

My name is Dr. Sidney Langer, and I'm the director of the Oral History Project of the Holocaust Studies Resource Center at Kean College in New Jersey. I'm very pleased that Mrs. Gertrude Lichtenfeld, who resides in--

Bayonne, New Jersey.

--Bayonne, New Jersey, has come to Kean College today to discuss some of her experiences during the Holocaust. Mrs. Lichtenfeld, I want to thank you very much for coming.

It's a pleasure to tell the whole story to somebody. People should know what we went through. I got no teenage life, nothing. And all the time I saw the gun by my head.

Can you tell me first a little bit about when you were born? Give me first, if you don't mind, your date of birth, the town that you were born in, the country, and a little bit about your family and life growing up in the town.

I was born April the 3rd, 1925, in a small town in Poland. It's very small. Niwka, the name is.

Niwka. N-I-W-K-A.

Yes. It's near Katowice.

Near Katowice.

Yes. And we were population about 1,000 Jewish people around.

What was the total population of the town?

About 15,000. Something like that.

So about 15,000 total population.

Yes, Polish people

And then Jewish population about 1,000.

Yeah.

How far away was Katowice?

Maybe about 30 kilometer around. I don't remember exactly, but something maybe like that. And it was a very small, happy town. We make a nice living. My father was a very bright person, educated. He speak many languages. My mother, too. And we were four sisters. I was the younger one. It was a coal mine town. My father was in the business in coal mine.

He was in coal mining.

Coal. Yeah. And we were very well-to-do and nice, and a good family, religion people, Jewish. And September 1st, 1939--

Let me just bring you back just a tiny bit. Tell me a little bit about the town, going to school, what kind of school you'd go to.

Yes, I was going in the public school, seventh grade public school.

This is a public school for both Jewish and non-Jewish students?

Yes. I was going to a Jewish cheder, they call this.

This was a school where you were learning--

Only Jewish to learn. So after school we went for lessons to learn Jewish.

Boys and girls together?

Yes, yes. Yes.

It was a modern thing.

Well, the rabbi, he teach first the girls. And then the boys were in a different class, like to say. And then we got once a week religion. They called this religion.

In the public school?

In the public school. So we have to go to a different town, because it was not enough Jewish-- we went to Modrzejów, they call this, a different town. And it was a very happy life, too. 1939, September 1, Hitler invade Poland. And we were right away first on the list, the Jews.

Let me take you back just a little bit. The relationship between the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community?

Very nice. Very nice. Very quiet. Very nice.

Now, Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933.

Yes, but in Poland--

I know. But in 1933, Hitler came to power. You were a very young child. You were eight years old.

Yes.

Were there any changes after 1933 in your town?

No.

Laws regarding--

No. In 1933, was a little bit anti-Semitic going on already, start to go. Because we, around town it's like [POLISH]. So they speak German and they speak Polish. They call this Oberschlesien. And in Polish it's [POLISH]. [POLISH], they call this. And they were already getting a little bit itchy on the Jews, very much. So we felt the pressure in the schools. The children, the Jewish children were felt a little bit, too.

You felt changes between--

Yes, very much. Yeah. We felt a lot of changes.

'35, '36?

Yes, it was going very bad. They start to ripping the beard on the people. One day my father was going to daven they call this.

Praying?

Praying. They were throwing rocks on him, on my mother. And they were calling ugly things, which I-- it was going on already.

And this was?

1937-38 it was going on very bad already. Yes.

Was there any talk at the time, in 1937-38, about possibly leaving Poland?

My father will not leave because he was born in this town, and he was raised. That was for generations. He will not leave. Other people left, different places, to Switzerland, to wherever they can.

That early, though?

Yes, early. People were leaving. From our towns, not much. I don't think so. But in other towns, we heard-- they were talking. Mostly they were talking in the shuls, in the little temples. They're called shuls. So they were talking. That's [PLACE NAMES] the very wealthy, very wealthy. So wealthy we were not. We just were moderate. Made a nice living. But the wealthy, very wealthy, they were leaving for Switzerland. They were talking. They were paying a lot of money for the passports, and they were leaving.

But my father will never leave. He said, oh, I went to war in another war. In 1914 was a war, there's something. And they were talking. Oh, no, no. It's going to be OK. We don't done nothing wrong. We just religion people, just Jewish. And was wrong.

Were you aware of Kristallnacht in Germany?

No. No, we don't know that in Poland till we got in our towns to start to do this.

You say that your father's beard was cut.

He got a small beard, and he had to cut smaller, smaller. And they were beating up him, throwing rocks. It was wintertime. And it was a lot going on. At nighttime we must be home. 7 o'clock was curfew and so on.

This is in 1936-37, as you've said?

We have to be nighttime home because we were beaten up very much. Rocks and all.

Did you understand?

Oh, yeah, I understand.

Because you were very young.

Yes, I was depressed. I start to understand something. But we don't got no television. We got the radio. But they were always saying the Jew, the Jew, and the Jew. But I felt a little bit that I'm not comfortable, but we always hope for better tomorrow. But never come. Was worse.

How far was Sosnowiec?

Four kilometer.

Oh, very close!

Very close. Four kilometer. It was a bigger city like our town. Four kilometer, it was. And in Sosnowiec--
Sosnowiec, I'm sorry.

Yes, Sosnowiec lived a lot of Jewish people. And they've got businesses, a lot of them.

Now, do you remember the day when the Germans invaded your town?

Yes, I remember very well. I never forget this. That was on a Friday, September 1st. I never forget this. I heard shouting and terrible noise. And we were very scared, very scared. My parents were awful scared. My sister was-- we were awful scared.

Did you have any warning at all before September 1, 1939?

We don't got no warning. Only they were saying the war. They were thinking that Poland will survive, whatever they're saying.

Were there any Polish Jews who had been living in Germany? Were they returning at all to your town prior to 1939? Because many Polish Jews who were living in Germany left Germany and came back to Poland.

By our town? Nobody survived too much. Nobody came back.

No, no, no. Before 19--

Oh. German Jewish in our town?

Well, actually, Polish Jews living in Germany who left Germany and came back to Poland.

I don't know about that. I don't know about this. I was not so bright. I don't remember that.

So what happened on September 1st, 1939?

Well, they came in. And we saw the German. And they occupied right away our town. Not the same day, but in a few days they came. And we heard the news and everything that the Germans invade Poland. And we have to do the best. And rules were right away. Jewish stores were taken away. And after a few weeks, [POLISH] have to be in Jewish businesses.

Do you want to explain what a [POLISH] is?

Yes, it's like somebody came in your business and watch your business. And he's the boss. And you just the worker. The owner is the worker. And he give you a salary. And that's what I stand like that. That's how it was. And at the time, they took it completely out, what they can. And after one year they start to rob them completely and taking out everything from the stores, and send out to Germany.

But what about during the first days, the first weeks when the Germans came into your town?

There was no food. We have to line up for food. And right away we were limited in the lines to stay. They right away start to beating up or something.

And this is Jews and non-Jews in the town?

Yeah. They right away start to show that this is Jew. And all kind of names we are called because they knows us. And

the Germans what they occupied, the police, they don't know that we are Jewish. But the Polish people show that we Jewish people. And that's what was the hassle with a lot of things.

Were any individuals in the town killed during the first days or weeks?

Yes. I remember I just came back from Israel. I visit my girlfriend. Her brother was ripped apart from dogs because the same week one Jewish person died. And they were sitting shiva. In Jewish, we sit shiva eight days.

Seven days.

Seven days, right. That was Saturday afternoon. They came upstairs, and they were davening.

They were praying.

They were praying. And one man was staying in a tallis.

I'm sorry. Who had died?

From our town, one Jewish man died.

Natural causes?

Natural. Well, he was sick and he died. And the family was sitting shiva. But Saturday they came up upstairs for [POLISH]. They came over there and davening. They would daven every day.

In other words, they were having the services in the home.

In the home, in his house, yeah. And my girlfriend's brother was there. My girlfriend's father was there, resting in peace. And this man, wonderful man. He was staying [POLISH]. And he was dressed up in a shawl, in a tallis.

A prayer shawl.

Yeah, tallis. And he davened. And then after, I went upstairs with my girlfriend because the father was a shochet, and he have to go in the evening, go and [POLISH]. Kosher.

He was a ritual slaughterer.

Yes. And we went upstairs. And remind the father, in certain hour after sundown he should remember that he have to go with his son at the town [POLISH], slaughter because meat for Jewish people. And then we went down. We came down. And we were going down. We saw German police with dogs going our direction. We went in the front door, and they came from the back door, because this house belonged to this Jewish family.

Downstairs lived Polish people. And they called on the police that is over there, a group where they making like-- like to explain-- something against the German, whatever they make themselves.

Underground.

Yes, something like that. And they came. And we saw them wearing the helms and things. And we came in the front. After a while, we were going home. It was not too far. It was about two blocks exactly to say, something like that, to my girlfriend's home.

And then something was going now terrible over there. The dogs chased the Jewish people upstairs. They were ripped apart. They were doing a lot-- the dogs were trained how to kill Jews. That was German Shepherds, big dogs. And was a lot of fun for the German.

Was this very soon after the occupation?

Yes, very soon. Very soon.

A week, two?

Something like that. A week, two, or something. That's really same thing. And the young man was 18 years old. Nice, bright person. And he was ripped apart. And they took him down. And I don't remember how I was, but we find out.

And not far away was a place from the coal mine, if somebody got killed in the coal mine, they was put over there, like a morgue. And they took this young man. And he was still alive. You heard the screaming. Because somebody came to them and said, oh, it's going on something else. And your son, or your brother and the other man. And his wife was pregnant, this man where he was wearing the big tallis was saying. His wife was pregnant. And this man was killed and the dogs.

And we heard no screaming because some people took the two people to this morgue. And we were staying by the window by the morgue. And the police were there, and they were having a lot of fun. And that what happened. And he died.

Now, this was, as you said before, very, very soon after--

Very soon. We saw what we can expect. We saw. A lot of people in our town were leaving where they can.

What happened next within the community? You said something about the fact that this family pointed out the individuals who were upstairs praying.

Yes. The people where they lived downstairs.

Did anybody organize in the town for any underground activities? Was it possible?

It was impossible because we got no ammunition, no guns. We got nothing. How we can do? What we can do? We can do nothing with the bare hand. It's impossible to do.

What happened during this first year?

Well, we saw it's not good. They start to come into the houses. They start to come into the houses, taking out the good furnitures. First of all, they came jewelry. They took off all jewelry. And they wanted the jewelry be right away given out. No jewelry should a Jewish family have.

Then they came in for the good furs. Jewish people, we got a very cold winter. We got like Siberian winter with a lot of snow. Came September, and the winter was to April sometime. We don't see the ground. So we wear good fur coat. And everything have to be given away. They take it. They just came in and robbed completely. What we can do? They come in, they take. The police came in with private citizen, German citizen.

Who were the police in the town?

German. Came in German police, sent from Germany someplace. And they were-- their voices. Their voices. They just don't-- they were so trained that a Jewish person cannot-- we got curfew, 7 o'clock. We cannot go out after 7:00. And we have to be in the house. And they were just animals, not people. They were coming, and who knows. And then came private people in, German, private.

And then was Volksdeutschen, they called this. The Polish people, some of them came and be German, that they call this Volksdeutsche. And that were the worst people. They never got in their life nothing. They never no work. Never no

want to work. And they came, just robbing. They were saying that the Jewish are rich. And Jewish people work very hard in our town to make a living and to raise family.

Were any Jewish people-- families, individuals-- taken out of the town during this first six months, first year of occupation?

After a year, Jewish people in the small towns around, like Modrzejów and small towns like [PLACE NAME] It's funny, but that's what the name is.

No, I would like to know the names.

That's a name. Dandowka.

These were all relatively small villages.

Very small.

Of a few thousand people? And sometimes less.

Yes. Modrzejów was bigger, like Niwka. But [PLACE NAME] was the smallest. And the little towns, we have to move to Dandowka. And Dandowka, the Polish people move to our towns.

What was Dandowka?

A small town.

Where was it in relation to Niwka?

About two kilometer to four kilometers, or the three kilometer. Very close.

So the entire Jewish population of Niwka was taken to this town?

Yeah, from [PLACE NAME] too, and all the small ones, and Dandowka. And they make a ghetto over there. And over there all the Jewish people stay. And we stay in groups like two families in one apartment and so on.

How many people would you think were in the ghetto?

In Dandowka? I don't know. Maybe about 1,500 to 2,000. I don't remember exactly. I don't remember exactly, but it's small.

You were still together with your parents?

I was still with my parents, yes.

And your sisters?

Yes. The older sister live in Bedzin. The older sister was married. She have a baby. And she lived in Bedzin with her husband. And between the second sister, she live in New York.

She was already living in New York at the time?

No, no, no. She live now in New York.

Oh, no, at this time.

She was home.

When you and your family went to the ghetto, one sister was living in Bedzin.

Yes, the married one.

And she was married. She was the oldest sister.

Yes, the oldest one. Rose.

But yourself and your other two sisters?

We were living with my parents. And the second sister, Helen, she live in New York, she was married in November. She got married in 1939, and she lived with us for a while.

She went with her husband then?

She went the husband and wife. We live all together. And that was the younger sister. Between Helen and me was one sister, Regina. And she was caught because she went to Niwka. She got some new clothes, and she went to Niwka to bring some potatoes because we were very, very tight in food. In Dandowka.

OK, I'm sorry. I have to interrupt because I'm losing.

Yeah.

Is this before you went to the ghetto?

No, we live already in Dandowka. We moved to Dandowka.

When you're in the ghetto?

Yes. 1940. We went to the ghetto in Dandowka.

Do you remember the month?

No, I think that was in the summer. I don't remember which month. In the summer.

In the summer of 1940 you're going to the ghetto.

Yes.

Your older sister, who's married and has a child--

She living in Bedzin.

She is not in the ghetto?

No, she live in Bedzin.

I understand. So you are together with your two other sisters and your parents.

Yes. And brother-in-law. The brother-in-law. She was married. The second one.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Your second sister was also married.

Married, yes.

OK. Now, your youngest sister was caught.

Yes. I'm the youngest one, but between--

I'm sorry.

The middle one, she was caught going from Dandowka to Niwka for people--

Dandowka was guarded?

It was not too guarded, but was guarded. It was like we can go and we cannot go. We're not supposed to leave the place. But she went because, how I like to say, [POLISH] because we need food. We start to very little with food.

How old was she at the time?

She was about 19. 18, 19 probably.

So she went out of Dandowka to get food?

Yes.

And she was caught?

She was caught. They caught her, but they sent her back. And she have to go to Sosnowiec. They send an invitation that she have to appeal to the police in Sosnowiec. So she went. She never come back. We cannot find out where she was and [INAUDIBLE].

After she was caught, did she come back to the home at all, to your home?

Yes, she came home. She came home. She said, why the German police caught me because somebody said [SPEAKING GERMAN].

Here goes a Jewish person.

Yes. And that's why she was caught. But the police write down her name and address, and they let her go. And after a week, so she got an invitation to go to the police headquarters, to Sosnowiec.

And you never heard from her again?

Never returned.

How long were you and your family in Dandowka?

In 1942, they took us to Sosnowiec, the whole family.

So from the summer of 1940--

To '42.

To 1942. Can you describe what life was like during that year and a half or so?

It was terrible. There was no food. Was very little food. Then we cannot do nothing.

Did you work?

I don't work. Was no place where to work. We just live up from what we got.

Your father?

No, he cannot work. He's Jewish.

Nobody was taken, for example, to a factory to work outside?

Yes, outside he was working. The German came, took all the men to work outside, like the streets, or street work, or just shoveling snow and so on. But was no pay. You got card.

Cards, yes.

Cards for food. Very little. Very little.

Was there a Judenrat in your--

Yes.

There was?

There was Judenrat. In 1942, in May, was Judenrat in our town, Dandowka.

Not Judenrein. Judenrat, a Jewish council.

Yeah, it was a Jewish council. It was a Jewish, like to say, office. A Jewish office, and they take care everything, all kind problems we got. Yeah, there was. And there was Jewish police, too, in our town, in the ghetto.

What was the attitude toward the Jewish police?

They got all this to pick up young people and bringing them to Sosnowiec, to a place. And then they start to sending away them to camps, to concentration camps for work. We replace the work when the Germans went to war.

Was there any religious activity in the ghetto? Were people able to still daven, to pray?

Yes, but we have to be very careful. When they find five people together, or 10 people, sometimes the people were punished. There were dogs bitten. They were from dogs bitten. We not supposed to pray. We're not supposed to. That's against the-- how you say? Against their law. We're not supposed to be together, praying or something.

Did you know about what was going on in the concentration camps?

No, we don't know nothing. We don't know nothing what's going on. We just know that we probably going to be caught and go to away.

Was there any underground organization?

Not in our places there. Someplace else probably, but not in our places.

OK. You were in the ghetto then, in Dandowka until 1942.

Yes.

Do you remember which month in 1942?

May. That was in May. I remember.

Till May 1942. And what happened?

They came, and they said, tomorrow morning you take something, very little belonging, and we have to move from here. And they move us. We walk to Sosnowiec. In Sosnowiec was a [POLISH], they call this. [POLISH], a big place, like in a movie. Movie place?

Theater?

The movie theater. But was not playing, so we stayed there.

Indoors?

Inside, yeah. And they start selecting young people.

You walked with your family?

Yes, and then they separate us.

The entire ghetto in Dandowka was taken to Sosnowiec in May of 1942?

Yes, yes. And some people were ran off the night. And they went to hide in some place. Some of them were hiding. But later on they were caught anyhow and punished and all kind. That's what they told me. That's what I was told because I went with the whole family to this place, to Sosnowiec.

What kind of selection was taking place in Sosnowiec?

Well, they're checking older people in one part, younger people in the other part, and then crippled people in another place. And my parents went to Auschwitz. And I was taken with another group, a young group, to Bernsdorf.

Who was doing the selection?

German.

Were there many officers there?

Yes, was a lot of them. And there was with Jewish people, too. But the selection was done from the German. If they don't like it-- they look on the face. They don't like it, so they put in one direction. And if like it, to working. But we don't know why they select us because it was groups then, two or three groups. And our group, the first group, girls, took us to another place, to a [POLISH], where we stayed.

Your parents were sent directly to Auschwitz?

To Auschwitz, yeah. Because I was told. Friends told me after the war that they saw my parents went to Auschwitz by train.

Transport.

Transport. And we went to a different place.

You went with--

Working camp.

--both of your sisters?

Yes.

And the camp that you went to?

To Bernsdorf. [INAUDIBLE] Trautenau. Czechoslovakia.

You went to Bernsdorf.

Yes.

How did you get to Bernsdorf?

We went by train. Two days or a day and a half we went, travel by train. And we came. We were the first one. About 40 or something like that. We were the first one. And later start to come in more girls. And was over there a factory where we worked, a [POLISH] factory, like linen. Before the war, they were saying that they were doing silk. And end the war, they were making [POLISH], sacks for the army, whatever this was. That's what we were doing.

How many women were in Bernsdorf approximately?

To the end was a lot less because a lot of them die of typhus.

You were in Bernsdorf from--

Bernsdorf.

Bernsdorf.

[INAUDIBLE] Trautenau.

Right. It's right on the Czechoslovakian border?

I remember it was near Trautenau, 12 kilometer from Trautenau and 50 kilometer from Prague, something like that. A small town, and was an industry, was a factory from [POLISH] and we were working over there.

And where were you sleeping?

We got two bunk beds. I slept on a bunk bed. Flat.

One person per?

Per bed, yeah.

Two levels?

Two levels, yeah. No fancy, no fancy. Not fancy. Not pillows. Not fancy.

I understand.

Floor. Wood.

You were in Bernsdorf from May 1942 until?

To liberation, 1945. May 9th.

So you were there for three years?

Yes.

Can you describe life there during these years?

Yes. We were working. We get up 6 o'clock in the morning, 5 o'clock, something like that. And we work till we came back 7 o'clock in the evening. But at the time, we work of shift. So we went to work 12 o'clock in daytime, and we came back by 1 or 2 o'clock.

In the morning?

In the morning. And we got lunch. 12:00 we got lunch. We got two potatoes. Soup was grass, spinach, and some flour or something. That was the soup. Supper, they give us the same, almost the same. Was about two, three potatoes and there was a soup. Or there was a black coffee, but the coffee was something mixed. It's horrible. It was a horrible taste. And once a week they give us two pounds bread for the whole week. And they give us about five ounces margarine for the whole week.

Were you working in the same factory for the entire period of time?

Yes. Yes.

Did you say you were making socks?

No.

Or it used to be a factory.

[POLISH]. We are doing sleeping bags or whatever they call this-- I don't know-- for the army.

Canvas.

The canvas. The canvas. That was from paper. [POLISH] from paper. We were doing from paper.

This was a very, very dangerous work, wasn't it? Because the flags--

Yes. I was not working by the flags. Other girls were working. It was very dangerous and very dusty, and very dirty, and oily. It was departments, many departments. Many departments. Some girls were working here. Some girls were here. We were doing the dirty work, to say, very dirty. Because was working over there Czechoslovakian people. They got the best jobs, of course. They got good pay. They got the best jobs. We got the dirty work, very dangerous.

You said that there was an outbreak of typhus?

Yes, was an outbreak, and a few girls die. Was a nice cemetery [? covered ?] over there. Young girls.

Did all women try to escape from Bernsdorf?

No, was no place for to escape. They can recognize you very fast. First of all, on your clothes. We got no clothes, only this what they give us. So we wear a number. We were called by the number.

Mengele used to come visit us. Very nice, polite. He used to come once a month or once in three months and make the selection. Very nice, polite guy, Mengele. Very sweet-talking. He was wearing very nice clothes. He smells good. He told the girls to go in the middle.

He made a selection of the girls who are already there or girls who were coming?

No, the girls where we were there. We were about a thousand girls over there, because they start to come in and was built up a big camp. And he pointed which girl. First of all, we have to go in nudie out, in the middle, and turn around. And he stay, and he looked over. Any mark if [BOTH TALKING]

So you were wearing no clothes?

No clothes, nudie. And he pointed. He got the stick, a long stick. He was wearing boots. And he pointed. Turn around. And each girl would have to turn around. Each one at a time, not all together. And if he saw any mark, any blister or any mark, he right away show to this side. That's mean he's taking along. He's going to heal out. He said, oh, don't worry. Every time when he came there was a terrible panic in the camp. So--

How did you know it was Mengele?

Because he introduced himself. He said Dr. Mengele. Cannot forget him. Cannot forget him. He was good-looking. And he was very sweet talk. But he was something else. Later he don't come anymore because he got so much people in Auschwitz. They all were piling up to Auschwitz, so he was over there selecting.

How many girls would he take in a selection?

Oh, 7, 10, 15. Depends.

But you knew--

About nothing. He said that he's taking a clinic. He make them feel very good. But we were not trusting this person. He said that he's taking to a clinic, and he will heal them out, and he will send them back. Don't worry. You'll be coming back.

But nobody ever came back.

No. Never. Young girls. Was just a little mark or a little blister, or something like that, right away he put them aside.

So there must have been tremendous concern to make sure that your physical appearance was always healthy?

Yes, but with such a food?

Of course. I mean, given the terrible conditions.

What kind of food we got? That was food?

No, of course not. But I'm saying that the women who were there had to be very careful to make sure that they wouldn't have, I assume, a mark on their body, which would make them noticeable.

Was impossible. Was impossible with this kind of condition, and then with bugs in the bed. And if anyone got bitten in the bugs from the bed-- bedbugs was. Nighttime was terrible. The bed was right away with bugs coming. They was

round bugs. I don't know how to say in English the bugs, but there were bedbugs. There was terrible biting. They left marks, terrible marks on the thing. What we can do? We were inside.

Who was there? Your sister at the time? Who was with you?

My sister was someplace else, but my sister came later. She came later. She was sent to a different place, and she came later to me. She was not a few days with my mother.

But your sister from Bedzin?

No. The sister from Bedzin, I never saw her again.

You never saw her again?

No.

I got one card from her that they were ready to be shipped away to-- because they want to make right a Judenrein in Bedzin. But meantime, they were working in a place close to the army. They were [INAUDIBLE] on the time, all the Jewish people for a while.

When did your sister arrive in Bernsdorf? The same year, but later on. Right away, yeah.

What kind of relationship did you have with the other women?

Oh, we were very close.

Was there talk? Was there discussion?

Yes, we talked that the tomorrow going to be better, like to say. We hope that we survive. And we're going to tell the world what's happened, what they've done to us. And we are hoping that the families can get again together like we were. And we go back to our hometowns. And we understand. But never happened.

Were there any Jewish women who were in charge of the bunks, for example?

We got Jewish Judenelters there. And then we got a German Lagerführer. The Lagerführer was giving orders to--

Do you want to translate? The Lagerführer would be the camp commander?

Yes, a lady, because we were a lady camp, only ladies.

Were there any men there?

No.

I don't mean inmates. Any men guards? Any German guards?

Yes, outside by the gate was men guards at the camp.

The German women, they wore guns?

No guns, no. No guns. But they knows how to hit us very well. There were ladies-- I don't remember how much was. A dozen or two were wearing green uniforms, the ladies. They were trained how to take care of us, how to train us, how to hit, how to scream, how to beat up us.

I remember one incident. Not one, but many of them, but just one. Almost the same was each one. We were walking from the barracks in the morning to work. And looks like farmer was passing by before last night with potatoes. And maybe about three or four potatoes was laying on the road. So I pick up one potato. And I want to put in my brassiere.

To hide the potato.

Yes. And what happened, the guard saw me, and she beat me up so terrible. She broke my spine. I felt cracking in my back. I was only at the time maybe 80 pounds or between 80 and 90 pounds maybe, I was. And she beat me up so terrible.

Of course I pass out. And she left me laying. So the other girls picked me up, and they carried me back to the place. And one girl got a little bit water in a little can, and she washed me the face. And I was working. I don't remember how I was working the day, but they were encourage me. They were saying, do your job. Do your job. Remember, we have to be strong. Do your job.

And she took out the potato. And she said, oh, what she stole! I don't stole the potato. It was laying in the street! It was laying when we were passing by. We were going on the sidewalk and was laying a potato. A couple was laying, so I picked up one. I don't stole the potato. And that's what many incidents happened, not just with me personally, but with other girls too.

How did you pass the time, when you had time, when you weren't working?

We were sitting. I had to wash my hands--

Were there leaders among the women who helped others be strong?

Yeah, was not leaders, but they were friends. You kept together like sisters and brothers. Like sisters, not brothers, because there was no brothers there. We were keeping very close with each other because we don't got nobody.

There was no communication in these years with the outside, except for the very beginning, I assume?

No, was nothing. We don't know. But I remember 1944 came a Hungarian group. And they got shaved their heads. And they came from Auschwitz.

To Bernsdorf?

To Bernsdorf. And they were very scary people. And we want to ask them. And something we heard that they came from Auschwitz. We don't know too much because we were so far away. And they were saying we cannot-- they tell us not to say what happened over there in Auschwitz. But the smell, human flesh smoking and so. They were smelling.

They don't want to say, but one from the other one was saying, don't say nothing to nobody because we so scared. And who go in, nobody come out, they were saying. That's when we find out more and more from them at the time. To when was the liberation, we find out the whole story what's happened.

Do you remember the day of liberation?

Yes, I remember very well. But I don't remember which day was in the week. Was a middle week. Was the 9th of May. It was a beautiful, sunny day, but I don't remember which day it was.

Who were you liberated by? The Russians?

By the Russian. Yeah, came in with the tank. We were in the camps.

Let me ask you. I'm sorry to interrupt.

Yes.

Toward liberation, near liberation, were there ever any American planes flying over Bernsdorf?

Yes.

Do you remember an incident where--

Yes, I remember very well. There was one winter night, that was 1945 the winter night. And the SS came in and said, you're all out. Just take one blanket and we going to walk.

This would be in January, February?

Or something like that. yeah. We all going someplace. So we took a blanket. Don't take too heavy clothes. Don't take much. We don't got anyhow nothing. Take just a blanket. So we took a blanket.

You had wooden shoes?

Yes, we got wooden shoes, with all blisters all the time. My feet was blistered all the time. I took papers inside in the shoe because I don't got no stockings. So it wasn't the fact that it was papers. I took a couple pieces of paper and wrapped around my feet and put on the wooden shoes.

So anyhow, I took the blanket and we all went out outside. And they start to counting us, how many girls we are. And at the time we heard planes coming over. And the SS were staying in the uniforms dressed up. Some of them were in black with the red band where they got the Hakenkreuz.

The swastika?

Yes, the swastikas. And some of them were in the green uniform, the regular guards. And we supposed to go for the march. Get out from this place. Go. Because they were afraid that the Russian is near them, the English are. So then we stand up outside in four. And they were saying, down! The guards say down, to fall down. So we fall down. And the guards want to hide, and they were under us, that they get covered.

And we saw planes. That was the time American, Russian, and the English plane, very low, coming over our head. And we were praying, come on down. Let down! Because that doesn't matter our life anymore. We have no strength to walk. We have no strength to go. Just get down and level us out, we were praying. Shoot us! Do anything! We are praying. We were calling in Jewish, in Polish, whatever we can, down! Down! Give us down! Finish!

We have no desire to live anymore in such a kind behavior, how they treat us. No food, nothing. We were very hungry. And the food was less and less, this kind of food. The two potatoes was one potato a day. And nothing but water with sand. It's just like dragging us. I remember I was about 70 pounds already. To the last minute, I was maybe 65 to 70. I was not able to stand up even.

But they left, the planes. And we were staying for a while. And then they say, wait. Between the German they were saying-- we understand German-- and they say it's no worth to [GERMAN], to [GERMAN]. That means to take them someplace. So we went back in the barracks. The barracks were mined. When we went to work, the Germans came and they mined the barracks. Mines. They put the--

Every day? No.

No, no, no.

When you went on the walk?

When we went at work, we all went in the factory working, one day they came and they mined the-- the mine, that mean they put the--

Ammunition down.

Ammunition underneath.

Around the camp?

Under the barracks. That the last minute there were explosion, whatever, something like that. How we find out, next barracks was a Belgian barrack, and then was a French barracks. There with two workers. There were two people, and they tell us one day they were passed by. One Belgian passed by with the wife, and she said in German that's what she saw.

We're not supposed to communicate with the people. But I was staying by the wall, and another girl, we were watching how the machine was working because I got a little trouble with the paper. The paper was wet, and every time I put the paper on the machine was cutting down. So I have to watch her more. And I was holding the machine to go slower, not to cut them down. Because if not, they will saying that I'm a saboteur. I break the machines or something. So I have to hold it.

So she passed by with her husband. And she said, you know, your barracks is mined. Mines under the barracks. Watch out. What we can do? I'm inside. We can do? So anyhow, the next day I remember that was like--

[TECHNICAL INTERRUPTION]

Let me stop you for a second. [INAUDIBLE]. There's only a minute left on that tape, right?

Yeah, the tape --