

Rudy Herz

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>> Herz: About the 24th or 25th of April, the underground factory started to destroy documents, and we destroyed documents. We knew then that the end was near, and yet our death was just as near because we knew that if they assembled us underground and blasted the entrance, there was no way for us to get out. We were some 600, 700 feet under a -- the tunnel was, at level ground, into the mountain, but the mountain was raised about 800, 900 feet above us, a massive rock -- well, just a mountain. And so if they had simply dynamited that -- maybe they did not have any dynamite. I cannot tell. At the end, we were about -- about the 20th to the 23rd of April, 24th of April, the first Red Cross packages began to arrive, and one more thing happened. The SS disappeared. They folded their tents and silently stole away and were replaced by Austrian police, military police, which guarded the camp from then on. We still couldn't get out. We still were prisoners, but there was no more work. Some food came in, not very much, and we are now approaching the end of the...

Whatever it is, I don't find the word for what the end is. The odyssey. It was not even an odyssey. The odyssey was a lot easier for the Greeks than our trip through hell. On May the 5th, a tank came up to the gates -- not to the gates -- to the barbed wire area where my barracks was located, and the conversation -- I was nearby. The conversation was in Yiddish, which by that time I understood perfectly well and spoke it. And some English was spoken also, and he said, "We are the American army. Your camp is being liberated. Stay here. You will get soup. The soup column is right behind you, but stay here. Stay here. We ask you to stay here." But he was the only one there. Behind him were some jeeps and trucks, and they collected the military police, the Austrian military police, which was not connected to the -- which was not the SS troops, and their weapons were thrown on a pile and set afire by the American troops. Somebody still had the presence of mind to ask how come he spoke Yiddish. He says,

“Well, I am a Jew from Brooklyn, New York.” We didn’t know Brooklyn from New York, but he spoke Yiddish very badly, very poor Yiddish, but nevertheless, he says, “You are free. The American army is behind me, but stay in the camp so that there is none of this confusion that might come on. We assure you you will be fed.”

Well, the first adventurous Russian prisoners, when they saw the Americans, got their revenge on their German Kapos, and this time, it was corroborated by Mr. West. They hanged the German Kapos, as many German Kapos as they could get ahold of. They killed probably three or four in my barracks. It was something that I -- I was incapable of feeling any sentiments. I didn’t feel any pity with them. My torment had ended. I did not care any longer. I felt truly like a bird who has flown out of a cage. I did not know what the future would bring. I did walk by the pile of burning weapons to see whether I could get a pistol out of there or a rifle or anything, but the metal was so hot that I could not touch anything. I burned myself on the fingers, and I got out. That is where the -- my story ends.

>> Interviewer: Where did you go after liberation?

>> Herz: I tried to go back to Germany. I tried to find my way back home. And there were many, many ex-concentration camp inmates plus *Flüchtlinge* or *Vertrieben*, as the Germans called them, “displaced persons,” Hungarians that had been dragged into Germany to work, Polish people. The whole countryside, this was the very last countryside in Germany where everybody had concentrated to try and get away, either from the Russians or from the Americans or from the British or whatever it is, everybody concentrated on the southern, Austrian part of Germany where I was. We knew where Linz was, a city nearby. I made my way to Linz. I went to a hospital which -- they had to take us. I don’t know whether they had room or there weren’t very many civilian casualties, and I was admitted, where they, first of all, treated the scabies, which had by now enveloped my entire

body. And after I got out of there, we all tried then to make our way back into civilization, into life. We had some food. Again, I narrowly escaped from being shot by an American soldier. I had discovered a grain storage depository, and I went there and got grain, which the Germans would trade me for something else. They would grind it up and make flour out of it. The second time I did that, some black American GI started to point his rifle at me, and in my poor English, the poorest of poor English, I finally made him understand what had happened to me and that I was desperately hungry and that I wasn't a German.

One more thing that I did, and I -- on my way to Linz, a column of American soldiers picked me up and set me in one of the jeeps. One of them had a harmonica, and they drove me through the cities, and they stopped there, and they made me play "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*" They didn't make me play. They wanted to show the Germans that the end had been there, that they had -- if I recall, they had a bust of Adolf, one of those hundreds of thousands of busts, mounted on their jeep, and they had fixed it with a wire so that the head nodded back and forth. I'm sure they had seen that. And with that and me in the jeep with the American soldiers, I played "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles" and the Nazi songs, and they hugely enjoyed that. But nevertheless, I got closer to -- I got, number one, American food, which, the first one time I ate it, I could not even keep down. No food stayed down at all. After a while, I was able to pick out that which I could eat, like white bread, some toast that they had, like chicken eggs; beef, forget it. Well, I gradually got a little bit of strength, but that way, I got a good bit closer to Linz.

They helped. They did not express any feeling, and I was not able to understand English. I understood some English. They knew only from my face and from my appearance that I was one of the inmates. By that time, they knew what concentration camp meant. They had liberated Dachau. I thought it was General Patton's army, but it turns out that the army had liberated the last

camps in Austria, and by God, ours -- I shouldn't even say that. By gosh, the last camp to be liberated was our camp, Mauthausen and Gusen. It was General Patch, P-A-T-C-H, and I was in Linz at the time that General Patch had a review of his troops. One thing that impressed me beyond anything that I've ever seen was that the army marched without any sound at all. They had clarinets. The military band had instruments that no German oom-pah band or military band would have, and they did not march with their hobnailed boot on the pavement. The sound -- there was no sound, just a soft, muted footfall. And I thought, well, how can they walk? I mean, this is not military. You have to have hobnailed boots, and the Americans did not have that. It was entirely a bunch of -- but they knew their business. They were soldiers, nevertheless, and they had come through quite a bit. And I'm sorry to say, Desert Storm was a milk run against what these American troops, the liberators of the camps, had been through. They had looked death in the eye, and they...

I don't know why this gets me. It must be the sum total of it, I'm telling you.

So I had a choice of going into a DP camp. Instead I, again, resorted to a subterfuge. Since I did speak Dutch, I attached myself to a group of Dutch DP's, former inmates, former forced-labor people who, via the Red Cross, had chartered or had made available to them a train going from Linz back to Holland. And since I had said that I was a Dutch -- not Dutch national. I had assumed the identity of a cousin of mine who had lived in Holland, was about my age, and was the child of my father's brother. They had perished. I told you about the group of people that had perished. He had fled to Holland with his wife and lived in Holland from 1937 to the occupation of Holland and in 1942 was sent to Auschwitz and perished in Auschwitz. But since there were no records -- Rotterdam had been bombed -- I could freely move in Holland. I spoke Dutch, albeit with a German accent, but nevertheless, the Dutch knew that many Germans had come to Holland, so this was no strange thing.

I attached myself to this group of Dutch people. We got some nourishment from Red Cross. We got a few pieces, bars of chocolate, and we rolled through a Germany that was utterly devastated. My aunt, who lived in Germany with her husband -- she was a Catholic. Her husband, my uncle, my brother's mother -- my mother's brother, had converted to Catholicism in 1920, so he was not entirely spared our fate, but he came close to it. He -- I lost my thread there. What was I trying to say?

>> Interviewer: You were talking about you went to Holland.

>> Herz: Holland, yes. Oh. He had fled Germany in 1937, '38. He had tried to become a Dutch national, was picked up by the Germans, and was -- but I nevertheless had the identity of this cousin of mine. I assumed the identity of this cousin of mine and went with this Dutch transport from Mauthausen area -- from Linz, in the case -- to Holland through a ruined Germany. Oh, now I know where I picked it up. Germany was devastated, and I wanted to quote my aunt, the Catholic aunt. She says, "*Am Boden zerstört*," because the Germans -- *am Boden zerstört* means "destroyed on the ground." The German communiqués always said 25 British airplanes *am Boden zerstört*, destroyed on the ground. Well, Germany was destroyed on the ground, totally wrecked. The cities that we drove through -- we are talking now only a month after the war -- still had the huge banners, *Räder müssen rollen für den Sieg*, "Railroads must run for our final victory." We couldn't believe it. I would have taken those signs down, you know, but the Germans didn't have the strength, the gumption, or maybe the occupation forces made them leave them up.

The American troops, in those days, were no friends of the German. Despite the later fraternization and *Ich bin auch Berliner*, "I am also a Berliner," in those days, the Americans had suffered at the hands of the German at the Battle of the Bulge, and they were no friends of the Krauts. My misfortune is that here, I am sometimes mistaken for a Kraut. I am not a German, and many times here I have to tell people, when they

start to be enthusiastic about the German and the cleanliness and the beer, I say, "Look, I am from Germany, but I am not a friend of the Germans." I have to do that quite frequently. And then, of course, people backpedal, but I have not forgotten. I shall not forget.

I attached myself to these Dutch people, and we made it in the railroad car, this time with food and stops and rest stops and Red Cross help. We made it to Cologne, the area where I was born. I saw the spires of the cathedral before me, started in 1248, housing the -- since you are a Catholic, housing the reliquaries of the Three Wise Men. They call them kings, but they were actually just the Three Wise Men of the Orient -- in a reliquary in this cathedral, and the train had to stop. It stopped four hours within about 5 miles of my place of birth. I would tell you only one thing. I went in this car. I went out of this car. I was torn as I've never -- never before been torn in my life that in a country that had been home to generations of my people, the Jewish people; where we had been living; where we had been -- I am quite sure where we had the religious -- not the religious freedom, but where we had performed our religious rites for hundreds of years because we're going back that far; where we had shared the fate of Germans, I did not know whether to go or to stay. When the train started to move, my decision was made. I went to Holland.

>> Interviewer: How long were you in Holland?

>> Herz: About four months. I was helped by the Dutch. There was no railroad to go to Rotterdam. My intention was to go to Rotterdam and see whether anyone had been left in Rotterdam. Do not forget, we had absolutely no communication at all with our relatives. On the train, the people from the train were then split up. Those that were going to Rotterdam would have to go through the canals, and those who lived in other parts of Holland could continue with the train. Well, I was going on a boat through the canals, and I had something that I had picked

up in the concentration camp. I had an infection, a blood infection. All of a sudden it started to creep up my arm, a red streak, and I only knew one thing, that it meant blood poisoning, and I knew that this was nothing to be trifled with. And the captain of the barge looked at it and said, "*Mijnheer*, I don't dare to take you very much further. We are going to stop at the nearest large town that has a hospital. I'll let you off. And all the Dutch people knew that we had suffered. By that time, they knew. They did not, they did not ask. They just tried, tried to make, to make us feel welcome amongst humanity. I was treated in the hospital there. They were more than -- they were human beings. It is strange. I have since while thought of Socrates and his lantern. I am searching for a human being. He wouldn't have found one in Germany.

Now, let's continue. In Holland, I was -- I went to a house where people from the camps were assembled, where we recuperated. It was a recuperation house operated by relief organizations. And I tried to make a life. I tried to inquire where my people had gone. I no longer found a trace of them. I found the people that had lived in his house, that knew them, that had some mementos of them. Go ahead.

>> Interviewer: If I could interrupt. The tape is running low, and they would like me to ask --

>> Herz: Go ahead.

>> Interviewer: -- if you could just briefly tell how you came to America and South Carolina.

>> Herz: well, it's very quick from then on. I met -- the Jewish Brigade made a concentrated effort to recruit people for Israel. I went with them to France, again, to be trained to fight in Israel. I found out in France that I still had one brother alive, and he was in America. He had been adopted by his liberators, a captain in the American army. He begged me to come to him as last members of the family, and I decided to come to

the United States, which I did. Last day of 1946, I arrived in New York, and I was reunited with my brother. I stayed in New Jersey on a chicken farm. I got a job on a chicken farm. My brother was still in New York, also working. He had decided to go to school there and to go, if possible, to a college.

>> Interviewer: How did you get to South Carolina?

>> Herz: South Carolina, I -- it still is a long way from South Carolina. From there I went to Chicago. In Chicago I became a watchmaker, and since my age at that time was 25 years and Truman had declared, that as part of the United Nations effort, to help Korea, since Korea was being invaded, I was being drafted. And although I could not call it getting out of the frying pan into the fire, this was, in essence what it was because I did not get a job in Germany with the army of the occupation. I was trained as an infantryman with a machine gun, and -- you guessed it -- after a very brief training in Louisiana, I found myself in a trench in Korea, facing 500,000 Chinese. It wasn't that bad. I mean, there may have been that many there. It was frontline duty with the 45th Infantry, the mission, and I would only say that we had a bunch of people there that was as solidary -- we were a fighting bunch. Do not forget now, we are talking about four years out of the concentration camp. I had not been an American by that time. Nevertheless, when I told the recruiting official in Chicago that I had suffered pretty much and I didn't particularly feel that this was going to be a crowning point in my life, he says, "Well, look at it this way. Do you make your living here?" I said, "Yes." "Do you have your home here?" "Yes." "Well," he says, "if this is the case, then you have to fight for this country. There's nothing else to do." So I said, "Okay." So I was sworn in, I joined -- I was joined. I was actually issued to the 45th Infantry Division because they were low in battle strength. We made it to Japan for an interlude of guarding the northernmost approaches, Hokkaido Island, and then in 1951, we made the second Inchon landing from the boats -- over the side

of the landing craft into the boats, and we landed at Inchon. And I made the -- well, we stayed on the front lines, I stayed on the front lines for nine months until I was rotated back to the States. You may have heard that term.

>> Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

>> Herz: How shall I say? Promotion was very rapid. I was a PFC when I was in Japan, ready to go to Korea. In Korea, I left with the rank of sergeant first class, in charge of an infantry platoon. So it was quite a turnover of personnel. But I did not get anything but a small injury, which bothers me still. But nevertheless, I came back to Chicago. In Chicago, briefly, I lived for a while. I made my living there until the area I was living in was slated for renewal. It was an old neighborhood, and they had to make room for newer places. The housing was deplorable. I decided to go to France, where I met my wife, and we married over there. She is German, but, again, she is not a friend of the Germans. By choice, she lived in Switzerland and in France. We married, but France was a very hard nut to crack for us because foreigners were not welcome to seek work in France, and I asked friends of mine to try and get me back to the States into a paying profession as a watchmaker-jeweler, which was my profession in Chicago. They found a place for me in Augusta, Georgia, but again, the Vietnam War intervened. All the troops were sent to Vietnam, and the economy took a nosedive in Augusta, Georgia, costing me my job. I advertised for a place, or I looked for a place in the neighborhood, in the South. I didn't want to go back to the North anymore because of the cold and because I'd gotten used to the warm climate. You probably know this by now. The job that was offered to me was, as a matter of fact, a Conway address, but the job itself was in Myrtle Beach. The job lasted about two years. The owner became disenchanted with me, and my wife, who was a professional landscape architect, decided that we should try our luck at landscaping. And we went into the landscape business, nursery,

plants, trees, shrubbery. This is where we are. I have done that for 20-some-odd years.

The South is different, but it is an individuality that you will not find very much. You will not find it in Nebraska. You will not find it in Indiana. The South is sort of a combination Jefferson, redneck, clay, the Confederacy, everything -- Faulkner, all rolled in one. When you are in the South, you are an individual, and I like this. I like individuals, and I like the South for that reason. The one thing that I will quickly tell you before we end on this was my attitude and the attitude of the people in the United States, Jewish people I'm talking about. I was invited to speak of my experiences in the camps. As you have probably heard by now, I did not ever say as much as I have said here, and I have not said very -- I have only briefly outlined what it was. There is more. It would take a long time to tell all. But when I glossed over it, when I skimmed over it, trying to make this sound as if it was deprivation only without degradation, when I started to get -- how do we say it -- to the brutalizing end, people begged me to stop. Number one, they did not believe it. Number two, and I think that this is -- they were putting themselves in the position of the people that they had left behind in Europe. They had escaped with their lives. Their people had not, and before their people found their end, that they were subjected to such horror, they could not bear, and they asked me to stop. "Please, stop."

Many people said, when I told them about that I had been in the camps, they said, "well, you must forget all that. This is a new life. Forget all that. Start anew. You were lucky." And I tried to tell -- I never tried. I thought it beyond -- I thought it was useless to tell them that I wished that I could have shared my parents', my family's, my sisters' -- I would have gladly shared everybody's fate. I did not want to be separate and apart from them, and I felt that my -- now it has been determined as survivor's guilt. Airplane survivors feel that way, and elaborate psychological measures are taken to rid them of their

guilt. There has not been any day in the last 40 years that I have not thought of Auschwitz and of our people, of the destruction of Jewry as a whole. I mean it. I'm not shamming this. Of the best and the brightest that were killed for no reason at all because I knew the best and the brightest in the camps. We had pianists that equal anyone that you can care to name here. We had philosophers. We had surgeons. They shared the fate and the death of my parents, my sisters, my family, the fate of every Jewish person in Europe. We are not very many. And this is what I sometimes feel that when I hear Catholics or religious, especially here in the South -- not Catholics, but this easily thrown phrase, "Jesus died for our sins." He died for whatever reason he died; I do not know. But I died for -- I have died in Auschwitz, my soul died in Auschwitz, and it's still there. I have died for the last 40 years, and there is no psychologist that can rid me of this. It is so ingrained in me. I have seen ovens. I've seen crematoria. I didn't share the fate of the people in the crematoria, but my soul is there. I have never lived a normal life. To myself, I have never admitted that I live a normal American life, American GI firing M1s, firing M16 carbines into the oncoming hordes. All of this, yes, but my family life and my own inner life, it's there.

>> Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we go?

>> Herz: You may want to ask some questions, things that I've left out. I don't know whether I have left out anything.

>> Interviewer: I don't think there's anything more you can say. Thank you very much.

>> Herz: You're welcome.

>> Interviewer: Thank you.

00:39:20