

Can you tell us about your experience at the border, which you alluded to last time?

Yes. Yes, it is something I will never forget. As we arrived, I didn't even know at the time we were at the border. But the train stopped. And as I was saying, everybody got off, and groups formed of different nationalities. They were talking about where they were coming from, where they were going. And this friend of mine I was liberated with that I was traveling with, we stopped just to listen what was being said or talked.

And some soldiers were in a group singing, Hungarian soldiers. So we just stopped there and listened. And suddenly, behind us, there was this Russian soldier with his uniform with lots of medals. Half his left side of his jacket was bemedaled. And he addressed the two of us.

I couldn't understand what he was talking about. My friend understood him, because as I said before, she spoke-- she came from the part of Czechoslovakia that was close to the Russian border. She spoke Russian, Czechoslovakian, and Hungarian, and Yiddish. And this soldier, a somewhat short, young man, was talking. And he wanted to know-- turned to me each time, what was my name? And it was translated to me.

And I told him my name was Olga. And he looked at me and got very excited, agitated, almost. He said, my mother's name is Olga. And he said, that's a beautiful name you have. And each time I had to ask what was he saying. I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Then, after a few minutes, he wanted to-- he put his arm around me, around my shoulder. And he says, come with me. You are going to stay with me.

And again, I had to ask what was this all about? And I said-- I responded that I can't stay. I am going home. I'm going home to find out if my family has survived. And he says, well, you can always do that later. You know, I am a commandant of this area. I have the highest position, and I have a house with servants. And you're going to have a very good life with me.

And I was getting more and more horrified at-- just at the thought of what he was talking about. And as he was talking, he was serious. I saw that this was no joke. He was not saying that in jest. And I thought, before this goes any further in his mind, and is becoming more and more reality from his point of view, I somehow have to convince him that it is not possible. And that I don't wish to stay with him, no matter what beautiful house he has or how many servants.

And it was most difficult, because as I say, I couldn't understand what he was talking about. But he was very animated and became more and more so. And at that point, there was some movement. People were coming and going.

And I just had to save myself, literally. And I ran between people and got on a train that was stationary. And not on the train, but on a wagon, an open wagon. There was no one there. There were some barrels and some blankets.

Did he attempt to follow you?

At that time I didn't know. I just ran and got on the train. And, as I say, I didn't get on a train that had-- that was a regular train, where you could sit on a train. I got into a wagon, an open wagon, which must have been at the end of this long train. And I got on there and climbed up. And when I saw these barrels and some blankets, I just pulled-- I hid under the blanket in a corner of the wagon behind a big barrel.

And I decided I'm going to play dead. Because this was something I didn't know how to handle. There was a language barrier. There was a-- I sensed that there was an authority that I was facing that I just didn't know what to do with. That was too powerful for me to deal with.

Now, I have to put between parentheses, I just got out of a concentration camp. But I was one of millions. And I followed orders like everybody else. Never stepped out of line. Did everything what I was told. And all through the time, I was never personally beaten, abused, any more than generally by the million. But suddenly, I was singled out and I had to deal with, person to person, something of an oppressor.

And I felt terribly overwhelmed. And I was-- I don't know how long it was that I was under this blanket, motionless. I tried not to breathe. I didn't know who would hear me. And then I heard running, and commotions, and whistle blowing. And I thought, well, maybe this is the moment. Now we will leave, and somehow I get out of here.

And I have to retract by saying that what he was offering me this fantastic life with him, to stay with him, he was also getting very upset and angry. And I could see it on his face. And this is what frightened me. He was saying that you, all of you, you all went willingly with all the German soldiers. I am your liberator, and you are rejecting me.

This was his attitude and how he saw the thing. He decided something, and it was refused. And he couldn't understand how can a liberator be refused such thing? And I have to say that I never had anything to do with any of the German soldiers during all those times.

So I don't know if it was minutes, or could have been hours. I was absolutely terrified. And finally, after much and long time, I heard the first creak of the-- the train gave a jolt. And little by little, we begin to move. And a lot of people came on top of the-- on the same open train as I was.

And I was still under the blanket. And I thought any minute somebody's going to step on me. And I will-- I was just holding back that, you know, I shouldn't scream out. I didn't know what was happening. And there were a lot of Hungarian soldiers who were traveling in this open wagon, because there was no place anywhere. So every space was taken.

People sat on those barrels, and were hanging their feet out of the train and everything. And I heard them say that there was some Russian officer who gave order to search the train before they could leave who was looking for someone. And they didn't know who it was or what they were-- what he was looking for.

But that's how-- under the blanket, I heard them say that this Russian officer gave order to search for something or someone, and they didn't know what it was. And finally, I suppose, he gave up. And this is how-- then we crossed the border. And I heard that on the other side there were Hungarians who stopped the train. And that's how I knew that now we were on the Hungarian side.

How long had you been under the blanket?

I have no idea. Who had a watch or time or anything? And when you are terrified, a second seems like hours. And at that time, suddenly, it all fell on me of being alone in the world and defenseless. And this is how reality loomed larger than life. And I couldn't find my friend after that. I have lost contact with her from the time I ran away from the platform to get on the wagon.

You never saw her since then?

I never saw her again. And this train was going to Budapest. That's why we got on to begin with. Because when we asked, the answer was yes, it was going to Budapest. So I arrived in Budapest. And it's all very blurry in my mind what happened there, because I had nothing on, nothing in my hand, no money, no identification. And when we got off the train, we were not given anything of that sort.

I didn't wait long enough when we were liberated in Czechoslovakia for the Americans. I don't think they were ready or set up for any such things to give a paper to someone that it would be an identity card or something. So in Budapest, I received something. Since I was returning, they allowed me to have one trip free on any train. Not two ways, just one way.

And they recorded my name. And I gave the name of a little town where my mother came from, because I felt-- my whole family on my mother's side lived in that corner of Hungary. And I thought, if anybody comes back, this is where they would come back to. And so this was one way.

And, of course, I didn't find anyone. But I met a cousin's husband who had two children, aged two and six. And he was

searching for his wife and children. And there was no one. And he told me that he came from another-- where he came from another town, he said he has a brother who came back.

And there were some-- a few young people, as he put it, my age, also without their parents. Why don't you come there? There is no one here. So I went with him. And that was the town of MÃ;d in the Tokaj region of Hungary, where they have the famous grape vineyards.

And so that was the story of returning to Hungary. And everywhere there were Russian soldiers. So I was glad to be at least with some people whom I know that they were Jewish people.

Did you know them from before, or did you--

I knew the husband of my cousin, yes, as a child. I was at their wedding. And I knew their two little children. And, of course, my cousin. They all came from the same little town where my mother come from. Incidentally, before we finish, I would like to pay homage to all those who didn't come back.

My mother had three older brothers. She was the youngest. So out of the three brothers, one came back. He lost his wife and two small children. One brother was not married. The oldest brother had four children. Out of the four, two were married. Two married daughters, each with two children, didn't come back.

His son was in a forced labor camp. He returned and died at age 75 last year. And the youngest of his four children was unmarried in her 20s. And she came back.

And my grandmother, who lived in this little town of GyulahÃ;za had two other sisters who also married in this town and who lived in this town. And their children and grandchildren all settled in the same little town. And none of them came back.

And my grandmother is buried there. But her two sisters, she had five sisters. They were-- four of them. No, they were five sisters. And four of them were taken away, all in their 70s, 80s. And their children and grandchildren. So the devastation was really incredible.

Did you find out about this only after you returned to this little town?

Yes, because we lived in a suburb of Budapest. And we had no communication with them for quite a while, as I have said before. We thought because there was all this-- all the Germans were using all the trains to go eastward to the Eastern Front to Russia. And mail wasn't taken or delivered. So we didn't know what happened and when it happened to them. And we were in total darkness about it.

How were you treated by the non-Jewish populace in this community?

Before the war?

After. When you returned.

This little town called GyulahÃ;za?

Yes. I did not stay there. I did not stay there at all. I went there back. And as I went back, I met the husband of my cousin, who invited me to another town. And I stayed with them for a while. But I didn't stay there at all, not even overnight.

Where did you go?

I went with him where his brother was, where they came from. The town where they came from. And there I didn't know anybody except him. And, of course, I had met his brother, whom I knew of but I never met before. And I stayed

there for-- and I had met a couple of young people my age and became friends. I stayed with them for a little while and then went back to Budapest again.

By sheer coincidence, my father had a brother in Paris who lived there all since World War One. And he had searched for his relatives, that is, my father, and my mother, and I, through the Red Cross. And someone heard our name being mentioned. And this is how I got in touch with him.

And then shortly after, I returned to France in 1940-- end of '46. So this is how I left Hungary. Then I really promised never ever to return. I felt very much betrayed that Hungary let this happen to us. And I have broken my promise.

About three years ago, I have returned. But I felt I wanted to return, almost like a ghost, that I should see what was left there. But nobody should see me. I wanted to pass unseen and unknown. It was very, very painful.

And I have completely forgotten Hungarian. I promised to forget it, and I promptly did. I have never had a chance to speak it since. And I really got out of the habit, really. And it was a psychological factor that I forgot Hungarian.

Did you recognize any places or people?

When I went back to this little town, as I said, this was the cocoon where my whole family on my mother's side came from, and lived there for centuries. And I returned. Somehow, everything seemed like-- there are two churches in town. This is a very little village, about 2,000 people, who lived there, and about 10 Jewish family lived there. Out of the 10 Jewish family, seven were my family.

And my family lived very close and side by side with the neighbors. There were no animosities. There were no rich people. Everybody had just about the same thing. And I never felt that because I was Jewish I was looked upon differently. I think children are not so aware of it anyway.

And I remembered the neighbors of my grandmother's, and children I went to school with. And as I went through the town, I was with a friend who met me in Zurich. And we drove all the way there. And neighbors came out to see, because nobody can pass there without being noticed. It was my hallucination. 6 o'clock in the morning, people came out of their houses.

And they recognized me. Apparently, from the back, I look very much like my mother did. She was about my height. And immediately, some neighbor came out and threw their arm around me and cried. And talking to me. And I couldn't understand what they were saying. And I could even less answer them. I was really just like somebody put a noose around my throat. I couldn't talk in any language.

But two minutes later, I was in their living room and being given breakfast. And they cried. They just cried. And it was a terribly, terribly emotional moment to return to somewhere where you felt so at home. And I felt sure and secure. And when I walked down the street as a child, older men would lift their hat to say hello, because they knew whose daughter or granddaughter I was.

And suddenly there was absolutely nobody there that was belonging to my family. But the neighbors received me very warmly. And this is how I-- I went back to the cemetery where my grandmother is buried. Then I went back last year, and I found a second cousin who was not back, not returned till later.

And he told me that not only my grandmother and her husband-- which I knew, I never met my grandfather-- was buried there, but also my great grandparents and great great grandparents. So, you see, in this little tiny cemetery, there are several generations. They were all shoemakers, tailors.

The Jewish people were either in business or in trade. And they owned a little parcel of their own where they grew their own food. This was a very low key town. Nobody had any more than the next door neighbor, and nobody competed with each other for anything. I was a very quiet and, I don't know, perhaps uninteresting way of life. But I am very sentimental about it.

When these people were greeting you again, did any of them attempt to talk about the past or what happened? Or why it happened? Or was this avoided?

No. I don't think they could talk about it either. And I had no voice to ask them. These were good neighbors that I remember well. I understand better today what really happened.

And I was not part of their life. They went through a revolution that was after something horrible happened to us. But something horrible happened to them, where people could point to each other in order to save their lives, saying that this one or that one didn't agree with the new regime. And they were hung. This was the Hungarian revolution of '56.

So they went through great deprivation. And after what happened to us, there is no comparison, perhaps, because it happened to us en masse. Everybody it happened to. But it eventually came to them in a different form. But this was a very difficult time for them. And I don't know all the details. But some of them must have had great traumatic experiences and losses, personal losses.

And as I say, we didn't talk about it. I hope to return and perhaps be more composed and find my voice in Hungarian and speak with them. I hope I can still find the same people. Because one of the ladies was quite on in years.

Has the language come back to you?

Yes. Yes, it has come back, because I have begin to correspond with someone. And I need a dictionary. And I don't have any good dictionaries in Hungarian. I don't even think they do have good ones. Because when I was there, I bought one. I had an old one, which was French Hungarian.

And I bought a new one, which is English Hungarian. And even so, I have great difficulty to finding normal everyday words that I want to use in my letters. But I have more facility today. And I think I'm more composed about it, because since the first time I returned, I talked more about it. And I think it's-- I released something in there, some little trigger in my mind that was holding it all back.

Let's go back to your stay in France. What did you do there?

My uncle was a musician during the war. Before the war, he was with the Paris symphony. As the war came, everybody went into the army, the undergrounds. My uncle went into the army with de Gaulle, the Free French Forces. And everybody lost their position.

The conductor came to San Francisco, Pierre [PERSONAL NAME]. And there was no orchestra. When the war was over, it took time before they were in financial shape to reorganize an orchestra. And, of course, they auditioned musicians. And he didn't get his job back, because he was 48 years old, and they felt that he would be eligible for a pension much too soon. So they tried to get younger musicians.

And he was in a difficult position to find a job. He was a classical musician. And at first, for a while, he was replacing-- you know, if somebody couldn't make it to the opera. He was also-- he played the big bass, which is not like you need so many of them. And for a while, he replaced musicians who couldn't make it on the evening they had to perform. So it didn't give him a steady income.

Eventually, he found a job, a better position with the Strasbourg-- [SPEAKING FRENCH] So this was a steady job. And when I came from Hungary, he happened to be in Strasbourg, employed in Strasbourg. And this is a coincidence, because I was born in Strasbourg.

So when I returned from the great detour that my father took, unfortunately at the wrong time, back towards Hungary, and when I came back, my uncle happened to be in Strasbourg. So I went back to art school. And that's what I did in Strasbourg. I stayed there less than four years.

Then I came to Chicago, to a cousin of my mother's. Just to show you how clannish and close the family was, I never knew about this cousin of my mother's. She searched for everyone who was her family. Her father and my grandfather were brothers. And there were about six children in the family there. And anyone who remained, no matter how removed, she single-handedly brought them out.

She set herself up with saving money from her kitchen money and putting enough money together to send a ticket. And no sooner somebody came out, and she put them into whatever profession or vocation they had. As soon as they earned enough money, they had to repay her, because she was recycling that money to bring somebody else out.

And I called her Aunt Fanny, because she was much older. She had grandchildren already when I came out. And that's how I happened to come to Chicago. She was a fantastic, wonderful person. This is Fanny Leibovitz. And she was known for her good deeds far and wide all the way to Israel. There are at least 50 people who she brought over by herself. She was like the Joint Committee herself, a one-woman organization.

And did you go to school in Chicago, or work?

No, I remained in Strasbourg until just before I got my diploma. I always seemed to miss the last six months, the crucial six months. And that was because there was a war going on in Korea. And every day, the newspapers reported about the 38th parallel where they were fighting, terrible fighting.

And someone had suggested to my uncle and myself that if you really think about going to the United States, you should not wait too long, because the United States is in such a war with Korea that they might close the border. And they won't let any immigrants come through.

So I left before I would have gotten-- I've gone through all the preparation for the diploma in designs and art and all. But I didn't wait for the oral exam at the very end. So I didn't get my diploma. But when I came out to Chicago, less than two weeks after I arrived, without speaking a word of English, I was working for the United Wallpaper Company in the merchandise mart.

And that's how I-- from then on, instead of going back to school, which perhaps I should have. But I was already earning money. You don't have to speak in order to do designs or colors. And I learned on the job. I learned English. Then, about eight months later, everybody was laid off, because they closed the studios.

And they told us, in a couple of months, if we reopen, try us again. If not, find a job elsewhere. And that's when I decided to come to New York. Because I really studied textile designing, and I couldn't find a job in that field in Chicago. So this is how I happened to come to New York.

Was there anyone living in New York that--

No. I came without knowing-- I had one friend from that little town that I had met some young people. And I wrote to her. And she put me up for a few nights. And then I found a furnished room in Brooklyn not far from her because she was the only person I knew.

And from Brooklyn, I traveled all the way to Dumont, New Jersey. It took me two hours each way to get there and to come home. But when you are 20 years old, it doesn't matter.

And what did you do in Dumont?

I was working for a wallpaper studio who supplied designs to the one I left in Chicago by sheer coincidence. And one day, the head of the studio came to look for designs and recognized me.

From where?

Because I worked in Chicago in the studio. And he was-- he came to Dumont, New Jersey into the studio to look for

designs. And I was there. I worked-- I was the only girl with 11 men in the studio. After that, I-- actually, I met my husband two weeks later.

He happened to write an article in a Y bulletin, 92nd Street Y bulletin. You've probably heard of the 92nd Street one. But I was living there at the time. And he was a soldier in the American army. And he was fighting in that area where I had lots of friends.

And I was unbelieving when I saw that there was somebody from the United States who ever heard of the small towns that he was talking about in his article. He returned as a soldier. He was there as a soldier, and he returned to see that year whatever happened to the places he's been to. Because he has really not visited. He was in the trenches. It was a big battle there. There is a tremendous American cemetery in the. Town and lots of his friends died there.

So he was at NYU at the time. And there was some very special trip advertised. And he took advantage of it to go over by boat and revisit all the places he has been to but really didn't see because it was occupied by the Germans. And he was wounded there. He was taken care of in one of the hospitals.

And when I read this article, I mentioned it to someone that it's unbelievable that someone knows this town. This is not a tourist town. There's nothing for Americans to see there. And the person I spoke to said, I know who he is. He lives around the corner. And he comes here very often.

And this young girl happened to have enough courage. In those years, we didn't approach people to talk to on the street. You had to be introduced. So she had courage to talk to him when he she saw him. And she told him that there was somebody who came from that area that he was writing about.

And then he came to the office where his aunt was the assistant directress to ask is there a young girl who just came to live here recently? And she came from France. So his aunt said, there is the list of the latest arrivals of the young girls who live here. Why don't you look if any of the names seem familiar to you?

And he picked out my name. And he said, well, when she comes to pay her rent, let me know. Tell her I would like to meet her. And that's how we were introduced, by his aunt. But I didn't know it was his aunt. And we talked about the town. But he knew the officials of the town and I knew the young people of the town. I have my best friends who live there. And so that's-- very shortly after, we got married.

So the town brought you together.

Yes, yes.

And your children were born soon after.

Yes. I have two daughters. And now I have five grandchildren.

Have you been able to talk with your daughters, or even with your husband, about your experiences?

My husband never asked me. I think he felt the more I put it back in my mind, the better I can go ahead. I had nightmares for years after. And he comforted me every time to wake me up to reality that is whatever I was dreaming about. But he never probed what it was about.

He was a very astute, very intelligent, very gentle, sensitive person, who would not want to touch on anything that would be hurtful. And so I never really talked about it. And being married to someone, a New Yorker-- for already his parents were born here, so he was the second generation.

I didn't sought out people who came from the back--, the same environment, who went through the same experiences. I didn't have the need. And raising two children fulfilled my life. And I really felt like a little seed who was carried by the wind. And now it was everything was blooming around me. I was very happy.

As for my children, I never talked about anything. I have decided quite early that I will talk to them when they will ask me questions. And always find out what was the motivation why they were asking me, and how much they wanted to know.

I did not want to give them any of the reality, which were really horror stories, because I felt I myself did not cultivate hatred. Because I felt if I let myself be eaten by hate, it will eat me up and will not change anything about what happened. And I did not want it to infect my children with hatred.

I felt whenever they would be old enough to ask questions, I'll tell them about it factually as it happened. And, of course, they have no grandparents. I have nobody as family to hand down to them. And eventually, I don't even know, I just asked my daughter recently if she could remember when she asked me questions at all, or when she heard it, and she couldn't remember.

But she-- one of my daughters automatically went through a lot of literature about it in order to learn all about what has happened. And my other daughter could never cope with it. I remember once, I remember she heard something. She was already in college. And she called home in tears of what she has heard.

And I comforted her to tell her. I said, well, if you want to talk about it, when you come home, we can talk about it. If you have any questions, I'd be happy to talk to you about it.

What she had heard, was it about the Holocaust?

She heard something about the Holocaust and all the Jews, what has happened. It has affected her very deeply. And she wanted to know, what do I know about it? And it would have been much too cruel to tell her over the telephone anything like that. And I said, well, we'll talk about it when you come home. And anything you want to ask me, I know a lot about it, and I will tell you about it.

To this day, my younger daughter, who is now 31, cannot bring herself to talk about it and seldom asked questions. This is her way of coping with it. On the other hand, my older daughter has really in depth-- I think there is not a publication that ever appeared, any book that ever appeared, that she has not read.

And she's very keenly interested in it. She's extremely sensitive as well, but she's able to read about it. And it's not so long ago that she really encouraged me to talk about it. And the fact that I am here to record this was also her idea, because she feels that it should be said and talked about so people should always remember.

And there are too many movements already who try to eradicate the memory of it. And unfortunately, as time goes on and people die, there will be less and less people who will be able to say, yes, I was there, and I am a witness. And I have suffered from it. And I have lost my family. So this is the reason that I am here talking with you now.

Thank you very much.

I can't say my pleasure. I wish I would have never had to do it, but I'm glad I did. And I thank you for listening.

[MUSIC PLAYING]