

Good morning. I'm Bernard Weinstein, director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project on the Holocaust. With me today is Manya Mandelbaum. Mrs. Mandelbaum, welcome.

Thank you.

Would you tell me, first, a little bit about your life before the war, where you lived and what your life was like?

All right. I come from a family, my father, Jeruchim Reich, my mother, Rosa Foster Reich. And in the family were four girls and two boys, and everybody is not anymore here, because after the war, I found out that I don't have a mother, or father, or siblings. My life in Kraków was very nice. We were a family, well-to-do, and my mother never work, and I went to nice schools. So did my siblings. And from the early years, I had a boyfriend, and then he became my husband, and my life was very happy at home. But all of this finished in '39 when the Germans came in.

Tell me, first of all, about your early life. Did you have a strong Jewish identification?

Yes, we were an orthodox family. All of the Jewish holiday were strictly observed, and I grew up with that. All my life, I was religious. Even concentration camp, I was eating kosher, or I didn't eat any treif food. And it was very hard, very hard, but thank God I have survived, and I am proud of it.

Did your whole family live in Kraków, I mean your extended family?

Yeah, the extended family. No, some, some. Like my grandparents from my mother's side lived in Cieszyn. This was a border of Czechoslovakia. And my father's family comes from Rzeszow. I knew very well my mother's family. She comes from a family, nine children, and no aunt survived even. No one, for that matter. Their grandmother and grandfather was killed also by Hitler, but even the aunts, when they were surviving the first stage of the war, then they disappeared in the concentration camps, and so I don't have aunts or uncles even.

How many siblings did you have?

Six. I mean, with me, were 6 siblings in the family, four girls and two brothers.

And where were you in the family constellation? Were you the oldest, the youngest?

Yeah, before the last. My brother was the youngest, Herman. There was sister Sala, Regina, Gusta, and brother Isaac, Herman, and before Herman I--

So you were the youngest of the sisters.

Right, right.

And what did your father do for a living?

Oh, he was selling every thing what the baker needed. The machines would make the rolls, like 30 rolls in one cut, and he installed ovens for the bakers, and he supplied everything except the flour what the baker needed for having a bakery. That's why, during the war, we were having bread, because he had connections with the bakers. As a matter of fact, the machines came from Germany. All the machines who divided the rolls in 30 parts or the mixing machines for bread, very heavy utilities, he supplied.

In Kraków, before the war, did you experience anti-Semitism, or did you experience isolation?

We lived in Podgórze. This was like, I would say, a suburb from Kraków because a bridge was divided between Kraków, and we had a comfortable life. We didn't experience anti-Semitism. We lived with the Poles in one house. We lived in a tenement where they were around 2, 3 families on one floor, and one was not

Jewish, but we were very friendly. But if you say about the suburbia from Kraków, if you go out where only peasant live. And sometimes there, they had to travel. He experienced names and stone throwing, because my father was in an attire like the Hasidim. He was not in European clothes, but later on, yes, but in the beginning.

So this kind of incident often appear, but not in Kraków that I should say. Later on, in the later years like '36, '37, anti-Semitism grew, because there were even incidents. My husband was studying in Haifa, so for vacation he came so we could go in Kraków on a very beautiful street, like in Florianska, and these anti-Semites, the students from the University, threw off the hat and call names like, you Jew, you Jew. Go to Palestine.

This was in '37, '38, and '39 because the anti-Semitism grew. Maybe I don't remember how it was because I didn't pay attention, but when I was already grown up, I realized that it was. But still, as Poland took, always, in Jewish people. Well, maybe some other lands didn't. Not all Jews could study. There was numerous clauses. We were like 10% population, so only 10% could be admitted for law, or even less for medicine, or engineering.

My husband couldn't study in Poland, so he had to go to Israel to the Polytechnic of Haifa, and he was studying from '36 to '39.

What was your own schooling like?

Oh, I had my grades, and then I went for three years like a buchalteria, how you say, bookkeeping school. How do you call it?

Like a commercial course.

Yes, commercial course. Yes, three years. And I finish, and then I got a job. I was short handwriting. I learned typewriting, and bookkeeping, and billing. So I had a very good job, before the war, in a wholesale place where they sell jewelry, but not fake jewelry. We always got this from Czechoslovakia. They were the biggest manufacturer for the fake jewelry, a very big place. This was a wholesale place, and I was working there until the war broke out.

And then, I was working, when the war broke out, I was zwangsarbeit. How you say that I had to work? zwangs is what everybody had to work when the Germans came.

Forced labor.

Forced labor. Sorry, forced labor. Sometimes the word isn't--

Yes.

So this was forced labor. And because I knew how to sew on the machine, so I went to a factory under the Germans auspices, and we made blouses for the soldiers, for the Wehrmacht. and so I was working there.

What are your memories of the beginning of the war?

It was outrageous. We thought that this is only a fake.

A false alarm?

False alarm. That's right. A false alarm. So this was the 1st of September. So it's a false alarm. But no, the bombs were flying over Kraków. So we realized, oh, my God, it's a war. The Germans came. So the radio was blasting that everybody that is young should run away toward the border of Russia, out of Kraków. So everybody but the old people, like my mother and father, said, where will I run? Where will I run? But the youngsters, they know how to run because by foot.

And so my boyfriend came the 16th of September from Palestine there for vacation to his parents where they lived on the same street, and to me.

What was he doing in Palestine?

He was in a polytechnic of Haifa engineering, and he had only three months to finish the engineering when he came for vacation to see the parents and me. The family was very unhappy, his family, because don't you know? In Palestine you didn't hear that war is so close? No, it seems that it will be only cold war and they will come to understanding, and the world will not break. But it will break. So he was trapped in Kraków.

And as a matter of fact, he had a Palestine visa to go back, and the Germans didn't allow. He went and he said, look, I'm a student in Palestine. It was not so strict, and maybe even the Americans, the English, didn't join then, only in '42. So they didn't allow him to go. So we started to walk, because it was like when you see the people in Vietnam. They take their belongings and they go. They go. So then all Poland walked. There was walking--

From west to east?

Yes, from west to east. Right. Everybody wanted to go to the east. Not knowing where, but probably to go to Russia, but there was no other way, because to the east was Russia. All the other countries like to Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria down below east. The east countries were also taking us in, the refugees, then. And a lot of people wind up to be in Lwów, where then the Russians came from the other side and take them all to Siberia, but at least they didn't murder them. They took them as refugees, but if it comes to the Germans, if they're caught, they shot.

This was like the 10th of September. This was Sunday. We started to walk. Simon, my husband, and my brother, Herman, the youngest, and my brother-in-law, Ascher Safir, with his son, nine years old, Joey. And we were walking and walking, and in the meantime, there were raids. So we hid in the bushes, and the screams because when a bomb hit somebody, so it hit. But so far, I have to tell you that we were going through Hell with the bombs with the Germans overthrew, and from our five people, nobody got killed then.

And we were walking three days, and we came to a little town, Mielec, and we thought that we were safe. We went to a peasant family and we asked if we can sleep over, and when we woke up, after the three days we'd walked and then we stopped. We woke up and the Germans were there too. So we couldn't run away anymore. So we decided we'd go back home. At least we have our own bed and our family. So this was September, maybe 6, 7, but we stood by them. The people let us stay there a few days until we rested, and we came, it was maybe September 15, home where all the people we met, my parents.

But Simon's family took off with a car, and with horse and buggy, and they went and they arrived, in the three days, to Lwów. And from then, his whole family, except him, was deported to Russia, to Siberia, and they survive, all alive. But when we came back, we had to obey all the laws from the Germans. It was the band, was going to work, to forced labor, and we were living from day to day. We didn't know what tomorrow will bring.

And as a matter of fact, in the beginning, I was going still to that store where I was working with the band. And then, it was a little dangerous because the non-Jews took advantage then, you see? Because from all sides we were blasted, the Germans and the Poles. And it was a very hard life. Right away, you couldn't buy things. So you get the rations. Some people, if they had connections, like always is the case. You have connections. You have bread. You have still butter, but it was always worse and worse. If somebody had a lot of money and jewelry, it was easier.

Then, this was '39, and '40, and it was-- can I remember-- all kinds of laws they made, the Germans, like proclamations. This you shouldn't do. This one not allowed to go out, and then they took away their freedom by putting more people in the household than it was. Always people were going from one place to another. During the war, people were wandering from one place to the other.

And they were crowding people together?

And they're crowding people together. And then, it came ghetto. So they crowded enormously. First of all, they make a clean up from people. The older people, they deported to other parts and you never knew where they are. My parents had to move from Podgórze where we had our home because they didn't get the permission to live there. You had to have special permission. It's such a chaos that I cannot even remember everything in detail, but life was miserable. Work and the not enough to eat, and then came the ghetto where we were closed in, only to have 15 families in the household where we are only five. it was unbearable sometimes.

Who was with you?

In '40, they proclaimed that all the bachelors must go to zwangsarbeit, to work, but not voluntarily work. I did still work in that firm where I was working, but their work. We got married in '40 with my husband, and with me and my husband, lived his brother and his wife, and my brother, Herman, with his wife and his wife's sister. It was, all together, in our apartment what consists of four room and a kitchen, 15 families. We took these covers and we made walls out of it that one family should live together and the other, not in one room like a shelter for everybody.

And this was very hard life, but still we were alive. It was nothing more only to be alive.

Your parents are with you too at that time?

At that time, in the beginning, my parents were, by then, they had to move out, because to live in ghetto, you had to have their permission. So they, as old people, didn't get. So they moved in suburban Podgórze in a small, small town where they rented a room, and they lived there before the ghetto. But in ghetto, they could come and they lived with us, because all the Jews from the suburbs they gathered, and they had to go into the ghetto. And from ghetto, it was the aussiedlung, when there was this--

Deportation?

Deportation. They deported them. First, they kept them in that building, Optima, a huge factory building. So they gathered all the people who didn't have the kennkarte. Kennkarte is the--

Identity card.

Yeah, and we had so we could stay. It's so hard to remember how it was tragic. I wanted to go with them when they deported them, and I was the wife. I was married. So my father said to me, your place is with your husband. You stay here, and they went. It was very, very hard to see that. They went and then we were still living in ghetto. Yes, and from the ghetto we were working, going to work. So blurred now, everything.

And then came the liquidation of ghetto.

After how long?

After two years. No, '39, '40. '39, '40. '41 was ghetto, '41 to '43. So this was '43.

So did you know where your parents were taken, or did you find out later?

Yes. No, no. I know that they were taking everybody who hadn't got the papers to live there, and some people hide, and they didn't find them. But my parents didn't hide and they took them. And they took them. And then, all the people they took on this day, they took them to the building, to Optima building, and from there transport, and transport went where ever. Majdanek, Treblinka, Auschwitz, where they sent.

The camps were already in operation.

I don't even know where. I heard the Yahrzeit for my parents the day they left me. What happened, and

when they gassed them, I don't know. And then, it was also my sisters. One in Debica, where I was born. She had a husband from Debica. So she went from there the deportation were also. My other sister was in Bochnia hiding. And all that was very tragic for me, because I had to suffer not doing a thing because I had to take care of myself, so to say, and Simon.

Excuse me. Do any of your brothers or sisters have children?

Yeah, both sisters, the older ones, had children, two beautiful children. When they deported the first time from Kraków, she went to Debica with the two children, a girl, 11, a boy, 9. This boy was wandering with us in the beginning of the war. But when he came back, the family went to Debica, and from there they were deported with the children.

And the other sister had two girls, 5 and 3, and she went to Bochnia, from Kraków, not far, and from there she was deported. So I knew about that living in ghetto, those times. And then, after this living in ghetto, every day we had murders. I mean shot for dead, shot for dead, because there were two gates to the ghetto and they command us went out to work, like my husband, Simon, they commanded to work.

Sometimes he brought a little something like bread or butter, and other people brought, not merchandise, but these necessities, what you couldn't get everything in ghetto. So if they're caught. And most of the time the Jewish order mans, the police, the Jewish police, were on that gate, but when a German were too sometimes, to see if everything goes in order, and they caught, he got shot right away on the spot, people. And every day you heard shots.

Were the ones who did the shooting, were they Germans or Poles?

Germans, Germans, only Germans.

SS? The SS. Yeah, most of the time the SS. There were also Jewish police, but they didn't have guns, weapons, but they were very common with us to please the Germans. This was outrageous, but it was real.

Was there a Judenrat?

Yes, there was a Judenrat, and you could complain, and you can go, and sometimes Judenrat helped very much, because there were Jews who were American citizens. So the Judenrat intervined that he should go out, go back, but sometimes they didn't let. This is up to the mood, I would say, what happened during this time, that everybody had his own say so. It's a lot of luck that you had to have to survive and to go through.

I can say about me, I was left alone from all my family and somehow I survived, and even today it's 45 years after the war, what passed so quick with all the tragic moments that I had during this time. Sometimes you pinch yourself. You survived? You survived? It's unbelievable what people can go through and survive, that a human being is so strong, and by the same token, is weak. Here you live, and next day you have a heart attack and you go.

So if you are a believer, you say everything is in God's hands. You have to believe that some higher hierarchy above you that you survive, and the fate of the other people that they died. So the life, altogether, when I only go back, were very happy in my youth. Very happy. And there was struggle. And it was the happiest time when I met my husband after the war.

What happened to you when the ghetto was liquidated, and how was the ghetto liquidated, first of all?

The ghetto was very tragically liquidated, because they took the people. If you had work-- in the ghetto, people worked and people didn't work. The people who worked, they were sent right away to Płaszów, and they were the work force like it was in ghetto. So I was working in Madritsch. This was a very big concern, a German owner, Madritsch was his name. And as I said, I was sewing the blouses. This was like piecework. And with my sister-in-law, always with my sister-in-law, Blanka.

And the people who didn't have work, they went to a place and they shipped them right away. They don't

need them. So they were standing on this place with children, because people have, and they were going to a transport where nobody knew, but then we find out, or to live or to gassed. And then the others, it was a complete cleanup from ghetto to Płaszów to go. Some people took children. They smuggled them into Płaszów, and they're were lucky that they have them for a little while, but then they take all the children to Auschwitz to gas.

At this moment, what we share with other people, I didn't have children. And other people lived in this ghetto with children, and I can remember one. This was tragic. A boy from one of the women who lived with me, and when we all had to go and clean up the apartment, this boy was standing on the balcony calling, mommy, mommy. She couldn't take him because otherwise she would be shot. A lot of women on that appellplatz where they went with children got shot right away.

This boy was standing on the balcony and screaming, only one boy, and we left. I was so sorry for him. Oh, I remember so many children, but I cannot forget that boy. As a matter of fact, I cannot forget because my son, when he was born, I named him Richard, because I couldn't forget. His Jewish name is Jeruchim, after my father, but we called him Richard. And so many tragedies, and I survived.

After the war, when we lived in BinderMichel, I went to the rabbi and I said, look, I was from a very big family, and I survived. Tell me why. What is that, that only I. So he said, Mrs. Mandelbaum, you survived because from you will come-- and said [SPEAKING YIDDISH]. He said in Yiddish, said [SPEAKING YIDDISH]. You know, a generation, what God wanted this. Thank God I have three beautiful boys, and I take it for granted that If I would not live, they would not be here. I am still very faithful.

People, after the war, they ask, where is God, where was God, but I never asked because I said, this is my life. This is my fate. I took it as it came.

Did you go right to Płaszów from the liquidation of the ghetto?

Yes, from liquidation.

Your husband too?

Yes. As a matter of fact, he went first because he was building the barracks. When we came to Płaszów, there was not everything built because still command us build, in Płaszów, other barracks, but we were over 18,000, because Madritsch was very prominent for the Germans, because he was doing something for the Wehrmacht. The blouses were very important, very industry, very important, where others were not so important, but they kept us.

So it was a gemeinschaft, where they made shoes for all of the Wehrmacht. It was also very important. Then, there was a gemeinschaft, where my husband was then working when the buildings were all built up. So he was working in the other corporations, so to say, gemeinschaft. It was a-- how did they call it? How did they call it? Something with metal, metal.

Metal factory?

Metal factory. So what did they do? The work was not important, but they had to come and work and then go home, and go the next day again to this. I have to laugh when I think that the men were separated and the women were separate. If some men were smart, and they were risking, they came to these wives, like my husband always visited me. And even in Płaszów, there were moments that you could be happy. But in all, this was so degrading, so degrading, all this life, and these latrines where we went.

They made you feel you are nothing. Then, when they needed the women, let's say, for other things. So it was not important that you are working for Madritsch. So they took a lot of from that industry, and they asked to carry these wooden planks. So two women, long, long, long. They were thinking only of vicious, vicious things to do to these people. If they couldn't legitimate ways, so they manipulated, that from exhaustion, that the women should die.

And if they didn't do that, so when the commander came, and they were searching to the iota what they brought, and one guy could something-- the whole kommando they took on the field, you know, all take off their clothes and shot. You know? Barbaric things, and you are used to it. Every day, you hear these shots. Finally, you are used to it, and you cannot help it. You are just helpless. You have to go like they say, a cow to the shokhet, how we say.

To the slaughter.

To the slaughter. Cow to the slaughter. So this was life in Płaszów. The food was very meager. If the people were working, only Madritsch had additional bread if you made more than the contingent. So people tried to work hard, and not to talk, and then only to work, that the piece of bread should come more. And it was like bread and soup. This was our food. It was awful. One day, they said-- this was in ghetto. This was still in ghetto that everything we had to give.

First was a fur day. So furs, whatever somebody had to give them. Then it was everything silver and gold. So the candelabras and anything. And then, if somebody had a ring, even. So they said the wedding rings we will collect. Some people didn't want to give, so they throw it in the latrine because instead to give them, you know, sabotaging. But as much as we could not to go to the slaughter with everything. We hoped that the war will finish every day, maybe today, maybe today, and it was dragging on and dragging on.

And then, by '44, when they took the husbands, the men, to Mauthausen in August '44. So we said goodbye, and we never knew that we will see each other, but we promised that, when we survive, we will meet there and there. We made the date. And then the woman went also, but you see, it started in September. First, other corporations like mine shafts, shoemakers, the paper factory. They were first. We heard that they went to Auschwitz.

And when they went there, they shaved everybody, the heads, the women. And for the women, this was so demoralizing. This is like to take away from them everything. But in this respect, we were lucky because we were in the later commander taking it, because they heard that the Russians are coming from the east. So they were very, very hasty to get rid of us. There was still a other commander in January for the five what was still in Płaszów, the rest of the people, and my brother was in this, but they shot him. The wife survived and she told me that Herman was shot.

The youngest?

The youngest, right. Because the other ones, they took them to concentration camps and maybe gassed them in Majdanek or Treblinka or wherever. I didn't know. I don't know to this day, but about this brother, the youngest, Herman, I know that this was in '45, January that they shot him. The wife told me that he suffered very much, and they thought that this is his appendix, and they took him to make the operation. And they did, in the hospital, and after two days-- this is 45 years ago-- they had to take everybody from the hospital. The Jews have to walk.

How can a sick person, with a wound still there, walk? So he didn't walk. So they shot him on the road. So this was my brother. This was my brother. I loved him so much. I named my son after him. And it's like you-- so Henry. And I don't remember everything, because it's hard to remember after 45 years everyday.

Yes. What do you remember about Auschwitz?

Auschwitz. When we came, they didn't shave us. You see, this was a mood from the commander.

When?

This was December. December, '44. It was cold. They loaded us, in Płaszów, in the cattle wagons. And I was dressed like today, because whatever somebody had, had for years. So I had a jacket, maybe five years old. So I wore the jacket, and a skirt, and a blouse. And in Płaszów, they loaded us, and when they closed the door, and the way it was-- so they made a stop to pick up something the next stop. So when the next stop, they open, a lot of peasants were there until Auschwitz where you go. And when they opened the door of

the cattle wagon, I was in the front, standing.

And probably because I was very testy, so I wanted to go through the crowd. I came too fast. When they opened the way, and I asked a peasant woman, I said, could you give me a little water? So she smiled, just like in this movie Lanzmann made.

Shoah.

Shoah. That the Poles, you know, smart alecks. She looked at me and she said, you know where you are going? You don't need that jacket on you. Give me the jacket, I bring you a glass of water. I said, never in your life you will get my jacket, and I didn't give her. You know, I don't remember what I ate yesterday, but this I will never forget. And to think that they knew what's going on. This was '44, and they knew. No, it was cruel. Everybody was, I guess, against us. It was hard.

So we came to Auschwitz. It was nighttime. They were gathering in one little room, and they said, everything to undress, everything. I had, here, a picture from that Richard and from my mother. They said that nothing, nothing should be found, otherwise you will be shot. You will be shot. My sister-in-law said, Blanca, you are risking because of the two pictures? You are risking your life. They will ask to pick up your food. They will see a picture. They will not know what picture this is. Maybe it's some sign. They always suspect that something is going on.

Something is being passed, some information or something.

Right. And I said, I will go with that. Some people had still jewelry. They put it in their mouth. And all kinds of things to survive. I don't know why, but anyway. My sister-in-law, she was a pessimist, and I was an optimist. So she said, now we are going to the gas chambers. I said, no, we are going to shower. How can you be sure, she said? We are going to the gas chambers. Don't you know? Don't you feel? Don't you smell? I said, Yes, because the smell of body was all over Auschwitz.

And this was by the end of '44 when the ovens were a long time working. And I said, no, we are going to shower, and you will see, and God will help us. We cannot survive, she said. Manya, what is with you? We cannot survive. I said, we will. I always was like that. And sure enough, we went to, and we came out. A heap of clothes was there, and this German woman gave from the heap, this, this you get.

So our five women, who I said that we are always together, got clothes, and we started to laugh spasmodic, because one was a nightgown as your attire. And can you imagine, in winter, in December in Poland, the wind? And one had a miniskirt, mini dress, until here, barefoot. There was a heap of shoes, one white, one black, one high heel, one. You had to, in a hurry, take two shoes and go. Can you imagine? And everybody was afraid.

We instinctively felt we cannot survive. So if you cannot survive, let them shoot you. No. So everybody was so afraid and was in a hurry whatever the German woman said, that it's pathetic. The will for surviving.

Desperate.

You see the danger. It's so strong that you don't even know, automatically your nature takes quick, go quick, take. But we couldn't resist this left, this feeling of seeing the people, how they look. It's just like, one falls down and it's hurting him, but the other people see that so they left. We were spasmodic laughing. This was one thing in Auschwitz that I remember.

And we went to a barrack, and then we had to go to make the numbers. So my sister-in-law said, no, when we will have the numbers, we are going to the ovens. So we hid in the latrine. We didn't want the numbers, and we hid in the latrine. So we didn't get the numbers. The next day all the numbers went to a camp. We didn't. We were running like mice afraid of the cats because we didn't have the numbers. We were not like one of them. So I was, in some way, blaming my sister where I said, if we would have the numbers, so we go now with the transport, because every day a transport went someplace else.



And so we survived nine days in that Auschwitz camp, running, and being, and not being. And I just can not remember day by day what we did, but I know that we were always running. And one day, they shipped 300 women to Hamburg. And this was this camp in Aschersleben. It's close to Hamburg. It's a suburb.

OK. Before we continue, we're going to have to stop for a few minutes to change the tape.

Uh-huh.

So we will.