

We'd like to welcome you back, Halina. One of the things that you had mentioned last time was some of the relationships that developed during the course of the year. Could you tell us a little about those relationships?

Definitely. I think that this is a very important part, which I want to talk about. When I came into camp-- to the labor camp, I met a group of young girls that came there together because they worked prior to being sent to this camp. They worked together, so they were a group already of a group of friends.

And I was alone, and they somehow befriended me and for which I was very thankful. And I formed a very close relationship with two of the young girls. One survived, and the other fortunately didn't. But I want to talk about how close we became.

What were their names?

There was Lili [? Zilbiger ?], and the other one was Helenka [? Spiegelman ?]. And they were lovely, lovely girls and we were from the same background and that's why we were able to relate to each other because somehow the family sent-- and religiously and everything was very similar.

And they served that purpose as family since you lost so many--

Yes, yes, very much so. And we became very, very close to such a point where I-- we shared our food and we ate together and we used to save our-- let's say if we got a portion of bread-- one portion of bread that had to last us for a whole day, rather so that we would not eat the whole thing at once that you tended to because the portions were very, very small and the tendency was to just eat whatever you had and then not have anything at all, we used to eat one portion and hide the other two. So we split the first portion between us, and we shared the other two for lunch and for dinner or whatever.

So this made the physical deprivations and everything easier to bear because you were sharing--

Sharing and--

The responsibility.

Yes and also you couldn't-- if you had any honor, which we all had, you couldn't take more or go in and eat the other portion. So that helped us to share in this food and have it so that you didn't gorge on it while you were so very hungry. You were able to have a little more for the whole day. And we-- and socially we used to tell each other about our families and about our experiences. We were very young girls you must understand this.

You were all the same age?

Lili was a year-- is a year older than I am, and Helenka was the same age. As it turned out, we talked to each other and discovered that Helenka and myself were related through some distant families. Of course, we were very young and I lived in a different town, so we didn't know the people. But talking long enough, we realized that we have a certain relationship-- a physical relationship also.

Did that cement the bond even more strongly between you.

More so. Also I--

Would have been there anyway.

Yes. It really wouldn't have mattered. Just that we had some more connection and some people to talk about that--

More in common.

Yes. But we formed-- this was a very close relationship, but there was like an extended family. The other people were also very close to us, and they formed-- the other girls formed also close little groups. But all of us really supported each other, and I just want to talk about it because I want you to realize how important it is that the Germans tried to strip us of this humanity, of this ability to think about other people not only yourself.

And they weren't able to do that we were-- we looked out for each other, and we would have risked our lives for each other, which in many cases people did and helped each other. And this was a factor and being able to survive because you were not an animal, and that's what they tried to create. They tried to create this animal instinct in one but--

It sounds like these two women really served as your nuclear family, that groups formed, and that you cared for these people like you would have your nuclear family.

Right.

Were you together in both Bolkenhain and Landeshut?

At Landeshut, and then from Landeshut-- we were in Landeshut. Let me continue with the story. We were sent after nine months that we were sent to a third camp GrÃ¼nberg. This was already an existing camp. It was a larger-- it was still a labor camp, but it was a much larger facility. They sent us out of Landeshut I think because they did not need or they didn't-- they weren't working this factory anymore. I think they were closing it or they were refurbishing it for ammunition or something like that.

Was GrÃ¼nberg a weaving factory?

Was also basically a weaving-- weave-- very large weaving and spinning and making their raw fiber before the spinning. It was-- the whole spectrum of weaving was contained in this factory, and when we arrived there, the small group from Landeshut, and a couple of other small camps, this was already as I said an existing camp. There was about 1,000 women there--

The three of you were together at that--

Working. Yes, we were together. And the people that-- the new people that came were given a separate hall. And if you want me to describe the facilities in this camp, I can briefly-- if it's important to you, it's important to us.

Yes. Well, it was like a big, big hall with bunk beds in very close proximity. If you ever saw pictures of the Auschwitz camps with the bunk beds, it was the same situation except that we were still able to keep ourselves clean. We had some of our personal clothes which they did not take away from us. We had our hair.

They didn't shave our heads there. And we were able to keep clean, to wash our ourselves and our clothes, and we had some bedding. They gave us blankets and pillows, and we had straw sacks that we slept on those beds.

And we shared a bunk. There were two women to a bunk. I slept with Lili. And Helenka, I don't remember, but she slept right next but with another of our friends. And that camp was a much different situation already than the other ones because there were so many more women.

The Germans that-- it was still very much that oversee this facility.

As opposed to SS?

As opposed to SS. But there was an appel. We had to get up in the morning and be ready and stand. An appel, you know what that means--

A roll call.

To be counted. We had to stand in rows of five. And because there were so many more, it took that much longer, and there was a big hassle because of it, stand in fives and straight and be counted. And the count wasn't right, it was already a much different situation and a much tougher situation. The food was much inferior-- more inferior than in the last facility.

What we used to get was some coffee. Ersatz, of course, black without sugar, which I became addicted. I still drink black without sugar. And some piece of bread, a very small piece of bread.

And we used to be marched to work. The camp, the sleeping part was pretty close to the factory, so we didn't have to walk very far, I would say across the road. But we were marched under guard.

And everybody went--

How old were you at this time approximately?

I was 15? 14, 15. And--

So are you saying the conditions were getting progressively worse?

The conditions were getting progressively worse, but they were still-- they were still livable. You could-- it wasn't-- we weren't in such deprived conditions that people were dying. If they would have let us, we would have survived in these conditions because we were able to keep clean. We were clean still, and the food was just barely enough to survive.

But you were able to maintain some personal dignity it sounds like.

Yes, because we--

Which is important.

Yes, definitely. I must tell you that we all tried to look decent, and the women tried to look pretty. And I remember putting curls out of rags into my hair to have a hairdo. It was-- the pageboy was very much in fashion from before the war, and I remember wearing it.

And we had few clothes, so we used to lend each other so that we look decent. And I remember I had a jumpsuit, and I used to sleep on it so the crease would be straight. So we were still maintained human-- s human feeling. We did not look like some of the camps that you saw from Buchenwald or--

What were the guards like?

We didn't have much contact with the guards except for the marching back and forth. And if you-- they weren't too abusive. They weren't too abusive. We were scared because we knew that they are German, but somehow we were able to maintain a distance from them unless somebody did something that they paid attention to or something that was out of the ordinary.

Were all of the inmates Jewish or were there--

Yes, they were all Jewish women. And this GrÃ¼nberg before we arrived there was a camp that men were there. I think I don't remember if it was mixed to begin with or they were men and women in the same camp but separated. But when we arrived there, they shipped the men out and just became a strictly a women's camp.

And you were there in GrÃ¼nberg right through to 1945 or--

No. I don't exactly remember the day or the date, but after a short period, this camp-- this labor camp became a

concentration camp. And how did this-- how did they transformed it?

Well, one day, they did not send us to work, and we were very much afraid because if you don't go to work, then that's bad news. Because what is happening and nobody knew what is happening. And if you don't know what is happening, then you know that--

Any change in regulations is a bad sign.

But we saw a lot of-- as the morning progressed, we saw a lot of SS people-- women and men in the SS uniforms-- roaming around the area. And as the hours progressed, they had to stand outside an appel that whole morning. And they-- finally what happened was that they had an empty hall with a table in the middle, and what they said were doctors sitting behind the table. And they had us strip naked and come in front of these people, supposedly doctors which I doubt if they were doctors, and we were given a number, not a tattooed number but a number on a piece of string.

And we're able to go back to get our clothes. But I must tell you that this was the first time that they made us feel so low, so degrading-- so degraded because we knew that this is not a doctor's examination.

And there were men, and they were the SS in uniform all around the room. And these were young people. The women were young women, and the soldier-- with the SS soldiers were young--

Was there anything in the attitude of them that convinced you that they were not bona fide scientists or doctors or whatever.

Because what kind of an examination is it if you just walk in front naked of somebody? This is not a medical examination. And it wasn't done in private.

Did they behave-- they snicker? Did they do?

No, they just made us very, very afraid because you didn't know what it is all about and what does it mean and what are they checking and what do they want and what are they looking for and why are they doing this. What kind of a-- it wasn't an exam-- a medical examination where you went and the doctor asks you questions or they looked in your throat or your eyes or whatever. No, this was just-- it was just something to degrade you. This was psychological.

An attempt to humiliate you.

And this was at that point a very, very demeaning and terrible experience, and we were all very shaken up and very afraid and the fact that you didn't know actually what it is all about. But it was over, and this was the designation. Now this camp was designated a concentration camp, and from that moment on, the SS took charge. The wehrmacht went away, and the SS was our-- they were the guards.

Did you know at this time, Halina, anything about the Final Solution or that there was a Final Solution or--

No, we didn't know the Final Solution by the name Final Solution. We knew-- absolutely we knew that there was an Auschwitz and that they are exterminating people. We definitely did. We did. We didn't know who and how and where, but this is what we were afraid of.

Did you relate what was happening in these places to what was happening now when in your camp, or was there any connection made?

Well, of course, when we-- when any change that transpired and we were-- they never informed us. They never said, well, now you're going to be stripped naked and go in front of a doctor because we have to check you and this is going to now be a necessity. No, you just-- they just-- this was psychologically done, and they kept you in suspense, worried, not knowing what is happening. And this whole day was a nightmare because we didn't know what is happening to us. We just knew that nothing good is going to happen.

When it became a concentration camp, what changes occurred?

The changes that occurred were just more stringent, the appels were done and they-- in a rougher manner. And the people themselves, the SS, were just a rougher crowd and a meaner-- and they were hitting without any cause. Whatever they didn't like, they slapped around, and they abused us more than otherwise.

And the fact that they-- that we knew that this is the SS and they walked around, their demeanor was enough to frighten you, and the uniform was enough to frighten you. And you just were so glad to get inside and then be out of sight because just being around them was frightening.

But work was the same and--

They still allowed you to work?

Yes, we were still-- we were still useful to them. And we ran this Jewish contingent-- ran this big, big factory because the heavy work, what they called [GERMAN], they found the girls that were bigger and stronger, and they did the heavy work that mostly big German men used to perform. And the whole factory was run by-- with our help. They were just a few Aufseher that were in charge. And that happened-- that-- we were working there until I would say December of '44.

Now Gr $\frac{1}{4}$ nberg was close to the Polish border because I think that now Gr $\frac{1}{4}$ nberg is Poland. This part reverted to Poland. So at that point in time, the Russian front started to move closer to that area.

And one day, all of a sudden, we did not go to work, and, again, we were frightened, didn't know what is happening. And they herded us into one hole out of the hole that we slept in into the other part, the older part, where the other women were. And all of a sudden, we heard that they brought a transport of other women. They were Hungarian women that they must have just heard that them from Hungary and they must've gone already through one of the big holding camps. I don't remember which one they came through, but they were already shaven and they were stripped of their clothes and they were in a very, very bad shape morally to see what happened--

You mean they were demoralized.

Demoralized terribly. Because I'm sure that in your studies, you read and heard that they came into Hungary, and they-- what they did to the Polish Jews over a span of time, they did to them immediately.

Concentrated fashion.

Right. They just took them out of their homes, out of their families, herded them into trains, separated the families, and they were absolutely demoralized. They-- it was terrible. It was a terrible scene.

And the [GERMAN], but they were maybe I would say maybe 500 women or 1,000 women that they brought in. We didn't see them. They separated us, but we just heard through the walls that they are there. And they ransacked that hall because they were looking for extra food or some extra clothing. It was very bad.

In the morning, the following morning, they told us to get dressed and to take our belongings, and they marched us outdoors. It was in the middle of the winter. This was December, and the winter was-- if you remember or you don't remember but you've heard-- that it was December '45--

It was a terrible winter.

Or rather '44, it was a very, very hard winter with lots of snow outside. And we realized that they are marching us out of this camp and we realize that they are marching us out because the Russians were getting closer and they didn't want to leave us behind to be liberated by the Russians.

So they took this-- we were together with the Hungarian women. We were about 2,000. They split us in half, and they marched us out-- out of this place--

When they split you in half, did they march you all in the same direction?

No, they marched us in two different directions.

One group ended up in Bergen-Belsen finally after whatever they went through, but the group that I was in was marched and we were probably 1,000 or over 1,000 women. Now this became the Death March.

What happened was, they marched us a whole day. We were walking perhaps 30 kilometers a day away from the Russians in the snow. None of us was really equipped for this kind of weather, but we tried to protect ourselves as best as we could. And the SS were the ones that-- they were guarding us, and we were guarded with rifles and the ready. So there was no way of just disappearing or running away, and there were some cases in the beginning in the first day that the girls-- as we stopped for a break that didn't get up right away or thought maybe they will just walk away and maybe disappear. And they were shot on the spot, so they did this to frighten everybody else not to try--

To your knowledge, no one managed to escape. Or no one successfully.

Yes. Yes, there were women that did escape that stayed behind because at night, they used to find the shelter in some stables or wherever they were able to find shelter for us. So they used to herd us into a big stable, and we were just squeezed and then shoved but it was better than being outdoors.

What kind of clothing did you have at this time? Did you have coats or--

We had very bare clothing, but we used to-- but we put on layers. Whatever we possessed, we wore because it was much easier than to carry anyway. You couldn't-- we-- some girls had a little more than others, and they started out carrying some bundles. They also gave us whatever they had in supplies. Like whatever bread they baked, they gave us a loaf of bread. And I remember that we-- they gave us some sugar that they still had in the supply place. They did give us a little bit.

I think this was about all that we had. But you couldn't carry anything, so it was much easier to wear what you had. So this is what happened, and the blankets that they told us to take, we used as a cover. And there are some women that had better shoes. Some women right away had no shoes to walk in in snow that was reaching your ankles. It right away became a very, very crucial situation.

And the beating that was going on right away if you just stepped off to take some snow to use as water, do you-- they clobbered you right away because they thought that maybe you want to run away or whatever they thought, they had an opportunity to clobber your or hit you, they did.

And this went on for weeks. We were marched every single day out of the facility-- out of the shelter that they found for us and march us a few more miles if you--

Were going further east or-- did you know the direction you were going?

No, we didn't know where we are going. We had no idea where we are going because they never told us, and we just didn't know. We just went through towns and through villages and on the highway or through the woods.

People in those towns and villages saw you.

They saw us, but they-- nobody--

Lifted a finger.

Lifted a finger, no. But there were some women that stayed behind or ran away in those shelters at night that we were at, and some of them survived. Some of them the Germans turned in and brought back, and then they were made an example of and shot in front of our eyes.

And so it was very scary to run away. We knew that if we would only be able to run away and stay behind, we felt that the Russians were right behind us. They are almost in our tracks, but it was so scary-- you see, I think the fear of the death is so great that unless you are very gutsy or very desperate, you were-- you always had the hope that maybe tomorrow you will survive.

But what happens if you run away and they will shoot you. And that's what-- you think-- now I'm thinking back how could I-- how could we just continue doing it. How could we just go on? Why didn't we stay behind?

And we planned every night when they brought us to some wherever it was that we-- that they made us stop. We were looking. Can we run away from here? Can we stay behind? Can we hide under something?

But somehow-- when I say we, I'm talking about Lili and Helena and our immediate friends that we were-- that we kept close. But somehow we never found an opportune moment to be able to do it because we were so scared that they will find us and if they find us, they surely will shoot us because that's what we saw that they did to people that we knew.

So we continued. So we continued walking day in and day out. I just know that after weeks, we did pass through Dresden. You heard of Dresden.

Of course. It was bombed during--

And we passed through Dresden through the American bombing of Dresden. Now if I can just try to give you a picture of this. The town was empty because the inhabitants were in shelters. And this was-- and this group of these unfortunate women in rags already and looking ragged and emaciated already at that point because the food that they found for us was less and less, we didn't eat a whole day.

They didn't have any food for us. Only when we came to at night that they were somehow able from the villagers or from wherever we stopped to gather some food. But the times were very bad, and the Germans didn't have much food for themselves.

So you can imagine that there wasn't much for us, and whatever food that they had, the SS people managed to procure for themselves because they had it well. They weren't starving. They were just marching with us, but they certainly weren't starving.

And at that point, when you think of what was the purpose of this march, it was a shelter for the SS. Do you understand? Because they marched us so they would not have to go to the front. If you think about it because they could have just taken a machine gun and finished us off--

So in a sense--

It gave them something to do.

So in a sense--

The march was their form of invasion.

Was their form of protection for themselves. They had a mission because if they would have finished us, where would they go? They would go to the front. It was better to walk, to march, with the Jews than to go to the front.

But as they were marching you through Dresden--

Yes.

And through places like that, which were constantly being bombed by Allied planes, weren't they exposing themselves as well as you--

But I'll tell you--

To that?

There was no bombs. We did not experience until-- any bombings until we came to Dresden. And this was something that they didn't know is going to transpire. When they-- when we walked through town, we had to walk through the bridge that was demolished right after we walked through. I don't have the map and I don't remember exactly where they were going, but they had to go through the town and through the bridge to get to where they wanted to go to run away from the Germans or maybe it was already the Americans that were--

You mean to run away from the Russians?

From the Russians.

Yes.

I just don't know exactly what at that point they were moving us away from, whom, but they did not plan this and they did know that this big, big bombing is taking place. So as I started painting this picture before, the bombs were falling all over. We were just marching, and they are marching with us.

And we were not-- we meaning the Jewish girls-- we were cheering. We were hoping that the bomb will fall right on top of us and finish our misery and end all this. Or maybe we were also seeing that there is an end to-- that maybe an end is coming to our misery and there will be an end to the war finally.

Did you see it in terms of retribution also for--

No. We were-- at that point, we were just survival. Just we were hoping that even if it finishes us right then and there, it was better than continuing. But we did manage to go through Dresden and through the bridge, and just as we passed the bridge, the bridge was bombed.

And then they brought us-- in the beginning-- in the very beginning after the war, I was able to remember all the towns, the names of the towns that we stopped in chronological terms, but I don't remember now and I don't have a record. I wonder if any of the survivors that went through the march remember the names. But I'll tell you how we identified in the beginning with these stops was that we remembered if perhaps we got a better soup at the end of the day, we remembered it by what we ate. And this was so vivid in our memories.

Also I must tell you that through the march, we were in a very, very poor condition as far as cleanliness, and we were full of lice at that point because the Hungarian women were already not clean. And we were herded together, and lice spread. And, of course, with the dirt and we-- there was no shower, and there is no washing. There was no facilities at all.

So I must tell you that we marched the whole day, and we could not take off our clothes. We slept in the clothes that we were in for warmth and otherwise. The only thing that we did was take off our shoes and try to dry them if we still had shoes because there were some women that already had rags on their feet or the shoes were already full of holes because when you march-- yes.

As you went on, weren't there some women that just couldn't keep up with you?

Yes.

And what happened to those women as they would just not be able to go any further.

They were either-- they just died, or they killed them. But at that point yet, I don't think that they had a wagon because later on they had a wagon that was going behind and the ones--

Collecting bodies.

Collecting--

Corpses.

No, not corpses. Corpses they didn't collect. Only the ones that were still breathing but couldn't walk. So they finished their life on the wagon.

Did you ever feel that you wouldn't be able to go on?

Yes, many times. Many times but as long as we had the physical strength, we managed to push another day. After Dresden, they herded us into a camp.

What was the name of the camp? I just--

I just have a blank. This was an existing camp. It was a concentration camp, but it wasn't just Jewish people there. They were--

This wasn't Flossenburg, was it?

No.

Because that was--

No. It'll come to me. I can't remember.

But they-- we stopped there. As we came there, they stripped us again, and they stripped us of more possessions that we had. We still had our personal things like a toothbrush or a comb or a mirror or something from home or some women were still able to hide a little ring or some pictures.

When we arrived into that camp, they made us give all our possessions, whatever it was, away-- pictures and all. Now remember I showed you the picture of my mother and myself and that other little picture. I folded-- this was a little snapshot-- a little tiny snapshot. I folded it, in four and I put it in my shoe and I risked my life virtually hiding that because they just shot you for such a subordination, that this was not allowed. But I was able to retain it and survive with it.

They also stripped us of all our clothes for entlausung. Do you know what that means? De-lousing.

I don't know they boiled the clothes, which would have been very welcome if it would accomplish the purpose but didn't do anything. They just-- it was another humility to strip you of everything and then you couldn't get back your clothes, but whatever you grabbed, you had. So the short women were-- wound up with big dresses or whatever, and the taller girls wound up with little things that they couldn't wear. But later on we tried to trade off and to--

What was your own physical condition like when you arrived this last time.

It was getting-- it was very-- it was getting deteriorated. We were very-- I was very thin already, lost, of course, a lot of weight. But I did not have any sicknesses. I still was able to function, and so was Lili and so was Helenka and our

friends.

And this facil-- this camp was-- I can't remember the name of it.

It's all right. Maybe it'll come back to you when we [INAUDIBLE]

It was a terrible camp. It was a terrible experience because we did not work there. We just sat there. They herded us into a big barrack. There were no beds. We were on the floor and straw, just loose straw I think. It was filthy.

They-- the food was terrible there. There was water for-- the soup was some cabbage leaves flowing in some dirty water. There was a piece of bread sometimes yes, sometimes no. And there was sickness. There was typhoid prevalent there.

So women were just getting very sick with typhoid. There was a clinic that the sick ones called the Revere. The sick ones, they took-- they separated. And, of course, there was no medicine, and there's no doctor, no help, and the ones that did get sick with typhoid, most of them did not survive. They just died there, and we were just sitting there and waiting to die.

And I remember toward-- we were there for like maybe four or five weeks. It was a very long call, and it was very bad. They herded us to appel like three times a day, and they just made it very hard for us to even exist.

Was this the winter?

This was the winter, yes. This was-- I would say maybe this was March, but it was winter. It was cold and miserable.

I must relate to you one incident and this woman is alive. She did survive. She managed to hide a bunch of her pictures through this initial checkpoint. And she wanted to hide them, and she went behind the barrack with the pictures and somebody spotted her. I don't know if-- who it was-- if a German spotted her hiding these pictures. And they took her, and they shaved her head. And they made her stand outside for I think it was 24 hours. And they--

I think they poured water over her, and she survived it. She somehow survived it. She lives in Queens. She was able to survive this terrible ordeal. This was for trying to hold on to her family pictures. Wasn't gold. It wasn't dollars. It wasn't guns. It was pictures.

This was another way of de-humanizing you, cutting off your connection to your family.

And doing such a thing as an example to anybody else not to try anything. There were many incidents for other infractions that they did things like that.

Finally, after I think five or six weeks, they marched us out of that place again because the Americans were getting closer.

Did you know that?

Yes.

You did.

We knew that the Americans are getting closer. As a matter of fact, it was one or two days that the American planes flew over, and we were hoping that they are going to bomb the place. We were hoping. Do you see. When you hear now, people say why didn't the Americans bomb Auschwitz.

Many times I've heard that.

Why didn't they? It would have been a relief even if they would have bombed and killed people. To the inmates, to the people in the concentration camps, it would have been a relief. It would have been at least dying for a purpose.

So we-- when we saw the planes, we all ran out to greet these planes and to greet whatever is coming, but there was no bombs. It was just an overflight. I think if I remember, there were some leaflets that they threw. So they knew that there was something here. I don't remember what-- we probably didn't understand the English.

And, of course, the Germans didn't let us keep any of it, and they herded us immediately inside the bunk so that we wouldn't know what's going on. But we did march out of there, and it was the, again, they were fleeing the Americans. The American front was coming here.

And the group that started out from that place was really a very ragged and very terrible sight because we were dirty and we were sick and we were-- we really we looked like--

This was just a remnant of the group that marched out of GrÃ¼nberg.

Just a remnant, whoever-- another few that survived this ordeal that didn't die of typhus that still remained. But we went through the same routine. They marched us again every single day and found some facilities at night, and there were more girls dying of exposure and hunger. And there were more trying to run away, and there were more killed.

Some did run away successfully-- that did successfully run away. But the three of us plus other girls plus Gerda and her friend continued on the march.

And we marched until we got-- they got us to Czechoslovakia.

Halina, you had said that your friend Helenka did not survive.

No, but that was-- she died in Czechoslovakia. I'll tell you about it. I want to tell you about Czechoslovakia because this was a very unusual experience after all the months of marching through Germany that we had with the--

This might be a good point. We can hold that story for the next round because we have five minutes anyway, and I don't want to be cut off in the middle of it.

OK, very good.

We'll stop for a few minutes.

[INAUDIBLE]