United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Sonja Gottlieb Ludsin
July 13, 1994
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Sonja Gottlieb Ludsin, conducted by Sandra Bradley on July13, 1994 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.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

SONJA GOTTLIEB LUDSIN
July 13, 1994

Q: Would you tell me your whole name and when and where you were born?

A: My name is Sonja Gottlieb Ludsin and I was born in Riga, Latvia in 1923, the twentieth of October, 1923. I lived in Latvia, with my family. And the War broke out.

Q: Tell me a little bit about what your life was like, before the War.

A: Okay. There were six children, four brothers, two sisters, my father and my mother. The Russians came in the year before the Germans. They took two of my brothers to fight against the Germans. We did not know what happened to them. And then Germany came into Latvia. They separated our family by taking the young ones and putting them to work in big apartment buildings, that they made in factories, for the SS men. Whoever was able to make shoes, worked so, or make clothes for them, of any kind. We used to work from the home, at first. And then they put us in a ghetto. In _____ Latvia itself, they had two ghettos. One was _____, and one was _____. Not _____, _____ -- _____. I landed in _____. Then they transferred me to _____. And it was -- I did not know where the rest of my family was.

Q: Let's go back a little bit. Tell me before, how old you were. And tell me a little bit about your family life. Were you happy? Tell me about your school, and tell me about the things -- the dreams that you and your siblings had.

A: We were a very, very happy family. Because each one of us did something of musical (sic.). My sister was an opera singer at the age of 17. She was the first Jewish girl accepted to the Latvian Opera. It was just the most thrilling, the most wonderful thing anybody -- parents can imagine. My brother sang. I sang. We all played the piano. One played the guitar. One played another guitar, or like a -- what do you call it? I can't think of the word, the instrument at the moment. But we were a very, very happy family. There was never just us alone in the house. There was always a friend of mine, or a friend of my brother, or maybe both. And we all ate together. And we all had a very beautiful life. These are my memories of my family. My parents were young. At this stage, I realize just how young they were. Because my mother was only 49 years old and she was killed by the Germans. And my father was 50. I didn't know what happened to them. I was 14 years old. So, when I was concentrated in the Latvia ghetto, they still -- my hopes were still that I was going to see my family. I was sure that my family is going to be saved, like I thought I was, not knowing what was happening to them. Now, my two older brothers, they were chosen to go in the woods, to fight against the Germans, because they were already with the Russian army. Because Russia came in a year before Germany. And then we were only left a few. But I thought they were alive. In that Latvian concentration camp we had a lot of Christian prisoners. What they did, to be prisoners, I did not know. But they were above us. They were like capos, they called them. And they were very cruel. But we still walked from the ghetto to these different places, to be useful. I told them I could sew, which I learned -- I taught

myself. And I sitting on sewing on machine, part of the German, the Nazis' clothing. And we actually only lived on hopes.

Q: The ghetto, the ghetto was formed after some big action, where a lot of people were killed; is that correct?

A: Yes. The ghetto was -- the ghetto was formed -- it was separated. You see, everybody that they shipped from Germany they shipped to the Latvian ghetto. Families came from Germany, from Poland, from different places. They were separated from us. They split the ghetto. And there was a small ghetto, because Latvia was not a big city. They took the very worst neighborhood, like, and they made it into a ghetto by wiring around it. Now, we were happy as long as we were together. But, we lived now in two rooms, three families. At that time, we were four children and my mother and father. Then when we went to work, in that place, for the SS men, one day I heard that when we go back, there is going to be massive killing of all the ghetto people. Because they were bringing in more and more trains from other countries. So, naturally, we wanted to be with our loved ones, but we also wanted to save ourselves. Now, by the end of the day, get picked out the oldest people, the weakest people. My youth helped me. And I knew somebody who was like a foreman. He was Jewish, too. But he was the one who relayed the messages from the SS men to us. They didn't speak to us. He spoke to us. And he was influential enough to put me aside, with another few people. And not turn me back to the ghetto. Because that meant death. Now, the emotion that I had, to go back to the ghetto, was very, very hard. At this point I couldn't make up my mind. And it wasn't a question of my mind. He saved me. He was alive until recently. I saw him, and I thanked him, again, and again, and again. So we knew that that ghetto was liquidated. And new people were brought in, from other countries. What they did, they left us in that place and I worked there. And I lived there. But we were very few lucky ones.

Q: Tell me in that incident, who was the man, and how old were you, and where were your brothers, or did you know where your brothers were, and who kept you from going back?

A: Now, what happened was, I was still the same age, because it didn't take that long in Latvia. Maybe I had reached the age of 15, at the time. They heard that all the people who were in the ghetto, the Latvian Jews and whoever lived in that ghetto were brought to a mass -- in the woods. And they had big, tremendous grave dug out, where they shot them, threw them into the grave, with shovels. And some of them were not killed by the bullet, were still alive. And they were thrown into that same grave. And then they put the dirt over them. And even the ones that were alive was killed. And I found out -- I found that out afterwards. There was railroad man, the man that used to control the railroad closing and opening -- he witnessed this thing. And he said -- he was not Jewish, he just lived there. And he said, "I will never, ever be able to shut out the scenes and the horrors that the people that were trying to save themselves, and couldn't. I cannot sleep. I cannot get it out of my mind. It is very difficult for me, which is very much -- to understand how it really affected a man who was totally removed from it. After that, when they killed everybody in that massive grave, they

liquidated the place where I was working. And they said they were going to send us to Germany, to a beautiful place. We were very few.

Q: The man who saved you, what was his name?

A: His name was Aaronson (ph.). He was actually, in normal times, he was a cellist, a very well-known cellist. And he was in charge, like I said, to relay the messages, between the SS men and us. And his name was _____ _____, which was his stage name. But it was Aaronson. I didn't know whether he was alive or not, afterwards. But I just -- I was in touch with him, not too long ago. He lived in Texas. I spoke to him over the phone, and I thanked him. And I told him I will never forget him, as long as I live. And I didn't, because he saved my life.

Q: Where were your brothers, at the time of the action?

A: My two brothers that were sent in the woods when the Germans fought the Russians, I don't know what -- I didn't know what happened to them. My other two brothers, on the other hand, I didn't know what happened to them. And my sisters, and my parents, I didn't know what happened to them. So, there I was, maybe 14 and a half, 15 years old, and I had no idea of where my family was. They -- when they told us they were going to ship us to Germany, they piled us up in a big, huge fishing boat, which was totally empty inside. It had -- we were hundreds of us, from both the ghettos. And they put us in a standing position. There was no room to sit down. There were no toilets. There was no food. And they shipped us to Germany. When we arrived there, in order to get where we had to go, they got us out of the boat, the ship, whatever you call it, and they put us in the trains, where they ship animals. Those trains -- what a horror. I can smell it now. And I remember so vividly, that it follows me. I just saw the Holocaust Museum and I saw that train. And I felt such emotions, that I couldn't even cry, because when you live anything in life, like that, for five years, you cannot cry at sadness. I cry at gladness, because if I go to a birthday party, or any surprise party, it touches me and I cry. When it comes to sadness, I don't whether it made me the more -- not stronger, but maybe I have more control over myself. Now, we arrived with the trains, at night, in the rain, and these SS women wore capes with hoods. And we looked out of the train, and we saw the capes with hoods. And these women -- because we did not have SS women in Latvia. They only came into the picture in Germany. We looked out, and we saw the camps. Then there was beautiful green grass and barracks. So we thought maybe we will find our loved ones there. Maybe they were shipped on a different shipment. But it wasn't. They weren't there. And they chased us into those barracks. And the barracks were the most horrible thing. The -- what do you call it? The bunks were not as wide and the one that is at the Museum. They were narrower. At the other camp, later on, they were as wide as the one at the Museum. And we had to sit, four of us, in one -- in one -- what is it called again?

Q: Bunk.

A: Bunk. It was three levels. The lights were dim, and we had one girl from Poland who was

pregnant, because she came into the picture later on. And she was pregnant, and the SS women knew that she was pregnant. And she gave birth. And we all listened. And we heard how she cried, and how the baby was delivered. And she delivered it herself. And one of the SS women actually helped her. Then they made a little partition, and they put that baby where we could hear it. It was a little girl. And they allowed her to breast feed the baby. And then, when the baby was two weeks old, they told her, she can't breast feed the baby anymore. She had to let the baby die. And we all died with it. I mean, that was so horrible. We listened, the baby was crying, and crying, and crying. And no food was given to her, and she died. And we had to comfort the mother. We were a lot of women in that bunk. But were all like one, all like one. Now comes the picture, where I -- we were starved. We were under-nourished, with rashes on our bodies. We were shaved. I had a rash that covered my entire body. And I was in agony. But you can take a lot of pain, when you are young. Now, the SS women were very cruel. They were crueler than the SS men. We had no toilets. We had -- we did not have a period, because they gave us something in the so-called soup. It was given to us once a day. Even the circumstances that we lived in, we had no periods. So that eliminated about how can we protect ourselves, if we don't have a period? And they dug a long narrow strip outside, with a board across. That was our toilet, outside. And there were days when it was like 30 below zero. We had to go and pull our clothing off. It freezing, just freezing. But things were so sad that -- we were young, and we sat in those bunks, and I sang. I sang all kinds of songs. And then this SS woman came in, and she says -- she took the black -- I don't know what you call it, but the policemen wear it. The black stick, the black --

Q: Nightstick?

A: Yeah, and she beat. And she said, "You have it so good that you sing?" Because you never answered an SS woman. Then she remembered that I sang. And every time they took us out to be counted, which was four in the morning, twelve at night, any time they desired. And it was beastly cold, in the winter. They counted us. They chased us in, back to the barracks. And anything that we could get to be busy with -- I personally always lifted my arm, no matter what they asked. Can you sew? Yes. Can you clean? Yes. Can you go there? Yes. Can you go pick up the soup for the barracks? Yes. I always went. Then you be better. Then you be better than any other prisoner. Maybe there were three or four more. And then they made the Jewish men into capos. They called them capos. And they put a band around their arms. And they had to hit us, chase us, hit us, get us out of the barracks as fast as possible, to be counted. That was their pleasure. The Jewish boy that was concentrated there, like Hitler said, "We don't have to kill the Jews. The Jews will kill each other." And in circumstances like that, that is exactly what was happening. Those few guys who were the capos, they took a bigger piece of bread. They took another dish of soup, which deprived us of having us what we were entitled to, because we were so starved. We were swollen from hunger. My legs were twice, three times the size. And one day, there was a men's camp further out. And in order for them to get their rations of food, which was a big kettle, like, where the soup was in, they had to go to the women's camp to reach the kitchen. And somebody hollered out to me, "Sonja, I just saw one of your brothers." And I ran out and I screamed at him, and it was, one of my brothers, in the same place. It was the most unbelievable happening. And there

was this one SS woman, she was over six feet tall. And she was the meanest, meanest, most horrible human being anybody can imagine -- even Napoleon. She took me and she said again, you have it too good. You just made contact with the men. And I said to her, "This was my brother." And it didn't matter. They never hit us in the middle of the room. They always put us against the wall. And then she slammed my face. She knocked my teeth out. And also you got like a back knock, at the wall. That was the purpose of the wall. So you get a double pain. And she beat me until I just fell down and I just couldn't take it. I just laid there. And it didn't bother her. And she just walked away. And she says, " Now you're going to know you will never, ever make any motions to anybody." And we stayed there. And that actually was not a death camp. That actually was a camp that they took us out and brought us to an ammunition factory, where we used to -- it was a huge place. They made the bombs for -- the large bombs. And we were making them. I was upstairs with the women. And downstairs were the men. And there again, I knew, my God, I was downstairs. And I was lucky enough -- and that is why I feel that my life had many miracles. I was lucky enough that they asked, in that factory, "Who can speak German fluently?" And I said, "I can." And I was the interpreter between him and the Jewish girls that came from Poland. The Hungarian girls came in later on in the War, because Hungary was not jet included. And I relayed the message, what they had to do next, whether he had complaints about anybody. We were so undernourished, we didn't have the strength. We couldn't work on those machines. They were big, huge machines. So, they put a white band on my arm, and they always used me as an interpreter, between the Polish girls who did not speak German, between the Hungarian girls who did not speak German, between all the other ones who did not speak German. And he was actually nice to me. And he threw slices of bread under the machine, as he passed by, because he had to be careful. Once I got those extra few slices of bread, I was able to give my brother the bread that I got, legally. But how do I get to my brother? I cannot go downstairs. So, this SS man, when he spoke to me, and he gave me the orders, and he told me what to do, and who to tell what they have to do, he spoke to me very nicely. And I said to him, "You know what you did was wonderful. And being as you are so wonderful, can you help me to get my slice of bread to my brother?" And he says, "Yes, I will. "He made me take a bomb. He put it in my arms, and says follow me. And he got me down to the lower level, where my brother was working. And that was called the _____, which meant that when the bomb was made upstairs, they had to use very hot ovens, to finish it off. I don't know the technical way, how they finished it off, but it was like 120 degrees in there. And my brother was there, undernourished, just as swollen as I was. And he stood there, and he watched, the other SS men wouldn't see him. And I threw that bread under that machine. And my brother got the bread. And I did it as often as I could. But that was still while we were working. Now, we were shipped to another camp.

Q: What was that camp called?

A: We didn't know, at that time. But we landed in _____ and they were putting numbers on the prisoners. And they just sent us to there, through another camp, which was called _____. And that was a death camp. There was no work. There was no nothing. There was just -- every day was elimination. They counted us. One, two, three, out. One, two, out. One, four,

out, which meant they were going to be burned in the ovens. So, knowing that at any time they were about to pick me, they knew me, the SS women. And they said to each other, "_____," which means later. They are not going to take you now. But they didn't say it in that many words. So I was happy. I figured this was wonderful. How long is this going to last? Because we were getting less, and less every day. They were eliminating, they were killing. They were awaiting for new shipments. And also in this shipments (sic.) came with the trains. They were all told they could take their personal belongings. Everybody thought they were going live, so their personal belongings consisted of shoes, and a little clothing, and maybe even a little bit of jewelry, thinking that they were going to buy themselves out of the hardest. Now, we had to go to those trains, and we had to -- they had to throw out their belongings, their valise. And we had to open them, and sort them out, where the Nazis helped themselves to it. And it was just people who were coming -- coming to be killed. But they didn't know that. So, that was the second most horrible thing in my life, or the third. I also was very happy that I was with the Polish girls, the Jewish Polish girls. They had a lot of vigor. They were never afraid. Before that death camp, when we were sent out to work, they made contact, somehow. And they used to bring in, either between their legs, or someplace, a piece of bread. And they got -- they heard of it, the SS men, and they stopped the entire -- all of us, coming in from work, to the camp, and they looked all over and they said, "You will tell us who is bringing in what. And if you don't, we're going to put you outside, and we are going to pour water over you. You are going to be on your knees. And you will freeze to the ground." Which we did. We all went out, the way they chased us out. He had us on our knees. It was late at night. It was bitter cold. It was way below zero. And they poured pails of water over our bodies. And we froze to the ground. We could not lift our legs up. But none of us told them who brought that piece of bread in. None of us. And they saw, the following morning, they got us up, somehow, and they left us alone. Because they saw they were dealing with something that they feel it isn't important enough yet, to kill them, because we were still going into work. I jumped my report to you, because that was still when we were going into, every day, to work. Now --

Q: Was that at the first camp?

A: It wasn't the first.

Q: It was the one you came to with the boat and the train?

A: Right, that was -- that was . No, it wasn't Latvia. That was _____. And we had -- now one day, I came back from work, and I was picked out to be hung. And myself, two more girls, and three guys. Because they thought I brought something into the camp, like food, or something. And they said, they are going to fool around with us anymore. You are going to be killed. You are going to be killed by -- we are going to hang you, right here, and when all the prisoners come in, they are going to see the example, what can happen to you, to any one of you, if you date brig anything into the camp, like a slice of bread, or a raw potato, or a raw beet, that we found in the ground. So, it was another miracle. As it happened, my brother walked by, and he saw. I was standing there. And he knew I was going to be killed. But, as

luck wanted it, there was an SS man, from Latvia, who came to oversee how they can torture more and take a lesson, the way Germany had their camp. That Latvian SS man knew who I was, that I was in his camp in Latvia. And as he walked by, in the Latvian language I asked him to save me, and somehow it worked. He saved me. The others were hung. And he saved me. He told the other SS men not to kill me. And it was like God sent somebody to take this person, to live, which was another miracle. And we were in the death camp. And they were going to -- they were going to give us a well-known shower, which was -- we didn't know. They told us they were going to give us a regular shower. We have not had showers or baths or anything, or toilet paper, or anything. So, they chased us into a room. We were totally naked. They put up a table. It was like a fashion show table, like a runway. And we had to walk naked on that table. And the SS men -- they sat on both sides, and they looked at our bodies, whether we were worthwhile saving, or being gassed. I had this horrible rash, that I knew I was going to be gassed, because the gas was for -- the rash was from malnutrition and dirt. Naturally, we were shaved, so therefore, we couldn't have anything in the hair. And I hid behind my girlfriend, and walked in step into step, so the front of my body wouldn't show how bad it was. Then came the other miracle. I was young. And to the right was the showers. To the left was to go -- we didn't know where it was going. But as they -- as we stood there, to put our clothes on again, we heard the screaming of the women, because we didn't know what way they were being killed. We knew they were screaming because they were being killed. And that was with the gas. It came out of shower heads. Later we saw, when the doors opened, there were ten shower heads, many of them over the ceiling. And turned on the gas, and by the time they opened the door, and I peeked in, we all peeked in, all of them were dead on the ground. That was a sight. That was just unbelievable. That was worse than the ovens, because once those women went in there, they didn't know what was going to hit them, until -- just screaming. They inhaled the gas. And I was saved again. I was alive, still. When we were shipped to that death camp, like I told you before, we did not know when the end was going to come. But, we did not lose our hopes. Because we thought, why isn't President Roosevelt doing something for us? We thought that President Roosevelt was our savior. We thought -- we heard that he was going to save us. Nobody saved us. There was no way for anybody to be saved. And we knew we were going to die, which, at that time, was actually a relief, because we were starved to death. We had no -- nobody, I didn't know, except for the one brother. We didn't know if they would come out dead or alive. But every morning at ten o'clock, planes were coming down, very low. And always circling around the concentration camp, which I later found out, that was the American Army, taking pictures, exactly. They knew that was a concentration camp. And they were trying to bomb the city, but to avoid bombing the concentration camps, which actually was the case. They did not bomb the camp. One day they chased us out, and they said that we had to go and pick something up. I think they said it was for food, because we had assigned women who did the food -- picking up the food. And as we went to pick up the food, we saw on the other side of the gate, that there were some, a pile full of rotten beans, laying there. They absolutely devoured it. We grabbed it. We ate it. It was pink. It tasted like the most wonderful thing in the world, because we were -- we just couldn't exist any longer, from the hunger alone. It was -- we stayed there for a while, and then we heard that the war is towards the end. How we got that information, we didn't know. I don't know how it happened. Now,

the SS women who knew me, they used to entertain the SS men. And there was no radio. The city was totally bombed out. There were no lights, no radio. They did not have radios like today, with batteries. So, I entertained the SS men. They wanted somebody to give them music. So, they used to get me out of my bunk. And they used to take me in, and put me behind a curtain, or behind a piece of furniture. And I used to stand for them, and sing for them, German songs, which was wonderful. I thought it was the greatest thing, because that would give me more life, which it did. It actually did. It actually -- every, like I said -- every time they counted for the others, they always put me aside. It was very good. It was wonderful. But they had no mercy. They knew that in the very end, that regardless of what happens, that we are all going to go.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: I am going to go back and ask you some questions from the very beginning. You were very young, but do you remember specifically when the first fight -- when you first knew there was fighting going on?

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me what it was like, or what you remember, specifically.

A: I didn't remember it at first. What was devastating for my parents was that the Russians came in the year before the Germans, to Latvia. And they immediately took young, strong men, boys, and drafted them, and pushed them into the fighting in the woods, against the Germans. Because the Germans were already coming, towards Latvia. They used to Lativia, Lithuania, Poland, for all the killings, because Hitler was under the impression that he was going to end the War. And when he wins the War he will say, "I never killed any Jews. The Polacks did, the Latvians did, the Lithuanians did, all the other countries. I never killed anybody." That was the first thing that was so horrible for my parents, and my sisters, and my other two brothers, to know that we may ever see them again. And we didn't.

Q: Before the ghetto was formed, you were already taken to go to work; is that right?

A: The first thing was, they took us from our homes, and they put us into a ghetto.

Q: That was the first thing.

A: That was the first thing.

Q: Do you remember when that was, what year?

A: The very beginning of the War. The War broke out in 1940. I was liberated in 1945. 1940, '41 or '40. I don't remember exactly, because when the Germans came in, they made the ghetto right away. They chased us out of our homes. We had no belongings. And that is when I remember we all lived in one room.

A: And in the ghetto, horrible things happened, or tell me -- did you know about those things yourself, or were you insulated from knowing, because you were so young, or what did you know, and what did your parents know?

A: We didn't know much. We didn't know what was going to happen to us. We were just hoping that a miracle was going to happen. We did not know that they were actually going to kill us. They are actually going to tear us all apart. My two brothers were already gone, with the Russians, at the time. And we were in the ghetto. We did not know anything. All I know is, when we walked, we walked in the middle of the street, even in the ghetto. You were not

allowed to walk on the sidewalks, because that was too smooth and too good for the Jews. So we walked in the middle of the street which was many years ago, naturally. It was paved. It was big rocks, uneven rocks, that were cemented to the ground. And one day I didn't see it, but I heard that a German SS man named Mengele came into the ghetto to oversee the ghetto. And if he didn't like what you looked like, he took out his gun, and killed everyone that walked. So the walking of the ghetto, from our apartment to a friend, was really eliminated, because we were afraid that they were going to kill us. So, we stayed in, all the time. But, morally, I mean we felt, we're together, whatever happens. We prayed it would happen to all of us, at the same time, at the same place. But we still didn't believe that it would. We still didn't believe it.

Q: You didn't believe that you would die.

A: No.

Q: And your parents --

A: Did not, did not believe that. Why would we die? I mean there was a German Jew that came in 1939 to Latvia. He met my father and he said, "Do you have any money?" And my father said, "For what?" And he said, "Do you have enough money for your family to go to Israel, go to the United States, go anywhere you can, just run away from Latvia, because Hitler is going to come and he is going to kill you. I came from Germany to Latvia to escape him. But he is going to come here too." And my father says, "Don't be ridiculous." It was just like somebody today would say to me that I live in this country, in the United States, take your family and run. Run to a country that is not going to kill you. Why would I do that, if I know that that cannot happen? We didn't think that it was going to happen. We did not think that Hitler was going to come to Latvia. Latvia was an independent country. Why would they want us? But he did. And that is when it all happened. But there were very few Latvian Jews that made it to Germany, to the camps. Like I told you, they eliminated them. They killed them.

Q: Specifically the Latvian Jews?

A: Yeah, and also -- it's a matter of fact -- two of my brothers were married in the Latvian ghetto. Both of their wives were expecting a baby. And both of their wives gave birth almost within a week apart. But when the Germans came into the ghetto, the first thing they did, they went to the hospital. And what they did there, they made the grownups, the mothers that gave birth, the father was imprisoned, they threw the babies out the window, onto a pile on the ground, and then they threw the mother who gave birth to the child, and whoever was there, into that pile. And the ones that were still alive, they gave us to shovel them up, they were dead, and threw them into -- like a big dug out grave. And my brother had to -- saw his wife and his baby in that pile. And he had to help bury them. And that was something that was unbelievable. You cannot believe this. So, it makes personally I feel in my life, at this moment, and all the way from my day of liberation, I cannot forget it. I still have nightmares.

And I have had depression ever since. I live on medication, in order to be happy. And I am happy. I am a happy person. But it is something that you cannot erase. You just cannot erase. Like I listen to the television, and I went to see Shindler's List, and Oprah Winfrey was on television, and she said she saw Shindler's List. And she absolutely swears she has become a different person, from what she saw. And that was only -- as authentic as he did the story, as beautifully as it was directed and done, it was only about maybe ten percent as painful and the real thing was. And he noted later in the magazine, and even in the newspaper that it took him ten years to create this movie, so people would accept it, and want to go to it and see it, but not be -- see the real, real horrors. Because you cannot show the real horrors. It is impossible. It is unbelievable. Why would anybody do things, kill us? But to torture, the torture that you go through, that repeats on you over. But I must say -- I will compliment myself. I did not ever show it to my husband or show it to my children, what my inside was really like, because I wanted my children to be happy, and they are. And I wanted my husband to be happy, and he is. As far as I am concerned, I am happy. But I cannot wipe it out. And it's already 47, 48 years, I think, 50, right? You can't wipe it out. It is impossible. It's not something you can just close the door and say, "Well, so what?" I never talk about it. I never talk about it. I don't like to talk about it. I don't need anybody's sympathy. And in the beginning, when I told some Americans, a little bit of it, because they questioned me. "Yes," they said. "The War was horrible. We also couldn't get any nylon stockings in this country." So I figured I never talk about it. My friends know very little. And my children don't know that much either. But my son got very interested in it. And when he heard that President Carter was going to make it possible to have a Museum, even before that, they were building a committee who would help the Holocaust -- explain to the world the Holocaust. He wrote a letter and he -- they actually wrote back to him and said you filled every deed of your knowledge, but unfortunately we need more influential people. Which meant, they need people with money, to build the Holocaust Museum, and to support it. then one day he got a -- on his machine, Mr. Steven Ludsin (ph.), this is the White House calling. We want you to appear at so and so time. We want to speak to you. Because they had already chosen all the people. But he was the child of a survivor. And he got very, very, very interested in it. And I still didn't tell him all. If they ever heard this interview there are a lot of things that would be very strange to them. Because I do not -- I don't want them to have nightmares about it. I only hope and pray -- I only hope and pray that the only reason I wanted to do this, was for my grandchildren, of which I have three of them, by my daughter, and for their children, and for their children's children. For the world to know, and people that say the Holocaust never existed -- for these people.

Q: Let me ask you a couple of other questions. The trip from the ghetto --

A: Yes.

Q: The deportation from the ghetto --

A: Yes.

Q: First by boat, and then by train --

A: Tell me how long the trip was. And tell me about the deportation itself, what you remember, and what season was it?

Q: It must have been fall, because it was raining. The trip on that big shipping boat, which must have held at least 1,000 prisoners was a very long time. I can't remember whether it was a day and a night, or two days and one night. I can't. I really can't, because a lot of things I like to choke out. From that boat, when they put us in the train, I think we left the day before. And we arrived in a very rainy, late night. That is why the SS women wore those capes and the hoods, because it was raining. And they were chasing us off that train, and bringing us to that real big concentration camp, which was _____, _____. It was _____. _____was in Latvia. And like I said before, when we arrived there, the outside was so immaculate, the grass and the barracks. It looked like -- gee, maybe it is going to be better. But once we got in there, it was a nightmare.

Q: In the ghetto, were you already starting to starve; tell me what the ghetto life was like. Were you hungry all the time?

A: The ghetto life was not too bad, because it was the very, very beginning, when the German's came in. Now Latvia itself was a very beautiful city, very beautiful country. We had beautiful vegetables. We had beautiful food. Everybody was employed. Everybody lived nicely. And when we were in the ghetto, we did not have much, because we were taken away our homes. And we had no clothes to change. Whatever we could grab in a little bag, that's what was ours. And once we got into the ghetto, we didn't know what was happening. We only said, please God, let us only be left together. We did not care what we left behind. Material things don't mean anything anymore. If you fight for life, and the ghetto life was not -- it horrible, but it wasn't -- because we didn't believe it was going to get any worse. We felt, oh, this is going to be our punishment. And after that, the War will be over, and we will be saved. And once we are saved, like -- we are young enough to build a life again. And my parents were too, because my mother, like I said, was 49, and my father was 50. They worked -- my father worked, he took care of the family.

Q: About how long before -- were you in the ghetto before you were deported?

A: I think the whole ghetto thing was very short, well, maybe six months. Because they needed the ghetto to bring the other trains from the other countries, to eliminate the Jews from Germany. And they didn't want to do their killing in Germany. So, then we walked from the ghetto to these concentrated places, to serve them jobs like I told you where we lived, all day long there, they took a big apartment building and from the bottom to the very top, which was the six or seven stories high, was --one was the place where they made the boots for the Nazis. One was a place where they made fur jackets for the Nazis' girlfriends. One was a place where they made dresses for the Nazis' wives and girlfriends. And on top was one where they were making shoes, ladies' shoes. And anyone who had a trade was lucky,

because they were used. But luckily, like I told you, when you are young enough, and you have a lot of guts, which I did, I told them I could sew. And I did. I did know how to sew, because when I was in school, they taught us how to sew, like they do here, too, I understand, in the United States. But you are under pressure, of the necessity. You are the best -- it is the best teacher. You learn an awful lot, even things you don't know how to do, you learn how to do it. You have to. And it was a big help. And then they couldn't keep us in Latvia anymore. We had to go to Germany, to the camps, which was not really Germany, because if it was _____ or _____, _____, or _____. And there's Dachau. They were all on the outskirts of Germany, because, like I said, when the War would have been over, and Hitler would have won, he would have said he did not kill the Jews. So, that's what it's all about. That's why when I went yesterday to the Museum, it was very, very emotional. But by the same token, I was very, very thrilled to see young kids, because school is out.

Q: When you were still in the ghetto, and there were actions --

A: Yes.

Q: That were outside the ghetto, did you hear those; did you know they were going on?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me what you saw, or what you heard.

A: What it was, it was actually -- they used to take a gaggle of people, in the middle of the street, and they just were shooting them, and making the ghetto more available for the next shipments. So, I saw it. And I heard it. What I didn't see, I heard about it. And if I listened, I heard the screams. So, you are always -- and you still didn't believe it. You still didn't think -- you were very fearful. You were very careful, not to expose yourself. But, how can you not hear? How can you not see? If one was saved, if one person was -- they didn't shoot, and he survived, he told it to us, what they did. And there was not people who were any different than you and I. It was just that they happened to be picked out, taken in the middle of the street, and just shooting them. And that was their biggest pleasure. They did it with so much, with so much -- they were actually happy about it. They were -- when I saw Sophie's choice, I realized how great the movie was made, because they did it with a lot of love, although they tell you today that they were assigned to do the job, and they followed instructions. They enjoyed it. They loved it. They Latvians loved it. And the Germans loved it. They did it with a lot of pleasure. And they were not, as far as I'm concerned, I could not believe the German people could do such a thing, because they were very cultured people, very intelligent people, very clean people, to become such murderers. And the Hitler Youth, little boys, 13 years old, 14 years old, they were just as poisoned as a 40 year old. They took their guns and they were shooting. So, as long as you were Jewish -- they got any kind of a Jew, even if you were a quarter of a Jew, and eighth of a Jew, they killed you. It was something that is indescribable. You can't really -- to this day, I can't believe it. It's unbelievable, that people can do it.

Q: When you were in the camps, later on, did you end up forming any close friendships with other prisoners, that are -- where you sort of were like sisters?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about some of those, or tell me about that.

A: I had one girlfriend in particular. She was from -- she was from Germany. And luckily we were always -- we became friends. Luckily we were always shipped to the same place at the same time. And we were even choosing our -- in the barracks when we came in, we chose the upper level of the bunks, because it had a little light there. And we also had no control over our bodies. We were so weak, that some of the elderly people, the elderly women used to urinate and it just came down onto us, so we made up, we were going up to the top. So nobody would do anything on top of us. But we befriended each other. And we still keep in touch, and she did not know that I survived. And I did not know that she survived. And the overall, the woman all were very civil to each other. The only time we became animals was when our piece of bread was given to us. Then we became animals. But otherwise, we had actually -- did not approach each other by name, as much, because there were lots of them that were from different countries. And you have to shift for yourself. Whatever you did, you had to shift for yourself. But I made friends. I made friends. And I have some of them, to this day. That I speak to my girlfriend, who landed in Mexico City. And I speak to her. We keep in touch with each other. And we even arranged to go away together, on vacation, so we would be without husbands, and be by ourselves. That was very important, to have somebody left, who has been through the same as you did. Because that person is the most compassionate person to you, and me to her.

Q: And when you were there, was that friendship -- did that friendship help you get through, from one day to another?

A: Yeah, yeah. In a way, yes. We always hung on together for the coping, because they watched us constantly, as though we could go someplace. And they also -- the day we walked in the showers, she was not as badly infected as I was, with the body rash, and she was walking step into step, and covering my -- the front of my body, so the SS men would not put me in the shower. For whatever, we knew it was for death. We knew it wasn't for anything but death. By her covering me, I think it saved me. So, we went to the left, she went to the left, and the others went to the right, which was to the gas chamber.

Q: There was some sort of an incident when you were selected, and you escaped by hiding, by crawling into a gutter.

A: Right.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: Well, that was very interesting. We had heard that the American Army -- they are at the border. And we had all the time planes flying. They were flying. And if they were giving one or two it meant that everybody had to turn their lights off in that city, the people who lived there, because they did not want to be killed by the bombs of the Americans, or whoever came across. I personally feel that if the War would have lasted another 10 days, we all would have been dead, because it was the end of the line, as far as the hunger, and the sickness. So, now we hear a five alarm. And with that five alarm the gates opened up, and the SS women and the SS men ran away from the camp. So, we ran. But immediately after that -- a little while after that, and the gates are open, and we went into the city. And that city was very bombed out. And we knew that the Americans were not there yet. So we found a place where it was flat to the ground, the building was bombed out, the apartment buildings were bombed out. And we opened up a little opening there, a little rock or two rocks, and we crawled into the basement of that bombed out building and we were about nine or twelve of us. Once we got in there, now there was a question. What are we going to do about eating, if it lasts another few days, before the Americans come in? The first thing I did -- we did, is as we were crawling in there we saw about -- I don't know how many feet away it was, one building -- a little building remained, and it was not bombed out. And it was a cleaning store. So, my brothers broke the window down, and the other guys, and got the clothing from the cleaning store, and we eliminated our striped clothes, and put on the clothes that didn't fit. But it did not matter. And we waited. And while we were in that basement, we had heard that the Americans were already in that city, so we took up the guys to walk out, and walk in the street. And as we walked in the street, American soldiers came to us. And they saw that we were shaved, and the men wore -- they called it _____, which was skinny bodies, skinny arms, and fat legs from hunger. And one was a German Jew, who was an officer in the American Army, and he said to us, what language do you speak, in German? Naturally, we all jumped on him, because we all spoke German. And he immediately organized for the soldiers to go back to their place, where they were staying. And within half and hour or so, they brought us all their rations, of their food, a toothbrush, I asked for. I hadn't brushed my teeth for years. And he brought us a bar of chocolate, to us was -- it was unbelievable. I mean he did not eat -- now I know it was a big Hershey bar. And you know how it is cut? We ate little crumbs of it, so it would last longer. And -- before we walked out, the German found out that there were Jews hiding in that basement. Now we hear them. And how can we hide from them? So, it was like a little cubby, with steps originally going up, and underneath is always a little cubby. And we all crawled into that cubby. And we did not breathe. So the _____ did not hear us. And they said in German, "We knew there are Jews here, but where are they?" And they walked out, luckily. And when we walked out, we met the American soldiers. Now, the rest of our group found out that the camp is empty, but there is some food, some food. So they went back there to get the food. And they were caught, because the Nazis came back. It was not quite over. And I told my brothers, we are not going back. We are staying right here. And we did. And I think in the last minute they killed a few people who we were with, because they thought the war was still not over. That particular city was not liberated for them, yet. So, we decided to stay there, and we'll wait. And we'll be walked out. And then one -- I don't know where I got my brains, but I decided that we cannot eat a lot,

because that would kill us. It killed quite a few of my friends, that I was with, because we were so undernourished, our stomach was so -- could not conceive or accept that much food. And I did it for my brothers, as well. And thank God that he did it, because a lot of them overate. They ate too much. There was nothing much to be had, but people ate potatoes, which was like cake. And from then on in, they stayed there, when we were liberated and we tried to find the place where to live. And start to work for papers, to go someplace. Because we didn't want to remain in Germany. The memories were horrible. The streets were bloody. There was no need to stay there. So, we arranged it.

Q: Do you -- did you know of any incidents with Partisens; did you ever hear any rumors of --

A: No.

Q: What about an underground in the camps; was there ever any talk about trying to make --

A: No.

Q: No.

A: In Poland they did a Resistance. But they did not succeed. You cannot resist, when you are naked. Do you know what I mean? It's like taking a person, and undressing the person and saying, "Fight for your life." With what? There was nothing, never. We never had anything.

Q: In the camps, do you think it was easier for women, than men?

A: That's a good question. No. It was only easier if you were young enough. Because they eliminated anything under 13, and over 30 were killed. Okay? I shall also never forget, in Latvia, at the Latvian concentration camp, a few of the mothers had their children. They were like ten years old, nine years old, five years old. And then they came one day and said, "We are going to take your children. We are going to take them to a beautiful place where they are going to be given more things than you have. So we are going to put them on a truck. And we are going to ship them over to that place." And the mothers, and we all knew it was for death. Now, these mothers -- I had a friend that I knew through the camps, she had a child. They actually hung onto those trucks -- it was an open truck. They piled them up, standing up. They were hanging on, to whatever they could hang on. And they were dragged along, until they had no more strength, and their arms couldn't hold them up, and they fell on the ground, because they knew their children were going to death. And these children were crying, screaming for their parents, crying for their mothers. "Mama, mama, please, save me." You know, it was -- it was -- it was just horrible. And they were eliminated. And they eliminated. They kept on eliminating, over 30 of them. They had one young boy who went through the whole thing with us, and we all saved him. When they counted us, we shoved him -- he was little, we shoved him between us, we covered him with our upper parts of our jackets. And then, when we had to go anywhere, the mother of this child somehow or other, she sewed up -- you know our bunks -- we had a straw covered with burlap. That was our

mattress. And we helped her take that burlap and sew it up, and she covered him, and pretended it was like sugar, or flour, or whatever. And it was her child. He was the only child that we saved. He is still alive.

Q: How long was he hidden there, with you?

A: He was hidden with us. He was like a big, big thing. Because they escaped taking him, plain as day. When they took the children away, somehow or other, they didn't get him. When all these kids were shipped away, and they were all killed, and he was the only child, we found later on, was living. And we weren't going to let him die. So, we all fought for his life, and he survived.

Q: Did you hide him during the day, when you guys went off to work; or was this when you weren't going to work?

A: We were going to work. We were hiding him. Somehow or other, he was hiding under the last -- the -- in the bunk, you know. So we were hiding him there, and wherever -- wherever we could. There's a lot to say about people who go through horrors, how your mind works, how you really can do -- like the day when they were sending all -- there was another incident when they were sending everybody somewhere. And they were counting everybody. And there was a drain, where the water runs down? And I left myself -- I put myself into that. I lifted that. I don't even know how I was able to lift up that iron drain. And I put myself, my body, into it. And I held on to the -- to those iron things, and I saved myself. Because, your mind is -- it's the animal instinct, I think. If you want to live, that you can use so much imagination, to really save yourself. There are so many things -- I mean there were so many things happening. There was a man -- the oldest one in the camp, of the men's camp. And he was -- also he played, he was a musician. I think he was a cellist, too. And they beat the hell out of him, the Jewish guy, the one that wore the thing on his arm. He couldn't get off his bunk, to go to be counted, because he was so sick. He was only 50 years old, and he was the oldest. So, he Absolutely -- they beat him, with that black police stick. And he crawled out to be counted, because if you wouldn't -- because if the number would be off, then we would be killed, at least 10 of us, for one person. How -- you couldn't escape, but they would say, where is he? You know. So, the men dragged him out. We weren't counted together. The men's camp were counted. To say it was easier for a woman than for a man, I don't think so. I don't really know. I think it was equally as hard, because -- very, very -- it is actually up to the individual. In the first place, where we were working in Latvia, before the camps were made, there was a friend of mine. He was my age. And he turned out -- he is still alive. He is a violinist. He plays every instrument. And he was little enough, and I was little enough and they used to give us great food there. It was farina. And farina was cooked for 250 people, in one big kettle. It was about seven feet tall. So in order to clean that, you have to get inside. So, my main friend, at that time we were not being together, but we still had a little contact in this place where we worked. So, he used to clean the inside of the pot, and I used to clean the outside of the pot, okay? And it was in the kitchen. And we had an , what they called _____. He was the main -- the manager of the entire thing, the SS

man. He was more than an ordinary SS man. He had a higher rank. He was the main man. And all of a sudden, we hear screams. And he brings in this guy, puts him in the middle of the kitchen, and shoots him, kills him. That was so strange to us, because that was the first place that we were working at, and going back to the ghetto. And we couldn't ask him, why did you kill him? He felt like it. He found him and he wasn't working at that moment, so he took him to the kitchen and he killed him. And that was for no reason at all. And he was nice. He was a nice SS man. He wasn't so bad, because he had -- and you want to hear the best? When the War was over, he said, when the Americans liberated us, he said he was Jewish. And you know what? He lived for a while. He lived. And when they asked him how could you be Jewish? He didn't look like a German, he had dark hair. He put on the striped clothes, and he said, "I'm Jewish." He says. So the American says, "What was going on in the camps?" So, naturally he could describe everything that was going on, because he was part of it. And the American Army was lenient. We knocked our brains to find the Nazis, after we were liberated, and when the fellows brought them -- they found them and brought them to the American Embassy, and expected for them to be killed, they wouldn't kill them. The Americans didn't kill them. Because now I know why. They have to have enough proof, to know whether or not he was really a capo or an SS man. So, that's -- there are so many episodes, that we would -- if we sat now, for another eight hours, I could tell you, but I do try to choke it out. I try very hard. And I hope I will be able, but as I get older, I find it more difficult, to be very honest. And the biggest pleasure, for me, is to speak to you right now, and to be able to come to Washington, and to see the Holocaust Memorial. Because that is absolutely the greatest thing I have seen. The man who designed it, the architect, the people who had the pictures, who saved it, who found it, or what they did, is unbelievable. The shoes, the original things that are in that museum. I am so angry at myself, that to save myself, that I took off my striped clothes, and I threw it away. And I put something on, so I wouldn't be recognized as a prisoner. And I put the kerchief on my head. I am sorry I don't have that jacket. But my brother saved it. And he gave it to the museum in Florida. That is where he lives. And he has his number on it. And it is his jacket. And it is written in that museum, that that belonged to the prisoner so and so, and so and so. I think that is very gratifying. I think that is -- that trip that I just took will definitely be very well remembered. But I hope that for many, many years that everybody should know about it. That is my input, to do that. Because I am not -- I am hurting myself. But I am not that selfish. Somebody said to me, "Did you go to see Shindler's List?" I said, "Of course. Why not?" "How could you do that? How can you go and see it?" I said, "Did you?" She says, "Not yet, because I don't like to see sad things." I said, "How can you be so selfish. It isn't that sad, to begin with. And how can you ignore something of history? The world should know and you don't want to see it?" And they went. And they all went.

Q: Sonja, tell me about some of the songs that you sang.

A: We had several songs that - first of all, these songs were made up by some talented that we were with, at the camps. So, the one in particular that I remember, and I often sing it, is _____, which means do not say, ever, that you walked the last walk, which gave us courage, gave us hopes. And singing together many times, as bad as things were, we were happy. We

were happy to be able to make each other happy, by singing. And those songs were very good for us, because we went, like I told you to the UJA meetings, that they had people who, for an evening, for dinner, and then our songs. After we were finished singing those songs, they were very willing to give money to the United Jewish Appeal, because they knew and they saw the proof, what was -- how it happened, how we came to this country, since they paid for us.

Q: When you were in the camps, did both you and your brother sing, did your brothers also sing?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you sing together?

A: No. We were never together, never. We were only together by liberation.

Q: When you sang behind the curtain, for the Germans --

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of songs did you sing then?

A: I sang modern German songs, cheerful songs that they wanted to hear. And that was part of their pleasure. What was going on behind the curtain from -- I mean that was hiding me, I never looked, because I wasn't interested. I wasn't supposed to. And I never did. But I know that is the way they entertained the SS men. And I want you to know one more thing, how sick these women were, these SS women were. That when we were running out to run away, we had to pass their quarters, where they were situated. And quickly, very quickly we ran through it. There were some photographs and we grabbed it and we ran with it. And they always had dogs. They always -- every SS man had a dog. Every SS woman had a dog. When they walked through the camps, into the barracks, they always had a dog, because -- I don't know why. They did. Then we saw pictures that they actually photographed their sexual satisfaction with a dog. That is how sick they were, which was not too clear to me. But later on it was explained to me. And I also remember one more thing. My husband and I went to Europe. And we went to visit friends, relatives, and so forth. And our trip was scheduled with a stop in _____. But somehow or other we had to land in _____, either to refuel or I don't know what. But they didn't want to keep us on the plane. And they wanted us to get off the plane, and then come back. And then they will fly us where were supposed to fly. And I looked out of the little window of the plane and I saw a black raincoat, belted, black, long, with a big German Shephard. And it was a policeman, a German policeman. And I actually lost my -- I felt like I was going through an emotional horror, because they looked exactly, exactly like the Nazis did, during the War. And I said to my husband, "I am not getting off." And he said, "Why not?" And I said, "I am afraid." He said, "What are you afraid of?" I said, "Take a look at them. They look the same, just like the murderers." And

they did. So, the fact remains that it is not easy to go through life, to have experienced what we experienced. And I am grateful, for myself, as well as for all the other survivors, that some of us survived to tell the story. To me, this is the biggest, the best thing that could have happened.

Q: We have just a couple of minutes. Now, did you also sing in the barracks, you and the other prisoners?

A: Yes. That is what happened. That's how the SS woman knew that I did, because I sang, we sang together, we sang apart. We taught each other songs. We put songs together. We had to do that. We did it and that is how the SS woman knew that I could sing. She had no other knowledge. And that is when she started to send for me, to come to that place where she was living, that part of the camp, to entertain her gentlemen, the SS men. They were sick. They were very sick. But unfortunately I heard that some of the SS women pulled the same thing. They said that they were Jews. And they came to the United States. Because they know everything that went on, in the camps. And they had no -- there was no proof. How can you prove you are not? I mean a German girl -- the SS women looked like we did. They were dark. They were light. They were blonde. There was no stamp on them, I am German. And you are Jewish. They looked the same. As far as I'm concerned. And as far as anyone is concerned. They look the same. That is why I can never tell apart, to this day, whether this person is Jewish or not Jewish. It really doesn't matter to me. It has no meaning to me. I have very, very good friends who are not Jewish, and I cherish them, and I respect them, and I love them. So, during the War, before the War broke out, we had very dear friends who were not Jewish. And they used to see us walking in the middle of the street, like horses. And they couldn't even look at us. They were afraid to look at us. They didn't want to let on that they knew us, because it could have been hard too, you know. Knowing a Jew was a criminal thing.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Q: I appreciate it.

End of Tape #2
Conclusion of Interview