

Good morning. I am Joseph Preil, Director of the Holocaust Resource Center here at Kean College of New Jersey. This morning, November 30, 1994, we are privileged to have with us is our distinguished guest Mrs. Sylvia Wirtzbaum, who currently lives in Manhattan and came here with her daughter, Mrs. Rita Green, who lives in Livingston New Jersey. Welcome, Mrs. Wirtzbaum.

Could you tell us when and where you were born?

I was born in Borod, Romania in 1928 September.

Before we get into the story itself of your experiences during World War II and the Holocaust, I want us to identify some pictures that you have.

That's my father and I when my father was taken into the army. And I went with him to this town called Cluj.

How old are you in this picture?

About 10 years old.

So this was shortly before the outbreak of war.

Yes.

It's 1938.

Yes.

OK. This picture?

That picture is my family-- my parents, and my two brothers and sister, and myself.

So it's your--

Family picture.

--immediate family.

My immediate family.

I assume shortly before the war.

Shortly before the war.

And this is the same picture not in a frame, in case we didn't get a good picture on the monitor, we'll use this one too.

OK.

Now, you don't have any pictures during the war understandably, and I think this is after the war.

That's-- I am on the right bottom. And the rest of the people are the people that survived. One is not from our town. The rest are all the people that survived in the town that I am from. There was a very large Jewish population. I don't remember, about 2,000.

So as far as you know, this handful of people are all the survivors of your community-- right

--in Romania, which then became Hungary.

Yeah.

I don't know if this picture will come through, but evidently it has much meaning.

That's me and my American cousin who was stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, through whom was able to come to this country. He helped me an awful lot, because he spoke Hungarian. He learned in the home from my grandmother, who lived in the United States. And because he was walking on the street in Frankfurt and there were lots of refugees there trying to come to this country, he approached one, and he said, I have a cousin in Romania, how can I get her out of this country? And one boy said that I'll go and get her.

But by this time the borders were closed. And my aunt sent him \$500. And with that money he bought illegal papers and border crossing people that helped him make connections. And then we were walking borders and borders-- about five borders-- all night to cross from one country to another and from one zone to another. And when we got to Linz, which was half-- was one part Russian and the other part Americans zone, the people in town crossed the bridge to go from the Russian zone to the American zone to work. And he got a legal identification cards, and 8 o'clock in the morning with a false identification, we crossed the bridge and got into the Americans zone.

We'll hear the full story when we get to that part in the story.

No, no, not that way. No.

This?

No, hold it the other way. Like that.

That's in Frankfurt when I arrived. I was 16 and a half years old.

This is--

After concentration camp.

You were born in '28.

Yes.

You were 16 in '44.

I was 16-- no, then I was 17 and a half.

This is shortly after the war.

Yeah, right after the war.

OK.

It was in '44, '45, '46-- '46, end of '46. So I was-- how old I was, 18?

17, 18.

17, 18, yeah.

What month is your birthday.

September.

September. I was about then.

In September '46-- I hope I'm right-- you had your 18th birthday.

Yeah.

Now, this looks like a festive picture.

Yeah. That was when I arrived to this country and I got married by a rabbi.

And this is wedding celebration.

That's my wedding celebration.

All right. Now, at the beginning of the interview, we customarily ask something about your family. You said your immediate family consisted of yourself, you had one sister, two brothers, and two parents-- six people.

Right.

How many survived?

I am the only one.

You're the only one who survived. Your extended family would be, beyond that, your grandparents. For those who are in Romania, Hungary at the beginning of the war-- I keep on saying Romania, Hungary,

Right.

--because I know you were born in Romania and it became--

Hungary, right.

--under Hungarian domination. Those who were there in '39--

Yeah.

--your grandparents, of course your immediate family, the six, are included, and then your grandparents, your uncles and aunts and their husbands and wives, and first their children, your first cousins. How many who are in your extended family? My mother had one sister and one child, my father had one brother and three children, and spouses.

So that's--

And grandparents.

--that's 3. And with the 3 is 5 is 8--

That's 3 and 5.

--and your six are 14. And you had grandparents?

Yes.

How many grandparents were alive in '39 in--

In Romania? My grandmother-- my father's mother and father. My father's parents.

Your father's parents were alive. And your mother's?

My mother's mother was in this country.

Oh. So I think we said you had 5, 8, 14. Then two grandparents who were there. That would be 16. Of the 16, who survived in addition?

No one. Still you're the only survived.

I am the only one that survived. That's something. So 1 out of 16 of the extended family. Can you tell us something about your family life-- and was it in Borod that you lived-- before the war.

Well, we were a normal family. We had a happy home. We were four children. And my grandparents, We lived very close. We went to school, and my mother was a homemaker.

And your father?

My father dealt in leather. And he used to go to the market and buy leather. And he had a friend who had a bus route out of town. He had eight big buses that picked up the people in the morning, went out of town to do their business, and that night he came back. And this was my father's good friend, a Hungarian Christian.

And when they gathered us, when they announced that we're going to be taken to the ghetto, we should pack up, my father took all the valuables, like my mother's jewelry, and the candlesticks, and some dollars, I guess, that we had, and put it under his coat to take it to the woman that used to come to turn the lights off Friday night and Saturday. And on the way, this good friend of my father's, watched for my father, took everything away from him, and beat him up. That's what happened.

What was the general population and the Jewish population of your hometown of Borod.

Borod and a walking distance, people that came to the synagogue in Borod were about 1,600, something like.

1,600 Jews.

Jews, yeah.

That, you think, was the Jewish populated.

The Jewish population.

And the total population?

I don't know. I don't remember.

What was the relationship then before the war between the Jewish Polish and the general?

It was normal. It was all right. There were some that showed their antisemitism. And like I told you, my brothers always came home without their-- Saturday, we didn't go to school, we went to synagogue. And they used to come home with a bloody noses, torn clothes, without their cap on their head. But there was nobody to complain, because if we went to the

police the police never did anything.

But it was all right. We got along pretty good. They were the farmers like, and the Jews were the store keepers, and they bought clothes, and shoes, and food, and groceries the Jews had. In Europe Jews weren't farmers. And my great grandfather was a farmer. He owned a small town. He was the only Jew in town. And all the Romanians-- Christians-- worked for him.

But he didn't do any work. He just-- the town worked for him, and that's how they made their livelihood. And that was normal. That was the way it was I guess in Europe. In Romania for sure.

What happened in 1939 when the war broke out? How--

My father was taken into the Romania army. And in '40 Hitler gave this part of Romania to the Hungarians. And the Hungarians came to occupy us. And my father-- I don't know how-- but he came home that day from the Romanian army.

He took off his uniform-- I see him in front of my eyes now-- and welcomed the Hungarian army, thinking that Franz Joseph arrived and the Jews will be treated equally with the non-Jews. And that wasn't the case.

Of course, there was no Franz Joseph.

There was no Franz Joseph, and there was only antisemitism. And slaughtering the Jews. Because that day, when my father opened our home to them, and all the food that we had in the house my father gave to the soldiers, they took the Jews with beard up to the highest mountain near where we lived-- it was called-- I don't know how to say it. In Romania, it's called [ROMANIAN SPEECH]. I don't even know-- in Hungarian, [HUNGARIAN SPEECH]. I don't know how to say that. It was where Dracula lived-- those mountains, high mountains.

And they threw the Jews down from the mountains. And that's not he--

The ones with the beards.

The ones with the beards. So you're saying that you felt Hungarian antisemitism much more severely--

Much more. Yes, yes.

--than Romanian.

Hungarian. Hungarian. Definitely Hungarian. No Romanian. You know that the Romanians didn't give out the Jews. The Romanian Jews didn't go to concentration camp.

They were slaughtered because, of course, there were some bad people. But the government didn't give out the Jews to Hitler.

But starting in 1940 you were under Hungarian domination.

We were under Hungarian domination.

Now, how long did this period last? What time in 1940 are we talking about when the Hungarians came over.

From 1940 in the summer. Maybe June, July, or August. I don't remember.

Summer 1940. And how long did this period last under Hungarian rule?

Until we went to concentration camp.

So what brought out the change?

Did you-- how was life when it started?

It was rationed. It was black marketing and rationed. I remember I was a kid, and I did black marketing. The peasants didn't need so much sugar or white flour. They needed other things.

So we exchanged and we used plum butter. We made plum butter by big-- a lot. And I put sugar in and a big container, covered it with plum butter, and I went to sell it to get other merchandise that I needed. And things like this we had to do to survive.

Did your father work or do business during this time.

My father-- it was rationed. He was allowed to have only so much leather to sell or to work with.

And it was very tough.

It was difficult.

It was difficult. Food wasn't so in abundance like it--

Yeah. Now, we compare this with parts of Europe that Germany had conquered. Poland comes to mind for instance. There the murder program was going on.

Yes.

What you had was difficult economy it seems.

Yes. And you couldn't work and make a living as it had been formerly. And there wasn't the abundance you had before the war. But you could live.

We lived in our home, not like the Polish Jews that were in ghetto right away.

And this way of living lasted how long? From summer 1940 until when?

Until early '44.

That's a long stretch of time.

Yeah.

In terms of your own life, you're talking about age 12 to age 16 I think.

15, because--

Something like that. All right. Now, what happened to change the situation of '44.

In '44, a law came out that we have to gather ourselves and go into the ghetto. We went into a ghetto. They gathered us, left our home the way it was, and the families with the grandparents, with the aunts and uncles, we went into the ghetto. We were in the ghetto for a month, and then they put us on the cattle wagon, and we were transported.

You know the situation with the cattle wagons? Now, you left home and went into the ghetto in town. Are you in Borod at this time?

Yes.

Borod is the outskirts of?

Of Oradea.

Oradea. Where was the ghetto?

First we went into a ghetto in Borod. We were there not long, maybe two, three weeks. And then they transported us to Oradea.

Now, what were the conditions in the ghetto in Borod.

The townspeople brought us food-- the people in town. We were in the school auditorium. And in school-- it was summer. No school wasn't over yet. We were in the school auditorium. I don't know. I remember we were in the school auditorium.

And we would have been still able to sneak out of there and go up in the mountains to the Romanian peasants, and they would have hidden us. But my father was still believing in the Hungarians. And I was 15, and I was fighting with him, begging him to sneak out. And he wouldn't. And that's what happened. That's why nobody is alive.

The whole of Borod was in this one area in the school?

In the school. And then there were other--

It was a small population that we're talking about--

Yeah.

--if you could all fit into the one school.

No, we didn't. There were three other places. There were in big buildings we were scattered. I was in the school auditorium.

And the townspeople seem to have been pretty decent at this time, because they brought you the food.

The townspeople-- the Romanians, not the --hun the Hungarians, no. This friend of my father never came and never brought us anything. But after liberation, everybody knew. And some of the boys that came back beat them to death-- killed him. His name was Botis, Joseph Botis.

How do you spell Botis?

B-O-T-I-S.

B-O-T-I-S. How did it come about that you were transferred from the ghetto in Borod to the larger one.

To the larger one in Oradea.

Oradea.

And there we went on the train.

How long were you in that ghetto?

Also A very short time-- a couple of weeks. In other words, there was a program.

Yes, yes.

And your turn came.

Right.

The purpose wasn't to have you in a ghetto. The purpose of being in the ghetto was to get you onto the train to go to-- to Auschwitz.

To Auschwitz. How many of you are on the train? Do you recall.

We were like sardines. If I think back of that transport, I myself don't think it's true. And I was there, and I know it's true. It was like, I don't know how the bathroom situation was. The food was what we brought with us. It was like to use up-- we lived on and goose fat. My mother made gribene. You know what gribene is. And the fat from that we used for cooking, like you use oil now.

Now, my mother made, in Jewish they call it einbrenne and in English they call it roux, made roux.

In English they call it what?

Roux. In French they call it roux. In English, I don't know what they call it. Roux is einbrenne-- the flour and fat, and then you dilute that and you put it in. You made the food taste good or taken the sauce or whatever. Like you make gravy. In this country you make gravy with flour.

And that's what she brought on the cattle car?

Yeah. And that's what we ate.

And this lasted-- the trip lasted how long, do you recall?

I think it lasted about a week.

Was the train moving the whole time?

It stopped. It stopped sometimes. And they opened the door. I don't recall detail about the train trip. All I know it was-- we were like sardines in that cattle wagon. We arrived at night to Auschwitz. And then they said that my mother is going with the children and my father is going I don't know where.

And they took me and girls. Early in the morning we arrived, and we went into this big room, . And they undressed us naked. And the German soldier stood in front of us and shaved our hair. I had long braids. Shaved our heads and shaved our pubic hairs, and then made us take our shoes off and stuck in the water-- in Clorox water. And then we put it on, and they gave us one piece rag of a dress.

And we stood there looking at each other in Auschwitz. We didn't know what to do, laugh or cry. We were kids-- 15 years old. And then we went into the barracks.

You knew the other girls? You were only girls at this point?

Yeah, we were only girls.

Did you know each other from camp?

No, No. No, no. They were mixed.

So all strangers.

They're all strangers, yes.

And you said they. Who are they?

The other girls.

No, no. They took us here. They sent these over there. Who is doing this?

The Germans in Auschwitz, the SS. The SS. Mengele came into the barracks almost every day. We had to take that one rag off, hold it like this. And in what do you call it, goose-- in one row.

Goosestepping.

Goosestepping to see if there is something on our body. Then they throw us on the truck and go into the fire. I was selected once, but I jumped off the-- no. Not a car, but a--

A truck.

--a truck. And I went back--

Do you know why you were selected?

Why I was selected? No. I was very skinny maybe.

And how did you know that you didn't want to be there on that truck?

I didn't. I don't know how I know it.

Because that saved your life.

That saved my life.

I don't know how. I just wanted to go back to the barrack. And I went back to the barrack. And then in September-- I think it was September-- they emptied Auschwitz. I was in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] barrack 28.

They emptied the barracks, and they put us by the gate, and we waited our turn. They transported us to this labor camp, to Hohenelbe.

So you are in Auschwitz from-- you said you came there in the summertime?

In the spring.

In the spring. Do you know what month this was?

Maybe May. May. It was May.

So May 1944.

Yes.

You arrived in Auschwitz. And you remained there several months.

Yeah. Till September.

Till September. Sounds like four months, doesn't it?

I never tried to--

What did you do for months in Auschwitz?

Well, nothing. We stayed up early in the morning.

What's that?

They were counted. We went out early in the morning, 5 in a row, in long rows. They counted us. And there were Jewish girls already that were there for a long time. They became so barbaric, they were doing the counting.

And we had these wooden shoes on. And somehow I stepped on a nail once, and I got infected. And the infection ran up my leg, and I couldn't stand. And the girls hid me in the line. We were five in a row, and I sat down.

And she found me. She came, and looked, and she saw me sitting on the ground. And she dragged me out of the line and beat me beat me-- she's still beating me. And it was a Jewish girl, it was a red-headed Jewish girl. Her hair grew already. We were still bald, but her hair grew already because she was there. She became barbaric.

They were called kapos?

Kapos, yeah. And so for four months--

That's what we were there.

What do you recall doing besides being counted?

We sat in our barracks. We went to-- sometimes everybody had a turn to go to the kitchen to bring the food, which was boiled grass. And they slapped in our hand, and it ran down on our arms, and we licked it like this. That's the way we ate. And for breakfast we had some kind of a cheese-- some kind of a smelly cheese. And dirty water for dinner. I don't know what.

And they had latrines, and we went to clean these latrines. There were men there also, but we weren't human. I'm sure you heard it. We didn't have our periods, because whatever they fed us I guess.

And once I went to the kitchen, and the food was in like the garbage cans here, those large garbage cans. Two girls-- me and another girl was bringing this food back from the kitchen, and girl comes, takes this wooden shoe that we used for the bathroom in the night. If somebody had to go to the bathroom, she peed in the shoe. In the morning, she spilled it out when we went in and put it on her feet.

Now, one girl took the shoe off, picked up the lid, stuck it in and she stole this food. So barbaric. I'll never forget that either.

It was a desperate life.

It was an unbelievable life. I went through it, and I don't believe. I don't believe the things that I survived. And I know that many survived longer and more than I did.

And this was the same for four months?

Yeah.

So there was no definite routine or tasks or work you had to do?

Nothing. They just kept us there.

The time hung.

Yes. Time hung.

And after four months, what happened? You're into September '44.

We were waiting at the gate, and then they put us on a train. And I don't remember how long the train ride was. I don't think it was that long. We arrived also at night to this Ober-Hohenelbe.

Where is that?

In the Sudetenland.

In Czechoslovakia.

In Czechoslovakia. And that was, I think it was a radio factory. I was working on a little metal things that I was very unhandy of doing. And I always used to get a slap on my head. But it wasn't bad. The food was pretty good. It was a sort of mush, but it was-- we ate it.

And then we went in the kitchen. And once a week we had showers-- normal showers. And the girls died. One girl died. It was also a barrack, but we had blankets. In Auschwitz we had no blankets. It was only wood boards with not smooth, but when the word is not-- what is it?

Splintered?

Splinters, yeah. And our pillow was our shoe. And we had no room to lie on our backs-- on the sides. They were I think 13 on a board. Not one board. It was out of pieces.

So you we say was not bad in Hollern?

In Hohenelbe.

Hohenelbe.

Hohen--

Hohenelbe.

Ober-Hohenelbe.

Ober-Hohenelbe.

Not bad after a few months in Auschwitz. You felt it was not bad.

Yes.

Had you gotten there directly, you might have had different-- from home, you might have felt differently about it.

Well, you know, Auschwitz, we didn't feel anything in Auschwitz. We weren't human.

But here you were?

Here we were more human. But we still didn't-- the girls didn't have their parents.

What kind of conversations did you have with the other girls in--

Numb.

--in Auschwitz as compared with Ober-Hohenelbe?

The same conversation. We were numb. We never thought that-- at least I never thought that I am not going to find my family.

You had no idea what was going on with your family at this time.

No, I had no idea.

You you saw no one in your family once you came to Auschwitz?

I saw my father about three days later.

What happened?

He came to my barrack in the striped clothes already. And I was bored bald. He said to me, my dear child, what happened to you? What happened to your hair? Did you see mom and the children? And I said no, but I think we'll see them someday-- something like that.

You wanted to calm him down.

I had no idea what that fi-- I saw the flames, I saw the fire, but I had no idea. I had no idea what it was.

When did you understand what was happening?

Later. The girls knew it. The older girls, you know.

The ones who had been there?

Who had been there knew it. And in every barrack that was an oven in the middle. The bunks were on two sides, and in the middle was an oven.

Was it being used when you were there?

No, it wasn't.

So when did the idea hit you that you might not see your family?

I don't even know when. I think when I was in Hohenelbe, the girls were talking about it that there was a crematorium. And all the younger people and mothers, they put them in the crematorium.

In other words, even though you were in Auschwitz--

But I still didn't feel anything. I wasn't hysterical.

Even though you were in Auschwitz for four months, you really didn't know what was going on in Auschwitz.

No. No. I didn't know what was going on in Auschwitz.

It was other people who probably put in more time.

The barrack that I was in, they were all-- I was the youngest group, and there were older people. There was a woman that was older than my mother, and she was selected to be there. Because she had she had two sons-- none of the sons survived-- older than I am. They were about 17 and 18 or 18 and 19-- under 20. But I remember Silverstein was their name.

And she was there with us. She never survived. She lived-- I don't remember when she died. But my mother, because she had young children, was taken right with the children into the fire.

But all of this you began to understand later?

Yes.

At the time, you really didn't understand what was going on.

No. I didn't understand. Maybe others did, but I didn't.

In Auschwitz, a lot of people were tattooed, with the numbers.

Yes. We weren't.

You weren't.

I wasn't.

Do you know why you weren't?

No. No. No, I guess because we came later and they didn't bother or whatever.

And the war was going very badly at that time?

Yeah. Yeah.

So probably the German situation was beginning to be chaotic.

Yes.

Because I noticed that a number of the people who came later and didn't stay there long were not tattooed.

Not tattooed.

I don't even remember. I saw my father, but I didn't ask about the tattoo, and he didn't tell me.

You probably didn't know about it at that time.

I didn't know about it. No. I only remember him he was wearing the striped clothes.

Were you aware of any difference in the treatment of Jewish inmates as compared with non-Jewish inmates?

I don't even know about non-Jewish inmates. There were no non-Jewish inmates there. They were all Jews. And there were the barbed wires, and some of the Jews ran against the wire, and they were electrocuted immediately.

That I saw all the time.

They wanted to do.

That was suicide, you mean?

I guess. I don't know suicide-- maybe unwilling suicide. But the next there was the barbed wire, but I was able to see through the next camp, the next barrack or camp through the barbed wires. There was death-- everybody was dead there. The corpses-- the way they carried the corpses in carts or something. That was like you see in the movies-- those corpses.

That you understood what was happening?

Yeah. But I didn't know they were-- I didn't know what those were. I don't know about corpses they were. They were corpses, but I didn't know they were Jewish corpses. Because those were there for God knows how long, from the Polish and and Slovaks.

The preponderant majority of those who were killed and gassed in Auschwitz were Jewish. We have studies on that now.

Were Jewish, yes. Those that were gassed were Jewish. And these corpses were Jewish also.

Yeah.

And then there was-- I have a cousin in Israel who went in. She was a young married woman. She went in pregnant. She gave birth there.

In Auschwitz.

In Auschwitz. And they hid the baby for about three days. And then the girls took the baby, killed the baby. And I don't know how they-- what they did with the body. Because otherwise the mother would have gone with the baby. I never knew it until she told that to me in Israel.

She survived?

She survived. Her husband survived. And they came back home to Borod when I was there, and she gave birth again to a boy. And I made the big bris. I did all the cooking. Wonderful food-- I am a good cook.

And then I went away to hang around. I had no home. Because our home, where my parent's home, everything was taken out. The floor, the walls was picked up. They were looking for dollars and jewelry, the townspeople. And when I came home the boy died two weeks later from an infection from the bris, from the way the mohel did the job.

Let's go back to Ober-Hohenelbe. You arrived there in September '44.

Right.

Did you say that that was-- you were in a factory there?

Yes.

What kind of work did you do?

On radio parts.

And you did that until when?

Until liberation.

Which was when?

April or May.

So you're talking about a period of four months in '44 and another four months or so-- that's about eight months or so that you are there. And you say that was, in terms of Auschwitz, bearable. In comparison to Auschwitz, that was bearable.

Yeah. Well, I beared Auschwitz also, because I survived it.

Yeah.

But it was unbearable from what you say. Now, how did liberation come to you and the other people in the factory?

We were all girls, and one morning we weren't called to work. And some of the girls looked out the window and they saw black flag on the building-- on the kitchen building. The building we had our dormitory was, downstairs, was the factory. But there was a kitchen, and there was a black flag on the kitchen. And the girl said, we are liberated.

And we want to go out-- to run out of the building-- and Russian soldiers were sitting drunk at the door and wanted to rape us. I didn't know nothing about rape-- I didn't know-- but the older girls, we couldn't get out. And then, finally, somehow they subdued these soldiers, and we ran out.

And then we ran into town and ran into the people's houses, and we took food, and took clothing, and they all let us do it. And at night we went back to the barracks to sleep.

You took without asking?

Pardon me?

You took food and clothing without asking.

We took without asking. Yeah. I was young, but the older girls were the leaders, and we took fabrics, and we made dresses. And we took food. And they were very nice, the townspeople.

And we hung around there for a while. And just before-- I don't even know who arranged to get the transport out of-- maybe the townspeople-- to get the train to get the people to go back where they belong and they came from. I got sick. And the girls took me. I was shivering and I was very sick, and the girls took me to the hospital in town.

And I was-- what do you call it when nobody's allowed to come to you--

Quarantined.

Quarantined. I was quarantined. And this one girl, the rabbi's daughter from my hometown, Suri--

So there were quite a few people from your home town in--

No. It was only this rabbi's daughter.

Oh.

But there were lots of girls from the nearby towns. She came to the window, and she says, we are going home. There's a transport that goes home, and I made the arrangements for you too when you got better to come home. And she did speak to the head of the hospital.

I got better. And there was another girl that had her appendix taken out. And then we got better, and we were waiting to be taken away to get home. And we were waiting a week or two, I think, and the townspeople brought us clothes and food. And they were very nice-- and sandwiches.

And the garden was beautiful, and we were vacationing there. But we wanted to go home already. And they never took us to Prague. This was like in-- and I said to her, Muncy, tomorrow morning we go into the train station, and we're going home. And she was afraid, but she came with me.

And we went into Prague. We arrived 8 o'clock in the morning.

You did this without any money.

Yes. Yes. They knew-- sure, we had no money. We told them who we were. and they came to look to us for tickets, and we told them who we were, and they let us go. We arrived to Prague, get off the train, and we approached a man. And he took us for breakfast, and then he took us to the Russian zone. And we went in there, and they didn't let us out.

It was a big building, a big room, and we laid on the empty floor, on the stone floor there, for two or three nights. And they fed us junk. And I said to this woman, I'm getting out of here, come with me. And she was afraid. She said, they don't let us out.

This woman is the one who got the appendix out.

Yes.

Was she a girl at the time? A girl, 24 years old. A girl.

To you she was a woman.

She wasn't as sharp as I was. I was younger, but I was sharp. And she didn't come out, and she stayed there. And I went into Prague, and I hung around town, walked around there. And I went into restaurants and places to ask for food. And they gave me-- I was nothing.

And then I, on a bench, was sitting. A Romanian middle-aged man with some young men in a uniform, a captain's uniform, and I went over and I talked to them. And right away he took me. And he says, you come with me.

And I went with him. He had a horse. He sold the horse. He got food-- bread, butter, milk, salami-- a big salami-- and we went up to the hotel room where he stayed. And he gave me pajamas. I slept in pajamas that night. And a few days or a week later, we boarded a train, a sleeping car. I slept on a train. I don't even think I slept, but it was a sleeping car.

And he went to Constanta. He was from Constanta. And in Budapest I changed trains, and I went to my hometown.

Constanta is in what country?

Constanta is in Romania, the seaport. It's the Black Sea.

Right.

By the Black Sea.

So you were two Romanians.

We were to Romanians. He had no children. He begged me to go home with him. He said, you have nobody waiting for you. All your family was killed. And I didn't believe him.

What was he-- he was a not Jewish Romanian.

No, no. A Romanian Christian. A Greek Orthodox. I think that's what they are. And I went home. Of course, there was nobody. But there were struggling people here or there, and some men some women came-- young-- came back. And there was no furniture in my parent's house, so I stayed with these people.

One night here, one night then. I ate here, I ate there. I had no home.

This is back in--

In Romania.

In Romania. In--

In Borod.

In Borod.

And then I get a letter. The mailman brings me a letter. On the street he recognizes me, because I had just come to my house. Brings me a letter. He says, Sylvia, you got a letter from America. I get a letter from one of my aunts. She knows what went on and asking who is alive.

And I wrote back, I said I am the only one that's alive.

You knew it for a fact now.

I knew it for a fact. No, I knew it-- but for years I was looking for my older brother who was 13 and my father because I was told that he is alive. But then he was a religious man, and he prayed over the corpses. Not corpses but the other camps, like Buchenwald and these camps. I don't know which camp my father was in, but somebody came home and said that your father is alive, because he was praying over us.

And then somebody else came home, two boys, a young man, said no, they killed your father because he was healthy, and he walked between us, and he was praying over us. And the Germans-- there were about 30 out of thousands that were half dead in typhoid-- typhoid fever you know, that's what they all got-- and the Americans came and revived them, brought them back to life. And they killed-- the Germans shot the ones that were standing on their feet, and my father was one of them.

So he perished because he was healthy.

He perished because he was healthy.

There was no way to win.

There was no way. And still today I always think of my older brother at least. Is he somewhere alive? He was a

beautiful, young, healthy 13-year-old boy. He has his bar mitzvah already. He had his bar mitzvah in February of that year. It was 13 February 3.

Of 1944.

1944.

Now, you were telling us that you received the letter from America.

Yeah. I received a letter from America. And I answered that I am home alone. And my aunt wrote me another letter saying your cousin Jack and Julia, who died in this country of breast cancer at the age of 39, and Julia's son Jack is in Frankfurt in the American army. He'll get in touch with you, and he will get you out to America somehow.

And then I got a letter from him to pack up and somebody is going to come and get me. Well, I sold the house-- my house, the walls. And for the money I bought boots, and fur-lined coat, and some clothes to get ready for the trip to America. And then this boy came, and he made arrangements to cross the borders. The borders were closed already.

And he said, don't worry. We were about six in a group that were crossing borders illegally to try to get from one country to the other. We crossed the border from Romania to Hungary. We walked all night, hearing the shots-- the gunshots-- from the border guards. But we didn't get hurt.

And from Romania to Hungary. Then we went to Budapest. We washed in the puddle from the mud up to our necks. And we went from there, we took the train, and we went into Budapest.

Now, in Budapest it took a long time, about four weeks, to try to go to this town page where it was near the border.

The young man was with you the whole time?

The young man was with me the whole time.

Who was this young man? Your cousin Jack sent them, but who was he.

This young man was also a young boy that lost his family. They were two brothers, him and an older brother that stayed in Germany, in Frankfurt, trying to get to America.

After the war.

After the war. He got to America. But I got to America earlier.

And Jack knew him.

Jack met them in Frankfurt on the street. Jack spoke Hungarian, because he learned Hungarian from grandma here in America. And he heard the Hungarian language on the street and he approached him. American soldier approached a refugee-- that was a big deal. He knew an American soldier. And they made contact. They're still friends today.

And he told them about me. My cousin told them that he's got a cousin in Borod and he would like to get him her out here. And this young man said, yes, I'll do it. And he came, and he got me, and we crossed about five borders.

It was not easy. All night we were walking in mud up to our. Necks and then finally we got two Linz. I was in Vienna in the Rothschild castle, where lots of refugees stayed. I think you know about that. And from there we went to Linz. We went to Salzburg, and they stopped us. We were in a taxi, and they stopped us. We were illegal there.

But somehow-- I don't remember how-- this boy got us out of it. And we went to Linz. And Linz was a half American half Russian zone. And the boy got some illegal identification papers-- and he gave me one, and he had one, and the

others, we were about six in the group-- that we were going from the Russians zone to the American zone to work. And this end was a Russian soldier with the gun standing guard.

And he looked at it. I was 16 years old, 17 years old. And looked at the identification paper, and he started a conversation with me. I spoke a few words of Russian somehow. And the boy was ahead of me. Already and he sees that I stopped there. He got scared that I am in trouble.

So then I said goodbye to the soldier, and I went, and the American soldier let me go. And we went in. There was an organized some kind of a place, home, where all these kind of people were taken in and given food. And I was in heaven. I was in America-- the Americas.

This is a phenomenal story. The boy who came to take you out, did he know that he was endangering his life? That he was going to force all these borders illegally?

You know, we weren't afraid. There was nothing we could lose. He only wanted to help another victim like me.

That's phenomenal. You probably know him well today.

I know him, yes.

Where does he live. he's. Retired now. He has two very successful sons. One is a lawyer for the stars in California in Hollywood. And one is in Boston. And he has about five or six grandchildren.

What's his name?

His name is Mike Berkowitz.

The one who saved you.

The one who saved me.

Well, he didn't save me.

Rescued you.

Well, sure, rescued.

Well, listen, he brought you, you said, to heaven, to the American side.

Yes, he did.

Yeah. All right. So now you're in the American zone, and life is different. Or is it still--

Life is different.

It's immediately different?

Then, from there, all these refugees stayed in the camp where the Germans used to stay during the war. It was called Pocking. And I went to Pocking because he stayed there. He, his brother, cousins, friends already, stayed in Pocking in barracks. But they--

This is Austria. Is it Austria or Germany?

No, it's Germany. How do you spell Pocking, do you know?

It's the way I say i-- P-O-K-I-N-- and G.

Where is it? Near what the big city?

I think Frankfurt.

That's where your cousin Jack was.

Yeah. My cousin Jack was with the American army.

When did you meet-- Oh, I see. I just noticed by the clock that we are finishing the tape. We'll have to take a short break, and we'll get together with Jack on the new tape. And then we'll finish the story.

OK.