

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Fritzie Weiss Fritshall
June 27, 1990
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Fritzie Weiss Fritshall, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on June 22, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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FRITZIE WEISS FRITSHALL
June 27, 1990

[Technical Conversation]

01:00:10

Q: Okay. Fritzie, we're going to begin our interview now by asking you to tell us your name.

A: My name now, or my name while I was in Europe?

Q: Well, let's start with your name now, and then—

A: Okay. My name now is Fritzie Fritshall, and my maiden name was Fritzie Weiss.

Q: And where were you born, Fritzie?

A: I was born in a small town called Czechoslovakia – a country called Czechoslovakia, in a small town called Klyucharki, which was near a city called Munkács. They were like, I don't know, maybe 20 kilometers from the “big city” called Munkács.

Q: What can you tell us of life in the city, as far back as you can remember?

A: I came from a small town. There were not many Jewish families in our town. We were maybe a handful. I was a child, and I don't – I, I couldn't tell you how many. But it was a close-knit Jewish community. Prior to the war, I personally didn't – I did not feel any antisemitism directed towards me or my family. As far as I remember, we lived in peace with our neighbors. My friends were not Jewish as well as Jewish. In fact, my very best friend was not Jewish. She was a young lady, a young girl my age, who used to sleep in our home. We would share a bed, many times, and – as I would sleep in her home. And I, I personally never felt any antisemitism directly towards me, or directly towards my family.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: My dad came to this country just before the war broke out. Our families were farmers mostly. And I don't really recall. I think he was, he was an owner of a store – clothing store, prior to coming to – his coming to this country. I don't really remember him. To tell you the truth, when I came to this country, I came to my – I had very few memories of my father. He was like – it was like coming to a stranger. You know? So I really don't know.

Q: And when your mother was looking after you, when you were growing up as a small child, could you tell us whether she looked after you alone? Or were there others in the

family?

- A: Well, we had – my grandmother lived in town. And, of course, I had uncles and my aunt. And we did have family. There were some cousins. We were very fond of our grandmother, and I spent a lot of time there; and my mother also had her parents, who lived in another town. And so she had support from both families, both on her husband's side and on her, her own parents' side. But after my dad came to this country, he used to help us. When my dad came to this country, it was right after, I believe, the Depression. And he came to Chicago, and earned three dollars a week working for Vienna Sausage Company in Chicago. And the story went that my dad would send us a dollar and a half to live on in Europe – which was a lot of money at that time in Europe. And, of course, he lived on a dollar and a half here.

01:03:37

And when my dad came here, immigration was very strict. In those days, a man had to show that he could support a family before he was allowed to bring a family to this country. And I believe there's a long story behind this, but by the time my dad was able to send us papers to immigrate to this country, the war had broken out. And my mother was afraid to take her family. I had two younger brothers; and my mother was afraid to take three children on a ship that might have been bombed on the waters, that were beginning to be bombed already because the war had broken out. I, I believe this is the joke of, of the century: her being afraid to take us on a boat that might be bombed, and then getting caught in the war in Europe and concentration camps. You know? So....

- Q: As you speak of the war beginning, could you tell us what your first impressions were of the beginning of the war?

- A: The first – okay. The first that I really knew that Jews were being persecuted in Europe was as a child. I recall my mother taking us – meaning my brothers, my two brothers and herself – going to my grandfather's town where my grandparents lived, where my mother was born and came from. And she took us there, often times, for visits. And, I believe, in 1939 when the Germans took away citizenship from the Polish Jews that emigrated to Germany, became German citizens, established businesses in Germany and fought for the German government. These Jews were asked to leave Germany when Hitler came into power. He took away their businesses, as you well know; and he took – confiscated everything they had, and sent them back over the border to Poland. When these Jews came to Poland, they had no place to go. They had no homes; and of course the Polish community did not want these Jews back. So a lot of the Jews were being persecuted, and a lot of them went into the mountain areas. My grandparents lived close to the Polish border in Czechoslovakia; and, of course, in – near the mountains.

01:06:05

I recall, as a child, these Jews coming down from the mountains looking for Jewish homes; and begging for food, begging for warm clothing and so forth, to take back to their families in hiding. I recall, as a child, helping my grandfather; taking buckets, pretending we were going to feed the animals, and going into the barns for whatever reason. And carrying food and warm clothing in these buckets to take back to these people, so that they could take it back to their families. I recall hearing horror stories of Jews being persecuted in Poland and in Germany. Of course, we didn't know about concentration camps at that time. But we knew – I knew, as a child, that Jews were being persecuted. And I recall hiding many of these young Jewish people that would come; and putting them into wagons and covering them with straw and whatever, and taking them into different parts of Czechoslovakia, to different towns. So that we could help these young Jews escape. We still had freedom at that time, and little did we know that we were going to be next. That we were going to be persecuted. So I did know at that time that Jews were being persecuted. But we still lived in peace with our neighbors. We, as I said, were not being persecuted at that time. Our life was peaceful. The businessmen did or went about their business as they pleased. And that was my first recollection. Then I recall going back home to our hometown in Czecho– in Klyucharki. And I had a young uncle that must have been 17, 18 years old at the time; and as Czechoslovakia was being occupied, this uncle pretended he was going to take eggs and things off of the farm to go into the big city of Munkács. He would take these things and put them in a basket on his bicycle and pedal to the city; strictly to find out about what was happening in the city, what was happening around the world, so to speak. Because that was the only news we could really get. We didn't have television and we didn't have radio, as they do today. And my uncle used to come back and bring us bits and pieces of news. We were not allowed to listen to this news, we as children. We were being protected. And we were just – we were getting bits and pieces of this. So I did know that in certain areas Jews, because they were Jews, they were being persecuted. But we ourselves were not touched by it at that point. Actually, I personally was not affected by this until Hitler marched into Czechoslovakia and took over the country.

Q: Do you remember that?

A: My first recollection was when I went to school. The night before going to school, my friend who was not Jewish – she and I slept in our home. Slept in the same bed, played as children do. I remember my mother opening the door and telling us to go to sleep, because we were being noisy and the next day was school. She and I got up in the morning to go to school, one morning. When we came to school, she was allowed to walk in and the door was closed to me.

01:09:40

I was told I was not allowed to walk into class anymore. I needed to go home, because I was Jewish. A teacher who was my teacher, who took out a white handkerchief from his pocket the week before to wipe a smudge off of my face, turned to me one day and told

me I must not come to school anymore. All of a sudden, for whatever reason, I needed to go back home and not come back to school. I remember going home and crying, and not understanding why I was not allowed to go to school anymore. A few minutes later, my two brothers came home crying. They too were sent back home, and were told not to go to school anymore. Because we became quote "Jewish" overnight. My mother had to sit down with us and tell us the facts of life. Tell us why we were not allowed to go to school anymore; tell us that the country was invaded by a man called Hitler who was a bad man. We did not know about the killings at that time – at least, I didn't. But we were told that there were certain rules we needed to follow from now on, and one was not to go to public school. I recall the laws being set down one by one. Not being able to go to a grocery store, except during certain hours. Not being able to work our farms anymore. Not being able to walk into a bakery anymore, except during certain hours. Not to go into a park and sit on a bench, unless it said, "For Jews Only." The wearing of the yellow star. And the hours we were allowed to be out, and the hours we were – has to be back in the house. And those were the first that I personally felt. And then, of course, the laws that came down one by one. Everyday there was a new law, and everyday we had to obey the new law. And we were not allowed to walk down the street anymore. If someone came towards us that was not a Jew, the Jew needed to step off the sidewalk to allow the next person – who of course was not Jewish – to walk by. I recall our neighbors turning their backs on us. Spitting on us. Neighbors who lived in peace with us, who were our friends the week before. And then, of course, we were lucky we were farmers; because we would have starved to death.

01:12:40

You know, it's interesting. You, you sit and, and you talk, and as you sat and memories came back. It took me many, many years to find out why my mother would put food on the table for her three children at night, give us our dinner, and after she served us, she would walk out of the room. She never stayed in the room where we ate. I could never understand this. Just recently – shows you how smart I am – I've just recently figured this out. I probably had forgotten all of this. The reason she didn't stay with us was because there wasn't enough food to go around. So those are my early memories of Hitler walking into Czechoslovakia. And, of course, then there was the knock on the door in the middle of the night. We were told to gather our belongings, take warm clothes, take our valuables, and to take our pots and pans. We were told we were going to be relocated. And as we know today, they lied. And we believed. I'm not sure if our parents knew what was going to happen or not. But we believed. I think we needed to believe. And, of course, as we know how brave Hitler was – the knock came in the middle of the night. It was the last days of Passover when they came to get us, and they told us to take whatever food we could. We didn't have bread in the house yet. We still had matzo. I remember my mother packing matzo to take with us to the ghetto. It seems like yesterday.

Q: You mentioned to the ghetto. Was the ghetto in the town or did they transport you?

01:15:00

A: In our case a ghetto was in a small – in our small town. The Germans took over the grammar school, a small school. They emptied the school. They put a fence around the school. They brought soldiers. They brought dogs. For some reason, always dogs. And the guards, of course. And they put us into this school – which became our ghetto. All the Jewish family from the – families from this community were put into this school. We slept on the floor. We had our bedding, because we brought it with us. We were not abused while we were in this so-called ghetto. Food was brought to us every day. We didn't have an over-abundance of food, but we were not starving. Of course, our neighbors did not come to see us, nor did they come to ask if we needed any food or any help. I will never understand that part. I will never understand how one human being – a neighbor, a friend – can turn against you. A person that has lived with you in peace, that has watched you born, that has gone to school with you, knows your family and knows your life history, can turn against you as a human being. But nevertheless, that's what they did. The Germans would come – the soldiers would come every day to the ghetto. They would take our young people on a work crew – I was too young, but they would take most of the young people – and they would take them to do forced labor. Whatever they did, I don't know. There were different jobs for all the young men, as well as women. They would tell us that they would bring them back at night; and in most cases, most of them did come back at night. The ones that didn't, we were told that they were sent to a different area but we would see them in some future time. Of course, we never did. And this is how we lived for several weeks. We – the families stayed together; and we could have lived that way, very well. We would not have had all of the comforts of home. But if they would have let us, we could have survived in that type of an atmosphere. Until the trucks came to empty out the ghetto; and, of course, to take us to the famous trains. When they came to empty the ghettos, again they told us we were going to be relocated. I had two younger brothers, of which one was nine and one was seven. When they came to take us on to the trucks, as we were walking on to towards the trucks, my youngest brother turned back and ran back into the school. He would not come out. He hid underneath a table. They carried him out, bodily, and threw him on to this truck as he was kicking and crying, as if he knew where he was going to go.

Q: Your mother, you, your brothers...

01:18:50

A: ...my grandparents, my aunt, my relatives, and all the other Jews in the community – we were all loaded onto this train, going to Auschwitz. When we were put onto this train, which, of course, I don't need to describe to you. It was a cattle car, as you know. No windows and no seats. No toilet. When we got onto the trains, none of us knew we were being taken to a concentration camp. None of us knew anything about Auschwitz. At least, I don't think we knew. We honestly thought we were going to be relocated. Until the door closed, and we heard the lock go on from the outside. I believe, that was the first

we knew wherever we were going to be taken to, it was not going to be freedom, and it was not going to be a great relocation. We were not told where we were being taken to, nor did we know what direction we were going in. I recall there was a small window on top of this compartment, the train we were on. They would lift a child up that could read. A man would lift the child up as the train would pass a station, so that the child could read what direction the train was going in, what stations we passed. And that would give us a clue where we were going to. This is how we knew where – towards what destination we were being taken to. The train would stop once, sometimes twice, a day and wait for other Jews to be brought to be put back – to be put on to this train. Until the compartment was so full that there was standing room only. It got to the point where if one needed to sit down, someone else needed to stand up; because there truly was absolutely – it was a packed train. When the train would stop sometimes once a day, they would push in a bucket for our personal use, for toilet. They would push in a bucket of water; and they would take one of the men off the train to go and get water. And usually it was a matter of choosing who would go to get this bucket of water, because we weren't sure if the person would come back or not. And usually it was a young man that would volunteer. And that bucket of water needed to go around for every single person. And often times it didn't make to the very end. Many people would not get any water on that given day. How do I tell you about a train ride like that? About the dignity that is taken away from you when you need to use a bucket as toilet in the middle of a compartment on a train, in front of everyone? About sharing water with every single person? About the mothers holding on to hungry children. The crying. The stink. The fear. It's strange, fear gives out a certain smell and that mixed with open bucket – it's a smell I don't believe one can ever forget. It's, it's not to be described.

Q: How long were you in that train?

01:23:03

A: I believe, two and a half days. I believe we were there two and a half days in all, with the stopping and going. I can't tell you exactly. I believe if I live to be 100, that smell will stay with me. And I will always hear the crying of the babies; and in particular, the young mother trying to feed an infant, breast feed an infant, and not having any milk to feed this infant. These revisionists that don't believe, I would like to take them all and put them into a compartment like that and show them what it feels like.

Q: When the train finally stopped– ?

A: When the train stopped in Auschwitz, of course, we didn't know where we were. The train arrived in the middle of the night, so we were greeted by very bright lights shining down on us. We were greeted by soldiers, SS¹ – men as well as women. We were greeted by dogs and whips, by shouting and screaming orders to try to empty the train, by

¹ Schutzstaffeln [Protection Squads] (German)

confusion, and by men in striped uniform. We didn't know it at the time, but the men in uniform were the Jews who were brought there before us. They were called "Kanada²," which I found out later. Their job was to empty the train. One of those men saved my life. That was the first. When they had asked us to empty the trains, these men would come onto the compartment of the train; and they would try and push and pull us off the train as fast as they could. These men were not allowed to speak to us; but, in their own way, they tried to help young people. They walked amongst us, and in Yiddish would whisper to a child, "You're 15. Remember you're 15." When we got off the train and they asked us to line up according to age, I lined up with – I became 15 years old, lined up with the 15 years old. And I truly believe that man, whoever he was, saved my life. Time out.

[Pause in interview]

Q: Anytime you want to continue.... You've brought us to the point where a man gave you advice, and you followed his advice. Can you remember what was going on around you, in terms of your mother, and your brothers, and others who came with you?

A: When they asked us to line up, of course.... When we, when we got off the train, the men needed to go to one side, the young boys – I believe it was to the left. It's like a picture. The babies were taken away and put onto trucks. Today that I am a mother and a grandmother, I can understand this more than I did at the time. The young children and the babies that were taken out of mothers' arms and put on to these trucks; and the mothers running after them. And the crying and the screaming, "My baby!" And they were told they would see them later. Of course, as we know today, they never did. The old people, the cripples whoever couldn't walk, these were put on trucks. The young people needed to line up. Women and men were separated, as were children. My mother and I stood on the same line when they told us to line up, and then they started to call age. Mother was a young woman. They called, "Age!" And I told my mother she stood in the wrong line. My mother went into another line. I found out several hours later that the line she went in went directly to the gas chambers. I'm sorry.

01:28:06

Q: It's okay. Take your time.

A: I thought this was going to be an easy interview.

Q: They're never easy. But after you realized that the lines were separated, and you were in your line–

A: I have to back-track a little bit, if I may.

² Canada (German); term for the warehouse of looted goods at Auschwitz; also used to refer to prisoners who were assigned to work in the warehouse facilities.

Q: Sure.

A: When I came to this country – I don't know if you want this on the tape or not – when I came to this country, I came here as a teenager. I had decided that I was going to live as a normal teenager. I could not live with my memories of what had happened. I couldn't handle them. So I had taken all of my memories and put them in a little box, and put them on the very bottom of my brain. Closed the box never to be taken out, never to be examined. This is how I lived for many years. This is how I handled my past. This is not saying it's right or wrong, but it's saying the way I could cope with it. Except for one time, after I came to this country. My father cornered me and asked me about what had happened: am I sure my mother is dead, and am I sure my brothers are dead? We did not discuss the Holocaust in our home. It was taboo. I would not associate with any survivors. I would not join any organizations. I got married. My husband knew I was a survivor. We raised a child who knew his mother was a survivor, would come home from school when he would learn about the Holocaust – as little as was taught at that time, because we're going back 30 some years – and would ask questions. I could not answer the questions. I would give a one syllable "yes" or "no" answer. And after a while, a child realizes that these are things we don't talk about. And so he stopped asking. This is how I lived for many years. This was my way. Until about five, five and a half years ago, my son called one night, and he said, "Mom, I just read an article in the newspaper put in by the Holocaust Foundation of Illinois, asking for survivors to come forth and have their stories recorded." He says, "Mom, you need to do this. You need to do this, because I need to know. It's time." And he called me once, and he called me twice; and I kept saying, "Yes, I'll do it." I had seen the article several times, but I ignored it because I could not handle it. And one day he called me and he said, "If you don't call, I will call the Foundation. Mom, please go. Don't ask for anything. Sign whatever they tell you to sign. But ask for a tape. Ask for a tape so that we – your grandson, now, and I – will know what happened." And so I did. And this is when the memories started to fall back into place. This is when I went back into camp, and started to relive all of this. The reason I'm telling you this is because many things are blocked out in my mind. One of the things is, crossing the threshold from the train station into the camp itself. Whether it's really blocked out or not, I don't know. But probably, psychologically, it's there; but it needs to come out. I remember the gate. I can see the gate in front of me: "Arbeit Macht Frei³." I see the separation. I see the lines. I see the trucks moving. But I do not recall going into the camp. The first memory of camp is sitting in a chair and having my hair shaved.

01:33:15

And I recall the hair falling in my face, mingling with my tears. And then a uniform being thrown at me and a pair of clogs. Pushed outside. I recall walking outside, and

³ Work Makes [You] Free (German)

seeing all of these hundreds and hundreds of other women with their heads shaved. Some holding on to their uniforms, and some wearing their uniforms already. And here was Fritzie – this pampered child – thrown into a snake pit, so to speak. A lady walked up to me, and kept staring at me. The lady turned out to be my mother's youngest sister, whose hair was shaved already and who was in uniform. It was due to that lady that I survived Auschwitz concentration camp. But that was really my first memory of walking into Auschwitz. This lady held my hand all the way through the months of Auschwitz. I'm not sure any survivor can describe Auschwitz to you. I know you said you are going back there; but unless you've lived under those conditions for one day, you will never know. How does one describe the walking into Auschwitz, the, the smell? And someone pointing out to you that those are gas chambers, that your parents went up in smoke? When I asked, "When will I see my mother?" several hours later after I came into the camp, I was shown the smoke. This is how I found out where she went. How do I describe fear? How do I describe hunger to someone that has probably had breakfast and lunch today? Or even if you're dieting, or even if you're fasting for a day? I think hunger is when the pit of your stomach hurts. When you would sell your soul for a potato or a slice of bread. I believe that once one has experienced hunger, they will never ever forget it. How do I describe living with lice in your clothes, on your body? The stink. The fear. The selections. The Appells⁴. The being told when to go to a toilet, not when you needed to use it. The using of the morning coffee to wash your face with. The knowing that Dr. Mengele⁵ will be there for his selections every single day. And mostly, mostly death in the gas chambers, the smoke. There is no way to describe your first coming to Auschwitz.

Q: As you struggle to remember and help us to know, can you share with us some of your impressions of what you saw and how you reacted to it?

01:37:10

A: I think the, the reaction is – I think the first thought is, to survive. Your concern for your family. Your wondering what happened to them. The people around you. The seeing of death day in and day out. Not knowing when your turn was going to come. But I think the struggle to survive, in all of us. And, and none of us really know the kind of energy we put in every day to survive, unless we're faced with this. And I know many people thought of dying, and many people thought of committing suicide. My thought was always of tomorrow. And I believe that's what – maybe youth – but my, my hope was always of tomorrow. The struggles to survive.

Q: You mentioned the word "selection." Could you tell us a little about that process?

A: Selection. We needed to get undressed every day. And we needed to run – not walk – in

⁴ roll call (German)

⁵ Dr. Josef Mengele

front of Dr. Mengele, or his entourage, which was SS soldiers. We needed to show that we still had strength left to – whether it was to work or to live another day. I recall some women were beginning – as the hair grows back, they were beginning to get gray hair. And they would go and take a little piece of coal from one of the pot-bellied stoves that was in a barrack. And they would use this coal to color their hair with, so that they would look a little younger. I mean, one grayed at the age of maybe 18 or 19 under those conditions. And they would run – we would run in front of whoever it was that was doing the selections, to show that we could survive one other day. If one had a scar, a pimple, if one didn't run fast enough, if one didn't look right for whatever reason to the particular person that was doing the selection. They would stand there with a stick – to the right or to the left – as you ran by them. One never knew if they were in the good line or the bad line. One line would go to the gas chambers. The other line would go back to the camp and to the barracks, to live another day. This is how the selection was done. I believe there were so many people that needed to be gassed every day. And we knew the trains were coming in; and we watched the people marching. And we knew many of the barracks were being emptied out, day in and day out, to make room for the new people that were coming in. We never knew when our turn would come next. So one always lived in fear, and one always tried to get through these selections for one more day. And, of course, the Appell. They would wake us up at the crack of dawn and empty out the entire barracks. And we would need to line up in fives to be counted, twice a day – the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. To make sure no one had escaped, no one was missing. Sometimes we would stand there for hours and hours. Just stand to be counted, until every single person in the particular camp was accounted for.

01:40:46

You must remember, there were thousands and thousands of people in each camp. Whether it rained or the sun was out, if it was hot or if it was cold. We had very little clothing. And, of course, in the summer we had to wear whatever we had. So if the sun would beat down on you, many people would faint during these "Appell" counts. Nobody ever wanted to be at the beginning of the line, and nobody ever wanted to be at the front of the line; because for whatever punishment was being dished out, they would pull people from the beginning or the end of the line to punish these people. To show us what would happen to us if we did not obey orders in every day living. And, of course, the dead people that that would die during the night from starvation or disease, or from killing, from beatings, they too would need to be carried out from the barracks every single morning, and lined up in front of the barracks. They, too needed, to be counted. Every single body needed to be accounted for. Day in, and day out. We would not get any food until every single person was accounted for. And then we were allowed to march and get our breakfast, which often times just consisted of a cup of coffee. Often times they would give us a little soup and a small slice of bread. And most of the time, of course, we didn't have any water. So we would use that hot coffee to wash our faces and our hands with. So we wouldn't even get the hot coffee in the morning. This was our existence while we were in Auschwitz. My job in Auschwitz was – they would line us up

every morning and they would take us outside; and we would carry huge rocks from one side to another. One day we would come, and we would take these huge rocks from this side and we would carry them to that side. The next day, they would bring us back; and we would take these same huge rocks, and we would carry them from that side back to this side. Now you need to know, we were undernourished. We were all weak. And to carry a big rock like that was a lot of weight and a lot of work. By the time they take us back to the barracks at night, we could barely crawl. But we needed to show that we could still walk, and we were strong enough to give one more day.

01:43:17

Q: How long did that go on?

A: That went on for several months. It went on for close to nine months. Until one day they came and they were emptying out our barrack. And we knew exactly where we were going to go. They lined us up, and they were marching us towards the gas chambers. It was our turn. My aunt and I, and the rest of the women, marched towards the gas chambers. And they had a selection. My aunt was chosen to go onto a truck to be taken somewhere else. And I was chosen to stay, to march into the gas chambers. The last my aunt saw of me, was walking towards the gas chambers as she crawled down from the truck and begged could I come onto the truck with her. And they were laughing and said no, but she could come down and join me, as the trucks were pulling away. As we started to walk towards the gas chambers and we were walking in, I was at the end of the line – again, because of my aunt. Six of us were pulled out of line; and I was literally in the door of the gas chamber. I will never know the reason why. Six of us were pulled out and put onto another truck, with several other women, to go to work in a factory. Forced labor. When they brought us to the factory, I was the youngest of 600 women.

01:45:36

Our job was – we were doing parts. Each one of us had a different job to do, and this was – they were doing parts for airplanes. My particular job was to put the spring into the compass that would go onto an airplane. Because I was the youngest, 599 women shared their precious food with me. Allowed me a little extra food every day. If anyone could rest, I was the one that would rest. I was their hope to survive. I was their hope to carry the message to the world. To tell the world what happened. It took me 40 some years to remember a promise I made to 599 women. But I remember today. And I remember every time I stand up to speak, it was due to them that I made the last days of camp.

Q: Of the 600 women including yourself, do you recall how many were able to come out with you?

A: No. I don't know what happened to any of them. As Germany started to lose the war, they started to gather us, of course, and the famous death march. And we, too – all of us were

– joined a group, the group from other concentration camps and factories. And started the death march. I don't know if you're familiar with the death march, but it was – I don't know how to describe it. All of us were weak already, but we knew – we did not know where we were going to go, but we knew that it was the last days of the war. We knew because of the bombings; and we knew because of the way the German soldiers were pushing us and pulling us already, and emptying the camps and whatever. They took us all and put us together, all of the people from camps. And they had us march through towns and through fields. They didn't know where to put us anymore, and they didn't know what to do with us. And there was no food, because the Germans were losing the war. Often times, as they marched us through a town, a window would open and a shutter would open, and either a potato or a loaf of bread would come flying out; and the shutter would close after. And we would all pounce on this potato or this – whatever this piece of food was that came at us. And, of course, they would shoot at us; but we didn't care at that point, because we were hungry. The streets were literally covered with bodies. As we marched, we would pass bodies. Body after body after body. People that were dropping dead from hunger, from disease, from dysentery; because they did not have the strength, or because they gave up. So we knew it was towards the very end. We would sleep in the fields. We lived on whatever we could find. If we could find a carrot, a potato, snails, snails! In order to survive. The planes would come down low, and shoot at us often times. Towards the very last, a friend – a girl whose name I do not recall – and I ran into the forest. I believe they saw us run. I believe the Germans saw us run; because they could have shot us at that that point. But they didn't. We ran into the forest and spent the first night in the forest sleeping. And we spent all the next day there, because we were afraid to go out. And when it started to get dark, she and I found a town to walk to.

01:50:00

And we came to a farmer. And, of course, they had to know who we were. Our heads were shaved and we wore striped clothing. And we begged for food; and they did give us food, and told us to go into the barn. Because they had to go and give us – get us stamps, because they didn't have enough food. And we went into the barn; and when the man left, we ran out of the barn and ran away, because we were afraid they would turn us in. And we lived in the forests until the Russians liberated us. You know, as we read books today and we watch films, and of course, we know the Germans “did not know what was going on.” So they tell us. Not true. They all knew what was going on. They marched us through the towns to the forced labor, with our heads shaved and wearing striped uniforms. Often times, a window would open and they would throw food at us. The workers that worked in the factories with us. They tell us, “Hitler did this.” Did Hitler really do this by himself? Are we forgetting the machinery Hitler had working for him? Are we forgetting the soldiers that gathered us? The people that took care of the ghettos? The people that drove the trains to Treblinka and other places? The men and women who were the guards in Auschwitz concentration camp? Our neighbors that turned us in? Are we forgetting all of that? Hitler didn't do it by himself. Hitler had lots of help. What about these men that were the guards in the camps, that would go home at night to play with

their children and listen to their music and hug their wives while they were killing our parents and our sisters and brothers? Did they keep a secret? Can they keep a secret? How many people can keep a secret? We were told they didn't know. What about all the people that lived in the towns around Auschwitz and other concentration camps, that saw the flames day in and day out? That smelled the stink of the bodies burning, day in and day out? What about all the people that saw the trains passing by, and the people begging for water, for food to give to their babies? Why are we forgetting all of that? Why are we saying, "Hitler did this?" Yes, Hitler was instrumental in doing this. What about all of those people? What about all of those people that were my age, at that time; and were taught to hate me because I was Jewish, and to hate other Jews? They are my age today. Do they love me? I'm the same person, but so are they. Do they love me today? Have they overcome their hatred? Do they forget that, yes, we are Jews, but we're also human beings? Do they forget that we all breathe the same? End of speech.

01:54:00

Q: Well, Fritzie, we certainly will not forget. Before we finish the interview, could you share with us a few moments of how you were in fact aware of your freedom, when it came?

A: I think – well, as I said, I was liberated by the Russians. I think the first thought is to fill your stomach and to have a warm bath. We're all human.

Q: Let's go back to the point of being liberated by the Russians. How did that actually happen?

A: When we heard that Russia had occupied the particular town we were liberated in, we went to them and presented ourselves as prisoners, as they could see, because we were skin and bones, and of course our hair had not grown back in the few days, and we were still in uniform. We joined other survivors. They took us to an area where they had other survivors that they had liberated. And then the Russians took us into a town, where they took over an apartment building; and they put us all into this building and literally made it like a ghetto type of a surrounding. Although they did give us all the medical attention we needed, and they did give us food and they gave us a bath and they gave clothing. They had to put guards around us, because they were afraid we were carriers of disease at that point, as probably we were. Most of us were sick. And they – as I said they put guards there; and they put they put wires on the windows. But they did – we were given freedom at that point. And I think the, the windows and so forth were being protected – we, we were given the protection from their soldiers at that point, more than anything. Because we were women; and, of course, you know, the protection we needed. After that, after we had medical attention and all, they had asked us where we wanted to go. And I chose to go back home to my hometown, hoping that someone from my family had survived and would come back home.

01:56:34

I was one of the first to come back home. And when we came – when I came back to our town, our home was destroyed. Soldiers had used it as a lookout post. It was kind of on a hill, and they could see different directions from it. So it was totally destroyed. My grandmother's home still stood. There were no windows, but the home was intact. And I moved into that home. And we had a train that would pass by our village once a day. And I would go to meet that train every day, to see if someone else had survived. And little by little, some of our young people started to trickle back, one by one. And my grandmother's home became the gathering place for all of us. We all moved in. We had what you call communal living; except that we did it out of necessity, 'cause we had nothing else. And we all migrated to this one home, and lived off of potatoes and carrots or whatever we could get off the fields. Our neighbors did not come to offer us anything. Our neighbors – who used our furniture, who used my aunt's clothes and my mother's clothes, that we recognized – not once came to ask if we needed any food or warm clothing. I like to think that it was done out of shame, maybe out of guilt. I don't know. I like to think that this is why they never came forth. And we all lived that way until we all went in our different directions.

01:58:03

Q: How long were you there? In which direction did you go?

A: When I came back to our hometown in Czechoslovakia, my dad was in this country, in America. Neighbors – the post office had mail from my father, who was trying to locate his family. Not knowing what had happened to his family, tried to locate us in any way he could, any of us that had survived. And the post office had some letters that I had gotten from my father. And so I knew where he was. I knew he was in America, but did not remember his address. And I was able to get in touch with my father, and he was able to send me some money in letters. And an American dollar at that time was a lot of money. And so I survived on that. And after we lived there for a while, I found that I had an uncle that had survived. My mother's youngest brother, who lived in another town. He came to find me, and then the Germans closed the borders between East and West, and we were caught on the Communist side of Czechoslovakia, of course. And my uncle had left. He went to the Sudetenlands. And I was – my aunt, my one aunt that I survived and I were caught under communism. And my uncle paid a man to smuggle my aunt and to smuggle me over the border in the middle of the night. That's a book I need to write one day about that part of it. To smuggle us to the Sudetenlands. And we lived with my uncle until my father was able to send us papers, and I was able to come to this country. I came here in 1947. I was still of age where I did not need to wait for a quota number, so I was able to – it was a little easier for me to come to this country. And life is as it is today. Life goes on.

Q: Fritzie, we cannot thank you enough for sharing this remarkable story with us. Thank you.

A: Thank you. Thank you.

[Technical conversation]

[Displaying photograph]

A: The lady on my right is my mother's youngest sister, she went through Auschwitz concentration camp with me. The lady in the center is my mother, and the lady on my left is my aunt, she's my dad's sister. She's the only one that survived out of the three. I think it's important to note this picture, see that we were not backwards, even at that time. As you look at the picture you are going to realize that we're normal, modern human beings.

02:01:10

[Conclusion of Interview]