

Document: Irena Otrębska Interview – Translation
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Additional information:

This is a verbatim transcript of a videotaped interview with Irena Otrębska conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies (link: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508833>)

ROBERT BUCKLEY: ...1995. And we are in Poland, outside of Warsaw, in the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses and we're interviewing one of Jehovah's Witnesses, who was in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, as well as others. And we'll begin our interview at this time. OK. Could you please ask her name and where was she born?

INT: Could you please introduce yourself, your name...

IRENA: My name is Irena Otrębska. My current name?

INT: Yes.

IRENA: Irena Otrębska.

INT: Could you give us your date of birth?

IRENA: January 9, 1922.

INT: And your parents' names?

IRENA: Maria and Jan.

INT: Do you remember what was the occupation of your parents? Could you say something?

IRENA: My mother used to work for Polish families before the war, there was no work in the factories, and my father was a baker, but (was also) a heavy drinker.

INT: Did you have any siblings?

IRENA: I had a sister, but she died (when) she was 6 years old.

ROBERT BUCKLEY: (Inaudible)

INT: How was your family life like?

IRENA: Well, I went to elementary school in Sosnowiec, my mother lived in Sosnowiec, and I continued until third grade there. From the third grade of elementary school, despite the fact that my father left for France, my mother was left destitute and so she sent me to the countryside to my grandmother, to my father's mother. I was there for 5 years. I went to school there, to elementary school. Later, I was sent... brought back to Sosnowiec and here I finished seventh grade – sixth and seventh grade in Sosnowiec.

INT: And...

IRENA: After I finished elementary school, I couldn't go to secondary school, because my mother did not have the circumstances. I was also raised in an orphanage. Later my mother took me from the orphanage. But I am sorry – I will come back to this – because in the orphanage I went to second grade and to "*ochronka*" (nursery), as they used to call it. It was just a child's life. Then, when I finished elementary school, I had to work for a Polish family, to serve, you know, to work.

3:02

INT: And when did you come across 'the truth' for the first time?

IRENA: I learned 'the truth' in 1940, when the war started. Maybe it was even in 1939, but I wouldn't count that, because it was already October and I only heard a little, but (I got to know) more in January. I worked... I went to Myszków, because it was the war and young girls were sent to Germany. And I knew a gentleman from the Trade Unions there, and he directed me to Myszków to one of his friends, who had the position of factory director there. And I worked there for his family. And they were renovating apartments, and there were two painters, fleshly brothers. One of them was 'in the truth' - Brother Nakielski, and he started telling me about the Kingdom of God. There was a Polish director, who was removed, and this building, the villa, where I was assigned, was taken over by a German man. The housekeeper and her daughter lived in (the house) and worked for this Polish director, and they were actually the first to hear from Nakielski about 'the truth.' I used to visit them, her daughter was older than me but we became friends because I didn't know anyone in Myszków. And they said: "You know what? You should be interested in what this painter says, who comes here. There will be a Kingdom of God, there will be a New Order, eternal life." And I thought, 'Ah, should I change my faith?' "But let's just see, because I heard it in Sosnowiec, and it was interesting." Well, that's how it happened. I started visiting them, but my mother used to come there almost every other day – to Myszków, to me, and I told her right away. And then it started!

INT: Some major persecution or opposition?

IRENA: She immediately started to say: "I will get it out of your head, because your grandfather, great-grandfather believed it and they did not live to see it, now will you disturb your family?" Well, I then (thought), 'If grandfather, and great-grandfather...' my heart was so joyful that there had to be something to it. And I told my housekeeper friend what happened with my mother, that she was so aggressive, and she would come to talk to me. But they gave me a brochure, I think it was "*Heaven and Purgatory*" or something like that, such a pamphlet to read. I was reading it in the evenings, and when my mother came, I already knew more and I said: "Listen mother, think about it, here is the truth, I will probably leave (our) religion." And she was so aggressive that she told this German man for whom I worked, that I had learned a different faith, that she would not agree to it, and that he should put pressure on me. So, he talked to me, and I said this: "After all, to believe in God, I'm old enough to..." because I was 17, then I said: "if I do all my duties for you, who cares what I believe in?" – I answered. "But your mother forbade you!" "No, in this case neither mother, nor you..." – I said right away aggressively. "Nobody will impose any faith on me, as I am getting to know a book, the Holy Scriptures" – I did not know the Holy Scriptures yet, but I said: "... and there are Gospels in it, there is sound teaching in it," I said: "I don't think I will return to (my) religion." But my mother was so aggressive that he sent me to the factory and said: "I will give you such a job, that you won't earn enough even for black coffee and dry bread!" And he sent me to a factory to (make) pots. There used to be the "*Światowit*" factory – it is still in Myszków to this day. It was... it was in Myszków, to (work with) those '*acids*.' But I had a good time there, because I worked three shifts and I could meet with the brothers. Whenever I worked the morning shift, I would go to the brothers in the afternoon and acquire knowledge. Each time my mother came, I knew more and more. So I did not allow her to talk me out of learning these Biblical teachings and I tried to learn 'the truth' more and more.

8:15

INT: And when were you baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses?

IRENA: Then I worked... because of my mother again... the Employment Office... I will come back to that... Well, the German Employment Office... It was like this, there was a law that young girls were

not allowed to work here in Poland, with the exception of agriculture. He sent me to the factory, but girls were not allowed to work in the factory. Still he sent me to the factory. I worked, but it was forbidden to work in the factory, (I was meant) only to work for him, as I had worked before, or to go to the 'bauer' (to work on the farm) in Germany. So, the 'Arbeitsamt' in Sosnowiec – The Employment Office – brought me back to Sosnowiec. There was a middle-aged couple there, they had a boy around 12 years old. I went to work there. I worked, and in 1943 I was baptized. I told her right away, but they didn't understand anything in Polish. So I took the Holy Bible and told them that I was a Jehovah's Witness. She understood, and told me that her mother 'mutter' and father 'vater' were as well, but whether they were (Witnesses) or were interested I did not understand, only that it brought us closer. I also understood that she knew Jehovah's Witnesses and she changed her attitude towards me. I noticed that she started to trust me more... So, I worked there, and she gave me 2 hours of free time for myself every week on Sundays. In the meantime, I became acquainted with the brothers and I also started (going to) them when I had these two hours off. And they introduced me to (other) brothers, because my mother tried terribly to intervene, terribly! She didn't let me find any contact anywhere! But they introduced me to brothers in Czeladź. I was already working there for a few weeks, when I got acquainted with brothers in Czeladź, and when Sunday came, at 1 p.m. the lady would let me go, I had the day off until 3 p.m. I would go through the cemetery, because there was a cemetery there, where the power plant was in Sosnowiec, and the cemeteries were not fenced. Through the cemetery, through the fields, I ran straight to Piaski – Czeladź Piaski, to our brothers. They would teach me songs and we would study, as we understand it now, it was a Bible study. And so, in that way I acquired knowledge through the brothers, until the (time of digging) the trenches. When it came to digging the trenches, it was ordered that all the residents of Sosnowiec should gather to a place called "Skałki", in the suburbs of Sosnowiec. I also went there because I had to go, my German lady sent me there too. I went there, and I saw that the trenches were dug. I went to the... I had to know, because of my conscience, now I had to obey God's law. I had to be careful here, what I should and shouldn't do. And just like that, I acquired knowledge all by myself, although brothers had studied (with me), nobody told me that you must or mustn't dig (trenches), or whatever. And I went there and I asked these men and I said, "Will we be... what are we going to do here?" And they said: "Listen, we dig ditches here, the Germans will lay mines and you will bury them. If the army or some military cars pass by, they will explode and kill them." I ran home as fast as I could, and I told the German lady that I would not go any more, that I would not do it. I just ran away. Well, I said that I would not do it, and then she brought a woman who sometimes translated for us, and I told her: "It is not in accordance with God's law, I will not do it."

12:08

INT: Was this the reason for your arrest?

IRENA: Yes, it was the reason for my arrest. For... for, for... because I had... she had arranged that I just had to report and come (back.) But I said: "No, it would burden my conscience, I cannot do it." And then she received a phone call for me to report to the Gestapo and it all ended. In the Gestapo, I was taken to a room for about two or three hours... they took a rod...

INT: But did they come home for you?

IRENA: No, no, no – by myself, myself to...

INT: You have reported...

IRENA: Well, because they gave a phone call that I must report.

INT: Yes.

IRENA: Well, when I reported, they asked me there why I did not go (to dig trenches.) I told them:

"I will not go, because I know the Holy Scriptures and as a Jehovah's Witness – it was not yet official then – I said: "I'm 'in the truth'" and I told him that I will not do it. And he took a rod as thick as a hand, when he put it on me, I had a bruise after, but he did not hit me. He put it like that and said: "I could beat you with this rod into pieces." He said: "See how they walk" – there was beautiful weather, because it was July – "See, how they walk on the street." And I didn't say anything. He said: "Will you go?" I said: "No." And then, by car they took me to the Ostra Górká prison in Sosnowiec. I got there... (Documents are passed to Irena) Well, I know... When they put me in the cell there, there were about three female prisoners, but they were not our sisters, not our sisters. And I started (speaking to) them immediately, what I already knew about the Kingdom of God, I started to tell them. And it was like that for the first week in prison – nothing. The second week – nothing.

14:07

INT: And were there some interrogations at this time?

IRENA: In prison, there were not. Only this German lady called them to convince me that I could come back and that she had everything already arranged, so that I would not go to dig the trenches. However, my conscience would not allow me. So, I said that I would not, I would not go to the trenches. So, I have stayed in prison for two weeks. Suddenly the cell opened, and two women entered. And there was such a commotion in the prison, and I immediately started talking to them: "What are you here for?" "For the trenches." And I felt so happy in my heart. I was so happy that I also did the right thing, and then they said: "You know what? The whole prison is filled with Jehovah's Witnesses." Well, this is how we were imprisoned. How long were we there?... a month or two in Ostra Górká in Sosnowiec and later they took us to the camp, in small train cars, which fitted ten. It was impossible to sit or move, one next to another we had to stand. And they let us out every so often, but we didn't know exactly when.

15:23

INT: Did you know where you are going?

IRENA: No, no. No one said anything, but they led us in handcuffs to the train. It was dark, I do not know what the hour was, either the morning, or the evening, I did not know whether it was dawn or dusk. The train stood with train cars, and into these they pushed ten of us in each one, and we took off. Where and when, for how many hours, I do not know... At night they would take us out, take us to prison, but in which city it was not possible to know. Then again, in the morning, also around dawn, again to these train cars. They transported us for a few days, I do not know if ...

INT: Could you tell us something about the conditions in this transport?

IRENA: Not much, just that when someone wanted to go to the toilet or drink, it was not possible. We only had as much food as we were given. My mother did not give me anything, because she did not know when I would be taken away, but the sisters cared for us and they shared what they had and this is what we only ate. Well, when we would get off, they would give us: water, black coffee, whatever they had in prison. There was black coffee, or if someone wanted water, they gave you water, in prison.

INT: And do you remember those, those...

IRENA: And to the concentration camp....

INT: ... those days of travel, do you remember what it was like?

IRENA: Well, as I mentioned, there were 10 of us in each train car. We couldn't see anything, there were no windows. There was a smaller window at the top, as I recall, but it was already 55 years ago. I only know that we were huddled in the train cars, this is how we were transported. And every now

and then, when you were transported – as I have already said – you didn't know if they transported you a day, two or 24 hours. And they threw us into the cellars, and then they led us in handcuffs to the prison, and transported us again. It was that way until Berlin. In Berlin, we were held there for 24 hours. From Berlin, they put us on another train, a normal one. There we could even sit on the floor. There were no benches, but these were larger compartments, we had more space, all the way to Ravensbrück.

17:53

INT: Did you know you were going to a concentration camp?

IRENA: We didn't know anything. We were guessing, because when they took us there from prison, and we saw the barracks in the camp, prisoners had such badges: red, black, purple, and so we asked: "What do these mean?" "Well, for what someone serves their sentence, they have this badge" – this is how you find out what the sentence is for. And they assigned us to barrack No. 27. It was a very scary hut, nothing but... broken windows. Whoever was clever there, escaped from this barrack... either to the gypsies or to the Jews, somewhere, where no one knew. But only one or two could escape, it was impossible, because it was suspicious. So, in this barrack... we had to appear at roll-call the next day. They gave us red badges, but we didn't know what the badges were, or what the color of the badges meant. Only later did we ask the prisoners what... what the badges meant, what they were for. Well, it was then that we found out that purple were Jehovah's Witnesses. Ah ha! Well, then, I went to the "*sztubowa*" – she was the barrack supervisor who managed this barrack – and I said: "Will you give us purple badges? Because we are Jehovah's Witnesses and we will not wear these badges." She was a bit reluctant, it lasted for several days, but I said: "No"... I took out this badge (and said): "Please change this badge for me." And all our sisters got purple badges and our German sisters started to recognize us. But it was not possible (to make contact) at the camp, because we were under (watch), since we were a new transport. The SS 'camp elders' were already checking on us every day and were interested in us, because we were young, so they wanted us for the ammunition factory. I stepped forward and said that we would not go to the ammunition factory, because we were prisoners for refusing to go to war and we would not be involved in killing people. And then a SS man took a rod and waved it over our heads. I thought that one sister of ours was hit, because she was very tall, later I asked her, but she had bent. He said: "I will beat you to pieces with this rod!" But we were not... I've always been brave, I went everywhere by myself first, I didn't wait for others, I just went ahead. On the next day, another roll-call and again... because new ones always went to roll-call and were sent to work, and the next day again – where? Well, to sew military uniforms. I said that I would not go there again – there was a Silesian who translated everything from Polish for us. I said: "Sir, we will not do any military work." And this SS man said: "Against the wall! To be shot! Bring the machine gun!" – this world "machine" we understood.

21:17

INT: Was it about you or about others as well?

IRENA: About all of us! There were over 20 of us. They were from Strzemieszyce, Zawiercie, from everywhere, they took us to this prison, they brought us here... but only later in Ravensbrück I found out who is from where. Before that, I only knew that the two that were in my cell with me were from Zawiercie. Because it was not possible... it was so that... maybe Jehovah God had already directed it – all the sisters went to work to the "*bauer*." Let me come back to Sosnowiec, when we were still in prison, they all went to the "*bauer*" – to the field, but they did not take me... Maybe this was what the Creator directed, because Mother would go there every day, wherever the prisoners worked, she looked for where they were working. Because the guards told her that some had gone to work there and she was looking for us. She found our sisters from Ząbkowice and asked if they knew me. And one replied, "Yes! She is imprisoned with us." "Why isn't she here?" – "Well, she's not here."

However, this is what the Creator directed, because who knows what she would do there, I don't know. But enough about that. In Ravensbrück (they wanted us to sew) these uniforms and they put us against the wall, but a SS-man was passing by. He saw us standing against the wall and he asked the SS-woman who told us to stand there. Then he spoke with her for a long, long time, perhaps an hour, he must have known Jehovah's Witnesses. And then she said "*Raus!*" – to the blocks. And we departed. Then they sent us to chop trees, we chopped big stumps, dug out stumps, out from the forest. Prisoners did not cut them down, and such stumps had to be broken up with wedges... into small pieces for the kitchen, we chopped them up. Then from that... we were chopping there, I don't remember for how long, quite a long time we were chopping. And then they put us in the laundry room. And we in this laundry room... And it was then, they started to say that... that the Germans were fleeing from Poland – such rumors were spreading, but it was hard to believe them. But maybe it was true, because there was a certain panic among those... at the camp, the Germans changed a bit, their attitude changed towards the prisoners, towards us. In general, in prison, they said that the Germans had become so delicate. So, we chopped these stumps and then they put us in the laundry room. And in the laundry room there were baptisms twice, 16 Russian women were baptized.

24:05

INT: I understand that you were staying close to each other?

IRENA: We stayed close to one another. There were 24 or 26 of us. Well, more than 20. Only Polish women, and later there were Hungarian or Bulgarian sisters – three of them, they were older women. They joined us there to chop trees and worked with us. Well, we had a little lighter work. I said: "Girls, chop the trees!" because when we brought one or two loads (of wood) to the kitchen, they always gave us soup. But in the barracks there was only rutabaga, a boiled stew with rutabaga and water. I could never eat it, one of the sisters could and she ate mine, because I could not do it. In the kitchen, whenever we brought one or two loads, the "*aufzjerk*" (female guard) would say: "Come here." So, I went and she told us to take the whole pot, we all shared this soup together, with all the Hungarians, with as many of us as were there. And that's how we survived. This is how the Creator guided it. Later the sisters were hired to work in the laundry, and we worked in the laundry like that until the end.

25:20

INT: Do you think religion made it easier for you to survive?

IRENA: Well, I think the Creator protected us, because we saw the other prisoners, and what they were doing.

INT: And could you tell us something about that?

IRENA: Hunger, hunger, for example, we could bear hunger more easily. For example, my mother sent me a package to the camp. It was bread cut into cubes, not large, the size of sugar cubes, dried bread, and two onions. So, I distributed these pieces between all 28 of us in the barrack, all of us shared these pieces, and the onion. Well, I can only owe it to Jehovah God that we survived.

26:17

INT: And when it comes to these situations, you probably would meet, maybe you had a Bible and talked with others about it?

IRENA: We had no Bible. Only twice, the German sisters gave us a Bible scripture on a piece of paper. So, we only read it. In Polish, in Polish.

INT: Did you also talk to others...?

IRENA: Well, we did not talk to the sisters that much, because they spoke German, and we could not understand each other. They were already imprisoned there for 12 or 13 years, since Hitler had come to power. These sisters said only that their sons and husbands were in prison, and once we got a message that we should pray, because about 80 of our brothers were going to be executed... these sisters' sons.

INT: Well, I was thinking about other people, from these other groups...

IRENA: Ah 'from the world' (meaning: not Jehovah's Witnesses)? Yes, we were speaking (to them) because when we were in the barracks we spoke about the Kingdom of God, they were even interested, but there was nothing they could really read, because it was not possible. But when it comes to the Kingdom of God, there was a Greek woman who came and said: "Irena..." – because it was close to the end of the war... and transport arrived, so the prisoners were silently interested from where this prisoner transport was from – and she said: "The war is ending, because we came from Auschwitz, they are evacuating Auschwitz" and she thought that the transport was from Auschwitz. Well, about the Kingdom of God... we would always speak in the evenings. And this Greek woman just came to me and said: "You know what, Irena? I guess I will also be executed" because the Germans were already starting to call prisoners one by one, but you know, some people...

28:26

INT: What was the purpose of that?

IRENA: To behead, shoot or hang someone.

INT: Why one by one? Was there a reason...?

IRENA: The war was ending and she just came to me and said: "You know what? They will also call me and for sure..." But for what she was imprisoned, I did not ask her, because it was no longer... about the Kingdom of God, we were talking a lot and that's why she was looking to be rescued between us, but this was not possible. In the end they called her and she went, and I never saw her again. Earlier, there was one German woman with whom we talked about 'the truth', as we were chopping the trees. She sometimes came to talk, and once she said: "I probably will also be... The Germans will definitely destroy me." I said: "Why?" She said, "Because they arrested me" – three Russians were caught at her house, she had hid them and was caught, so you know, maybe it was just for such things. But for our (sisters) not so much – death was only from illness.

29:35

INT: Did you get sick?

IRENA: I got sick... At the end of the war I had rubella (German measles) on my legs, and then maybe a month or longer, there were general roll-calls. Sisters and even 'worldly' (meaning not Jehovah's Witnesses) too, held me in the middle, because we had to stand in fours. So, they put me the middle, because I had a high fever and could not stand on my legs anymore. Otherwise the SS-man would pull me out and shoot me, but somehow...

INT: ... and you had to come to the roll-call?

IRENA: You had to go to roll-call... It was no longer possible to take 'sick' (leave), because whoever was sick then was sent to the gas, shot or hanged. It was no longer possible. There were tense situations, tense days, somehow, thanks to God I survived. And then as the Russian army came – because the Russians set us free – then the girls took me to the Russian hospital, when the Red Cross arrived.

30:34

INT: How many people were in this large camp at the moment of liberation?

IRENA: It is hard for me to tell. Even the German sisters did not say. One German sister belonged to 'the anointed remnant.' As we were working in the laundry the other German sisters told us, that it was once a penalty barrack. And she was imprisoned in this barrack, sister Anna – I remember her. Well, she was imprisoned in this barrack, but for what I do not know. It was difficult to communicate if you do not know the language, and also you had to be very careful, because even prisoners, some to gain something were watching others. I even saw 'worldly' ones who denounced others. For example, there was this understanding among us that we should not take injections, that there is blood in each injection. So, in the concentration camp, when it came to take injections, I stepped forward and said that I will not take it. As it came to me, I said: "I will not accept it, we are Jehovah's Witnesses and we will not take these injections, because it is against the law of God." And this "sztubowa" (barrack supervisor) got angry and said: "You must accept it! You must accept it!" I said: "You cannot force me" and she always tried to force me... I said: "Listen, I will die today, and you will die tomorrow, because we are in this together, but you will not force me to do it and harm my conscience." Then they called the SS-woman, who came and took me aside, and said: "You will go to the bunker", but I just stood there... All our sisters accepted, but I did not. So, she came up to me, this SS-woman, actually she did not come to me, she took me aside and said: "*Komme hier*" (come here.) I went to her, and she said: "Since I wear this uniform, will God destroy me?" And I did not know what to think, or if I had heard her correctly, and I said this: "There is no divine judgment yet, everything is in God's power" – because I was surprised with this question, and she said "*Raus!*" – to go back to the barrack, but all our sisters accepted it. And I had to explain it to the others, because I went for the injection first. Was it not God's care? God looked after us with great care. Because this could have been an opportunity to give a witness. Then others started saying that you need to have faith, but you have to have faith like Irena's. Thanks to God, we were keeping together as a group and as I was sick on these legs, I got rubella (German measles), and then as the Russian army came, the Red Cross arrived, our sisters and even 'worldly' women tried to find out if the army hospital had come. And when it came, they took me there quickly and there I laid. There were no gates in the camp, so the Russians had a patrol. A lot of German prisoners left the camp, because they may have lived nearby. Ravensbrück is surrounded by a lake, so a lot of German sisters also stayed. Later they gradually started to leave, but we Poles who were taken from Polish territories, or even these Hungarians, had to wait until they gave a message that there were trains stationed. This was the town of Fürstenberg – the first station from Ravensbrück and there were a variety of trains with cars, one had to get there on her own. And when I went to hospital, the doctor there healed me. They told me to stay, because it was not perfectly healed, but it healed so that I don't have problems with my legs to this day.

34:54

INT: When you were in the camp, did you believe that you would leave Auschwitz (meant Ravensbrück) alive?

IRENA: No one thought about it. We only hoped to remain faithful to God, to remain in the Lord... to keep faithful, and no one has thought about if we would survive. None of us talked about it, it did not pass through our minds. We did not think about it at all.

INT: And how did you feel after liberation?

IRENA: Well, we all... For example, when the Russian army entered, some prisoners, mostly Russian women, threw themselves on their necks, greeting them, but we did nothing, because such liberation is not the kingdom of God yet, it was not Armageddon, was it? Well, we were quite calm.

That's why I say, my brother, I went to hospital, as (soon as) they let me know, then the doctor told me that it would be good for me to stay, but I knew that it was impossible to stay. Well, the girls took me and we departed. But what a transport it was! We were going home probably for a month. They stopped the transport in the fields. And as I went to the village, for clean water or milk from the farmers, because the train stopped near the village. They said: "Ah, from prison, for what were you imprisoned?" I said: "We were imprisoned, because we read the Holy Bible" – I always told them, the Germans: "Because we were reading the Scriptures." Well, in this way we came home and it started again—hell at home again. It was better for me in the concentration camp than at home. My mother started to act in a terrible way.

36:49

INT: Are you saying it was worse than in the camp?

IRENA: Exactly, because I could not have anything. She burned or destroyed all my literature. She chopped the Holy Scriptures with an ax, and with this ax in the morning when I was still sleeping, and at once I felt something on my head, and there... iron. I looked, and she stood over me and said: "I will chop you, like your Bible, I will show the book, I will chop you like it" – I looked and she really went and chopped the Holy Scriptures. Well, every now and then she would approach me and with this ax shouted: "I will chop you!" Then a neighbor came to her and said: "You know what, I have some poison" – she said in my presence: "You can give her poison, she will sleep, and you will have peace of mind." If I ever wanted to go out, they would rip my garments, I had to always have a dress, or a blouse hidden somewhere in a bag, so as to have something to change into. I even could not go to a funeral. It was terrible, terrible. Even when I got married, I moved to Żąbkowice, because my husband is from Żąbkowice. So, when we lived there, our brothers contacted us, because they used to have meetings there in my father-in-law's time, even during the war they were conducting meetings there. When they got to know that Janek (Jan) was married, they started again, but the peace didn't last for long. As my mother came, the brothers had to go to the attic. You could not stand it, you could not.

INT: Does it mean that soon after liberation...

IRENA: (it was the) second concentration camp.

INT: The second? Worst? So, you weren't bringing Ravensbrück back to mind?

IRENA: Absolutely not! I had to defend myself here. I had to be careful. For example, it was the 1950s, there was a ban. Well, in 1945 the war was over. I got married in 1946 and the trouble had already started. In 1950 our brothers had meetings, so I had to be careful not to cause any trouble for my brothers. More than once the brothers had to go to the attic. I took her by the shoulders and said: "Mom, go home and don't show yourself here at all." But she was as if the Devil was leading her, a devilish tool. It was clearly visible. Even brothers said: "You know what? She is a real devil!"

INT: Has she ever changed?

IRENA: She never changed. Later, when my children grew up and went to school, she was afraid to cause a scene again, so she would not destroy my literature anymore. When the children started talking, she didn't want to listen. She liked her grandchildren, so sometimes when I had to go to work, she would take the oldest daughter – she was four years old – so she would understand if my mom tried to bring her to church. She didn't intervene with my children anymore, but she was still against it. She would no longer destroy the literature, but always made a fuss about it. When there was a meeting, the same thing: "They are coming together, they are already coming!" and I would reply: "You have the door open, go to Sosnowiec." It was like that until her death.

INT: It proves that the most difficult opposition comes from those the closest to us.

IRENA: Well, it was, and in the end, as I said, it happened that hateful spirit against 'the truth' and our brothers was terrible.

40:54

INT: (Switches to English) So we have arrived at the point after the Second World War. The sister is saying that the persecution she was suffering from the hands of her mother was much worse than the concentration camp. So, she is saying that right after one concentration camp, she was enduring the other one. Perhaps more difficult, she said a few words about that. That is the story.

ROBERT: OK, can she tell us a little bit about her family today, does she have children and so on...?

INT: Could you say something about your family today?

IRENA: I have all my children 'in the truth'.

INT: And how many children do you have?

IRENA: I have four children. Well, they are children under fifty – the oldest daughter is 45 years old. The daughter of the one that is here, son-in-law's wife (unclear meaning) was also a pioneer before she got married. My granddaughter from my oldest daughter is a pioneer, she married, they do not have children and she is a pioneer. During the holidays, all the older granddaughters take part in... even a daughter also went with her daughter – with my granddaughter. And my second daughter, also with my granddaughter, went on a special preaching campaign, because my son-in-law, who is married to my oldest daughter, is overseeing a special preaching campaign. So they also went on that campaign. When it comes to present times, I am thankful to Jehovah God that I have all my children 'in the truth.'

42:35

INT: Where do you live now?

IRENA: One daughter, they live in Sosnowiec, one lives in Śródula Sosnowiec district, the second one lives in Klimontów Sosnowiec, and the third lives in Zagórze Sosnowiec – these are new districts. And we live in Ząbkowice, with my son. And my son has two children. He is 'in the truth' and a ministerial servant.

ROBERT: Maybe she would like to show some of the documents that she has, maybe (unclear) ...she is holding on her lap now?

INT: Could you show one of those documents that you have here and explain, for example... could you take it to your hand... and explain what it is? Can you hold it...

IRENA: But this is German.

INT: Ah, but can you say what it is?

IRENA: This is the document from the concentration camp, isn't it? Yes, from the concentration camp, they gave it to us. I had one from the hospital – even an ID as well. What is this?

INT: (Switches to English) In English – International Tracing Service. Certificate...

ROBERT: What is that for ...

INT: ... Ravensbrück

ROBERT: She was being traced by...?

INT: Yes.

IRENA: Ah, This one.

INT: ... (to) testify that she was a prisoner of this concentration camp... this number and... information.

ROBERT: (unclear) OK, Now this is a....

JAN (IRENA's husband): This is a statement about the camp, because the Russians did not produce any documents in the camp. But they gave her a hand written 'ausweis' (certificate) so she could come home.

INT: (in English) This is in Russian. The Russians didn't have any kind of official documents, so they prepared something in handwriting. That was a kind of pass, so that she was permitted to go back home.

JAN: ... in Russian ... in German.

INT: (in English) There is in German, but there is in Russian. The Russian authorities, Russian authorities that liberated the camp, gave this document allowing to go back home.

45:03

ROBERT: OK, is there anything on the other side?

JAN: There is nothing here.

ROBERT: What is that?

JAN: Listen, my wife did not say everything, for example she did not say about the baptism of the Russian women. Did you say it?

IRENA: I said it, I said it.

JAN: There was nothing about baptism of the Russian women, right?

INT: There was information about 16.

IRENA: 16.

INT: (in English) Here is the experience of the sister, hmm... it was mentioned that even in the concentration camp they were able to baptize 16 of the Russian (female) prisoners.

ROBERT: Hmm? So, 16 people in Ravensbrück became Jehovah's Witnesses?

IRENA: 'Ja' (yes.)

INT: Yes of... Russians.

JAN: She was there for 8 months...

IRENA: I was there for 11... with a prison sentence.

ROBERT: (Inaudible) OK, OK ... maybe what could do, just for a moment, we can meet her husband just to say hello. Maybe he would like to sit down...?

INT: Maybe, Brother Janek, could you sit here next to your wife?

IRENA: I will leave now, right?

INT: No, no, no – sit for a moment together.

ROBERT: And we would like to thank you – this is your husband?

INT: Here is your husband, right?

IRENA: Yes. My husband.

ROBERT: And when did you get married?

INT: When did you marry?

JAN: In 1946, in November. November the 23rd.

INT: '46, November '46.

IRENA: Forty... 'jahre' (years) – 49 years.

JAN: You can say that our whole home was serving brothers all the time.

IRENA: I said this already...

JAN: I know, but in critical times they even published literature in our home, also that when my wife here...

INT: Theocratic home...

JAN: ... we raised our children in the theocratic spirit. I am a pioneer (full-time evangelizer of Jehovah's Witnesses) now, my wife did not mention that I am a pioneer for the last 12 years, and I am active for over 60 years.

INT: Over 60...

JAN: Over 60 years or so.

INT: (in English) 60 Years active as a publisher of the Good News.

ROBERT: OK...

JAN: Well, my father-in-law belonged to the 144,000, he died in the camp ...

IRENA: My father.

JAN: So we have a blessing at home...

IRENA: All our children are 'in the truth' this is a blessing. All our children and all our granddaughters are 'in the truth'.

JAN: All our children are 'in the truth', all our granddaughters are 'in the truth', also all our granddaughters are the best at school, only highest grades.

IRENA: But the most important thing is that they are active 'in the truth' and as I said, went on a special preaching campaign, two granddaughters.

JAN: So we have been serving the Lord constantly, me pioneering, and my wife almost a pioneer, because she works...

INT: Supports you.

JAN: You did not say that you work on...?

IRENA: Two people have been baptized in Częstochowa – my interested ones from the market. I helped them to get interested and directed them to Jehovah's Witnesses. One could not meet me, but she had the Holy Scriptures, the Christian-Greek Scriptures – the New Testament. She was carrying it with her, so long until she met me. "I have been carrying this for a month," she said, "to show you that I am with Jehovah's Witnesses." And now she got baptized in Częstochowa.

JAN: She came to us.

IRENA: No, this is another one, the other is a Russian woman, she came too. She embraced me.

JAN: She embraced us.

IRENA: That I helped her get to know 'the truth' that she would live.

INT: (in English) The joys of the life today (inaudible).

JAN: My wife did not mention that 2 years ago her mother – my mother-in-law was with us and she changed a lot, and that we buried her... as a Witness.

IRENA: Not exactly as such, because I would be ashamed in front of the brothers... if this would have to be a proper funeral. She had a tomb, my stepfather was at the bottom, and it was one grave. Only a gravedigger opened the tomb and a brother said a few words.

INT: (In English) The mother was opposing so much and...

JAN: We have blessings from Jehovah, that's why we always want to praise Jehovah... Here, there are very interesting words: "Throughout life, our large family serves faithfully in the work of Jehovah God and has the same goal: to praise Jehovah for eternity."

ROBERT: Well, we would like to thank you very much for your experience.

INT: Thank you for your experience.

ROBERT: We appreciate it very, very much and we wanna thank you... the Holocaust Museum would like to thank you for sharing your life experiences with us.

INT: The Holocaust Museum thank you very much for your experiences.

IRENA: Thank you, thank you and many blessings ...

50:37

[End of the recording]