United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Regina Laks Gelb
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Regina Laks Gelb, conducted by Susan Williams on July 7, 1992 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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REGINA LAKS GELB
JULY 7, 1992

05:00:00

A: My name is Regina Gelb, born Laks, in Starachowice, Poland, December 16th, 1929.

Q: And you can look at me, rather than right into the lens? Okay?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: We're really going to start where you want. You said you didn't have any particular vivid memories of when you first arrived in Auschwitz?

A: Well, you wanted to talk about Auschwitz? I will just add perhaps, I arrived in Auschwitz from a labor camp in Starachowice.

A: I am the youngest of three sisters. My older sister Anna[1], my second sister Chris, and I were in the same wagon coming from the work camp in Starachowice, while our father was in an adjacent wagon with the men, also out of the camp in Starachowice. Mother was no longer with us, because she was taken away two years prior while the town, Starachowice, was being cleared of Jews. When we arrived in Auschwitz, our basic existence consisted of practically the same route so to say, as those other people who had arrived from Starachowice camp. Namely, we were tattooed right at the station. We were fortunate enough to stand in line so as to get consecutive numbers. My older sister received the first, my middle sister the next, and I received the third. Because we then realized, that if we are to be given numbers, we will probably be referred to as numbers from now on. And every time a number is called, we might be lucky to have it called in sequence and remain together. Auschwitz basically was the same as I said for the women, the same experience. We were in quarantine for a month. We were doing work that was no work. It was just carrying a rock from one end of the camp to the next, and back, just in order to exhaust us. The food was awful, it was meager. We stood on roll call.

05:03:00

All the things that were happening to the Starachowice group of women was happening to us. In October 1942, October 27th to be precise, there was a general round up of everybody in town. The Germans came around knocking heavily on the doors, "alle raus[2]," and we were supposed to go to the square. Mother was in the house at the time with my father and I. My two older sisters were not in the house at the time, because they secured a job in one of the brick factories in town. And they were working on the night shift. Therefore they were kept over. Nobody was let out of the factories in Starachowice for the selection. Only people

[1] Anna Wilson
[2] Everybody out (German)

who remained in the houses were chased out. I remember that I was a very, very skinny kid, and tall, but very slim. And my mother made me – she made me heavier, and she put breasts on me out of some rags, and she gave me rouge to make me look older and more mature. And I remember we did put on more clothing then necessary, even though that was – that was October, and it was still rather warm. Because we really didn't know where we were going. And when we came – we were driven, there were already a lot of auxiliary German police, and the Latvians – who were helping out, and the Ukrainians – who were helping out at that particular time of the round up. And I do remember seeing horrible things on the way to the market place where the selection was to take place. They would grab children, and smash them against walls. And people who couldn't move fast enough were beaten mercilessly. And when we finally reached the market place where the selection was to begin, my mother noticed a lady who was an older lady, who was – she was very friendly with. And she was sort of helping her out. The lady's name was Kazimierska, Mrs. Kazimierska. And she was elderly, and couldn't walk too well, and mother took her by the arm and stood with her. My father of course was pointed to the group where the men were. And I was pointed – I was near my mother. But mother was pointed with Mrs. Kazimierska in this other group, and I was pointed in another group. Obviously, I had no idea who was in which group. Soon enough we were put in a formation, and made to walk.

05:06:00

And we walked -- I was of course walking with the women. And we came to a camp called Strzelnica, that was within the premises of the Starachowice area, where the Nazis were establishing a work camp for slave labor. Because in that town there was a munitions factory run by the Germans for which they needed forced labor. When we arrived in Strzelnica, in that camp Strzelnica I soon discovered that mother was not there. Only father was there. Because we were grouped men and women separately. I had no idea where my two sisters were, but I did know that if they are "gainfully," quote unquote, "occupied", they would be saved. Well, we subsequently found out – and when I mean subsequently, I mean many years later after the war – that the selection that took place in Starachowice was destined for Treblinka, and that is where my mother perished. Very soon my two sisters were sent to another camp within the Starachowice area, and that camp was called Majówka. And now, the Nazis were running two separate camps. One was Majówka, and one was Strzelnica. Most people were employed in the munitions factory. The highest echelon of the camp were the Germans, and everybody else taking care of us were the Ukrainians. They were the guards, they were the people who conducted the convoys going to work, and from work. And they were brutal, absolutely brutal. Well, I don't quite remember how long the camp Strzelnica existed. I do know that the typhus – a terrible typhus epidemic broke out, that I had typhus. But I do remember subsequently these two camps were joined. And this is where I got reunited with my two sisters and my father. And from that point on, until late in July of 1944, where the entire single Majówka camp was resettled in a smaller camp which was adjacent to a railroad track. We were together, meaning the women, on the women's side, but we were able to see our father. And personally, I was terribly dependent on my sisters, because I absolutely and truly had no initiative and I had no idea of how to behave in those

circumstances, or what to behave. I truly gave myself up to their care, and they became my surrogate mother in really more than one way.

05:09:00

From that last camp, which did not really last too long, we were loaded on to the trains that were brought there and shipped to Auschwitz. We arrived in Auschwitz on that railroad station in Auschwitz. It was either the end of July, or very early August of 1944. As we were being unloaded we realized when we stood on the platform, our train was adjacent to the men's train in which my father was. And we still saw our father on that railroad platform and he saw us. And that was as I said, probably the beginning of August. We never saw our father again after that. And we found out after the war from people – we never saw our father again after that.

05:10:00

[Pause in proceedings]

Q: Can you go back a couple sentences? You got off the train.

A: We got off the train, and our wagon happened to be adjacent to the wagon in which the men traveled. So, when we were discharged from the train onto the platform, we did notice our father in that group of men who descended from the adjacent train, and that was the last time we saw our father. He was taken into Auschwitz with the men, we went with the women. And after the war we found out that father totally lost his – you have to answer?

Q: Just wait.

A: It's all in a days work. I'm sorry.

[Technical conversation]

05:16:00

Q: Okay. Let's just go from what you learned about your father after the war. What happened to him?

[Technical conversation]

Q: You remember the tapes of the apple?

A: You know the most amazing thing to me is, I am very particular about cleanliness of food. I don't even eat in restaurants, unless I come in and smell the place, and look it over. And of course the apple, that was the apple – I hadn't seen an apple I'm sure for a few years. And this

was the absolute find. And I always say to myself, "How was it that I ate that core, that leftover core without thinking: Who ate it? Who threw it away? Who spat on it? What dog made on it?"

Q: It's called "starvation."

A: Yes, well—

[Pause in proceedings]

06:01:00

A: The job for which we were picked was in Brzezinka within the confines of Auschwitz in a self-contained unit called Effektenkammer[3]. That unit consisted of a warehouse, which kept in very specifically assigned bags, numbered bags, the personal belongings of the political prisoners – non-Jewish, political prisoners – who were imprisoned in Auschwitz. We were to guard it with our lives almost, because there wasn't ever anything to be missed, or mislaid. There was to be no pin transferred from one place to another. Those were bags that were hung up on racks with numbers. And whenever a political prisoner perished, his personal belongings were packed in a box. We were taught how to package it, and mail it out. This job was absolutely a godsend. In the first place, we were a totally self contained unit, separated from everything else by barbed wire. We lived indoors and worked indoors. We did not have to go to the marshes anymore. We had a kitchen that cooked whatever meager provisions there were, but at least it wasn't the same kind of starvation diet that was prevailing at the camp proper. And the unit was run basically by Polish women, Christian women. And apparently the 30 women who were dismissed from this job, who were replaced, because there was some contact with them and the Polish underground. So actually, somebody's misfortune turned out to be our great, great fortune, because for the duration of the stay in Auschwitz – we're now talking about November or December, very bitter cold – we were spared going to the marshes and standing in the cold water.

06:03:00

And meanwhile of course, January rolled around, and Auschwitz was being evacuated, and we with it. Luckily enough, we were dressed not in rags, but we had clothing on us that could keep us warm. And we were then driven on a march toward trains, that were somewhere. There were stations somewhere, but I really don't know. Because at that point much as I was trying to be very independent, not to be a burden to my sisters, I always knew they were really looking out for my benefit. But right here, I just could not overcome my physical person. Meaning we were marched without stopping, and without sleeping, in the snow. And I completely and totally separated myself in sleep, from the reality, the prevailing reality, the march. And my sisters to this day tell me, and I know it for a fact, I never would

[3] Personal effects chamber (German); warehouse for confiscated belongings of prisoners.

have survived if they had not pulled me through that march. I think that lasted for almost a week. It was day and night. And I remembered the hallucination, that is the only thing that I really remember. There was a white road, and there were trees on both ends, both sides of the road. And it seemed to me like I was in an enclosure, because it was white and dark. And that I was in some kind of an enclosure, that was a total fantasy. But I actually lived that fantasy. And as a matter of fact, after a number of hours – I don't know how many – when we stopped, everybody was told to relieve themselves right where they stood. And my sisters told me to relieve myself, and I absolutely couldn't. Because you see I was in that other reality. And it just did not – did not yet match up with my physical person. So, that what actually happened was, as Chris my sister told me, I slept through that march. And we would just fall by the wayside, and stop at barns or whatever it was. Anyway, we finally reached that particular station, or whatever it was, a siding, I couldn't tell. But the trains that we were loaded on were cattle trains, but they were open. I forgot the name, I think they are called coal trains, you know. And they were sort of benches on them or on the ground.

[Telephone rings]

[Technical conversation]

06:06:00

A: And Chris was telling me it was like an overnight type of stop, and they found me. And that I remembered. Well, the march from Auschwitz in the middle of January or thereabouts, going west, which was the evacuation of Auschwitz was a horrendous experience for me personally, I fell asleep during it. And I survived only because I was pulled by my two sisters, who insisted that I walk. That I sit down when we're told to sit down. Who directed my physical motions as needed. Just so that I would make it through. And actually I do remember the hallucinations that I had at that time, where reality was – the present reality was fiction, and my imaginary reality was the reality according to what which I acted. Be that as it may, that was a horrendously difficult trip because of the winter snow. They were killing people right along the way if you did not march in line, if you sat down for a minute. People just falling like flies. And we finally made it, whether it was to a railroad siding or a station, I don't know. But there were these cars.

Q: You got hit once, right?

A: Yes.

Q: What happened?

A: I got hit once during the march when we were for the night somewhere or other, they were – we were chased into a huge barn, and everybody was supposed to get in and sleep. At any rate, I didn't move fast enough, and I was hit right on the face – whether it was with the butt of the rifle, or with a shoe, or whatever it was – and I fell down, since I was asleep anyhow. I

just fell down, and I never moved. And the next thing when I woke up, and the commotion started, I found myself at the very edge of that big enclosure where as everybody else was inside. And I realized that I'm alone. And I had the presence of mind to pick myself up and stand at the door, and see who was exiting. And I found my two sisters that way. And of course I imagined that perhaps my hallucinations lessened because of that short sleep. However, we did make it to that string of open cars in which we were seated. And the fortunate thing that happened was, the snow started falling. And because the car was open, we were covered with the snow. And you know, in every misfortune, there is a good fortune. While it was cold, we were huddled with a mass of humanity, with women obviously. But we had moisture to drink. We would scrape the snow off the faces, and off the coats, and off the clothes, and eat it. And Chris even reminded me, that we took with us a bit of sugar from our last station in Auschwitz and we mixed the sugar together with the snow, and that sustained us until we arrived.

06:09:22

We did not know where we were going. The train pulled up, we were all covered with snow, and there was this big sign that said Ravensbrück. We never heard of it, at least I didn't. We were unloaded right there on to the snow. Not the platform, but it was sort of a snow area, and there was no place to go. And we were told to stay there right on the snow. Apparently by that time, all the other camps were being emptied, and people were being collected inside Germany. And Ravensbrück completely overflowing with humanity, for which they had no place for all these people that were coming in. So, we were held in that area which must have been some kind of grassy knoll, but this was now covered with snow. And I do remember when we were finally taken into a tent, when we left, the whole white area was covered with feces and urine of course, because we sat there and people had to relieve themselves. And we came into a huge tent with free standing – free standing bunks to stay on. It was absolutely the worst, most disorganized of all the German camps that we have seen up to that point, because there was just too impossible to accommodate all that humanity. Life in Ravensbrück was absolute hell. There was no work to go to, there was just counting in and out, counting and sitting around, and being squashed by people. Finally, they said that there might be transports going out. And as I said before, I had very little to do with my own survival. But my sisters decided that whatever happened, "If there is a transport, we've got to get on it. Wherever it's going it doesn't matter, because nothing could be worse than this particular situation, which is beyond description." And so, these trucks came up, and we got loaded on. And I don't remember how long we drove, but I guess it was quite a number of hours because when we arrived we were unloaded in another camp, and that name of the place was Retzow. And that was a totally empty camp. There was nobody there, and they took, I don't remember how many, it was not as big as Auschwitz or Ravensbrück, it was a small camp.

06:12:00

And because we were among the first to alight from the trucks we were lined up and we

were given jobs. And the SS women who were supervising that camp, these camp women had their own lodgings there. We were lucky enough, I got a job as a maid for one of the SS women to clean her room. My sister from Canada, Anna, was assigned to an office, to clean an office. And Chris, I forgot what kind of job she got. But she reminded me of it. That the woman for whom I cleaned her place – this German woman – took a liking to me. And she decided she was going to be good to me, and leave me the crust of her bread on a piece of paper because she wouldn't come near. She kept leaving it on the table, and the crust of her bread on a piece of paper, because she wouldn't come near. And she kept leaving it on the table the crust of bread and going. And one day she asked me if I'm getting the crust of bread. And I said, "Yes, but I'm sharing it with my sister because she doesn't have a good job and could she get a job indoors?" And Chris was assigned to the kitchen. And subsequently, because they were so unwilling to be mixing in with prisoners, they housed us underneath the office, so that we would not be mixed with the population of the camp, however big or small it was, for the reason that we wouldn't be bringing lice, or whatever, we would be clean to serve them. And this is now April. And I distinctly remember that I found out that President Roosevelt died. Truly, I just knew that President Roosevelt was some great, wonderful president somewhere in America. But somehow one of the prisoners heard on a radio or whatever it was, that president Roosevelt died, so I think he died in early April. Soon after, the bombing started, the allies were bombing that Retzow camp, because this camp was basically located near some kind of an airfield, or Air Force whatever. And the women who were brought after us in the trucks that followed were assigned to digging ditches for anti-aircraft, you see. And so it happened that the bombs were falling ever more thicker, and all of a sudden we were told to pack up for the German women, because we were going to leave this camp. Not knowing which way or however. But we had to line up again. Again in formation, except that this time those of us who worked as maids had to carry the belongings of the SS women, because they were also evacuating.

06:15:00

And I remember distinctly, we walked not very long, until we got to a big highway. And there was this most incredible thing. First of all we were handed rations of food from the Red Cross. It was – we don't know how, there was Swedish Red Cross was handing out rations. And these German women were grabbing all the cigarettes, and grabbed all the cigarettes and packed them in their own bags. But we had rations. I remember distinctly my first sardines came in a can in those rations. As soon as we found ourself on the main highway, there was a totally new – a new situation for which we were not prepared. Because we really did not know the progress of the war. We were in the eye of the storm, but we never knew what was happening, of who was winning or losing the war, or how the war was progressing. We just knew the misery of people dying constantly. And we finally knew that President Roosevelt had died, but was neither here nor there. Because that did not reflect on our personal reality. We found ourself on that highway, which had civilians, it had cows, it had horses, it had German tanks, it had soldiers in uniform, out of formation. It had soldiers in uniform in formation. It had – it had Polish Christian workers who were working forced labor on German farms during the war, who were also mixed into this mix. And us walking

with painted, heavily painted white "X's". It was a white enamel type paint that they painted our clothes. An "X" in the front, and an "X" in the back, right through my coat. In fact, I had the coat after the war. And when we came back to Poland, I had it redone. It was fantastic material, but it had that horrible cross. But anyhow–

06:17:00

Q: What was the cross for? Was it to identify you as–

A: As a prisoner, yes.

[Technical conversation]

06:17:22

Q: Did you get anything to eat in Ravensbrück? Was there food there?

A: Oh, practically nothing. Practically nothing, because it was totally disorganized, you see. You didn't eat in Auschwitz, but you had that water, or watery coffee, or whatever.

Q: You Just told me – I'm sorry, you were saying in Auschwitz at least what?

A: Well, in Auschwitz though the food was meager, less than meager, it was doled out with a system. In other words, whatever watery coffee you got in the morning, it was there at all times. And the same whatever, horrible stuff they gave you that was soup. It was not soup, it was sand and some piece of turnip for a caldron of soup. That was at least what you expected to get, and you got. In Ravensbrück, because of the total inhuman influx of people for which they were not prepared, or perhaps they didn't want to plan, or as I said, I did not know the realities of the war to account for that. It was just total hell, disorganized hell. This is why we really volunteered for that trip to Retzow, which we didn't know where they was taking us. Every selection was another selection. Every transport could have, as I said, ended in death. But we were desperate enough, and not so much my plans, but my sisters', they made the plans, and they decided "better out than in for staying." So when we went to Retzow, we had these indoor jobs, and we didn't freeze anymore. And we sort of recouped our strength to the point again, where we are able to withstand whatever horror was going to come our way. And when we were driven onto the road when the camp – the bombing increased, Allied bombs increased. And of course maybe someday I'll tell you the reaction to bombing of people in our unit, where different people reacting to bombing all of the time. One was washing herself all the time. One was rubbing her hands. Anyhow – but that is another story. That is sort of like a vignette that probably –.

Q: No, tell us the story.

A: It's very interesting, because we lived under where we worked, where we served the German

women. We lived under this barrack in sort of like a cellar. And every time the bombs started falling, and we somehow had a feeling that things are going to end very soon. And some people, some of the women were petrified, they won't make it.

06:20:00

One of them had an obsessive – completely obsessive kind of a behavior. She would grab a bucket of water, and she kept washing herself. It was absolutely unbelievable. And whatever made her do it, and of course some people sat in corners and prayed, and some people sang. Some people were singing songs. Some people were having hysterics, because the bombs were so very, very near. And I guess we were affected by it, never thinking that the Germans were probably more scared than we were, because we had by now gone through living hell, and this was just one more thing that was in the scheme of things, wasn't such a tremendous – you know, it's not a tremendous problem. It was only bombs, you know, from which you die either way. It isn't starvation, or death, or all this dirt and being eaten by lice and bedbugs. This is not the same category. And indeed – they were indeed scared, because very, very soon after we were evacuated, and found ourselves on the road. Before that as I mentioned, we were given Swedish Red Cross rations, and we found ourselves on the road with all that population, with the mix of humanity, of cars, and cattle, and horses, and tanks, and Germans, and Poles, and workers, and POWs, and us being marked with a white enamel cross on our clothes. Not a cross, it was an "X" rather on both ends. Well, at one point the roads were so packed, that the women who were guarding us said we have to sit down, because there is no way to move. We sat at the roadside.

06:22:00

And meanwhile, they got over to the side to talk with other SS women who were guarding other groups. And one of the women, of the girls who served as a maid as I did, who carried the rucksack for the German women said, "Hey, I speak German very well." She was blonde. I think she must have been 20 or 21. A mature girl. She said, "After all I am blonde, and I speak German very well. Why couldn't I impersonate her?" And the group around her, we were 12 of us around her including her, decided, "Yes, in this madness of this mix, how could you tell, except that we had our clothes that was marked?" You see, if we were just in regular clothes, we could have mixed as the population, the civilian population. And she took out from the German woman's bag her cape. And they used to wear like a garrison cap, you know, one of those German hats. She put that on, and she said, "You know what we're going to do, we're going to detach ourself. I will be your guard. If we're found out, I will say we just got lost in this melee, and I was trying to protect these prisoners, and we just got stuff mixed up." And we slowly slid down like it was like an embankment, 12 of us with this Halina. Her name was Halina. I have no idea what her last name was. Perhaps I knew and forgot, but her name was Halina. She was a Polish Jewish girl. There were Russian girls, and Polish girls, because this was really such along way out of Auschwitz, and out of all these selections, that the group was extremely mixed. Anyhow, we slid down that embankment, and went into the field. And anyway, the night came, so we decided to stay over and see

what happened. Anyhow, next morning we got up, and we saw some men working in the fields nearby.

06:24:00

And we were going that way, not knowing which way, east, west, south, or north. It was just away from that road that was now still choked up with all that, and we didn't know where it was going, or what was happening. These men in the field were – excuse me, Polish POWs, Christians who were working on the German farms. And as soon as we got to them, they discovered that we speak Polish very well, and some of us were Polish Christians, and Polish Jews, and there was a mixture. And they said, "You know, there's a house, sort of like a little villa up there. You go there, and tell this woman – there's a German woman, a servant – that we sent you and she had to feed you." And we came in, and sure enough the house was deserted by the owners. But there was this old woman, I don't know how old she was, but there was this woman – German servant – and she fed us. And we were just absolutely beside ourself with the surprise of it all. And it was this miracle. Of course we didn't know what danger faced us. Because we didn't know whether the war ended. This is now the end of April. We did not know, this is end of April, 1945. Because we were in Retzow about two months. So, coming out of Auschwitz in January, into Ravensbrück for two weeks, into Retzow you see. So, we are in Ravensbrück about two weeks, and Retzow for about two months, because now it was the end of April 1944.

Q: '45?

A: Yes, 1945. Excuse me, 1945. We had no idea what was really happening, except all of a sudden we noticed Russian uniforms around, and Russian tanks. And not in any victorious fashion as you would imagine sometime, "How am I going to be liberated? Will there be flags flying?" It wasn't anything like that. It was the melee of things, and people, and then these Russians. And the following day, or maybe two days later, they came up to that farm – that was rather really like a villa, it wasn't an ordinary farm – and they said, "Oh, well that's great. Here's these women, and they speak Russian, and they speak Polish." And they said, "We're going to be coming back in two days, you're going to work for us." Meanwhile, the word got around they were raping the women. The Russians girls told us. And as soon as they left, we packed up and we left. We left that so called "paradise." We were finding out now that the war was coming to an end. But things were very disorderly, and nobody knew which end was up, and which way was – which way you should head. We sort of traveled with some of the original 12 women but we scattered, because not everyone had the same idea. We knew that our parents did not survive, but my mother came from a very large family. There were nine children, meaning with families – nine families. And there was my father's big family, and we were hoping we could get back to Poland as fast as we can. We would at least be able to find people who survived, because my grandmother did not live in our hometown you know.

06:27:22

So that we decided to go to Poland. So, that the march started again, because we were way inside Germany. I think rather very near Hamburg is where Retzow was. Northern Germany, the area generally known as Mecklenburg. So that we had to make our way from Mecklenburg back east to Poland. So we walked as far as a place that was than called in Germany, Schneidemühl, now it's called as Pila, it was in Poland, now it's in Polish territory. So, we were finally able to board a train that was going east. We got on the train. Two stations later we were bumped off the train, because soldiers were coming, and they had preference. So by the time we got to the Polish town of Bydgoszcz, we must have been in and out of trains, waiting to be off one, and on one. And of course we had no idea where we were going. But as long as we were going east, it was in the direction of home. And we were planning on getting back, and see what was happening. Soon, very soon, on one of the trains when we were finally seated on a train, a gentlemen in uniform came over and he heard us speak Polish. Whether he was a Polish Jew or Russian Jew, I don't know. But he was Jewish, in uniform. He said, "I overheard you talk, and say you're going back to Poland. I must tell you one thing. Where do you come from?" We said "Starachowice." He said, "You must not go to back to any small town. You will not survive if you do that. What you have to do is go to any big city. You go to Warsaw, you go to Krakow, or you go to Lódz." And we said, "How we going to go to these places where we don't really know the place, and we certainly don't know who is going to be there?" He said, "This you must do." But he said he had a sister that…

[Technical conversation]

07:01:19

Q: Did any of you ask the man?

A: Well, the man told us that it's dangerous. The situation is unsettled. This is now early May, 1945. The war was officially over. But things were in great flux because the armies were moving east and west, west and east. And the population shifts during the war as you know, were such that there was just masses of humanity going from hither to yon and back. Because people were resettled, and uprooted, and whatever else. So, he said that would be one thing. Another thing, that small towns if you come back, and you might have been a person of means, and had property, that might get in your way. Because you would be suspected of coming to claim your property. If it was real property, or houses, or whatever. And we said, "What are we going to do? We don't know anybody." He said "No, you will go to Lódz. If you want to go to Lódz, my sister lives there." He said he had a sister, and he's going to give us her address. But basically now, the three big centers had Jewish organizations registering people. And it was most important for us to put our name in those registries, and go there and find out -- day after day -- to find out who else signed in. Because that was the way – you see the Red Cross was handling some of it. But the masses

of uprooted humanity was such that the Jewish Agency[4] set out its own – its own well bureau, its own office to register the returning Jews from the camps. We got to the sister's house. Sure enough, it was in the evening, her house was packed. People were there like herrings, laid out on the floor. Because whoever came back ended up there, and we stayed in that apartment on the stairwell. I remember, even Chris reminded me of it too. We talked about it, we laughed, because that was a real great welcome. We had absolutely no idea where we were. And it was packed, but people said "Welcome, stay." And they pointed us in the right direction, the Jewish Agency. I think it was the Joint Distribution Committee[5], or whatever, the Jewish Agency, or international agency. We signed up, and we went. Everyday we were given rations, and you know, provisions to sustain ourselves.

07:04:00

And whether we found it on our own, or they somehow assigned to us a hovel, that was the most incredible place. It was nothing, but it was a roof over our heads. The walls were falling in, and it was horrendous. However, we were very lucky to discover that Uncle Alexander survived. Uncle Alexander was my father's brother. We came from Starachowice, and he came from Radom. His name was Alexander Laks. And Uncle Alexander came to Lódz at the same time we did. So, we were reunited with uncle Alexander, and we formed a household. And soon enough Chana came to Lódz, and she joined us, and she was part of the household. She became the fourth sister, Chana Tencer, so we formed this provisional household. And we did not discover – we did not find anybody else coming back however, until Alexander's wife survived in Sweden. She was taken by the Swedish Red Cross out of one of these camps, because she was also in Auschwitz. So Uncle Alexander stayed with us, and went back to Radom. He had property and he was able to secure some funds, and we lived with him, and started struggling, and finding jobs and such. Subsequently in Lódz, I went to school. My sisters went to work. They also went to – paid a visit to Starachowice and came back very quickly, because they were threatened also that they were going to be killed if they stayed around. So, that really was the end of our connection to Starachowice. We stayed in Lódz.

Q: Your Uncle Alexander was the only one of the nine brothers and sisters -

07:06:00

A: No. Mother's family was not Laks, mother's family was Tenenblum(ph). My mother's family was a larger family. Uncle Alexander was my father's brother, and my father had two other sisters about whom we didn't know anything. One of the daughters of the sister survived in

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[4] Jewish Agency for Palestine; branch of the World Zionist Organization whose aim is to assist and encourage Jews to foster development and settlement of Israel.

[5] American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Jewish American relief organization founded in 1914.

Israel, her name is Andzia[6]. But my mother had a very big family and nobody survived. And we did find out later she lived in Ostrowiec. And we found out from people that lived in Ostrowiec, that she taken when Ostrowiec was being cleared of Jews. And my mother's youngest sister, the pharmacist who worked in Lomza. Right before the war she got in a pharmacy a job in Lomza after she graduated from the University. We never heard of her. Nobody heard of her, because Lomza was northeast, and that was somehow annexed to Russia. And then the Germans came, and the Russians came, and it was back and forth. And Lomza also had these Jews shipped out to Belzec, I think. But we don't know whether this younger sister of my mothers ever survived the selection. So, Uncle Alexander in our life at that point was the only surviving relative. When my sisters went back, as I said, to Starachowice they were threatened, and something terrible already had happened in town that same night when they were there. Two women with children who returned from Auschwitz, six and eight year old children, and two women – they were killed in Starachowice that same night my sister came. And of course I did not go. I stayed with Uncle Alexander in Lódz. And they went. Of course they did not come back with anything except for some personal gifts that my mother's very dear, dear friend who kept a few mementos, who never even thought she should take things, you know, to hide for us. My two sisters went to her house, and she smuggled them out in the last minute onto the train to get out. So that was the end of our going back. You know, you can't go home again, in more ways than one. And that was certainly brought home to us at that point, and we stayed on in Lódz, and we eventually went to Berlin, and ended up in the United States. But again, I would like to add at this point, that I have mentioned it before. Not that I was a coward as a child. But I had nothing to do with my own survival you see. It was either chance, or it was my mother's wonderful wishes for her children to survive. Or whether it was my sisters' efforts to keep us going, or whether it was the support we gave each other. However it was I survived, it was it was none of my doing. It was the, the merest chance. And the most miraculous thing of that, having survived all of that, I sort of made peace with my background in the sense that I have learned going through life that people have other horrible life experiences, people who have never suffered in camps. And because I was able to make a life for myself, and still be educated in this country, and still be a child in this country, because I still went to summer camp here, I went to high school. I went to college. I graduated from, from college.

07:10:00

I was working. I was taught Polish at the University. I married an, an American. I have a wonderful husband. We've been married for 38 years, and we have two grown sons. The house was never oriented around anything that was part of my past, in the sense that I still have very close ties to my friends. And always my dearest friends are the oldest friends from these times. I've never denied the Holocaust. I have never ever removed my numbers, though I was absolutely almost forced to remove it by some people I knew. And he was a plastic surgeon. In fact my first job in America was as a governess, for a family who went in the country for – and he was a plastic surgeon, and he kept telling me, “I will not charge you.”

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[6] Andzia Ptasznik

Of course those were my childhood days, and really, I was absolutely green about everything. And he said, "I won't charge you. I will do a beautiful job for you, and I remove your numbers." And I said, "Absolutely not, because that is like brown eyes, is a part of my person, so is this number. It is an indelible thing." I live with it. I don't regret not having removed it. I cannot say I'm proud of how I survived, or what I survived. It was just part of a life, but perhaps I was young enough to still catch that little bit of – because my youth was lost in Poland you see. And because I was able to recapture some of that childhood in America, it somehow made me feel that this is really the life that counts, even though I lost my parents. You know, and it was a terrible loss. So that I don't dwell on it. I talk about it freely as you could see.

07:12:00

Not that I've rationalized it. I've just analyzed it, and said that, "If you are going to go through life once, and if you are going to live with your daily cares and your daily expectations, why dwell on something that was too horrible to even ever recount? Because most of it sounds likes fiction anyhow." You know that after the war, I had a double set of teeth.

Q: How do you mean you had a double set of teeth?

A: My baby teeth never fell out – and I still had -and my new teeth came in. Because I was undernourished, and my development wasn't – I was a starved child after the war, after all was said and done. I was tall, but skinny, totally underdeveloped. Totally flat, like a board. And two rows of teeth. And when I went to a dentist in Berlin, he sat me down in the chair, and he pulled 12 teeth with his hand. You know, one by one. Because they were really ready to come out. But you know, they were – my physical person, so to say, hadn't yet caught up.

Q: You were 15?

A: Yes. I had baby teeth. And 12 teeth in one setting. And it wasn't even pulling with anything but his bare hand. But of course that's another story. And than of course everything changed. And I have been back to Poland twice. Once with my husband on a tour, and another one on an interpreting job. And I find that I can face it rationally, and think about it rationally. And realize how it fits in the scheme of things of a human life, and I've made peace with it so to say.

Q: You can rationalize?

A: Can I rationalize?

Q: You can rationalize?

A: I can, because this is also the nature of your mentality. I am by nature optimistic and

outgoing. So, that it would not be true to my type to be spending my life regretting what happened, or what didn't happen, or what I went through, or I didn't. I certainly learned a lot from the experiences, even though they're too horrible to recount. Because human kindness in all that horror was also a very great part of my survival. There were people who were always taking pity on me, and I don't know why. It was not only my sisters, but also the goodness of other people helped me through. You know, people would give me a potato, or something. I don't know if I was such a sorry sight, or whatever. But I survived thanks to human kindness, and the real great help of my two sisters. Is there anything else that you would like me to elaborate on?

Q: And you're not angry? You're not angry about your parents, how they died?

A: Well, I am not just angry how my parents died.

Q: And how a whole culture died?

A: I am angry what happened to the Jewish people. What horror happened, what unspeakable horror that could not even be described. That could not even be comprehended. That genocide on that scale, that is most unprecedented. My parents were dearest to me indeed, but the thousands and thousands of others. My big extended family they were tremendous family, and they were such lovely people, and they were such educated people. And I grieve for my parents, indeed I did. And I was wonderful – terribly attached to my parents. I was the youngest, and rather spoiled, and was very attached to my parents.

07:16:00

But as you read history, and study the whole – the whole scene that has unfolded in the second war that was never even contemplated, or one step from the next, was the more horrible step from the next. And you never knew who the horror came from, or where the goodness came from, you see. And yet, the other people were not treated the way we were. You see, when I always think of those pillows airing in the windows, where there was real normal life, when we were at the edge of total destruction. And the fact that you had to witness the most animalistic traits of human nature that you would never suspect people displayed. Because anybody, there were people who felt that they could trample you to death if they could grab that one leftover potato, you see. That was on the one hand. You saw the basest nature of the human person at its worst, and than you also saw the most wonderful qualities of people; of devotion, and people who shielded you, who cared about you, and who consoled you. And after all, I was a child and I needed a lot of consolation, and a lot of good deeds to push me through, aside from my sisters, who weren't in such wonderful shape themselves to do it, but they did it. When you assess the – it was a trauma. But when you assess the whole problem, the whole experience of a huma– of 6,000,000 people you see, and than you fit yourself, that one single person who was really a child into that framework, it boggles the mind, you see. Therefore, if I chose to contemplate or live that past, I probably

would have been a burden forever after. And my only and one desire after we were liberated was to never ever be a burden to anybody. That was one thing, because I realized then I was an orphan. And although I was pulled through by my sisters, of course it didn't happen, because when Miles married Chris, I became another – a charge of his you see. So, even though I was really always being considered a child, when I came to America I came with a children's group, with Miles and Chris, but as a child. All this is fine. But you see again having that optimistic nature, I felt that grieving over my own past would not get any me anywhere. Beside, I had not lived. I had not lived. When I was given a chance to live in America, to go to high school, to go to college. Having that wonderful experience to go out of town in college, it was – I just fell in with it. This was just the most wonderful thing I could ever dream about. I guess – am I angry? I can't tell you whether I'm angry. I grieve about it, and I think about it. But it can't be brought back. But I hope it's going to be forever remembered, and prevented from happening again. So that is my only hope. If our experience could teach the world anything at all about human nature, and about how people can be – how people can actually – the bestiality of one man to another, if people could just learn that, than my experience was worth it.

07:20:00

To have survived to show the world how such a thing could happen, so that it does not happen again. Because if we don't learn from this particular experience, it will probably happen again. It's something to work on, not just to think about. You know, to work on for a better world. But at this point it doesn't look like it, but who knows.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

[Technical conversation]

[Interviewee shows tattoo]

[Technical conversation]

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

07:23:28

[Break in recording]

07:30:14

Q: So there were two incidents that you remember particularly clearly about Auschwitz?

A: Yes, yes. Those were during that particular march from the camp proper to the marshes, where we were to clear the marshes and the underbrush alongside the river. And because that was a rather lengthy march, in formation with guards guarding us, we did pass quite a number private dwellings along the way, because we were basically outside of camp. Whereas, whether these dwellings were for Germans who were taking care of the camp, whether these were Polish people who occupied it, I don't know. However, they really were private homes and on one of the marches I notices pillows airing in the windows. And that really was a very painful moment, because in normal conditions in Poland everybody was airing pillows. That was just the thing to do if you lived normal life. And it brought to mind, that here we were in this situation -- having been separated from our parents, forever probably, and being left alone, not knowing of our future, working under most horrendous conditions -- and here are people who are still living a normal life, airing their pillows, even in such close proximity to the camp where all these horrible things are happening. And somehow or other, that particular scene reminded my mind, because you know how you sometimes remain with a picture in your mind, well that was the observation that struck me at that time and remained for me ever after. And a similar incident, from that particular walk -- march rather, from the camp proper to the marshes and back, which we did everyday while we were working on that, on that job -- is that one day, whether we were going or coming back I don't remember, but I did notice an eaten apple of a core on the ground as we were passing. I bent down and picked it up and quickly ate it. And I was myself amazed that I have done it. That I was – the hunger that overpowered the even second thought, "Should I pick up this core?" Because after all it was on the road and it could have been thrown away by some sick person, and it could have been the, the – god only knows, dogs could have been over it and whatever. It absolutely never entered my mind. There was this little bit of apple left on the core and this is what I grabbed and ate.

07:33:16

And I have very often come back to that, to that – apple core picture, that picture you know, even in this day when you are always concerned about hygiene and "under what circumstances would you do such and such, and not do such and such?" Well that is the answer; I did it without any second thought and that was of course probably the only apple I've tasted in more than two years at that point and that was – there was at least the taste of the apple of the real thing, of that real life that of course I was separate from. So these two incidents remain very clearly in my mind from this particular work detail in Auschwitz.

[Technical conversation]

A: Many times when I go back to these specific memories, to these specific pictures in my mind I always wonder "Living a world of plenty in America where things are discarded constantly

and I go back to that episode of that core of an apple, of what that could do to a starving person – where of course in hindsight and looking from another perspective in a totally different age I look at it now I am really most impressed of how life can change your approach to things. How life can absolutely move you into another dimension to make you aware of values of certain things even such as an eaten apple core, which of course today you would not ever consider anything but garbage. Because people though away more things that are not garbage in today's society that we ever dreamt of.

07:35:23