United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Trude Sherntine Heller
September 24, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Trude Sherntine Heller, conducted by Randy Goldman on September 24, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

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

TRUDE HELLER
September 24, 1998

Q: Trude, I'd like you to just begin by telling us your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

A: I'm Trude Sherntine Heller, and I was born on June 19, 1922, in Vienna, Austria.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family, and your family life in Vienna.

A: I was an only child, extremely cherished by my parents. I was spoiled, and I didn't even like being spoiled, but I was an only child and -- and my parents doted on me. I was -- I had friends of all kinds, always, lots of friends, because I was an only child. And they weren't only Jewish friends. And I had one girlfriend in particular that still is my best girlfriend. And we are luk -- luckily we both wound up in the United States. And I had a wonderful life. I had everything I ever wanted. I had many animals to keep me company, I still like animals. I grew up very happy and -- and --

Q: Sorry -- yeah, this is -- what is it, a truck backing up? That's a truck backing up. I -- I'm sor -- I was hoping it would --

A: Now I don't know where to --

Q: I'll start you. So you had a lot of friends, you had pets. You had a happy life.

A: Yeah, very happy life. And I grew up like that, not very interested in politics. I -- I was sheltered. My parents sheltered me from everything. I was not alone with my husband till the day we're married, that's how sheltered I was. I wanted to bring that up. We were never left alone. And that's how they kept me from many things. So when the time came for all the unrest, and so forth, I belonged to a gym class, and I was never allowed alone, and I was 15. And I always had somebody walk with me, and I was walking to a -- my gym class through the city of Vienna when it was two days before the vote of the anschluss. And we -- as I walked through the city of Vienna, everybody was shouting and yelling for their party. They were the Social Democrats, who had the three arrows. There were the Christian Socialists, they were black, white and red. There were even Communists with hammer and sickle. And everybody was shouting for their party. There wasn't one swastika in sight. I took my gym class, and when I came out, the entire city was a sea of swastikas. Every policeman, every building. There were synagogues burning already. There were books being thrown out of libraries, that had Jewish writers. It was something that it was burn into my mind that I can never forget, and whenever I hear that the -- the Viennese didn't want to be part of Germany, I can't believe that, because I was there. And I hope everybody knows that, because they wanted it, and they asked for it. And I knew very little about anything at the time, but I went home, and my father came home, and he said, "Let's leave." And my mother said, "What do you mean leave?" He says, "Let's get out of here." We always had our passports ready cause we liked to travel.

And my mother says, "How can we leave everything we have here, and we have nothing anywhere else, and where would we go?" And my father said, "I don't care where we go, let's get out of here." And my mother wouldn't do it. And I -- I just couldn't imagine what was happening at that time, and I learned very fast. And it was an unbelievable moment in my life.

Q: I want to continue with that, but I -- I feel that we need to talk a little bit more about your family life, your Jewish identity. Tell me --

A: Okay.

Q: -- a little bit more about your parents, and what memories you have as a child.

A: Mm.

Q: Were they well off, what kind of business?

A: My parents were in the tailored supply business. Everything in Austria was tailor made, every suit, and every dress, and every hat, and every underwear. And my parents had all the supplies for tailors. And that was our business. My father was originally from Kraków, Poland, and he came from a family of -- he had three brothers and a sister. His father died when he was young, and the mother was a real -- they call it a queen. She was a real go-getter, and she worked her boys real hard, and they were very successful. And as a matter of fact, I used to go visit them, and then my father would go to the grave with his father, which was in the little town of Merkow, Poland. And we went there every year, and in -- in Merkow is where my father had grown up. And we went to visit where he used to live, and I had to stoop down, and be on a dirt floor, that's where he was born. And they did very well, and moved to Kraków. And they were in the dried fruit business, and my father was at the railroad station checking out carloads of fruits going to Vienna when they came and said they were looking for him to go into the military. So he got on that train with the fruit, and went to Vienna. And there he met my mother, and stayed. So, that's how I came about. His whole other [indecipherable] his family stayed in Kraków, and as a matter of fact, they all ended up on Schindler's list, eventually. But my father became very Viennese, and loved cars, and my mother was a very wonderful business woman. She'd rather be in business than at home. And they always had somebody to keep me, either English miss to teach me English, or a French mademoiselle that teach me French. So I knew a little bit of both languages.

Q: Were you particularly religious?

A: Not very. We belonged to a -- a conservative synagogue. I remember the rabbi's name, even. And the men and women did not sit together, but because I was a young girl, I was allowed to sit with my father every now and then, and I did. But we only went for holidays, and I was confirmed. And -- but we weren't very religious. My mother did not

grow up very Orthodox. Her mother was Orthodox, but her father grew up in an orphanage, and therefore wasn't, and he loved to eat things that weren't kosher, and -- to the great concern of my grandmother, who was. And there was an interesting thing, my grandfather on my mother's side, his father loved symphonies, and music, and so forth, and he was in -- attending a concert when fire broke out, and all the -- the doors went in instead of out. And many people died from the smoke inhalation, hundreds. And when they told his mother that the father had perished, she died. And she left two little children who grew up in an orphanage. And he was still Jewish, but had not been brought up with a lot of it. And that's it. I was a mixture. My father was -- came from Orthodox home, but my mother didn't. And we never had any pork or seafood, or anything like that, but we weren't kosher.

Q: Was -- was Judaism important to you?

A: Yes.

Q: Were your friends Jewish, that you --

A: Half of them were, and half of them were not. I -- it was -- I knew I was Jewish, it was important. I -- I learned about Judaism. But it wasn't anything -- I don't know, it -- it didn't come up as much, and I didn't -- since I was so sheltered, I did not have very much anti-Semitism. And that's all I remember, and I didn't really follow politics.

Q: You didn't feel different, or your community didn't see you different than everybody else is, or --

A: Not very, no. On holidays, yes. Also in school, because we had religion in school, and a given hour we separated, and I always thought that was terrible, I still do. It made us different, and -- and that's what I remember most.

Q: Any other memories of, sort of, life before the -- the Germans came in that you think are --

A: I -- I did go to a lot of dances, starting at 14 years old. There were some -- although there were all kinds of dances, there were a lot of Jewish dances, and I went to the Jewish dances, most every Saturday. I wasn't allowed to go with friends, I went with my parents. And my parents sat with me, and my father sometimes went and slept in the car, but they wouldn't leave me alone, and I had a very good time. I loved dancing. And di -- these dances were always organized by some Jewish people who made a living out of it. And they were very wonderful, because Vienna was full of dancing. So that's -- that was my youth, I -- I liked -- I liked school, and I liked my friends, and I had a good time.

Q: And you met Max during this period?

A: I met Max -- the first time I -- I met him mac -- well, I didn't meet him, but saw him, is when I was 14, and we had a friend who knew both of us, who want to introduce us, and we refused to be introduced. But then at 15 in the summer resort, I won a prize, and that's when he came to ask me to dance with him. And then he ask me what -- what are you doing tomorrow, and I told him I was going to play tennis, and he came to the place, and that's when he asked me to marry him. Which is awhile back.

Q: And you're still together.

A: Happily.

Q: So you began to tell me about the events of --

A: Yes.

Q: -- March --

A: Mar --

Q: -- in 1938.

A: Right.

Q: This must have been very shocking to you.

A: It was a complete shock to me. It was a life changing hour, and a growing up hour, and also of taking things in hand. My mother was an extremely nervous person, very hysterical for everything, so I became the leader with my mother, because I was more calm. And so I aged very quickly. At that time, that day when everything went awry, my father started to say we've got to leave here. But then, things happened so fast. The very first week of Hitler's coming into Austria, somebody came with a rifle, knocked on our door, and said, "Car keys." That wa -- that's all that -- that was the whole interchange, and we handed over the car keys. And then somebody came and said, "I like this apartment." My parents had bought it before they were married, and had put in a bathroom, and -- a co -- like a co-op, they had done all the alterations and everything, it was ours. And we had to be out in six hours or die. And what do you do first? Do you pack, do you find a place, do you moo -- what do you do? So one of my parents went and got boxes, and one went to find a place to live, and I started packing. And in six hours we were out with as much as we could pack. The rest we had to leave just like it was. You know, we had all kinds of built ins, and things, and was all gone. And the -- we moved to a place that was almost like a ghetto, because it was an very old house, and most of the people there had to move out quickly, had to move into places like that, so that was quite a shock. We had two stores, and you were no longer allowed to have employees that were not Jewish, and we always had help in the house, living in, and she had to leave, and the

people in the store could no longer help us. So -- but they were still open, and we were trying to sell enough to have enough money to -- for every day things, because the bank accounts were closed, and all in all, this was our income. So we lived like that until Kristallnacht -- Crystal Night. Kristallnacht, we woke up in the morning, and my father had said -- we didn't know it was happening, and my father said, "Things are getting so bad." This was already November. He said, "Why don't I take some of our valuables to the store and hide them there?" And he took out cameras, and some jewelry, and -- and he left. And as he left the phone rang, and my girlfriend called and said, "Don't let your father leave," and hung up. We had no idea what was happening. You know, what people don't realize is there was no television, and there was -- there was very little communication, so that nobody knew it was happening, really. So about two minutes later, doorbell rang, and it was my father, and he said, "I'm lost. I'll never see you again, they arrested me, and they're taking me away." And I knew one of the men, and I ask him could I leave some keys with you? So he had all this camera, and jewelry and all on him, and he took that and put it somewhere. And then he put on long underwear because he was cold, and my mother was almost screaming. And then she had an idea, and she went next door to the neighbor, it was a Jewish woman with a son who was not well. He was si -- a very sickly man at the time. And she said to her, "Would you hide my husband?" And she said yes, and she put my father in her closet. They came and took her son away, and she didn't tell them that my father was hiding there. Luckily at that time, there was no concentration camps yet, so they send him home because they -- they didn't know what to do with him. So we felt better that we -- you know, that my father survived, and he did, too. But this is how it was done. It was -- it -- it snuck up on us. It -- it -- we couldn't believe people would do things like that. So then we didn't know what to do about my father, then we found out from the radio that the Viennese had 24 hours to do with the Jews as they pleased. And they were taking away Jews from everywhere. Men. They -- they put men into prisons and things, but they had no room for the women yet, that came later. But I went downstairs and got a taxicab, and my father laid down on the floor of the cab, and the cab driver did not give us away. And we went to the store -- one of our stores, and we have a friend, a mutual friend of my husband and mine, who was helping us out in the store, and he had opened it that day. And we went in there -- we closed the store with the iron gates from the inside. The store had no bathroom, and nothing. We wen -- we went in there and we closed that. And this young man and I, and my mother and father stayed in there. We had a telephone, and my girlfriend kept us aware of what was happening. She also sent somebody with some sandwiches to po -- put under the door. We didn't know how long we didn't there -- we would be there. We stayed about 30 some hours in there, and even though it was so terrible, we told stories -- we had no light, we couldn't turn on a light. People knocked on the doors, and we didn't open. And then finally my girlfriend says they have lifted this terrible thing that -- of Kristallnacht, and she said, you can come out now, I think. But we were still scared. And when we looked out, the Nazis had put a swastika seal on the key lock -- on the -- where the key goes, and at that time the keys were these large keys with the long tops. And I took a key, the key from the inside, and I unlocked it, and it didn't tear. Because that would have been certain death. Nobody could hurt the swastika seal. We ha -- w -- I had

an aunt that wa -- had no husband. She lived with her sister and her daughter, and my father went in to hide there, because they didn't expect a man to be there. And he spend the next two days there. The young man that was with us, was -- they looked for him many times. He would not have survived if he had been hiding with us. It was a horrendous day.

Q: When you went out of this building, and this was right after Kristallnacht --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: What did you see? What was -- what was it like?

A: A lot of broken glass. All Jewish businesses had been torched, or broken. All the merchandise was either looted, or thrown out. It was -- it was horrible. And w-we couldn't believe we survived it, or that my father survived it. And h-he came back home after two days, and we had no more stores, we had nothing, you know. I remember going out of the store, I even took money out of the cash register, I remember that. But we -- we -- thank God we survived it, and we were looking for ways to get out of Vienna. As you know, nobody wanted us. No country wanted us. The countries, most of the time just were closed to us, and you couldn't get out of Austria unless you had a permit to go to another country. So we had no such thing. And then, after that, it was probably in January, my father got an invitation to come to the Gestapo. And nobody ever came back from that. And that same day, the same friend was visiting me, and my father said, "I'm leaving." And -- and my mother says, "Where are you going?" He says, "I'll find something, but I'm not going to the Gestapo." And this young man said, "Please take me with you." So they each put a shirt and a shaving brush into one of my dolls suitcases. I still had dolls with suit -- I never liked dolls, I liked teddy bears -- and put it into little suitcases like that, they each had one. And they left. And my father and I had made up a whole language between us. And they were gone. And a few days later, I got a call from Antwerp, Belgium. My father said, "We're here, we're safe," and he told me what to do. And what he did was this, he got on a train from Vienna to Rotterdam. Well, there was no more border between Austria and Germany, but there was a border between Germany and Holland. And before he came to the border, he contacted one of the waiters that looked simpatico, and he said, "I have money I'd like to give you if you would hide my friend and me under table." And he said okay. So they got under table at the border, they put tablecloths over them, and then they stood in front of the table while they searched the train. They found the two little suitcases, and nobody claimed them, so they searched some more. In the meantime they had the heating unit in their back. They said it was unbelievable, and they couldn't move. But they finally left, they couldn -- nobody knew what happened to these men. So, when they got to Rotterdam, my father said to this young man, "Get out of the train and stretch, and act like you're lighting a cigarette, like you're going to get back on, because they'll be looking for us. And then make your way to the exit, and go to the streets, and when you find the -- a place that has a kosher sign on it, they'll help you." And that's exactly what they both did. They found a place with a

kosher sign. They went in and told them they were refugees, and what should they do. These people knew -- these Jews knew that in an -- in Belgium, in Antwerp, they were giving 30 day permits to people to stay. So they made them up false papers, and they send one by car, and one by bus to Antwerp. And that's how they got to Antwerp. And our family in Poland send us money -- send my father money so he could exist. And my father said to me, "And you do the same with mother." And I said [indecipherable] gave me all the details, he described the waiter, and said, "He said he would help you. And have twice the money." So my mother and I packed up huge boxes, and send them to my father in Belgium. They did not get there, they took out all the valuables, but I do have my things that -- from my grandmother, and pictures, and all that really survived by going to Belgium. My mother and I got on the train, the train that we knew he would be on. We went into a compartment of people who were -- turn out to be some Jews, and there was one young man that had a shaved head. He had already been to a camp, and they let him out and said, "If we catch you again, you're dead." And they had no place to go. Nobody had any place to go, and I couldn't tell them what we were doing. I felt like a traitor, but I wasn't going to say, because there's no way that many could be under tables. We went to the dining car, and I spotted the waiter, and I s -- I -- sit in front of me -- I had the menu in front of me, and I spoke to him, and I said, "I have twice the money, you promised my father." I identified myself. And he said to me, "Don't speak to me, I'm being watched." And that was the end of that. So here were my mother and I going into no man's land. We went back to the compartment and one of the people there had gotten a telegram from a friend that -- on the border in Achen -- no, in Cologne, in Cologne, there was a hotel, an hourly hotel, a fleabag hotel, who would allow Jews in -- un-under the eaves for a certain amount of money. So we went with them to this place, it was a horrible place. And they put us all under the eaves. They also had people there that smuggled people across, that came there, and for money they said, "We'll get you across the border to Belgium." So we -- we did this. I was a young girl. There was a waiter there who liked me a lot. My mother was hysterical with this, there was nobody to protect me. And I had to really get out of his way. And I learned a lot very quickly. And then we started with trying to be smuggled out. It took five weeks of unbelievable things. We were caught five times. There was ice and snow. My mother had a 105 temperature. And we used to walk like half the night through the woods, and then be caught and sent back. They didn't know what to do with the women, the men disappeared.

Q: Were you -- when you were doing this, were you with other people, or was just you and [indecipherable]

A: Yeah -- no, they usually took five or six for one trip. Some of them had bought out the border police, but not all of them, just some of them, and they'd let us go on, and then later on we'd hear a car coming, we'd throw ourselves in a ditch. Then we'd hear a motorcycle, and that didn't catch us, but then the man came on his mot -- on a bicycle, and he caught us. We once made it to no man's land, to a -- we had walked all night, and I had to go to the bathroom so bad, and they had an outhouse surrounded by German border police so I couldn't go, cause they all liked me, because I was a young, big girl

with no protection. I -- we sat -- we were soaked to the skin, and we sat and waited to be picked up from the other side. And the German border police came and send us back again. And one of the -- one of the people there had send me a note that he was in love with me, and that he knew what I was doing, and he wanted to join me when I got out. And I should -- gave me his name and address I should write to him, and I said sure. And when the border police came in, I dropped it under the table, I didn't want to be found with that. And that was a terrible time. Each time they send us back as far as our money would go, and you become very wise, you know. The men disappeared, the women were sent back. You become wise, you know. You become street-wise. So after five weeks of this, constant trying to get across the border with fashing, which is Mardi Gras time in Cologne, going on with -- they wouldn't even have us at that hotel, we found some other place, and my mother was very ill. And we were like up under the eaves, and had -- we had no ration cards either, so we couldn't buy any food, and I would go out in the street, and I found this little cheese shop, cheese and bread. And the proprietor was this very jolly, nice, fat man. And I went in and I said, "I don't have a ration card, but I'm hungry." And every day he sold me cheese and bread, or every few days. So he was a good man. And my accent was Viennese, so in Germany they knew immediately that I wasn't from there. So they knew what I was doing. I once fell down a whole flight of steps, and two German officers picked me up, and I couldn't say thank you, because they would have known immediately that I wasn't German. We had a lot of terrible incidents like that. And then one day my father called and said he had found a Gestapo man who wanted money out of the country -- out of Germany, and he was smuggling people across. And he send him to us and told them he would pay him on the other side, so he could get money. This man made us first go to the border police and be searched. We were searched each time, everywhere. There was a woman searching women, and a man searching men all over the body. And then he took us -- we had to walk about three hours through the night, in the woods. And then he picked us up in cars without lights, and we drove for two hours without lights, at night. And then we drove into Antwerp, and he delivered us. I went into hiding for two weeks. I couldn't -- I was afraid to go in the street. It was an after in fact. I had another incident before that in Vienna when they made me wash the streets one day, the people that I knew and grew up with. And they taunted me, and they send away all the other people and they surrounded me, and started touching me. And German officers came in and stopped it. And I cried for two days and two nights, and had to have a shap to stop it. So here went again, I was scared to death. I was real brave until we got to Antwerp, and then I be -- I just let loose. And after two weeks of not leaving the place, my parents made me go to a movie with them. What they didn't know is there was a Communist giving a speech for the movie, and I was so afraid, because you get so afraid of anything political, or anything that has to do with the law, and --

Q: Must have been quite a reunion, though.

A: Oh, unbelievable, yeah. And then it came to where you had to get a p-permit every 30 days, and that -- that was another thing that was almost impossible to get. We couldn't

work, and -- but somehow, I was young, I still went dancing. I had made friends, I went dancing. But it was tough, very tough, and we got permits, and then we had this little apartment that was very nice, and the landlord wanted more money, we really couldn't afford it, and so he told us to get out. And we hadn't gotten out, and he called the police and said we were refugees without permit. And the police came, and we had a permit. But after they left, my father was going to kill that man. I mean, he lost his composure completely. The man lived upstairs and my father was running up the steps, and I ran behind him, and I pulled him, and I said, "Don't do that, don't do that," you know, "you'll kill all of us." But he was -- went berserk that somebody could do that. Luckily he wasn't home, so he didn't kill him.

Q: Was your father working in Antwerp?

A: He couldn't. You weren't allowed to -- ma -- th -- ou -- our relatives send us money. I still had a grandfather in New York -- in Vienna, and he send us money. We lived very cheaply, we -- they had parts of -- of things that they sold in the butcher shop, that they gave away. My mother was great cook. And this young man I told you about that escaped with my father, and he was there, and we fed him, too. And we just existed for a year, couldn't find any place to go. Nobo -- you know, nobody wanted us. We were like in limbo.

Q: I'm -- I'm intrigued by the fact that while you were in Germany and on the run --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- you were able to communicate with your father.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Or that your relatives in other places --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- were still, at this point -- you were able to all communicate.

A: Yes, it was early on. They were not set up yet as -- as well, that's why we were so lucky to get out so early.

Q: You communicated by phone, by [indecipherable]?

A: By phone -- b-both, yes, both.

Q: And in -- at this point in Belgium, they had no premonition that they were going to --

A: No, no --

Q: -- have problems either?

A: None at all, none at all. Life went on as before. Then our -- our relatives in Poland found that we had a th -- a cousin 10 times removed in the United States, and we contacted him, and he send us papers. They were not very good. He had no money in the bank, he had five unmarried daughters, he had no insurance. He had to state all that, that when you guaranteed for family to come to the United States. We took that to the American consul in -- in Antwerp, his name was Leroux, and he was a very nice man, and I -- I spoke some English, and I said, "I -- I want -- we'll work and we won't need any help," and -- and he believed me, and he said, "Okay. The first visas I get for Austria, your mother and you will go, but your father can't because he was born in Poland," and Poland was a different quota. There was a -- there was a strict quota system of where you were born, only so many a year allowed into America, no matter what. So our visas came, and we had to leave, and leave my father behind. And it was a terrible goodbye, but he had promised me the first Polish quota would go to my father. And we -- we got to New York on March 10th. We went on a Dutch ship during the war -- already the war had started, through the channel. We had to anchor at night. The winds were the worst in March, of any time. The entire ship was seasick to such an extent that when we got to New York, a lot of people were taken off on stretchers, that's how bad it was. We had no music -- we had to -- there were sunken ships, and mines all over the place. I remember seeing them go by. We had to wear our what do you call it? So you don't sink? Our life preservers. We had to wear them day and night, and it was not a good crossing, but we made it. We made it, and came to New York. My mother had a brother that was in New York already, and he got us a room for three dollars a week, and we went to work the day we got there. My father, May the ninth send us a telegram that his passport was at the consulate, and he had booked passage on the 11th, and we woke up on the 10th, and Hitler had marched into Belgium. We had no idea what had happened to him, and we waited till July the 18th. July the 18th, my -- Max, my husband, who I s -- I wrote to all the time, and he wrote to me, we were in touch always. H-He was my good luck omen, always. I -- somebody knocked on the door on July the 18th, and there was Max, and behind him the Western Union boy with the telegram from my father that, I'm alive. So my father had been put in a cattle car in Antwerp the day of the anschluss of Belgium. And he was sent into the desert where they had all camps, and they had all [indecipherable] with -- with -- left from years before.

Q: The desert where?

A: In France. They -- these were cattle cars, all cattle cars, standing up, they went three days and three nights, and only half people survived. And he got out there, and said he was a cook, and he was, he was a very good cook, and he figured if he's in the kitchen, maybe he'll have some to eat. They had very little to eat. But then he escaped from there into Marseilles. So that was -- you know, for two months we have no idea. But he did escape.

And I got all kinds of papers for him. It took another year, and he did come to the United States. So -- the other thing I forgot to tell you is, while I was in Belgium, we were looking for ways to get out of Belgium, we heard that the Chilean consul had left town, and the [indecipherable] consul was selling visas to Chili. So immediately my parents send me in, and with our passports, and we bought visas to Chili. We picked up our luggage one -- aboard a ship to Chili, and we were spending the last night before the trip at home, when in -- midnight the doorbell rang, and in Belgium the houses are build one onto the other, all the bedrooms are upstairs, and you had these huge mirrors to see who is at the door. At the door was the Chilean consul with the car, with the flag. We knew immediately he came to cancel our visas. And I still have those passports, we cancel -- they cancelled the visa. They took our luggage off the ship. The ship sank, and everybody drowned. It was -- the Simon Bolivar was the name of the ship. Hundreds of people drowned.

Q: It sank because of the war?

A: Yeah, it sank because of mines. It ran a mine.

Q: And why had they cancelled your visa?

A: Because we bought it, we -- they didn't want us either.

Q: Did they give you your money back?

A: No, no. That was -- that was black ma -- black market money, you know. That -- that was another miracle, to survive, you know. Sometimes I go through all those miracles, and say how did we survive. But that was close. Another close one. And -- so that's how we ended up in New York. I went to work the first day. I wanted to eat. And everything else then went well.

Q: Let's back up a little bit.

A: Yes.

Q: You had mentioned that -- well, let's back way up.

A: Okay.

Q: Maybe you can describe in a little bit more detail --

A: Right.

Q: -- the life in Vienna after the anschluss, before Kristallnacht.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: I mean that -- that's a period of what, eight months or something.

A: Na -- from March to November.

Q: Yeah, it's a while.

A: Yeah.

Q: What your daily life was like, what you saw, what you experienced, how you spent your time. Who was on the streets, what was happening.

A: Well, first of all, we all had to get a paper with our name. All Jewish men became Israel, and all Jewish women became Sarah. We lost our identity completely, and numbers. And we had to carry identification of who we were. And we were stopped sometimes, just to show our identification. It was hazardous to walk on the street. There was a park nearby, but every bench said, no Jews allowed. And it was -- it was dangerous for us to go there, because there was some of the young Hitler youth, or SA, the yellow uniforms, who were very reckless, and felt their muscle, so to speak, and they'd attack Jews, and beat them, and do terrible things to them. So we couldn't do that either.

Q: Did you witness this?

A: I saw that -- this -- the washing of the streets, and the things. I never witnessed any beating, actually, but I heard about many of them. We lived across the street from a police station, and I could see what was going in and out, and I could see them just arresting people in the street. Like, sometimes they'd ask for identity, and if you were Jewish, they took you away. And as I said in the beginning only the men. And also they -- there were incidences of where they got Jewish girls to come and be measured all over. They wanted to know the difference between Jews and non-Jews. So they'd take all these nice Jewish girls, and measure them everywhere. And one of them was sexually assaulted that I knew. And there's no one to take up for it, I mean, it was condoned. It was -- it was perfectly fine.

Q: Were you ever measured?

A: No, I wasn't.

Q: Did you ever sort of suffer any physical abuse, or --

A: Not really physical, just that one incident I told you, when I washed at the [indecipherable] washed the street, and they got me into this room. My mother was taken

away to another room, and she was screaming, and -- and they started to attack me -- when the Germans stopped it.

Q: And this was a -- a group of Austrians --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- men and women?

A: Men only.

Q: Oh, men.

A: Men only, yeah, mm-hm. No, they were going to sexually assault me, and they called me by name, they knew who I was, because they were from my neighborhood.

Q: What were you thinking?

A: I was petrified, petrified. I was also very young in that respect, I knew nothing about that. I -- I was completely illit -- illiterate in sex -- in sexual things, and my mother knew, and she was screaming. I didn't know what they were going to do.

Q: But you knew it was bad?

A: I knew it was terrible, cause they started touching me. And I was saved by two German officers.

Q: Did you think they abused your mother?

A: No, they didn't. They had her with some other women.

Q: Now, you also had this added responsibility of trying to take care of your mother.

A: Mm-hm, I did, that's true.

Q: That must have been -- that must have been --

A: She was -- yeah --

Q: -- difficult.

A: My mother -- my mother's face mirrored all her emotions, she couldn't help it, and that was bad. But I did it. I was strong at the time, and then at the end, I wasn't so strong. And

when I talk about it today, I get jittery, very jittery. So many years later. I can even hear it in my voice myself.

Q: Well, it was -- it must have been, you know, a tremendous responsibility, but there was the emotional component, but also as --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- probably a little bit of a burden.

A: Well, when you're young, it do-doesn't come up, really, you just do it. But you learn very quickly what's dangerous, and what isn't, and you learn very quickly to try and get out of the way of it. And those few weeks in Germany were such a horror of survival, not only o-of trying to get across, but for my mother and me to save me, cause I was a young kid. And --

Q: You're saying that you were prey.

A: I was prey, completely, mm-hm.

Q: Well what -- what do you think gave you -- because you were a sheltered child, what gave you the instincts, or the strength to do what you had to do?

A: I don't know, I don't know. It comes. You do what you have to do, because I -- I used to say to my parents I didn't want to be so sheltered, but that didn't help much. Including in the United States, when I was engaged to be married, they were still sheltering me, so they never changed, so -- but you grow up. I hope I did.

Q: When you were living in Antwerp, the conditions were difficult, but were you frightened still, or did you feel fairly safe?

A: No, I felt fairly safe. The only frightening part was to get another permit every 30 days, and to get a place to go. I mean, we were really -- we were -- we didn't know what to do. We weren't allowed to work, and it was hard [inaudible] and I was so young. Of course, by that time, I was 16, 17.

Q: Were there a lot of other refugees there?

A: Yes. There were a lot of refugees who all weren't allowed to work, and got into skirmishes because there nothing else to do. They didn't like each other, or something. I could never believe that, sometimes fights broke out over little things, and then they'd send them back to Germany. A lot of people were sent back. And that was the scary part. I -- I've had friends, and I -- my mother was wonderful, she always cooked something, and there was always somebody that needed a meal, that was in our situation, so we

always, somehow it was, you know, she made it easier for that year. We stayed exactly one year, exactly, from March first to March first.

Q: And that was, I think, right be --

A: 1939 to 1940.

Q: That was probably right before Germany came into Belgium, yes?

A: Yes. We left March first, and they -- they went in ma -- May the 10th.

Q: From Holland to Belgium.

A: May 10th, yeah. Those dates are imbedded in my mind.

Q: Good timing.

A: Yeah, yeah. But we got out, and so did my father, so I'm very grateful for that, but we did lose a lot of family. My father's family lived in Kraków, and one of the family, a dist -- more distant cousin that I never met, owned the factory that Schindler took over, and he got 14 members of the family onto Schindler's list, and so -- but a lot of them did perish. But Schindler saved a lot of people.

Q: Are those -- are they[indecipherable]. These relatives of yours that were saved by Schindler, are they -- are any of them still around?

A: Yes.

Q: Are they in Israel, or the United States?

A: No, they're in the United States. We helped to bring some here, and they're -- maybe six are alive, so --

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

A: Wait a minute. Have to rearrange a little. Okay.

Q: I was just wondering if in these weeks that you were tr -- what? Oh.

A: Okay? Is sound okay now?

Q: Yeah, no, it's fine.

A: Okay.

Q: If in this very frightening period, when you were trying to get into Antwerp.

A: Yes.

Q: If there was maybe one or two experiences that are -- that you still think about, that were s -- especially strong memories.

A: Oh I -- I -- I think about all of them. I know that it was a terrible thing to be in that hotel, helpless to what might happen. To be at the mercy of guides that dealt in human beings for money, and you really didn't know where they were taking you. It was awful to know that we had no ration cards, that nobody was to help us, that we didn't know anybody. We were just at the mercy of so many people. And even though there were a lot of good people in the world, not enough of them. Because we were afraid to speak to anybody. I was afraid to open my mouth. And i-it was so awful when we walked through the woods in the middle of the night. One time they took us through a -- a train tunnel, and I -- I thought, what if the train comes? And we walked through tunnel for a long time. And then when we came out the other end, there was a street, a road, and -- not much of a road, but a road, and we were so relieved to be on the other side of that tunnel, and that's when we were caught again. And I was lying on the -- in a ditch when we heard something coming, and all of a sudden I had a gun in my ribs. And we came out of the ditch, and they took us all the way back, when we had gone through that whole tunnel, you know? And we had to g -- walk all the way back, and be searched again, and sent back to Cologne. And this happened so many times. It -- I think sometimes I don't even want to remember it all. I kind of slop over it because it's hard. Especially when my mother was so ill, and I didn't know what to do, you know, we -- we didn't have any medicine, we didn't -- we couldn't call a doctor, and here we were in -- in strange country, and hiding. And I'm sure that a lot of people that went through a lot more than I did, but at that time, it was terrible. It was terrible because we had no protection of any kind.

Q: How did you know whom to trust?

A: We didn't. We didn't. Each time we turned money over to a guide, we had no idea whether he'd help us or not. We had no idea. Sometimes -- I'm wondering if we were caught because we were caught, or because somebody tipped them off, and just took our money. But they did make us walk, always, half the night. And the weather was awful at that time, very cold. So -- but --

Q: Did you get help from -- let's say, people who were living in villages, or --

A: No, no. We -- we never let on that we were there. Later on I read when I was in Belgium that several people were killed by gunshots, they were trying to escape. So, we didn't, you know, we lived through it. I -- it was just -- it's hard to verbalize what it was like. Most people that learn about the Holocaust have no idea what it really meant. It is the people that lived through it, and even me, who went through some of if, when I hear about others, can't imagine that they lived through it. So I guess it's all relative. You do what you have to do.

Q: How'd you calm your mother down?

A: It was the --

Q: You said she was a very nervous --

A: Very nerv -- never calmed her down.

Q: But you obviously needed to prevent her from --

A: Oh yes.

Q: -- screaming, or really having a fit.

A: Oh yes, yes, yes, I did. And I -- I -- she did okay, as long as I did all the negotiations and things, and I did. And even in Belgium, dealing with all the embassy, or whatever, I was the one to do it all. And even then it was a little dangerous, because I was a young girl. Because I was prey, as you said. I had incidents even there. And that's only because young girls at that time were considered like open territory. And my parents protected me, but it wasn't easy.

Q: Well, I think especially when you needed favors.

A: Yes, that's exactly right. Unless we could pay for it. I was asked a couple of times for those favors, for -- for paying in those terms for favors. And even though I didn't know exactly what it meant, I was frightened a lot.

Q: But you never felt so desperate that you would consider it.

A: Never. No, never.

Q: This is interesting, this is an area I must say that hasn't been explored very much.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Which is the fact that women during the Holocaust had many different problems to consider --

A: Yes.

Q: [indecipherable] or challenges to overcome --

A: Oh, of course.

Q: -- than man, and --

A: Of course, and many of them didn't make it. I don't know if I should bring this up here, but I have a cousin who was in Schindler's List, and one day some Germans came in, and recruited women for their bordellos, and they picked my cousin. And her -- her fiancé, th -- they were younger than I am, and they were not married yet, but they were engaged, he was the head of the factory. He was a very clever young man, and he walked up to the German and said, "She is my best worker, if you take her away, it'll hurt the war effort." He thought he'd kill him, but he didn't, he just left, and left her. So this is how far we all were from that, you know, never -- never knew what to expect.

Q: Were you conscious at the time of w -- of -- it must have been harder because you were female?

A: I wasn't. I only knew they took away all the men, and I was still there. We had no feel of time, it -- it seemed like forever that we were there, and it was only five weeks, it seemed like a lifetime. Everything's you know, nothing worked. It -- it all came together, and that's when I ended up in Antwerp, I was just a complete wreck.

Q: In that time that you were in Antwerp, of course, the war -- the war officially began.

A: Yes, '39.

Q: How much information did you get about what was happening in Poland?

A: Oh, very little, very little, from Poland. We knew there was a war on, we were thankful the war had started. And my husband-to-be, Max, had sent me a letter with his picture, and with a marriage proposal to come to the United States, and he'd marry me and bring

me to the -- by proxy -- and bring me to the United States, and then I could divorce him if I didn't like him. But his picture wasn't good enough, I thought it was a terrible picture. But my parents wouldn't let me go anyway. They -- I don't know why they thought I would be better off with them than going to the United States by myself. But I was still young, too, you know, so that didn't work either, but he tried.

Q: You also talked about -- started to talk about how after, sort of, a period of, sort of, great challenges, where you just had to get through it, you would just break down.

A: Yes, I did. I -- I guess that's my make-up. I can get through things and then go to pieces afterwards.

Q: Are some of those traumas still with you, I mean are there -- there's certain things that happened to you, or that trigger memories that --

A: Oh yes.

Q: -- bring all this back today?

A: Oh yeah, yes, it does. It seemed like another lifetime, but yet, when I do something like this, it takes me awhile to go to sleep again. Because so many vivid things come up. Then also I'll say, why didn't I think of saying that, and that, so it would be recorded for later on. And we all know it was a bad time, we all have a different story. My children knew very little about that, too. Told them very little about it, and they're more and more interested now. And I hope in time to come my great-grandchildren, and great grand -- great-great-grandchildren will listen and learn something, not only from me, but from others. I once spent five hours in -- in the museum -- in the Holocaust museum, and all I did was listen to stories, because everybody has a different story. Everybody could write a book, and I was just lucky, very lucky. So many times I'm lucky.

Q: Let's just briefly sort of catch up. You -- you came to New York, you worked for a while.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: You eventually --

A: My -- my husband Max and I kept in touch, and --

Q: Your future husband Max.

A: My future husband Max. We kept in touch. My father was not yet here. I got a job with National Silver Company, I was cleaning the offices. I'd never cleaned anything in my life. I was cleaning offices, and I was wrapping silver. And the boss was very nice to me, and he helped me bring my father to this country. I was forever grateful to him, his name

was Bernstein. And my husband Max kept -- he couldn't call me often, because he couldn't afford it, but he wrote me letters by parcel post, and we were in touch all the time, and he asked me to marry him. Well, it wasn't easy for my mother to think about moving from New York to Greenville, South Carolina. And my father came, finally, a year later, and Max came to see us, and asked for my hand in marriage, and my father at the time said, "Who are you?" And ma -- Max said, "I have a job, and you don't." But they relented, and we all moved to Greenville, South Carolina, and we were married there in 1942, in Greenville. The only place with an air conditioner was one restaurant, and that's where we put our chuppah, and we were married in August. It was 104 degrees, and the air conditioning didn't work, but it didn't matter. It was a hot wedding. And still is, 56 years later. Yeah, it's wonderful.

Q: You have a family.

A: Three children, 10 grandchildren, one great-grandchild. Four of the grandchildren are married, one's getting married next month, and one in the spring. And two great-grandchildren are on the way, and our family is growing. I was -- I am an only child, and now they'll -- by April we hope to be 27. I like it a lot.

Q: And I know you -- you both got very involved with the community.

A: Yes, I -- when I first came to Greenville, Max invited me to come for New Year's Eve, 1941, right after the war broke out. And -- of course my mother wouldn't let me go by myself, so -- but I had really wanted to move to Greenville, so my mother came with me on the train to Greenville, South Carolina. Max picked us up, and he drove, and drove, and drove, and drove to his house. Probably 20 minutes. Going back it took two minutes, he just wanted me to think it was a bigger city than it was. But I came to Greenville for New Year's Eve, and he knew everybody, he was the eligible bachelor in town. I didn't know anybody, so around midnight I started crying. He had to rush me out of there, and he drove me around for two hours, and I cried and cried, and I came back to the house, said to my mother, "I want to go home, and never hear of Greenville again." And I moved in February. Love is stronger than anything else. I just knew he was right, and he was for me. Nobody else was.

Q: Meanwhile, you barely knew him.

A: Well now, I'd known him, you know, from Vienna, from when I was 15, and his letters, you know, were wonderful, and he'd call me when he could, and he came to see me, and I just knew that was it.

Q: I have a question for you, I didn't ask Max this, but sort of an interest to me, you were newly arrived in the United States --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- when the United States went to war.

A: [indecipherable] war.

Q: You must have had a very different perceptive, having just escaped, than the average American.

A: Oh yes. Whenever I speak, I always say thank God for the American soldier. Can you imagine what the world would have been like? Can you even imagine? I have been warned at times in high school that there were skinheads present. And then I even do it more, because what good have Nazis ever done? Name one good thing. Never anything good, only bad. And if the American soldier hadn't intervened, where would we be? Where would anybody be? So, when I came to the United States, and there was a war, I was -- I was just hoping that they'd beat them. I couldn't understand why somebody hadn't done something sooner, that this madman was taking over all of Europe. So I was very glad about it. Course I didn't figure what happened with Japan [inaudible]. That was different, but I -- I couldn't believe that this was -- you know, let go that long, that nobody could tell how bad it was.

Q: When you were living in New York, were most of the people you came in contact with native Americans, or were they other people who had come from Europe?

A: Both. Mostly Europeans I would say at the time, in New York. Nobody in Greenville.

Q: The reason I'm asking is did you sense a di -- a difference in attitude toward the war?

A: What occurred to me in New York was they really didn't want refugees. They are afraid we were taking jobs that Americans would have. And they weren't very kind about that. I think after awhile, they could see that a lot of brain came with it. Doctors, scientists, and artists. And then it became more palatable. But I think they really didn't want us to take jobs, and we had to have jobs. I started working pinning the flowers on hats, the day I came. And my mother took a very menial job as cutting out ol -- from old uniforms, cutting out buttons and zippers, dirty stuff. But we ate. And we weren't afraid to work, and they could see that. We were anxious to work. I ended up doing some piecework, and I was told not to go so fast. I wanted to make more money by going fast, and I was told not to work so fast, because the others didn't want to work so fast. But the attitude to us at first was, you know, we're taking jobs away.

Q: And you felt that?

A: Yes. But it -- when I went to Greenville, it was different, because there weren't any people like us. I don't think there were maybe one or two, that's all, afterwards. We were sort of the first ones, refugees, to come to Greenville. And we were really welcome.

Q: What about the difference in attitude toward going into war? Obviously you knew why we were going there.

A: Yes.

Q: But do you think that your fellow Americans wer --

A: I -- I think at the time, yes. I really think there were a lot of volunteers, and most people understood that that was a very necessary war, although to me, no war is -- is necessary. My husband always says, "What they should do is take the old people to fight the war, instead of the young ones." Then it wouldn't last very long. But I came to Greenville in '42, so everything was still going on in Europe, you know. And the hardest thing we -- we were doing was trying to get people to write affidavits for other -- for people still left. Everybody was afraid to do that. They'd have to take care of them. And we said, "Look, we -- we are making our way," you know. And -- and that was a disappointment, great disappointment. Some did, but not too many.

Q: But that was something you got involved with?

A: Oh yeah, yeah, we sure did. I -- you know, we -- we worked every day, all of us. And Greenville at the time didn't know many Jews. No -- there weren't any Jews that stood out that -- in politics, or public life, or whatever. And so people didn't know much about Jews, and they actually felt my head for the horns. I mean, that's what they thought Jews had, was horns. And -- so we -- we had a lot of groundwork to do. Even today we have big discussions with people, and -- it's very pleasant, though. And also there was some anti-Semitism, but it was mostly they'd never known a Jew. They didn't know what to expect. And there were a lot of good people, too.

Q: What surprised you most about this country when you -- when you --

A: Well, when I first came to New York, the vastness of it just overwhelmed me, and I had to take the subway the first day to go to work. I had a friend who took me on the subway. It overwhelmed me, really, even though Vienna was a big city, but Antwerp was not, and all of a sudden everything was so big. All but our room. My mother and I had to stay in a little room and get dressed and undressed on top of the bed. But otherwise, everything was big. And in Greenville it was the other way again. All of a sudden I was in this small town, because at that time Greenville was a small town. Since then it has grown tremendously, but that's the -- so it's okay, it's an okay place.

Q: After all of these years --

A: Yes.

Q: And now we're talking about many in this country.

A: Yes.

Q: And since -- since your experiences in Europe, are there certain things, whether it's a smell, whether it's seeing a man in uniform, is there -- is there something that -- a -- a sound that brings it all back to you?

A: Well, mostly it's when I'm asked to speak somewhere. I speak to lots of fifth graders, and they're wonderful. They all write me letters. And I have boxes and boxes of letters of kids, cause I always say, "Tell me what you learned." And then I don't sleep very well. I -- it all goes through my mind. I sometimes go through old pictures, and it brings back memories. I'm lucky to have those old pictures, not everybody does. When I'm with my cousins, I remember the times when we were all little together, and what has happened since. Max and I really never spoke German at home, mostly because we were angry, and didn't want our children to know the language. Our children were angry with us for not teaching them. But at that time we just didn't want any part of German. We talked to each other when we sm -- met somebody German that wasn't younger than us, didn't trust them. Didn't -- we were thinking, where were you? We still doing this a little bit. Not much, but a little. So, you could say we're still a little prejudiced, but we try not to be. The first time Max had somebody apply for a job as secretary who was German, we talked to each other, and he hired her, and she became a wonderful woman, and wonderful secretary. But I want everybody to think that way, that when they said all Jews were bad, and all Jews should die, I never want to do that about any class of people, including Germans. There were some good Germans who tried, and were afraid of their own lives. There were a lot of bad ones who wanted to take advantage of people. I could never understand the people that worked in concentration camps who did things they didn't have to do. Where were these men that could kill children, and then go home to their own children? How is it possible? How -- what kind of human being was that? And that -- I always ask myself that, how is it possible? I -- I can't -- and so we never wanted to hate anybody. And we taught that to our children, they know that. And we tried to be fair, and I hope we are.

Q: Is there anything else you want to say about some of the, maybe adjustments you had to make in completely changing your lifestyle, your country, everything?

A: You know, at the time you just do it. You have to, there is no choice. We never had a choice.

Q: But perhaps certain aspects of that adjustment are more che --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- diffi -- difficult at first.

A: Oh, they were all difficult, I guess, but we were so grateful for every good thing. Today's young people have a lot of choices, and sometimes that doesn't come out too well, because they have so many choices. We had no choice at all. It happened, we had to do what we had to do. I -- I don't know what else to say about that, but sometimes that's not all bad, that -- that we did it because we had to do it. Sometimes it's better than having too many choices. And I -- I -- I don't know why I say that, I want my children to have choices too, but not too many. At one point you have to make a decision. My husband is a great decision maker. I've learned that from him.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add, cause I'm --

A: Na --

Q: -- delighted that you were able to do this, and --

A: Well, I'm --

Q: -- share with us.

A: -- I thank you for doing this, and I think it's very important. I think that the world must know what happened, and not forget. I want thi -- my family to know all these little details. I want them to be good people, and they are. We are v-very lucky, we have lots of good people. I -- I hope I taught them all the right things. I -- it was difficult to suddenly bring up American children. I had to go out and buy books with nursery rhymes and songs to teach them. I didn't know any. And that goes not only for that, but for everything else. It's a whole different life, and also with every generation things change tremendously. We had to get used to a lot of changes, and I just want them to grow up [indecipherable] my children are very grown up, and so are my grandchildren. I want them to always be good, and fair, and we all love life together, and I want them to have the same with their families. And I'm very lucky to have been married 56 years to a wonderful guy. Now I'm crying. And I hope for many more. And I think that's about it.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

Q: You know what, I didn't want to go back and ask you this, but I'm so curious, because you were so protected, did you protect your children?

End of Tape #2
Conclusion of Interview