Werner Reich

My story is very, very unusual. But it's very typical as well.

It was typical for most western European Jews, that when Hitler came to power they escaped to a different part of Europe, and then Hitler caught up with them. They were dragged through the camps, their parents were killed, and then eventually, those kids who survived came back, were orphans, had absolutely nobody, and then had to find a way to make a living. Most of them emigrated to other countries. They went to America, to Israel, they went to Australia and Canada and the United States.

So when you hear my story you will hear the story of thousands of others who went through exactly the same situation. Middle class background, western Europe, somewhere else in Europe, and then dragged through the camps and came back.

In 1933, a great, great number of laws were imposed by the Nazis. On April 1st, 1933, right away there was a boycott of Jewish businesses in Germany. That was two to three months after Hitler came to power. And businesses were destroyed, people were standing outside lawyers' offices, doctors' offices, preventing people from coming in. And about 300 Jews committed suicide within the next day or two, after April 1st. There was a law that, later on in June, that children couldn't go to school anymore. There was a law that professionals couldn't teach anymore, at universities or couldn't be school teachers. And there was a law that Jews could not work for non-Jewish companies.

My father was a mechanical and an electrical engineer. And he worked for Siemens. And in 1933, he found himself without a job, and both his children, my sister and myself, couldn't go to school anymore. And so we left Germany, and we went three countries away. We went to Yugoslavia. We lived in Zagreb, Yugoslavia. Beautiful, beautiful city. But immediately we run into serious problems. We had to learn Croat and we had to learn Serbian, and my parents never did. In addition to this, my father just couldn't make a living, because the country didn't need any engineers. The country was very, very rich in raw materials, but they shipped these raw materials to other countries had them pre-fabricated and then bought them back. Just to give you an idea, Yugoslavia at that time was something like 75% illiterate. Just to give you an idea.

And in the meantime, Hitler came to occupy more and more countries around Europe and there was

no place we could escape. In 1940 my father died, and in 1941 Germany invaded Yugoslavia. And the part of Yugoslavia where I lived, Croatia, came under the ruling of Dr. Ante Pavelić. He was a Fascist of the worst kind.

We had to wear the star in the front and also in the back. So you couldn't really hide the star by crossing your arms over the front of your shirt. So people used to push you, throw garbage at you when you walked on the street. And obviously we avoided going on the street. If you were stopped by police and you didn't have a star, you were arrested. And sometimes you were arrested even if you had a star.

Pavelić immediately opened a concentration camp called Jasenovac. There were six extermination camps under German jurisdiction. And they were all in Poland. All of them. There was a seventh, and that was in Croatia, that was Jasenovac. And the number of people who were killed there varies anywhere between 70,000 and 200,000. Nobody knows for sure because the camps, the small group of camps, were on the edge of the River Sava. And people used to, they killed them and they threw them in the river, which flowed into the Danube, and that flowed into the Black Sea. Most of the people they were killed by having their throat cut.

In one town, a couple of German soldiers were shot by the Resistance. So they went to a local high school, a typical high school, you are going to, and they picked up two hundred students. They walked them out of town and they shot them.

If you walked with a star, if there was a soldier on the sidewalk, you couldn't be on the sidewalk, you had to step into the gutter. And my mother was afraid that something was going to happen to me. As I said, my father died just shortly before that. And so she placed me with one couple, and my sister with another couple. And I lived there with these people for about two years. They were working for the Resistance movement. And so for two years, I was developing films, I was making enlargements and so on. That's from the age of roughly thirteen to fifteen.

When I was fifteen years old, by the way, I couldn't go near the window of the apartment, it was right in the city, because people from the street would see me. I couldn't wear shoes because people in the apartment below would hear me. And whenever I called up one of my friends, there was no answer on the phone, or sometimes a strange voice. When the war was over, nearly all of these friends were dead.

So, one morning at about six o'clock in the morning, there was a knock at the door, and six Gestapo agents came in, the German secret police. And they turned the place upside down. There was a guy who stood next to my bed with a gun and he pointed the gun at me and I couldn't get out of the bed. And then at one point I had to go to the bathroom and he followed me. You haven't lived until you've peed with a gun at your back.

So they took me down to the local Gestapo headquarters. A Gestapo agent questioned me. He wanted to know what the people were doing and, frankly speaking, I didn't know anything. And every time he asked me a question, he hit me. And there I was, crying and bleeding all over his carpet. As I said I was fifteen at that time. And then they locked me up in the basement cell, which was originally a cold cellar and there was nothing in it except a bucket to be used as a toilet. And I was locked up there for three days, and after three days I was shipped to a border town between Croatia and Slovenia, and I was locked up in a tiny little cell, it was like a tool shed, and there was just a shelf against the wall I used to sit on and to sleep on. There was nothing soft or anything. And there were millions and millions of fleas in there. I was wearing a short sleeved shirt and short pants and these fleas just attacked me viciously.

And from there I was transferred to Graz, Austria, and I found myself in this building, which still today is the police headquarters of the Graz police. And I was locked up on the third floor with three other kids. Two kids were arrested for burglary, and the third kid had murdered his mother. It was truly stimulating company.

That's where I had my only revenge on the German government, by the way. Because I infected that cell and all the adjacent cells with fleas. That's my total revenge.

And one day I looked into the prison, into the police station yard, and I saw my mother walking around in a circle with some other women. That's the last time I ever saw my mother. I have not the slightest idea what happened to her afterwards.

From there, I was shipped—I was there for six weeks, locked up, and after six weeks I was shipped to Vienna, and I found myself in this beautiful synagogue. But by the time I came there it was destroyed during Kristallnacht. There was glass on the floor, and soaked in water, and torn prayer books, and torn prayer shawls. It was a total mess. The seats were all torn up and cut up.

And I was there with about 120 other people, and the next morning we were put on a train, and under SS supervision we traveled for two days to Czechoslovakia. And we found ourselves in a place called Terezín.

It was a fortress built in about 1780. And when planes were invented, all of a sudden fortresses were useless, because all you had to do was fly over them and drop a couple of bombs and the place was wiped out. So they literally moved out and civilians moved in. And about 2,900 civilians lived there. And when Hitler came and conquered Czechoslovakia he said, "This is a perfect place for a concentration camp."

So, what is a concentration camp? If you have lots of people living very happily together, and one group decides that they are better than the others, they can take all the others and lock them up,

"concentrate" them in one little area. And that's where they can do lots of things with them. They can do nothing with them, they can put them to work, they can work them to death, they can cut their throats, or they can gas them. And the Nazis did all of these things.

The Nazis had hundreds of thousands of these camps, some of them big like Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, and most of them were very, very small, maybe had a few hundred people in there. Some of them were working camps, most of them were not.

The Nazis really were the first ones in Germany to have concentration camps, and they had concentration camps 30 years earlier, in 1904, in Africa, where they locked up the Hereros and the Namas.

The town was old and dilapidated. I helped lay these railroad tracks for others to arrive. And that's where, for the first time, I encountered permanent mud. There was always mud, inside and outside the camp. And outside the camp, we had to cut willow branches and make baskets out of them, baskets like this, for carrying potatoes.

Terezín was a very, very unusual camp. It was a demonstration camp. It was made specifically so as to appease the Red Cross, the Swiss authorities, and the Swedish authorities when they complained that the Germans mistreated Jews. And they were considered prisoners of war, and, according to the Geneva convention, they had to be treated fairly.

So, from time to time, inspections came. The problem was, that there were originally 3,000 people in the place and now there were suddenly 60,000. In other words, for every 1 person who was there before, there were suddenly 20 people there. And obviously also, being a camp, the food was horrible. So the food problem could easily be solved. They simply brought in extra food, and when the inspection was there, the food was reasonably good. The prisoners were also the intelligentsia of Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany there, so they played music, and the children had crayons and paper, and, as far as culturally was concerned, the camp had great freedom.

The problem was only that, what do you do with all these extra prisoners? Well, the answer was very simple. You bring in a whole bunch of railroad cars and you load them in and you ship them to Auschwitz, and kill them. And that's exactly what they did. And while I was there they were several inspections there, and each time people were shipped away to a work camp. We never knew where they went to.

I did all different types of jobs there. I exterminated vermin, I made baskets, and I laid railroad tracks. And one day—I was there for ten months, no contact whatsoever with anybody on the outside—and then one they brought in a whole bunch of railroad cars, 25 of them, and they put in a hundred people in each car, and they put in a bucket—these were cattle cars, there were no seats in

them—and they locked the doors and the windows and off we went, on a train ride east.

We were in these cars for about three days. And obviously the one bucket overflowed after an hour or so, and for the next three days we lying in our feces and in our urine and some people died in our car, and it was basically hell.

And then suddenly the train stopped and we were immediately greeted by a group of SS men and people in striped uniforms - every single one of them has a walking stick. And these guys were hitting us over the head, over the shoulder, over the face, wherever they could. We were crying, and screaming, and bleeding all over the place.

The SS men had a typical SS man cap, but on the lapel they didn't have the two SS arrows, which were traditional, but they had a skull and cross bones. These were the SS men, people assigned to concentration camps. Most of them were volunteers.

Behind us was a gate and next to us was electrically charged barbed wire. High voltage. If you touched it, you were dead. So we asked, "Where are we?" And they told us, "You're in Auschwitz 2, or Birkenau. Or what's known as an extermination camp." We'd never heard of Auschwitz or Birkenau or an extermination camp. Before us was again the traditional mud.

There were actually three Auschwitz camps. There was Auschwitz 1, which was strictly for German criminals. These were people who'd been sentenced to 20, 30 years in jail for murder, child molestation, rape, you name it. And they already spent maybe 10, 15 years in jail, so they were brought to Auschwitz 1 to act as guards for the other two camps. These were all German citizens. In addition to this, there were a great number of homosexuals amongst these. In Germany, homosexuality was a crime. Then there was Auschwitz 3, which was a small factory, which made artificial rubber. And then there was Auschwitz 2, where we were.

Everybody arrived in one spot and then probably 70 - 80% of the people were walked over to the areas where the crematoria were, the buildings with the gas chambers and the ovens. There were also buildings called Canada. This is where all the property that the people brought with them was taken and sorted, including the clothing of the people after they'd been killed. There were about 6 camps, each camp housed about 5,000 or 6,000 prisoners, and each camp served a particular purpose. And the purpose changed from time to time. While I was there, one camp was strictly for families from Terezín, which was dissolved. One camp was strictly for gypsies, they all got gassed and killed. And one camp strictly for Jehovah's Witnesses. They also got all gassed and killed. The area below the green spot was the women's camp. That's where Anne Frank and any other woman you know was there. Then there was the area where the Nazis had their barracks.

And not one single bomb ever fell on the gas chambers, on the railroad tracks, or on the German barracks. In other words, the good people did nothing.

All of us, when we got into the camp, were tattooed, got a tattoo on our arms. And we also had a number and a triangle. And depending where you were in the camp, that's how the triangle was colored. So political prisoners had a red triangle. Homosexuals pink. Jehovah's Witnesses purple. Gypsies black. Jews yellow. Thieves and robbers were light green. And murderers dark green. And these thieves and robbers were known as Kapos, they were camp police.

In a typical men's barrack, there were six people lying on each level, and sometimes the top level would collapse and fall on the middle level, the middle level on the lower level, and kill people on the lower level. The wooden boards were covered with burlap bags, and the burlap bags had straw. But there was a constant drizzle of urine and feces from one level to the other. We had only two properties: a bowl and a spoon. We had nothing else. We had no combs, we had no pencils, we had no pocket knives, we had no glasses, we had no handkerchiefs, nothing, absolutely nothing.

The bowl was filled in the morning with brown water made out of acorns and we got two ounces of bread made out of flour and sawdust. For lunch we got a soup which was really salt water in which tiny little pieces of unwashed dirty potatoes were cut. And in the evening we got a same type of a soup, and we also got another piece of bread. And that was it. We got a total of probably 400 calories a day. There wasn't a blade of grass in the camp. There was nothing that could possibly be eaten that was in the camp, not even bugs. Eating that food gave us two problems. First of all, because we had no vitamin c, we lost our teeth, and secondly, we got terrible diarrhea of dysentery.

And the toilet you had to use, you could spend just a couple of minutes there. There was absolutely no toilet paper or anything of the sort to wipe yourself with.

And three times a day we had to stand and be counted. That was one thing that had to be done every day. We were standing in mud, and just be counted. And if one person was missing, we had to stand there until the person could be found, or we had to, what is known to "sport," which means we had to jump or roll away in the mud or anything like that until a few people died.

There was no way you could escape from the camp. There was electrically charged barbed wire, there were guard towers. There were German shepherds that had been trained to run after prisoners, and they were trained to tear the prisoners apart. When Auschwitz was liberated all these German shepherds were immediately shot. And if somebody tried to escape they brought them back. Invariably they were caught. And they put a big cardboard sign around his neck which said, "Cheer, cheer, I'm back here." And then the person was killed, was always killed in the presence of other prisoners in order to teach us a lesson.

We always were taught various lessons. I once had to watch how two prisoners were beaten to pulp, and I mean pulp, with large wooden boards. Once a prisoner tried to escape, they caught him, they took a barrel, they hammered nails from the outside of the barrel into the barrel, put the man in the

barrel, closed it, and rolled it down a hill. Many people couldn't take the camp so they just threw themselves against the wire and committed suicide. And every day the power was turned off for about 20 minutes or so, the bodies were removed, and then it all started again.

There were four crematorium at the edge of our camp. And the gas chambers - people were brought in, were told that this was a shower, and then they were stripped naked, and then they were pushed into one of these chambers with their arms raised high, little children were thrown on top, and then the doors were closed shut. And through this hole in the ceiling, Zyclon B gas, was tossed in, and then the people were dead. A group of prisoners removed the bodies, cut off the fingers if they had any rings on them, removed any gold teeth, and then threw the bodies into these ovens.

And the only things that remained of the people were boxes full of wedding rings, empty suitcases, lots of clothing, shoes, glasses, and other stuff. This is what we saw.

People sometimes ask me, "What's the worst thing that ever happened to you in the camp?" The worst thing that happened to me was that I was 16 years old, and I didn't have the slightest idea whether I would be alive the next day. The air was constantly filled with smoke and the smell of burning hair and burning flesh. Underneath us was mud and in our hearts was fear.

I guess what kept us going was humor. We were constantly telling jokes. We were living in Auschwitz, we used to say, "I'm happy that I'm in Auschwitz. Because if I wouldn't be happy, I'd still be in Auschwitz. Might as well be happy." That's the type of thinking. And we spent evenings, hours upon hours, telling jokes. We had big joke sessions. Jokes brought us simply away from the reality. There were dirty jokes, there were funny jokes, there were long, long, long, long, elaborate Yiddish jokes where the punchline really didn't matter but the whole situation leading up to the punchline was funny. But, and we used to sit there, and somebody tells a joke in Yiddish, and then somebody else translates it into German, and somebody into Russian, and somebody into Polish, and somebody into Hungarian.

One day Dr. Mengele came into the camp—he was also known as the angel of death, because he liked selecting people. He also experimented with people. He took twins and he broke their legs and tried to cure one twin one way and the other one the other way. And so he stood with a group of SS men telling jokes, and all the young boys in the camp we had to strip naked. We were between the ages of 12 and 18. And we had to run past Dr. Mengele and there was Dr. Mengele occasionally nodding his head for a person to go in the other direction or moving a finger for the person to go in the other direction, and then he was through with it, and we had to run again. And we were running for our lives. We tried to look taller, and stronger, and healthier, and happier, you name it—anything that you can do under the conditions to look better than you really were. And after the third selection there were 89 of us. And we were sent to the adjacent camp, which had the camp gallows in the backyard of the barracks where we were. The remaining roughly 5,900 prisoners in the camp, nearly all of them were, over the next five days, sent to the gas chambers and killed. Of the 89, 10

months later when the war was over, 46 of us were still alive. Today the number is somewhere around about 6 or 7.

I was sent to Auschwitz 1, where the criminals were, and I worked there in the stables. I took care of the horses, and the horses were eating dried sugar beets, and I stole some of that food from the horses.

In January, 1945, the Russians were advancing, and all the German criminals were put into German uniforms, and sent to the Russian front. And the rest of us, we were given a piece of bread and we started on a death march. We walked for a couple of hours and then we stopped, and those who couldn't get up were shot. And we continued like that throughout the day. At night we slept in some stables. The next day we continued. And things got worse and worse. People were stripping themselves naked. There was no warmth, there was no warm food, there was no food whatsoever. And after, on the third day, we arrived at the railroad station. By this time we had walked 35 miles, and of the 60,000 who left, 15,000 were dead.

And the rest of us we were loaded into open railroad cars. And it was unbelievably cold. Unbelievably cold. In a moving train in subfreezing temperatures, it was indescribably cold. And at one point, the train stopped in Moravská Ostrava, which is a town in Czechoslovakia. And there was a steam engine on the tracks next to me, and there was a man walking around, so I gave him an aluminum cup, which I found, and I asked him if he can give me some of that water that was dribbling out from the piston. And he did that. And it was the most delicious, best tasting food I ever had in my entire life. It was the first warm liquid or anything warm I had in probably four or five days. And so we continued traveling, and after four days we arrived in a concentration camp called Mauthausen.

Mauthausen was a concentration camp from hell. The prisoners were stripped naked in the winter and sprayed with water. They had to walk up 186 steps and push each other off the cliff. Anyway, we arrived there, and walked into this yard, and we were standing in this mud. And we were brought into the building and showered and we collapsed, screaming with pain, because those who were still alive were all frost bitten. And after three days my feet started to rot. And there was a Serbian doctor in the camp, and he cut off my toes on one foot, and so saved my life, bandaged it up with paper.

And then things got really bad because there was no food there, and we were lying in our feces and in dirt like this in our barracks. We had been squeezed between Russian forces and American forces.

And on the fifth of May, we were liberated by American forces.

I was at that time, 17 years old, and I weighed 64 pounds. And the Americans had absolutely no

food for us that was really suitable. So they gave us military rations. And about 20,000 prisoners died eating these rations. I ate a can of chewing tobacco. I didn't know what I was eating. The majority of the prisoners were dead. So they brought in the local population, local men from the town and they picked up the bodies and they buried them in mass graves. And after three weeks they gave me a slip of paper and said, "Go home." No money or anything. I got the clothing of a dead person, and I hitchhiked by train back to Yugoslavia.

When I came back there was communism there, and I lived there for two years. And by hook or by crook I managed to escape and get to England. When I came to England I had a little problem. I had no schooling, I had no skills, and I couldn't speak English. So I started off as a laborer, then as a machine tool picker, and then a dye maker. I got married, I came to the States. And I went to college for 10 years at night.

And that's basically my story. I worked as an industrial engineer, as a vice president of industrial engineering for many, many years. I'm blessed. I'm truly blessed. I'm alive. You know, I'm reminded of the story about the two prisoners who were locked up in a cell, and they look out into the prison yard. And one of them sees mud, and the other one sees stars. And, I like to see stars. Life has been very, very good to me. I've been married to an absolutely fabulous, wonderful lady for 61 years. She passed on two years ago. I have two fabulous sons, two daughters in law who are much too good for them. And I'm going to schools and I have friends and I mean friends, not acquaintances, I have people who work with me. I'm very happy. And for the last 25 years, I've been speaking in schools and in the Jewish spirit of Tikkun Olam, "Repairing the world," I'm trying my best to repair it just a little bit.