A: -- and one of the most amazing -- amazing experiences was that I had to go -- I had to have a document notarized. And I was told -- and I asked where is the notary public, and I was told it's the newspaper man at the corner. I couldn't imagine that a newspaperman could be the notary public, because in Europe a notary public was a man of a certain standing, like a lawyer, with a big office. So I went around the newspaper stand, I was looking for a sign that this is the notary public, until I realized, or somebody made my mistake understood to me.

Q: So, you were still disoriented.

A: Yeah -- so -- but a -- but yeah, cli -- they are little things and I think all Americans, or most Americans -- no, all Americans except the Indians hail from immigrants. But the present generation and those who have se -- have -- who have

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been -- who -- who -- who are natives of America don't realize what it means to be an immigrant anywhere, not only in America. For instance -- after all I was a person of common sense, I didn't know how to do certain things at the post office, because your -- the way the post office worked here is different from how it works in Europe. Now, that's the other way around to, if you move to Europe, or to any other country.

Q: And how was your English when you first came to --

A: Well, I could speak, but it -- it was broken, it was broken English and I really have ne -- never fully acquired a mastery of English.

Q: So what were your impressions of -- other than the examples that you gave, about the notary --

A: Well, the impression were overwhelming, primal -- primarily because America is more advanced in many respects than Europe. And number two, I came from war-torn Europe, which had fallen back beyond the time when the war broke out. Even in England, conditions were pretty tough as compared to pre-war times, to peace. And the American civilization is quite different from the European civilization. So there are many aspects and many details which we have to learn about, to which we have to get accustomed.

Q: Elizabeth said that -- that it was the freedom that was remarkable. Being able to just walk down the street.

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A: Yeah, that was remarkable, not only the freedom in comparison to what happens now, also the safety and security. For instance, I worked -- when I was in New York, when I studied, I worked in a typewriter shop. And sometimes we were told by our bosses to bring a typewriter somewhere to some part of the town, to the Lower East Side, to deliver it there. There was no fear whatsoever that somebody would take the typewriter away. There was no fear at all at that time, when I came to America, that somebody would attack you, that somebody will mug you.

Q: So what were your plans when you came to America, did you have any?

A: I had no plans.

Q: And how did you [indecipherable]

A: I thought it's -- it's -- it's reasonable to try to continue my studies. And that what I did during the first two years. But I wasn't sure whether my studies would help me and whether I -- whether I would succeed in getting a reasonable position, or a reasonable job.

Q: What was -- what was it that you wanted to do?

A: I really didn't know what I wanted to do.

Q: You were doing odd jobs?

A: Yeah, but the odd jobs I did only because I was studying. I wanted to finish my studies. I wasn't very hopeful that would help me.

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Q: And were you going -- you were going to school while you were living in New York?

A: Oh yes, I went -- from the very beginning I went to school for about two years, then I made my Master's -- I got my Master's degree and then I was able, with the help of Elizabeth's father to get a job as junior instructor at Johns Hopkins University. That was miserably paid. Elizabeth worked in -- we were in Baltimore, Elizabeth worked in the veteran's hospital and that we were -- that what we were living from. And then I decided I cannot continue living on such a small salary, which practically was no salary. I have to look for another job, and Baltimore being near Washington, I went to Washington looking for a job and I got one and I got first -- I got a very good offer in the treasury, but I needed a job immediately so I got a summer job in the Department of Agriculture, a two month's job and s -- out of these two months became 40 years.

Q: You studied political science, or what did you study at Hopkins?

A: Economics.

Q: Economics. And when was it that you decided that that's what you wanted to do?

A: Oh, the moment I came -- the moment I came, I think the second or third day after my arrival, I decided I have to continue my studies. I had studied in Europe, too. And the question what to study was clear, economics. It seemed to be clear.

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Q: Why was that clear to you?

A: Because it seemed to be a practical occupation, not to remove from life, not necessarily a research [indecipherable] you can make research in economics, but it dealt with contemporary events. And that, of course, was of great interest.

Q: When did you become an American citizen?

A: In 1950, bec -- I didn't have to wait five years because my visa was based on my -- on Elizabeth being an American citizen. So after two years I became a citizen.

Q: Was that significant for you? Was it very meaningful?

A: Oh, certainly it was very meaningful. It was more than meaningful, it was a major event, because you mustn't forget, we always speak about the Holocaust and of -- and of persecution. But the fact that we were refugees before, meant that we were odd man out, we had no legal status. We had no country to which we could appeal for protection. Nobody cared for us. So to be again -- to have again a little status, and what was more, to be an American citizen was grandiose. So that was certainly a great event.

Q: Was it in a -- in a room or a place where a lot of people were?

A: No, no, it was my cousin -- my second cousin who is now dead, and I don't know who else went with me. Elizabeth? I don't think Elizabeth. Somebody. Wa -

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- no, it was just a judge and it was a ba -- the -- the -- I mean, the event alone was -
- the fact of the event was impr -- impressive.

Q: What -- what did it mean to you then to be an American?

A: Well, to be the citizen of a big country, which was a free country, and a humane country, but I -- I -- I mean, I wouldn't say I'm -- I never believed I am a Yankee, or I could become a Yankee. I was a citins -- citizen of the United States. And don't forget, I was born under an emperor and I was an Austrian citizen. And then the empire collapsed, then I became a Czechoslovakian citizen. Then I was nothing, because there was no Czechoslovakia any more and nobody else wanted to recognize our nationality. Then -- so when I became an American citizen, this had many aspects, many positive aspects, but from a very personal point of view, it meant that was again -- that I wa -- I was again irregularized. What is a man who has no country? He's a nobody in the sense of the world.

Q: Was there -- I-I'm sure there were negative aspects of -- of your -- your arrival to America and your -- your transition.

A: Yeah.

Q: What -- what were some of them -- were the hardest things?

A: I don't think there were any negative aspects. I was not very encouraged that I would be able to succeed. I mean, I was interested in economics. I was interested in studying and then teaching, that was very nice, in Johns Hopkins, so it was a

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modest position. But teaching there was very nice and I liked it. But I couldn't see how I could return to a normal, middle class life, because during s -- up to the time I had gotten a job in the government, I was not mi -- I was not middle class, I was very far down, no, that didn't -- that was no hardship. That was one of the positive aspects of America, that in spite of the fact that I had very, very, very little money, I could have a breakfast which was richer than the breakfast of a European minister of that time. Unless he dealt on the black market, he couldn't have a breakfast, at that time, which cons -- for less than one dollar I could buy toast with butter, a piece of bacon on it, orange juice -- imagine orange juice at that time in Europe -- compared to Europe, and -- and coffee. So I wasn't suffering in any way.

Q: Why did you have such doubts about your ability to ex -- succeed?

A: Because we didn't know how -- I didn't know how to succeed in America. You know it only afterwards. You cannot judge an experience which you don't have.

Q: You -- did you -- you consider yourself an ambi -- ambitious person before the war? Did you have a-ambitions and --

A: No, I am not ambitious, but I am interested in many things, and I am particularly interested in history, not only for academic reasons, but I lived through it. You know, we -- we lived in Czechoslovakia and during my earlier life in a very, very upsetting time. I mean, the collapse, for instance, of Austria was a

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major, major event. And the collapse of Czechoslovakia, the abandonment of -- of the Czechs [indecipherable] England. All these were major events which affected us, of course. So, it was difficult to find, at the beginning, a satisfactory orientation. One didn't know what's going to happen.

Q: Di-Did people wa -- in your first few years in America, did people ask you where you were from, what had happened to you? Were they curious, did you talk to them about what had happened?

A: Well, you know, when you asked for -- when you applied for a job in New York City, people were not allowed to ask you where you are coming from. It's -- you know, in -- in order to -- to avoid any discrimination. But on the other hand, people had not the slightest idea of the Holocaust. That's a phenomenon that's an -- a -- a subject which became interesting only in the 80's. Once a la -- I told the lady -- I don't know any more who it was, but I remember the event, that I was in a camp. And she said, what did you do to get into a camp? She had no idea. I -- in -- when I arrived in -- in the summer of 19 -- 1948, I had a -- an eczema. It wasn't dangerous, but it was all over my body and I had to be hospitalized. And the people in Mount Sinai hospital didn't -- also, they saw my number here, they didn't want to accept me because I had -- I couldn't promise that I would pay. So th -- there was a -- tha-that's a very interesting phenomenon. Now there's so much

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talk and fuss about the Holocaust. But people here discovered this only -- well, I would say in the 80's, not before.

Q: People ask about the number on your arm?

A: No, they didn't even know what it is. I mean, you know, that was, for instance, one of the great contrasts between America and Europe, because in America -- in Europe people knew about the Nazi regime, and it was not only a Jewish affair, thousands of non-Jews, 10 thousands, hundred thousands [indecipherable]. When you heard what the Pope said when he was in Poland, he s -- he went to a place where 135 Polish intellectuals, officers, had been arrested and sent to concentration camps. It was German policy. And all of them died.

Q: So people weren't asking you --

A: No.

Q: -- or inquiring. Were you telling anyone, were you talking about it?

A: No, because nobody was no -- in the first place nobody was interested. In the second place, the few people who were interested were afraid to hear ster -- and still are, still afraid to hear stories about concentration camps. All this talk avoids talking about what happened in concentration camp. Because the listener identifies himself or herself with the person who tells the story and is afraid and shrinks away. I mean, people go as far as Anne Frank because she doesn't speak of in -- of

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g -- of cruelties. It's a sad story, but it's not a story where all the bestiality of the SS comes to the fore.

Q: Was that frustrating to you or would you rather have, at that point not have talked about it?

A: Well, I was always willing. I think one should talk about it, it's a -- it's a major event. But I was not frustrated, I mean, you consider people as being ignorant, because -- and not understanding the time in which they are living, if they show no interest. But I know why they show no interest, they do show interest, but they're afraid of it.

Q: Was it still very much alive for you a -- at --

A: Well, yes.

Q: Is it still?

A: Well, you know, the years have diminished the liveliness of the experience. On the other hand, due to the fact that Elizabeth worked in the Holocaust Museum, it is now nearer to me as it would have been had I not -- had Elizabeth not worked there. I -- what did I want to say now? I don't know. I wanted to say something.

Q: Wa -- about Elizabeth had gone over --

A: No, no. No, no. I mean, my interest in the Holocaust, I know what I wanted to say. In Europe, those of us who had survived ex -- talked all the time and all the time and all the time about our experiences. And of course you -- you learn from

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each other new things, which we personally hadn't experienced. But on -- on -- on -- on -- on -- because of this and because I was always interested in history, and I have read a lot ev -- of -- about the Holocaust before the museum started here, I'm interested in, certainly.

Q: How much did Elizabeth know about what happened to you in your early years and when did -- when did you start telling her the details?

A: Well, she knew in general what has happened. But, I mean, she hadn't experienced it either, and she was in the same category as the non-survivors. Non-survivors in the sense of not having gone through this phase.

Q: She described finding something at -- at the -- at the museum about --

A: Yes.

Q: -- about Auschwitz and -- and --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and I suppose -- and she said she hadn't known a-about it, so that you hadn't gone into great detail about your experience.

A: No, you cannot, because it's very complex story. For instance, I was in Auschwitz, but what was Auschwitz? Auschwitz was a series of camps, not one camp. And one of the camps was Birkenau, where people came to be killed immediately. In the other camps, where we worked, many people were killed, and people died. For instance, I was lucky not to die of hunger. I was once near the

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point where I thought I couldn't continue any more. So it's a very complex subject, very complex subject.

Q: Do you remember the first time telling Elizabeth in detail?

A: Oh yes, I think that was probably still in -- in eng -- in England, yes.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Sorry.

Q: But she had said there was a -- there was a gray period where you just didn't discuss it, because she wasn't sure --

A: Oh. I never hesitated to discuss it with anybody. It was the f -- the fear of others, of your listeners, which we -- you noticed, which discouraged you to speak about the details.

Q: When -- when did you talk to your daughter Nicole about your experience?

A: Oh, I -- slowly. You cannot tell such a story to a child, still less when you're in Germany with the -- when we came to Germany, I mean, I was attaché in Bonn, she was six years old. And she did -- she went five days into the amer -- an American school, but on the sixth day we sent her to a German -- on Saturday she had to go to a German school, you know, to learn German, and she hated to go to school and she hated to learn German, she learned it much later. And under such circumstances you couldn't tell her where we are and what happened. But she learned it.

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Q: Maybe you can go back and you -- you started to talk about your 40 years with the -- working for the --

A: Oh yeah, yes.

Q: -- United States government. If you could go back to the chronology of -- of --

A: Yes, well, Johns Hopkins, they paid very, very badly and I also wasn't -- I learned a lot there and I was very happy to teach there, but I also wasn't happy about the ivory -- ivory situation of the school. It was far removed from the --

Q: Ivory tower?

A: Ivory tower. It was far removed of real life. So I looked for a job and I found a job, a temporary job, which then lasted 40 years. And I was very happy in that job for many reasons. First of all, it was a rather solid position -- a comparatively solid position. Number two, the subject was very, very interesting. It was a world agriculture, world trade, trade policy, very, very interesting subject. And I and all those who worked in the Department of Agriculture on this particular subject were very lucky because we learned about foreign policy, we follo -- followed foreign policy developments in foreign countries. And from a purely intellectual point of view, we had a very interesting job. And I was in the Department of Agriculture. First I didn't advance, then I advanced gradually. And -- and I -- I was very happy there, even is -- even when I didn't advance, I wasn't that -- I wasn't happy not to advance, but I was happy there, I liked the work. And in 1959 I was appointed to

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be assistant agricultural attaché at the American embassy in Germany. I was there from '59 to '64 and then I was transferred to Brussels to the common market. And there I was agricultural attaché for 10 years. And I probably could have stayed there forever, but I got an offer to lead the American agricultural delegation in a big trade negotiation in Geneva. It was called the Tokyo round because the decision to enter such negotiations was made in Tokyo. So I was then s -- seven years -- no, over seven years, six years -- less than seven years, six years in Geneva, then I came back to Washington. I was here for two years and then I was appointed agricultural attaché -- no, counselor. Counselor for agricultural affairs at the American embassy in Paris. So we came back to France again, and that was very nice. So my whole career was very nice and very satisfactory and very interesting.

Q: And when did you finally retire?

A: In 1990, seven years ago.

Q: What was that like, going to Germany and living there?

A: Well, you know, German is my mother tongue. I have, except for -- well, for the American studies and for the one year in Czechoslovakia after the war, where I went to the Czech university, I have only German schools. I have German grade school, German -- what is called the gymnasium, which is more than the high school here, but approximately in this category of schooling. And I went to the --

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to graduate [indecipherable] at the German university in Prague before the war. After the war the German university didn't exist any more. And I went for one year to the Czech university. And both the German and the Czech university had the names, Charles University. So I was very familiar with German -- and I had never lived in Germany, but still coming to Germany -- except in the concentration camp, I was familiar with their way of talking, with their way of thinking. I was very familiar with everything, which facilitated my work. At that time most, not all, but most of the people with whom I dealt, were former Nazis. Of course, they were hiding it, but they couldn't hide it. I didn't discuss anything with them, but you know the way they spoke, I mean, not specific, there were -- there was no question about this, I mean, this --

Q: There was no question --

A: No, except one little incidence, but I mean they were all good democrats, they said, but they were not. Now when I speak of those people, I mean primarily government official, and relatively high government officials, with exception, with exception. But for me it was fun because I understood that -- and I mean, I could see through them.

Q: It was fun.

A: It was fun. We had one incident which is remarkable. We ran a restaurant in a little town in Germany, Elizabeth and I, and we overheard a conversation at the

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next table, where one person said, no, Herr doctor, that goes too far. Expel yes, burning -- to burn them, no. And [indecipherable] said, all of them should have been burned, there are still some survivor.

Q: You overheard that?

A: Oh yeah, we overheard that.

Q: How did that make you feel?

A: Well, it was laughable, I mean, you see, Nazism is a very complex per -- very, very complex problem. It requires a lot to understand why it happened, who did it. For instance, those who were the SS, those people who were in the concentration camps and killed people and tortured people, these were the lowest of the lowest. You know? These were at the margin of society. The others acquiesced in it. Take the German government. Hitler was a man who had no career before he became a politician. Goering was a -- a former officer who didn't find his bearings after the war. They were all people at the margin of society. But these people didn't kill, I mean, all -- at -- at the top. But those who were in the camps, the SS, the SA and those from the -- the police battalions who were in Poland and killed not only Jews, but thousands, 10 thousands of Poles. These people were really the -- the scum of the earth. Really, from every point of view the scum of the earth and they were also, I would say, the scum of the German people.

Q: You were associating with -- with people who perhaps gave the orders --

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A: Yeah.

Q: -- that were somehow involved --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- in a higher level --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- and I would think that would -- that would make -- part of me would be --
would be very upset and angry at -- at having to associate with --

A: Well, you -- you -- you couldn't identify this or that person as being a
murderer, you couldn't do that. But you knew what the attitude was.

Q: But you -- you had said it was -- it was fun or amusing. Was there a part of you
that was --

A: Well, imagine during my stay in Germany, and even when I was in -- in
Brussels, I used to go to the so-called Green Week, which was an agricultural
exhibition in Germany -- in -- in Berlin. An exhibition which had a long tradition.
Every year by the end of January, there was this big exhibition. And at two or
three occasions, I was invited, together with other people to dinner by the
president of Germany. So where I was sitting? Not next to him, but this was a long
dinner table and I was invited to dinner by the president of Germany. Certainly
that was amusing, it gave me a lot of satisfaction, because I-I realized, and I qui --
I thought of it, I was condemned to die. I was not only condemned to be in the

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camp, all of us were destined to die, by the highest authorities of the German Reich. And now here is another highest authority, highest authority at least formally, of the German Reich and I was his invitee.

Q: You had defied --you somehow defied them. [indecipherable]

A: Yeah, yeah. So that was -- I mean -- well, you know, if a child is bad -- suppose you have a very bad child, you don't hate the child, you try to understand. And I wouldn't say that I didn't hate the Nazis, I certainly hated them. And I say [indecipherable] the scum of the earth, but I try to understand. And my feeling is that apart from this lowest level of society, the guilt of the German people consisted in acquiescence, rather than in active persecution. On the other hand, there was resistance, and there were so many shades of attitudes, like these two people who -- but there were many more shaped like these two people whom we overheard in the restaurant. And one said expel, the other said kill, and so on and so on and so on. And then, how can you judge any nation? A nation consists of millions of people. How can you really judge and know what their feelings are and what their attitude are? And one important thing, no country in modern times has suffered such dictatorship as the German people. It was incredible, it was -- the dictatorship alone was German efficiency. And the Germans, who believed they are courageous, were afraid. And how could you -- how could you oppo -- if you

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opposed it you were -- you -- you -- you were killed yourself, or you were sent to a concentration camp, at least.

Q: Did you go back to Auschwitz after the war?

A: No, I didn't go back, but not because of any fear of being overcome by emotions, but simply for the following reasons. When I was in Germany, or in -- no, in Brussels, I once made a trip to France and I visited the military camp where I had served in southern France. And there was nothing left. I didn't recognize the place. I knew that was the place. The barracks had gone, there was no spirit in it. And I know when I go to Auschwitz, there is no shouting SS, no fear. What you see are remnants of a different time. They don't tell me anything. I have my own memories, but the memories will not be revived.

Q: You didn't feel as though there was any use for you --

A: There is no --

Q: -- personally to go.

A: -- no, there is no use. Yeah, I was with Elizabeth last year in Austria and another person who was with us wanted to see Mauthausen, and they went there. I didn't go along, but not because I -- I am afraid I would be emotionally distressed. It is not the same. What you see are not living things.

Q: Mm-hm.

End of Tape One, Side B

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Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: Because Elizabeth was not at a -- a concentration camp --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- or -- or an extermination camp, do you not consider her a survivor?

A: No, a survivor -- the question is what do you survive? If you were not in a concentration camp you're not a survivor of a concentration camp. If you were not in a battle, you're not survivor of this battle. No, I mean -- oh yes, she is a -- she was persecuted, she had her own experiences. But that's one thing. One cannot speak of survivors who didn't survive a certain -- a certain event or a certain process. On the other hand, there is no merit to be a survivor and nobody has to be proud of -- of having been a survivor. You can be -- no, one shouldn't be proud at all. I think pariet -- parietes should not be applied. One can be satisfied, one can be happy to have survived or satisfied to have shown resistance and courage. But to be proud? The Bible says pride cometh before the fall. I mean, I just mention this, but there is no merit in it.

Q: You hear a lot about survivor's guilt. Have you ever experienced any of that?

A: No, that's nonsense. What kind of guilt? Did they do anything wrong, that they survived? They should be happy that they survived. You know, there are many false stories, there's a whole mythology about the survivor and the survivor's children. The children are influenced by ha-having learned about what happened

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to the parents, naturally, but why should anybody be guilty that you survived?

Why? It's ridiculous.

Q: How do you think Nicole, your daughter was influenced by you being a survivor?

A: She learned it gradually and it -- she understands, I think. You know, she also had th -- she went -- she was with us in Germany and she went to the German school, and she hated school and she hated this. But then she -- when she came to - - when we were in Brussels, we sent her to a school where you -- the children were taught in their mother tongue, in -- and in a foreign language. Now, there was however, only a limited number of languages which were considered mother tongue, and English was at that time not considered the mother tongue for a child. So she went to courses which were in German, which was considered her mother tongue, and in French. Geography was in French, history was in German and so on. And she learned German in Brussels at the school, not in Germany. No, she -- she has a very objective attitude, and you know, she has such a -- very good experiences about Germany. And I must say, I was going to -- I have gone to German grade school, I repeat this, to German high school, to German -- to German university. And in grade st-school, my teacher was a neo-Nazi, probably later on was a Nazi. In -- in -- in the -- in high school for eight years, the head of the teachers was a Nazi. And I had good experiences with him, but that doesn't

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excuse they're Nazis and that was their stupidity. But after all, I had very good German friends. Chauvinism is really a high degree of ignorance [indecipherable]. Chauvinism is a high degree of stupidity. Why should one hit somebody because he speaks another language, or he is formally and really part of another nation of people. Only people who are very, very narrow minded have such views or attitudes.

Q: Have you -- you talk in the video about the Polish officer, the former Polish officer --

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: -- who saved your life --

A: Kubacic.

Q: -- a couple of times. Hav-Have you -- did you ever talk to him after the -- after the war?

A: No, I -- you know, the story is as follows. When I was in Vernet, which was a horrible French concentration camp, but we were not beaten or tortured, we were hungry and we -- people starved to death, I was there by mistake, as they said, so to facilitate -- to ease my position, I was made assistant postmaster, which meant I could circulate in the camp and distribute -- distribute the mail. And one day Kubacic came to me, I hadn't known him, and asked me wher -- and asked me whether I could give the letters and the rest to him -- to him personally, because

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the French officials who were in there took the stamps away and his letters had very beautiful stamps. And so I became acquainted with him without knowing him really. And when we were deported in the train, already in Poland and we moved through the city of Katowice, he was standing next to me -- you know, in the train, the train moved through the city of Katowice, he was standing next to me and he had this -- the -- the strong desire to talk to somebody. And since he knew me, he talked to me and he told me he's not Jewish. And he cannot say what he really -- that he's -- that he was a Polish Intelligence officer.

Q: Yeah.

A: And then he helped me -- that was at the time when I broke down out of hunger, and he was able to -- you know, he was our kapo and as kapo, he was supervising the food rations which we got. And he managed to let me have two of rations. And in this way I ris -- I recovered again.

Q: Do you know what happened to him after the war?

A: Yes. Well, I don't know, but the end of the story is -- I don't know whether I told this in the first interview. I was on good terms with him, he had helped me. And one day he started to shout to -- shout at me and beat me. And I didn't understand what has happened. Two -- two weeks later he had escaped. And he beat me and shouted at me so that nobody ca -- he was very decent -- that nobody believed that I known about his plan to escape. And about a year later we read in a

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French paper -- you know, papers were smuggled into the camp. There were [indecipherable] many Frenchmen and sometimes it was a piece of a paper, but there was a paper, a Parisian paper which stated that six -- six French resistance fighter had been arrested and executed. And they gave the names. And one of the names was Stanislaw Kubacic. Now whether it was the same, I don't know.

Q: Do you ever go to any reunions, or do you ever meet up or talk with any of the other survivors at your [indecipherable] camp --

A: No, I have a friend who happened to be in the same camp as I was, but I don't know -- I don't know any survivors here. I would be interested to talk to people, but I don't know any.

Q: What would you be interested in talking to them about?

A: Because, when you talk to people who have the sim -- a similar experience as you, you learn about new details which you didn't experience, or which you didn't know. Also, recollections came -- come back if you talk with somebody you -- there might be an event which you have entirely forgotten. And somebody mentions something in this context and the event comes back to you, and you start to remember.

Q: Do you talk to your friend who lives in this area about --

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A: Oh yes, yes, we talk, yeah. Well, he doesn't -- you know, he's now in a situation where he talks all the -- all the time about the camp, but sometimes he doesn't want to hear about it. It doesn't matter to me.

Q: How -- is it always on your mind, do you think about it a lot, is it never far?

A: Well, you know, I had -- up to now, now my memory weakens very strongly. But I had an excellent memory. I don't know why, I cannot explain. You might have noticed that I said on the 14th of February we went to Czechoslova -- [indecipherable] different year. I remember date, I remember many details from the past. And so shortly I -- but I live it, my whole past, it's not only concentration camp. So, no doubt that was one of the greatest events in my life. If I say one, it was the greatest, but there was another one, which was of short duration. But I was in the Battle of France when France lost the war, and to be -- only for a short da -- time, under fire, under -- under -- under the fire of guns, it's quite an experience. But that was the same in Auschwitz because we were bombed and I was in the middle, once. Not all the time. But once I w -- the bombs were falling right and left. So that -- it wasn't such a great experience, I'll tell you why. It was intellectually, mentally it's a bit -- it was very noisy. You know, noise is horrible. Noise affects you physiologically, physically. And that was the -- that was the day when -- when we were shelled by ar-artillery.

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Q: I was going to ask you if there are any m -- smells or tastes or may -- and now -

-

A: Yes.

Q: -- noises that remind of --

A: Yes.

Q: -- of that camp.

A: I have the strange experience of having been led to the gallow, to a temporary gallow and th -- together with several other boys, and this gallow where they wanted to hang us was one of the cement with a kind of poster which -- you s -- you see it very often, you know, where you have a fence, it's -- it's a poster which is a bit -- a little bit curved, and the fence is fixed on this. When I see such a thing, I remember it.

Q: It reminds you of that.

A: Oh, it reminds me, yes. But I tell you, I have -- I had very few dreams wer -- were a-about the concentration camp. I had some about bombing. Bombing was a terrible experience, but had very few nightmares about the concentration camp. And yet, I-I think of it, not with pleasure, but I think of it and what happened. And you see, if you talk with people who had the similar experience, they remind you of certain things which you might have forgotten.

Q: You had said in -- in the video that the hanging incident --

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A: Yeah.

Q: -- or the near hanging incident had somehow receded in your memory for awhile.

A: Yeah. Right. I say there, or I believe it has receded because there was an [indecipherable] to -- to suppress it, you know? To me -- because it was really -- I mean, even the bombs were falling, when they were beating us, when I -- when I was so weak that I gave up really. I was about to ga -- give up. I -- I couldn't do any [indecipherable]. That didn't give you the feeling of the imme -- the feeling of immediate death, but this event, when they wanted to hang us, that was really the next -- the next thing is nothing. The next thing you are not here any more. And that, perhaps, created in me the desire to push it aside.

Q: When did it resurface and did you actually forget that it happened, or you just sort of pushed it way back?

A: You know, I have written my souvenirs -- my memoirs, and they are 420 pages, my whole life. It starts with my birth, until 1990. And of course a large part is devoted to the camp experience. And there, when I started to write this, then it came back, in all clarity. It was here, I knew about it.

Q: What year was that when you started writing?

A: Oh, a couple of years ago.

Q: Mm-hm. Was there anything that triggered it, that --

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A: No, I decided, I mean, since I had a ma -- an extremely na -- a life full of contrasts and full of extraordinary experiences, I should write it down. And I have done, but it's no -- really not finished, and I don't know -- I would like to -- I would like to have it published, but not because I am l-looking for glory, or -- or for a name or something. Just because I would like to give it to people and if I have it myself published from my own money, that costs a lot of money.

Q: I wanted to go back and -- and ask you one follow up question about the cement poles that you say --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- when you see them, it reminds you of that time that you were --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- almost hung. What -- what -- what feeling comes over you? Is it -- is it palpable?

A: Wel -- no, it's not frightening, but it reminds me of this event. I mean, I -- I -- I think there must be such poles here too. I cannot see it without immediately having the association.

Q: You said you do have nightmares sometimes, or have had nightmares of --

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: -- of the bombing.

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A: Of the bombing, yes. The -- and you know, that was an additional enemy. We had the -- the SS and we had the hunger, the beating of the -- by the SS, but the bombing was something -- an extraordinary event.

Q: I was curious to read where you thought the bombing of th -- o-of the railroad line would have been insignificant because they would have built it back up and that's a --

A: Oh yes, yes.

Q: -- I mean, still to this day a debate.

A: Yes. I say this because I myself has -- have worked on rebuilding trucks and I know how fast it goes. And you know, if -- if the -- the rail -- the -- the rails to Auschwitz had really been bombed, so the Germans would have taken the people out and shot them. They were able to shoot thousands, 10 thousands. It's, for instance interesting that the story I heard about my mother -- and I heard it from two sources, spoke always of 30,000. 30,000 people having been massacred there. In the literature about the Holocaust and about massacres, I think I've never read about 30,000. Perhaps Babi Jar, but I don't know whether they have been killed at the same time.

Q: You had read -- I had read in -- in -- in the transcripts of your video that you -- you said you considered that you had a lot of luck in your life.

A: Oh yes.

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Q: Do you still consider yourself lucky, or fortunate?

A: Yes, lucky -- luck -- lucky -- chance is the right word, because chance is a double meaning. It's chance [indecipherable] and it's chance opportunity, yes. So I was lucky because I had -- there were chances. And the chances were just chance and -- but also opportunity. I am satisfied -- not proud, but satisfied that I took certain decisions which were very dangerous, but I dared to take them. One was to get in -- to get into hiding when the camp was evacuated because if they had caught us, they would have killed us. They were very jittery. The SS was very jittery, they were afraid. And there were other occasions where I took very risky decisions, but I felt that has to be done, that is the impor -- the thing to do. And now I am older -- not only older, I'm old now, which is -- which amuses me. You know why it amuses me? It amuses me because I remember my grandfather, and how old -- I mean, I was on good terms with my grandfather, but how distant in age he was to me as a boy. Oh, I -- I express it by showing you with my hands where he was. And now I am in his -- a-at -- in this age.

Q: Does it feel -- still feel distant?

A: Yeah, yeah. I was in Vienna with a colleague a couple of years ago, and we saw -- we -- we -- we saw -- we passed some [indecipherable] elderly man, well dressed and very respectfully I -- I was l-looking. And I said to him, look, there

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still are -- seem to be people whom we owe respect to, but we are their age. We look the same as they do.

Q: I-I'm curious about the -- the fellow survivor who is your friend here.

A: Yeah.

Q: What in particular -- you say some -- on occasions you'll talk about what happened in the Holocaust. What [indecipherable]

A: Well, we -- we often exchange experiences, reminiscences about the events. I didn't know him in -- in the camp, and he is 10 - 15 years younger than I, so he was a young bo -- almost still a boy in the camp. He is of German origin, German is his mother tongue. So -- and he didn't look Jewish either, so he sometimes had a certain advantage from this fact. We had fun coming -- coming -- you know, there was one SS man who both of us knew and we called him Tom Mix. Tom Mix was a character out -- from out -- out of American movies. And as far as I remember, Tom Mix was always out either to cheat the Indians, or -- he was a cowboy or something. And this Tom Mix the SS man was similar, he always wanted to find a -- to -- to -- to surprise us when we did something which we are not supposed to do.

Q: So you talk about this fellow and -- and sort of make fun of him?

A: Ye -- yeah, yeah, yeah. But of course the memories start to vanish. For instance, it becomes more and more difficult to visualize the camp. I think, for

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instance, he was probably in my neighborhood, in a barrack near me, but it's very difficult to visualize this.

Q: How do y -- this is a hard question.

A: Certainly.

Q: How di -- does -- how do you think the experience of having survived the holocro -- Holocaust a-affected your out -- general outlook about life?

A: Oh, very much.

Q: Can you talk about it, in what ways?

A: Yeah, I can say it in a -- in a few words. Don't give up. I never gave up except when I said I almost di -- died. There I was so weak, I was so weak that I asked for permission to stay one day away from work. And you know, that was a voluntary confession that you cannot work any more, but I didn't care.

Q: Did you have that attitude of don't give up before the Holocaust? Were you a persistent person, or --

A: Yeah, ye-yeah.

Q: -- did it add to that?

A: Yeah, yeah. Oh yes.

Q: Just made you more --

A: Oh yes. I mean, when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia and they stopped the train in which I was and told us to go back, I envisaged to disregard what they

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were saying and to cross the frontier on my own and then see whether I can cross Germany to come to France. I gave this -- I gave up because I -- I thought -- I deliberate and thought it's too risky, I mean, I will not succeed.

Q: Did surviving make you -- how did it affect your spirituality? Did it make you more spiritual, or did it have --

A: No, it makes me more realistic. I like intellectual activities, but I don't like spiritualism. It makes you realistic. Incidentally, realism has its own spirituality.

Q: How does it make you more realistic?

A: Well, you see what is possible. You see la -- how human beings behave and you see what can happen. I mean, the idea of my mother -- come back to my mother, my mother, a very good, nice, non-political middle class lady to be shot in a massacre? That seems to be incomprehensible. Unrealistic. Completely unrealistic. You can say out of this world, yet it happened. And so many other things happened.

Q: Does it make you question the -- the goodness of humanity sometimes?

A: Human beings are neither good or bad, you know, some are very bad, because they are, as I say, the scum, I mean the lowest level, educationally, morally, in terms of their experiences. But there are other human beings wi -- who are very, very good. Astonishingly good. Willing to sacrifice. No, I think one cannot say human beings are bad. There are many bad people. You know why? Because

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they're weak. And that is one of the basic explanation for the behavior of the German people. Just think of the fact that the Germans were one of the most civilized people in the world. And they were a Christian people, I mean they had to learn certain moral -- moral -- moral be -- about moral behavior. But don't you do what we must not do. And they acquiesced in these horrible events, in this horrible policy. But they were afraid and fear, fear is one of the most potent motives for human beings.

Q: Do you consider yourself a hopeful or an optimistic person?

A: Yes, I'm optimistic. Which doesn't mean that we might not anticipate horrible things to happen. Horrible things. Why, the Holocaust could repeat itself on a much larger scale. Or when the Jews were killed as -- suppose six million were killed, 20 million or more, it's perhaps 30 million Russians were killed, in one way or another. They were not only shot, I mean, they died of starvation after the war came to an end. Millions of Poles have been killed. So there could be a new Holocaust -- I don't mean, necessarily an anti-Jewish Holocaust, though it could be an anti-Jewish Holocaust.

Q: Do you think your -- your testimony and the testimony of other survivors makes that less of a possibility?

A: Not to the same extent as some people believe in, particularly the people who founded and who promoted the Holocaust Museum, because the horror of these

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events is not a sufficient deterrent to prevent its repetition. And moreover, concentration on the Holocaust alone doesn't give you a sufficient explanation of what happened. You cannot understand the Holocaust if you only speak of the Holocaust. You have to see the whole system which ruled in Germany and which was one of the most barbaric systems in history. Imagine what they did. Not only did they kill people, murder people, but they took their teeth, their gold teeth or their hair. Now, the most backward people considered it anathema to utilize parts of human bodies. I mean, the -- the cannibals, that's a different -- the cannibals are something quite different. The Germans, the Nazis were below cannibalism.

Below cannibalism. So did you bring us sandwiches, Liesel? [tape break]

Q: So I was curious why you agreed to take part in this project and to tell your story.

A: I think it is useful to take part in the project because it may contribute. It does not necessarily contribute. It may contribute to make the Holocaust or the experiences connected to it -- with the Holocaust more plausible and understandable. But it probably never can do full justice to the experience of the Holocaust. If for instance I were to tell you, or to somebody else, that one of the most horrible experiences was not hanging and beating and killing, but to be on a very cold day when it was raining -- and raining, the rain was a bit icy, in the open, and not being pushed by the SS because they went into hiding, they wanted to protect themselves

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against the rain. And standing there from six o'clock to six o'clock in the evening, doing nothing, just standing there freezing and shivering, that was an extraordinary experience. Or, how can one -- and one doesn't do it really -- is in this interview convey what life is like if you are undernourished and hungry. If you have no soap, no toothbrush for months or years. I never had -- I never had the toothbrush in the concentration camp. If you're completely cut off in the outside world, that is to say you're not supposed to na -- to write, you're not expected to or -- or supposed to, or permitted to receive any correspondence from wherever. It could have been, if paper taken from cement bags, which were -- was plentiful and on the construction sites -- the only thing which was plentiful, serves as your handkerchief, as your toilet paper, as a means of protecting yourself against the cold. This is difficult to convey, but however little you can convey, may be useful.

Q: You seem to talk about these things with now a sense of detachment.

A: Yes.

Q: Was it always that way, or --

A: No. We were in a relatively favorable position, as far as our attitude was concerned. When we were in the camps, the greatest powers in the world, America, England and Russia fought against the Nazis. So there were our allies. And whate -- whatever success they had was our success, it was a step nearer to liberation. I always think that in this respect we were favored, if you compare us

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with the prisoners in Russian camps. They had no hope that Stalin will die, or if Stalin will die, there will be another Stalin. They had no hope, or hardly any hope that the regime would change and that they would be libera -- that they can expect liberation. For us the situation was, in this respect, different and that was the -- th - - that was the -- th-the -- the -- the idea which kept us alive and which made us hopeful.

Q: Do you ever think about what your life would have been like had the Holocaust not taken place?

A: Yes, but I did -- I do not come very far. I cannot imagine it. But there was another thought which we had particularly at the beginning. When we were deported to Germany, the question was, why are we deported. And while we thought of ourselves as workers who will have to work, why do they dis -- deport old people and children? What sense does it make? These people cannot work. And there, I personally envisaged that the Germans are going to establish a slave county or country or area somewhere in Ukraine, that's there -- that that is our future. We might be slaves forever, if we survive. And then, you know, there's another thing, we must not think of it respectively in the sense of drawing conclusion on the basis of knowledge which one acquired only after an event took place. For instance, I didn't know, and my colleagues, we didn't know that the Germans are bent to kill all of us. Really, not only all of us, that we expected. We

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were absolutely convinced if they want, we were 5,000 in this one camp, they might decide tomorrow they will kill all of us. But that they are going, and are bent, and decided to call -- to kill all Jews, that never occurred to me, and not to the others. I mean that there was the plan of mass ec-ex-extermination, that we didn't know.

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: I do -- I don't think I have any other questions. Is there anything else that you'd like to say that --

A: No, I have nothing else to say. Are you going to have this transcribed?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And can I see a copy before --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- before it is finalized?

Q: I'm sure you can.

A: Yeah.

Q: I'll ask if that's possible.

A: Yeah. Because what I should have done before we had this interview was to write down certain points and deal with them, which I didn't do. And then --

Q: Oh, I think you did just fine without them.

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A: -- and -- and then it's a bit incoherent, you know. So you -- you had the systematic questionnaire.

Q: Somewhat.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay.

A: Very good, thank you very much for your effort.

Q: Thank you for your time.

A: Thank you.

End of Tape Two, Side B

Conclusion of Interview