

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Renata Laqueur
July 16, 1995
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Renata Laqueur, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on July 16, 1996 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Arlington, VA and is part of the United States Holocaust Research Institute'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.

RENATA LAQUEUR

July 16, 1995

01:01:09

Q: Good afternoon, Renata, it's nice to have you here.

A: Hello.

Q: Can you tell me the name that you were born with and where you were born and when?

A: I was born Renate Laqueur and I was born on November 3, 1919, in Brieg, Germany. Today that part of Germany is Poland, because it's Silesia and it's near Breslau. I was shipped from Germany three weeks old to Holland because my father emigrated to Holland in 1919. So, this is why I'm more Dutch than German.

Q: Can you tell me about your early childhood and about your family?

A: My early childhood, let's say, was of course in Holland. I grew up in Holland, went to school in Holland. My father and mother were both German and had their parents still in Germany. We used to visit my grandmother in the summers because my grandmother's home in Brieg was a jewel of a house. It was a big house with a beautiful garden and a tennis court and a swimming pool and in...in the twenties my mother's father was a...what do you call it? He was making paper stuff, let's say, like folders and writing. There's a word for it, I forget what it is.

Anyway, he made his money in this factory, or firm, in Brieg and she had the money.

01:03:00

My father was an intellectual. He had studied medicine and was mainly interested at that point in medicine and pharmacology. He never practiced medicine but was a Pharmacologist Endocrinologist and the interesting thing about this is that in the early twenties he starts in Holland to work for slaughter houses because he wants the hormonal products of horses and cows because they begin the first hormone preparation in his laboratory in Amsterdam. He was first in Amsterdam and ended up as the Dean of the University in Amsterdam in the thirties and forties. Anyway, he... In his laboratory they discovered testosterone. So, he is one of the first hormone researchers and I grew up when you asked me about childhood, that my father would put Ponds Cold Cream on one cheek and another hormone cream on the other cheek to see which one worked better. I think it was the Ponds. O.K. Early childhood, what more do you want to know?

Q:Brothers and sisters?

A:Let me just quickly tell you about my mother because my mother was the artist in the family. She sang. She painted. She was a terrific painter and terrific singer also a good looking woman. Titian kind of reddish hair and lousy taste in everything except in art and music.

Q:What do you mean?

A:Lousy taste because she wouldn't throw out a thing and she would buy crap because she was stingy. So, we didn't grow up in a house full of beautiful objects. We grew up with whatever was available. Never had a decent new bought dress in my youth because that's the way they were brought up. You get hand me downs. We were five children. There was an older sister

and older brother. Me and my younger sister, so five. I think one of the reasons why I got very orderly and very much into beautiful things, whatever, was a reaction to this kind of wild household.

01:05:48

But intellectually I think I owe both my parents the interest in literature, art, medicine, anything.

Anything except politics. Politics did not play a role. Religion was a very strange situation because my father and mother were both Jewish racially, but had never, ever been in a synagogue. Even in Germany, so my father was born 1880. My mother was born 1883. I've personally never been in a synagogue except when I travel and if I'm in a group or if I'm in Turkey then the guide goes and shows me a synagogue.

01:06:28

Q: Were you conscious of the background of being Jewish?

A: I was conscious of this background and made more conscious of it by a sheer fluke. The schools in Holland are not like here, private or public. Every school was public. You went to public kindergarten, public lower grade, middle school, whatever and then high school is Gymnasium. To go into a university you had to go at that time into a certain school which prepared you for the university. If you went into a trade, there was another school. But if you had... If you didn't want to go to university, I couldn't make it to the university school, I was too stupid. I jumped from what they call a girl's school into the second class of the Gymnasium. I wasn't all that stupid I was just in protest. What made me very interested in

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religion, I was 11 or 12 and I had to go, let's say, into the school where you either go to university to stay in a trade school or you could get a girl's education. At that time it was just nothing. And, I was a biker. Like all Dutch kids, you were born on a bike and I biked and I was careless. And they wanted to put me in a certain school which was right around the neighborhood because then I wouldn't bike so far and come home with a broken leg or whatever. I got put into that school.

01:08:28

It was a so called Hervormd Lyceum which is not only Lutheran but it is the Reformed Lutheran church, so the most Calvinistic sect of the Lutheran church you can be in. That was my school, because it was in the neighborhood. Then the school moved out of the neighborhood and I was in the school anyway, but there comes my religion. My religious background was Sunday school, Christian. It was prayer every morning and so and so on. And it had some Jewish children. I wonder whether they were there because it was the neighborhood. I think they were there because it was a very good school. And so, this is where the Christian background comes from. The other thing, there is a habit in my family which is very German that came Christmas around, number one we had a tree. Number two the kids were supposed to recite the Christmas story under the Christmas tree. The oldest kid first and by the time it reached me and my sister, it must have been close to the middle 30s, Hitler was there already because I was born in '19. So this was the Christian background. Jews were never mentioned except after '33. '33 the first immigrants came from Germany fleeing Hitler and my father immediately got into committees, helped and was on refugees committees. We had refugees all over the place, and we were aware of it, how lucky we were that we did not grow up in Germany but in Holland. I had also problems in school because they knew

that my parents were Germans and the Dutch kids hated Germans. They had nicknames for them like in France the Bosches and we called them the Moffen.

01:10:40

I was always the child of a moff father, which was a German father. The problem was that he was a professor, that he lectured at the University and that he was so ungifted with language that he never learned decent Dutch so that the students finally said, "Professor Laqueur do us a favor, talk in German because we can't understand you." So, he lectured in German, but wrote in German, English, whatever they wrote in at the time. I think they all still wrote in German. Nobody wrote in English, in medical text. Dutch, you didn't write because nobody could read it, but they wrote German. They changed it. Science was German.

Q: Tell me about your brothers and sisters?

A: Brothers and sisters. The oldest sister was a woman, was a girl and she died after Bergen-Belsen. Nobody knows about this. I never mention her in the diary. She was over 40. She was born in 1906 so if the war was from 1943 to '45 she was over 40 or close to 40 and anybody who got typhus died over 40 because of the high consistent fever for 15 to 16 days and whatever. She lived outside of Holland for part of her married life. She was married to a doctor in Czechoslovakia and then came my second brother. My second brother, Peter, studied medicine and biochemistry and also got into endocrinology. He immigrated to South America just before 1940, in 1939 because there was a branch of the factory which made the hormones, Organon, which was part of Hoffman La-Roche. So, there was a combination of pharmaceutical, endocrinology pharmacology on that side.

01:13:06

My brother, Peter, was an M.D. and Ph.D. and in South America. He emigrated later on after the war in 1946 to New York and switched to psychiatry because of the drugs. The third brother was five years older than I. He did study medicine, but flunked out because he had the feeling, you know, you studied medicine because your father and your brother studied medicine. And he became a businessman, first photography and film in the 1930. Went to the Berlin Olympiad to film. I just saw on PBS the other day and I realized that Hein my brother was there for the Olympiad just to film. He was born in '14 so he was 22, 24. I guess. And the younger sister, Lilo, is the one who lives in Boston. She was born in 1922. Went to school in Amsterdam. All the other kids went to normal schools. They went to public schools. Nobody went to this Lutheran Calvinistic outfit where I went. None of them was as Christian as I was, because I saw it. I have to pray and I also tried to become a Catholic but that's a different story. I had a Catholic boyfriend, but never Jewish. So, Lilo married in Holland a German refugee who was in international insurance, marine insurance with whom she immigrated in 1947 to New York and she lived in West Westchester and had three children and is today retired in Boston. She's a registered nurse. Again, medicine, there's always medicine somewhere. That's the kids.

01:15:24

Now, my mother died in 1959 and my father died in 1967¹ in a very strange situation. He was with

¹ Renata misspoke here; her father died in **1947** not 1967.

his girlfriend in Switzerland and he was somewhere in Zermatt near the very high mountains and the Swiss Post Auto, you know, one of those busses squeezed a woman who was running against the wall and she died. And he, as a physician, was called in and while he was administering help to this woman, he died of a heart attack. He had a bad heart, bad kidneys, bad heart, so this is the story of my father and there were write ups all over the New York Times, all over Europe. Ernst Laqueur died while he was trying to help somebody not to die. A question...

Q:What was dinnertime like at your house with all these kids and your parents, what kind of a ...?

A:That's an interesting question. First let me tell you about the food. The food was always too much and too heavy. Everybody was heavy. I learned. My people in New York told me I want to be -- what do you want to be. I said, "I want to be what I should be." She said, "You cut everything you eat in half."² I never went on a diet. I lost what I had to lose and stayed that way for the rest of my life. Father disciplined because children were brought up not to talk unless they were asked questions. Children were there to be looked at, but not to be heard. We were very well brought up. We also had nannies. We had a nanny, we had a cook, we had whatever and the nanny was, in many ways, more important than the mother. The mother was there when you were sick and when you were in trouble with your father, she would mediate.

01:18:03

² **R.L.**: "My doctors asked me, 'What do you want to be.' I said, 'I want to be what I should be.' My doctor said..."

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My mother was called, surprisingly, an avalanche which rolls up the mountain. She was that forceful. She ran the house in many ways and my father was the guy behind the desk, always on the phone, always public relations. I learned public relations from him. Public relations before the word existed. Team work, working with people was my father. My mother was an individualist and totally you do what you feel like as long as you don't run into trouble with the law, and that's it.

Q: Was she warm?

A: Was she what? Yes, very warm, but also very egocentric. If she was warm, you were warm., but if she was cold and she didn't understand you, she wanted you warm, and it wasn't that easy. The sense of humor strangely enough was my father. He had a kind of a understated...he couldn't have survived with that woman next to him if he wouldn't have had a kind of certain distance and a kind of an ironization of his own position.

Q: Did you think they were in love with each other?

A: No, and I think this has been one of the traumatic things. I never talked about that because to me it's so natural that I always knew he had girlfriends, but I also knew that the girl friends were not sexual and this is something which I never understood. Girlfriends were achievements. They were either just -- I hope this doesn't go anywhere because this is purely personal -- they were either very beautiful or very famous or both or they needed him because he could provide whatever they wanted. It wasn't persecution. It was a very complex relationship because I think sexually he didn't function. I found that out by talking to one of them. I mean, I was the one who became very...and there was another thing. I had tremendous

problems as a teenager and as a young woman because my father was afraid of temperament. Afraid of passion, afraid of sexual involvement and he warned me, he said you're dark. I was dark. Today I'm gray. You look like a gypsy and you look aggressive. I didn't even know what he was talking about but I understood much later that this was his fear. He loved me and he said, "You will never need to do anything except get married." I think I started at the ripe old age between 40 and 51 to prove that I could do other things but get married.

01:21:41

But when you ask me, "Did they love each other?" They may have been in love for a very short time, but again to give you the 19th century, when he married my mother, who was, of course, a virgin when he married her in 1905, he said, "If you don't have a son or a daughter in a year, it's over." So, in other words, he wanted to propagate and I don't know -- I don't know whether these stories are true but this is what I remember in my family and there are other things that I remember which are not showing love. You're so long together, you stick it out.

Q:Were you close to any of your brothers and sisters?

A:I was very close to my middle brother who was five years older when he was very young and I became very much estranged from him in the last 20 years of his life because he was to my mind, too narrow minded. For instance, he never forgave me that I went back to Germany. He never forgave me that I wrote the dissertation and that I kind of published our background in the sense of, from my grandparents already tried to escape. "And now you

describe this whole business again, what it was to be a German, now you get involved in the whole Hitler aftermath.”

That became very difficult because I thought, “How narrow minded can you be. You know damn well it's not my problem.” I am delighted that I survived and I had the guts to write a diary. Then somebody else picked it up and published it. I gave it to a publisher because it was there in Holland, it was nothing. It was typed, but I never did anything with it. I have actually never done anything until now. This is the last time that I try to get this published in English. I've had it. Let it sit somewhere.

01:24:11

Q:What did you like in school, what subjects?

A:You better say what did I not like. What I didn't like was science and math and anything to do with that which wasn't language. I loved geology, geography and all that stuff but no mathematics, no science. Even when I came to New York and I wanted to study I talked Columbia and NYU into giving me a year off so I got instead of 128 points I only had to do whatever and I said no science. I'm never going to go anything with science. I regret it today because I ended up in medicine at the age of 60, but anyway. I liked going to school. I liked to learn and I like kids and I like to be with people. I have no problems. I had a very good childhood. I was strong, tough and I loved to just play. No, beef at all. I had a wonderful childhood. I knew I didn't get the stuff I wanted in clothes. I knew I didn't get ever a room which was filled with beautiful objects. I always saw them but I knew I wouldn't get them. Later on I did get them, so what else?

Q:When you graduated Gymnasium --?

A:Eighteen. I was eighteen. I wanted to study and my father said no. It was 1938 and he said my daughter doesn't go to university and he was right. He said, "You first learn something which you can do anywhere in the world." I mean this was '38. The war in Munich had happened and peace was just a matter of negotiation and most likely never, and he said, "You can go to University maybe if you have done this, but go to secretarial school." He was right. He said, "You're good in languages. You're good, learn shorthand, typing, bookkeeping, all this stuff." He sent me to the best secretarial school, an international school in Holland and I did this for a year and a half and I had a diploma. I ended working in Montreal when I immigrated in French, German and English in shorthand because I translated my Dutch into whatever and so on...I could make a living wherever I was.

Q:When the Nazis took over in Germany --?

A:That was in May 1940 the Nazis took over.

Q:I know in Holland, but I'm talking about what was happening in Germany. Were you thinking about what was going on in Germany? You had your grandparents --?

A:I was constantly...Only one grandmother and the grandmother was brought to Amsterdam. I forget which year, but she certainly came--either in '30--after the Kristallnacht, so after November 1938. Maybe a year earlier but I don't remember that. But she was my mother's mother. She came. I was not concerned about family. I was concerned about, quote unquote, "the immigrants," because we were made to feel guilty that we had to do something because

there, but for the grace of God, would we be moving, so I resented them. If you have to do something, it doesn't come from the heart but it comes because your father said like they said later on, "Eat your stuff because the people in Europe are hungry."

01:28:15

Q: So, what were your obligations?

A: Obligations were to see and be with people who were in deep trouble. These were my obligations. We were told that tonight, let's say, a conductor or a professor or a this or a that is coming. You know, we had very many people who immigrated, who came via Holland and went on to America. I remember a house full of famous people who came through.

Q: And they stayed with you?

A: They stayed with my parents and the sponsorship was always the business about how do they get to America, because they have to have the guarantee of a sponsor and so on. You know, the finding relations and connections and this is what I remember about immigration and whether it was people they talked about whether it was a Thomas Mann or whether it was a Bruno Walter or who was or whatever or chemist or musician, he was also into music³.

01:29:35

³ **R.L.**: Here Renata is referring to her father.

He was a board member of the "Concertgebouw Orchestra", so this is Lincoln Center. So, we got all these people from the theater, from the concerts, from music and from science and I remember life was interesting but there was always this feeling of guilt. Guilt by what would...I think I'm talking now with hindsight. I'm not sure that I thought this or I'm making it up. If you are a kid between, let's say, 10 and 16 and you're constantly surrounded by people you would have been if your parents wouldn't have done this or that, that's it.

Q:Do you remember any particular people or conversation, did they engage with you or were you also sitting there being a very quiet young lady?

A:No, I was never quiet. No, I asked questions but I remember fascinating, being fascinated by stories by the first -- honestly Joan, I don't know any more what is memory and what I'm making up. This is why I don't like this kind of interview. You talk about something which you feel today. I am not 100 percent. I am terribly aware of authenticity. This comes through my research and the feeling of afterwards, pre, during, and afterwards and what you felt before something happened or while it happened or what had happened afterwards to differentiate which is the real thing. I can only swear to what I really remember almost physically, but if it's purely mental, it's very difficult to remember a conversation. I remember all kinds of faces, all kinds of discussions about music, art, going to school, but I don't know who said what, so I don't want to talk about it.

01:32:14

Q:Were there ever any children that came through with these people or were these mainly men, famous men, who were coming through?

A: There were families, but I don't remember any children. I only remember that they would come to dinner or that the word was said, "There's another one coming." So, it was -- I wish my sister were here, because my sister would say how come you remember the annoyance factor. Joan, I have never thought about it. I have never voiced this. This is the first time, when you said, "Have you ever talked about it?" No. That's so interesting about it. The interesting thing is that you go through it and you come out of it, and that is I think is not my doing. It's sheer luck and chutzpah.

Q: When the war starts in Poland in 1939 --?

A: That I remember. September 3, you first get the declaration of war of the English. I'll never forget that because the radio was on day and night, BBC, whatever. Holland was free. We were on the radio. There was no television, but when Poland started, that was the beginning of the end.

Q: Do you remember that a few months later or around the same time that Westerbork opened for illegal refugees?

A: I don't remember but I know about it historically because I read about it. I never heard about it, never. I didn't hear about Westerbork. I don't know. I may have heard about it because I think one of my "cousins" came via Hamberg where his parents were, he came through a children's camp into Westerbork, which was just before the war. So Westerbork was a kind of receptacle for immigrants.

Q:Now, were you conscious of the Nazi party in Holland?

A:No, never heard about it until May 1940, and not even then. Only I would say after the surrender when the queen had left and the NSB didn't kick up. We knew there was such a thing like it was something in Britain. Also there was something in Holland. There were people who were anti-Mussolini, we knew that. I'm trying to think. I think in my Gymnasium class, I graduated in '38, there was definitely a color line against the people from the colonies, Javanese, what you call the Katjang and there was Anti-Semitism and Anti-Catholicism.

01:35:30

There was a lot of anti- stuff. Protestant versus Catholics reminds of Ireland and Holland. You have a very strong division line where the river, the Rhine, and the--anything below is Catholic and anything above is Protestant. So, the northern Frisians don't talk to the people of Brabant because they are Catholics versus Calvinists.

Q:How did that affect you?

A:It affected me very much because I was in a school which was pretty anti-Catholic because it was purely Calvinistic. I mean I learned about these things. It didn't affect me, but it didn't affect me except that I don't know how these things affect you. I have never gone to Spain except under duress because I was raised in Holland. Because of the Duke of Alba and because of Philip II and when I wanted to go to the Escorial in Madrid my husband said, "Are you crazy?"

01:36:36

This goes back to your history teaching of Holland between the age of six and the age of 12. I said, "That's it. Who wants to go to Spain." This biased we were. Because the 80 years war never stopped in Holland. That's why I understand the Irish so well.

Q:When you say that there was Anti-Semitism as well as Anti-Catholicism --

A:Anti-Semitism in the sense that they thought Jews were people who--Wall Street--didn't exist for us, but who were either bankers or, usurers, medieval thing, or they were selling oranges on the street or, what is it? Voddeman. Old clothes.⁴

01:37:30

So, Jews were either bankers...They were neither lawyers or doctors. Not like in New York or in America. But there were these kind of medieval restrictive kind of thoughts and yet Holland is the place after all with Erasmus and the philosophy and the Jewish philosophers. So, it's a weird place to grow up. Very advanced and very restricted. Advanced in the sense that there were sea farers and everything with the sea and broadening the horizon and going all over the world and being Dutch meant that you traveled and at the same time being very narrow minded. Sitting behind a tiny little window and looking into the street. You know the look out corner of a window?

⁴ **Voddeman:** seller of old clothes, ragman.

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Q: Did you have any identification problems at this point given what was going on with the Jewish refugees coming in? Did you identify with them, as much as you may have resented them?

A: No, I didn't identify in the sense except for a feeling of gratefulness and thank God I'm in Holland. To me feeling that anything would happen in Holland didn't occur to me. That didn't occur until we got the Wehrmacht, the orders from the occupational army to fill in forms that you had Jewish grandparents and I remember my wild resentment to my father.

01:39:11

I said, "Don't be such a goddamn Prussian, don't fill in anything." If he wouldn't have filled it in we would have been all okay. Because--That's why I kept saying Prussian prejudice and Prussian education. There's another problem that also comes out in the book Schreiben KZ in the introduction, because my German editors insisted that I give my story about my father and he said, "If you don't give it we have it in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Archives." So I said, "Okay, here it is". He is born in 1880. He is a German. He is a medical professional. He is a teacher at the universities, various universities. The war breaks out in 1914. He is a German. He volunteers into the army as a medical officer. Imagine growing up in Holland and having a father who was a volunteer in the German army. Okay, number one, he is then, because he is a Pharmacologist he is being sent to Belgium. In Belgium they have a Gas Schule, a Gas School in Berlin where they experiment with poisonous gas for the war. From '14 to '18 Laqueur is in the gas schule. He only does research. He has no idea what the research is for, but he does research as a Pharmacologist. He's being sent to Belgium as an occupation army, you know, from '14 to '18. He ends up with a death sentence in Belgium because they say, "If you ever come back we'll kill you." So, for the

rest of his life, when we were children, he travels to Switzerland where we have a chalet in the summer. He travels on the Belgium French side, we travel in the third railroad car with my mother on the German side⁵. These are the things they knew in Germany and my friend and editor Martina in Frankfurt said, "Renata, if you don't tell us these stories we have them anyway because the Germans knew about this." I think it's only funny, but of course I don't blame my father. If you were an American and if ...we have never been occupied in America, but if the occupational-- yes we have been occupiers. We have occupied Germany. We have occupied whatever. So, if you then do something because your government tells you to do this or that, do you or don't you? But there are other things which made me nervous about this interview because my own bad conscience comes in, I hated to be my father's daughter in Holland.

01:42:44

I never forget the last talk I had with my father in 1947 before he went to Switzerland and he was a sick man, he had cardio and kidney problems and I said, "Why did you go into the army?" Why this or that and he simply had no other explanation but, "This is my duty." Again the Prussian. Duty, honor, --ugh.

Q:So when he puts down that he has Jewish parents --?

A:Then he gets like everybody else, a "J" on his identity thing. My mother gets a "J," and his children unless they were married to non-Jews and then they started working around it. My

⁵ **R.L.**: Here Renata is referring to the third **class** railroad car.

middle brother is exempted because my mother said, "I had another guy and he's the son of another guy." And this gets all taken into paper and it's all very complicated and so he is out of the story. My sister isn't married so she still has a "J" and she lives with my parents, and I am married and I married a Jewish boy who was baptized, Paul. We wanted to disappear, you know, go underground and my father said, "Don't do this because if you do this you endanger my staying and, let's say, being tolerated." Because the Germans, because of his relationship to the industry, to the pharmacological industry, they wanted shares so badly of his outside involvement in South America and in America and they tried to pressure him into giving them access to his money. He never did.

Q: To your father's money?

A: They never succeeded but meanwhile they kept saying "Laqueur, you can stay in your house. You can do whatever you can do," but of course his job was gone because he had to be sacked as a professor because you couldn't stay in the university if you were Jewish.

01:45:20

But they left him until the end of the war. Of course there were stories about it that he sold his children to the concentration camp because he could stay home. Nonsense. It had nothing to do with him. We were arrested because we were Jewish. We had a "J" and I had done some illegal stuff, and a...and stuff, documents. It's a very complicated story. Anyway I ended up in prison in Amsterdam and then a Dutch concentration camp which was worse than anything else. Then being shipped to Westerbork and then my father, with his good connections in the Hague and with Berlin, got me out of Westerbork and I came back out.

Then Paul and I said to my father, "Now it's time that we go underground, because I don't want to be shipped ever again to Westerbork." The transportations were going to the East. We didn't know what happened there, but I didn't want to be shipped. He said, "You can't do this. You just stay where you are. I will try to salvage whatever I can." He bought us Ecuadorian passports. We got Venezuelan passports. We got immigration stuff to go to Palestine. We had everything, every paper in the world. Then we got picked up because with the Germans there was always one word, Bis auf Weiteres, until further notice.

01:46:57

So, in other words, if you had an exemption that could explode from one hour to the next, and our so called Stempel, stamp had expired and we were shipped to a so called preference camp which was Bergen-Belsen. At that time it wasn't a concentration camp. It was for the children of notable people.

Q:Can we go back? First I want to --

A:I'm talking much too much.

Q:No, that's the idea. Tell me how you met your husband. I want to get a little bit of a sense of who he was.

A:That also has to do with the war. I met Paul in May '40 when we were overrun by the Germans. I meet him bicycling with a member of a family that I knew and I meet him and we fall in love. It's May, June 1940. He's my first man and being well brought up you marry the first

man. We have a love affair and then I tell my father that I slept with him and he almost killed me for that. I said, "Don't worry, we'll get married." He said, "You shouldn't get married because you will get divorced right after." He was right, but he said, "Do you want to marry?" I said, "Yes, I want to marry because otherwise we can't live together." Because there were certain orders from the Germans that you couldn't live in this city and in that city you had to live together. They were making restrictions on where you lived and what you did and so on. It was the ghetto mentality already. So, Paul and I got married and the two fathers, Father Goldschmidt, Paul Goldschmidt, his ancestry was German but he had been three or four generations in Holland and Father Goldschmidt and Father Laqueur got together and said, "Those kids are going to get divorced as soon as the war is over. What do we do about our money?"

01:48:07

So, they said that each kid whatever they brought into the marriage would go back into their own family, and boy did that happen. But this is really very personal. When Paul and I got divorced in the 1950s, after I met my second husband -- this is a story I have to tell you, but it's purely personal. Anyway, to get to the money first, it got divided very nicely except that Paul said, "I can never pay you for saving my life." I said, "You don't pay me. That's a natural. I either saved your life or I let you rot." So, whatever it was we got very amicably divorced. I gave him some share of my father's LaRoche Organon stuff and he gave me some other stuff, but these are civilized marriages.⁶

⁶ Renata Laqueur has added an addendum to her interview release form in regards to the words: "LaRoche Organon." She does not permit these words to be used in any publication or production, including literary, print, audio, audio-visual, computer-based or any other medium now known or which may be created in the future.

01:50:10

We are still friends. The story of how I met Paul and how I met my second husband. Paul had been a speech therapist. He had dyslexia and that way got into speech trouble and interested in psychology and psychiatry but he had never made the Gymnasium so he could never study medicine. 1950, after the war, there were stories, there were children and also no children and all kinds of things. In 1950 the first international speech therapy congress convention is in Amsterdam and Paul says to me, "Do you want to work for that? Do something because you're good with people and good with money and all that." And I said, "I will be the treasurer." I'm the treasurer, the general secretary of that international convention comes from New York. He is Deso A. Weiss, M.D.

01:51:21

He has been Paul's teacher when he was a kid studying in Vienna, because he came from Austria, Vienna, Prague, whatever. Paul knew him and admired him as his teacher and his professor. He was 18 years older than me so he was also 13 years older than Paul. He said, "Don't ever start anything with him because one of these days I'm going to America and I don't want my wife to have a relationship with my professor." You only have to say, "Don't start," and Renata starts. A week after I meet this guy, ten days, I said to Paul, "Paul, you're absolutely right." He doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to get this guy. I'm going to marry him." He was in a bad marriage, no children. I knew about that. It had nothing to do with anything. I achieved that after four years. He was my second husband. He was the great love of my life. That's Paul, Deso, and Renata. Everything was very friendly, very whatever. How did I

meet Paul, we were young. We had the first sex and he liked my family. He said it was the craziest family he ever married into. I liked his too, but they were different. They were very formal, very -- totally different background. Totally business people, very rich. Not showy but very established and we were so bohemian. I've been talking for an hour. You said you wanted to give me a break after half an hour. How much more do we have to do?

Q:Where were you living when you got married?

A:The first time or the second time?

Q:The first time, we're back in the war?

A:Amsterdam, and actually that is nice. I have a picture of that. Amsterdam, Burgerlijke Stand, which is the civil authority, no church, no nothing, no synagogue, no nothing, just a civil marriage. We were married on the 24th of December 1941. Christmas 1941.

Q:Who married you?

A:I don't know. Some official in the -- what do you call it the registry where you're married?

Q:A civil ceremony?

A:A civil ceremony. I don't know who it was. I just remember the second time when they said, "Two dollars please" in New York. That's all.

Q: So, did you have a big party?

A: No, but I remember what I wanted for my wedding meal?

Q: What?

A: I wanted frankfurters and I wanted sauerkraut and I wanted chocolate pudding. All things you couldn't get, and I got them on the black market. My mother got it. I wanted frankfurters, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut. I mean my taste has changed.

Q: Was this typically Dutch?

A: It was Dutch. I mean, the frankfurters were not frankfurters, they were called something else. We didn't put the word "frankfurter" to it. It was called Wiener Wurst, Viennese, and it was potatoes with gravy. You know as a kid you would have potatoes and you would make a hole in the middle and then the gravy would go in there and you would spoon this up instead of a fork. And then they would always say, "Don't eat the potatoes first. Eat your vegetables first."

Q: Were there vegetables at this particular wedding?

A: No, there were no vegetables. I wasn't yet a salad eater or veggie eater. I was still a meat eater. That's it. But only frankfurters. I didn't like meat.

Q: Did you go away after the wedding? Did you have a little honeymoon?

A:No. We had no honeymoon. We went... ah I forget where we went. We went to somebody's apartment. We had been living together. It was no honeymoon. We said after the war we would travel. I'd never been to Paris. So the things like that.

Q:One last question and then I think we'll have to take a break. Did he have a J on his passport also? On his identity card.

A:I don't know. I don't know! I guess so. I'm not even sure that I did, because I don't know anymore whether I had one or whether I just always hid it. I only know we had to wear that damn thing on the yellow star. That was the worst part. The feeling of always trying to hide it, that you had the star. You know we had to wear it on our clothes when we went on the street. And the restrictions was one of the part I remember, was the restrictions. You couldn't do this, you couldn't do that. You couldn't. You had no freedom. Taking away first your bike, and then no street car, and then no park and then this and then not this. And then all this, it's an unbelievable feeling. It has me, altered me so that I practically don't want to sign any form. I revolt against any signature on any paper, because of the effect of, if you put it down somebody else is going to abuse it.

Q:And let's take a break.

A:Yes ma'am!

Q:We'll start with the restrictions when we come back.

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A: We start with the restrictions? I'm very comfortable by the way. I don't have to take my jacket--

01:58:08

Tape #2

02:01:55

Q:Renata, tell me about the movement of the restrictions that you felt because now you're identified as a Jew in some respects, yes?

A:The restrictions I felt then or restrictions today? Today I feel no restrictions.

Q:No, then.

A:This is one of the reasons why I'm particularly happy in New York. There are no restrictions. It's the freest city in the world.

Q:No, I mean with the occupation of Holland?

A:The occupation? What I felt is having grown up as a happy child and being with "normal people" who went to school or into business or whatever they were doing to be singled out as something which is in somebody's eyes, now I'm going to get into the concentration camp again, where you are vermin. Here we weren't vermin, we were just abnormal. We were singled out because we were something they wanted to get rid of. And, to be singled out is something which I have never liked. If it's good, not, and if it's bad, not because I like to be just able to be free and choose the fact that I had no more choices. My choices were taken away, whether I wanted to go to the park or to the movies or take a street car or buy something not before 3:00 in the afternoon and not in a certain store. It is something that I've always objected to. Not having choice and it gets the worst when they imprison you,

because you have no choices.

Q:How did you find the Dutch population, your friends that you had before, now that you're under those restrictions and they're not?

A:The interesting thing is, Joan, I thought about it but I just don't remember anything. I don't think that I lost anybody. I don't think I saw anybody less. I don't know. I have no memory because I'm such an egocentric and selective memorizer. It's a good question. I don't know. I think nobody really reacted wrong because I didn't know anybody who was in the pro-Hitler. And don't forget that it is a very free and open society and democratic which is over run by a tyrant so that they were all against him. And whether I was singled out, they were singled out if they were Catholic or Communist or homosexual or whatever. There were so many people singled out. It wasn't just Jews. You were a victim because, you were what do you call it? Occupied. Occupied means they sit on top of you and you have restrictions. Almost everybody had restrictions. The Jews had different restrictions than other people. There was constant curfew. There was black out. It just occurs to me that the atmosphere between 1940, I was only there from 1940 to 1943 was one of constant interference with people's lives. You couldn't just go to school and learn, you had to learn what they said was okay. You couldn't just sit in a street car because maybe there was a Wehrmacht, or a general or whatever. Maybe there was a *razzia*⁷ on the street and they were rounding up people to go to work camps or Jews to go to whatever.

02:06:01

⁷ **Razzia:** a roundup (Italian).

There was always something going on which had to do with the occupation. I cannot differentiate occupation from personal persecution because I didn't suffer really any personal persecution, never. I was very lucky. I wasn't dragged by my hair. I wasn't tortured. I wasn't threatened except once during the first interrogation in the prison. That was no fun, but they said, "If you don't tell us where you have those papers from," I had false papers, I⁸ said, "We're going to stick you in the water until you talk." I said, "Then I can't talk." I mean to give you examples. I have had situations where personal chutzpah has saved my life. One of them is I think in the diary. I walked in Bergen Belsen on a very hot July afternoon. We came back from work and I was working in the kitchen. I was working in the kitchen because not only could I eat, but I could steal for Paul and there was a can of pork meat. As a Jew you don't like pork meat but when you're hungry who cares. And I take the pork meat, the can and I turned it inside into my bra and I had work overalls and I walk through the gate where the SS is to count us, you know, when we come back and I had no idea that there was a fat stain from here to there over my left bosom and the SS man says, "Was ist los? What's the matter with you? Ihnen geht wohl die Milch ab? You lose your milk?" I said yes, "That's what it is, can I please go quickly back to the barrack and wash myself because this is awful." At the same time I had under my hair which was long and I had a net under it, a half of pound of margarine or butter. So, if they would have caught me -- I mean I was lucky. But you see, when the guy says, "We stick you in the water until you talk," I said, "Then I can't talk." I yelled right back and he also. I mean, I was lucky. But these are personal things and I was terribly afraid of torture, terribly afraid of pain, terribly afraid of it. But these are always things you hear or dream about and are scared -- still I'm terrified of certain things. But...

⁸ **R.L.:** Renata meant to say, "They."

Q:Were you connected with any underground groups?

A:Only an underground group who was making false identifications and this came through my non-Jewish family of Paul whose sister was married to a resistance fighter who was in prison and tortured and beaten and sent to Dachau and whatever, and we were involved with that group and we were lucky. Once again lucky. They found only my papers. They never found the one of Paul and that is the reason why I was arrested alone without Paul first and sent alone to prison and alone to Westerbork and my father pulled me out. And Paul was home. Again, sheer luck. His false papers were a little further under the floor boards and of course they wanted to know whether I knew anything. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know where they were.

Q:Where did they find these papers, at Paul's sister's?

A:They found them in Paul's sister's husband's hide out. He was already wanted because he had been a director of the music conservatory and he was a famous young guy and he was a resistance fighter and, somehow there was...there were traitors that had betrayed him. They found whatever his hideout and they found under the floorboards, false i.d. cards. I mean proof of identity which were fake and which, of course, were given to Jews and to people who were fleeing to England. There was always going something on in Holland. People are still trying to get to France and to Spain and to England and so on. So, they found us. And they had me with a picture.

Q: So they came after you?

A: They came after me.

Q: How did they find you and where did they find you?

A: They found me in the apartment we had rented very close to my parent's home and they came in and they were Dutch. They were not Germans. They were the Dutch police. This is what I remember and they said, "We have a warrant for your arrest." I said, "What for?" They said "You'll find out when we take you to our jail." So, I told myself, "Dutch jail, that's not too bad. That's not Gestapo." Dutch jail was under the Gestapo. I found out why there were Germans. And then they more or less -- I don't remember the thing because I've repressed this whole thing so much. They confronted me with the fact that they had my papers and of course I was going to a concentration camp, if not worse, you know, whatever they threatened and I ended up in jail and I ended up in jail with -- a Dutch jail -- with about six women in a one person cell. I only remember the smell, the closeness, and the fear. And I don't know how many days but the whole thing lasted about ten days and then I was shipped to a Dutch concentration camp in the South of Holland and I had a stamp on my i.d. card, which was not a regular...which says S, which means Straf Fall, so I was a punishment case. This is how I was delivered into Vught and Vught would transmit me to Westerbork and Westerbork would transport me eventually to the east. We didn't know anything. This was 1943. I was, I think, four weeks in Vught.

Q: What was that like?

A: Vught was the name. V-U-G-H-T. Vught was the name. It's a concentration camp in Breda, near Brabant, Dutch.⁹

02:13:23

Then shipped in a train to Westerbork and then in Westerbork I was freed in July. So it was from February to July. And in Westerbork I got pulled¹⁰ by connections. I don't know how anymore, how exactly out of this so called S barracks, where they would take the people and ship them without any further procedures into the freight cars which were standing every Tuesday and every Friday in Westerbork chugging along to the east. That's it. Then I came back and from July until November 1943, Paul and I lived with all the restrictions in Amsterdam and then there was...

Q: Can I interrupt? What were those few months like? February to July is not just -- it's not even one month. It's not two months.

A: It's three months... somehow I forget whether it's... Eighteenth of February to -- almost five months.

Q: Did you work there?

⁹ **R.L.:** Renata would like this to read: "Vught, a Dutch concentration camp in Brabant."

¹⁰ **R.L.:** Renata meant to say, "pulled out."

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A:I worked every where.

Q:What did you do?

A:I worked everywhere. Wherever...I always used my languages. I worked either as an, I don't know, interpreter or as a secretary always trying to do something to do with what I could write down things. I always found a job. Or in Bergen-Belsen, in the kitchen to get food, or wherever.

Q:What was it like in Westerbork then?

A:Westerbork was a camp like a kind of internment camp in a very bad physical situation because it was built on sand and mud. That was a good lesson before you got to Germany, horrible climate and run by Dutch under Germans and with still a lot of freedom. You could still do all kinds of things. You could write. You could get packages. There was music. There was theater. There were all kinds of things in Westerbork and always still the hope that you were still in your own country that one of these days it would end and you would be home. You were only let's say as far as Boston from Washington, if that far. It's a small country.

02:16:09

Q:But you were there at the time that the transports were leaving every Tuesday?

A:Yah. Tuesday and Friday, I think twice a week.

Q: So, that must have been a very difficult situation in the camp?

A: Yes, but we didn't know what they were leaving for. They were leaving very often, very optimistic because they were going to work. There were no transports yet of old people, sick people. No, nothing. This was also, if I remember it well, I have to be careful now because I'm beginning to wonder whether I know it from what I read or what I really went through. To my mind, 'til July 1943, there were no transportation yet of the people from mental institutions or the old people or -- there were always Straf transports, which is punishment and we wondered what happened to those people. Because we didn't know whether these guys were put to work let's say in the "mines" in Mauthausen. We knew that Mauthausen was very bad. We knew about that. We knew about the mines. We knew about the chemical factories in Germany. We knew a little about Poland. We knew mainly about Germany. Don't forget concentration camps were in Germany. Something which I also found out with the dissertation, no real, what do you call it, annihilation, last solution with gas was in Germany. They're all in Poland. Not in Austria, not in Germany. They were built east of where I was born, in Silesia.

02:18:14

I always wonder why. Did they really think it would make the difference. They would get points. It's interesting. Anyway, where were we? The five months. Somewhere if I can improvise, there was nothing quite as bad as the fear of being arrested. Once you were arrested, you were rolling with the punches. Because what you imagine is all from my experiences is almost worse, you can't imagine things which happened later on. I didn't know I would live among the dead and the sick and the hungry. I didn't know what hunger was. I didn't know

what dehumanization was. I didn't know. You can't imagine.

Q: Since you didn't go to Westerbork with Paul --?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: No, no, the first time.

A: The second time, we went.

Q: Yes, the second time you were but the first time --?

A: To me this was old hat. I said it isn't so bad and it wasn't bad.

Q: But the first time, did you make friends?

A: Yes, I immediately made friends and friends who later on were sent on. When I had left I know that they were -- they never came back. They disappeared. And I don't know if they went to Birkenau or Auschwitz or wherever they went. Of course I made friends. But again this is all like a dark hole. I don't remember names. I don't remember faces. I only know of certain circumstances. I think the whole thing about the camps to me is everything I wrote in Bergen-Belsen are facts. Everything I did before and after are part of a mechanism where I somewhere struggled to stay above it, not get involved again. Talking about friends, talking about family, talking about pain or illness, about whatever, but I can tell you one thing, it all came back. Under anesthesia and when I had cancer and I was at Sloan-Kettering, 1992,

they find colon cancer, invasion of the lymph nodes, chemotherapy, the works at Sloan-Kettering. I'm again dreaming and fighting being strapped, being tethered to a certain thing - my fight with the chemotherapist that I had to be once a week at Sloan-Kettering for a year. After five months they stopped it because I had too many side effects. But I tell you, this is something that goes so deep that I fight anytime when I need anesthesia whatever, even at the dentist. Since the war, I will not go under unless they absolutely hit me. Because I'm out of control. I need control to survive. And that goes very deep because if you ask me about friends, love, decency, everything stops because I went through so much which I didn't like what I did.

02:22:41

Among other things I ate Paul's bread, Paul's ration. The guy was six foot three and I'm just a little person in comparison and I ate his bread and I did things which are not -- it's sheer survival. One thing I never done and I'm very proud of it, I've never done any prostitution. I had occasion, but I didn't do it. Not because of moral thing, because I told myself that's stupid. Because you do it with one you have to do , it with a couple of other people. So, I have no moral convictions and I came out totally an amoral person. It went so far that Paul said in 1945 when we were back home, that he said, "You've got to see a psychiatrist because you are totally demoralized. You don't know anymore what is right or wrong. You pick up anything you like because you think they owe it to you. Whether it's an ashtray or a cigarette or a piece of meat or a piece of whatever, you steal, you organize. You have no values. You have no respect for anything." I went into therapy. It took about six months and then he said to me, "Renata, you can do it yourself." I said, "Who's paying whom anyway?" But whatever, I learned. I learned because if you live in a normal life where not everything is

topsy turvy you better adjust because otherwise you can't survive. So, I survived the other way. But I'm very bitter. I'm very bitter about things and especially when people complain and when people say, "Oh, but if Hitler wouldn't have been there and if this and this and this wouldn't have happened and if I wouldn't have come to America and maybe I should have done this..." I say, "It's all up to you. Don't blame anybody. You came through anything. The only people you have to live with eventually is you. If you can look into the mirror in the morning and say it's okay, I'm neither criminal nor an addict nor a this or a that, it's fine."

02:25:30

But what you do under I would say the ultimate circumstance of either being dead or alive, I have no judgment and no prejudice about that. I can understand that. I'm always afraid of torture in the sense that if I've been I would do anything and I wouldn't blame anybody who has betrayed a secret or an organization or anything. Do you understand what I'm talking about? What I'm so worried about is I'm put in a position where I have to make a real decision what will happen to somebody else. Let's say a situation where you know that your husband or your child or your father or your mother or your friend is being tortured or beaten and that you could save them but you know damn well you can't save them because they beat them anyway and they will kill you too. Joan, I don't like this digging into the past. People have very often said to me, "Renata, why are you doing this? Why are you going to Germany. Why do you go now to the Holocaust Museum and give them an interview? Haven't you been through enough? Why do you have to do it at all?" I said, "God knows somebody else can learn something." If you ask me one question, I'm asking you as if I were you. Would you do anything different than what I did. I would say "Yes." I would not have

stayed in Holland. I would have accepted an invitation in 1939 to go to Berkeley. I had a friend who wanted me to go to Berkeley and who knows? But otherwise, I might not write another diary although I still write diaries today. I can't do anything unless I write it down. I really am like the person who says I haven't lived anything until I have written it down. Because then you objectify. You're kind of above it, not any more in it. I never write in Bergen-Belsen in order to sit 52 years later in Washington and talk about things because I didn't think it would ever be read by anybody, not even by me. It was my survival mechanism if I write about it, I objectify. I rise above it because other people were drawing or reciting poetry or thinking about food or thinking about the past. This is where we are different from animals, I think. We have a brain.

02:29:39

Q:Were you writing diaries as a child? Were you always writing diaries?

A:No, I was never writing diaries. Never. I only started in the concentration camp¹¹, that occurs to me. I had written stories. I always wrote, I wrote for magazines and things like that. I usually wrote what I call women's stories, but --.

Q:Did you do that during the war before you were picked up?

A:Yes, right, I always wrote, but not diaries. I never made notes. It was the writing mechanism. The mere fact that you try to do something which describes it so that it's not you but it.

¹¹ R.L.: Bergen-Belsen

Q:But you didn't do it in Westerbork?

A:No. Typical. It may not...It never occurred to me why didn't I do it in Westerbork. It would have been much easier. I didn't do it in Vught either. I only started it on the day we get to Bergen-Belsen. I think I know why. Because it was foreign. I was in Germany. I wasn't home anymore. That may have been the idea. I always write travel notes when I travel. I never write when I'm home. Only when I travel.

Q:Quite a trip!

A:Yes. -- that's interesting. Jesus, it never occurred to me that I only wrote because it was a trip.

Q:Can I ask you when you got out of Westerbork the first time, your father got you out?

A:I guess so. Father and friends. He went to the Hague and I had a German friend, I had a German friend who knew people in the Hague who were not Gestapo who were army and somehow that did work. It was a connection business. Again PR.

Q:Now you said when you got out you told your father you and Paul really wanted to go underground.

A:I didn't say it the same day I came home, but during the month we were home. I said, "I think things are getting very tough, and I don't want to want to get back into Westerbork." I never mentioned the idea of being shipped, because we didn't know. We really didn't know. But I

wanted to go under. I wanted to possibly try to get to Switzerland. You know the illegal route. And of course Paul's brother was arrested and was killed on his way to Switzerland. And other people in the family tried it and got killed. They never came back. I mean they tried to get to Belgium or wherever and they were killed. Some people made it to England but much much later or earlier.

02:32:22

Q. So you decided to pay attention to what your father was saying and not go underground?

A: Yes, we decided, we were set¹², "But then you bring me into danger. Because if you guys disappear the Germans will wonder where you are because you're part of my, my reservation." Reserved until further notice. Reserved from persecution. Preserved, reserved you name it.

Q: So what did you do between July and November?

A: I don't know what I did. I suppose we tried to buy things on the black market and survive the best we could and listen to the BBC. What do people do normally? I don't know. It would have been very interesting if Paul...and I want you to get to Paul in Germany. I have the address and the phone number. I want somebody from the Holocaust Museum to go to him and have him talk. Because he helped me in Germany when Martina and I were doing this book

¹² **R.L.:** Renata clarified that, "My father was set that we should not 'go underground' because it would endanger him, my mother and younger sister who could remain at home 'until further notice...'"

he met with her and he stayed with us. And he said, "My God, you have this all wrong. This wasn't this way or this wasn't that way." And he's very much into it. So let's see. You can ask him. Are you ever going to Europe?

Q:Yes.

A:You ever going to Germany? Have you been?

Q:Yes.

A:Where? Frankfurt?

Q:Berlin.

A:Berlin, I have been to Berlin too. Have you ever been to any of the KZ¹³ places like Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz.

Q:Auschwitz.

A:You have not been in Bergen-Belsen? You should go there.

Q:O.K.

¹³ **KZ** is an abbreviation for Konzentrationslager (German), which means concentration camps.

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A:And go to Dachau, Munich.

02:33:55

Q:Tell me why the two of you were picked up the second time. Do you know why?

A:The second time we were picked up, because it was a general tightening up on people in November in 1943. They were beginning to round up people and begin to ship them via Westerbork to the east. I don't know why we were picked up. I only know that they came in and say, "You go to the Municipal Theater." That is the gathering point and then we, you go to Westerbork. And then in Westerbork we were supposed to stay. Because we again had the right kind of papers. And then in Westerbork we got the notice. That we were going to Bergen-Belsen. We were in Westerbork from my birthday November 3 until the 15th of March 1944 and then we were told in Westerbork that we were going to Bergen-Belsen which was a so called preferential camp.

Again, through the connections of my dad because we were not being sent east.

Q:Were you able to be in communication with your parents?

A:In Westerbork?

Q:Yes.

A:No. I mean we could write a letter but it would take weeks. Yes, we were in communication and we were not in communication but not like picking up a phone or sending a postcard, but

there was some connection. We knew more or less that they were alive and they knew that we were doing okay. We could also get parcels. We could also get parcels in Bergen-Belsen for a while. That came through the Red Cross and that came again through connections in Sweden and whatever connections one had.

Q: Did both of you work when you were in Westerbork also at this time?

A: I don't know. I think so. I think... I definitely worked in some administrative job and I don't know what Paul did. I don't know. He was still in good shape and I think he may have worked even in speech therapy, because wherever he worked he tried to do his professional thing. Even in Bergen-Belsen. People do what they are. So, but not officially. I mean, you don't get a job and you don't get a pay check.

02:36:39

Q: Before you leave for Bergen-Belsen, do you feel yourself changing, your character changing? Do you feel yourself getting depressed or angry? Or...

A: Before I leave for Bergen-Belsen?

Q: Yes.

A: I thought I was still very, very angry that we were going to Germany. Depressed, I can't remember depression until much, much later in life. No, depression is not the word but angry, yes. Angry and kind of feeling the "victim" that I'm being shipped like a parcel. The

impersonal aspects of something. Later on in life I learned in America that this is where we are going here. The impersonal -- I worked in a big cancer center and the impersonal dealing with government. And the people can't do anything. You're helpless. You're being managed. Managed care.

Q:Paul said to you much later that you were amoral, that you became amoral?

A:Yes, my second husband said, "You're a monster," and I had been in psychotherapy and Paul said, "You're amoral. You can't survive this way. You must learn manners. That's not the point. You must learn you can't do certain things. There are the ten commandments. The only thing you don't do is kill. Otherwise you steal, you --."

Q:It's interesting the way you describe yourself because you come from a certain way a very privileged home.

A:Very.

Q:Though Bohemian, nevertheless very privileged.

A:Privileged in many ways that I had all kinds of things which were given to me as a child, background, education, appreciation, diversity. I was never bored. Never.

02:39:13

Q:Do you think that gave you strength when these things started happening?

A:I think that this is a terribly important thing. I call this “vitamins”. If you had a childhood with vitamins of diversity, you will never ever lose that because you will always play games. You will always fantasize. You will do something. It's very interesting. One of the titles of the diaries from Dachau is *Imagination as Weapon*. So, in other words, I had a very imaginative, imaginative surrounding and imaginative childhood and parents and brothers and sisters who were serious but also playing with life. There were very few rules and very few restrictions and as soon as the restrictions begin I get angry and I protest.

Still, I think at age 76 I should have learned to keep my mouth shut and to behave.

Q:Can I ask you whether you know why Westerbork in someway is vague to you in your memory?

A:Why is it vague? I'm trying to think. The first answer is always what you should say. The first answer was that it was so messy. It was so disorganized. There was nothing. It was not final. I think it has something to do with the fact that it was so close to the border with Germany physically. It was a transit camp, transit to what...Transit forward, backwards, back home. I had been there once and had gotten out. I felt in Westerbork that it was a kind of a continuation of the kind of...Bohemian is not the word. I don't know how to say it. It was still not really restrictive. Yes, of course there were guards and there was barbed wire but very far away. It wasn't right -- the guards were not all over the place like in Bergen-Belsen or in the concentration camp in Vught. It was kind of a family internment camp. I think why I remember so little is that what came afterwards left its mark much more. And don't forget, physically what I have been through since Westerbork, typhus, encephalitis, you name it I've had it. The cancer hasn't helped, especially the chemotherapy, but that's over now. I see my surgeon Friday.

02:43:17

Q: Tell me about your preparations to go Bergen-Belsen and the trip?

A: The first time?

Q: No, Bergen-Belsen?

A: You're talking 1943 or 1985?

Q: No, 1943.

A: My preparation? There was no preparation. I mean I can't -- maybe Paul remembers it. I don't. I don't remember whether there was any preparation of what to take. You took everything you had. You had a suitcase. You stuffed everything in it. I remember my preparation for jail. That I'll never forget. On the 18th of February... Again, because it's very personal. On the 18th of February they ring the bell in the evening. It must have been eight, ten o'clock, between eight and ten in the evening. I had no idea. They are the Dutch police and they say, "We have a warrant for your arrest. You're going to jail." Now, it was right near the central part of Amsterdam. I said what can I take? He said you can take anything you want to for a few days. I said to Paul, "I'm going to take toilet water and perfume." He said, "better take a sweater." I said, "I'll take a sweater. I'll take my best sweater. I'll take my best pants. I'll take my toilet water and perfume." I was smoking at the time too. I started only smoking when there were no cigarettes, but that's what I remember. Now when you ask me what I

did for Bergen-Belsen --

Q:Why did you think of taking perfume. What were you thinking about?

A:Preservation of my -- why did, in Bergen-Belsen, did the French women fight more for the lipstick than for their -- I don't know. This is...It was the worst thing the people could do to you and I remember that in one of the camps where the women had long hair and they took away the comb which would hold up -- at that time everything was walled, remember, and they took it away. They took the bras away and they took the combs away because they knew that the women would suffer from that. Leave it to women. So anyway, I don't know why I took my lipstick. I don't know why I took perfume, but it was something that would remind me of the civilized world. Let me give you another example. When I had a test in English at NYU Professor Edel the James scholar, gave us a question, "What would you take if you were on an uninhabited island and if you know you would never come back, which book?" Most people had either the Bible or Hamlet or whatever. What did I have? Madame Bovary. So, Edel said , "why?" I said, "The food, the clothes, the ambiance, the discussions, the love, the whole thing. It's all so bourgeois and that I would miss. So, why does anybody take whatever it is that's very personal? Reaching back in order to stay on a certain level. I don't think today I would take the toilet water, but I don't know. I think I would take a thermometer.

02:47:16

Q:Do you remember the trip to Bergen-Belsen, in '43?¹⁴

¹⁴ **R.L.:** Actually, Renata was deported to Bergen-Belsen in 1944.

A: Oh yes, very much so. I remember this feeling of riding to Germany and I'm never going to come back. Yes, we're going to come back. I remember -- it's all in my diary. I remembered that because that I immediately put down. This feeling of going away into the unknown and certainly very unpleasant.

Q: Did you take a notebook with you, a blank notebook?

A: That notebook is the one which is now in Bergen-Belsen. I had a black school book, a black notebook like this and I had that with me and I had it with me and I don't know why I had it and I started writing. I never wrote in Westerbork, I told you. Never wrote.

Q: What did you write with?

A: Pen, pencils. Don't forget I always worked in administrative things. I stole left and right. Watch your pencils.

Q: Do you remember having a bunch of pens or pencils with you on this trip when you went?

A: No, certainly not more than two. I didn't have a bunch of pencils. I always found a pencil. I steal them, find them. That is really the euphemism for stealing, borrowing. Mark Twain. I don't know. That was never a problem for me to find something to write with. It was a problem - it wasn't a problem to write. It was a problem of tiredness, when do I do it, how do I do it, what do I risk? Is it worth it? I don't remember. I just did it.

Q:Is the diary a companion?

A:To me?

Q:Yes.

A:No, I think it was like the perfume. It was something very personal which gave you distance. Distance from what's around you, what's happening. It still is. I write much better than I talk, but whatever.

Q:When did you usually write, at night before you went to sleep or did you just steal time?

A:Anytime when I had a moment when it was light enough, when it was quiet enough and I shared the diary with other people. I read it to them, and I remember those Sunday afternoons when we're sitting with a back against the barrack wall and I wrote about what we had to eat and what we had done and whatever, and people kept saying, "Why do you write, it's dangerous." I said, "I'm not writing anything dangerous. I'm writing what's happening." So, it became a kind of a -- and there were other people who wrote too and there were other people in other camps which were much more in danger than we were because if you were in a real, real concentration camp, like Ravensbrück or Dachau, if they found it you were dead.

02:51:04

Q:Did you read very often from it to other people?

A:No. I would say twice a month.

Q:Did people find it entertaining?

A:Yah, because it reminded them of something that they had already forgotten. They didn't remember this or they didn't remember that we had to stand on appell on that morning or this and this and that and that we had hoped we would get mail or not. You know, you do this as a kind of recording mechanism, but I never ever wrote in the sense of J'Accuse, "I Accuse," I didn't think anyone would ever read it, find it, find it, read it, = publish it. It never occurred to me. I wrote for myself.

Q:Did you change the names of people? There are two names that are in there. Paul's name is Paul.

A:I changed no names. Hein is Hein and Lilo is Lilo and no names are changed and they mention very few names.

Q:That was on purpose?

A:I had this feeling that being a writer you had to be very careful of whom you write and what you write about. One of the people, when I tried to publish the diary, I went to a literary agent in New York and he's the agent of Norman Mailer and Gerald Greene, and he was involved with this whole Holocaust crap T.V. movie and he said, "Renata Laqueur, your diary is much too impersonal and not violent enough for publication. Your dissertation is much too scholarly and who cares. These are other people in the concentration camp," and so on and I

got a terrible critique. That is what made me totally desist from anything and that happened long before the German guy found my diary in Germany. That was between '65 and, I would say, '82. And I never did anything about it more in America. I said, "Go to hell." I spent 500 dollars and that's it. Because what they want here is victims in Bloomingdale clothes. That's about what they did when they made the T.V. movie from Holocaust. Everybody looked much too good and forget it.

Q: In your diary you don't write about the structure of Bergen-Belsen about the --?

A: I don't write about that this camp is different from the tent camp and the Russian. We didn't know anything about the Russians.¹⁵ We didn't know about the prisoner of war.¹⁶ No, I wasn't interested.

Q: So what part of the camp are you living in?

02:54:31

A: I was in the so-called Stern Lager, the one where they had the Jewish, what do you call it?, privileged families from Holland. Were there already any French or was that in Bergen-Belsen. Are you talking Bergen-Belsen or Westerbork?

Q: Bergen-Belsen.

¹⁵ **R.L.:** Renata is referring to the Russian section.

¹⁶ **R.L.:** Renata is referring to the prisoner war part of the camp.

A: There were people who brought their stuff in luggage or whatever they had with them and they kept it. So, that was already very different from the people who were put into striped uniforms, Häftlinge¹⁷. So, we knew that our camp was a so called family -- the families stayed together. Not in one barrack, but let's say Paul was in the male barrack and I was in the female barrack but at least the families could see each other. They could communicate. That was the difference with a real concentration camp for everybody where everybody was divided into political, into pure Jewish, into Catholic and to homosexuals and to whatever. They had different kind of insignia.

Q: When you first arrived you decided you weren't going to work right?

A: I don't know, do I say that?

Q: Yes. It only lasted a few days.

A: Of course, I said, "Why the hell would I work." You learn very fast what you should do in order to stay on top. Whatever. There was no immediate danger. No, I decided I wanted to see what's going on before I decided to work and then of course I ended up in things which I didn't want to do. Shoes, or cutting turnips in the kitchen, you know, whatever.

Q: What's your most vivid memory of that beginning in Bergen-Belsen? Is there one particular one?

¹⁷ **Häftlinge**: prisoners (German).

A: The most vivid memory of Bergen-Belsen is the difference between the outside nature and coming into the camp because it was March and Spring comes early in the north of Germany and the trees were beginning to get these beautiful film of light green. And when you come into the camp there are these barracks which are dark, between dark green and brown and nothing but sand and mud and it started raining of course. It always rains. The first impression was freedom is trees and a camp is mud and a barrack. And of course guards and dogs. That's the first impression. That was very different from Westerbork.

02:57:43

An interesting thing, they put me in 1985 on the so called train Rampe¹⁸, you know, the platform and filmed there and asked me, "What do you remember of this?" And there were Canadians from the NATO at that time and we were eating ice cream and I said I don't remember eating ice cream at the entrance where the trains came in. You know things like that. It is unbelievable to come back in '85 after 40 years.

Q: Let's take a break.

02:58:14

¹⁸ **Rampe**: platform (German).

Tape #3

03:01:07

Q:Renata, early in your diary, March 20, you say, "I do not long anymore. Everything seems so futile. Desire is less important than food or clothes to be mended." Then a few days later you wrote, "Life is senseless." Do you remember what was going on when you said those things?

A:It's the first time that I -- as I told you before I don't see depression. This sounds like depression. This is the futility of...I can very well understand why I write this because I don't like the word "victim" because victim means that you have gotten yourself into a situation where you can't escape. But this feeling of it doesn't make any sense. Here I am in '43 I'm 23 years old at that point, and I'm only beginning to live and I'm somehow cut off from anything which I had hoped for and envisioned. This reminds me a little bit of Anne Frank. And Frank had these moments too in which she said, "It doesn't make any sense." You have actually again we come to my favorite word "choice." There are no choices. The only choices I have at that point in Bergen-Belsen is to roll with the punches and try to come out. I didn't know how bad it would get but the whole thing doesn't make any sense. It's senseless and futile. And we're wasting precious time, and I was brought up with a very puritanical idea of you don't waste time. I think this goes through my whole life, always having a bad conscience if I just do what they call in Dutch "niksen".¹⁹

¹⁹ **niksen**: Dutch jargon for doing nothing.

03:04:03

You don't do anything. You're niks. And here I was sitting in Bergen-Belsen. Why? What for?

How long? What's time? You will find this in all the diaries. You'll find the feeling of the sense of time. The urgency of time.

Q:And that you're losing it?

A:And losing it and losing it and losing it. And the fear of losing it.

Q:Is it boring in a certain way because it's circular, it's the same thing every day in some respects?

A:Interesting. First association when you say is boring, I said how can anything be boring which is so different from what you're used to? That's already almost a travel expansion. It is so different that it isn't boring, but then if it remains the same with the appeal and the wake up calls and the harassment and the lack of this and the lack of that, it's up to you what you make out of it whether it remains the same, or whether you found ways to, to change it. I don't know. I don't think it's boring in the sense when we watch something on T.V.. and we say it's boring, it means we know it already. There's nothing to learn. There's nothing exciting about it so why put it on T.V. or in a paper or you read a story and you say it's boring. I know it already. Here I don't think it was ever boring, because you never knew what would happen from one minute to the next.

Q:Was it then tedious?

A: Yes. The absence of color, the tedium of always the same. Tedious yes, but not boring. That's quite a difference. The absence of what you were used to or what you wanted, I want to say is painful, it's not true because if it's tedious it's not painful, it's just a drag. It's terribly depressing and depressing means that you're being pushed down and under and in order to come out from down under and to be on top you have to find ways and means either organizing stuff or writing about it or doing something connected with the past, living in imagination but you have to come out of it.

03:07:32

Q: Were you in some sense more imaginative than Paul in this situation? You kept coming out and finding ways --.

A: Women are always more imaginative. No, No, I'm serious. Was I? No. Paul is a different person. Paul is not a recorder, an evaluator, an analytical person. In many ways, Paul said often to me he had the best time he ever had in camp because it was less depressing than competing with the outside. That is the real depressive. I missed the competition. I missed the excitement of having to make it. He was happy because, he said, "The worst thing they can do to me is beat me," and he once said to me, "When they beat me at least I was warm instead of freezing." So, he had a different approach, and this is why I want you to meet somebody like Paul. You will hear the other side. No. I don't know. It's very interesting when you say the differences. He was also a better person because he cared more about what people felt and how they suffered. I pushed that all away. I didn't want to -- if I report about it I don't feel it. So, you see this is where later on you are actually a monster. Because he said, "You distance yourself from not being upset." Upset is not the word, but feeling

aghast and feeling guilty by documenting it and using the writing like people very often use photography, you know, as a kind of a -- the instrument is between their own feeling and what they put on paper in a photograph or in writing.

03:10:14

I was also so much left out in that diary. This is what the publisher said. It is not personal. Because then I would have whined and complained and I'm not a whiner and a complainer. For that I'm too proud because then I get hit again if you whine. I say somewhere in the diary, I say I think around the 15th of June, I said, "There's another one who keeps talking about the concentration camp. There's another whiner, another one who keeps telling us how awful it was. Who wants to hear about it." I already felt that while I was in it so I wasn't about to whine. Not even to myself.

Q:Now at another point in the diary you say noone talked about homesickness but inside I hurt.

A:Of course. I do. Of course, of course, you're homesick. I mean, I keep saying that I can smell the leather couch or can see this or that or this enormous desire for flowers, for beauty for air for sea, for cleanliness, for all the things we take for granted. I tell you yesterday I arrive at the Mayflower and the first thing I did is ask the guy who helped me open the window a little bit or whatever I said, "Can I drink the water?" He said, "I don't drink it." I said, "Jesus," to myself, "am I in Leningrad, St. Petersburg or am I in Washington DC?" So, I called the front desk and I said, "Can I drink the water?" He said, "I drink it." These are the things we take so for granted that we have everything. We have food, we have water, we have this. We have cleanliness. We don't have lice. We don't die of this or that of dysentery

or whatever and that is exciting.

Q: You're always looking for a quiet place?

A: Yeah.

Q: You love sitting outside at Bergen-Belsen, right? Maybe you'll get a moment when you're not smelling the stench or you're not hearing the noise?

A: I've always liked quiet places. That's right, because how can you concentrate when there is bedlam all around you. And especially that early time in Bergen-Belsen, it was just being with other people, just an inconvenience but it doesn't become a torture until it becomes so bad that you don't know how to defend yourself against one more exertion because you're so weak. I don't know. I don't know how I survived. I only know that I couldn't do it again. And that's now true either because when I got into situations later in life, and in the last four years, people said, "I don't know how you can do this." Get up and walk to chemotherapy and walk back to chemotherapy and these winters that we've had '93 and '94 and '95 and so on, and not taking morphine and whatever, I just can't do it any other way because I'm still the surviving rat.

03:14:35

So, it becomes kind of a bad habit. No, I'm very serious about this because it also implies that you have practically, as the French say "égards," no regard, no consideration at all for anybody else. When I got the cancer diagnosis and the operation at Sloan Kettering, it was Christmas

and my sister wanted to come and my other family wanted to come, I said, "Nobody comes until I am ready to see you guys." This goes back to the concentration camp. I cannot share misery. I have to be alone. It has to be quiet and especially the sicker I am and the more in pain I am the more alone I want to be. Just like a dog.

Q:But you can't be alone in Bergen-Belsen.

A:You can never be alone, but on the other hand you can retire into yourself.

Q:Is that why you don't talk about other people? Almost no one else is mentioned in the diary. You mention some people, but you don't mention people close to you in Bergen-Belsen except Paul. Is that because there isn't anybody or is that because you don't want somehow to speak about them?

A:I don't want to talk at all. I don't want to get involved. I have enough to survive myself with out getting all their life stories meshed into mine. Of course I listened. Of course I knew people, but I don't remember the facts of anybody. I have repressed it so much that people very often asked me, "Did you meet such and such. But you were together in one barrack." And I said, "I have not the vaguest idea of who she or he is." Paul has asked me questions when I met him. He said, "Don't you remember this?" I said, "I have not the vaguest idea of what you're talking about. You can give me the third degree. You can torture me. I have nothing to give." He said, "Where is it?" I said, "I don't know. Gone."

Q:But you do remember that you listened to people or you talked with people?

A:I have always been interested in what people tell me, but I didn't --

Q:Record it?

A:Didn't record it, didn't want to get involved in the sense of...You see I almost rarely talk in the diary about what I really feel. There's very little hope in the diary. From are we ever going to get liberated. You know, you find this because I don't remember anymore whether I believe, really believed that we ever would get liberated. I don't think I did.

03:17:32

Q:Especially towards the end you say --

A:I think this is again...This is a very simple physiological explanation. I still have it today. I have to get something to eat. I don't care what it is, but I get these attacks of...If I get hungry I go wild. Standing in line in a cafeteria I always have something with me, candy, you saw I ate one or two bites of the dessert because I needed it. I needed the sugar. I have no hypoglycemia. I've been going into that, but I need somewhere not to have to wait and not get it. Then I go crazy.

Q:Can you talk about food in Bergen-Belsen, because in the diary you talk about spinach. You talk about spaghetti--

A:Everybody else talked recipes all the time.

Q:Did you?

A:No. I wasn't a recipe person. No, I didn't. But I'm just thinking back one of the diaries says I read cook books like I used to read pornography and I must tell you, this is very nice. I don't remember whether I talked recipe. I'm sure that I talked, yes, also about white bread and chocolate and things we got especially as children. You always go back to your childhood. I'm sure that I dreamt about chocolate, and I taught myself not to like chocolate because it's bad for you. So.

Q:What was the food like? You had trouble with turnips?

A:I had trouble with the turnips because the turnips go into your gall bladder. Turnips are bad. Food was...Food was food. If you had it, you ate it. There were some people who were really heroic. I remember there was a rabbi who wouldn't eat a piece of meat because he wasn't sure that it wasn't pork and he was dying of hunger. That is principle. I admire that, and I was angry at the same time. I said, "Then give it to Paul or give it to me."

Q:Did you tell him that?

A:Yes. He didn't give it. I think he didn't give it. He must have said something, "If you're a good Jew you don't eat it," and I must have said, "I'm not a good Jew, I want the pork." I don't know but there were altercations about this. Paul knows these things. He told me when I met him he said, "Do you remember the guy who didn't want to eat his meat?" I said, "Yes."

Q: That you remember?

A: That I remember.

Q: Do you remember working in the kitchen?

A: Oh, yes, yes. That I even remember the smell. I remember this enormous big vats with something boiling hot. It was either soup or some thing with a vegetable in it and always seeing whether there was any meat or a piece in it which you could eat like a potato or a piece of meat or a whole carrot and working in the kitchen meant getting up before day and dawn at three a.m. and being there until four in the afternoon or five in the afternoon and then taking something home, back to the barrack, and it wasn't always as dramatic as with the pork or the hair or whatever, but I gained weight and I could give Paul things and that was important.

03:21:05

Q: But it was difficult for you to work there. You worked there for about three weeks?

A: So difficult that I had to give it up because I didn't get any sleep because I was too excited and too, you know, hepped up about getting to the kitchen and the whole tension of whether I'd be able to take food out. I think I got very scared after that episode. If I remember it right, it was too tiring and I told myself it isn't worth it. It's going to kill me, so I gave it up.

Q: Now, I would imagine people might be surprised that you decide to switch jobs?

A:I didn't switch jobs. I just gave it up. I didn't switch jobs. I didn't go to an unemployment office and I didn't put a resume in and say, "I can do this." No, but there were some other things that I could do and I don't know what it is but this was July 1944. It depended on the circumstances. In 1944 in September the barracks got more crowded, because people were being pushed with the Russian advance and Auschwitz being emptied, beginning to be emptied, and Birkenau and all these people came west and there was less work and less food and finally we didn't do anything anymore. We vegetated.

Q:But in the beginning you worked in the shoe command --

A:I worked in the shoes. I worked administratively. I worked--I did all kinds of things.

Q:What did you do administratively?

A:There were always people who needed things written or they needed things explained, especially translations and I also worked in very often in a kind of a semi medical situation. I had a Red Cross diploma so I knew how to do a bandage. I knew something, and so I worked in the hospital. I always worked in hospitals. Hospitals had more food so it wasn't because of the sick you came here, the hospital was not because of the sick. I wanted to work there because maybe there was a scrap of food more. Always a motive.

Q:You were very calculating.

A:A bitch, a real bitch in the sense of-- if I wanted something I got it and I remember exchanging

things for cigarettes because cigarettes were more important than the food because a cigarette was a moment of -- I don't know if you've ever been a smoker. I gave it up. I gave it up before Dachau in 1954²⁰ because I had to and then I started again in '70, smoked 'til about '71 and then my husband died, and then I smoked very little but I gave it up the day before the cancer operation. They wouldn't have operated on me if I smoked. Forget it, and they're right. But anyway, calculated in the sense that, yes, if I do this will I have a better chance. If I don't do this what's going to happen. Using common sense, if that's calculating.

Q: Did you meet women who were coming in from Auschwitz Birkenau?

A: I didn't meet them but I talked to them. I talked through the wire to them and I heard the first time about the gassing from these people.

Q: When was that, in August or September?

A: No, that is a little later. That is the end of September 1944. The weather is beginning to get very bad. We couldn't stand it there, wire between us anymore because it was either pouring rain or too cold, or we were too sick and they were in tents. They came and they didn't have barracks for them anymore and they started putting tents up.

03:25:25

²⁰**R.L.:** "I gave it up in 1954 because I had to and then I started again in '70 during a visit to Dachau KZ monument, while I was working in Munich on my dissertation. I smoked until about '71. then my husband died; and I smoked very little, but I gave it up the day before the cancer operation (in 1992)."

We called them the Zeltfrauen “tent women” and they were the ones who told us that there was gas and that people were killed and we didn't believe it.

Q: You didn't believe it?

A: We didn't believe it. We didn't believe it.

Q: Did you think they were crazy?

A: We thought they were crazy. They were so hungry, they were so underfed, they were so tired from marching all the way from wherever they came from Poland. We didn't believe them. People wouldn't do that, we said, even then.

Q: So you weren't hearing with all the Jewish press agency, the rumor mill, you weren't hearing that?

A: We didn't hear anything officially, the Jewish press agency never had it right. We didn't hear anything about the invasion. We didn't hear anything about D-day. I mean there were rumor mills but the business and I can tell you that people who knew heard about it in Holland from people who returned from concentration camps didn't believe it. They simply said, “It's not true.” Like some people today say they don't believe it but that's different.

Q: Do you remember that the camp changed when Joseph Kramer came and became Commandant or is that not a significant moment?

A:I forget who the guy was before him. There was Kramer and there was another one. I remember Irma Grese.

03:26:48

Q:You do?

A:Yah. The famous ward who was cruel and kind and nice to children, but I remember what she looked like. She was a hefty blonde and I remember her stiefel, her boots and the whip and I'm not sure whether she was on our appell, we had to be counted, or whether it was in the next camp, or whether she only came in on a Sunday, but I definitely saw her and knew who she was. Now, Kramer -- oh God I don't think this is in the diary. I told this story to Peter Wiebke²¹ when we were, in '86, making the movie and doing something. I said, "I didn't only work in the kitchen I also worked in the private quarters of the SS." Because that was next to the kitchen as a cleaning person and I remember that I took the toothbrush and put the toothbrush into the toilet. This was my private revenge. He would never know but I knew that he would brush his teeth in the shit. So you see these are the things and then Peter said, "How come it's not in the diary." I said, "Are you crazy? If they would find that, that was censorship." He said, "How come you only remember this now?" I said, "I don't know why something..., "it had something to do with kitchens. We were eating in kitchens of the NATO. You know, this was the army time in Germany. And we had a Dutch meal in a Dutch kitchen and somehow the kitchen brought back memories of Bergen-Belsen and here I was discussing diaries and there comes the toothbrush situation and my wiping the wash

²¹ **Peter Wiebke:** Renata's German translator.

basin of the SS with a dirty rag and ending up with the tooth brush into the toilet. This is magnificent. Silent revenge but also very calculated. Hopeless.

Q:Were you ever brutalized in Bergen-Belsen?

A:No, not ever personally, not in any way. Not hit, not...No.

Q:Paul was beaten?

A:Paul was very badly beaten and beaten because he was tall so he stood out and the guys were cold. They wanted to beat themselves warm as they were pulling out trees and stumps in the winter. He was badly beaten. He wasn't tortured but he also was put at the entrance as a punishment and made to stand for hours and no food and that is the time when I ate his ration. When I knew that he was standing there and practically fainting from exhaustion and hunger, and I ate his bread. They had given us two rations, one for him and one for me, and I ate it.

03:30:28

Q:Still bothers you?

A:Oh, God it bothers me. It didn't bother Paul because he said very often, he said, "I got something the next day and after all without you I wouldn't be around." I said. "I know but I still ate it." You don't eat stuff of a dying person. But then I'm so confused now because I remember my doing all my research and finding diaries and there's a guy I think in

wherever, Dachau, Neuengamme, who says, how come his porridge, or whatever they had, his soup is still here. He must have died so he goes out of there. So, that feeling of if there is still something left, I can eat it. And there are these unforgettable pictures of people gnawing on bones just to get something. Maybe there is something left somewhere which I can eat. The stuff we ate is so unbelievable.

Q: You describe maggots in the soup?

A: I describe maggots but particularly in the train situation I described what we eat. We eat anything because we were starving.

Q: Were people being cannibals, are you describing people eating human remains?

A: No, not humans, but they ate around where there were human remains. They... I don't know of any cannibalism but I know that I'm sure of it. If you have nothing to eat -- I know of the urine drinking because they had no water. O.K. That we know. We all know that. We don't have to talk about that. I didn't though. I ate anything. I still eat anything from the floor. People always say, "How can you stick that in your mouth." I said, "I've had every disease in the world except AIDS."

Q: In December you wrote the following --

03:33:06

A: Is this on purpose? So it's not that I can't get it. (indecipherable interchange between Renata and

Interviewer)

Q:Yes. In December you wrote "There are men who have been incarcerated for many years and have not seen a woman for as long a time. The consequences could be seen one hour after they took over the camp." Then you say nothing.

A:Of course not. I mean, the rest is up to you. What did you think they did? They screwed.

Q:Were they raping women?

A:No. Am I talking about the --Am I talking about...

Q:The kapos.

A:Oh, the Kapos. I'm talking about the guys who had food. I don't think they were raping. I think the people there they found were willing. There wasn't much rape. The Russians raped. The Russians raped anybody except if you came out of a concentration camp. Then you said Konzlager. They said, "Let's drink." And let's Kindermachen.²² No, I don't think there was much rape.

Q:But you do talk about kapos having girlfriends?

A:Oh yeh. I'm talking about...Sex was only possible if you had protein. You don't have sex if you

²² **Kindermachen**: make babies (German).

starve. It's biologically impossible, and the kapos had food until the last minute.

Q: So, this was a way for the women to get food?

A: Yeh, right. This is the way I avoided, already, during the camp because I told myself I would have to give the stuff to Paul. He would know. It wouldn't be our thing. I remember that. And a... That it wouldn't end with one. It would go on and on and on and on.

Q: But you're also very non-judgmental?

A: I'm totally non-judgmental. No. I also feel that if people felt that they could do this -- I tell you one thing. I'm thinking now, I've never thought of this before. If I wouldn't have had Paul and kind of this feeling of obliged to help him at least, I might have done it because it was only my survival. I am only responsible to me. So what. There was no AIDS. You wouldn't get sick. What the hell. But I didn't feel like it because it wasn't my choice. I think this is more significant than anything else. I would really feel like a victim if I have to prostitute myself for this. This is something, there comes a point when you just say to yourself short of torture, I'll do anything. There came a point when I told myself no. I remember walking with these guys behind the barracks and they gave me a cigarette and they said, "Let's do it," and I said, "No way." They said but you can have this or that and I said, "Sorry." I usually got something any way. I always got something.

Q: It's interesting that these men were not trying to force themselves.

A: No, because number one they weren't that sexy, sex minded either. They always found somebody

who might really be willing. And they might find somebody who was also fed. Look it's no fun if you have no fun at all. I don't know. I don't think...I'm totally un-judgmental if people do it. I personally didn't do it unless I liked somebody. So, we don't talk about these things.

Q:How about children? What do you remember about the children?

A:Children...is always...asked this question. How was it for children and I said, "I don't know." I'm delighted that I didn't have a child in the camp because it's bad enough to have a husband. It's bad enough to have a parent, but to have a child. I think I would have done what the other women did, give more to the child than to themselves. I mean, this is something they do also in outside life. I mean, in our normal life. People give and give and give. Or abuse and abuse. I mean it's the other side. They are so fed up that they abuse.

03:38:17

Q:When there was a family there, so that there was a husband and a wife and a child or more than one child, was the woman having more responsibilities than the man usually?

A:Yes, because the man was in a different barrack and the woman was with the child. The woman-- Let's say the boys until they were a certain age, I don't remember the exact age, but I guess it was the women who had the children with them and the men were in a different barrack and the men came to visit or to do things or whatever. So, anyway, yes, because I don't think there were men with sons only, maybe but not little ones, and there were tiny ones. They were definitely in the so called "female barrack." But again I'm talking more sense than memory because I don't remember. I should. There are so many things I should have written

about but who the hell knew.

Q:How did you save Paul?

A:Very simple. Being very nasty and still feeding him. How did I save him. We were in the train. In the camp I couldn't save him. That was beyond. I mean I saved him, but I didn't save his life in the camp. I saved Paul's life really in the train. Because in the train he was dying.

Q:The train is --

A:The train is between Bergen-Belsen and near Leipzig where we get liberated, and those ten days I think I remember everything. The other thing with Paul was that when we left Bergen-Belsen, when we were pushed out of the camp on whatever day it was, the ninth of April, whatever, he wasn't with me. He couldn't walk fast enough. He was trailing behind so I lost him. I told myself, I must have thought, "Good riddance," and at the same time, "God now what." When we got to the train, I got somehow in the train. I was with the psychiatrist and his son. The son's a psychiatrist who, I'll give you the address now, who survived, and I said, "Where's Paul." He said, "Paul is over there. Try to get him into the train somewhere." So Paul got into a carriage, three or four carriages behind mine. And somehow I used every connection, every possibility I had to get him into my carriage. And in my carriage he was lying on the floor near the door and near the toilet and I was still sitting and he was lying there and he couldn't move. He couldn't cough. He couldn't swallow. He was dying. And I told myself, "You better do something."

03:41:44

And I began to do things. I began to find water. I began to find whatever I could find outside the carriage, a raw potato, this or that. Once we got bread and so on. And I began to organize with that psychiatrist's son, Louis M. Tas. We went and we went into the fields and you read the story about when we go into the mine fields and we try to get beets and carrots and potatoes and whatever and we go into German houses and we bring food back and I spoon fed Paul back into life. Then we get into the Russian liberation camp, the hospital and then I get typhus. And just...Just in that time Paul begins to sit up and he begins to spoon feed me sugar, tea because I have had this incredible high fever and encephalitis. I had these tremendous headaches and he feeds me and I have fed him and this becomes a relationship which has to stop because we basically hate each other. We hate each other. We have survived something we didn't want. He is at that time -- I'm 24 and he's going on 29 and I want so many different things from him. He wants to get back to his "speech therapy" and maybe finally get into medical school if he can ever get a diploma. I want to go and have food and fun and Paris...., Paris for becoming a fashion designer. It never occurred to me to do anything else. I had doodled in Bergen-Belsen. The doodles are in the diary by the way and they're in an exposition in Bergen-Belsen. But anyway, we are growing apart like this because we are totally different. He gets depressed again. I get--I have to get my morals again. We grow apart and we try to stay together by having a family. So, I have one miscarriage after another. Finally we have a child. The child is eight and half months pregnant and it chokes itself inside my belly.²³ It's born dead. That's the end of the marriage. That is 1947 in the fall. He has his girlfriend and I have my boyfriends and we finally decide in '50 when Deso has arrived in '50, he said, "That's the man you should have married."

²³ **R.L.**: "The child is eight and a half months into my pregnancy."

And we remained friends. The interesting thing is he always...he didn't want children. He said, "I don't want children in this depressing world. What the hell. Maybe we adopt, maybe we should have somebody else's child, an orphan from the war or whatever." I said, "No, if we have a child, it's our child." He said, "I don't want any children." He marries the second time. He has four children.

03:45:45

Q:Do you know his children?

A:Not only do I know his children, I know his wife. I became very good friends with her. She was a young Dutch, half nobility, half whatever, totally Dutch. And she was the one whom I asked before I went to America in 1952 I said Helene you have been living with Paul...And we divorced in '50, and in '52 I finally immigrated to Canada. I couldn't go to America because I was born in Germany and the German quota was full and I couldn't get out. So, I went to Canada on my Dutch passport. I went to Helene, and I said, "Why don't you marry Paul finally. I am leaving." She said, "I won't marry a Jew." I said, "You won't what?" I said, "You've been living with the guy. He has been baptized. Already his father is this." She said, "I won't marry him because my family wouldn't stand for it." I said, "Screw you. I can't do that. You can't live with a guy and fall in love with him and not marry him." She married him and she had four children with him. Finally she got breast cancer. She died. But they were divorced already. He found a friend in Germany where he had moved because he could easier find work in Germany in his field than in Holland. A long story, nothing to do with me. And the interesting thing is that Paul always said, "One of the best things which ever happened to me is not that you saved my life but that we met and it was wonderful."

That's nice. That is nice. "You saved my life, of course it's wonderful." But he is so depressed that he sometimes feels, "What's life?" I don't know. Last question, what do you want to know besides this? You must be dead tired. These are all stories of other people and how they relate, this is not necessarily a Holocaust story because it has nothing to do with the horror of Auschwitz and Birkenau. If you're being shoved into the gas, it's much, much worse I think than being starved and diseased. I don't know. I think because this is the final victimization because even if you are dying of hunger, even though you're dying of disease, you still have a certain control. If you're being pushed into a shower and it turns out to poison you...This is my fear of the anesthesia also. Anything which is done to me where I can't be in control.

03:49:32

Q: You don't feel like a victim, do you?

A: No, that's why I also feel so guilty and that maybe also the reason why I feel almost frivolous. The fact that I talk about and wear lipstick, the fact that I am "not looking my age" is not an effort. It's just I'm a survivor. By the way, why do you look so good at age 57. That is a matter of skin and haircut and also personality. I love your haircut. I hope it doesn't cost 300 dollars, because mine cost 15.

Q: What do you think that is about that you -- I understand that Bergen-Belsen is not Auschwitz Birkenau, but in reading your diary it's clear how difficult it was and one did not know whether it was going to end?

A:Unbelievably difficult but not final.

Q:But you didn't know that.

A:That's right, but the people in Auschwitz knew. The smoke, the pipe, the fear of going through the pipe. You know. The smoke of the crematoria. We had no gas in Germany.

Q:But you had a lot of death in Bergen-Belsen?

A:Death?

Q:Death.

A:By the loaves. An unbelievable amount of dying percentage wise because people were dying of disease and starvation, but that's a different death than by being pushed into -- I don't know. To me it's much more horrible. Because it's so phony, it's so typical German. You tell them they're going to have a shower. You tell them, "You're going to be disinfected." You're being killed. In Bergen-Belsen they didn't tell you that we're not going to kill you. They said we don't give a shit whether you die. Wir lassen Euch stehen bis Euch die Scheisse runterläuft, "we let you stand here on the appell until the shit comes out of you."

03:52:07

They didn't give a damn, but they knew. It wasn't a fake. They weren't faking the people like I later get in the diaries where they make people up so that they have -- the women make

themselves up so that they have rosy cheeks or rosy lips so they will not go to the left or to the right. I mean I'm talking about something which is a totally different situation. It's almost silken zores. As my Jewish husband said, my second one. He said, "seidene zores."²⁴ If you compare this to going into poison gas.

Q:It's interesting. Not everybody has that kind of perspective. You obviously have a perspective of being able to compare, and to...Do you know what I mean?

A:This is what they call the impersonal...impersonal situation in my diary. To me this is that I kept the perspective. And the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung writes about this, and he said, the amazing thing is also the second book that I could write a dissertation about this crap. He said that, "She has the emotional distance to be able to objectify the horrible experience." To me it is nothing else than survivorism. It's a mechanism.

Q:Is it from your father's scientific perspective that you can some way think you don't have --?

A:You mean just because I grew up with appendixes in vinegar, experiments and stuff? No, No, No. No, because I'm not a scientist but I'm very organized and I'm -- I don't know.

Q:Is there anything you'd like to say about your experiences that you don't think you've said?

A:Yes, I'd love to read that because this will bring back what I'm talking about. The mere fact that I can say today is July 1969 on June 15,"²⁵ on Thursday, June 15, 1944 I am thinking a lot

²⁴ **seidene zores:** silken worries

²⁵ **R.L.:** This was a misspeaking. Renata meant to say here: "July 16, 1996 and I am reading here

about after the war. Will we ever be able to convey what these camp years have meant for us when we talk with someone who has not actually lived through a similar experience himself. What it is like to see from behind barbed wire, tall, green fir trees and new vegetable crops growing along the camp road, what the constant pressure and coercion by SS guards and their perennial check ups really mean. How you try all the time to convince yourself that it does not touch you. All this shouting, cursing and kicking that you notice that you're growing older and that you're used to slipping through your fingers in these long years of waiting for the end of oppression. What the months mean when you count them in hours, days and weeks. And in which the only bright spots are sleep, warm soup, and sometimes a ray of sun on the way back to the barracks after another endless roll call in the damp chill of the big center Appell fields. Good moments also, the thoughts and dreams about before. Homesick and more homesick and whether it's the Frenchwomen who sing about "Paree, Paree," or the Italians in their brightly patched Mediterranean get ups or the Greek, Spanish Jews from Salonika. They all think of and yearn for only one single thing: home, going home after the war. And what is home? Will we be able to find our way back from the concentration camp universe into a world in which most of us have no longer any other possessions than the memories of before the war and in which we will live among people to whom our years of imprisonment will only mean --"Oh, there's another one of those who only complain about lost things and tell horror stories." This is true. Now, if you put this while you're there how much have you written yourself out of the situation. I climbed above it, out of it and was neither in the past or in the future but I was me. They couldn't take it away and I think this is not only me, this is where I feel this camp diaries are crucial to show what human beings could do with their brain. Write themselves above, out,

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and through it.

Q: Thank you.

A: You're welcome. I'm delighted I could do it.

03:57:52

Tape #4

(Viewing pictures)

4:01:04

Q: Could you tell us who is in this picture here?

A: The lady in the back is my mother. She is Margarethe Laqueur. It is 1928 in Amsterdam in our home and that's me with the bangs and the dark hair and it's my sister Lilo, Liselotte and that's it.

Q: You were the taller person, the taller child?

A: I'm the taller child. I'm the older child.

Q: Go ahead.

A: It's 1931 again in Amsterdam. I was born in '19, I must have been 12.

Q: When was this?

A: The winter of '35-'36 in Amsterdam.

Q: Okay.

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A:'35, another sad picture.

Q:Do you remember the colors?

A:Yah, navy blue and white.

Q:Okay.

A:This is March 1940, two months before the occupation and what I'm wearing is a white silk blouse and an ivory rose. I remember.

Q:Okay.

A:That's a pre-wedding picture in 1941 just before I got married.

Q:Go ahead.

A:This is the 24th of December 1941 my wedding day and I think we are looking at the wedding registration or something.

Q:Go ahead.

A:The deed is done. We are married. And the woman on the right side with the hat is my sister Lilo and the woman behind her is my sister-in-law and that's it.

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Q:Which one is your sister-in-law?

A:The one with the hat behind the one with hat. Lilo is right next to Paul. December 1941, wedding picture with my parents. My father, my mother, Paul and myself.

Q:Can you give us your father's name?

A:Ernst Laqueur and Margarethe.

Q:Okay, when was this?

A:This is June 1943 in the transit camp of Westerbork.

Q:What are you wearing?

A:A shirt, a flannel shirt I think.

End of interview.