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My name is Bernard Weinstein, and I'm the director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies project for the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Dan Gover. And we are privileged to welcome Mrs. Gladys Helfgott, a survivor presently living in Union, New Jersey, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about her experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Mrs. Helfgott, we would like to welcome you to Kean College.

Thank you.

I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about your city, where you came from, and about your early life.

I was born in Poland in Eastern Europe in Lodz-- the first industrial largest city, so-called a little Manchester-- a textile industrial city. I had a very cheerful, loving, and happy childhood.

My family was comprised of four people-- my immediate family-- a very gentle, loving, caring father, Jacob, a very devoted and loving mother, Eva, and a younger sister, Sara, of whom I'm going to speak a little later to. She was two years younger, no doubt about it-- more beautiful, more sensible, more sensitive, my younger sister-- myself, sensitive, but somewhat stronger-- teenager at that time when it all started.

Oh, I'd better go back to my childhood. You asked me about my childhood. I went to school-- my sister, the same school. We had very comfortable life as children. Father was most successful-- a top notch upholstery maker. At one time or another throughout the years, he employed about eight to 10 people in his upholstery shop.

Some of the people that worked for my father were even his brothers and brother-in-laws. He was a caring father and a wonderful husband. And as I remember, this was the most loving, caring moments that I do remember, just being together, and loving, and caring.

Were there particular memories that you would like to share with us?

Childhood memories?

As a child, yes.

Only that there was love and feeling between the family-- and the circumstances when we lived in Poland, as such, that we had almost everything in our household, but we did not have particularly nice apartment. The apartment was everything confined in one area-- the shop and the family lifestyle.

That was the only thing that really bothered all of us. But my father, somewhat like superstitious, he forgets, he has good luck with his business, he does not dare to move his family. And that's how we stayed. In Lodz, I think even to this day-- maybe not to this day 50 years later-- but there was no plumbing system in Lodz-- a big city, big population, and yet there were no conveniences. But we in our home had nothing but the best, except living quarters.

What did being Jewish mean to you then? Were you observing?

I didn't really come from a very religious family, just traditional Jewish family. Father observed and mother observed Shabbat. He was at the time on Friday night, for example, his people had to close early enough on Friday night in order to facilitate and get home before the Shabbat.

And yet at night after the Sabbath meal, Friday night meal, he and my mother and his wife rather went to a movie or to a theater. But traditionally, they kept tradition. In the beginning, they wanted me to go to a private school and learn Judaism. But such was the school, somehow, that they were washing fingernails, and not the type that we observed at home.

So the following few weeks, they decided that it's not for them that their daughter should be dictating to parents what to

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do, because they were not religious enough for that kind of Hasidic religious. They were just Jewish in the Jewish tradition, at it's best.

Did you experience any sense of difference in Lodz being Jewish, from the rest of the population?

Since I have had a very quite sheltered life, my friends were my friends. And I did not differentiate anything about religion, except that towards the end of the beginning, that's when we started to sense antisemitism-- influenced more or less by the German population, the so-called Volksdeutsche and other areas.

And at that time, it was a crucial time for me to realize that my schoolmates are having some antisemitic remarks. And occasionally when I went to Warsaw, for example, on a trip with my school, they took us to a university where they showed us that the left side and the right side, just before prior to the beginning of the war, that Jews were not supposed to sit on the same side in the university as the non-Jews.

And that's when I started to realize that there is something going on. And we felt a little bit, on my own as a girl, influence of the Nazi movement, I would say. But to me, friends are friends. And there are good people, and there are bad people.

So your friendships continued.

My friendships continued. At one incident, I remember that one girl that made a nasty remark during school hours, a non-Jewish girl, was dancing with me on the lunchtime. That's what we do in school in Lodz at that moment. And we were dancing on the lunch hour, and she said to the non-Jewish girl, you dancing with a Jew?

She said, she's my friend. So what? And that same girl that said that, a little later when the Nazis already entered Lodz, she came to me to apologize because she heard the rumors that not Germans are going to be occupying Poland, but the Russians are coming. And she got scared that I may denounce her, because she was using German slogans.

So that was just a little against this girl that I had why she acted like she acted. She wanted to rectify it, but it was already too late. I had my opinion about her.

What happened right at the beginning of the war?

OK. It all started on September 1, 1939. I think it was a Friday from a historical point of view. And Eastern Europe countries-- when Germany occupied Poland and Poland was invaded, and in a surprise blitzkrieg attack, the Wehrmacht, the armed forces, the German army, and the Luftwaffe, the Air Force forces, with about 2,000 Panzer units, they entered the city of Lodz, where I lived.

And in general, they bombed Poland. And Poland lost the war within the same month, September 1939. can I continue about what happened? OK, now at that time, there was very big surprises and the soldiers marching, which I do remember.

And there was a halt to industry, and to commerce, and a halt to education, and a halt to culture, and religion, and burning of the books, and burning places of worship, houses of God. And then became more serious to me as a teenager, and I did experience this rather harshly with a lot of chaos and a feeling of degradation-- and tyranny, and brutality, and mostly random shootings.

The intellectual people-- scholars, and teachers, and professional doctors, and craftsmen at its best, they were the first victims and destroyed-- and it all was wasted just from the beginning. That was the first casualties of war. And there are many implications of a full-scale war, not only politics, and strategies, and battlefields, or casualties, combat operations-- but this was a different war. In the wars, no one is a winner. Not even the other sides.

If I could just pause here for a moment-- were there any things that you remembered in those early days that happened that you would like to tell us? Anything that you saw with your own eyes?

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Yes, I saw with my own eyes. My cousin-- we lived in the midtown of the city Lodz-- Lodz just one block from the main street, which was called Piotrkowska. And I lived on Poludniowa, which was just less than a block from the main street. And I went to visit my cousins who lived on Piotrkowska, 17-- the Hubert family-- and I was trapped there.

For some reason, there was some chaos going on. And I was trapped with them. But I witnessed this-- they didn't touch me personally, but I witnessed shooting into the family of my cousin. One cousin got shot, and the soldiers threw him down, and kicked him down, and he fell down.

And then my cousin, which was another cousin, was shot also. But he played dead. And it was winter, December, and he played dead. And they threw him on the wagon with the dead people. And he still played dead on that wagon. And then later, he rescued himself.

So he was a victim that he survived, and I witnessed it, more or less. I knew about it, I witnessed it, but I personally was not involved in it. I was just standing by like the others--

Did he tell you the story of what happened?

He told me. He told me the story over and over again. And he was the one that is my closest relative who is still alive, Adam Hubert, whom I love very much. And he rescued himself by playing dead, and he was alive. He was bruised, or scarred, or hurt, but he was helping himself with the snow with his wounds that he had.

Please continue.

OK. And that was just from the beginning. And then in my mind, it runs as a teenager, teenagehood, and I somehow was very pampered and shielded home. But knowing that there is a war going on, I became stronger from being just protected. I became the protector.

I started to do things. And I was raised on [? quote ?] which is unusual in Polish circumstances, but very well milk and honey stories. But then I became rough and tough. And with all my little gentleness that I have, I still possessed this roughness that helped me throughout the war-- for deciding to be reckless.

I guess it stayed in my genes. I'm not obnoxious, or mean, or nasty, but I just figured that I thought that I must be strong. And I became a little stronger, but needless to say, this was a man-made destruction that war geared toward the civilians. And a total of 12 million civilians perished during this Nazi occupation. And 6 million of them were Jews.

And we were condemned to hunger, and starvation, homeless, and helpless, believe it or not-- helpless, confused, deprived of freedom and dignity. But as a teenager, it hurt me most to see the total of over 1 million children perished during this Nazi era.

Young children were not permitted to live. Madness fell upon this world. The life of sweetness and joy in the young children turned into dust.

Can you talk about any of this specifically?

I can talk about this in general, the way I do it, please. And we are just paying tribute to those young children that I, a survivor, I represent them. Anything in particular you ask me if I went through? Yes, you will hear this later.

As I lost my sister, who was younger and couldn't make it-- I'm talking in general and personal-- I was writing beautiful poetry about those children that perished. And that little diary was taken away from me at another time when we were deported. And I still miss that little poetry-- maybe around 12 poems written by me.

And that's where I expressed those feelings-- mine and others'. And what I really speak about is the anguish, and the deprivation, and the grim deal of this missing link of this eternal bond of family members that we lose, including

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children that all of us hold so dear.

I don't fully yet comprehend, and nor do I grasp at all the happenings. And I am still in the soul-searching process. I still don't comprehend it. And to survive a Holocaust, it needs a lot of strength, a lot of faith, a lot of natural instinct, and a sheer strength of the human spirit, and a touch or a big deal of affection in your heart. And that helps you to survive ordeals.

In 1940 in May, the ghetto was opened-- the first ghetto in Poland, Lodz, called Litzmannstadt ghetto, and the last ghetto to be closed in 1944. My family and I, we spent four long years in the closed walls of the ghetto.

And having broken no rules in the 20th century civilization, we were segregated from this entire world and forced out of our own homes. Plumbing or not, it still was our homes. Business-- forced out of the business, and confined to one strip of land, which was the ghetto in Lodz-- the Litzmannstadt ghetto.

In the ghetto, we had no political purpose, no sanitary condition, no social structure, ration of food to such an extent that people were dying of malnutrition, and no medical supply. This was the time for my own experience where my sister, being younger, still in the growing stage, contracted tuberculosis-- the thinning of the lungs.

She was too young to take this pressure from hunger and malnutrition. When she was little, she was little to begin with. And before the war, my father always told her, and mother, why don't you stretch out? Stretch out a little bit to make you grow faster.

And then when she was in the ghetto, they told her, don't stretch. Don't grow so fast, because your lungs are growing, and we don't have enough food for you. The father and mother, they knew we were hungry. They couldn't help us with food. They knew we were cold. They couldn't help us to keep us warm.

My father was still an upholstery maker and still went in the ghetto to work. Such was the structure of ghetto that raw material was coming into the ghetto. And it was delivered as a finished goods. And that's how the Jews in the ghetto sustained themselves with their own resources.

Many of them were not capable. When you were too young or too old, too skinny, or too sick, you were not able to be productive. And the people who were unproductive were sent away for deportation. At that time, the deportation destination was still, to us, unknown.

So living in the ghetto, you know that hunger leaves your belly empty. And war and hunger degenerates your mind. And starving is painful. And starved mind hurts and leaves scars forever.

In the ghetto, we had no uprising. We only relied on our own resourcefulness. And we had no uprising like in the historic Warsaw ghetto, where the heroic people, against all odds, were fighting with an uprising. But the people of ghetto of Lodz decided against all odds to have their own obedience to authorities and just revive with their own resources by working.

And this was actually the resistance action-- to work and obey in order to survive. And the need for survival runs very, very high. And people want to survive. And they will do things, firstly, things what makes them survive. And therefore, against all odds, there was no uprising in ghetto. And those unproductive were sent away.

And at that time, we did not know, but this was the ultimate concentration camps. I mentioned before, I was only a teenager, and I worked in a factory. Before they were making anything, I was put in charge of a small group of small children-- unproductive children. And one of them was my little cousin who had a touch of genius.

He knew mathematics to solve very big problems-- multiply by heart in seconds. And he was one of the children in that class. I was acting like a sort of a surrogate teacher, without my own background in education-- but just teaching the children the basic ABC and a little bit arithmetics.

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Until one day, I asked to be discharged. I could not stand the pain of seeing those young little children coming in one day, and the next day, they were gone. As a teenager, I felt it. And I could only imagine how it was felt by the parents and by the children to be deported. And I did ask to be relieved from that.

I went again to a place that we were making straw shoes out of hay. The raw material in the form of straw and hay came into the ghetto. And the people of the ghetto in this particular factory, we were braiding the straw and the hay into a shape of straw shoes, which in turn the shoes were sent to the German army-- to the front.

So we were productive. And that's how we quote, "resisted" it, and also protected ourselves with our own lives. I also worked later in a place where they were having a warehouse full of shoes-- the shoes that were taken away at the concentration camps and sent back to the ghetto for redistribution and for other reasons too.

Little did we know that those shoes came back for redistributions, but the people who got the same implication when I worked again in a factory where we were making rugs-- very pretty designs, rugs, out of rags-- rags that were sent back with the same theory for redistribution to make pretty rugs, while the clothes that the rugs were made from came from our people from the concentration camps. They came for making pretty rugs, but those garments once adorned a human being.

And the rugs were made of those rags that once adorned human beings. The humble and gentle person was discarded, and the garments were put to use. And I worked in a place where I made pretty rugs-- with the fingers on that-- the place was very well-organized. But the people were gone.

A true question comes to mind-- why? And can it happen again? And who are those who survived? That's why we are here with a mission, with an obligation of telling about man's inhumanity to man.

This is the growing stage, stage of a growing process. It was getting worse and worse by the day because of malnutrition. I myself, at the age of 18, contracted disease called typhoid. As a matter of fact, I had twice typhoid-- at this time in the ghetto and at the end of the war.

And such is due to the lower resistance and crowded, unsanitary conditions, an epidemic broke out. And actually, the head of the Lodz ghetto went to Warsaw to bring some doctors and nurses for this epidemic to cure. And such is the typhoid that the central nervous system gets attacked. And you fall into a coma with very high fever, which I'd like to share with you a little spiritual encounter, a spiritual experience that I had when I had the typhoid.

My grandfather, who was a religious man, a very wise and proud man who died prior to my sickness of typhoid, at the time of my recovery, the beginning of my recovery, appeared to me in my delirious stage with fever-- and appeared to me and handed me a kiddush cup, and said to me-- and with those words, I acted very slowly.

And I still remember how I uttered those words. He said to me, drink this wine, my child. Drink it. And that was a cup of life. That was a gift of life-- a kind of a spiritual experience while I had the typhoid. And that particular typhoid, where the central nervous system gets attacked, when I did recover, I started to walk like a baby.

You had to be trained walking like an infant. Such is the disease. And I do remember that my friends from around me and my family gathered, and they were encouraging me to make my first step. Therefore, I call it a gift of life.

I had my other tuberculosis, typhoid at later time, and that was a bacterial infection when the gastrointestinal tract attacked. But that was towards the end because of unsanitary. One is called [NON-ENGLISH] and one it's called [NON-ENGLISH] -- typhoid. And yet in the Lodz ghetto, I feel we were together-- the family, and uncles, and aunts, and cousins, and friends-- yes, friends too.

And that made me come back with thoughts of good feeling that, at least, in the very extreme difficult tragic conditions, we still have some memories that linger on to this day. There was a touch of culture in the ghetto as a form of cultural resistance. We had the concert hall, not for long, because the musicians eventually got thinner, and thinner, and they were deported, and so on.

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But it started, I think, in around March '41. And that was like showing that this is our culture of resistance-- to have a house of culture-- they called it a cultura-- and a touch of class for the soul.

Do you remember any of those concerts?

I remember attending the concerts. And I remember that a variety show, which one of my friends is in Canada, and he's still handsome-- he still thinks he's an actor, but I don't think so. But that was like a form of resistance, I would say.

And I have my best friend who calls me sister, because we were very good friends. And later, she was an opera singer trained in Milan. But while in ghetto, she was also giving concert as a singer-- not opera necessarily, but she was a beautiful singer. Esther Greenhud-- she calls me, you're like my sister. And I feel the same way. She has a beautiful voice. I didn't hear her for many years, because she has some kind of depression set in [INAUDIBLE].

Outside the ghetto, the war was raging. And Germany was occupying Eastern Europe countries one by one. And a lot of concentration camps, and labor camps, and forced labor camps, and extermination camps came into being. Needless to say, how many countries were involved? History tells it, but I speak that was what happened to us, my family.

And in 1944 in August, the last crucial year for a transition for all of us in the Lodz ghetto, and for our family-- the so-called final solution, the extermination. The family-- father, mother, and sister, and I were hiding for three days only in an attic, which was full of dust without food, without water, without proper sanitary conditions-- and a lot of dust.

And the dust was making my sister, who had tuberculosis, cough more and more. And because of the deterioration that was present from the dust, and because of the noise that she was making, and because we had no way in the long run to survive, we decided, the family, the parents, decided to surrender to the German authority.

It was time for us to take the journey to the concentration camp. We became the persona non grata at the time on August 1944. In very simple words, a very complicated story-- no home to live, no place to sit, no chair to sit on, no table to sit at, no food, no houses of worship, no stores, no lipstick, no romances, no library to visit, no Sabbath candles, but the ultimate-- the deportation, the concentration camp.

At that time, the destination to us, unknown-- Auschwitz. As a matter of fact, I remember one case that my girlfriend, who her father was Professor Herschbach from Danzig, and they lived in the ghetto, he was a translator for the German authorities and came up from the ghetto every day to work to translate the Bible testaments-- whatever he was doing for them.

And he was one of the first ones to be deported with my girlfriend, Zima [? Rakia, ?] and her family and her sister, Boobie, and mother. And he didn't know where he's going. He did not know where the destinations. We waved goodbye to each other, we said, we see you again, maybe you come back.

And that's Professor Herschbach that went out of the ghetto almost every day to work for the Germans was the first casualty of this particular closing of the ghetto and did not know where he's going. They took all the things with them, and we did not know at that time. But this was the crucial year for my family, for our family.

And the transportation from the ghetto was in cattle wagons-- about 80 to 100 strangers between themselves sealed in in the cattle wagon without sanitary condition, with one pair of strangers between themselves to eliminate-- beneath animal treatment. And only a mess of flesh laying and pushing each other in one cattle wagon-- I guess it was for three days, the ordeal.

And the arrival to the Auschwitz gates-- Arbeit macht frei-- work makes you free. But inside, an inferno-- the notorious Auschwitz camp, separation of male and female, separation of children and parents from children and mothers, and separation from fathers and friends-- yes, separation from friends too.

With deep sadness in my heart, I share with you my emotions-- with a genuine desire to understand and capture my

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heart when I saw for the last time my father-- for the last time, I saw my father. And you hear the echo of my soul.

Gentle Ravic, 44 years old-- beautiful father and husband. He was separated from us, and he did die seven months later in Dachau when his strength and health failed. He died alone without his family, without his dear ones. But you don't need a monument of stone or granite to remember them and to love them.

The last chapter of family life-- family life shattered, closed behind us forever. The powerful structure of family life, which all of us hold so dear, the unity of family-- closed gates, a new horizon, the Auschwitz camp, the notorious extermination camp.

We're inside the compounds. The prisoners when we arrived were yelling. We understood they wanted bread and food, but they also wanted spoons. To divide equally the ration of soup, they want the day rations. Only then when we were inside, we knew why they were screaming and yelling to us-- send us, give us some food, some bread, give us some spoons.

And the Auschwitz notorious selections-- who should live and who should die at the mercy of men-- at the mercy of mad men-- mad men acting as God. The gas chambers, the showers with no drain and no water, only poisonous vapor-- so-called Zyklon B vapor-- poisonous vapor that's designed especially for this occasion to gas people.

The mass selection, who should live and who should die? You're left in your own crushing grief and soul to be consumed. The crematoria, where they gassed people, bodies, the oven chambers, where the name Holocaust, consumed by fire, comes from, [GREEK], the Greek name-- [GREEK].

I still remember the smell and the smell of the burnt bones, and skin, and hair. I witnessed this dreadful terror-- the gushing, the flames, the blue sky. What I am about to tell you is an isolated case about what happened to my mother-- my dear mother. It's one in a million-- a case, perhaps, one in a million, an isolated case that ended well.

What prompted this Nazi guard to take my mother out from the door of the gas chamber, to this day, I don't know. We were all stripped naked in a huge room-- stripped of everything physically and mentally, hair shaved off. I noticed my mother being separated from my sister, standing at the door, which proved to be the door to the gas chamber.

With a shriek, I exclaimed, in front of the guard, meine Mutter, mama, mother. And in a fleeting moment of unexplained emotions, this Nazi guard was instrumental in saving one life-- that one of my mother. Mother was 44 years old at that time. She was always beautiful.

Mother survived selections. She was alive. I was most privileged to have my mother all those years where other daughters and sons did not. My mother died at the age of 82 of natural causes. My mother, like any other mothers, will live in my heart forever.

And now I am alone. And my family is together. But I don't feel alone. Seared into my memories is the sentiment, which I don't let it crush in my own body. I reveal it, and I open my heart. I open my feelings. And since I do not have a capacity for hate-- I do not have a capacity for hate-- it is easier to reveal sentiment and love.

I would like to pause at this time for a few minutes, and then we come back, we'll ask you some questions.

OK.

Gladys, thank you very much.

Thank you.

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