

Go ahead. Joan, go ahead.

Mrs. Halpern, would you continue for us then with what happened after you came back to your hometown and you were with your relatives then?

Yes, so--

And what was your life like then?

So we found already one set of relatives. And then we found some very good friends. As I mentioned, a lot of my aunts was a pharmacist. The one that used to live with us. Well, she used to work with a family. Very good friends of ours. I'm very good friend with her daughter. She lives in New York now.

So we found them. They were the ones who saw my aunt being led to the cemetery by the police to be shot. And so I found them and that was also another family there, but anyway. But [INAUDIBLE] that survived was my family and some other people. So we kept close by. We lived in very near proximity, all the survivors.

The war was still going on, except we were liberated. But the war was still going on because we were liberated almost a year before.

Was there food and supplied?

Well, it was-- no, there was also at war. But of course, we were free to get what we could. My mother did some knitting. First I started school. Then I saw I wasn't good so I went to work and worked in a office because I knew the language really well.

During the course of the first two years that they would there-- of course, Ukrainian we learned anyway. This part of Poland was very heavily populated with Ukrainian population so we took Ukrainian in school. We spoke Ukrainian.

But during the first two years the Russians were there, we also learned Russian. I learned in school. So I knew the language very well so I worked in an office for a while.

And then when the war ended, the Polish citizens had the right to immigrate to the rest of the part that remained Polish. So we all registered. We all went-- not together, but in sections. We went with one group of people.

Can I go back again for a moment? Were you at any time during that period that was July of '44 when you were back in your own town? Until April of '35, were you aware of what was going on elsewhere? Of what was happening?

Oh, by then everybody knew that the all Jews were killed.

You knew about the final solution and you knew about--

Oh, by then everybody knew already. It's just that we couldn't do anything about it anymore. In fact, it was-- that was told already to us after we came home because [PLACE NAME] was liberated four days before we were liberated in Lvov.

So we heard a story that right after the liberation, there was a young woman, young Jewish girl, who was saved by a widower, a Ukrainian widower with 11 children. He was a shoemaker. And he saved her in the house. She took care of the children.

Somebody came. They had a hole under the table and she would crawl into that hole and it would be covered up. They would put the table on top and all the children would sit around the table eating, doing homework, whatever. So there would be no suspicion.

When the war broke-- when the war ended the next day, out of gratitude and wanted to be a mother to all these children, she married this man in the church the following day. That night, they came. They call themselves [NON-ENGLISH] if you're familiar with it. It's Ukrainian national revolutionary organization. And as a matter of fact, we heard that they're still active now after so many years. They're still active there. It's very unusual.

They came and they killed all of them, the man, this girl, and all the children except one who crawled someplace under the bed. And being that there was so many of them and they lost count so they missed one.

This is after the war.

This was two days after the war, yeah.

So you were living back in your hometown then and then you left there--

Not in the house we lived in.

Right, but in that town. And then you left there at the end of the war and went to what is now Poland.

Poland, yes.

And you lived there for how long?

We lived there-- we came it was just the summer, one summer. That's when I met my husband in that town. And we left in December '45. I don't remember exactly when we left hometown. Maybe it was May, June. Probably June, so let's say from June until November, end of December.

How did you meet your husband?

Oh, everybody was meeting everybody. Actually to a friend of his-- I had met a friend of his and we were going out together with a group of them. Then he brought in a friend of his and this is how we met.

And this was--

Very prosaic.

And this was after you had gone into what is now Poland?

Yes, that was in Poland. Yeah, because they had-- he and his brother and his cousin came from his hometown.

And where was this in Poland?

This is a tiny town called [PLACE NAME], not far from Tarnow. But we visited there too when we were there now, yes.

Were you ever in a displaced persons camp then after that?

For a very short while. When we came to Germany-- because when we left we were still engaged because we were married in Germany. We left in December '45. We left for Germany. My mother, I, my husband, his brother, and his cousin who lives in Canada now. She's married. She has a grandchildren. And so we left.

It was a transport. We went to the [NON-ENGLISH]. They were taking people over to Germany, to the American zone and from there we're supposed to go to Israel, which didn't materialize. In the meantime, we went to the United States. So what are we talking about?

You left Poland and went to Germany and you were in a displaced persons camp.

Oh, so in Germany came into know some friends but we were there for like a very short period. I don't know, a week or so.

And were you married at that point?

No, no, no, no. We moved from there. They were very bad living conditions. My mother and I had a bed in one room by somebody. And the two of them had a room someplace else. His sister-- his cousin in the meantime got very ill. She was taken to the hospital. All these things happened.

Now we move to a small city called Bayreuth. It's famous for the Bayreuth Festspiele. For Wagner, yea. And then formed the Jewish community and we moved there and we were married there. We lived there for three years. Our oldest son was born. My husband had business there.

And then you left to come to the United States?

And from there we left to come to the United States.

And what precipitated that move or--

Well, we wanted to emigrate. Originally we wanted to go to Israel. Then the only living relative that my husband had was a brother of his mother and he lived in the United States. And he sent us papers and my husband wanted to go to the United States at that point. So we came here.

And you've been here for how many years now?

38 years.

Where did you live when you came here?

We came to New York. First we came to the Bronx. Then when we got a room [INAUDIBLE]. We came at a time when there were no apartments. Everybody was coming back from the war. Then we were in Brooklyn. Then we went back to the Bronx. Uncle, he's no longer alive. He lives too in the Bronx so we went back to the Bronx. And then my husband went into business in Washington Heights and Broadway so we lived on Riverside Drive. We lived nine years with everyone.

And did you have children by that point?

Yes. Well, we had the one son that was born in Germany. And then six months after we came here our second son was born.

And you have a--

Seven years later we had another son. And one was born already when we were in Jersey in Livingston, yeah. All my children were born in different hospitals.

When you came to New Jersey, where did you live? In Newark or?

No, no. We lived in Elizabeth.

In Elizabeth.

Yes, we lived across-- [INAUDIBLE] an area not far from here, yeah. I cross the street from the JC. We lived there for three years then this is when my husband sold the supermarkets and he went into a different business so we moved to Jersey. Oh, we lived on [? Kepling ?] Road, not far away from here. Then we moved to the other part of town which is also not too far away from here. [INAUDIBLE] the family grow.

Can you tell us, Mrs. Halpern, how this experience has changed your life or what ramifications it's had on your life?

Oh, I think it changed my life tremendously in many ways. To begin with, which is trivial thing. I changed-- maybe not so trivial. I changed from a very spoiled little brat into a very mature person. At least, of course, now I see things that I didn't see at the time. But I grew up like in one day practically. That's one thing.

And then when you have no father you have to mature. You have responsibilities. You can't-- and when you go through what you go, through you tend to look for these things everywhere. You know what I mean? You look at every situation from a certain point of view that never leaves you, no matter what.

It's hard to trust again then.

But it's a certain something that stays with a person. It's like when you-- I went through that experience also. That's why I can compare it. It's like when somebody who drowns once, is afraid of water. I had learned how to swim since. I'm still petrified of water. So that's another thing that stays with you.

And other things. I can't throw our food. Being that I was so hungry. I can't throw out food. I'll put the food in the refrigerator. When it's bad, then I'll throw it out. I don't feel as guilty.

I understand.

When there's vermin and you want to step on it, yes? Each time I would step on a cockroach, or whatever happens to be crawling in the street. I say to myself, this is how we were stepped on. There's certain-- of course, it leaves you with a-- yeah.

So there's more of a sensitivity then for things that might not otherwise have not.

I don't know. Maybe other people have too, but I feel that this is something that affects you.

Your mother was with you when you came here to America.

Yes. My mother passed away 2 and 1/2 years ago.

Was she able to adjust to life here as differentiated from Europe?

She adjusted. She adjusted. My mother was a very matter of fact person. My mother never complained. My mother never-- you have to take life as it goes step by step. There were many people who fell apart or couldn't continue.

How do you fit-- or maybe you don't. Do you feel that it's affected your spiritual life in any way, how--

That's very hard difficult to tell. And I'm sure it affects me in many ways that I don't even realize.

Do you feel like you're more religious now than you were, or that it had no effect on you in that way at all?

No, I mean my religion now is of a different nature, I would say. If you know what I mean. It is not because I have been taught that. It is because you believe in certain things. You believe in what's meant to be or-- I can't quite explain. You know what I mean?

Yes, I do. Because as a child you're taught religion does that and the other. This is not it. Yes, maybe to a certain-- but

that maybe happens to people as they get older anyway.

You experience it rather than go through--

I mean, I go through it. I'm an observant Orthodox Jew but it is not what I mean. When I say religion it is there's more to it than-- at least I think so.

It's not rote. It's more inbred within you than--

I think so. It is certain beliefs that you have.

Yeah, were you able-- during the early years that you were here-- able to talk about these events or did you find it difficult to do this?

For some reason, I never spoke to my children about it. My husband was able to talk to the children and I was not very much. I still-- there's a certain block there that-- I speak about it now, of course. Now they're all grown up and they know about it.

Did they want to know when they were young?

Yes, they want to know. In fact, my son said I should make a tape. I said, if you have the time you come, we'll make a tape. I'm not-- I should sit down and-- the lady, the daughter of the people who saved my life. She said when I was in Poland--

By the way, we lost contact. After we were liberated, she and her daughter-- the women left for Poland before and he left sometime later. Communication traveling wasn't so good so we never saw them after that. And of course we went to Poland, we didn't know. You couldn't know much. Then we came here and we all went through a very difficult period of--

Adjustment.

Adjustment. Of building a life and so on. And at many points I felt I would maybe advertise in paper that so-and-so is looking for--

To find these people.

And then-- I don't know if your remember. But the political situation in Poland was such that I said to myself, maybe I will do them no favor.

Mhm.

Yeah, here's somebody with a Jewish name is looking for-- at one point, '57 and '58 and then the '60s they had this political thing there. So I didn't. And when we took the first trip to Poland, we didn't go to my hometown. The first trip we took about 10 years ago we went to Moscow, Leningrad, then we stopped off in Warsaw and in Krakow.

And everything-- as I said. Everything in life is by chance. And we met this man. Somebody had sent a package from family here. And we met this man. The name's Yakobovich. He was the head of the-- now there's the younger Yakobovich. There's the-- his nephew is their and Mrs. Yakobovich. He was saved-- by the way. He was saved by the present pope. In fact there were childhood friends. Yes, the pope grew up in their house and then he saved his life. Anyway, it's a whole story.

So at one point I said-- if I could find-- I didn't expect him really to be alive Mr. [? Haliski ?] anymore or Mrs. [? Haliski ?] for that matter. But I knew that the daughter-- by all normal expectations. She should be alive. And I said, if I could only find her. She shouldn't-- I wanted to see. I wanted to do something for them. I just wanted to see them. And after

all, it's a bond.

So he looked at me-- I left him the address-- the names anyway. But he looked at me like, look for a needle in a haystack. Two weeks later, I got a letter. "Yes, the lady lives right there in Krakow." She came to see him. A very handsome-- aw, you saw the picture. Beautiful woman. Very elegant. And she was very happy and I-- she left the address. And I wrote her. And then I had received a whole book. She writes beautifully. You can not only-- what she writes but you can practically photograph it. That's how beautifully she writes. And since that time, we are in touch. But we didn't see each other for '45 to-- let's say in the '70s--

So 30 years.

Can you describe your reunion? What was your reunion like?

It was unbelievable. We covered-- we sat down and we covered all these years. And I found out all these other people are no longer alive. But she kept in touch with them. We covered the entire territory, why this was so? And she told me stories how things went with this uncle and all that. There was really no need to be afraid of him but her father didn't know and so on and other things. And oh because yeah, I saw it as [INAUDIBLE], I presented her with a medal from Yad Vashem. And maybe, I'm hoping at one point she'll be able to come to Israel so we'll plant a tree. Because I did not plant a tree. My husband brought his people over and they planted the tree. This I did not accomplish yet but anyway.

She's never been to the United States?

No, no, no.

Just you been back there though.

She's never been to the United States. She has a son and a daughter. I never met the son but I met the daughter. She's professor of-- I don't know what, at the Krakow University. Very nice woman and the children.

How was that for you going back there seeing all of the places that you had been in hiding, that you had lived all of the childhood memories? Can you describe what that was like?

The best I can describe it was like being in a time. Machine it was unbelievable. Of course, I didn't see myself. When we went to my husband's town, nothing is left. The town has changed. There's a new town there so there were no personal memories for him there.

But when we came home-- and as I described before we met this woman. Everything came out like out of nowhere. And when this woman took me, she thought I wouldn't remember. And we walked into the house where we lived. This was an apartment building, a small apartment building. And I walked up the stairs-- and wouldn't you know. The doors-- which doors were open? To the apartment we lived in. And they invited us in. And where would they invite us in? To my room. There is even a bed in the same place. It was-- my husband says, I should have seen myself. I was so emotional. I didn't feel it. I didn't realize it.

So you've been able to go back then?

Yes, it was very-- I didn't know if we would be allowed to do this or that or the other, but nobody bothered with us. And we took pictures, you see. We took pictures there. Also, thanks to this woman. Because I thought maybe you're not allowed to take them. She say, no. You can take pictures. You can do whatever you want.

Was being there and seeing it again as you did-- did it change anything for you as far as--

Yes, it brought it all back into focus. Things tend to get blurred.

Yeah.

Certain things never, as I said before, like the burning of the bodies or this train ride. That one hour on a train or this night that I slept that I thought, my god. What did I do? Who knows-- they're going to kill me. Who knows what they're going to do to me? Things like that. That stays with you forever.

But the rest of it was-- you were able to put into some kind of a different perspective then?

Well, obviously. I mean, you go on living. You live through things in life. You just go on living. Unfortunately there are people that have never been able to-- what they've just done. And people lost children. People lost-- and even these people had to make peace with themselves.

Is there anything that you would like to say just by way of conclusion?

Well, I'm here and--

We're glad you're here. We're glad you were able to share with us.

I was able to bring up a family. In a way, it's sort of a revenge on what they wanted to do to us.

Thank you, Mrs. Halpern.

Thank you so much.

[INAUDIBLE]. I don't know. I'm-- but anyway.

Thank you for sharing these very personal memories with us and we appreciate your being here today. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]