

Good morning. My name is Bernard Weinstein, and I'm the director of the Kean College Oral History Project at the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Selma Dubnick. We are privileged to welcome Cecile Seiden, a survivor presently living in Livingston who has generously volunteered to give testimony about her experiences during and after the Holocaust.

Mrs. Seiden, I'd like to welcome you. And since you were a child survivor-- a very young child survivor-- I would like to begin by asking you what your first memories were? And where they of the time of the Holocaust or before?

I lived in Antwerp, Belgium. And my first memories were, if you've ever seen the program on Anne Frank and you heard the bleeping cars of the Germans, that was my first encounter that there was something else going on in Antwerp. I remember the bleeping cars. I saw the flags on all the buildings. And that was really my first encounter with the Holocaust.

How old were you then?

This was in 1941. And I remember listening to the music and marching towards-- my mother would sort of spank me and say, no, this is not our music. Just a very catchy marching music. And there were loudspeakers all over on all the buildings. Flags were up.

And you would see the soldiers marching. You know, Belgium has cobblestones. And you could hear the clicking of their boots on the cobblestones. I would watch this from my apartment window.

You were just four years old?

Right. Four or five.

Years old.

Yeah.

Did you find these things at any time frightening or disturbing? Or did you did you respond with curiosity?

I asked my mother why we have soldiers in the streets. And she tried to explain that we have been invaded by the Nazis. But to me, I didn't understand what that meant until a few years later where I saw their brutality as a child. I saw people being beaten.

I remember seeing a man being dragged by his beard across the street by a Nazi soldier. So I did see things like that. But my mother always tried to cover up my eyes and tried to shield me.

And after 1941, after we had the curfew in Antwerp, which was a 7:00 curfew, Jews were not permitted to leave their houses, we basically kept to our house pretty much. We were afraid to go out. And especially my mother did not take me out. If she did leave, she would leave me with the neighbors in the house.

I wonder if we could backtrack a little bit and if I could ask you perhaps to reconstruct in any way as it may have been told to you something about your family, your parents, their background, what they did for a living, and things like that.

My parents had moved to Belgium in the 1920s. My father was born in Romania. My mother was of Polish descent.

And they had both come to Belgium and had married in Belgium. And I was born in 1937 in Antwerp. Antwerp was a very Jewish city. We lived in a very Jewish neighborhood.

My father was a jeweler by profession. Most Jews were involved in the diamond and jewelry business. We lived right in

the Jewish district.

We were considered a family of middle income. We lived in a four-apartment house, mostly Jewish people. We did live in a neighborhood where Christians did live in our neighborhood. And it was, you know, we got along very well in the neighborhood, and we felt very comfortable in the neighborhood.

When Hitler marched into Belgium in May of 1940, this is really where we had the first taste of what was going to come. My parents, after they bombed Antwerp totally, I mean, not completely. But they dropped a lot of bombs. My parents picked up, and they decided that they would try to get to England.

So we went without clothing, without luggage, because this was the way to travel. And we went to France, into France trying perhaps to get to the seacoast in this way, but we traveled over to England. My parents were not successful. They were rounded up, and they were taken back to Antwerp.

And where were they at that point when they were rounded up?

They were in Paris-Plage, which was in France, close to the water. And later on, my parents came back to the apartment. My father was still doing some jewelry work. But as you know, when you're going hungry, you don't need jewelry.

He was busy for a while because people were converting all their money into jewelry, into diamonds, because that was the way that they could save themselves. If you had money at that particular time, you could still buy a fake passport, which was a fortune at the time. And you could not come to America. You could not go to Palestine.

So there weren't too many places you could go to. Belgium is surrounded by Germany, by France, and by Holland to the north. If you were lucky and you had a visa someplace, you could leave. But very few ports were open. The only port that was really open was Shanghai. So there was nowhere to go.

Many Jews went into Holland to hide, you know. We stayed in Antwerp, because we did not have enough money, really, to leave.

Yeah. What was the mood in your house in the early days, 1940, 1941? Were your parents very severely depressed by what was going on? Were they hopeful that they might be able to--

My father had his first taste, really, of what the Nazis-- of Nazi brutality. He was going on the street. He was going to go join a factory which did work for the underground. And he was going out to buy fatigue suit. And he was caught on the street.

And they arrested him and took him to a interrogation center. They beat him very severely and returned him to the house. And suddenly we heard a terrible knock on the front door. This was a four-family house, and we lived upstairs.

And my father was thrown into the doorway. And this was really the first taste of what we saw the Nazis are capable of doing. So my father decided he would try to do his utmost to try and get us out of there.

But by 1941, Jews were asked to wear the yellow star already. We had the curfews. Food was getting very difficult to find.

You know, parents were very tense. I noticed my mother, I could not question her about things. I always asked her why.

I remember one incident my mother and I were walking on the street. A woman walked over to us. She just gathered the spittle in her mouth and spit at me.

And I was so shocked by being spat at that I said, why did this woman do this? And my mother said, because she hates Jews. And I kept asking her why. So my mother answered me, please don't ask me why. It's just a terrible time we're living in, and they don't like us.

So that was very puzzling to me. I came home, and I just couldn't rub it enough. My cheek was all red from rubbing because I thought this was a terrible, horrible thing to be spat at.

I noticed that after 1941 we went into the basement a great deal. We had a basement in our house. And we noticed that the Nazis would make arrests mostly at night. They would always try to catch you in your night clothing.

So as a result, my mother and I and my father would try and find work or we would try and find food. The food lines were very, very long, my parents told me after the war.

And we were dressed fully, always ready to move. I always had two dresses on. And we were always ready--

Summer and winter.

Summer and winter. And we were always ready to be on the move because you had to be on the move without your luggage because that would cause suspicion. And you had to wear your yellow star, of course.

And we had already lived in the Jewish neighborhood, so they didn't have to round this up to put us into the Jewish neighborhood. We were already living there. And it was very tense in the basement. The four other families, there were about five, six children there.

We couldn't play. We couldn't talk. One time I remember I had my mouth taped up because they were afraid.

I remember in 1942 after my father had been taken for the second time-- I'm backtracking a second-- I remember the Nazis broke into the house in the middle of the night. And they carried out-- they looted the house.

They did a very odd thing. My mother had a composite photograph of myself at the age of four. I think they took it because it had a silver frame.

And they took dishes, and they took linens. And we still had candlesticks left. They took everything.

And they machine gunned down the front door. So we saw-- they were always very nosy when they came in. And we had feather beds. We slept in feather beds. And they rifled them, so the feathers went flying all over the place.

They took wallpaper. They ripped it up on the walls. Anything to give you the aura, you know, this terror had just taken place.

Who was it who did this? Were these SS? Or were they military?

These were SS soldiers. You did not see any Belgian police in the street stopping them. A number of Belgian police did collaborate with the Nazis. But you could see the soldiers roaming the streets. And they would just come and stop at the car, run up to your building, and come to arrest you.

My father went out again. My father tried to find work. And he was caught again on the street.

This time he was very smart. He took his wedding band, and he threw it away. And he ripped up his passport, which every passport had Juden-- "juif," Jew written across it in a big letter J in red. And he was sent to a camp. He really ended up in Auschwitz.

The main deportation center from Belgium was Malines. Malines was about 3/4 of an hour away from Antwerp, maybe an hour away from Antwerp. And he was taken off the street, right, and shipped there into Auschwitz.

I noticed from his transport he was taken on September 12 in 1942. Most of the Jews were shipped from Belgium straight into Auschwitz. My uncle, my aunt, my cousins, they perished.

My father was very lucky. He looked very robust. And he was six weeks in Auschwitz, and then they shipped him to a labor camp.

But in the meantime, we did not hear from my father. I remember this. I really adored my father.

And we waited the first week. We waited like, six weeks we did not hear from him. And my mother received a postcard. I'm going to the East to a local camp. Send me all my warm clothing.

So my mother packed a bag, and she sent it to him. Of course, he never received it. At that time, people around the house started to agitate. You know, your husband has been arrested. You must leave.

And things became exceedingly nervous in the house. I remember the children weren't allowed to play anymore. And things became very serious. My mother would let me sleep during the day. And she would watch the windows to see what the activity was in the street.

We had a very kind-- I call her righteous-- gentile and neighbor who had a fruit store. And whatever fruits she had left at the end of the day, and vegetables, she would send to her Jewish neighbors. She was a wonderful person.

My uncle who was a dentist and also a Belgian citizen-- that's the one who perished in Auschwitz. He was shipped in 1942. He had a maid who worked for them. And she was a wonderful woman.

She decided that we could not stay in this house anymore. So she took her boyfriend, and they came to get us with a little truck. And in the middle of the night, you know, my story was always in the middle of the night because that's when you really moved out and you try to go.

My mother said, you may only take one item with you. So I took my favorite doll. And my mother ripped a few photographs out of the albums, whatever photographs we had in those days.

And she closed the door to the apartment door, and we left with nothing. Because we had to travel, we could not take anything with us. And we were taken with this truck to this man's farm. It was his parents' farm.

And these people had never seen us. And they took us in. Their farm was a potato farm. They had animals and livestock to sustain themselves.

This was in a village called Boom. It was about 3/4 of an hour away from Antwerp. To me, the ride seemed like forever. It was nighttime, and I was told, you may not speak. And I was really quite frightened.

What were the thoughts that were going through your head during that ride? You were such a young child.

I was really scared. I didn't know where we're going. And by that time, by the way, we did not speak about my father anymore. And every time I mentioned, where is daddy, my mother would change the subject on me.

I asked her, is he dead? And dead was a very hard term to understand when you're a young child. She said, no. But he's very far away.

I was very frightened. But the people were absolutely wonderful. The woman was living there with her son, her husband on the farm, her daughter, and her husband. She was a woman who was active who was a Roman Catholic because Belgium has a lot of Roman Catholics.

She was active somewhat with the underground. She kept an active full part in the underground. Also very active in her church.

And they told the story, she had a brother who lived in Antwerp. And he was sort of the black sheep of the family.

And she told them that we are the surviving widow and niece. So my mother and I became-- my mother became the sister-in-law, and I became the niece. Now here I was discharged from Antwerp. I'd never been on a farm. And they had to acclimate me to farm life.

I remember I had to wear wooden shoes. And I worked on the farm, just like everyone else did. And it was so ironic. Wherever I was seen, I called her tante-- aunt. And wherever I was seen with this woman, they said to me, your niece looks just like you, which is-- it's really incredible how you can sell yourself this way.

My mother-- excuse me. My mother worked very hard on the farm. She really participated and helped. And I even worked where I helped to milk the cows and collect eggs from the chickens.

I really loved the farm very, very much because I was totally-- I was surrounded by people who loved me. There was a problem, however. I had to be debriefed as to who I was. And I may not tell that I'm Jewish.

And I would play with the children. And they had a terrible game they always used to play. They always wanted to play Nazis and good guys, like children play cowboys and Indians today. And I was always the Nazi, which I told my mother, they were-- one of the children was a terrible bully. And he talked about if he would ever see a Jew himself, he would kill him.

And I remember running home to my mother telling the story. She said, you must not ever tell that you are Jewish. I learned how to speak Flemish because when I was born, my parents spoke German to me. Flemish is very similar to German. And Belgium is bilingual. They speak French and Flemish.

We lived on the farm about a year and a half--

In this house with the family? In the same house?

Yes. The family was absolutely wonderful. I even attended Catholic church. I was being prepared for communion.

I remember going into the church. As a Jewish child when you first enter the church, it was-- you know, it was huge. And I remember getting lessons. And I don't remember what the lessons were all about, but I remember learning about the Roman Catholic faith. And here I think at that time I knew more about Catholicism than I did about my own Jewish religion.

We had an incident where I developed very bad sores on my legs. And we had to go-- there were no doctors around where we really lived. It was a country area. And we went to Malines, which was the shipping center of the Jews of Belgium straight to Auschwitz.

And we went to a convent. I was treated for my sores. And I thought I was being very brave as they treated these. So they were very painful. I had them all over my legs, I guess from malnutrition.

And on the way home, my tante squeezed my hand so hard. And I just couldn't understand. I said to her, I did not cry. I was so brave, like a soldier, I explained to her.

And she just said, no. Don't talk. Just let's walk home quietly.

And we came home. And I found out from my mother later why. At the convent she heard two sisters speaking to each other. And she said, one sister said to the other sister, did you see how those poor Jewish children were standing at the train this morning, all alone, no one with them. My heart goes out to them.

So the other sister said, don't worry, Sister. They're only Jewish children. When she heard that she just felt so horrible. And she did a terrible thing. She withdrew from her church. She became inactive. That was a big mistake.

The priest came calling almost weekly. Why am I not coming to training? I did not go to school at the time, but I was still going for training for communion.

And it caused a slight tension with her and the church. We were afraid that we would endanger her life. So she made a decision that we should go live in her daughter's house. The daughter was living with her at the time, by the way.

And many times at the dinner table my mother said she would be close to fainting. The daughter was very anti-Semitic and would have discussions. You know, I wouldn't save a Jew who was sitting at this dinner table, with her mother who saved a Jewish woman and her child.

The woman gave us her house, her daughter. She gave us her coal supply. And we lived in this one-room house. But we were not allowed to go out.

It was just so bad. I had no books to read, so I became a knitter. We would rip out socks or sweaters, and we knit them.

And my mother was very, very sad, I noticed. She would try to make me cheery, but I noticed that she was just very sad.

Who furnished food for you?

The people where I was at, they gave us food supplies. It was mostly dry goods, you know, flour, yeast. Sometimes they would bring in yeast to us or some bread, because she did grow everything on the farm.

I mean, we weren't hungry, but there was not a lot of food. At that time, really, I didn't care whether I ate or not. When you're a child, it's not one of your main concerns.

A terrible flood developed. Belgium is a low country like Holland. And the water started to rise around the house. And my mother said, we have to leave. So we left.

And this is a horrible scene. We were swimming for a while. I didn't know how to swim. My mother could only do the breaststroke, and I was hanging on to her neck. And she said, don't choke me. And I was so nervous.

And I saw people, you know, I saw animals floating by. It was very, very scary. And we were picked up by two men with a little boat.

They really saved our lives. And we were taken back to the farm. And they were so happy to see us. And we stayed on the farm for a while.

And I remember the farm was near a river. And the only part of the war that I saw, the sky was always pink and black. And the other notice that I had of the war, one time a bomb dropped very close to us. And they also would drop chaff, which is a silver foil to block radar. And we would make balls out of it and play ball with it because we virtually had no toys as children.

My mother felt that-- we heard of nightly raids in the surrounding areas. And we were very much afraid that we would endanger this woman's life. So we asked the woman to get in touch with her contacts of the underground. And perhaps we could try and get to Switzerland.

In the meantime, my father, who had been a jeweler, had left some gold and platinum in his workshop in the house. And he had put it behind a brick in the wall and then put wall paper up on top of it. And he told my mother, only take it if your life is at risk.

So my mother went back with the woman who had saved us. And she said when she came back, it was a horror. The top floor apartment had been bombed. She said wherever she looked, there were empty apartments. She said it was horrible.

This was in '43. By '43 they really had shipped most of the Belgian Jews. And she said she tried to find neighbors.

People were gone.

The woman with the vegetable store who had been very kind to us, she said to her, we're going to try and smuggle into Switzerland. So if my husband ever should come back, please tell him. And she kissed us and wished us good luck-- you know, kissed my mother. And the woman who helped us, her name was Joss.

And my mother came back to the farm. I was very scared that night because I was afraid my mother would also disappear on me. I had this paranoia, you know. Here I didn't have a father. I was an only child, you know. My mother's gone again.

She did return. And she woke me up the next evening in the middle of the night. I said, why must we leave? Because we have to leave. We're endangering tante and her family.

And I really loved them very, very much. I could barely leave them. They loved me, and I loved them.

And we were taken with the Belgian Underground. We walked and rode trucks. We were in trains. And we did not have fake papers. So had we been caught at any point, I wouldn't be here to tell you my story.

I remember we went from Belgium into France and from France into Switzerland. This was in 1943. Switzerland at that time did not accept refugees anymore. She had closed her borders already.

And we had to cross illegally the border. I remember the barbed wire fence. I also remember an incident where we were almost caught.

We were walking along the bed of a river because the Germans at that time were hunting people with dogs, German shepherds. Still today-- and I happen to like dogs-- but when I see a German shepherd, I freeze. Because I remember I once saw a terrible incident with a German shepherd and a soldier and how he attacked a person. And that was stuck out in my mind.

How many of you were there escaping into Switzerland?

There were about 30 of us.

Now, the underground-- some people did it for money. Some people did it just for the sake of helping people. There were always people who profited from other people's problems.

We had to travel as a family unit, we had to adopt a man. And we adopted this man, Mr. Rice. I felt very sorry for him because I was terrible to him. I was not a terrible child in any way, but I kept telling him, you're not my father. I can't call you Papa.

It was very hard for me. I was six years old. And he said, just pretend. I have to be your papa.

So we were walking, and we went in trains, we slept in huts. Sometimes we were fed by people on the way. They would give us some groceries. Sometimes we did not eat.

But I remember this particular river bed because we walked, and I was wearing knit slacks. And they kept dragging down into the water. My mother carried me.

And at one point we were resting. And we heard-- we were near a railroad track somehow. And there were soldiers-- Nazi soldiers-- with their dogs. And they were patrolling.

And somehow, one of the people screamed out. Something fell on him. And he was a terrible grouch. He was not a very nice person to travel with.

He complained constantly, I can't go on. And people, we were trying to help each other. And he said, I'm staying here. I can't go on anymore.

And I kept saying to my mother, why is he such a grouch? And at one point he cried out. And they heard that. Two soldiers heard that. And had been let go the dogs, we would have been caught.

Now, I understand from my mother that the group that just went before us got caught at the border, and they were sent back. The guards were bribed with gold and sil-- with gold and platinum. Money was, of course, not of value at that time.

And when we came to the border, it was an electrified fence. He shut it off. He turned around, and he smoked a cigarette. That I remember very distinctly.

The children were taken, and they cut the first wire because it was very near the dirt. And they pushed all the children through. There must have been about eight or nine children with the group.

And I was already--

You were one of the youngest? Or--

Yes. Yes. I was one of the youngest children there.

I was always told to be quiet. After a while I didn't speak anymore. I just walked quietly with my mother.

You realize that I didn't understand the whole implication of what was happening. But you know, when everybody is tense and you see you're traveling in secret, you get to understand that there's something wrong. And you're quiet. I was very quiet.

I was already in Switzerland when my mother and some other women, they couldn't climb. They were very-- I mean, they weren't climbers. And I remember at that time it was fashionable, she still had a Teddy bear coat. She got her coat torn. And she herself got stuck on the barbed wire.

And I was on the other side. I really was hysterical. So they put a hanky in my mouth because they were afraid. They could shoot across the border. It's not like you had the protection. It's only barbed wire.

It took about half an hour until everybody crossed over. And my mother was cut up from the barbed wire. And at that moment I really thought, she's not going to make It What am I going to do? You know, panic set in.

And we were taken to a refugee camp. In that refugee camp we stayed-- I must have stayed there about two months.

And my mother became very ill. And in the middle of the night, she had a gall bladder attack. I was with the children. They separated the parents from the children. Some children had one parent. Some children had two parents, depending on how you crossed the border.

The next morning I woke up, and I went to find my mother. And my mother was gone. And I asked the-- we used to call them Herr Commandant and Frau Commandant, you know, the leaders of the refugee camp. And he said, well, your mother's gone. Don't worry about it. She'll be back next week.

Didn't say that my mother was taken to the hospital with a gallbladder attack. Had they only said that to me, I may not have worried as much as I did.

There was also a flea epidemic. I mean, a lice epidemic. Everybody had their hair cut. When I came in, I had very long hair. They didn't cut my hair anyway because the lice epidemic was over.



And the children resented me because of that, I remember. And I asked them, would you please cut my hair, also? So I sort of hid it under a kerchief.

Many weeks went by. I would come to this Frau Commandant and say to her, where is my mother? On visitor's day, people came from other camps to visit their children, or they came to see their children. And I did not find out where my mother was.

And I was taken. I remember one day, they lined all of us up. And the Swiss Red Cross came in. And an elderly couple came over to me and said, I'll take that one.

And I remember they had brushed our hair.

Pointed to you?

Yes, pointed to me. I was standing in the line with other children. And they said, I'll take that one.

I couldn't understand what was going on. I said, why are you taking me? So they said, oh, we want to give you a home, and we want to take care of you.

The couple lived in a remote little village-- I don't know the name of it-- on a hill, on a mountaintop. And the man was a Christian. He was Swiss. And the woman was Dutch and Jewish.

They were an elderly couple who never had children. And he was a cuckoo clock maker. And I think his clocks got to him. He was an obnoxious man. He did terrible things to me.

I mean, you actually had to leave the refugee camp and go and live with him?

Yes, yes.

And you still hadn't seen your mother?

No.

But by this time, how long had you been separated from your mother?

Two months. Two or three months.

How long was your mother actually in the hospital?

Six weeks.

And then where did she go?

Then she was sent to a women's camp. A hotel was converted on top of a mountain called Sonnenberg. And they knit socks for the Allies.

So they had people there from all nationalities. They had Russians, those people who had lived in Europe. They had some Poles there. They had mostly Jews, though. But there were other people who were not Jewish.

And my mother was put in charge of the knitting area. And she did knit on the side for people and earn a little bit of money. And I did not see my mother for the next six months.

Did this couple think they were adopting you permanently?

No. The man, he was very sick. He was a very sick man. He told me that-- he would always tell me the story of Red Riding Hood. You know, the European version is where the wolf eats the grandmother and Red Riding Hood. And then the woodsman come and split the belly of the wolf open. It's a violent story.

I used to like stories, you know, fairy tales. Because my mother always read them to me before I went to bed at night. And I couldn't stand this story.

And there was a reason why he told me this story. He one day left me in the woods by myself. We went blueberry picking.

And I adored this woman. I called her mama. And he wanted me to call him Papa, and I didn't. Couldn't stand him.

And he left me in the woods all by myself. It got dark. I got lost.

I heard animals in the wood. And I thought it was a wolf. It was really a fox, but I didn't know that.

And then the woodsman found me. I had climbed a tree. And he said, you know, you're a naughty child. Papa was looking for you.

And when we came back to the house, he warned me, if I tell this to Mama, he will take an ax and chop off my head.

Oh, God.

Which is a story-- I told this to my mother after the war. When I had seen my mother for the first time, she said, why didn't you say anything to me? I said, Mother, I was still living in the house. I was terrified from him.

So I became this woman's-- my Mama's-- shadow. Wherever she went, I went with her. And she couldn't understand that why I was so attached to her.

And I used to tell her I love her. I really did like her.

And you never said anything to her about what her husband was doing.

No. What of my life?

What was his relationship to you during this period when you were sticking so closely to his wife?

He was very jealous. He threatened-- he threatened me several times. This was not the first time he had threatened me.

But the axe scared me the most because I had seen him chop wood with it. And he called-- he told me-- do you know what a prostitute is? I said, no.

And he told me. You know, my mother had come to visit. She gotten permission to come and visit. And she looked terrible, by the way. Then I found out where she had been. And she wore lipstick.

And he said, all women who wear lipsticks are prostitutes. And I was so upset, I cried. And I didn't tell that to my mother either. I was so afraid to talk to her.

I was very lucky. He couldn't stand me after a while. And he took me back to the Red Cross without his wife knowing.

One day he said, we're going to go buy milk in the village. And he took me with him. And I never returned to the house.

And he told me one thing. Where I'm taking you now, you'll never see your mother again. So I was taken back to a refugee camp. And another family came to adopt me. I was there several weeks again.

And I remember the feelings of the children. We would discuss what it's like to be in a foster home. And of course, I told them my experience. And then all of them didn't want to go.

You know, children speak to each other. And the treatment in that particular camp, it was not the best conditions either. And it was uncomfortable. Many children were there who did not have parents. And children speak to each other.

We were really very tense. We did play. But it was more with-- we were tense.

Were these camps for children under the auspices of the Swiss Red Cross?

Yes. Yes. The Swiss Red Cross, by the way, also had a regulation. If you were under the age of six, you could be with a parent. But I was over the age of six. So I could not be with my mother.

So a second family adopted me. When the second family came to adopt me, I was wild. I kicked them. I cried.

This was a wonderful family. They had a 16-room villa. And they were both Swiss. Very wealthy family with two children.

And I went on a hunger strike. I did not eat for several days. And finally, the young daughter, who was 15 at the time, won my confidence.

And I explained the whole story to her. These people were wonderful to me. I started school. This was in a town called Zofingen. Zofingen is not too far away from Zurich.

And they were wonderful to me. And I started to have a normal life. But of course, I did not have my mother.

I was allowed to visit my mother once more. So I really saw her twice more in Switzerland in a year and a half. And I remember traveling in the train all alone. They put me on the train.

And I was going to go to where she lived in Sonnenberg. And I had a ticket on my lapel. And I remember sitting in a compartment with a woman with her two children there. And they were drinking cocoa.

She suddenly saw this ticket. And I felt so rejected. So I hid the ticket and as a result, almost missed my stop because the conductor was looking for this little girl with a ticket on her lapel.

And she offered me hot chocolate. And almost, she felt sorry for me. And I said, no thank you. I drink hot chocolate all the time, I told her, which was my reaction of telling her I was well taken care of.

I arrived to my mother's camp. And we had to walk. There was no transportation. They had a cable car going up to Sonnenberg. It was a very high hill. But the cable car wasn't working.

So we walked up. And everybody in the camp, really, they spoiled me. I stayed, I think, two or three days. And then I had to go back again.

My mother took me into the village. And Switzerland is very, very beautiful. I remember that. I remember looking at the scenery, and it was just magnificent.

I, of course, had a terrible time leaving my mother. And it was like I was being taken away from her again. And she assured me, don't worry. These people love you.

These people also asked my parents-- their name was [? Stettler, ?] whether-- my mother, excuse me-- whether I could attend church. So I remember I attended church. My mother said, do whatever you do as a family.

And I attended church. I remember I did not have to kneel, which was interesting. She did not make me kneel. And I remember people looking at me because I did not kneel.

And--

This was a Catholic church?

Yes. No. Protestant.

Protestant.

And I also remember an incident very vividly when I was at her house. It had come-- Christmas time had come around. And in Switzerland they had father Nicholas who dressed in gray. And he came with a bag visiting the children at the various houses.

And I remember sitting on his knee. He asked me if I was a good child. I told him yes. And he gave me a gift.

But that gift did not impress me as much as the gift that I received in the mail. I remember receiving a package from the United States. It was not addressed to me personally. But in the package was a leaden dreidel, some coloring pencils, some chocolates, and several hankies.

I was so thrilled that this package came from America. I had heard of America. It was a country. But I didn't know anything about America.

But I was so happy that I personally received a gift from so far away that I remember I carried the chocolate around until it melted. And--

Did you know what the dreidel was all about?

No. No, I did not know what the dreidel was all about. And the woman explained, it must be something, a toy. She didn't know what it was about either.

And I kept the dreidel. After the war, I found out what it was.

And there was also a little tiny mezuzah in there, a little mezuzah made from aluminum. You know, it's not a real parchment. But I guess they wanted-- the United States sent these packages around to the various children. And I felt very good about it.

Did you ever find out who specifically had sent it?

No. I never found out the organization who sent it or anything.

I am in contact with the family that I'm talking about right now. I spoke to the woman. She's in an old age home. She's an elderly lady today. And I spoke to her. She called me from Switzerland.

I'm in touch with the daughter that lives in Greece. And when I heard her voice after, you know, this was just done last summer. I was so emotionally touched, I couldn't speak to her. And we spoke in German. She spoke several languages.

And I learned Schweizerdeutsch while I was in Switzerland. But I don't speak it anymore today. And I said, thank you so much for what you did for me.

Please don't thank me. This was the right thing to do.

And the family who had hidden us during the war, it was the same thing

Did you ever find tante again?

Yes. The tante-- first tante in Switzerland? Or the one in--

The one in Berlin.

The one in Berlin. Yes. After the war we went to visit them. And my father bought them several supply of coal because coal was so expensive. And we asked them, why did you do this?

And they explained to me, there's no question. This was the thing to do. I'm not a hero or heroine.

This was the thing to do. They were wonderful, wonderful people. And by the way, the daughter--

I was just going to ask you.

--who was so antisemitic, she disowned her. She was not allowed to come to her house again.

And it was-- I went back, by the way, to play with the children. And I had one friend over there in particular, a girl. And I said, do you know I'm Jewish? That's the first thing I said after the war.

She said, you are? It was like shock. But she was still friendly with me because remember, this was a town where a lot of farmers had lived, there was a lot of prejudice. And these children heard the prejudice at their dinner tables. It's not that they disliked a Jew. They didn't know what a Jew was, really.

I'm not in touch with them right now, unfortunately. You know, sometimes you lose touch with each other. I have not been back to Belgium since 1949.

Have you visited Switzerland?

No.

No.

Not yet. But I'm planning to.

I wanted to ask you if all the children in the refugee camps were Jewish, because I imagine that some Belgian children might have been sent out to avoid the bombings.

I would say that about 90% of the camp was Jewish. They were mostly Jewish refugees.

There were some plans during the war, by the way, of convents adopting children and taking them and hiding them. And my mother did have such an offer. And she was seriously thinking about it. When it came down to really doing it, she said, I can't do it. I will try to survive with her.

This was after my father had been taken. My father, in the meantime, was in concentration camp for about three years. And he was in many war camps. And what saved him was the fact that he was a jeweler, so he lied, and he said he was a welder.

So he was sent to factories. You were given a card-- issued a card. And you could go in and out of the camp. And he also made rings from the jewelry, from the gold of the teeth of the inmates. And he made them for trinkets for the kapo, which was the lowest ranking officer in the concentration camp. Ruthless, cruel, brutal.

And my father knew this was gold of teeth, but it meant bread. And he could share the bread with people in his bunk,

which was very important.

My father said whenever he saw a woman's transport come in-- they used to divide the transport-- whenever a train came in, they made the women and children go to one side and the men go to the other side. He would always run to the fence looking for me, and of course, thank God, never found me.

And my father was freed by the Russians. And he weighed 85 pounds. After the war, this was the-- they were called Muselmanner, because you were just bones. And, you know-- but he was very swollen. He had holes in his lungs from the malnutrition and the beatings.

So the Russians had no time to take care of you. They just freed you and went on to kill the Nazis. They had a very good mission in mind.

And he was handed over to the Belgian underground, and he was spoonfed. And he said when he was freed, the Russians freed the camp and then left. And suddenly, the inmates found themselves all alone.

And they were in shock. They didn't know what to do at first. And then they raided the kitchens.

And many Jews died as the result. My father said he remembered grabbing chocolate and eating it, and he became violently ill. He's lucky he did not die.

And he somehow managed-- after several months he came back to the house. And by that time, our floor had been totally bombed out. And he stood there crying. And the woman of the vegetable store saw him, tapped him on the shoulder and said, I think they're alive somewhere in Switzerland. So he got in contact with the Red Cross.

There were no papers. The telephone lines were down. I mean, it was virtually-- you know how people found each other? They left-- you know, I call in a kvitel, which is a little piece of paper. They would pin little pieces of paper anywhere and everywhere, especially in synagogues on bulletin boards, if a synagogue still stood or it was partially bombed.

And that's how people found each other. They would meet each other on the street and say, listen, I have family. They were last heard of in this particular camp. Have you heard of them?

And it was very difficult to get in touch with people. I remember I was being bathed. The only reason why I'm telling-- explaining it is because I was so excited that I almost went under the water. The young girl in Switzerland was bathing me. Her name was Eva.

She said, there's a phone call for you. I've never received a phone call in my life. And she said, your mother is on the telephone.

And my mother said, you'll never guess what. Your father's alive. Well, you can't imagine the joy. I was just tremendous joy.

It took a while to come back to Belgium. And my father was a very, very handsome man. And he came back, and he had no money. He had nothing. We had virtually nothing.

Belgium looked like Germany did, bombed out houses, bombed out streets. You hardly recognized your neighborhood. People were looking through the rubble.

And one of his customers-- one of his-- a metallurgist who my father worked with because he would melt down the gold shavings or prepare gold or platinum for him took my father in. He was a Gentile. And he really took care of him. And when we arrived in Belgium, they gave us shelter. They gave us clothing. They supplied food for us.

Now, I remember the first time I saw my father. My father was out in a line going for a soup plate, one soup plate that

we could all share. Because, you know, that's how you got your supplies.

And the man, Mr. [? Flamar, ?] took me to where my father was standing in line. And he said, there's your papa. Well, I didn't recognize him.

First of all, he had stubbled hair. He was very heavy, very swollen. And he thought, he was envisioned-- he had lost track of time-- that I would be this big girl coming back. And I was only eight years old.

And it took a while. And he said my name. He recognized me, but I just looked at him. But when I heard his voice, I recognized him, and I ran to him.

And we couldn't talk to each other. I spoke Schweizerdeutsch. He spoke German, French, and other languages. So he would always have to ask my mother, what is she saying? And can't she slow down?

The Swiss speak very quickly. And Mr. [? Flamar, ?] the metallurgist, took care of us for quite a number of months. Then we rented a one room. And he lent us some money.

And we slowly became a normal family again. Of course, my father suffered terribly. He would smoke very heavily, and he would have nightmares.

I slept in their room. And they would have these discussions. He also brought back pictures of the trenches, you know, the burial, the funeral pyres, because he was afraid that people would not believe him and what he had seen.

How did he acquire these pictures?

When they raided the kitchens, they broke into the German lockers. The Germans kept meticulous pictures, and they kept meticulous records. That's how I found out when my father was taken and where he was shipped from such records.

Did he keep these pictures with him?

Yes. He hid them in the house on top of a closet. And my parents had a habit after the war to go for long walks. And I took these pictures once, and I laid them all out on the floor.

I'll see those pictures to my dying day. They were the worst, like what you see on Night and Fog. Horrible. Trenches, bodies half burned, gas ovens, funeral pyres, mutilated bodies, hands, legs. The worst. Just the worst. I'll never forget that.

And my father knew I had watched them. I kept having nightmares after that. And he burnt them, which was very sad. But he just felt he had to do that.

And he said, I'm never talking about it again. And it was a very difficult period for us after the war.

In a way, you saw after the war what you were spared--

During the war.

--during the war.

Yes. And as a young woman, I became obsessed with the subject. And when I first came to America-- I had come to America in 1954-- in 1965 I became a religious school teacher. And I started to teach.

And I wanted to talk about the Holocaust, but nobody wanted to listen. And now I can't talk about it enough. I'm invited into public schools, and I'm invited to do teacher workshops. And I do a lot of speaking. In fact, sometimes I can't take

the pressure of it, but I never say no. If a public school calls me, I really always go because I feel it must never be forgotten.

You spent some time in Australia, did you not?

Yes.

What made you go there, or your family?

My father wanted-- my mother had family in America. My mother came from a family of 10. And seven had perished in the Holocaust with children and husbands and cousins. And my mother decided she would like to be with her two brothers who lived one in New York and one in New Jersey.

But we could not come to America. We did not have a quota number. And my father was Romanian, therefore, considered a behind the Iron Curtain. It was a problem. People coming from behind the Iron Curtain were not permitted to come to America.

He was not a citizen of Belgium?

No. My parents never attained Belgian citizenship. It was very difficult for Jews to do this. My uncle had become a Belgian citizen because he went to medical school in Belgium.

And it was very-- it was an extremely difficult situation. My father decided, why don't we go to Australia, attain the British citizenship, and then after Australia, we'll try and come to America. In the meantime, we had lived in Australia for five years.

And in 1954, my American quota number came through. I was stateless. My mother was Polish. My father was Romanian.

I was permitted to come here with my mother, but we did not want to separate. I had an ironic experience. This was my first impression of America.

I ended up on Ellis Island being taken there by police paddy wagon and standing behind barbed wire fence looking at the Statue of Liberty. There was something wrong with our X-ray. We had tiny little X-rays. And in order to come to the United States you have to have a tuberculosis X-ray.

So we ended up on Ellis Island, one of the last people because they closed Ellis Island in 1954. And it was an odd experience to have. But you know--

The land of freedom, and you're standing behind barbed wire.

But that notion was quickly corrected when I came to my relatives and I saw how wonderful the United States is and the fact that you could live in freedom and no one persecutes you.

Yeah. Have you been able to communicate your experiences to your own children?

Yes. I started doing this very early. I felt that they know my story, they know my husband's story. And I introduced them to the Holocaust through books. And we talk about it. We're an open family where we discuss things.

My father, on the other hand, never said anything to me. My mother can't talk about it. So you know, it's a very difficult subject to speak about.

I feel that I can speak about it because I had not been in a camp. And I always tell my students, what I went through is really not a very hard thing because all my friends, some of them had been in convents without their parents. Some of



them had hidden in woods.

And most of our friends that we socialize with right now are survivors, which is interesting. We didn't do it on purpose. These are my child-- these are my husband's childhood friends. So a lot of them are survivors. And many of them don't speak about it.

They find it obviously too difficult to bring back such memories.

It's only recently, you know, I would say within the last 10 years. And especially since the program was on, you know, The Holocaust?

Mm-hmm.

And that people are more willing to listen to it. And I think I learned a great deal when I went to the 1983 Washington's second generation and first generation survivors' meeting. 15,000 Jews came together to bring their children and show their children what had happened to them.

I lost my husband at the conference. And for about four hours I was sitting waiting on a bench trying to find him. And people sat down next to me, and they looked at my tag, and they said, well, you're too young. I said, well, I was young.

And they didn't want to hear my side of the story. They just totally unburdened themselves to me and said, thank you. I've never told this to a living soul. And they walked away. So it's a very difficult thing to talk about the Holocaust.

I was going to ask you this question. As a child survivor, have you had difficulty talking with other people who are perhaps older than you and had a greater awareness of what was happening or the significance and the context of it all?

Well, I have found a level of comfort, if you can call it such, because I read avidly on the subject. And I have taught the Holocaust at the college level and the high school level. So today I know about the Holocaust because this is-- that I learned after the war in speaking to many friends, many relatives.

When I speak, they realize that my memories are the memories of a child. But I fill in a lot of gaps because of what I have learned and what I have spoken to other people. So I have this level of-- if you can call of comfort, it's such an uncomfortable subject. And it's a difficult subject to speak about.

And they realize that I was a child. And I always feel the more you read, the less you know. There's so much on this, it's just incredible.

I keep-- I'm sorry.

Go ahead.

You know, as you were speaking, I was thinking of the recent acts of anti-Semitism. Several synagogues in Long Island and even in New Jersey and how do you as a child survivor, what reaction do you have when you read about these things? And do you think that your speaking to high school and college students is going to make that much of a difference?

I always try to bring a message to them that first with the Jews, then with the Gypsies, and then I point to them, and I say, it could have been you. Just remember, there's prejudice, there's hatred in this world. And at the end of the Hitlerian period, it did not end the hatred. The hatred is there.

Try and be open-minded, be educated, read. And above all, don't forget. Learn something from this experience.

Miss Seiden, thank you very much.

<https://collections.ushmm.org>  
Contact [reference@ushmm.org](mailto:reference@ushmm.org) for further information about this collection