

Arthur Pais  
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Interviewer: You grew up in Lithuania?

Arthur Pais: Yes, I was born and raised in a town called Vilkomir in Lithuania, and, in fact, I'm not really supposed to be here, because everybody in my hometown was killed. It was by sheer coincidence that we moved the year before the war started and we moved to Kovno.

Interviewer: Do you know a woman by the name of Nessie Marks?

Arthur Pais: Everybody asked me that. You know, I have never met or probably know her.

Interviewer: Because she's a Lithuanian Jew out of Kovno.

Arthur Pais: Yeah well I was in the Kovno ghetto yeah. But anyway, so, I had a good childhood. We were in a kind of well-to-do family. My father had a flourmill. I'm the youngest of three children. My brother and sister, we're six years apart and as I said, we had a normal life till the Russians came in, in '39 when Germany and Russia divided Poland. So we had a border with Poland and Russians came and take over. And, of course, I happened to be going to a Hebrew school. Not a religious school, but a Zionist school, because Hebrew was outlawed. So it was a Yiddish school. But as it happens, my brother and sister were in Kovno at a university and our mill burned down so my father got a job in Kovno and he had an apartment with my brother and sister and before long, the Russians moved in. An army captain and his family left us one room so it was time to move, so we left our town and lived in Kovno. As it turns out, everybody in our hometown, everybody was killed, forty five hundred Jews all killed in the first month. I do have a blank period from the time the war started until we entered the ghetto. I guess I always have to be first in some areas. I happened to be in summer camp two kilometers from the German border when the war broke out. So I was a German prisoner within the first couple of hours and within a day, there were Lithuanian partisans. They separated the Jewish kids from the Gentile kids and I can't remember a thing what happened during that month. All I remember, that one young boy, see his face now, you know, spoke back to one of the guards and they shot him, but finally through the Red Cross, the Jewish children were brought home. So I came back to Kovno, sometime early August because August 15th was the deadline when all the Jews had to move into the ghetto. So what happened during that month, I have no idea and from what I've, of course I understand, there were a lot of pogroms, a lot of Jews killed before the ghetto was closed. When the ghetto was closed on August 15th, the people were crammed together in a very small area. There was really one room to a family and my brother by then was married. He had a wife and a small child and we started out

with about twenty-five thousand Jews in the ghetto and within a month or so, they had everybody assemble at a square and there was just the German Sergeant. Everybody had to go by – whoever stayed in their homes were killed, just right, left, you know, nobody knew which side was on and ten thousand people were marched off to a nearby fort where they were all killed. So that was the first mass killing. Then, actually, we're in the ghetto for about three years and we had a--

Interviewer: You were about thirteen, fourteen?

Arthur Pais: I would say almost fourteen when the war started. The Jewish leadership managed to talk the Germans into letting them open an [unintelligible] school to teach workers, so I went to the [unintelligible] school for about six months and then decided, "Nah, I'm a mechanic," because it was advantageous to go to different work brigades outside the city under guard where there used to take you but you had a chance of bringing food or something. So I stayed, you know, I was working during the, I'd say, two and a half years of the three years we're in the ghetto and then, maybe, I don't remember the exact date but, within six months after they took the ten thousand away, they came in one day while most people were away at work and gathered up all the old people and small children and took them away and got them killed.

Interviewer: You think that the systematic killing of people is what you remember most about the ghetto?

Arthur Pais: Well, this is about what, you know, what happened but ghetto life, you know, went on, people worked. I happened to work in the bus station which was part of the... Everybody wore uniforms and Germany, of course, was part of the post office department and I worked in the supply room and actually there was... My work was relatively easy there but the German civilian that was the head of the supply room, he used to sell tires on the black market and he used to make me deliver them outside and I guess if I was caught I'd be shot but, you know, I had to do that. So, then one day – my sister, by the way, was a medical student before the war and she worked in the ghetto hospital as a nurse and one morning, she came to work a little late and there were guards all around, they wouldn't let her in. She pleaded with them, they wouldn't let her come in, and a little later they set the hospital on fire and burned the doctors, the nurses, all the patients, you know, so they were mostly coincidences, you know, how we survived. Then when the Russians came near, we were... let me go back a little. From the ghetto there was still a chance sometime to escape and some of my... I was the littlest kid in my class and some of my friends decided to escape and fight with the partisans. Of course my mother wouldn't let me go but I did manage to steal some German uniforms that I gave them and I have no idea if any of them survived.

Interviewer: How did you steal them?

Arthur Pais: Oh I had worked from the supply room. You know, I managed to tuck them away,

if I could help the guy steal tires, it was easy to steal a few uniforms. So when the Russians were advancing, they told us that we're being moved to a work camp in Germany and we were all packed into boxcars and there was literally no room to stand up. It was just standing room, you know, people wedged together and all there was, was a bucket of water and a bucket for sanitary purposes. We were on that train I think for about three days. You can imagine what the train looked like. Then the train stopped at a place called Stutthof which turns out, we didn't know it at that time was concentration camp and also extermination camp and they told us the women and children should get off and the men will meet up with them later. I remember my mother started crying and I said, I'll see you a little later, of course I never saw her again and later of course I found out that my brother's wife and child were killed and we continued on by train and wound up in a place, it was in outside Dachau, was you know, a sub camp of Dachau, a work camp and there were about two thousand prisoners. There were several camps around there and the first week, everyday of course you had to line up and they took all the smaller boys away well obviously to Auschwitz and I was hiding behind somebody else or stood on tiptoes I don't know which but somehow I managed to stay in that camp. At that camp, we had two thousand people, we had an average of twenty- five to thirty-five a day just dropping dead of starvation and then of course they'd replenish new prisoners.

Interviewer: How were you surviving? I don't mean physically surviving.

Arthur Pais: I don't know. It's for some reason, I think, you think of just today, you used to see...if you were thinking I think about, maybe I was stupid, but if you're thinking what wishing what should be or what the past was, you could see people gave up and you knew they'd be dead within a couple of days and we worked on a construction site, actually a building, an underground Messerschmidt factory and we worked twelve hours shifts, two weeks days and two weeks nights and we probably had to march a good hour and a half or two to the camp and from the camp. We would get a cup or bowl of, so called coffee in the morning, then when we came back, we got our ration which was a piece of bread – picture a loaf of bread, half and about this wide – and watery soup, that's all you got, but the typical German efficiency, when they would find every morning, you know, dead prisoners in the barracks, if they couldn't identify them, we all had to, you know, march by, nobody got their food till the prisoner was identified and that's where you saw real brutality, I mean, hanging people for, you know, no other reason. I mean, if a German guard would stand at attention, if they were hitting you, the worst thing you could do is duck, you had to stand there and take it but somehow I survived, I was there. I really had, at this construction site the foreman of that group where we had worked, I, kind of, had to clean his hut and run errands so I really didn't do heavy work and in fact, he gave my father a job on the inside otherwise I don't think my father would survive but once in a while, when a crust of bread, he was nice to me but he wouldn't give it to me. He would throw it on the floor like you throw it to your dog and I remember one time they brought in replacement prisoners and these were Hungarian-Jewish soldiers and they came in

their, still had their uniforms on, of course, you know, you by the way had to strip and get prison garb and the first weeks, you saw them in the morning get up and try to, you know, wash and bathe but I think it was such a shock to them. We were used to this gradual hunger. I think they all died within a month. They're all dead and then when the Americans advanced, they evacuated the camp and they put it...we were on a death march, I guess, that's how everyone call it, and they marched us to the main camp in Dachau and, you know, later when I checked the dates, I find out, the day after we left the camp, the Americans arrived.

Interviewer: Tell me about the march.

Arthur Pais: Well the march, you know, we all marched and anybody that dropped out in the back, the guards would shoot them.

Interviewer: You marched from where to where?

Arthur Pais: The camp was near Landsberg which is, I don't know how many miles from Munich and we marched to the main Dachau camp. We spent one night at the Dachau camp then they marched us again and in fact, my father was left with the weak and dying, he couldn't walk anymore and on that march, I think it lasted, let's see, we started on April 28th or on April 24th, we left for a march to Dachau, I guess on April 28th, we left Dachau and they were marching us towards the Bavarian Alps or some place and May 2nd, we woke up and there were no guards. I was liberated on May 2nd but the interesting was, again, everybody who dropped out would be shot and at one point, we saw a bunch of guards then dogs go ahead of us and you're just like, you know, cattle marching. I figure they're changing guard during that period. The Americans were so close that anybody that dropped out was liberated, you know and so I was liberated on May 2nd then we--

Interviewer: Tell me about that day. Tell me about May 2nd.

Arthur Pais: Well, we woke up, you know, they marched us for some reason at night and we rested during the day, and I remember all we carried with us of course is the blanket and woke up and there was this much snow on top of the blanket but we looked around, there were, you know, no guards. So we roamed around and there was this little town, it was right in the Bavarian Alps and I remember there was a dead horse and a lot of, you know, prisoners were hungry, you know, came running getting the meat. Most of them died. It was contaminated meat somehow and by the way, my brother who is twelve years older than I was, he says it's different but trust me, I dragged him. He used to want to give up during the march, "I can't walk anymore." Anyway I seemed to...during the camp for some reason I wind up taking care of my brother and my father, and that they were in a little village and we knocked on a door, some Germans took us in and I know we took a bath and the first time we slept in a bed, and after a few days the, I guess American army took us to Munich where there was an old German army camp

where they started a DP camp in Munich and I was there, I mean, that camp existed for many years but I'd say after three, four weeks I decided I have to get out of there. So a friend of mine and I took a walk and we found an army camp in there and I asked them that I'd work in the kitchen, of course I got food and clothing. So I worked for the army for about three, four months, and helped me brush up on, I had two years of English in school which of course we know as much as what you get with two years of Spanish, but it helped me brush up on English and then I went back to the same DP camp and I worked as a translator because, you know, we always had people from different country--

Interviewer: What DP camp were you at?

Arthur Pais: That was...

Interviewer: That was in Munich right?

Arthur Pais: Actually, it was in Munich, but I think it was a suburb of Munich I can't remember, Freimann yeah Freimann, and interestingly enough the [unintelligible 0:18:41.8] team was a retired Jewish army captain who was the head of our team and another Jewish officer that retired stayed on and one Jewish lady from Palestine and one Jewish mother volunteer lady from New York, and I worked at that camp for again maybe three four months then believe it or not I got a job as a translator at the American consulate and I, you know, for interviews people, you know, applying to go to United States and my father's entire family happened to live in United States. My grandfather was there. My father was the only one of his side of the family in Europe so I managed to actually in...I left on the second troop transport. So in July '46 I left for the United States. So I was, you know, in Germany really a year after the war.

Interviewer: I want to take you back just a minute.

Arthur Pais: OK.

Interviewer: Your day of liberation May 2<sup>nd</sup>, you woke up, blanket covered in several inches of snow, no guards around, you're with your brother.

Arthur Pais: First thing you're hungry.

Interviewer: You're hungry?

Arthur Pais: That's the first thing you're looking for try and find food.

Interviewer: When did you realize you were free?

Arthur Pais: Well it didn't take long--

Interviewer: You didn't see the guards?

Arthur Pais: --I mean we didn't see the guards because we knew that they were running I mean, you know, you knew the--

Interviewer: When did you know that liberation was pending, at what point in the camp do you think you heard?

Arthur Pais: We didn't because the guards had orders to kill us if the, you know, Americans advance so, you know, we didn't have any hopes for liberation. You're gone by the day...as I said I think you live because you only live by the day. If you start thinking of tomorrow, tomorrow never came I really think it's that simple.

Interviewer: Do you think your ability to stay in the moment that you were dealing with was the key to your survival?

Arthur Pais: That's what I think now and that's the only reason I think.

Interviewer: What about your brother?

Arthur Pais: Probably the same--

Interviewer: Do you think you practically were together?

Arthur Pais: --well we're together as I said I looked after him, oh and then by the way after we were brought to Munich and I think a week later I heard that there were some survivors in Dachau so I walked with a friend of mine to Dachau, I think Dachau was seven kilometers from where ever I was, and I found my father and I brought him back to Munich and as I said--

Interviewer: Found your father where?

Arthur Pais: What?

Interviewer: You found--

Arthur Pais: My father was in Dachau actually the main camp at Dachau yeah, and as I said I didn't stay at the DP camp. I...we rented a room in a village nearby and my father and brother and I lived there and frankly I don't know where I got money to pay for rent but I managed and--

Interviewer: You find it extraordinary that you, your brother and your father all survived?

Arthur Pais: Oh definitely yeah, and then of course my mother and sister were in the camp. My mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in the ghetto, of course there was no, you know, medicine or hospitals or anything. So when they were in the camp

and it was a very brutal camp that wound up my mother and sister were at and, you know, my sister did her work and carried her and, you know, carried her through the death march and so my mother actually lived through liberation, died a month later, you know, after liberation. So at least we know where she's buried but so, you know, it's surprising that so much, well considering my brother's family were all killed and of course all our relatives and my mother's family her, you know, her sister and family and everybody was killed, our family, you know, we mostly came out intact.

Interviewer: You mentioned the nice man, your words, who threw you the crust of bread.

Arthur Pais: Yeah.

Interviewer: He wouldn't hand it to you he threw it on the ground?

Arthur Pais: The same guy, I saw him get mad, this was by the way, everything was done in a big way; this was a concrete mixing station where they pumped the concrete building that reinforced the underground factory and to give you an idea every load of cement, you know, concrete mix took a small car load of cement, you know, and gravel that's how much they mixed it at the time and the same guy I saw him get mad and scream and pushed one of my friends right into the cement bin and of course he suffocated and died. So was he nice and in fact interestingly enough he was captured, you know, while I was still in the DP camp, you know, the American soldiers had him on a truck and, you know, he saw me I couldn't get myself to come up to say a good word about him, I couldn't. But then I left everything behind and went on with my life.

Interviewer: Did you leave it behind?

Arthur Pais: I definitely did when people, you know, I speak to a lot of groups and schools and, you know, there's always questions, you know, "Do you hate them," and, you know, I always felt carrying hate, you're the only one that's, you know, your, you know, your stomach is churning the other one doesn't even know it. So I never let it bother me. I don't have nightmares, I remember sometimes, you know, it gets to you but I don't carry it with me. I carry no baggage.

Interviewer: So when it gets to you as you said?

Arthur Pais: Hey when you talk about it once in a while you just, you know, feel a little choked up and you go out.

Interviewer: How do you explain the evil?

Arthur Pais: You can't, you can't when you think that these are the same people that probably went home to their family and kids--

Interviewer: They're fathers...

Arthur Pais: --yeah and how they treated people it's unimaginable how people can be this cruel and there was no reason for it but that's the way it was done.

Interviewer: You're a father?

Arthur Pais: Yes.

Interviewer: You see ten, twelve, thirteen-year-old children, you're children were once thirteen you see how young that is?

Arthur Pais: Oh yeah but, you know, it's interesting, my children never, never asked. I never refused to answer questions but for a long time they never asked questions.

Interviewer: Do you think it has something to do with the way that you've gone on? You said you've put it behind you?

Arthur Pais: Well then maybe, maybe only one time I told my son and he wouldn't... something he wouldn't eat that I said, "You know, when I was in concentration camp, I would have given anything for it." He said, "Maybe you should have stayed there." That's Ray, my good son. You wouldn't believe it of him would you Rob?

Interviewer: So how do you want people to know when the children ask you?

Arthur Pais: Oh well, you know, I speak to schools and surprisingly enough you'd get all kinds of questions I've had fifth graders ask questions for about an hour and a half or two hours. Once in a while a kid asked me, "Did you ever meet Hitler," you know, but most of the time they were very serious questions, you know, and--

Interviewer: What are the ones you can't answer?

Arthur Pais: I tell them right up front, there is no question that you can't ask and--

Interviewer: So I mean you emotionally, what do they ask that you really have no answers for?

Arthur Pais: If I don't have any answer I just say, you know, I can't think of any but I don't hold back, I don't hold back.

Interviewer: Do they want to know why?

Arthur Pais: Oh sure, well, if they want to know why I remember the very first time I spoke to a group. My daughter was in Emory at Holocaust Studies and she talked me into of course speaking to her class but she didn't tell me the week before they had Elie Wiesel but I remember--



Interviewer: Hard to follow.

Arthur Pais: --yeah well, I didn't know any better so I did the best I could, but I remember some kid asked me, you know, "Can it happen again?" And my answer was, "If you let it." ... and, you know, just--

Interviewer: You mentioned your messages were to never forget and treasure your freedom.

Arthur Pais: Well that's really what I preach, you know, interestingly enough just recently we're talking with a bunch of my friends and I said, you know, you guys, and not that anybody complained, but I said you guys really don't appreciate... don't know what it's being an American like because you never, you know, I always said I don't want my kids to lose their freedom to find out how precious it is, but something you value.

Interviewer: And what brought you to Tennessee?

Arthur Pais: I started business in... I had... my business was in Chicago and then I built a plant in Morristown and I thought I would set it up and leave it alone. Well, to make a long story short, I commuted for four fourteen years every week Chicago to Knoxville and finally moved and so I've been in Tennessee now for twenty-five years and I guess because I go ahead, I--

Interviewer: Who did you went into business with?

Arthur Pais: Oh, oh well, you know, to show you my last business I had a joint venture with a German company and this German he was six years old during the war and I really... we became good friends. His father could have been the worst killer but he hasn't done anything to me, and this is the, you know, the attitude I have. I remember the first time I was... I had a stopover in Germany, it was in '62, I was in Finland and when I saw the buses and their efficiency I couldn't get off the plane. But then later in the early '70s I started a business. Most of the equipment was done in Germany and I started traveling to Germany and--

Interviewer: How was that?

Arthur Pais: At weekends I had to get out but, you know, it's interesting you dealt only with young people. The old guys stayed in the background so, you know, it's--

Interviewer: Did you go back to Dachau?

Arthur Pais: No and just like I would never set foot, people I know don't want to go back to Lithuania. The only reason I'd want to go back to Lithuania is to reclaim my property and set it on fire. I don't carry the hatred for the Germans as I do for the Lithuanians. These were our neighbors and friends and they killed everybody.

They did all the killing.

Interviewer: I'm a descendant of Hungarian survivors and the main feeling through my family with the victims, survivors since that they were more... the sense of betrayal was stronger among the neighbors than the Nazis themselves.

Arthur Pais: That's the way I feel and I was a kid really, you know, I only know what happened but the way the Lithuanians behaved, well there was always antisemitism in Lithuania and I have, you know, people, like, kids ask me, you know, why is there antisemitism? I said I'd give you two reasons, first of all you lived and I'm hardly in a position to give philosophical answers. You live in a country where all your life you've been told the Jews killed Christ and then most of them, you know, whether you're on a farm or you worked a couple of days and a couple of years in school that was enough, then you went to work and I always try to tell people that Jews, as a rule, education was the most valued and respected thing. In our little town, the two most respected people in town were the teacher and the doctor and, so guess what happens when you go to school, you have a better job and you have a better life, there's envy. Those are, you know, in my, in my opinion those are the two basic and of course at home you're taught at home prejudice you don't pick that up on your own.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Arthur Pais: And the only other thing that I have to add is that I had my 50th anniversary five years ago and I had a family picture taken and my brother once said to me, you know, you won over Hitler there you know, there's one of me now there was thirteen I think now there's fifteen of us. So I guess I made a life and raised four children, educated them, they're good kids, what else can you ask for?

Interviewer: Nothing, thank you.

Arthur Pais: Your welcome, you want another six hours? Keep asking questions I'll give you answers.