

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Fredda Remmers. I'm a member of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling Library of Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Dr. Robert Roth.

We're privileged to welcome Mrs. Francis Weisman, a survivor presently living in Springfield, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about her experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. Welcome, Francis. Would you, first of all, tell us where you were living before the war? And would you describe what you remember of your life there?

We was living in Uzhhorod. That was the capital of Carpatho-Rus, Czechoslovakia. I come from a family of eight. I had five brothers and two sisters. And it was--

Francis, where were you in the list, first, or in the middle, or what?

I am the youngest from the girls--

Aha.

--and like on the end because I have two younger bro-- I had two younger brothers. And before that, I was-- and we all were-- we all had trades, were working, and we lived to-- in my parents' house. But I had already a brother, who was married, and two sisters. They were married when the Germans came in.

And I learned a trade. After I finished school, I learned the trade sewing because it was very hard already to get office, to go to get that job in an office or similar. And I always liked sewing, so that's what I did. And what else should I--

What was the town like that you lived in?

Was a-- That time, for me, that was a very nice time. It was around 40,000 people lived in it and 16,000 Jews. And life was beautiful under the Czechoslovakian government.

Francis, did the Jews mainly stay in one region of the town or associate with themselves?

No, they was--

Or did they associate with the others also?

Yeah, yeah, they associated with others also. Parts were Jewish areas, but was always in between non-Jews also. And I went to school with all kind of people.

Yeah.

What was your father's occupation?

My father's occupation, he had-- he was like-- he had a truck, deliver merchandise, so he delivered with horses. We had people working for us. And we wasn't rich, but we-- like middle class. And what?

So in his business, he worked with people who were Jews but also people who were not Jews.

Mostly now-Jews.

Mostly non-Jews.

Mostly non-Jews. Special workers were non-Jews, but yes, the workers. And he did business also with mostly non-Jews.

Before the war, were you aware of any anti-Semitic feelings in your town? Was there ever a sense of that in the area you lived in?

Not by the Czechoslovakians. They was very democratic. But in 1938, when the Hungarians took over that part of the country, they was very anti-Semitic. They right away when they came in, wherever they saw a Jewish business store, they went in. They looted. And then started the trouble.

And we started to feel they-- and not long after that, they started to take away a license because you had to have license for any business. They started to take away license. And in 1941, they started to take Jews who weren't citizens or who are born in another country. They took them to Poland, and they never came back, already in 1941. So--

What were the first signs for you that there was something wrong of-- that you were in danger?

Well, the first signs was when they started to take-- instead of they should take the Jewish boys to military, they started to call them into forced labor. And all my brothers except the youngest one was home. And they really took them all over for the war to make roads and for the-- how should I say-- the heavy work they had to do. And they just gave them some food, but no clothing, nothing. And they tore some clothing, or shoes, or what. They had to get it from home, whoever.

When Jews started having problems, or when the attacks on stores started, did any Czechs who were non-Jews support you in any way, or stand out for you?

The Czechs, they left the country in 19-- when the Hungarians came in, they left. They did not remain. They went to their homeland from wherever they was from, Moravia or from all those [? Slaskos, ?] from Slovakia. But the Slovaks were also very bad. The Czechs were very intelligent people.

Then were the Jews who were remaining, were you put in a ghetto? Were you-- did you all live in the same area once the Hungarians--

Under the Hungarians we stayed in the same area wherever we lived. But nobody had to move out. It's only when the Germans came in, they took us into a ghetto. We was able to take only what we could take on our hands.

And they put us in a brick factory where there was no closed walls, only roofs we had over our head. No cooking facilities, nothing. Nothing. And we was there from April-- after Pesach, the day we had to leave. And we stayed there for-- until after shuls.

Some people transport, they took away already before. So for about two months we stayed in the ghetto. And they was rushing cars fast to Auschwitz to take--

Was your whole family together, then, Francis?

Not my brothers.

Your brothers were staying there?

They were still out in the labor--

They were still out.

--in the forced labor.

Yeah.

Just I was with my older sister-- she had two children-- my parents, my sister's in-laws, my sister-in-law-- my brother's wife-- and she had one child. With these people we was together. Until Auschwitz, we went with them.

Already going to the train from the brick factory, my mother couldn't keep up the marching. So the Hungarian-- was Hungarians who was helping the Germans-- one Hungarian threw her down and hit her. And she stayed behind. You couldn't stay behind, so she stayed behind.

And when we arrived to the train station and they put us in to the wagons like when they put cattle in, but I didn't want to go in until I don't find my mother. I finally found a Hungarian who I knew from business, and I ask him he should let me go and look for my mother. So he allowed me to do it, and I found her. So we went-- we was together until Auschwitz.

How old were you at this time?

How old was I? I-- you have to figure out.

Just roughly, you were--

25, about.

Did you ever have a chance to go into hiding? Was there-- at any point, could you have--

Yes. Somebody who my father was contacted in business, he said that he's going to hide me in one of the smaller towns. But I didn't want to go because I didn't want to leave-- it's very hard to talk. I didn't want to leave my parents and my sister with the two children. I thought always then, they take us-- that's what they was talking-- and they going to take us to a labor camp. And then I'm going to work and help them to go out it alive.

But it wasn't that. They rushed with those trains so fast to get to Auschwitz. There, when we came down from those wagons, like-- because that took-- I don't remember exactly, a day and night, or two days. So-- took over two days.

And I helped my sister with the smaller child. I took her on my arm, and she took the older one in her arm. And we came down, and then the SS man was waiting for us. And he told me I should give that child to the mother. And I had to obey what they say, because we knew already how they are in the short time they was in the city.

And they lined us up in a line when all the wagons was emptied. So they took the other people and separate where I was. And we was marching, and the music was playing, and going to those places in Auschwitz.

And on the way going, I heard screaming. That was probably the ovens. Because when they selected people who they didn't like, they put in a truck. And with a truck, those trucks turned over towards the ovens and emptied out. So people were screaming. I told myself-- I didn't want to believe it, what I heard. You couldn't see much, but I saw the ovens there.

And then they took us to a big like auditorium, a big place, and was there a lot of SS. And they told us to take off everything, whatever we had on. If we have jewelry, to take off, and everything. And we went in the first-- we had to go in through a door where they were waiting. They had girls, and they cut our hair from our body, head and all over. And we went further, like showers.

And from there, they threw for us rags to put on, on us. We didn't recognize each other, even if that was a sister or the best friend. We couldn't recognize each other, who we was. That how everything went.

And from there, they took us to a camp. We had there was barracks, barracks. And every barrack was numbered, A, B, C. And they put me in C, a lot of people, and there was no bunk beds, nothing, just the ground. We didn't have anywhere to sit, nothing. It was very bad.

And food, I don't have to tell you they didn't give us food, because just for breakfast was a black coffee. And for lunch, I don't know even if they gave us something.

But Appell, we had to stay twice a day. Even if we was able or not, we tried not to show if you don't feel good. And by every Appell they selected people. If they don't like something on them, they selected you.

And to supper, they gave us a slice of bread, and that's it. For lunch, was a soup which was just water, boiled water. Sometimes you found a piece of cabbage, sometimes nothing.

So after-- in that C barrack, it was very bad. And next day, I walked out from there. And I went, maybe I'll find somebody, family or what. So I went into a barrack where somebody recognized me from our town, where they used to come to us and park their carriage and horse in our yard.

And I ask-- they was five sisters. And they introduce themselves, who they are, because you couldn't recognize. And I ask, maybe I have a place on your bunk, because I am there, and there is worse. You have at least here bunks where to lay down, even not comfortable, like herring we was. And they took me in. And I was there for-- I don't recall. For a long time I was there.

And because I knew sewing-- every building had a Blockalteste who was watching on us. And she gave out the orders, whatever. And she saw to it for the Appell we should be ready. So I told her maybe she has something to fix on her clothes or something. If she has a needle and thread, I'll do it for her, because that time, I was already very sick. I had some infection in my mouth, and even that little bit what we got, I couldn't eat.

So she said OK. And she gave me a needle and thread and whatever she had to fix, and I fixed it for her. So I was able-- when they went for Appell, sometimes for hours you had to stay. So she only called me out when the SS man came in, I should go in the line. So that helped me.

And then one Blockalteste came from another block, and she was looking for dressmakers. And I volunteered right away. And that was a shop, a shop where was a lot of machines. And people was working there, whatever, or cutting. And I was able to do whatever they put me to it. I was able to do.

So that helped also, because I didn't have to stay Appell outside. I was inside, because we was working people. But we didn't get more food or any benefits from it. That was the one thing which was that helped my life.

Did you find any of the rest of your family at any time you were there?

No, not there. Not there. None of them came, because they took them right away to the crematoriums. Later, months later, I found out-- somebody told me I shouldn't dream about--

And one day they called everybody out on the street, and they said we should undress. And we had to undress, just like when you are born naked. And they selected from this group also people to send someplace. They send, but I remained further in that shop where they brought the machines, and I was working there.

It was very, very hard when it started already to get cooler. And the latrines were very far. It was cold. We didn't have clothes, not shoes. One time I had those Holland wooden shoes, and that ached my bone whenever I stepped in it. And you couldn't get even a rag to put in.

So soon I came back from the latrine, I had to go back because you had no covers to cover yourself. And you had no clothes to keep warm. So life started worse and worse all the time.

And then January the 18th, they liquidated Auschwitz. And they gave for everybody a bread, and I don't recall if they gave a blanket. And we had to march through towns. I don't know how many kilometers it was from Auschwitz to Krakow.

And it came the night, we had to stop wherever. And we passed by towns, you couldn't see a human being in those towns, because probably they gave orders nobody to come out. And guards, were every few steps guards with dogs. And if somebody couldn't keep up, so they shoot them right away there, and the person fell into the gutter and they left her there.

And when came that night to sleep, and the snow was still about the waist. And while we was walking was all right, but when we stopped, our shoe, whatever we had on was wet from the snow and walking. And overnight, that got frozen on our body. I don't have to tell you what it was, the feeling. You couldn't make a step, nothing.

So next, when we was already close to the trains to the station, again they threw us into those open wagons, which was open-- was no roof, nothing-- without food, without water, nothing. It was snowing. We kept our mouth open, that snow should fall in our mouth, because we was even hungry for a little water.

And the people got-- just plain they lost their mind. One kill the other. And a lot of-- when the train stopped in Bergen-Belsen, was a lot of dead people on those trains.

And though it was-- they was fooling us. Because in Bergen-Belsen, on every barrack and the roof was put a red cross, and we was happy for the moment that they give us over to the Red Cross. But there was even worse than Auschwitz.

There was the same thing, no place where to get something. Or, if somebody died, we had to pull and throw it on the fire, just like when you throw wood on the pyre, one on top of the other. That how was Bergen-Belsen. And sickness, all kinds, and typhus. So the people just fell like flies.

And there, they called me in also to that shop to work. And that was not far from where the kitchen was. So I once wanted to steal a potato. So I got beaten up for it.

And they kept on always, in Auschwitz and in Bergen-Belsen, selecting people. But I don't remember in Bergen-Belsen if we had Appells like in Auschwitz. I can't recall.

And when came already, to this spring we was praying already. We saw an airplane pass by, was hoping they should throw bombs on us. But nobody, nobody did nothing. We was tired already living. We already felt like we should also be dead. It would be better already.

And when came, they was-- it was very bad. And when before-- we knew then the Germans that they are not going to let us alive if they have to give up the camps. We was sure then they going to poison the water, or what. But they didn't have time, thank God, to do those things.

So when the English came in and liberated Bergen-Belsen, they really stopped the border and everything. But I couldn't remember nothing because I had typhus that time. But I had friends who were very good to me. If they got something, I just felt like to have some kind of drink or lemon juice or what.

So a few days later, they went into the town and they asked from the German people for some food. So they brought maybe a potato or two and they cooked and they gave me. And because those people who was able to get to some kind of canned food, they were so hungry and their stomachs were so weak, and they died from that kind of food. So I was lucky I had good friends around me.

And after, took-- I don't remember, because I was very weak for a long time. I couldn't stand on my feet. And that was what saved my life, because if it would have been under the Germans, they would have finished me already a long time.

And they took us out from Bergen-Belsen to a nearby town. And then everything was cleared already. So they put us like in a church, and there they put clean straw and whatever. I can't recall, exactly. But they gave us already food. And we was there for weeks, until end of June, where I was able to get a little strength, and to get myself to go back home. I wanted to go home.

There were a lot of people who went to Sweden, too, because also some families adopted them for just to nourish them. I didn't want to go because I just wanted to know who I have for my family.

So that trip took days and days, because the trains were filled with military. And if came to a stop, so who was able to grab a seat was filled with mostly military. And from one station to the other, you had to wait in the train stations already.

When we came to Prague, I knew the language very well because all my schooling was Czech. So I saw Czechoslovakian soldiers, I went to ask them from where they are, and if they didn't see somebody from our city, Uzhhorod. So somebody told me that, yes, he-- because the president of Czechoslovakia went to Russia. And he formed a Slovakian army from people who are in labor camp. And they fell under the Russians. So my brother-in-law was between them.

And he said then he met a governor, and that is my brother-in-law, and he met his wife, so that's my sister. So I started to scream and cry. People thought that I am out of my mind. So I told them, I have already a sister. And that's how it went on until I got back to Uzhhorod.

And then the train arrived. I couldn't go out because there was a drunk man the way I was supposed to go out. I had to go the longer way. And there was waiting my husband. We was engaged before. In '43, we was engaged. I didn't know about him, nothing.

And he found out-- somebody came from Budapest, and he said that they saw me in Budapest. So with the nearest train I came home, and they was waiting, my brother, the younger one, Mark, was waiting, and my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, the older one, which sister didn't come back. So I was very happy. And I have already a brother, also.

And we went to-- our house was already liquidated from the strange people. And I stayed there for a few days. And my husband went to the police-- I should be able to go, because he found out who lived in our house and who emptied out our house. So he went to the police and they gave him-- then, with the police, with the Hungarian police or from the city, somebody, then he should go and get the things. And I went, also.

And that guy who lived in that house, who took over our everything, he came with two Russian police. And they wouldn't let me take nothing, because he said that I'm a Jew and I don't deserve to have nothing. And they threw me down from this stoop, which was five or six steps.

So that was the time when I didn't want to remain any longer in that city. But we couldn't go right away because I couldn't again separate from my sister and brother. But when they decided to leave, after, I left also with my husband.

And we went to Czechoslovakia, which was not Russian but Czechoslovakia, because it was still 1947 Czechoslovakia under Benes. And our first president's son was also alive, Jan Masaryk. So they tried really to keep order, but in talking-- I don't follow things the way it was. Where do I stand now? Yeah, when we came from Uzhhorod, we left the Carpatho-Rus and we walked through the border. And we went to the Sudeten where there used to live German people. So Benes ordered them out from the country.

So there we was able to get apartments. And we was working there, but you couldn't get food, only what was on the rations, and that was very little. So in '47 or '46, we moved to Brno.

On account of the food I was very anemic. You couldn't get meat, you couldn't get fruit or vegetables. So somebody told us that in Brno you could get it sometimes on the market and the free market. You could get things. And we went there.

How many of you were there now still together? Was it the four of--

No.

--you, or just you and your husband?

Just me and my husband, because my brother-in-law was like Czechoslovakian soldiers, so he got a business in the Sudeten, and a fixed up apartment. And they remained there. And they was all right, a little bit better than we was.

And Mark was where?

Mark was also here and there, and then he left to Israel. But also, somehow he-- it wasn't easy, it was also. But some Zionist were, and he got in touch with them and he left in '47 to Israel.

And in Brno it was not easy either, because in 1947 they had elections, or if you want to stay as Czechoslovakians, or we want to join to the Russians. But the Russians, their politic is so-- they promise everything. And they was-- when you went to vote, they were standing there, and you couldn't vote who you wanted. They told you to put this here and this here. You was not already free.

And after that they killed even-- they killed Benes and they killed Masaryk, also. People were crying all over, the Czech people. But they couldn't help it, because the communists were stronger. They was able-- they just promised things, like now also in this country. American people don't understand, and they believe what they say. But you can't believe them, nothing. It's everything, they lying, whatever-- it's very hard. I don't know what I-- where I stand in Czechoslovakia.

We left-- when we got to Brno we left-- my husband had there a niece and she had an apartment. So she took us in into the apartment until we going to get something. But we couldn't stay there because only a little room we had. We met other people there who was from Uzhhorod, and they was ready to leave to this country, to America, and they had a nice apartment. So they said come and take over this apartment. We did.

And when we took over that apartment, they left. So it was already under the Russian influence. They came and they said, this is two rooms, and you can't live in two rooms two people. And we worked also in those two rooms. We should-- they wanted to give us a room which was dripping water, bad. And I wasn't feeling good. Somehow, another family took us in, in her apartment.

Was this because you were Jewish, or this was everyone was subject to these--

No.

--kinds of rules?

No. In Czechoslovakia, it was-- that time was already because the, communist ruled already. And like even now in Russia, two, three families live together. So here they came to a big city like Brno and after the elections they won the elections.

But we-- I couldn't-- I didn't have the strength to go to Germany to the DP camps. So my husband found out that he has a sister who came before the World War I, or before the Second World War, in the '20s. And he somehow got her address. And he wrote them we would like to come to this country.

So they send us an affidavit, but they didn't let out until the affidavit came, In fact, They didn't let out already nobody from Czechoslovakia. The corridor was closed, and they didn't let out nobody.

We stayed there until '49. When they came, then they opened the corridor. And it was like between the first ones, we was called to pack, to the counsel of the American. And we had to get papers. You had to go with a sack to have permission to go out and everything.

So that was our luckiest day when we came to this country, and we appreciate it until this day. And I feel like to kiss, because I wouldn't go to Europe if they would give me Europe for nothing.

You have not been back then since you left.

No. I wouldn't go.

Maybe I left out certain things, but it's very hard for me to talk.

How do you think that your experiences during the war have affected your life today?

Yes. I have trouble with my stomach since Auschwitz. They gave-- when they gave that slice of bread that was so black and raw, and we was hungry and we ate. And since then I have trouble, nervous stomach.

In the first-- in the beginning, the first few years, I used to have nightmares, screaming. Terrible. My husband always used to wake me up. And I had, since the war, with these back aches and stomach trouble. All the years-- I have just the last few years, which, thank God, but ever since I live in Springfield, also, I used to keep on going to the chiropractor, which was one time, and I should have an operation on my back. So my husband wouldn't let me do it.

And affected my life even when we came to this country. He wanted to have a family. I couldn't get pregnant. So the relatives from my husband's side took me to a gynecologist, and he said that I can't get pregnant because of the Auschwitz, in concentration time, when they gave into the food certain medicine to stop the periods for us. My womb was like for a young child, he explained.

But after with injections, I used to go to him, and I was able to get pregnant. And I had my two children seven and a half years apart.

Have you ever told them about the war or about your experiences?

I didn't. I can't talk about it. You see even here, I have a very difficult time. Because before, if even a relative used to ask me something, I-- or even my sister or my brother-- because I was the one with who-- I was the last with my parents. I couldn't tell them nothing because I right away started to cry, and I couldn't go on.

So maybe this tape will help my children to understand. They know a lot about already what they read. They very nice two children and they were very good children to us. And we tried to give them education, and God should help them.

And no human being should go through that, what we went through. You can't describe it. You can't put it on a paper everything, how terrible it was. Animals you don't treat the way they treated us. It's no words to express everything.

Since, I don't care too much to go where big crowds are. And I'm happy to be home. Like to Europe, I wouldn't go for-- if the world was able to watch and see and not to do nothing for millions of people, not to help, how can I ever forgive that to the world?

Anything you want to ask, maybe?

The people who-- when you went to leave Brno and then were able to leave, some stayed in Czechoslovakia. Do you have any relatives in Czechoslovakia anymore--

I don't have.

--that you know of?

Because whatever-- very few relatives came back. And whoever came back, the rest, a few cousins, they went to Israel.

Are you in touch with them?

They died already since. And I have two cousins in Canada, a brother and a sister. That was my father's side. And with them we are in touch. But otherwise, nobody.



Many families disappeared altogether. Nobody came back. So I have-- I'm very thankful for this, that I have two brothers and a sister. And we keep close. And thank God for that. Thank God that they are in this country.

Did your experiences have any effect on how you practice your religion or your faith, or your feelings about--

Here in this country?

Your experiences during the war, did those--

Yeah.

--affect your feelings about your religion, or your practice of your religion?

--in Czechoslovakia, we had no problem, because again, they was intelligent people. And we had Czech neighbors. They was very nice. But they had also their problems because of the change then became communist. And I had no problem in Czechoslovakia.

In Uzhhorod, they destroyed all the temples, the synagogues. They made-- we had a very beautiful synagogue. They made-- I heard, I never-- like a theater from it. Or, they destroyed it altogether, cemeteries, everything. They do what they want. They don't go according to other human beings.

And maybe now already they are-- now maybe they are more educated, the Russian people. But those-- the Russian soldiers, they were so uneducated. If they saw on you a pocket watch, they told you to make from this, too. Or whatever, they took away everything from the people, the same thing like the Hungarian soldiers.

And I know when the first few years when we came to this country, whatever-- we spent a lot of money on doctor bills because we had no insurance. And I needed a lot, always one doctor or the other doctor to go on. Thank God now I feel better than the beginning, the beginning of the years.

But when the nerves are shot, you can't-- I don't know if you have a medicine for it. You try to talk out yourself. What you can't help, you can't. We are just thankful for this, that we are here.

You had said that with your sons you haven't talked about the war years experience.

Daughters. I have daughters. Yeah.

How about with your husband. Do you avoid speaking of this together, or sometimes do you ever--

Well, he had his bad times also, because he was in the labor camps, forced labor camps. It wasn't easy. But for him was also easier because of the trade that he had. He used to fix for there, whoever was above him. And he had a little bit easier.

And maybe in the beginning I used to tell him, but I couldn't talk about it. I didn't want to upset myself and upset others.

We are certainly grateful that you talked with us today.

Yes, we'd like to thank you for being here with us today. And that concludes our interview. And again, thank you very much for joining us.

Thank you very much for having me.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[MUSIC PLAYING]