

Good afternoon. My name is Frances Farber. And I'm associated with the Kean College Oral Testimonies project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling library of Yale University. Sharing the interview with me today is Bernard Weinstein, director of the Kean College project.

Today, we're privileged to welcome Mrs. Zelda Peters. Mrs. Peters is a survivor presently living in Highland Park, New Jersey. And she has generously volunteered to give testimony about her experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Welcome, Mrs. Peters.

Thank you.

I thought we might start off by having you tell us something about your early childhood-- the date and place of your birth, where you came from, and your family.

Yeah. I was born in 1921, May 29 in Sighet. My parents-- my father's name was Alex. My mother's was Charlotte.

Sighet is in Romania. Is that correct?

In Romania, yes. And we were three brothers and three sisters, six children. I was the youngest. And we had a very happy life, childhood and growing up, though my parents were very poor. But still, we had a lot of love in the house.

Three of us went to school. Three of us went only four years, grammar school. And three of us went on further. One brother studied to be a doctor, the oldest one. But he never finished it, because the war came in between.

And my sister and myself, we were always very close. We always went together all over. And then, in 19-- this part of Romania was usually Austria-Hungary. And in 1919, after the First World War, they gave this part of Transylvania to the Romanians. In 1940, Hitler gave it back to the Hungarians. And that's where the problem started.

We were not allowed to go in the street whenever we wanted. In the post office was a big sign put out, Turks and Jews are not welcome. In 1944, the Hungarians came in in 1940, September the 5th. And until '44, it was not too bad.

It was bad, but not as bad until, in 1944, when the Germans took over. And after a few days, they were in. And they took us to a ghetto. And two weeks later, the deportations started.

My parents went with the first transport. There was four transport. There was 28,000 Jews living in Sighet. And I worked for a builder, an architect in a building company. And they always said they're going to hide me.

About how old were you at this time?

22. And I accepted it, until one day I got a card signed with my mother's signature that we are here, and it's very nice. It was those printed cards where they give for everybody. When I heard that, I didn't want to be hidden anymore. I said, I want to go where my parents are. Little did I know what happened to them.

In 1944, May, we arrived to Auschwitz. I came with four of my best girlfriends. My mother, and my sister, and the kids, and my father, they went with the first transport. And there was nobody left, only my only sister, who lives in Highland Park.

And I was in the C lager. And my sister was in the A lager, meaning that she was supposed to work. And in the C lager, we were condemned to death. Every day, when we were standing outside the line, the SS woman used to come and just point with her finger, you, and you, and you. And whoever face she didn't like or looked too old, they took them out, and we never saw them again.

One day, one of my friends, they took her to take a bath in the A lager, where my sister worked, because that's where we had to go to clean up. And they saw my sister. And my sister said, I don't believe it that Zelda came, because her boss

wanted to hide her. But little did she know that, a few weeks later, I came to the same place.

I was picked out for a transport and taken to have a bath taken and to get new clothes, cleaner clothes. And as I was-- I looked terrible, because I had a gum disease. And I got very skinny. And I had a dress only until about here, with everything showing.

And I saw my sister stay in Zahlappell in the street. And my feet just got stuck. I couldn't walk. And then she ran over to me. And she says, oh, my god, you are here. I thought you're not going to arrive in here. And then they took her away. And I haven't seen her until later in March, until 1956.

When you went to-- was it to Auschwitz?

Yes.

Were you aware of what was happening there?

No.

Were you aware of what was going on?

No.

What did you believe, for example, when you got the telegram?

They took us in cattle car. And like I said, I got a card from my mother. I thought, we're going to be here, living. But when the transport, the train arrived, and we saw people laying in the street, and all the packages laying in the street, then we knew already that this is trouble.

Yeah.

And then came the SS with dogs. It was a terrible experience.

I believe you said you were in Auschwitz from May till November.

I was in Auschwitz from May until September.

September of '44.

Yeah. In September, I got picked to go to [PLACE NAME]. That's by Frankfurt am Main. We did the surfacing on the airport in Frankfurt. So from the-- where we used to stay, in the barracks, every day we had the March about 10 kilometers to work and back from work.

I was there exactly one week when I woke up on a Saturday morning and I couldn't walk. I couldn't get on my feet. And nobody knew what happened. I didn't either.

But you had to go to work. So there were three sisters. Their names were Jacobowicz. And they were very good customers of my father. They used to buy the meat from him.

Your father was a butcher.

And he used to deliver it. Yes, my father was a butcher. And they took me on their arms that I have to go to work. Otherwise, we will go to the-- unable to work, they didn't need any more. They finished them.

And that went like this for a few days until I came into the hospital. Finally, they put me in the hospital. And I was there

until November of '44. And then they took us to Ravensbruck, because the Americans were closing in.

Yes.

So they emptied the camps. And we went to Ravensbruck. And a lot of girls died on the way. We were also two nights and three days on the road--

On the march.

--in those cattle car. And when we arrived, they took the deads off first. And they took me, too. They put me on their trucks for the deads together. So I figured, well, here I go, that's the end. And when we arrived, I was in there when the English came to bomb.

The air raid.

So they took us into-- an air raid. They took us into a cell, what they used to use for the horses. And I started to scream. I don't want to die-- that I'm too young, I don't want to die. Because of the air raid, everything was dark.

And then the same girls, they come to me. And they said, Zelda, don't be scared, we are here, too. So when I heard their voices, and I saw them, then I figured, well, no, maybe, maybe I'll live. And I was there until April the 30th, when we got liberated.

But in the meantime, we had to stay outside in the snow. And I couldn't walk home before already. So you can see, even now, you could see how that leg looks. I got tuberculosis in my bones. And I was in the hospital there. And every two weeks, I had a different name, because you couldn't stay so long in the hospital.

And there was a nurse from Czechoslovakia, a Gentile. Her name was Milka. And every night, she used to stay by my bed and cry. I always said, Milka, why are you crying? She never wanted to tell me.

But one night, she came. And she said, Zelda, tomorrow comes a big doctor from Frankfurt am Main. And if he says, you walk, you got to walk if you want to live.

And he came, the doctor. And she took me off. And I couldn't walk, no matter what. I didn't have no bone there. I couldn't walk.

So the doctor said, what's wrong with her? And the nurse said, she doesn't have calcium in her bones. So he said, I want to see the x-rays.

She says, oh, they are so bad, you can see nothing. So he says, OK, go back. And that's how I remained alive.

That's right. She saved you.

She saved you.

Yeah. She saved me. I don't know where she is. I know she was from Czechoslovakia. But you lose a lot of memories. And I just couldn't keep her address in my head.

Of course.

I don't know how to sew. I used to sew clothes for them. Then I always got an extra piece of bread. On the 30th of April '45, we got liberated.

By the Russians.

By the Russians.

And what were your feelings like then when--

When they came in, they had a white sheet on and those big boots, those army boots. We kissed the bottom of the soles of the boots. And the whole hospital was dynamite. And naturally, they took everything out. We were about 2,000 sick people in there, because the healthy ones, they took on to the march, wherever they went.

How were you treated by the Russians when they took over?

Very nice. Very, very nice. The one who was in the hospital, they treated very nice. But some of them moved out. And they raped a lot of girls. But the one we stood in the hospital, they were really very nice to us.

How much longer did you remain in the hospital after?

Until July.

Until July.

Yeah.

And then what happened after you went--

Then I went over to the American side, because I knew there was nothing for me by the Russian. And then I met my husband. And we lived in Germany. My daughter was born in Thalheim. And then, in '51, we came to the United States.

Had your husband also been in a--

Yeah. Yeah.

Can you tell us something about your experiences from when you were in the displaced persons camp in 1945, you say, till '51? Can you tell us something of your experiences there?

Well, it was nice to be free. Everything we got was just-- we could be happy with everything. And we had a nice room. And the bathroom was on the floor.

A few families shared the same. Then we moved out of Ravensbruck, which we didn't-- it was no more a camp. We went to live private, because we had some very good friends in Joint, in the Joint Distribution.

Joint, yes.

My daughter was a very, very sickly child. So they thought that it was better for us to be there. She always used to faint. She had a fever of normal. In two minutes, it would go up to 105. And then she got convulsions.

Yeah.

And then, also from the Joint, they put us to work for the Quakers in Bad Aibling. We got a job there. I was a house mother. And from there, we emigrated to the United States. The Quakers were very, very nice.

Did you at any time want to return to Romania?

No.

No?

I was, after the war, yes.

You were?

But not to my hometown. I can't go there.

Yes.

No. We had some friends in Bucharest, and we went there. But I could never, never go back, because I had such experiences with my best girlfriends who were Gentile and says, oh, I'll hide your clothes, when we went in the ghetto. At least, when you come back, you will have something to wear.

The next day, she came to visit me in the ghetto in my clothes. And so the memories are too painful. And then, like I told you, before that, all the time I could not accept what happened--

To your parents.

--to my parents, and my sisters, and my brother, and the kids. And--

You were one of six children.

Six.

Yes.

Yeah. Now there's three of us left.

Yes.

And I used to count always the months backwards-- that only one more month, we're going to be here, and one more month. And always that, until next month. And when I was a liberated, naturally, I got such a diarrhea that I couldn't take me off from the toilet. And then I started to cry, because I had to accept what happened.

Yes.

You were not able to cry during the whole period--

No. No.

--of your incarceration?

No. But I cried here enough. I love United States. When we came, I kissed the ground. And every time we go someplace, when I come home, I kiss the ground.

I'm sure.

And when you came to this country, did you settle immediately in New Jersey?

No, we were in Brooklyn. I had an aunt there. My mother is one of 13 children. And that's the only one who remained alive, because she came to the United States in '23, 1923.

And she was very sweet. She was alone. But we had an extra apartment. And we were four years in Brooklyn. And then we moved to New Jersey.

Where you live now, in Highland Park?

Yeah.

I see.

Yeah.

What do you think sustained you during all of this time, during all this suffering? Do you--

Mostly, because I counted it every night, when I went to bed-- that there is one more day left. I always said, well, June started, and 30 days. Yeah, it started-- 29, 28, 27, always counting backwards, then July.

I knew it was going to have to happen sometimes. Much hope, we didn't have. But something had to keep us alive.

Would you call it a kind of blind faith in something or--

Yes. Yes.

And it was the counting that enabled you to hold on.

I fell asleep for that.

Counting?

Yeah. We were six on one-- sometimes, it's not funny, but it's funny. We were six girls sleeping on one bed. And there was only room to lay on one side. So we started to the left, to the right. When one had to turn, then the whole six had to turn.

Yes.

Which of these memories for you is the most vivid? Can you tell us?

The most vivid was when I saw my sister again. That's because we were always-- she's only-- not even two years older than I am. And we were always very close. She lived in Israel.

She was also very sick. And they took her to Sweden. Well, I'll let her tell you her story. And from Sweden, she went to Israel.

Where she lives now, in Israel?

No, she lives here.

Now she's here.

In 1956, she came here.

She came. Yes.

Yeah. And then my brother came in '64 from Romania. So it was the three of us here. We live one street apart. So there is not one day that we shouldn't get together, all three of us.

Yes.

Are you able to talk about these things with each other? Or do you find that you have to--

I'd rather not.

--talk around it?

I'd rather not, because it always ends up that, the whole night, they are chasing me whenever we talk about it. And it's very sad memories.

In other words, you have dreams about it? Or you recollect it, and you can't sleep?

Oh, how many times I shield my child in my dreams under my skirt-- many, many times. And see, I got in-- '59 and in '63 I had, two times, a nervous break down. And then I had rheumatic fever, rheumatic heart disease, which I contacted there. And from this, I got, 10 years ago, open heart surgery.

So your health has been terribly affected.

I was normal. And then I'm not normal. I limp. I wear special shoes. This is my sitting shoes. I wear special shoes, high lace shoes. I always buy them in Israel. They don't have them here.

Have you been able to get any kind of reparations or any kind of compensation?

No. I had a very bad lawyer. Even that much, there is some kind of alliance between the United States and Germany that whoever worked in Germany is entitled to social security.

Yes.

So we put in the papers. They had me through the mills. I had to take an exam from German culture. Well, it just so happen I speak it, I write it, I read it. But in order-- imagine, for somebody to get social security, you have to be educated in the language. And they threw me back, because they found out that Sighet wasn't a German culture house.

On the basis of that, you were denied reparations?

On this basis, yeah. Not a penny. And I worked. I worked for the Quakers.

Were they in any way able to intercede for you, or to use influence, or--

I don't even know where they are.

Yeah. I don't know. I know her name was Miss Roberts, who was my boss. But I have no idea from where. Who was thinking then, doctor? Who was thinking?

Yeah. Yeah.

But perhaps there are records. Quaker's are international.

Yeah. Are you still to this day pursuing it? Or do you--

No. I get very upset. Every time we start it, I always get so upset that my sister said, if you're going to do it once more, I'm not going to talk to you. I get very, very upset.

I see. Is there anything that you want to tell us that you haven't told us yet about your experiences, or anything that--

I'm thinking--

--comes to mind?

--because I bet you, when I'm going to go home, I'm going to remember, why didn't I tell this, and why didn't I tell that?

Well, maybe you want to backtrack to your being a young girl, a young woman, before the Germans came into Romania. Perhaps you can tell us, were you at school, or working?

Yeah, we went to school, my sister and myself. We both went to Catholic schools, because they keep you there a very good education. And you didn't have to be Catholic to go to a Catholic school. And naturally, the main subject was religion. So when they had their religion, we had our religion with a rabbi.

Was there a strong Jewish bond in your household, in your family?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My father was very religious, very Orthodox. You could see. I showed you the picture with a kerchief. My mother used to wear a wig.

But she was 27 years old when her father died. And in 10 minutes, she turned white. So she said, no more wig, only cutting the whole hair. And all she got was a kerchief.

I see.

My father was a very good looking man. And he used to have a butcher store. And she used to tell us my father was seven years older than she was. But she was a sickly woman. And she looked older. So people, when they came out of town in the store to shop, they used to say, is that your son, of her husband.

And then I went to business school. After finished four years there, I went to business school. And then I started to work. First, I worked for an export-import office, and then for a lawyer. And towards the end, when we were deported, like I said, I worked for that builder and the architect.

The one who offered you--

Yeah. They were very nice. They really risked their life to bring something to eat into the ghetto.

Are you in contact with these people? Are they still--

No, they died already.

They died.

Yeah. I was in contact with them, but they died. And they were then already in their 50s. In 1944, they were in their 50s already.

And you say you did make a trip back.

Pardon?

You said that you did visit.

Not home. No.

Never?



No. Only to Bucharest.

Only to Bucharest.

Yeah. I couldn't go there. Then I didn't know that my sister was alive. And when she found out, then I found out. And then I knew she went to Israel. But she came here only in 1956.

When did you learn that your sister had survived the war? And I know--

After the liberation, in the hospital where I was, there was a girl--

In Ravensbruck.

In Ravensbruck. There was a girl. She says, you know-- we started talking-- I had a sister by this name, and I had a brother by this name. She survived us with a girl, a daughter. That's my sister. But I don't think she's alive, she said, because she was very sick when they took her away. So I was sure I don't have her no more.

In '45, after the war, I found out my brother was in Romania. And we corresponded. And I wrote to him. I says, I never thought that my sister would not survive, because people were very hard working people, and people not spoiled. So we thought we could manage with everything.

So my brother said, you're not. He says, your sister is alive in Sweden. And then I sent her right away a telegram. And she called me. But seeing-- I saw her only in '56.

Yeah, I lost my mother and my father, a brother with his wife, and a sister with her husband and two girls. That's only the immediate family-- and my brother-in-law. I have two cousins here. One died already in Maryland. And they were together with my brother-in-law.

And they found out that I'm forced labor. We were on forced labor for the Hungarian. And everybody says they didn't know that there was a concentration camp. They didn't know. But the soldiers knew it.

I mean, my brother-in-law, he was in the forced labor. And they told him what happened to the kids and to the wives. And in that instant, he went crazy. And they put him to the wall. And they finished him also. My cousins told me that.

In Romania, you knew very little, I understand, about what was happening elsewhere in Europe, elsewhere to the Jews.

See, there was a newspaper, a Hungarian newspaper. My mother was a very self-educated woman. She used to read a lot, too. And she had the-- the paper's name was [NON-ENGLISH]. It was a Hungarian paper.

And she used to read that. She says, I can't believe it. I can't believe it, they did that in Germany. Nobody wanted to believe it.

It must have seemed very remote.

Yeah, until it didn't happen to us.

Yeah.

When you came to Auschwitz, and you see those chimneys-- constantly, the smoke coming out. The girls from Czechoslovakia, from Slovakia, from the northern part, they were there already since 1939. And they used to be our house mother.

And the women asked the first day, when we arrived-- some of them, they took away the babies. When they came, it was left and right. The right went to work. So they came in. And they always used to say, give the babies to the old

people. But nobody knew why.

And then the next day, when they asked that house mother, when are we going to see our baby-- and we had a long stove in there. And she used to stay on top of it. And she said, you see those chimneys? She said, you see that smoke? There are your children.

And that's how people learned.

Yeah. And a lot of mothers-- a lot of mothers happened to give their children to the elderly people. When they found out what happened, they ran to the electric wire. They killed themselves-- a lot of mothers.

I started to go to the psychiatrist, because I got very depressed. And he said, the only thing-- he says, the conclusion I could come to-- he says, that's your conscience bothering you that you came home and the rest of your family didn't.

I understand.

Did you feel that was true?

Pardon?

Did you, yourself, feel that that was true?

He convinced me. I think so. I think so.

Do you have a different interpretation?

I don't know. Sometimes I say, maybe God wants something with me. I don't know. I don't know, because people say, there is no miracle. Believe me, there are.

When I was in Frankfurt am Main, there was nine beds in that one room, the hospital. And in front was another room where the nurse used to be-- naturally, also who were deported, just like we were. And the girls used to go out to work in the fields. And they brought out a few potatoes and a few tomatoes, which that was a fortune. And she had it in her room.

And one day, she saw that, in every barracks, they took out-- they used to hide it in straw sack. And she saw they took all the straw sacks out, and emptied them, and made a big bonfire, and burned everything. So she came to my room. She says, Zelda, I beg you. She says, I have a few things left, food. Hide them in your bed.

I says, my god, [? Ella. ?] I says, if they're going to find me, what are they going to do to me? They know I can't go out to work. Where do have them form? She says, well, let's take a chance. And I was praying. I was praying.

And right away, I The biggest problem, if I have, I fast. I says, God, I'm hungry enough, but I'll fast five Mondays or five Thursdays if they don't touch me. All the eight girls, they took out from the bed. And me, they left there. And I was all bedded out with tomatoes and potatoes.

Then, once I was standing in Zahlappell, in line with four of my best girlfriend, four sisters. And one was, at that time, 38 years old-- which when you're in the early 20s, you thinks it's ancient, right? And the Blockälteste came in, the house mother. And she goes, make your cheeks rose red, that you shouldn't look sick.

So you'll look healthier.

Then they come in. And she comes in. The SS we were staying outside, and she started-- you, and you, and you. And that 38-year-old was standing next to me. And I asked her, me? She says, no, the other one. And they took her. I never saw her again.

Do you ever think that there might be a reason for it, for your being?

I'm not that smart. I can't tell you. I wish I knew. But I could only tell you that I suffered an awful lot. And I'm still suffering.

Yes.

I was three years in bed, three years with that leg.

After you came here?

Yeah. And then one doctor said to me, it has to be amputated until the knee up. And I says, no. So then they took another set of X-rays. And he came back. He says, well, if you have patience, there will be three years in a bed and in a cast. Then we might save your leg.

And he did.

And naturally, I was choosing this.

Of course.

I figured, if it doesn't go, it's still time.

Yeah.

Only thing, I have walking shoes, and I have sitting shoes.

When was this, in the 1960s?

'45. In '45.

I thought you meant after you came to this country.

No. No. No.

Oh, it was there.

No, that was over there. No. After I came to this country, I got the nervous breakdown. Once you relax a little bit, then everything comes out. And I could only say this country was very good to me, very good. I worked hard.

But it was-- I don't have to turn around a dollar ten times if I want to spend. And my poor mother, she used to put away all year 100, 100 grams of sugar every week that, when the season comes to make jellies, she has enough sugar. That's why we're always talking with my sister-in-law to how our parents had to work and--

Struggle.

--struggle.

Just to stay alive.

Yes. But God gave me a beautiful daughter and three beautiful grandchildren.

Have you been able to tell your daughter and your grandchildren of your experiences?

Not much, but especially the baby. The baby, he's 14 years old. He is the youngest. He always comes out with questions. He, and then Sarah, the middle, the girl, they always ask them. And I answer.

But sometimes, we talk about. But they get so emotional. The little girl is a very emotional child. We lost our principal last Saturday.

Yes.

Yes, I heard about the story. Very sad.

It was a no-no with her the whole day Saturday.

Yeah. He must have been a very fine man, because the--

Very fine man, very. He was even my daughter's social studies teacher.

Yeah.

The kids were very upset.

I can understand.

What would you tell young people of today in view of what you've gone through, and others? What message would you have?

What what?

What message would you have for--

What message?

Yes, for young people of today.

They should never let it happen again-- to nobody, not only to Jewish people, but to nobody. That's very good, that slogan, what they have, never again. That poor Hugo, too. He was born in the United States.

One of the people we interviewed.

I see.

Yeah.

Yeah.

He sits in front of us during the holy holiday.

He goes to the temple.

Well, he said much the same thing that you said when we interviewed him, what you just said right now about never letting it happen again.

You know, when we were in Frankfurt, there was one Obersturmführer, the German and the SS woman was there, too, the two of them. And they didn't want mother and child should be together, or sisters and sisters. They always tried to

separate people.

And they found out there was a mother with her 16-year-old daughter. And then they took the two of them down in the basement. And the daughter had to give the mother 25. And if they thought that she didn't give that hard enough, she didn't hit her mother hard enough, then the mother had to give it the daughter, too. And they were sitting there, and drinking, and joking around.

You saw this?

Yeah, I saw this with my own eyes. We know what was going on.

Well, I want to thank you for what you have given--

I shouldn't say it's my pleasure--

--to us.

--because it's not a pleasure.

No.

What you've done is very courageous and very important.

And it's a way of speaking to the world, to at least some segment of it, about these things.

And it's because of testimony like yours that we hope that, as you say, it will never happen again.

Let's hope to God that it will never happen again. We always used to say, if somebody is in the war and it happens, you get killed. Well, you can't help it, right? But they didn't give us a chance.

I know.

They didn't give us a chance.

People say, why didn't they fight back? That's the answer. There was no time. There was no--

I asked myself that question. But how could we?

How could you.

They took a transport of 3,000 Jews to the railroad station. And there was two soldiers. But the two soldiers had the guns.

Exactly.

We let ourselves be taken to the slaughterhouse.

Thank you very much.

You're welcome.

Thank you, Mrs. Peters.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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