

Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein and I'm the Director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Nomi Gelb. We are privileged to welcome Ilona Werdiger--

Werdiger. [INAUDIBLE].

--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. Werdiger, we'd like to welcome you.

Thank you.

Can you tell us a little bit about the community where you grew up and spent your early life?

I was born in Przemysl in 1925, December 16, 1925, to Simon Man -- last, Mandel and Sabina Mandel. Those were the names of my parents.

My father came from Krakow, and they moved to Przemysl because my mother had two sisters and they were very close. They wanted to be together. Therefore, my parents, after they got married, they moved to the city.

I come from a very religious background. My father was the Talmudic scholar, and in spite of his very young age, very popular. Besides that he was a Talmudic scholar, he was also educated in other areas, like he spoke fluent German and knew German literature and so on.

He also studied in Hungary. They sent him, that he was a very religious Jew, it was customary not to go to attend public schools. So my father, first he was taking private lessons and then he was sent to Hungary where he studied in Hungary.

Were there rabbis in your family, as well?

No rabbis, no. Mostly it was manufacturers and business people, but I happened to come, I shouldn't brag about it, from a very intellectual family. God gave them good brains and they were all intellectuals, I would say.

Even my children, I think, inherited those genes from my family, yes. I have two sons. One is a physician, one is an architect, and other degrees and so on. So I'm very proud of my family.

Do you have memories of early events--

I have, yeah.

--having to do with the Jewishness?

With Jewishness, yes. In spite of all that, my father was a very religious Talmudic scholar, as I said. He spoke beautifully Polish because that was in Krakow that every Jew with a beard and so on spoke beautiful Polish.

So he used to take me for walks and talk to me all the time, and I think that all the knowledge that I have-- because I did not attend too much school. I finished the sixth public school before the war. The war broke out, and then when we were under the Russian occupation, I still went to school for two years, to high school, but the level of teaching was very low because it was still not normal times.

And besides, European Jews were a little bit snobbish, and my father was afraid that if I go to school, they will make a communist out of me and so on. So they were very watchful about me. I should not learn the language so well, Russian. And I was very sheltered, I would say, by my parents.

And your father taught you?

My father was very careful with whom I keep company, and he was always talking to me and discussing all kinds of things. And the knowledge, I think, which I have a little bit of knowledge, I have to be thankful to my father because he paid a lot of attention. I was pampered and they tried to educate me as much as they could.

Were you the oldest child?

Yes, I was the oldest, yes. I have family that even now, the ones that are alive are very prominent in the intellectual work. I have a doctor maybe you would know. I have a cousin in Belgium, Ernest Mandel. I don't know if you heard of him. I'm sure that if you would go to the library here, you will find his books. Did you hear about him?

I think I have, yes.

Ernest Mandel. We are cousins. And my father had a degree from Professor Thon. There was a very famous professor in Krakow, Professor Thon. Very well-respected by all, not only by Jews, but by Poles, and internationally, I think, to a scholar. Not only for religious, Jewish reasons, you know, but in general, he was a professor. And also, he had a rabbinical degree, too. And my father had a degree from him.

Did he teach at the Jagiellonian University?

Jagiellonian.

Yeah, Jagiellonian, right?

Yes. So I can say, in general, that I had a beautiful childhood, for sure. I was proud of my family. We were, I don't want to say, "rich" or something, but very comfortable at home. And a loving, caring family.

I used to go every year as a child to Krakow to my grandparents'. So, nice memories, too. So I know Krakow just as well as well as I know Przemysl.

How would you describe Przemysl as a community?

It was a lovely city, historical city. A historical city. They had a lot of infantry and all kinds of military. Military, yes?

Were there military headquarters there?

Headquarters. A lot of them. A lot of them. And then during the First World War, they had a [POLISH]. How do you say [POLISH] in English? They were soldiers there, and they gave themselves up. It was like-- how do you say? You know, walls around the city?

Fort.

Fort, that's it. Yes, fort. They had fought there. And they were fighting for six months there until they had to give themselves up because there was no food anymore.

So it was nice. It had a lot of schools, high schools and public schools. And it had a, I would say, nice population of Jews, and the ones that I knew were mostly from Krakow because my father kept company with them.

What were relations like between Jews and non-Jews in Przemysl?

As a child, I didn't make much distinction between gentiles and Jews, to be honest. I personally did not experience antisemitism because it's a ghetto. The Poles like the Jewish girls, they didn't like the Jewish boys. And I was too young, I don't know.

I went to school because we happened to live in a section which was not predominantly Jewish. So I went to a public school where we were four Jewish girls. 60 students and 4 Jewish girls only. I didn't feel the difference. I was not indoctrinated with that feeling maybe.

However, if I speak with my husband, and he is from Krakow, he tells me when they were walking on the street, they used to be beaten up. They would run after them, and "You dirty Jew" and so on. So it was a different experience for me. I did not feel it that much.

Would you say that there was a generally higher standard of living and a higher level of education in Przemysl overall than there would have been, let's say, proportionately in a place like Krakow?

No, I wouldn't say that because Krakow was a big university city. But I would say it was similar, yes. Similar.

On a smaller scale?

Yes, on a smaller scale. Yes. They had a nice Jewish element of people. And I would say we had the Hebrew high school and we had other high schools, private, because it was very difficult for a Jew to get into a regular high school that was a city high school, a public high school.

So therefore, we had private Hebrew high schools, which were very expensive. You had to be able to afford to attend a school like this and standard of teaching was very high. They were teaching in the Polish language, but we also had Hebrew. We had half and half, Hebrew subjects and Polish subjects.

So it was a nice class of people, I would say. I didn't know that many because I was too young and my parents associated mostly with people from Krakow. They weren't that long in Przemysl because when the war broke out, I was not quite 13 years old. And so they were maybe 30 years and I don't know how much rooted they were in the city. So they associated mostly with people from their city, from Krakow.

But it was a nice city. It was a lovely city. And the Jews that I know, I would call them quite prominent people. Even if they would come to a different world, they would go to the West of Poland, I don't think that they could be on a lower level than the German Jews, which they considered themselves always to be more prominent than the Polish. They looked down at us. Ostjuden they used to say.

So we could not be ashamed. We could compete with them, I think.

Before the outbreak of the war, was there ever a time when you felt yourself in danger? I know you were very young at the time.

Before the war?

Before September of '39.

No. By the end, just before the war broke out, there was a feeling in the atmosphere. People were talking that something is going to happen. Something is going to happen.

How did they know? Or how do you think they knew?

First of all, we got papers, newsletters, so you had an idea, a little bit, what's going on. And I heard at home. My parents would discuss it. My family, when they came together, they would talk that they smelled that something is going to come up. Something is going to erupt. Yes.

Yeah.

We knew.

So there were some warning signs?

Not exactly warning signs, but feelings that there is going to be a change for the bad. If there would be a warning, I suppose maybe we would do more with ourselves. Maybe we would have tried to save ourselves, to get out of there.

But there was no warnings really, it was just like you feel that something is going to come. There is going to be a change. But not really warnings.

And did you feel that that change was going to be against the Polish Jews or against the Polish community?

Well, I tell you, it's difficult for me to tell you, but I think rather that a change-- a war, I would say. We did not realize at that time that this would be a war against the Jews.

You did not?

Absolutely not.

It was more political than racial?

Absolutely not. If we'd known, if we would have suspected that something is going to happen, something that would occur to us, I'm sure that more Jews-- because there were a lot of well-to-do Jews that could leave Poland. We could get out of it in the beginning before the war broke out. Later on when the war broke out, oh, forget it. Then we couldn't do anything unless some people were very shrewd.

But those were exceptions, and they could foresee what's going to be done. But those were just people that you could count on fingers. We could never. We never anticipated that something-- even though when it was happening already, we did not anticipate that it would get worse and worse.

I'll tell you a story. When the war broke out-- can I come out with that?

Of course, please.

The war between the Russians and the Germans. So at first, the Germans came. They stayed in my city in Przemysl for three weeks. Then came the Russians and they stayed for two years.

So when the Russians came, it's a communist country so capitalists are not welcome in Russia. So whoever was a businessman, a manufacturer, whether a businessman or even a professional, they would send them to Russia.

And then there were a lot of communists that were sitting in the prisons before the war. And when the Russians came, they came out from the prisons, they let them go. And those people thought that the Russians embraced them, that they will get high positions and so on and they will be somebodies. But it wasn't.

So what did they do? They gave up whoever was a businessman or whoever was a manufacturer or a professional or somebody, a prominent person. They would go to the Russians, they would give them up, and the Russians would send them to Russia.

So we were amongst them because my father was a businessman. And my family-- my uncle was a manufacturer, button manufacturer. So they wanted to send us to Russia. And from the factory, a worker warned us that tomorrow they would take us to Russia.

So we ran away from Przemysl and we went to Lviv Because we got a passport. You see, you had a certain passport with a paragraph that if you got that passport, you were not welcome in this occupied part of Russia so they would send you deep into Siberia. And so when he warned, that worker from the factory, we ran away to Lviv, Lemberg and we

stayed there for a few months. And then my father arranged--

Where did you live?

Pardon me?

Where did you live when you were there?

In Lemberg? Slunecna. Slunecna was the name of the street. And it wasn't the nicest place.

Was it habitable?

No, it was not comfortable. We lived in very crowded surroundings. It was a Jewish section of Lviv. And it was tough, but still it wasn't as bad as when the Germans came. So we stayed there, fairly free. We could move around, but it wasn't good.

So we came back to Przemysl. My father arranged it. He got the regular passport. But then it was terrible to live under the Russians. I must say that. Then when we got the regular passport, we could remain already in the city where we lived.

But it was very tough because every other day, they would come and they would check on us because my father was a businessman. And each time, they would tell him, you know, were your this? Were you that? All the time they took away something from us.

But the worst thing that happened to us was when they cut off my father's beard. My father was wearing a beard and--

The Russians did this?

Yes, the Russians did that. And it was so humiliating to my father because he was such a pure man, such a kind person. So this was the worst thing that happened to him.

Was this done for a religious attack--

Punishment.

--or was it done because he was a businessman?

I don't know if it was the religion. Maybe it was a combination of both. A combination of both. And it was those people that came out of the prisons, those communists.

A lot of people collaborated. Either they collaborated with the Russians in NKVD or later on with the Germans. You had all kinds of people. So this was the worst thing that happened to my father.

They took away our apartment. We were crowded in two rooms. Not only as the immediate family, but from Krakow, a lot of Jews, men. Because when the Germans came to Krakow, first they started to punish men, not women.

So the men ran away from Krakow. They went more to the east, from the west to the east. So Przemysl was on the east side. One part was east, one was for the Germans, occupied by the Germans.

So a lot of relatives from Krakow came and they stayed with us, like my uncle. One uncle, another, my father's cousin, whoever from my mother's friends and relatives. So we all stayed together and crowded. Whoever came, we took in the people.

How many of you were living in your quarters at one time?

In two rooms at one time, we were five, and six, seven, eight, nine people. And then little by little, my uncle from Krakow, he went once to visit somebody else in another city, and they caught him and they sent him to Russia.

So it was very bad. But I did not imagine it was so bad, under the Russians during the war. I was a young girl and I said, if I the war would come to an end and if I would have to live with the Russians, I would commit suicide. That's how I spoke.

But there is no limit to bad things. And when the Russians left and when the Germans came, then when that terrible thing started-- a tragedy. Those were such cruel people. When they walked on the street, you could hear their footsteps walking on the street. And such ignorant people.

This started in June of 1941 when the Germans came after the invasion.

Yes.

So you were not that far from Krakow, were you?

Not that far, but 35 or--

So the Germans were relatively close by. I tell you, Dr. Weinstein, we did not know any-- we had no information whatsoever about anything. We were deprived of newsletters, newspapers, books. We didn't know anything what's going on.

And besides, those were two enemies. We didn't know what was going on in Germany. I didn't know what was going on in Krakow where my grandparents lived and my aunts and my cousins, the biggest family I had in Krakow on my father's side. And we didn't know anything whatsoever what was going on, nothing.

When my uncle ran away from Krakow, when he lived with us, we didn't know what was going on with his child, with his wife, with his parents. We didn't know anything. We were so isolated from the whole world, from everything.

Yeah. Yeah. And what happened after June of '41 or at the time of the invasion?

When the Russians-- yes. So the Russians left and the Germans came. In the beginning, they formed the ghetto. A human being-- it's wonderful and it's very bad, but you can get used to everything. You started in the beginning to get used to the ghetto life.

We would meet, we would try to help ourselves with food and so on, and we had connections. We did have connections because my uncle's factory was still running because Germans, they still needed it. And my uncle was a technician [INAUDIBLE]. They left him in the factory in order to supervise.

So if you had connections, you could still help yourself. If you had a little money, you could help yourself. If you had jewelry, you could sell the jewelry in the beginning. The Poles would come and we could help ourselves.

But the ghetto started to diminish and to diminish and it became more dangerous. Even the Poles were afraid to do something with the Jews. And if they did something, they gave you up. They were very bad, those Poles, I tell you.

I would say that I wouldn't put them even in the same category as the Germans because they were worse. They knew the language, they knew the country, and they collaborated with the Germans. It's a wishy-washy kind of people. The Germans came, they were with the Germans. The Russians came, they were with the Russians. This type of people, very false people.

And they were always known for antisemitism, always. I personally did not experience it, I told you that in the beginning, because it's a ghetto and as a very young child. I didn't feel it, but I'm sure that my parents felt it, and I know

that now if I speak to people, and my husband told me, they were very bad always.

They used to have signs. How should they translate it? [POLISH], away with the Jews, but the Jewish girls with us. Written on the streets all over like this.

And so they gave us up during the ghetto time. In the ghetto they would take the money. They would promise you that they're going to bring you something, and not only they didn't bring you, but they would give you up. They would go to the Germans right away, give you up, and that's it. That was the end of you.

So they were very bad and it was getting worse and worse. People were sick and people were starving. And the worst part was every few months, they had those aktions where they would take away the people and the children, when you heard the screaming. Sometimes they would separate the children from the parents. They used to take them by their legs and just throw them against the wall.

It's unbelievable. I cannot even talk about it. And children you saw on the streets in the ghetto starving because not everybody had the money to help himself. And how much money could you have? How much money they took advantage on us.

So it was very bad.

Were there attempts made to get food in from outside? We hear a lot about smuggling that went on into the ghettos and bring food and medical supplies.

You had to have connections. If you had connections, then food was smuggled in, yes. And some people worked outside the ghetto so they would bring into the ghetto some food.

However, a lot of the Poles would give you up so the Gestapo sometimes were waiting in front of the ghetto. And if somebody gave you up, told you that you brought food or something, they would shoot all the people that worked, that went to this place outside the ghetto. But look, we smuggled.

I had also an experience. I was working in kaserna by Germans. There was stationed a German commander there, and I was going out the ghetto. If you looked good, if you looked fairly healthy, you were young, they would choose you for certain work.

So I was going outside the ghetto and we were working with Germans and Italians. Commander [Personal name] was there, too. They happened to be very nice, the Italians.

They were very good to us. They felt sorry for us. They weren't allowed to look at us, they weren't allowed to talk to us, but they did not care. They were so angry at the Germans and they would sometimes help us.

In fact, I met a German. He was a general, I think. He wanted to help. He wanted to take me to Italy. He was stationed there.

I wouldn't go. I had my parents, I wouldn't leave them. But they would walk, they would give us a little food and so on. I would bring this to ghetto with me, but there wasn't too much. I happened to be fortunate in this respect, but there weren't too many cases like this, and that stopped, too, after a while.

What kind of work was it that you were doing outside of the ghetto?

We were cleaning for the Germans, working in the kitchen, cleaning their rooms. And every morning we would go under a German escort to work and from work. They would escort us to ghetto. But that was only for a few months, and that was very helpful. It was considered a very good job because we could bring some food and help our families, so it was lucky omen, I guess.

How did they treat you when you were doing this?

Well, we were not permitted to talk to Germans. We had no connection, to be honest. We just went to do our job and that's all because we could not speak to them. If I would look at a German, a German would look at me, they would kill us right away.

It was such a strange, terrible situation. We were just Jews and we were confined to Jews. We could not do anything.

What were your parents doing at this time?

Nothing, just sitting in the ghettos doing nothing. Nobody. There was nothing to do. There was nothing to do.

And that's why we went into hiding. My parents built a bunker and we went into hiding. And my rest of the family, my uncle, my aunt that owned the button factory, they also arranged for a Polish family. They paid them a lot of money and they left the ghetto and they went into hiding to this Polish family. And we, from the bunker were supposed to join them.

But what happened was that the Polish people took away all the money from my aunt. Their name was [Personal name] And they took them, they gave them up, they imprisoned them, and they were shot.

And we were sitting in the ghetto in that bunker, and somebody else gave us up. And this was in 1943 when we went to Belzec. When they gave us up, we came out of hiding and they took us to Belzec where my whole family perished except for me because I jumped out of the train.

And miraculously, I don't know how I survived. I jumped out of that train. Walking on the streets of my city, being dark, whoever -- if somebody was dark and had dark eyes, had to be a Jew. That's how they identified a Jew, which was not the case.

I know in this country, nobody tells me that I'm Jewish. I hardly can recognize who's Jew. OK, I can, sometimes I cannot.

But with the Poles, if you were brunette and you had dark eyes, you had to be a Jew. And I did not care. I was walking on the streets. And I came to my maid.

This is after you had run away?

Yes, when I jumped out of the train. This was after they discovered us in the bunker.

How did you have the courage to do that?

To jump out of the train?

Yes, tell us about that.

I wanted to kill myself. I did not want to face the future because I knew that I'm going to die. I knew it. I had the feeling. I knew it.

So I told you when they discovered us in the bunker and when they took us to that place, it was a gathering place. When they gathered together about 200 people, they would come with trucks. They would load us on trucks and bring us to the trains.

So while we were coming out of the bunkers, they were hitting us and we should run, we should run. They always did that-- you should run. They were hitting and we had to run.



So I left my mother with my two brothers because my father went with the men. Men were separated from the women. My mother went with my two little brothers because they were still children, so they were permitted to go with my mother. But my father went with the men so we lost each other.

And then when they brought us to the trains, I was going up the stairway because those were cattle trains so the instep was quite high-- the stairs, I mean. So the Gestapo was on each train. On each car there was a Gestapo.

So I told him he should shoot me right away because I know that I'm going to die, I said, and I don't want to suffer. Why do you make me suffer longer? So he told me, oh, you are so pretty and you are so young and nothing will happen to you, and he pushed me into the car.

So I was in the car and people were coming in, so I just happened to stay by the window, by that cattle window, which was wired. And we were sitting there at first the laments and crying and asking for water, and standing there for a few hours but nobody cared. Nobody did anything to us. And after a while, everybody got tired and got used to the thought that we are going to die.

There were people outside who saw you?

Who saw me what?

Who saw the people in the cattle cars.

No, but the Poles would stay around the ghetto and would watch. Yes, some Poles from far away. They would watch us, yes. And the Germans were inside that place where we were gathered. The Poles were watching, but there was nothing they could do.

So when I was in the train already and the train started to roll-- we stayed there for a few hours. They called us about 12:00 noon time and the train left at 7:00. It was in autumn and it was raining a little bit.

And when the train started to roll, people started to cry again. And when I heard that, I couldn't take it anymore so I said to the women, please push me up, I want to jump out. And they wouldn't do it. They said, you are going to kill yourself, you are too young. I said, that's what I want to do.

So I was so desperate for them to lift me up that they lift me, up I sat on the window, and I jumped out. And the train left, and I was lying there on the ground. I don't know for how long. And then I came down.

You were able to pull the bars of the windows apart?

Those were not bars, those were wires. And I really don't know how I did it. I don't know how I did it. I pushed it away.

And cattle windows, if you're familiar with them, they are not very huge. They're like little squares. I don't know how I did it, Dr. Weinstein.

In a way, I believe in destiny because I was not that smart. I was not shrewd at all. I knew a different kind of life we were living.

We were not the wise guys. I don't come from a family like this. I should know how to help myself, how to act in certain situations. I don't know. I think it was a destination.

But I don't know why I was just trying to live and not my family. That I cannot understand. My father who was such a pure person, wonderful, kind, and civilized. But it had to be destiny with me because I wasn't smart to do a thing like this, but I did it. And I want you to know I did not do it because I wanted to go on with life.

It was like a last desperate act.

I did not care to live and I did not believe that I'm going to live. I just didn't want to witness all this. I knew that I'm going to die, so I wanted to do it as best as possible.

Was separation from your family part of what made you do that?

Oh, when I jumped out of the train, I was crying for six months. I was crying. I was young and a young person takes life differently. But I was crying. I had spasms for six months.

I was very attached to my parents. I was pampered by my parents and it was difficult to be without them. And then always before my eyes, I was thinking what happened to them, to my little brothers? I didn't know. When I think about what deaths they died.

Sorry.

How did you learn about their deaths?

I found out after the war. I didn't know.

Through records?

I don't know how I found out, but I knew that they had gas chambers, that they had camps that were designed just to kill the people. I don't know how I knew about it. It was just that people were talking about it.

But they really found out the real truth after the war. I had just a feeling. The way they treated us, they didn't treat us like human beings. So if they don't treat you like human beings-- every day they would take away from us things. At first in ghetto, we had to bring all our belongings that we had, the silver, gold, fur coats, whatever. We had to bring it back.

There was no schools, there was no papers, there was no books, there was nothing. They treated us like animals. So how would one think, if you had a little brains, that they're going to do something positive with us? We knew that they want little by little to destroy us morally and physically, both. Both.

We had the closet, I would say, with books, like a little library. The first thing that the Germans came, that's what took away from us because it had a lot of value, I imagine, if they took it away. But we knew that we are going to be destroyed completely. They treated us worse than dogs. I cannot compare to anybody the way they treated us.

But, of course, the real truth we found out after the war. And how did I find out? In Auschwitz. When I came to Auschwitz, then I knew that this is the end. I could never, never believe that I would come out of Auschwitz.

Yeah.

Let's go back to--

You want to know-- yes?

Let's go back to when you jumped out of the train.

Yes.

Where did you go?

When I jumped out of the train, I went to my city because I had nowhere to go. So I went to walk down the street in the dark. There was not a soul on the street.

First of all, in Europe, after 10 o'clock people did not walk on the streets, and they would close the gates of the houses. And besides, if something was going on in the ghetto, the Poles also were reluctant to walk on the streets. They rather stay home until it quieted down after two, three days when the [INAUDIBLE] would go out and assume normal life.

So I went to my aunt, [Place name] where she had a villa and a button factory. And in the factory, the superintendent of the factory was my maid. She stayed with us for 10 days. She was practically bringing me up.

When she got married right before the war, she got married to a man which worked in the factory. So that's why when they built the villa, they had the little house for the superintendent and she lived there. So I went to her. [Personal name] was her name.

And I said, listen, [Personal name] that's what happened. My family, we went by train. They found us in hiding and so on. And I jumped out from the train and I have nowhere to go and I came here to you.

So she said, oh, my dear child, I bring you coffee, I bring you bread, and don't worry. But I had a feeling because she was very bad during the war to us, and she used to send Gestapo and [INAUDIBLE]. During the Russians, she would send NKVD, and during the Germans, she would send us the Germans, and so on.

So I left that little place where she put me into and I went next door to a family, which had also a villa next door to my uncle and also a factory next to my uncle. They knew me very well, so right away they embraced me and they said, don't worry, we are going to take care of you, and so on.

At that time, there was only left 600 Jews in all Przemysl. It was ghetto-free, no more ghetto. But the 600 Jews, including families-- 600 families-- they were still owners of factories which the Germans took over and needed those Jews. So those Jews that their quarters, their barracks, not in Przemysl itself, suburb of Przemysl. And they would, every morning, go under escort to their factories, and under escort they would go back to the barracks.

So when I ran away from my maid, from our factory, I stayed with them for the day. In the evening they took me with them to the place, to the barracks where they used to live. I was there for a few weeks. Then the aktion was over already and things started to normalize, you know, after every aktion.

So a few people jumped out. I was not the only one. I found out later on. And then quite a few people that were in hiding came out of hiding and they went to those barracks. We were all there illegally in those barracks.

And somebody went and gave up, went to Gestapo and told them that they had some people illegal here. So in the middle of the night, they woke us all up, we had an Appel, they counted us. It was 130 people too many illegal there.

They chose 30 people for personnel, for taking care of those barracks when those people went to work. We should clean, we should cook. And 100 were arrested, and then a few days later, they shoot.

And it just happened that the prison was not far from the ghetto, from the Jewish quarters. So that's how I remained there. And those people took care there. And I was cleaning and cooking, so it wasn't too bad. That's when I was crying day and night. I missed my parents so much.

After a few months, they liquidated those factories. They took it away. There was no Jews at all. And they divided us again.

They sent the men to different camps. 50 went to-- not [Place name] What was the name of it? I forgot. Stalowa Wola. 50 went.

Another 50 men went somewhere else. The children they took away and that was the end of them. And they picked 15 women, we should go and dig graves. We were sure that those graves were for us that we are digging, but it just happened so that we were digging those graves for other people that they found and they shoot them.

And us, the 15 women, they sent to Plaszow. That's how I came to Plaszow, to Plaszow-Krakow. And that was in January, 1944.

I arrived to the Plaszow. Again, right away they checked us. They took away everything from us and they put us into work. In Plaszow you could still work. It was the camp that had maybe 24,000 people.

And I was put into [GERMAN] where we were sewing, sewing the German uniforms, the Germans that were coming from the front. So we would sew that. I didn't know how to sew, I was just sitting at the machine, but make believe that I was sewing.

So in Plaszow, again, you got used to that atmosphere. You get used to everything. It just happened so that I still had some money because when we went to the bunker to hiding, my mother would give me a belt with a little gold. Every Jew had a little gold, had something, and some money in the shoe staple. So I still could help myself in Plaszow, I could buy food.

A lot of people were going outside to work so they would bring some food, and the Polish people would come to the gates of the ghetto and they would sell something. So we could still help ourselves. Besides, we got some rations. Not much, a piece of bread and a little soup, but still we survived. We were getting thinner and thinner, but we were still surviving.

And I guess the main reason why we survived was that we were young and we had a good backbone, and I think that's what kept us. That's why we survived. Otherwise, it would be impossible to be alive.

You would not be useful to them.

Oh, of course not. Of course not. If you were not useful, they got right away with you.

Did you witness any brutality in Plaszow?

In Plaszow? Well, not so much in Plaszow but in Auschwitz more. Yes, of course we had brutality. They would come all the time and they would take you.

Again, in Plaszow they always had those aktions. Always, always. They came into the barracks one day and they were grabbing the women to go to Skarzysko, to a different camp. So they were hitting us and they were beating us up and I was lucky that they did not take me to this transport.

But they took me to another one. I went to Auschwitz, which was terrible. So in Auschwitz, of course that was unbelievable if I think of it. We came, 8,000 women, to Auschwitz August the 6th.

They made an Appel in Plaszow. All the 24,000 people-- I think it was at that time maybe a little less. We gathered on the Appel place and they picked 8,000 women, girls-- the most beautiful girls, beautiful-- and they sent us to Auschwitz.

And when we came to Auschwitz, the train arrived to Auschwitz, Mengele was there. And we came out and right away, he segregated us, left, right, left, right. I went to the right. I was young and I was still looking not so bad.

So they took away everything from us, all the clothes, and then we went to [GERMAN] to [GERMAN]. And they shaved off our head. I had completely shaved off, and that was a terrible thing for a young girl, a woman, to have shaved off her hair.

Your pride suffers so much and you feel like nobody looked-- I couldn't recognize my girlfriend. She didn't recognize me when we came out. And it took a whole night until we came to Birkenau because the shaving took such a long time. So I was one of the last ones because I kept postponing, postponing. It was so humiliating.

So we came out when they shaved off. Oh, when I came there, she said ah, now you will look beautiful. You see, I will take off all your beautiful hair. That's how they used to punish us.

And we came out of there and suddenly we saw fire. That was from the crematoriums. We saw it at night. That fire was so visible. And a terrible smell of the bones that they were burning, the people.

And I said to my girlfriend, Anya, that is the end of it. Anya was her name, a very close friend. We were together just like two sisters.

Where had you met? I was going to ask you.

I met her in Przemysl. She was from Lemberg but during the war she came to Przemysl and we became very close friends. She lost everybody. They took away her family, they took away my family, so we had only each other.

And everywhere we went together. She was a tall blonde, very attractive. I was short and dark. We were contrasts and so people paid attention to us always.

And when we came there, I said, oh, this is the end. We will never, never come out of here. And so they took us to Birkenau, and that's where we stayed, in Birkenau [INAUDIBLE], they called it, field. They had barracks there. They had I don't know how many barracks.

They took away everything from us. They gave us the wooden shoes--

The clogs.

--the Dutch, yes.

How do you call them?

[? Galosche. ?]

Yes. They took away everything. Because I was small, they gave me a long dress like this. My girlfriend was tall. They gave her a dress like this, a hole in the back just to humiliate, to break us morally, to break us down. And that's how we came to Birkenau.

They assigned us to the barracks. The barracks were so horrible. It was so dark and gloomy. And how many did we sleep? 15. They had like, two [INAUDIBLE] together. 15 together without any cover, without anything.

We did not have underwear, we didn't have nothing. Not a spoon, not a comb, not a brush, nothing whatsoever. Just you come to the world just like newborn.

You said they wanted to deprive you of everything--

Of everything.

--civilized.

They deprived us not that they wanted -- they wanted completely. That was their theory, to break us down morally, and physically, of course, too. How could you survive when we stayed on that Appel.

They would wake us up in the morning, it was so cold. And we stayed there. I don't know how we didn't get sick. It was just a miracle, the ones that survived, because majority, 6 million people, perished. It's unbelievable.

Did your friend survive?

My girlfriend, yes. We survived together. She's in Canada.

We're going to take a short break now and it is as long as you want it to be.