

>> Interviewer: That was -- what's today, Thursday? Last Thursday, a week -- yeah. Okay.

All right, we're going to start now.

>> Stern: Okay.

>> Interviewer: First question is, can you please tell us your full name?

>> Stern: My full name is Ben Stern.

>> Interviewer: Okay. And where and when were you born?

>> Stern: July 21, 1924.

>> Interviewer: Okay. And could you tell us a little about your childhood, your family, family life, childhood?

>> Stern: Well, I was the youngest of four, and we had four kids. I mean, when I said "we had," of course, my parents had four children. And we lived, I'll say, in -- I was born in Kielce in Poland, and as a youngster, about six years old, we moved to Lodz, which is the second-largest city in Poland.

>> Interviewer: Okay. When did -- what sort of family did you come from? Was it a big family? What kind of -- what did your father do?

>> Stern: My father, as far as I can recall, when he -- when I was a real young man, he was -- he owned or worked in a sawmill. And I don't recollect if it was -- if owned this sawmill or he worked for somebody at the sawmill. And later on, he contracted uniform-making; in other words, he was -- he received some cloth, raw cloth, and we were cutting the cloth, and then he was subbing it out to tailors, and they were -- matter of fact, they were uniforms for Franco's Spain in 1935, when the war

broke out in Spain. And they were -- the tailors who were making the uniforms, they would bring the finished product back to us, and we would inspect it. My father inspected it. He had a partner to the business.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm. What do you remember about Lodz? What sort of -- what was it like? Where did you live? What part of the -- do you remember anything about the city?

>> Stern: Yes. Of course, I was -- I grew up, so to speak, in Lodz because I was there from six to 15, when the war broke out. And the city itself was more or less divided in three. There were 750,000 -- the population was 750,000: 250,000 Poles, 250,000 Germans, and 250,000 Jews. Just like I've said, it was the second-largest city in Europe with, I would say, with all the modern, modern operas or theaters. The cultural life was up quite according to the modern times. It wasn't a backwards city altogether. It was a busy city. It was an industrial city.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Stern: And I had my schooling in the -- in Lodz until when the war broke out.

>> Interviewer: So you went to a public school in Lodz.

>> Stern: Well, I went to a public school. I also went to a -- what we call a gymnasium, which was equivalent, I would say, to a small college here. Not necessarily college, because we had a different system of schooling. I only went six years to public school, and then I went to a gymnasium, which was by far more than high school here, equivalent. And then I had one year of lyceum, which is another step forward, which is part of college. I received like one year of college at my tender age, so to speak, in a way. So that was the extent of my, my school. Then the war broke out, September 1, 1939.

>> Interviewer: What happened, what happened to you and your family after September 1st, '39?

>> Stern: I was still enrolled in school because we started, I believe, in the end of August, if I'm not mistaken. I vividly remember that we -- I had started school afterwards -- after -- before the war broke out. And September 1st, when I went to school, I, I saw on the billboards. That was the first time I knew that -- something about the war. I saw on the billboards that our ever -- I would say, not everlasting, but ever -- always the ever -- what was -- I'm looking for the word.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Stern: They were referring to the Germans, that this was our foe or our enemy.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, eternal foe?

>> Stern: Eternal, right.

>> Interviewer: Okay.

>> Stern: Has began the military action against the Polish troops, and they crossed, they crossed the borders. And I read that and jumped back into the house and told my parents about it because we had a small, tiny little radio, and this was a luxury, having a radio in the house before the war. But we were in, more or less, not -- I would say we were not poverty, poverty line, or, you know, not on the bottom altogether.

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: We weren't -- we had a small radio. Anybody who had a radio in the house was considered already affluent, not as poor.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, you mentioned that the city, that Lodz was divided into just about three equal sectors.

>> Stern: It wasn't divided as sectors. The population of Lodz consisted of three, population-wise.

>> Interviewer: Right. Right. Do you remember much -- did you have much experience with anti-Semitism growing up there?

>> Stern: Yes.

>> Interviewer: You did.

>> Stern: Absolutely.

>> Interviewer: What was the nature of it? Do you have early memories of anti-Semitism?

>> Stern: Oh, yeah. Of course, I had personally experienced the anti-Semitism in Poland, and I was always told about it. I was told by my parents, beware of this and beware of that. And personally, I was beaten up quite a number of times, again, because I was Jewish. I mean, that was -- when I was in public schools, and maybe that's the very reason that I went to a private school for one year, whereby my parents spent quite a little bit of fortune because before the war, to go ahead and spend money on a private school was -- not everybody could afford it. But I couldn't do it anymore -- they couldn't do it anymore than one year. And of course, that private school was a Jewish school. And of course, I didn't experience that.

>> Interviewer: Were there neighborhoods that you were told or that you knew that you shouldn't go into in the city, or were there particular --

>> Stern: No. There were not particularly neighborhoods per se. The only thing -- I can draw a parallel with the United States, which you probably will understand. Poland, in each city, had Endecja. The Endecja was equivalent to the KKK, which was, again, an organization which promoted hate, bigotry, and basically they were tremendously, immensely anti-Semitic, to the point where I recall we had a movie -- I went to the movies one time as a young boy, and I experienced something awful in Poland where before the movie was out, they cut the wires, they cut the wires, and we didn't have any -- well, the movie stopped playing, and there was no light, and we had to run out through the exit because I believe an emergency light came on. And we tried to run out on the pavement. There were ladders, just like step

ladders, ladders lying out on the sidewalks. And it was pretty dark, and so in order you will trip, and they can beat you up. So it was some experience I had as a youngster, and that was like -- I was about 12 or 13 years old. And I came home and told that story, and it was shocking because I was still a youngster, and I couldn't understand what it means to be Jewish and oppressed or persecuted by, you know, by guys, hooligans, who tried to go ahead and hurt you.

>> Interviewer: So you remember -- with all this talk about Polish Fascism, did you hear much about Hitler? When you were growing up, was that -- was it spoken about a lot within your family?

>> Stern: Not as far as I can remember. As far as I can recall, I don't think, not -- the last year, of course, 1938, I do because we -- as a matter of fact, some people from Austria, Vienna -- that's when Hitler occupied and went into Czechoslovakia -- went into Austria and then into Czechoslovakia -- that's when a couple came with two kids to our -- to live in our apartment because the Jewish committee or the Jewish organization in Lodz, they assigned some people from Austria, Austrian people, to live with them. So I heard about Hitler at that time. That's the first time I heard about Hitler.

>> Interviewer: That late.

>> Stern: Yeah.

>> Interviewer: And so just going back now, you talked about remembering the billboards and the posters announcing that the war had begun and the German invasion had begun.

>> Stern: Right.

>> Interviewer: What happened after that?

>> Stern: Well, the very same day, I sort of noticed that -- we walked out to look. We were extremely interested or extremely

curious to see what's going on. And then all of a sudden, we looked up at the sky, and we saw just a black sky with planes, with German planes going through, bombing, and we heard the bombs. I didn't see any bombs falling, but they were flying low, not to the point -- we could see their insignia or their mark, you know, the cross, on the plane, on the wings. So it was a scary feeling, and it was a scary -- of course, we knew then, it's a real war. It wasn't just on the billboard, but we were in a war.

>> Interviewer: What happened after? What do you remember about what your family did and what happened to you?

>> Stern: Well, my brother was in the Polish army at that time because my parents -- and I had two sisters and one brother. Again, as a youngster I wasn't concerned too much about it because -- I was, but we didn't take it as -- we thought it was gonna be over in a very short while. We didn't -- and it was a short while because after two weeks, which we didn't -- after two weeks, Lodz became Litzmannstadt. It became annexed to Germany, and that's the only city, as far as I know, in Poland which was annexed immediately to --

>> Interviewer: To the Reich.

>> Stern: To the Reich, the Third Reich. And all of a sudden, right then and there, all the Polish Germans started wearing armbands with the swastika on it to identify them as -- they were -- Hitler came in, the American -- I mean, the German army marched in, and they were liberated, so to speak. And they were worse than the Poles. They were Poles, but the majority of them were from the Ukraine, believe it or not. The Ukrainians were worse than the Poles themselves.

>> Interviewer: They had lived in Lodz?

>> Stern: They lived in Lodz, yes. A third of the population lived in Lodz.

>> Interviewer: What happened to -- and so they felt liberated, but what happened to the Jews in Lodz?

>> Stern: Well, we still lived in our own apartment. We still lived together, and progressively it started getting worse, such as when I was on the street, I was caught by -- a German truck passed by, and they asked me to jump on it, and they already rounded up quite a number of guys, young guys, and we got brought into a school -- as a matter of fact, the school which was was attending -- and there was a court. They took the school over. The Germans took the school over, the military, as their headquarters, if you will, or some installation. I don't know if it was headquarters or some military installation for them. And they were smoking quite a bit of cigarettes, and we were told to go ahead and clean up the court from the cigarette butts. I recall that. They told me to go ahead and lie down and pick up the cigarettes with my mouth, lying down flat on my stomach, and when we stepped and when we tried to go ahead and pick up the cigarette butt -- because we were scared. They had billy -- you know, those little billy clubs in their hands, and when we tried to pick it up and put it in a pail, they stepped on us. So I came -- from that little experience, I came home with a bloody nose and bloody mouth, and my parents asked what it was, and I told them.

So then, of course, it began. The horror began. And we then were told immediately to start wearing the yellow stars on the left side, on your wearing apparel. Regardless of what you wore, you had to wear on the left side, the Star of David, cut it out of a yellow cloth, piece of cloth, and put it on the right side on your back. And we started wearing that in order to be identified that you're Jewish, and if you walked on the sidewalk, you had to step down if a German -- if a German walked the same sidewalk, you had to go ahead and step off and step on the street because otherwise, you would have been hit. But this was nothing in comparison, of course, to what we experienced a little bit later.

>> Interviewer: Was this '40 now that you're talking about? Was it 1940, basically?

>> Stern: Talking about 1939.

>> Interviewer: Still '39.

>> Stern: Yes, 1939 because it was the end of 1939 we moved to Kielce -- back to the place where we were born, where I was born, and actually, my parents were born there -- on the last day of December. And because it was so stern, it was so tough, we heard that other cities are not as awfully bad, you know, that the life is not as bad, but since there were 250,000 Germans, again, and they, all of a sudden, became true Germans rather than Poles, they start persecuting and beating and did everything possible to the Jewish people.

>> Interviewer: So were things as bad in Kielce as in Lodz --

>> Stern: No.

>> Interviewer: -- or not as --

>> Stern: No, no, improved quite a bit.

>> Interviewer: They were better there?

>> Stern: Much better, much better. When we got there to Kielce, number one, we didn't wear the patches, the yellow stars. We were asked to put a band, armband, a white armband with a Star of David in blue, which -- we wore this on the left arm, again, to identify us as Jewish people, but we still were home, so to speak. We still lived in our apartment, and we were all together.

>> Interviewer: Including your brother? Was he still in the army at this time?

>> Stern: No, no. He came back from the army.

>> Interviewer: He came back?

>> Stern: Yeah. He was taken as a prisoner. He came back from the army about four weeks after the war ended. Even though the Warsaw Ghetto had an uprising, and they were still, after the two weeks, you know -- but as far as I am concerned, as far as the war, what I had seen of war, basically, Poland against Germany, it lasted two weeks.

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: And he came back after six weeks, a total of six weeks. Two weeks, and then four weeks afterwards, he came back to the home.

>> Interviewer: So basically, your family is back in their hometown.

>> Stern: Back, reunited. Everybody was there, and we were delighted because my -- at that time, my brother-in-law -- my older sister got married. She was married just before the war, and she and her husband, my brother-in-law, came back as well. And he came back, of course, to Kielce, even though they were from Lodz. And again, it wasn't so bad there until, until they start forming the ghetto.

>> Interviewer: When did that happen? Do you remember?

>> Stern: I'm trying to remember. If I'm not -- if I'm correct, it was 1941, or maybe towards the end of '40, or '41. I really cannot recollect.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember how it came --

>> Stern: I think it was '40. I'm pretty sure it was 1940 because I can remember -- I cannot remember being too long with my parents together because then we were put in a ghetto, and we stayed in a ghetto for a couple of years, till 1943. Now, the life in ghetto was bad, bad because you couldn't get no food. You were rationed with food. You -- me being blonde and didn't look like a Jew, so to speak, typical Jewish because -- I don't

how typical Jew is supposed to look, but again, not to be identified as a Jew, my parents send me out from the ghetto, which were a means to -- even though it was guarded, but you kind of smuggled yourself out from the ghetto in order to buy a couple loaves of bread, and I was hiding it in my pants, or I cut it up, and I brought it into the ghetto so we could go ahead and we can all have enough food. I don't think I used any moneys. We -- I was trading articles of clothing and linen and so forth as far as -- towels for either potatoes, which -- I was wearing, like, knickers, and put some potatoes in my knickers, and bread. I was caught at that, too, because again, the ghetto was policed by Jews. The Jews -- they were clever. The Germans were very, very clever. As you know, they utilized the Jewish help, so to speak, in order to go ahead and oppress the Jewish brethren by giving them a police hat, just a hat, and that's all they wore. They certainly didn't have any kind of weapon, but they had a billy club, you see, and they were the watchmen, if you will, over the ghetto.

>> Interviewer: Those were the Jewish Police.

>> Stern: Those were the Jewish Police.

>> Interviewer: Yeah. What do you remember about being -- you remember being caught when you smuggled bread one time. How did that happen?

>> Stern: well, this was -- I was trying to go ahead and open up the -- the ghetto was encircled with barbed wire, and I picked up the barbed wire, you know. There were several rolls of barbed wire, and I was trying to pick it up and just scoop down, and all of a sudden, I tore my pants, and some potatoes were falling out, and they saw it, and it happened so that the Jewish policeman was standing there with an SS German policeman, and they saw something. In other words, what I did is, I made some noise. They wouldn't have gotten me, but they heard the noise, and then I was beaten then, and of course, gotten -- they took away all the food from me, and they told me that if that gonna

happen anymore, then I'll be hanged, so that was the -- so I got back home, and with fear, I told my parents. I told my mother at the time that, "No more. I'm not going out," because I was scared to death.

>> Interviewer: What that the end of the --

>> Stern: That was the end. That was the end, yeah. I didn't go anymore. They didn't permit me to go out anymore.

>> Interviewer: How did the Jewish Police -- how were they selected? How did the particular people who became the Jewish Police get that position?

>> Stern: Well, to be honest with you, some of them volunteered because they felt like they would benefit by it. Some, they were picked at random by just -- if you were -- had a -- not a 15-year-old boy like me, but a 20-some-odd-year-old guy who had proper physique, tall and strong, so to speak, they took him. They took him. They picked him up. They picked him at random. I said random, when they walked in and they saw somebody walking in the ghetto, they would put him up on the truck, and they asked him to come to the headquarters, and they ask him -- they didn't ask him. They told him, "You're gonna be a guard, police, and you're gonna have all the food. You're gonna have everything what you want." And that's the way it was done. But I would say the majority was picked by the Germans. Some was volunteering because they saw afterwards that they did have a better way. In other words, what proves what human beings are, you know, if you can help yourself, regardless of the situation, you're gonna do something about it, you see, even if you're gonna sell out your own brethren. And that was already, when we were very, very -- the food shortage was extreme, was very, very extreme, and I'm sure that's the very reason they did that.

>> Interviewer: Did -- while you were -- and you were basically in the ghetto in Kielce for a couple of years, then, you say.

>> Stern: Well, I was --

>> Interviewer: Was it for two years, you said?

>> Stern: No, no. Well, I was -- no. I was taken from Kielce, and I started to -- I mean, I started work -- they took me, and I started working in a forced labor camp.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember how long after the ghetto was formed that would have been?

>> Stern: About six months.

>> Interviewer: Okay.

>> Stern: About six months, and then I was taken away from my parents, taken away from everybody, and that's the last time I've seen everybody.

>> Interviewer: That was it?

>> Stern: That was it. And -- no, well, by March, so to speak. They took us on a big square, and we were walking in line. There were ten in line, a file, and they asked me to come out, and they asked somebody else to come out, and I did not -- no, I take that back. I'm sorry. They took me out, but I was in a forced labor camp, but they were still in the ghetto. I was still -- I was still making -- communicating. I still communicated with them, but I was in a forced labor camp in the same city, in Kielce, Henryków. That's where we were making wagons. We were making wagons for the German army, which -- they used wagons when they invaded Soviet Union, when they went east. And I was -- I worked on wheels. I made the spokes for the wheels.

>> Interviewer: What were conditions like in this camp?

>> Stern: Conditions? I worked on a night shift, and again, not, not, not too terribly bad with the exception that it was a night shift, and I was, again, very young, so it didn't matter. But it was extremely hot there. It wasn't like a, you know -- it wasn't like an air-conditioned plant or anything of this sort, and it

was at night, and we had to go ahead and heat the lumber, heat the -- we cut up the lumber and heated the lumber through steam, steamed the lumber in order to go ahead and bend to make wheels, and so it was extremely hot over there. The food was not, the food was not adequate at all. We were there seven days, I mean, seven days a week. During the day, sometimes when I was trying to -- I asked the guy who was -- they were all Germans. There was no more Jewish Police. It was all German police. I asked somebody sometimes -- and that wasn't SS keeping you. They were just German police. If I asked to -- if I wanted to see somebody, you know, if I could, they would permit me to go get to the fence and see the ghetto to communicate with my folks for a little while, and then they cut it off. I couldn't.

>> Interviewer: After they cut off contact, what -- was the last you heard of your family?

>> Stern: That's the last I've heard, and that's when, in 1943, there was the deportation. They took all the ghettos. They have dissolved the ghettos, and they took everybody away. They took some people from our group, from our people, from the factory there, and we had to clean up the ghetto.

>> Interviewer: In Kielce?

>> Stern: In Kielce.

>> Interviewer: What -- was the camp mixed, Poles and Jews, or was it strictly --

>> Stern: Poles and Jews because a Jewish girl -- I mean, a Polish girl, she worked night shift with us. There were Poles in the prisoners, so to speak, or whatever you want to call us. And she was a tremendous help because she was -- see, I don't want to contradict myself. I was saying that a bunch of Poles, you know, they were the majority, was terrible. And there was a Polish girl which, she had a lot of, a lot of understanding, and she was coming to work, and she was bringing me a small pot with

potatoes, cooked potatoes already. And it was on a -- about twice a week, something like that. So she supplemented my diet.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Stern: But she was extremely -- some of them just had pity on you, you know. They, they kind of sympathized with you. I mean, not every one of them was just -- there were some which were righteous --

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: -- I would call.

>> Interviewer: Yeah. When you were sent in, you and your fellow inmates sent in to clean up the ghetto, did you have any idea what happened to your family and the other people who were deported from the ghetto?

>> Stern: Yes, because I asked a policeman. There were still some Jewish Police in there. They were the last ones to go into the cattle cars, and they were telling me because they were partially going to the train, to the tracks, and they were loading the Jewish people as well, along with the Germans. And they were telling me. And of course, that's when I found out, and they were telling me things like it was -- the heat was immense. It was during the summer when the deportation took place, and they were telling me, "You can't imagine what's happening over there."

>> Interviewer: In the cars.

>> Stern: The rings -- the ladies who wore a diamond ring or a diamond, some kind of a bracelet or whatever it was, they were swapping this with the German SS -- that was the SS troops -- for a glass of water, for a bottle of water or a glass of water or something of the sort. And what I did in the ghetto was to clean up, to put all the belongings on -- again, on some trucks, and I saw, matter of fact, some Poles were working, too, and one

Pole stuffed himself with some material things, you know, and a German asked him to go ahead and see what he's got, and he says, "Okay." And so he starts begging for his life. And he took the rifle, you know, like to kill him, to shoot him. And the Pole just bent down on his knees and begged him, and he says, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it," you know, and spoke Polish because that was a Ukraine. Again, and he went in the back and shot him right in my presence, shot him in his head, for just taking a -- I don't know. He took a shirt or something. So those were the -- you're right. I was exposed to some things which, as you well know, I could not -- I didn't know how long I could take it. But I guess, humans, we are -- we can last. We are made out of iron, steel.

>> Interviewer: All right. While you were in the camp, did you have any friends? Were you put in the camp -- did you know people from your previous existence, from the outside?

>> Stern: The only man I knew was our doctor, the doctor which we went to. That was our family physician, and he was in the same camp. And that's the only guy, and I was next to him because he was already -- he was about 25 years older than I was. He was in the 40's, and I felt like I'm more secure with him for various reasons, simply because he was a physician as well as, he was a friend of our family, I guess. But that's the only one was --

>> Interviewer: He was the only one you knew from the outside.

>> Stern: No, nobody else or nothing.

>> Interviewer: When the Jewish Police told you how terrible the conditions were when the cars were being loaded, did they tell you where the transports were going to?

>> Stern: They didn't know.

>> Interviewer: They didn't know.

>> Stern: No.

>> Interviewer: So did you hear rumors at the time?

>> Stern: I've heard rumors, yes. I've heard rumors that they'd gone to Auschwitz, and I've heard rumors they'd gone to Treblinka.

>> Interviewer: And you knew what these places were?

>> Stern: I've heard about it. I knew that they were extermination camps.

>> Interviewer: You knew that?

>> Stern: I knew well that they were the -- we've heard about Auschwitz. We heard already -- I heard that before -- as the war started. I've heard that when, you know, when the Germans marched in, and afterwards when the -- well, not about Auschwitz then, but about camps. I heard about the camps.

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: But we knew that this is -- and that time, when the deportation was, we heard about Oswiecim, and that was the Auschwitz, and we heard about Treblinka. But I didn't know what "Auschwitz" meant, and I didn't know. I didn't know what "extermination camp" meant. I knew about -- they told me, but I didn't visualize it, or I couldn't conceive -- I didn't -- I couldn't understand what it meant.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

>> Stern: Auschwitz was Auschwitz.

>> Interviewer: It's a place.

>> Stern: It's a place.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So after the deportations took place and you cleaned up the ghetto, what happened to you then?

>> Stern: I was taken back into Henryków. I was taken back there, and I was still working until 19 -- end of 1943. And I was then sent -- again, we were rounded up. We were rounded up and took -- we went into the cattle cars. They put us into the cattle cars, and that was some sight, and that was some -- well, it's awful hard to describe. And we were packed like, really, vertically like sardines, like you open up a can of sardines. We could not move our arm or leg. So we were traveling for two days, day and night, traveling, standing on tracks, and then traveling. That was unbearable. Until one morning early at dawn, we looked through the cracks in the cattle car. Cattle cars have cracks, you know, like you carry cattle, and I saw Oswiecim. I saw the name Auschwitz. It was not called Auschwitz then. It was Oswiecim.

>> Interviewer: In Polish, yeah.

>> Stern: In Polish. And then I was paralyzed like. I got numb. I lost -- literally I lost the feeling. I didn't feel anything. I was -- my -- I vividly remember that I got -- around my heart, it was just like somebody put extreme heat, and then I felt like, literally, like somebody would electrocute me, like I'd been electrocuted. And then I stood there, and of course, we were waiting until daylight. When daylight came, they opened the doors. They slid the door open, and that's all you've heard is, "*Raus! Raus!*" Just "Get out of here! Get out of here!" in German. And I had to crawl over quite a number of people because we had some dead bodies. But you didn't know they were dead because they were vertically squeezed. They couldn't fall, and they were -- they starved from, either from the heat, from malnutrition. I guess from no food, from not drinking. I guess from no water. And that was where we got out.

we jumped off as quickly as we could because we were under orders. This was already the SS with their hats and -- with the skulls on the hat and on the collars, and that's when we saw -- right then, there was the German, the officer standing with his

German shepherd, with his one foot propped up on a little stool, and we start to file up in one line, and right then and there was, more or less, a selection. And again, with the thumb, left and right was your destiny as to, are you going to live, or are you going to die? The left, unfortunately, went all to the crematory, as we found out. The right, in my instance -- we didn't know, of course, what is left and what is right, and we went to the right. And we were there, just -- scared is not the word -- I mean, just completely petrified, numb. Stood there like -- I don't know how we could stand, really. We just walked a little, maybe a mile, and they told us that we are going to be given some clothes, some new clothing, but before that, we've got to go in -- run into the showers, take a quick shower. Now, I personally didn't know, if we go into a shower -- because I've heard about Auschwitz, and I've heard about Oswiecim. Personally, I didn't know -- I felt like we're going to death. And when we jumped into the shower, it was a huge, huge room, I would say approximately about 20 feet in width and about 30 feet long, something like that, with showers. And it was just a matter of opening the faucet to see if water comes out or gas. And again, luckily, we turned the faucet, and I saw water, and we started washing ourselves.

And when we got out, naked, one guy stood there, the other guy stood there, and we were deloused because we were in conditions where we had lice on our heads. We had lice all over. We were deloused. It was like, again, like an assembly line. One guy stood there with some kind of chemical, which he was putting on your head. One of them was shaving you, would shave the heads. The other one was -- the other guy was putting some chemical on your head. The other one put it under the arms, everywhere, and that was the -- we got through this assembly line, so to speak, and we were given some prisoners uniform, very similar to the uniforms the chain gang is wearing here. The only thing is that the stripes were vertical, rather than horizontal. And we were getting a hat, which was like a beret, also striped, a beret,

and some wood shoes. Now, needless to say, you didn't get the size. You had to make out for what you got, and you got the wooden shoes, and you had to, right away, to be more or less in a line, to form a line and be on attention, and you were marched into a -- show you where your barracks were.

Before we even marched to barracks, we were lined up again in single file. We were tattooed on our forearm, right in here. My number was B -- I don't know if you want to see it or not, but I'll be glad to show it to you. My number is B-3348. I was tattooed. This is already the second series from what I understand because -- if I'm not mistaken, my friend Felix Goldberg, he was -- they wrote it on his forearm. I believe he got into Auschwitz in '43, or maybe '42, or earlier part of '43. Because my wife, as well, she got earlier there because her numbers are bigger and on the forearm.

And then we -- told us that I'm in a block. It was called "block," which is a barrack, Block 25 in Birkenau, which is part of Auschwitz. Now we had to march to Birkenau. It was several miles, you know, maybe 10, 11, 12 kilometers, which, we finally made it. But that was when we got to the barracks. The barracks, when you came in, right away -- well, before even. When we came into Auschwitz, or when we got off the cattle trains, there was like an entrance, a special entrance. I believe it was televised. It was -- the entrance probably still in existence. Kind of an arched opening with an inscription, "*Arbeit macht frei*," that "work makes man free," pretending that this is a work camp. But we knew a little bit different from that. I mean, we already knew what Auschwitz were. But when I was taken into the barracks after this, I felt like I still had an inkling of survival, very much, but you didn't give yourself a chance even to think that you're gonna survive, but you always felt like maybe, some miracle will happen. And of course, it did happen, needless to say, because I'm here to tell the story.

Now, it you want for me to continue as far as the camp is concerned, Auschwitz was --

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: I'd be more than happy because, again, I'm giving you just a --

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: -- brief synopsis of, you know, of what happened. I cannot get into details because if I get into details --

>> Interviewer: You'd be here forever.

>> Stern: -- I'll be here forever, really.

>> Interviewer: But we'd be glad, as much as you can remember, as much as you, you know, would care to say about it.

>> Stern: well, I cannot really tell you the -- just the details because the experience is so traumatic that when you tell the story, it takes you quite a while to come -- to get back to normal, to be normal. When I tell the story, and I do tell it because I feel it behooves us to tell the story to various churches, various organizations, various fraternity groups, colleges, public schools -- and I do it. And every time I do it, it takes me quite a while to recuperate and to be myself because it was a traumatic experience, and it comes to haunt you back. I mean, I get nightmares. Not that I don't have them after I -- periodically I'm getting them, and I never can forget that because again, we got -- we got a mind and a skull and it's stowed behind. We have it for the rest of our life. So if you don't mind, I will just go ahead and skip. I'll be brief because otherwise, it really will take too much time.

>> Interviewer: Sure.

>> Stern: when I was in Auschwitz, needless to say that every minute, every second was just a matter of, when am I going into

the crematoriums because this wasn't a hidden thing. It was right in front of me, looking at the fire.

>> Interviewer: And you knew what it was?

>> Stern: Oh, absolutely because you felt -- you smelled --

>> Interviewer: You could smell it.

>> Stern: You smelled the bones and smelled the flesh of human bodies. So that was no -- you couldn't mistake that for anything else. And also, you were taking -- as I spend the time there, on a daily basis, the daily routine was between 5:30 and 6:00, and I don't recall exactly -- it could have been 5:00, 5:30, or 6:00 morning, we were awakened, if you will, by, again, by a German prisoner who served with us, again, for a reason, maybe, that he did not go along with the fascism or he was against Hitler's regime for some reason or another, but he served time as well in the camp. But he was the *Blockälteste*, which is the -- he was the captain of the block, of the barrack. We were awakened by him. We slept in a cubicle of approximately, I would say, 3 by 3, 3 feet by 3 feet, like if you go to a building supply, you see a lumber rack, each cubicle had 3 feet, and we were three high, three or four high, and you saw prisoners just lying on straw. And we were -- this was our bed. We were, again, awakened like I said, 5:30, I would say, and we were told to get out as fast as we possibly can, out of the barrack. That German guy, the captain, he took a count, asked us to get in a line, to go ahead and count, and everybody was counted, and we stood out there until we got -- I was trying to say we got something to eat, but I don't think we ate anything at morning -- I mean, mornings. We got a little soup by noon, but we stood out there. We stood out there and done nothing. Absolutely, we didn't do a thing for quite a while. Right at the lunchtime, if you want to call it lunch time, you know. It could have been 12, 1:00. I don't recall. I was getting a little soup and a mes -- what is it called? Meskit? Those American -- you know, the silver, what the soldiers used.

>> Interviewer: Oh, like a can -- oh, a, a -- hm. Like a mess, a mess kit.

>> Stern: A mess kit? Is that it?

>> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Sure. And that's what you had to --

>> Stern: That's what -- yeah. That's what they gave me. We had mess kits. And we were getting a little soup, or it was just plain warm water. It wasn't hot. It wasn't -- we got a spoon, but we were fishing all the time for something to see if there's anything in the soup. Unfortunately, we could never find anything in there. And then in the evening, we got a slice of bread, which was a military bread. The thickness was about a quarter of an inch. And for six days we would get the same routine for quite a while, for about two to three months, with the exception of Sundays, we got -- with the bread, we received also a small, little, tiny, little block of margarine, like a 1 inch by 1 inch, a quarter of an inch thick, too, and we got a piece -- a slice of salami or something of the sort. It was once a week, Sunday.

Now, after -- that was the exact daily routine with the exception that you had -- we had the barracks -- if I can just explain to you, or if you can visualize that like a row of barracks, on both sides; in front of us, a crematorium sitting there with gas chambers. The reason I know the gas chambers is because they took us frequently to dump bodies into the places there and to see how everybody, kids, it didn't make a bit of difference if it's a child, if it was -- we didn't see any infants at that time because I believe infants were destroyed even before they even got to Auschwitz. I've never seen an infant in Birkenau in Auschwitz. So again, there were two rows of barracks, and there was like a street, and there were the German trucks, running back and forth and picking up some -- they're asking prisoners to jump on. They need some workers. We didn't know if we're going to the crematoriums because they were

picking some guys, and they never came back. So it was just a potluck, who would do something -- I mean, who would survive or who would not.

At one time I remember I was taken from there to do a little bit of work, which was nothing, again, to -- the extent of the work was to go ahead and take a steel beam. I was taking steel beams, and this was already in the wintertime, probably in October or November, which, in Poland, you get early winters. It's not like here. And we took like 15 or 20 guys -- I don't recall -- on both sides of the beam because it was a wide I-beam. We took by the flange, and we were walking down with that beam. They told us to go ahead and place it somewhere, and soon as we tried -- got it to the place, we couldn't, from the frost, we couldn't tear away our hand from the flange on the steel. The skin came off and started bleeding. They didn't permit us to go ahead and use any kind of a piece of clothing or anything of this sort. We had to be bare. And to put the same beam back in the same spot. This was the extent of the work, as far as we were concerned, in Birkenau, up there.

That was the daily routine, with the experience of watching the crematoriums and partly listening to cries and screams. And I don't know. I guess you want to -- I would like to say that I get used to it, but you never get used to anything like this because you get numb. You get completely inhuman. You lose your feelings, and that was agonizing because I would spend there till, till the end of '44, when the Russians start pushing back the Germans from the East Front back to the west, and they, they transferred us -- I was shipped, and I raised my hands to God then, saying that this is something, you know, that I can get out of this place, which I would never believe, you know, because you don't get out of Auschwitz. But we -- they loaded us up again on a cattle train, and we went to Sachsenhausen. It was, it was a camp, forced labor camp. There was no crematories, so it was, by far, a better feeling.

I backtrack: For one moment, because this was an experience which I'll never forget because when I was in that Barrack 25 -- and we didn't do anything all day, like I've said, and just very periodically was just taking a beam back and forth and so forth -- I sat down next to the barrack. It was like a big stone, and I sat down, and something really -- I'm not trying to go ahead and portray here myself as a prophet or like a -- and I don't fantasize. But I sat down, and somebody -- like I was told, "Get up." You know, something made me get up, and I got up from that boulder. It was more of a boulder than a stone because it was larger. And I got up a little bit, just several feet away from it, and it didn't take but a few seconds that a German guy, a German policeman, a German SS guy, came by with a truck and shot at this guy and killed him, right then and there, for no reason, none whatsoever, as far as I can tell.

>> Interviewer: He was where you were?

>> Stern: It was right there in the same spot where I was. So again, this was something -- the reason I'm saying this is because this is not something that you can explain or rationalize. It's pure luck, or God's will. Of course, at that time, we were trying, or I was -- losing, absolutely, faith in God because I did not -- I really didn't believe in God anymore at that time. I lost faith in God, maybe earlier because I've seen too many things. I've seen too many things with pious Jews. I've seen too many things, what the Germans have done, and the Poles, the Polish -- again, the Polish, the ones with the band with the swastika on it. What they did with the most pious Jews, with the Jews with the beards, with the locks, you know, those rabbis. And there was something which you cannot describe, you cannot go ahead and write. It's impossible to really sit and describe and be normal because nobody in their right mind can comprehend what transpired, and it seems like a fantasy, and it seems like you're making up a story which is not real because we were all living in the 20th century in the most civilized -- and the most civilized country in the world is -- the German people,

those were the Germans, the *Deutsche, Hochdeutsche*. Those were the biggest intelligentsia, if you will. What they have done. So I lost faith because when I was transferred from, from Auschwitz to Oranienburg, and those were forced camps. From Oranienburg to Sachsenhausen -- excuse me. From Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg.

>> Interviewer: How long did you spend at Sachsenhausen?

>> Stern: Sachsenhausen, I spent not long at all. It was just a matter of a month to six weeks, and I cannot remember. But I was trans -- at that time, and that was during the end of 1944, where I was shipped or sent from one camp to the other, and I went like from Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg, from Oranienburg to Kaufering, from Kaufering to Landsberg -- no. Excuse me. From Oranienburg -- from Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg, from Oranienburg to Dachau. No, I was right, excuse me, because the last two camps were Dachau and -- I was liberated in Allach, which was about 5 kilometers from Allach. But then I was -- we were about four to six weeks in each of those camps I mentioned, and we came to Dachau, and that was another experience because this was -- I've heard of that word, "Dachau," and we knew then that, again, this is the end of our being there. And I'm really kind of shortening the whole story because -- I'm not giving you the details as far as the other camps are concerned because, again, it would be too -- I'm giving you the highlights.

As you know, we only served with the males. There were separate -- females were in a separate camp. There were only males. At no time, at no one given time I can say that any of the SS had any compassion or any kind of a nice word that somebody -- you know, that I would experience somebody to say, It's gonna get better, or, Don't worry, or something like that. At no time had you had that luxury of hearing anything of the sort. You were doomed to die, and it was just a matter of when.

>> Interviewer: Did you wonder, when you were being shipped around to these different camps, why you were being -- why they were moving you?

>> Stern: Well, we knew from some German, from some German public, when we came to Oranienburg, we saw some -- or when we came to Sachsenhausen, we saw some German people, and they were telling --

>> Interviewer: Civilians.

>> Stern: Civilians, and we were -- but for a brief moment. They were not with us because they immediately separated us and put us, again, in the camps. And we had -- we more or less figured that this is the beginning of the end, as far as the war was concerned, that something must be happening.

>> Interviewer: Is it '45 by now?

>> Stern: By now it was '45. By now it was '45, and when I got to Dachau, I was completely -- I was just a --

01:03:00