United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Rosalie (Chris) Laks Lerman
December 1, 1998 and January 13, 1999
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Rosalie (Chris) Laks Lerman, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on December 1, 1998 and January 13, 1999 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.

ROSALIE (CHRIS) LAKS LERMAN
December 1, 1998 and January 13, 1999

Q: Good morning, Chris. Welcome to Washington.

A: Good morning, Joan.

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

A: I was born in Starachowice, Poland, March 5th, 1926. My Hebrew name was Rachel. My given name on the birth certificate reads Rozalia Laks. I also was known as Rozka or Rosha Laks, and during the war, when we were brought from the Auschwitz camp to Ravensbrück, I had decided that it would be easier to survive with an assumed Christian name, and due to the fact that no records have followed our departure from Auschwitz, when we were on the death march, once we arrived at the table where they registered the new transports, we changed our names to a Christian name – last name and first name in my case, the name Gorska – I assumed the name Krystyna for it to be a real Christian name.

Q: So, you have many names…

A: Many names.

Q: …in your life?

A: Right.

Q: Can you tell us about your family – your father, your mother, what they were like, what they did, and then about you and your two sisters?

A: We were growing up in a small town, population about 35-40,000, and it was – I would say that the Jewish population amounted to approximately ten percent, no more, due to the fact that there were large factories in the city, in the town, which were government – belonged to the government, and the people who were employed in those factories – they were manufacturing ammunitions, and also they had foundries and iron ore mines – People who were employed in the factories were mostly Christian people, gentile people. Jews were involved in predominately business and they were artisans and craftsmen, and this was more or less the composition of the town. The town – the Jewish population in town was very well organized. We had a lot of different organizations. And I as a child could only get more or less from the conversation that I overheard at home, you know, about my parents being involved in the community going to different meetings. They were predominately involved with Zionist organizations. They were not orthodox or religious people, but they were traditional Jews. My parents had a kosher home and I would say that we observed the main holidays. I don't think that my father was going to synagogue every day. I know he didn't. And as far as we were concerned, as youngsters,

as soon as we were old enough, we too joined Zionist youth groups because this was sort of saying the whole idea that eventually we will all make our way to Palestine. As far as my parents are concerned, they were very active in the community – Mother in particular, more so, because Father was a lot away from home. Father's involvement in the community never was as involved as was my mother's. He was what they call – I don't know the name, there is no equivalent in the English language – but it is *Brakaź*. What this – what he has – what he did, he was evaluating… How to say it? Actually he was an appraiser of large tracts of forest because he was representing a very large international companies that supplied timber to German companies and British companies. They used the timber for support in mines. So, he was working for a company like this, and before the companies went into the negotiation of the purchase of the timber, they had to have an idea more or less of what – how many trees they are, what it will yield, and so forth, because they had to pay tremendous amounts of money. So, my father's job was to travel to the forests and, in most cases, with the assistant of the forester, they went into the woods and he was estimating, more or less, you know, how many trees there are on the tract, how thick they are, what the yield would be, and when he was coming home from the trip, he used to sit and prepare specifications, and on the basis of his specifications, the companies went into the negotiations for the purchase. So, he wasn't that much around because usually once he went away, it was like three to four, sometimes five weeks before he'd return home, and when he'd return home he used to sit, you know, for hours and hours and hours in his study preparing, you know, the specifications. So, Mother was certainly in charge of the household and the children and seeing to our comfort and overseeing our activities and education and she was a wonderful woman, and really, as far as forming the character, it was Mother's responsibility. And, to her, education was very, very important. So, outside of the fact that she was very involved with community and the Zionist organization, she formed the WIZO in Starachowice. She was the first president in the WIZO organization. She was a member of regional and the national – no, what's the word I want to use? – she was a member of the regional…uh…

Q: Office?

A: …Office, and she also formed for young unmarried women, the young WIZO in town. So, every once in a while, you know, when I wanted to know a little bit more about my parents immediately after the war, I used to turn to those people who – the generation between my parents and my self that could tell me a little bit more about who my parents were. Because basically, you know, to a child a parent is a parent. You don't think of them as individuals. You just think of them as parents, and they're there to take care of you and provide for you and make you comfortable whenever it's necessary. So, with the conversation – in conversations with those people, I found out a lot about my parents and especially from women who were like eight, ten years older then myself who were, you know, already teenagers or a little older who told me how wonderful my mother was and how energetic she was and how inspiring she was in, some would say, in bringing the Zionist idea and inspiring people and so forth and so on.

Q: When you speak about your father being away, do you have any recollections of doing things with your father? Going for walks with your father? Or going on a picnic? Or is there some particular kind of recollection?

A: Well…

Q: Other than his working so hard.

A: No, Father was a disciplinarian. He was the head of the family, a typical European head of the family. He was a disciplinarian and a no-nonsense man. And he was outgoing and he was very nice, but still in all, you know, when he spent time with us, I would say that, if you were to compare with present days, you would say it was more quality time rather than otherwise. And, Father was – had a beautiful singing voice. He was, he was born in Silesia, which at the time when he was born, it was German occupied part of Poland that was occupied by Germany. So, I would say at the turn of the century, 1900, that was, his – his world was Vienna, 1900. So, the music, you know, by Strauss and Mahler and Lehár – that was his world. He loved music. He had a beautiful singing voice. So, when we get together, I remember how we used to – first of all, the taste for classical music I got from my father – and we have been listening to his singing, and we sang along with him. I mean, even in German, because his education was a German education. So, he spoke more, as far as foreign languages, he used more German then any other language. And so, he sang along with us, and he was teaching us voices in order to sing in different voices so that we could sing in harmony. And, no matter where we went afterwards, when we were in a crowd, they knew that the three of us could sing in harmony. So, we were always asked to sing any song, you know, and because we have learned what it takes to sing in harmony, we could ourselves, later on, adapt to certain levels, whereby we could create, even though not knowing whether we are doing it right or wrong, we could sing in harmony one way or another, you know, in different voices. So, this was very interesting. But, Father's culture, basically, the culture of experience, was more German. As a matter of fact, he had a study with a huge mahogany desk, and behind the desk was like a secretary behind glass doors. He was a very neat man, very neat, very elegant gentleman. I'm sorry I don't have the picture right now here. And, he used to have everything placed all orderly including the huge German encyclopedia. I remember when I went to high school and I took German as the second language, he used to say to me, "If you ever need to use the encyclopedia, you are welcome to it, but don't bend the pages, and please make sure that everything is placed back where it belongs." So, you know, this is the kind of a person he was. He was a very orderly person with whom, you know, things had to be always right. But I really developed a very close relationship with my father after we had been taken to camp, when we lost our mother, because it just happened so that we had been working together, and we had access to one another. It was the slave labor camp in Starachowice, where we were not separated all the time and we could have meals together and so forth and so on. It was at that time that I really realized what a caring and loving person he was, and inasmuch as he didn't have maybe the

patience when we were little to be with us. This was the bonding sort of time when I really felt how important he was in our lives, and how important we were in his life. So, these are more or less, you know, the way I would think of my parents.

Q: Tell me a little bit more about your mother. Was she very warm? Was she not so neat, given that she had to take care of all of you? That she was a little different then your father? Or was she…?

A: Mother was, I would say, the extreme opposite of my father. She was – first of all, she was more of a people's person. She loved to be with people. She was the person who organized all social events. She was the person who was entertaining. She was the person who welcomed everybody in the house, regardless of who they were. Poor, I remember days when the local people who were destitute were coming to my mother asking for assistance, not only Jews but gentiles. It is a family – there was a family, I mean, nobody is alive anymore – a Christian family that came to settle in Starachowice at the time when the revolution in Russia broke out. They used to live in Belarus, if I remember correctly, and they came to our town. They happened to be living in the same courtyard, you know, how Europeans cities where it wasn't individual homes, but it was like one house and there was a courtyard and in the courtyard were other houses and people lived all around. And, they were intelligent, very nice, wonderful people, parents and four women who were more or less the age of my parents, a little younger. And Mother got to like them. And it was very difficult for them to get, some would say, accustomed. to go to town and to make a living and so forth and so on. So, Mother has encouraged them to open a, like, a kinder care. I was three years old when I was already in that pre-nursery, nursery whatever you call it, with my sister, you know, my older sister, and of course, Mother had seen to it that other – that friends of hers would send their children. So, it gave them immediately a little bit, kind of a source of income in addition to the father who was, he was not a doctor, he was a medic, that Mr. Paliszewski. He was working as a medic in the Russian Army, I think, or whatever. He was so knowledgeable about medicine that eventually when the hospital opened in our town, he was an accredited practitioner in the hospital without being a doctor. So, this tells you something, but you know it takes time for any newcomer. So, my mother was doing all these things, and by the way, the Paliszewski family the most wonderful family to us. I mean, for us, they were a home away from home all the time. And I'm skipping things, but I must tell you that after the war, when I came back to my home town, if it wasn't for them, I would have been killed the day I arrived back. But this is another story. So, I cherished the friendship that my parents had with the Paliszewski family. So, here we are, we were talking about my mother, what she was doing. So, she was trying to assist destitute people. She was trying to help people who were coming to the community to kind of get settled and start a new life. She was, during the war – she was instrumental in creating the Hebrew school to which we went, a Hebrew Day School. My first four years of formal schooling were not in the public school system, but they were in the Hebrew schools, in the Hebrew school. Everything in that school was in Hebrew – math, geography – everything they taught us was in Hebrew. I mean, we were learning Polish as well, but Polish was a language –

Polish history and Polish was taught in Polish. Everything else was taught in Hebrew. Now, I want you to know that in our home, we never spoke Yiddish, which was a language that was used in everybody's house. My parents both were educated. They spoke four languages fluently – Polish, and German, and Russian, because Father was educated in German schools, Mother was educated in Russian schools, and Yiddish, of course, they spoke fluently. Sometimes they spoke Yiddish so that if they wanted to say something we shouldn't understand. Mother comes from a family that was, I would say, very educated due to the fact that even my grandma, I remember Grandma Sara, had a high school diploma, and I want you to know that in those days, nobody considered an education for a woman necessary. She had thirteen children, mind you. Nine survived; four died either in childbirth or whatever it was. That was – she married – she comes from a family of bankers, Fefers, from Ostoriwiec and she married a man who was come from Sandomierz. He was in the printing business. So, again, in order to be in the printing business, you had to be very literate, because otherwise you could not run a successful printing business. That was my mother's side of the family. All my aunts are – graduated from high school. The youngest one went to the university and she became a pharmacist, and she worked, I think it was the year before the war; it was her first year of employment. She was the youngest, you know, and that was her first year of employment and she was somewhere near Bialystok, and we never found out what happened to her. We thought that maybe, because she was so close to the territory that it was eventually occupied by the Russians – you know, in 1939, when Poland was divided between the German occupants and the Russian occupants – but we couldn't find her. So, out of the family of nine on my mother's side, there was a set of three sisters, first. They all had children. My mother is the last one from the first set of three girls. They have children who have married with children already. Like my oldest aunt had two sons who had been married before the war, and they already had little babies. One of them had two, and one of them had one, while the youngest sister was just graduated from the university. And in the middle were three brothers who at the time of the Russian revolution made their way to the United States and Canada. So, there were the first three women in the family, then there were the three men in the family, and there were the three youngest girls, sisters of my mother's, in the family, who were still single. One of them got married right – I would say during the war, maybe in 1940s, and I don't remember whether she had a family or not. I just can't recall that, and this is it. So, I was very fortunate to have some members of my mother's family here in the United States and in Canada that, at least, you know, makes you feel good that there is somebody around who can tell you who you are, when you were, and what was life like for them when they were around. Another interesting thing about my parents, if you want to know, is I mentioned to you before that they were very instrumental, always trying to assist other people. I remember, you know, whoever, as I said before, whoever knocked on the door, they were always, always more than willing to help, but beggars came around, you know, they used to give me like a coin and said, "Go out and give it to them." They were never asked to come in. And there were many people who were coming begging, you know, in those days. But then in 1937 maybe '38, I was a little older, there was – I could see new faces that were coming in and they spoke German, and when my parents – my parents used to say that if they are not

home and there is somebody who is coming in and doesn't speak Polish but speaks German, be sure to ask them to come in. Those were the German Jews who were being so-called "resettled" from the German territories. And they, when they were coming to the different communities in Poland, and they just happened to be come to our town, to Starachowice, due to the fact that Father was, spoke German so well and could communicate with them and understand their needs and Mother was so being having all these contacts and connections being so, so to say, as they say in America, a Macher, you know, trying to be of assistance to others, that I could see, you know, how they really spent a lot of time in order to assist them. And I didn't understand that much at the time yet, but somebody knocked on the door and they used to say in German "*Is Herr Laks zu Hause?*" And I used to run to mom and say, "Mommy, a *Deutsche Jude* is there." You know, I remember, I did it once and Mother said, "I don't want you to talk like this." If anybody's asking about dad or about me, open the door and ask them in. You know, you are a child, you don't know what to do. You don't know how to behave. So, what they did for the people, in what way they assisted them, I don't know, but the mere fact that I had observed that those people were welcome in our home and that my parents cared to listen to them, I'm sure that they have done something to make their life easier.

Q: Were you wealthy? Was the family wealthy or well off in some way?

A: Well, let me tell you about this aspect of the family. From the pictures that I have seen in the albums, from the early childhood, I think that we were quite comfortable because the pictures were from different resorts, areas like the Baltic Sea, you know, and from the mountains, the Bezkidy, and there was a spa in Busko Zdroj that my mother was going, and we always had either the maid or a nanny that came along, you know, to take care of us. But at the time of the depression, when America, you know, after the crash and when Europe was attracted by the American depression, which was 1933 or whatever, I don't remember in Poland at the time, Father's services were not needed anymore due to the fact that neither Germany nor England could afford to come and purchase timber in Poland because they themselves, you know, they had to make do with whatever they had, and utilize what they had. You know, it was a very, very difficult time. So, I remember Father was looking, I mean, he had to support the family. He stopped going away from home and he was around home base. So, I remember he had a job with the same company that he was representing before, but here, too, he had to be channeled into a different aspect of the operation of the lumber company, and there was only part-time work for him. So, he also assumed a kind of a half, semi-position with a credit company because we lived in, as I said before, in an industrial area, and people were buying things on credit, you know. So, let's say if somebody wanted to buy an item which was expensive, and I'm not talking about thousands of zlotys, but whatever, but they needed a coat or a new suit, and whatever. You know, he couldn't walk into the store and buy it. So, the man who was on the job in the factories, in the munitions factories, used to go to the store and establish a credit and he was paying so much a month, a week, I have no idea. But Father was doing the research in order to give them the credit reference. So, that was another thing. But we were growing up and we had to go to school, and my older sister in

particular was about ready for high school, and that was an expensive thing. So, my mother decided to learn a trade. We had, I mean, things were difficult, so we subletted a room, and we subletted a room in our house to a woman who was a corset maker. And the woman said to my mother, after she was half a year in town, she says, "You know what? You have such connections." You know because she was trying to assist her, "You have such great connections, and I'm a single woman, and I don't think I like to stay here for too long." She says, "Why don't you learn it? And why don't you run a corset shop?" So, of course, Mother figured she's there, so she might as well learn. Mother didn't know how to use a sewing machine or anything like this. I remember, in the beginning, she used to cry because the wheel was turning the other way around instead of forward. But she has learned and, of course, with all her connections in the community, you know, the non-Jewish and the Jewish population, she developed a wonderful business. She was really, and you know she had the respect of everybody, and therefore, so you know that was another source of income for us, which was easier. And then in 1937, finally, Father got back on his feet, and he became a representative of a wholesaler from abroad. I don't know. One company I think was in Lithuania that was sending different cheeses, so it was importing different cheeses from Lithuania, and canned fish either from Denmark or Holland, I don't know. So, he had these two franchises that kind of brought him back on his feet and things were looking up, and we were growing up and ready for school and…

Q: I want to ask you some questions about your sisters, but I'm curious, when you all were singing, was there someone playing the piano? Was there a piano in the house?

A: No, we didn't have – yeah, it was always a capella. We never had a piano. As a matter of fact, you know, Mother had a very good voice, too, but it was Father who really loved it, and as a matter of fact, my uncle from the United States who was the next to follow my mother and, Uncle Moish, and in the family of the nine children, they were the two closest siblings. So, when Uncle Moish, when I met him, he always was telling me how Uncle Moish played the banjo and sang. So, he used to tell me how they used to get together and they used to form like the little theater and perform for people in the community, you know, get together and they had other people, you know, who were like themselves kind of artistic and with good singing voices and everything. So, Uncle Moish was telling, filling me on those little things that were at home as far as singing is concerned. So, they all had this, this musical ear. In our family, my son, who is resembling my dad very, very much, is the one who has a good voice. Miles has a terrible voice, and Jeanette is just like him. They are always off-key. They love to sing, but they are always off-key.

Q: And you still sing?

A: I do sing, yes, but of course, it's not – it's not the same voice. I used to have the voice of soprano, you know, and very high, and I really sing very, very well without any particular voice training or anything like this, but I love to sing. I remember when we used to get together, always, the parents used to say, "Let's sing." And all the pop songs and the

national songs and Hebrew songs, when we were traveling with the children in the United States on long trips, to kind of keep them busy, keep them occupied, so they wouldn't fight with one another in the back seat, we used to engage them in singing, you know, and we had a very favorite Hebrew song, "Yalda Yafa", because you could also sing it in the harmony, you know, different ways, and I thought that this is going to make them kind of involved, more involved than otherwise. So, they used to get very upset when Miles started because Miles never, I mean he loved to sing, and he knew the song just as well. You know "Yalda Yafa", means a pretty girl in Hebrew, and they loved the song. We all loved the song, but if I started we could continue to vocalize and sing in harmony. When Miles started, no way. They still talk about it the trips, you know, to Canada, which took like 13, 14 hours before you got from Vineland to Toronto, about the long trips and how dad used to sing "Yalda Yafa"

Q: Tell us about your two sisters. You have an older sister and a younger sister. The younger sister is three years younger than you are.

A: Close to four.

Q: Close to four.

A: I was born at the beginning of the year, and she was born at the end of the year.

Q: So, you were born in 1926, and Regina's born in 1929.

A: But, I was born in March, beginning of March, and she was born middle of December.

Q: And, the older sister, when was she born?

A: She was born two years before me, in January.

Q: So, you're all… You're… Well…?

Q: But it's that difference in age, it was tremendous, so to say, when you think in terms of childhood, was between my oldest sister and my little sister. I used to adore my older sister. Whatever she did, nobody could do it as good as she did. She was my role model, and I would do anything for her, whether she took advantage of it, I would say yes, like any other sibling.

Q: Can you describe how she took advantage?

A: Well, if she needed errands, you know, and if she didn't want, she was too busy to do what she was supposed to do, like take care of uniform, you know. We went to school in uniform regardless whether we were in elementary school or in high school. In elementary school, we used to wear like a smock, which was, we called it an apron, you

know, with a little white collar, and for it to be fresh we used to change – like a Peter Pan around, kind of – for it to be nice and fresh we used to put everyday a fresh collar, you know, lots and lots of collar in a drawer that were always washed and starched. It was a matter of pasting it to the collar. My sister she wouldn't do it. She used to pin it, and it was always crooked. So, she used to have me do those things for her. Like, she was too busy with homework and she was too busy with her so to say, involvement with school and she read books. She read constantly, constantly. I mean, have developed a liking for books and for reading, especially classics, because of her due to the fact that I was the younger one. She was the older one. So, of course, I couldn't read the same books at the same time as she did, but when she was coming home from high school and some of her friends came along for a visit, and they were sitting around and talking, discussing books, I used to be so envious that I didn't know anything about it. So, of course, I was reaching out. How much I have gotten out of the reading at the time, like okay, let me give you a book like *Les Misérables*. I could understand that because it was about – from the historical point of view, I could understand. The social nuances of the book, I don't think that I understood then as much as I can understand now. Now, if they were, let's say, if they were discussing *The Bauhaus*, Ibsen, it was beyond me. And, I took it, and I looked it, and I read it for the fact that I wanted to get acquainted with it, but with how much I had gotten, I don't remember. I still read *Anna Karenina* and Tolstoy, you know, and some of it I have gotten. When I sat and listened to the conversations, it kind of made a little more sense. My problem was that I did not read the book before the discussions. I had read the book after the discussions. So, therefore, I could only apply just so much what I overheard and no more. I mean, and don't forget that it's not like right now, I would open a book and it would be quite clear to me, you know? Basically those days were – what interested me was the story and the people involved and the plot. But, in between the lines, how much I have seen there, I don't think I did.

Q: Would she talk about books with you? Was she patient with you?

A: No. No. She only had friends… She wasn't – you see, when she was ready to go to high school, there was no high school in our town. So, she had to go out of town to a larger city, to Radom. There were private schools in Radom, and there was like a federal school in Radom. That was the Gymnasium Chalubinskiego was the number one school in Radom. And in order to get into that school, you had to be a very excellent student. So, when she came – and they were accepting I don't remember 25 or 30 students annually – the school was predominately for local people from the city, and it was a non-Jewish school. So, the number of Jews was limited. You had to go through an exam, entrance exam, regardless of how good a student you were, you still had to have an entrance exam, entry exam? Whatever. So, when Mother brought her for the exam in Radom, Mother was nervous, not my sister, because Mother knew that she's not going to pass it. Not only being from out of town, but being Jewish, there is no place where she can take her. So, that was like in June, early June and the results were like…

Q: What year was that?

A: 1937, no 1935. She six grades of elementary school – somewhere around there. So, Mother took her for the exam, and a few weeks later were the results, and the school was closed already, so what they had is they had like a blackboard on which they posted all the people who had been accepted, not alphabetically, but on the basis of how they scored in the exam, and my sister was number five, and accepted. Do you realize that achievement? Now, that was very difficult times for us. That was the time when – she must have gone in 1935 because I was in high school already in '37. When she went to school, financially, my parents weren't doing so well, and tuition was expensive. Not only that she was accepted to school, but she received a scholarship, a 50 percent reduction in tuition. So, she was really brilliant, and I love her, she's so special, she's so special. She's having health problems now, unfortunately, and she lost her husband. So, it's difficult for her, very, very difficult. But, she's a very special person, and I always tried to emulate her, always. I mean, she stood there and she was reciting poetry. I mean, she was, she was just a very unusual girl. As I told you, she was my role model. I was – if I thought of myself trying to do whatever, whatever she did, I always thought that I'm a klutz, I don't come near her.

Q: And your younger sister? Were you to your younger sister what your older sister was to you?

A: No. No, different, because I didn't want to have anything to do with my little sister, not even use her for anything. She was too young. You know, there was – here it was like the difference in age was two years. There, it's almost four, and you know, we were little kids, and she kind of – I felt that she belongs with the sissies. I wanted to be what my other sister was. So, we kind of treated her like the baby in the family, you know. To play with her, play games and do things, you know, whenever she wants. She always had such a curiosity for things. Renia was an unbelievable person. When it came to learning about any little thing, nothing missed her ear or eye. And also the one thing about Renia was, when she heard a new expression, she put it to use immediately. We used to laugh at her because sometimes she couldn't say it properly. So, she used the word, but it was kind of, the word that she wanted to use, she kind of changed it around. I don't mean by changing it around, it's like, let's say, a child would say instead of a napkin, they would say "napik" or whatever, you know, this kind of a thing. They will leave out one syllable or whatever because, you know, it's either difficult for them to say it, or is it because they didn't hear the exact thing. But every word that was new to her, she used it immediately. What was the word that we used to make so much fun of her? I can't remember right now. It may come back to me. It was a – it had to do with intellect, and the way she used it was very, very funny. I just don't remember right now. I should've asked her.

Q: You describe, and when you talk about everybody, there's a kind of security about your household and your family for you. Is that accurate, that sense that you were very grounded in a family that supported you and…?

A: We were a very close-knit family. Even as much as Father was away, but when he was around, as I said, he was a typical head of the family. He cared, he provided for the family, he did things with the family. But I would say that now that I am a parent and I am a grandparent and I can observe how people behave at certain stages in their life, that I can see that with the exception of the present generation, where both parents are on jobs and are away from home, where both parents are involved in the actual running of the household. In the olden days, the father was not too involved with the children. Maybe if we had boys in the family, it would have been different. I don't know. I don't know. I may be wrong. I may be right. You know, maybe there would be a different tie. As a matter of a fact, I didn't mention it to you, but my parents had four children. The first born was a boy, and he was a very bright boy. He was four years old when my father went on a trip to the East, I mean to – you know, for the job, how you say on his duties on the job, and he took sick, and Mother received a telegram that Father was sick and he's in the hospital. So, she left the maid with the baby and she told the maid to take the baby, get on the train and go to my grandmother's – Grandmother lived only 30 kilometers away. So, the maid – it was wintertime and the maid dressed the baby up and whatever and it was hot on the train and cold outside. What happened, I don't know, but the baby got pneumonia and a week later my mother got a telegram to come immediately back from my grandma, and by the time she got back the baby was dead. He was the first born who before even my oldest sister was born. So, I could remember seeing in my mother's purse either fresh grass or wilted grass which must have been from the grave every time she went to the cemetery, but she always used to carry a little bit of something in her purse. His name was Juziu, Jusef was his name. So, now you are asking me about closeness with Father. I don't know. Remarkable, another thing that's rather remarkable is that Mother used to say to us when we asked her about him – we were children so we were curious because there was a picture of a little boy, very pretty boy – I'm so sorry that I don't have a picture of him. Little sailor collar, little white shirt and all that. And she used to tell us and then she says that during the First World War I think he was born. No, if my sister was born in '24, he must have died in '23 or '22. It was still wartime. And Mother was with him on a train and he was asking all kinds of questions. He saw the people in uniform and the buttons and the hats and all that, and she used to – he used to ask all the questions, and there was a woman sitting on the opposite of my mother and she looked at the little boy and she says to my mother, "That boy's not going to live too long. He's too smart." And, you know, Mother repeated to us when we were a little older and we started to ask more and more questions. It must have been tragic for her. I mean, she didn't want to dwell on it, I'm sure, because she had the responsibility to her family and it was a very – it must have been a very painful and sad experience for her to go through with this. So, this is the answer. You know, God giveth and God taketh away, and you never know when.

Q: Well, why don't we take a break now?

A: Okay.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: Chris, do you remember the first time you ever heard anything about the Nazis? Was it before 1939, before the war? Did you know anything politically that was going on?

A: The only – the first time really that that I was aware of something happening was when the German Jews were arriving, and when they came to our town and, as they were coming every once in a while to our house to visit with my parents, who were trying to assist them. So, the reference that I had made before as to always referring to the people as the *Deutsche Juden*, because in the community the Jews of the community used to refer to the newcomers, to the new Jews from Germany, as the *Deutsche Juden*, to distinguish between the local Jewish population and the Jews that were coming to town. And, of course, their plight which was kind of obvious because I could see the extent of my parents' involvement, but at the same time, this was happening in Germany and Germany, in the mind of the young person, is very far away. So, there is no immediate danger inasmuch as to my parents, I'm sure that they could see the whole picture in a different way. To us, we were still at home, we were still at school, we were secure in our environment, and therefore, we didn't pay much attention, and it has never been discussed. I'm sure that my parents inasmuch as they could have known or not, would not bring it up at all. We were, I feel, maybe – I'm sure we were too young to comprehend it, and it was no use of burdening us with additional fears, because you live in a world where antisemitism was quite prevalent and we had enough to deal with the hooligans in town who used to call us "dirty Jews" and throw rocks at you on occasion whenever they could, you know, and I was accepted. I mean, my friends that I went to school with used to refer to me "theyeste shenasha" (ph), as if to say "You are ours, our own" so to say, because I was just like them. You know, I spoke the language in the same manner, and we started together and we worked together on school projects and all that, but nevertheless, on the way to school, we had to pass by the area where the factories were, and they were kind of closed in by a very big fence all around, and for about, I would say, one kilometer, there were no homes but just that huge, huge, huge fence. And on that fence there were – they used whitewash, they called that thing? – all kinds of sign, anti-Semitic signs. For example, they said, "*Be zyd*" (ph) – not to kill the Jews, but hit the Jew, or there was a sign "*Zyd to Pijawka*" – the Jew is a leach, or they used to say, "*Zydy do Palestyny*" – Jew, go to Palestine. And, you know, it wasn't pleasant. I don't know who has put, you know, all that stuff on the fences, but they were never removed. They were there all the time. But if you live in this type of environment and you expect to see it all the time, you know, on the way to school and on the way home from school, it kind of – you don't pay any attention anymore to it. So…

Q: Did your Christian friends, your Polish Christian friends, ever comment on that? That's terrible, or…?

A: No, they never commented, and we didn't even talk about it. But you know it was an aggravating kind of a thing, that a twelve year old one or a thirteen year old one, you

know, we wouldn't – it's – let me put it this way, that I could understand it better my mother's desire to plan the eventual immigration to Palestine based on this kind of a situation. This is why she insisted that we learn Hebrew, and this is why she insisted to instill in us the Zionist idea and this is why she was helpful in creating a Zionist youth movement, and we joined, and, you know, we didn't have leaders in the community, so they used to bring leaders from larger towns who were coming once a month to kind of give us a definite direction more so from a contemporary point of view rather then be lead by some adult. And, but you felt it, you felt it, and there is – there were little incidents that were kind of always there. And, I remember walking with my father. Father came and the railroad station wasn't far from our home. It was like a five minute distance, you know? So, I used to – knowing that Father was coming, I used to run to the station to kind of welcome him and walk home with him. And one time, there was – it was during the time of the depression, and the Polish workers were very unhappy because they went on strike, they weren't paid well enough, and it was a very bad situation in town. And every time something like that occurred, there was a much stronger anti-Semitic reaction because it was – somebody had to be blamed for things that went wrong. So, I remember, as we went approaching the main entrance to our courtyard, there was a guy that we knew well and Father knew well, and he was standing there and he was giving out leaflets and he was repeating "*Be zyda, be zyda*" (ph) – hit the Jew, hit the Jew. And as we came close, I'll never forget that, he took the leaflets in his hand and put them behind his back, and he already uttered the word "*Be zyda*" (ph) and he says "Ekonomiczie", as we were crossing, he says, "Ekonomiczie." As if to say, not outright hit the Jew, but hit the Jew economically, which was more of a legitimized way to say it for my father not to get offended, but he had expressed it. And…

Q: So, you were extremely young at that point?

A: Well, I was ten years old. You know, I could understand it.

Q: Do you have any recollection whether your parents thought of going to Palestine before the war broke out or this was…?

A: This was a – no, it was a plan that I'm sure that they thought a lot about it. And maybe if at the time, they would have been in a better financial situation, maybe they would have done something about it, but due to the fact that up until 1937, as I mentioned to you before, things were difficult between '33 and '37, four years, you know, that you can only plan on the things that are needed rather than the long term for the future, and then of course the war broke out so, solved all the problems.

Q: Now, you've been using the words "father" and "mother" but we haven't given them a name. So, before we go on. Let's give your father and mother their names.

A: Okay, my mother was Pola, her maiden name was Tannenblum, and she was from Ostrowiec, was *Isaac*, or Isaac in English, Laks. He was from Sosnowiec, which is in the

Polish Sląsk or Silesia as it is now in the German language. They met, I don't know exactly when, but they had a very happy life. They really had a very happy life, and we had a very warm and happy, loving family.

Q: When you describe the anti-Semitic taunts and these things on the fences, do you have a recollection that it got worse the closer the war came? Or does it appear to you to be just the same, the same stuff all the time? Do friends start moving away from you?

A: Well, my school friends were one group, and my other friends were another group. Due to the fact that I lived in Wierzbnik, which was basically the community where the Jews lived before the consolidation of the two. Very early, there was a community called Wierzbnik and there was a community called Starachowice. Wierzbnik was so to say the earlier where all Jews lived and some of the non-Jews who even were involved with the business or in city administration or in jobs, you know, but most people who worked in the factories lived in Starachowice. As a matter of fact, in Starachowice they had two streets, two main streets. One street was named *Ulica Robotnieza*, which means the street for the blue-collar clerks, and the other one was *Ulica Urzędnicza*, which was the street for the white-collar clerks, and as you passed the streets, you could see the difference in the living quarters and they were not too far apart, side by side, but in order to bring in the skilled engineers and the technicians that were needed in the factories, they had to give them something more than just the average housing. While the workers, you know, due to the fact that we were like three or four kilometers away from the factories, they settled closer to the factories so that they didn't have to travel that long of a distance. So, now, when they consolidated the two communities, we became one, and it was called Starachowice. Wierzbnik was where the Jews lived. Starachowice was – the school, when I went to high school, was Starachowice. And this is when I had to pass from home all the way, you know, three kilometers each way, and as we were getting closer and closer to school, more and more children joined the group, you know, because there was one route that we use, you know. So, actually, we were three – in my class, there were three Jews, four Jews, three boys, myself and another girl and in the class above me was another Jewish girl. School opened the first two classes of high school at the time when I was ready to go to school. And in this my mother, too, had her finger. She was also very helpful in convincing the community that it's about time that the population of 40,000, which was right before the war, should have a school of higher education, not to have to send the children away from home. So, she organized a group, you know, and they discussed it long enough, and it took two years before the school was finally opened and it was just in time for me. So, now, I have these friends from Hebrew school that are my old friends, from Wierzbnik, with whom I feel very, very comfortable, then I have my friends from high school who do not live in Wierzbnik, very few. Most of them are living near the factories because their parents are working there, and our connections are more based on our school work. You know, every once in a while in addition to homework you have projects that you have to work together on, whatever it was, whether it was in math or whether it was in social studies, or whatever. One of us got an assignment, who was in charge, and we had to kind of a create a nucleus, a group of people who were responsible

for different things and we kind of made a presentation when, let's say, a commission came from Warsaw from the National Board of Education to see the progress that we are making. Usually, they had come for accreditation and, you know, to evaluate the level of education in the schools, and we had a very wonderful school. We had a really great high school. So, I had friends from there with whom after school I had hardly contact, but it's interesting that, when I went to school, things were not so good yet at home, and I had to enter – I mean, as I said before, any high school that you applied to you had to have an exam. So, I came out, I mean, very well on my exam. I was accepted to school. I was also given a 50 percent reduction in the tuition, but my tuition was twice as high as my sister's because hers was a federal school, and mine was a private school. But I was very fortunate that the teachers and the director of the school liked me a lot, and they recommended to me for tutoring younger children. So, I went to school, and from school usually the kids were the kids of the white-collar clerks in Starachowice who were just about ready to go to high school and they needed the preparatory exam and so, I was the one who was spending like an hour twice a week tutoring them, preparing them for the exam, and I was getting paid for it. So, this in a way defrayed the cost of my education. So, it was really interesting because on the one hand I was very secure and very accepted and comfortable, but if you were to say whether I was really seeking outright to be in their company, no, and for this reason, I don't know whether I would have been very comfortable or I would have been uncomfortable, but I was well liked and respected. I am felt that I am very – I mean, with the school friends, I had never felt any anti-Semitic things directed at me personally. To the contrary, we were very, very friendly.

Q: So, the war comes. Do you recall any preparation? Did you parents say what they think was going to happen? Was it a complete shock? Do bombs go off - I mean, what happens?

A: It was very strange because we were for the new school year. And in addition to being a member of a Zionist youth group, I was a member of a kind of a scout group. It was more than a scout group. It was kind of a patriotic Polish group. I don't remember even the name, that when you entered high school, you were kind of elevated to a position of responsibility, where you had to show your love for the country and responsibility, so forth and so on. So, being already in high school, I was a member of this particular group, and I loved Poland. I mean, to me, Poland was my country. I mean, I was a great patriot. I was – to me, if you would think in terms of how much do you love the country, I mean, to feel really good and comfortable, I really loved Poland. Everything, Polish literature and whatever was Polish was the best thing in the world. There was nothing better. I really enjoyed it. So, I remember that rather than to – like, a week earlier, before school started. We were called to come to school, and I can't recall who was the person who has addressed as members of this particular youth group, and they said to us – usually we wore the uniforms during May Day parades, you know, and we represented, carrying the flag of our school, and marched in the parade. So, they told us that we have to put on the uniforms and we have to gather not far from the factories because we have to dig trenches for protection from attacks that may come from airplanes, that there may be a war and

there is a danger of being bombed due to the fact that we have these factories and that it is our duty of young people who love the country to do it. So, you know, I was so eager, you know. We all went to the place where they gave us the spades and we walk along with adults and we built the trenches and all that. Of course, they didn't drop the bombs on our town. They just threw two bombs on the railroad station. They whole town, the whole community left for the woods. Everybody was afraid that they'll bomb us to smithereens, and then I get, after the war, a *Kalendarium*, what they're called, from my hometown because I wanted to know more of what it was all about, you know. I went from childhood to adulthood and left the country. So, in the *Kalendarium,* I found out that the chief executive officer of the factory that was appointed or whatever, placed – who has gotten this position three years before the war, was a German, a spy, who not only spied for the Germans to let them know what is the operation like in this particular – because that was a whole region, not just Starachowice. There was Skarzysko-Kamienna; there was Radon; there was Pionki. They used to call it the central industrial area. So, we were just one part of that whole region, and we found out this particular guy was a German who was maybe a *Volks Deutsch*, you know? But basically he was operating with Germany, and he told them that to destroy that would be ridiculous. They needed it for their war effort. So, I found out about it, you know, like in 1980, ten years ago, when I was finally established a very comfortable contact with my hometown, because I just didn't want to think about Poland, you know? I came to the United States and what the United States represents cannot compare with any country in the world, and for this reason I kind of felt that don't forget the past, but don't live in the past. Whether it was good or whether it was bad, it just doesn't make any difference, the past is the past, and for as long as you live you have to look towards – deal with the present and look toward the future. That's all to it.

Q: So, you evacuated. You dug the ditches, no bombs came, and the whole town leaves. Now, did you – were you back at home when the evacuation happened? So, you went with your parents and your sisters together?

A: We all went, we all went into the woods, the forest, you know? And we could hear the troops fighting, and we could hear the airplanes zooming by and bombs being dropped, but we were like about eight kilometers from town, you know, in the woods, and when everything calmed down and it was quiet, we returned to town. So, we returned to town to find the situation like that. All the stores were looted. There was no food available. Homes were plundered. Whatever was, whatever was of value was taken away. Whether it was done by the Germans or whether it was done by the Polish neighbors, I don't know, but that was the situation. I remember carrying the silver in a knapsack on my back to the woods and back, because Mother gave everybody something else to carry that was important. And we came back to home and our home, since we lived – by then we had moved to a modern apartment, because the home where I grew up was an old home, and the landlord didn't want to do much anymore in the repairing it and so forth and so on. So, we moved to another apartment that was built like '37, and it was built by a Christian, by a Pole, Wierzchowski, and he occupied the upper floor, and we were living on the

ground floor, and so it wasn't really a Jewish courtyard anymore, you know, it was kind of a mix. There were some stores. I remember there was a Polish butcher who lived nearby in a small house, and I can't recollect because it was a short period of time that we lived there. So, due to the fact that we were not in a Jewish kind of – because some courtyards, they had 20, 30 families, and mostly Jewish, you know, so if the homes were plundered, you know who did it. But here, due to the fact there weren't too many, and so, we found everything in perfect order when I got home. So, there was nothing really that was broken or removed or glass broken. I'm sure that they wouldn't have dared, you know? So… Because it was not a Jewish house. It was the property of a Pole, so they couldn't break windows in order to get in or whatever. And so it was hard because there was no food available and things were difficult to get.

Q: Chris, can I interrupt you for a moment?

A: Yes.

Q: When you came back, what was your first meal in the house? Can you describe what your father asked you all to do when you first came back?

A: Well, we came back, and of course, when we were out in the woods, you know, we didn't have much food. We took some bread with us and maybe a salami if I remember correctly, but we couldn't get any food. So, it was September and we were very close. We actually stayed in an agricultural school. Basically, it was a school, and also a kind of a laboratory, research laboratory where they were trying to introduce, you know, new ways of maybe growing things. So, there were a lot of cucumbers and a lot of tomatoes in the field, which I imagine that they had been gathered and sold at the market normally, but the war broke out and the students didn't come to school, so everything was left there. So, we ate them. You know, you sit in the dirt and you ate and you don't have water to wash your hands and so forth and so on. We got back home, and we had some potatoes left in the dark cellar because this is where you kept your roots for the winter, your root vegetables for the winter, and Mother went to the dark cellar and she brought up potatoes and Father says to set the table. So, we were kind of figuring on why does he insist on setting the table. He says, "I want the tablecloths on the table. I want the china on table." He says, "I want the silverware on the table, and the napkins and lace because, just because there is a war doesn't mean that we have to eat like animals. We have to remember that we are people and we have to conduct ourselves in this manner." And, that's the kind of person that he was. That no matter what kind of a situation you encountered, first you have to always remember that you are a human being and you have to watch the way – you have to be aware of how you conduct yourself, and your behavior and there was always the priority, stressed on the importance of being civil and acting in proper manner, no matter what. So, we had our meal: that dry potato on a big plate. But everybody was happy. Father was happy. We washed the dishes afterwards. Everything was fine.

Q: Did the three of you as children find it odd, even after the meal? Or did you…?

A: No, but that's the way it always has been. I mean, there was no kitchen table. The kitchen was a working place, and in the kitchen, we had a huge table, but it was a table that had like sides all around that was used like a work space where they were kneading the bread and cutting up the meat and doing all kinds of things, and you know, and baking and cooking and washing laundry and everything. That was what the kitchen was for. The dining room was where we ate, and it was this mahogany big table with the carved legs and the carved chairs around it, and whether it was breakfast or lunch or dinner, I mean, we didn't eat in the same manner as we do in the United States. You know, breakfast was fast because we all had to go to school, and Mother packed a little lunch to take along, and dinner was usually when we returned from school. That was the main meal around two-thirty, and then in the evening was just a small bite for supper, you know. So, it was just a sandwich with cheese or whatever, but the main meal was always during the day. And, it wasn't like here in the United States when you have meat or fish every day for your meal. I mean, a lot of times you make do with whatever was available, and mind you, it's not availability depended not so much on how money you had, but on the seasons. If, let's say, there was at one time, there was one product in abundance, let's say, and then the summer there are other products in abundance, and in the fall different things, and you kind of geared your whole planning around what was available in the particular season. So, I remember, like, Cornish hens, young chickens, we used to have in the summer, and the geese and ducks were in the fall and the winter, and then for springs there were turkeys, I mean, but they were not every day on the table. We used to have like maybe twice, three times a week meat. Otherwise, it was dairy products and you had to be very, very kind of inventive in order to create meals and my mother was a gourmet cook and she really – when she entertained, it was unbelievable. When she set that table, it was fit for a king. I have this craze now – I have four sets of dishes and with stemware and with everything and different tablecloths because I have to – when I set the table it has to be – it has to have a very special touch. It's not just what's sitting there in the closet, I'll make an effort. I'll go to the back. I'll pull them out to set a certain mood. I don't do it as much lately because the kids are older, I mean, our children are older. They are out of the house. And Renia is like that, too, you know. And my daughter is like this, too, now, very much aware of what the table should be like, regardless of the meal. But, to make an attractive table all by itself makes the whole meal so much more pleasant. Whether you eat a dry potato or whether you have a gourmet meal, it doesn't matter, but it is when you enter the dining room, what you create artistically about the looks enhances the food you eat like that, too.

Q: Did you have a favorite food?

A: Not really. I loved bread up until now – bread is my most favorite thing, but not really, not really. I mean, when we were young, we didn't need food, and when we were in camp, we didn't get food. So, however, speaking of food, while we are on the subject, I remember that when we finally were making our way home after the liberation, I turned

to my older sister Hania, and I said, "Whenever I have the opportunity to cook a soup." The soups in camp were hardly – I mean, you couldn't call it soup because it was water with some _____ on the bottom, and some floating potato peels may be in it at the most. So, I used to say, "When I cook a soup, it's going to be thick that when I put a spoon into it, it will stand all on its own." That was my dream. And, Hania said to me, I remember what she said, she said, "And I'm going and I would like to have a whole loaf of bread and not to have to share it with anyone."

Q: So, did you live up to that? Is that how you cook soup?

A: Oh, I cook great soups. Bean and barley is the most favorite because it's the thickest. The spoon doesn't stand up on its own. It doesn't stand on its own, it needs support, but it's good.

Q: Chris, the first meal that you have when you come back, that meal, and the war had started, is there conversation around the table? Are you all frightened or do you feel frightened? Or, I mean, nothing?

A: I don't remember. I don't remember, but you know, we felt so secure with our parents around us. You know, we never had to worry or plan our future. You know? We were in a home where the parents supervised our activities. I mean, they planned our schooling, they planned where we go to school, and we were very obedient children because we knew that whatever our parents are planning for us, for our future, that they know what they want and what we should be like from their own personal experience. And it's not just, you know, in some cases, where there were a lot of people that were totally illiterate before the war. There were people whose literacy was very limited. Some people had two years of education, three years of education. They felt the need of education. They didn't have the opportunity. Therefore they wanted to give their children the opportunity to know more then they did. And the compulsory years of study in school, in elementary schools in Poland, was kindergarten through seventh grade. After seventh grade, you had enough. It could carry you through life, you know, and you were literate and you could read the paper, and you knew math and you knew everything. But if you went to high school, then you were only in school for six years. And, it is like the junior high schools here, that was your first year of high school education, because we went from six years of elementary schools to four years of high school and then two years of Litsonian (ph) which prepared you for the study at the university. So, if you think in terms of years of schooling, it was like 12 years from beginning to end, from grade one to entering the university, if you so desired. So, in my parents case, you know they were both educated, and education was very important to them and there was no question. I mean, there was no question whether we want or we don't want. It's like, you get up in the morning and you have to brush your teeth and wash your face and have breakfast, and so you have to study, that's it. That's part of your daily activity.

Q: So, if you're not feeling fear at that moment, when do things start changing in some radical way as far as you remember?

A: Things start changing as soon as we see the action of the Nazi military in town. In the beginning, you know, when the marched into town, nothing happened. Nobody greeted them with flowers, that's for sure.

Q: Not the Poles, not the Jews…?

A: No, because you see in areas where they had – since the borders were constantly shifting. So, whether or not, you know, after the plebiscite, this is the right word in English, as well?

Q: Plebiscite.

A: Plebiscite, thank you. Depending on where you lived, you know, once the border was drawn, whether you originally German or originally Polish, wherever you lived, you became the citizens of this particular country. So, since the borders had been shifting constantly, there were a lot of German families who, after the First World War, after the pact in Versailles, were separated from their families and so forth and so on, and remained on the new Polish territories. So, some of them spoke Polish because in their families there were Poles and there were Germans and Poles and Germans, and they were intermarried so it didn't really matter that much. But, in some cases, the people felt very strong attachment to Germany, and they con-, inasmuch as they did in Poland, and they send the children to Polish schools, they considered themselves Germans. So, when the Germans entered Poland, of course, they were more then happy to welcome them because this is what they always wanted. We lived in central Poland, so we were far removed from both influences, the Russians and the Germans and even the Austrians from the south; because we were part of that heart of Poland that Napoleon has created in a way, that *Kongrasuvka* (ph) that he called. So, this is why they came, the Germans came, marched through town and sang the songs and all that, with victorious people, came. And it took about two or three weeks before they had organized the whole thing. And they started to catch Jews in the street to do work. Actually, not so much for work as to humiliate the Jew. So, I remember, I was walking with my father in the street, and he was an elegant man, as I said before, and always proper and always neat, always neat, and he was wearing a hat and a suit and we walking on the sidewalk, and a German walks by from the opposite direction, and he says, "You're a Jew! You have no right to walk on the sidewalk. The sidewalks are not meant for the Jews." And, he pushed him. Unexpectedly – I mean when somebody attacks you like that – and he pushed him in the gutter. Really, he fell into the gutter and he was wearing glasses, and his hat fell off. He was wearing a hat not because he was religious, but that was part of that elegance of his kind of a demeanor. And his glasses fell and he felt so horrible, so humiliated, and the guy kicked him over and over again, and he wanted to pick himself up. I remember, he spoke, no, he was asked him, "*Bist du ein Jude?*" - Are you a Jew? And he said, "Yes!"

And since my father had a lot of dealings with German people, I mean, at the time he had business contacts. Before the war, he was representing an international company and the people at the time he dealt were also business people from also large companies. So, there has never been in my father's, I imagine, mind a disrespect for him being a Jew. And just from the soldier walking and at the mere fact that he was honest and said he was a Jew, to be pushed off the sidewalk into the gutter and to be kicked when he tried to pick himself up, and his glasses broke, and he was bruised on his face, and he got all dirty and everything, that was the first indication. I mean, this is for the first time that I understood what the war was all about. Up until that time, I don't think I could comprehend what war really means because the stories that I have heard from either my parents or my grandma about wars before, like the First World War, they had experienced, was basically contained in the area in which they – through which the front went through. Fifty kilometers away from the front, life has not been disturbed in any way whatsoever. Only, if you happen to find yourself in the path of marching troops or battles or whatever, that you knew that there was a war. But, in that Blitzkrieg that the Nazis created, there was no such thing as so to say limiting to one specific area or having battles in one area. They just went through the whole country - within one week, there was no Polish government anymore, and immediately the Nazi occupation took over.

Q: Did this man hurt you, as well?

A: No.

Q: He didn't touch you?

A: No.

Q: So, did you yell at him? I mean, do you have any recollection?

A: I don't remember exactly. I didn't remember whether I ran home and left my father to tell my mother maybe. You know, it is something that I only remember how hurt he was when he came in. I don't remember, maybe, I think that I was with him. But anyhow, I remember how distraught he was when he came home from being treated in such a manner. He could speak with them and converse, you know, and I am sure that he would have expected to kind of say something. But with a soldier that carries a gun in his hand and beats you and kicks you, I mean, there isn't much you can do. So, that was his first humiliation, and I think that this was an experience that made me aware that times have changed or are just about to change.

Q: Do you remember sharing this with your older sister?

A: I really don't remember. I just know that Father was so bruised and so beaten and he had broken glasses, you know. He was wearing eyeglasses, that there wasn't anything to ask about. I'm sure that everybody realized what that situation was like. Of course, we didn't

go out in the street anymore, and the *Judenrat* was formed, and they came around and confiscated valuable things from everybody's home.

Q: Did they take away your encyclopedia?

A: I don't remember. I don't remember. I don't think so. We lived already in the new apartment, and Father had a desk. We didn't have this extra room for him. So, Father's desk was placed in the living room, and I think that – I don't remember what ever happened to the books.

Q: Do you remember Germans coming in and confiscating things?

A: I remember Germans came in and looked around, and of course, you know, everybody was aware that they are coming and asking for things. They were elegant. They were not just soldiers who were coming; they were officers who were coming to different homes. And they used to look around and if they liked something, they just asked to be wrapped. I remember a friend of mine used to say - he came in and he saw that *épinière* on the table, and he says to my mother, "*Oh, das ist schoen. Bitte mir das einpacken*," as if to say, "This is beautiful. Please wrap it for me." You know? So, this is one of the sayings that I remember from confiscating things. Again, I think that due to the fact that we were not really – the second, the new apartment that we were in, since it has not been necessarily an all-together Jewish courtyard, that I don't remember the Germans coming, really coming in. But what I remember from the second apartment that we lived is the war started, there was no school for Jewish children, none whatsoever. We were all school age. And again, I'm going to bring in my parents, you don't leave children hanging around doing nothing. So, again, my mother's ingenuity, she says, "Listen, it's war. You cannot go to school. This does not mean that you're going to sit idle." Hania is older than you. In 1940, we already had a lot of Jews from large and from Lodz and from Poznan (ph), you know, from the regions that were incorporated into the Reich. And from the large cities, people were displaced and were brought to our town with children who were our contemporaries, and they were educated people, and they were sophisticated people. So, my mother, in order for me to not to kind of be my sister's student, where she would kind of do whatever she wants with me, maybe, has gotten three other youngsters who were my contemporaries, and my older sister was teaching us every day as if we were to go to a regular school, okay? When I was done with my classes – they were in the afternoon – in the morning, I was teaching younger children. And here we have in the new apartment, we already had a small kitchen table. So, while my older sister was with some student in the living room, I was sitting on the window, I remember, on the ledge. It was summertime. It was so nice and warm in the forties, and I loved the sun – and I had around the table these little kids who I taught to read and taught to write. And it was that thing that we continued, you know, to keep ourselves busy, number one, to continue with our educations, number two, and even Renia used to play with the little kids. These were not even of school age, but just to give her something to do. So, we had this kind of a

feeling of responsibility to ourselves, and to others as well. So, it was all the kids in the neighborhood and mostly children of our friends younger then us.

Q: Didn't Hania also teach Renia?

A: Yes, that's what I said. Because Hania was teaching Renia in the morning – when I was teaching my class, Hania was teaching in the morning, but I was her student. And, in the afternoon, because some of the boys who were coming to class were working, I think – you know, there was an obligatory labor that you had to submit to every day. I mean, if you were called, not every day, but there were all kinds of jobs that required on the part of the German Nazi administration that needed to be done, and the boys who were at the time 15 or 16, instead of having their fathers go and do the job, they went to work. So, we would really study later on in the afternoon when they came back from work.

Q: Okay, let's take a break.

End of Tape #2

Tape #3

Q: Did you not go out very much in those months when you were…?

A: No, we went very little. First of all, we were very busy. I mean, Mother saw to it that we were kept busy, and constructive busy, which was very important. But, we used to get together with friends, you know, and since our ghetto was not closed ghetto, it was an open ghetto, it means that part of the town where there was a large concentration of Jews was, got to be a little more crowded with the fact that there were newcomers coming through from territories that were incorporated in the Reich, and also the few who lived not really in Jewish sections were forced to move out and to move into the designated ghetto area, and this is what happened to us in the '40s. We left everything behind in the apartment because we just – instead of having a three-bedroom, three-bedroom – a four-room apartment, we move into a one-room apartment. It was large enough, you know, for us to put beds at one end and tables, and a table at the other. We kind of had some space; we were not crowded. But we still had Polish people living near us, you know. So, some sections of town were completely eliminated from Jews, but other sections with Jews and non-Jews lived together. Of course, the more people were coming in, the more we were crowded, and we had to kind of accept another family to live with us. And when you live with a family and you are limited to the space and you lose some privacy, it's all right when you were only with your own family. But when another family comes in that you don't know, that is totally strange, whose living habits are different from yours, and who are uprooted and who are strange, and it had this problem with adjustment. No matter how hospitable you are, you still have to have a certain amount of privacy, and this coexistence with strangers was a very difficult thing to overcome. Oh, it was okay. And then we find an apartment which was the last apartment before the ghetto was liquidated, which was a house on the border of – almost out of town – which was the borderline, but the end of the ghetto. And there was a property and this property was kind of a duplex. It was on the river. It was a duplex, and in one part of the house was the owner, who was Polish, on the side of the non-ghetto side, and this was kind of still considered to be part of the ghetto. So, in this house, we had a bedroom and a kitchen, and we didn't have anybody to live with us because he wouldn't allow – the Polish owner would not allow any more than just one family. So, in a way, this gave us, you know, again, a better feeling of a family unit, you know, that we had a little more privacy. But, we were gathering with our friends. Some of them had on the outskirts, like, I had a friend who went to school with me and they also were in the lumber business that was established by their grandfather. They were well-to-do people, and we used to go. They had the river, and they were, you know – because they needed the water for the processing of wood, they were – like Bentwood for chairs, you know, this was their business. So, it was really wonderful. It was secluded, and they had like a little beach area. So, this is where we used to go Saturdays, and just sit around and talk and have time, you know, with our friends to ourselves. And, Saturdays usually was a quite time, you know, and Sundays, too. So, her parents were very, very religious. So, she liked to be with us. We had this freedom. We used to sit on the beach and enjoy the sunshine and talk, and everybody was

doing something important. I remember one friend was a terrific knitter. She could knit anything in the world, and she used to sit and knit sweaters, you know, and this is the way how she was supporting herself during the war because I think she lost her mother. Her father was in Israel. They were supposed to go to Israel, and I don't know how it came about, but she was alone and she lived, so to say, with the cousins, and she was sitting always and knitting, and this is how she used to support herself. She used to make the most beautiful hand-knitted sweaters and everything. But, those days you don't have no yarn. So, you used to rip apart old scarves, and old sweaters, and caps and whatever, and make a new garment and you have to be a genius to match the colors, to come up with an interesting product, which she always did. She was wonderful. And we used to spend time, and that was our free time, you know. Again, it was always in the company of the friends with who I went to Hebrew school and who were my, so to say, also members of the Zionist youth group and we were recollecting, you know, reminiscing the wonderful days that we had. We had a leader in the youth group. At first, we had a group when we were very young; we belonged to *Hano'ar Ha't Zioni*. That was the Zionist children's group. And then, when we got a little bit older, there was a kind of another branch of the same organization, but it was more on an intellectual level, and it was called *Akiba* and *Akiba* used to be, I mean, we didn't have anyone in town who could really supervise us at this level. So, Krakow was the center or *Akiba*, and they were sending to us leaders who were coming once a week to spend time with, once a month, I'm sorry – to spend time and teach us songs and lecture and discuss Hebrew writers and Hachman Bialik and all those things. So, we – I remember one leader who was with us in 1939 and her name was Vushka Liebeskind and she was, during the war, she married Dolek Liebeskind, who was the head of the resistance movement in Krakow. So, to us she was everything in the world. We couldn't wait long enough for her, you know, from one month to the other to come. And mind you that in Auschwitz, she found us. She was in prison too. And what she has done to our spirit in one hour, in Auschwitz, when we were really – it was Yom Kippur. We were – we arrived in July and we lost completely track of time, and I don't know whether the holidays fell in September or October, but somewhere around there. I don't remember exactly. She has been in prison since 1943, and because she was the kind of a person she was, and had outside contacts due to the fact that they were part of the resistance movement in Krakow, that she had connections which allowed her to kind of move around the camp a lot freer, let's say, than a person without connections. And I understand now that she was the one who put the emphasis in the spiritual aspect of that survival in concentration camp, and from what I heard about her was that she was finding little pieces of candles that were – you know, in the beginning, there was no electricity in camp, so they used candles, or whenever they were not allowed to use electricity and they still needed in the barracks a light, you know, for the work, for the administrative work, they had the candles. So, when the candle was almost at the end, you know, it was discarded. So, from what I understand, she used to collect the pieces of candles and bring them to people on Friday night, right before the *Lagerruhe*, you know, before people were not allowed to leave the barracks. And she used to say the blessings and people – it did not make to her any difference which barracks she went to, wherever there were women – and that's what she did. And we

were already, so to say, with a noose around our necks, in such a bad situation, because it was already three months that we already arrived in Birkenau, and you know, that it was, so to say, a point where we didn't say any chance for survival or anything. And I remember we came from the ward, and a very pretty woman with a striped uniform and a kerchief around her hair, you know, her hair was cropped short. She was not – her head was not shaved like ours, but she had this and she had very good shoes on her feet, and I thought, "Well, you have to be well connected to kind of look this way when you were in camp." And she started to ask around. It was after the *Zählappel*, after we had been counted. Sometimes we had like half an hour before we were allowed to the barracks, or sometimes we were immediately forced to go into the barracks, and she says, "Are any girls her from Starachowice?" So, there were five or six of us that were members of the youth movement, and she told us who she was. Of course, we were unrecognizable at the time. I mean, from hunger and from beating and from the condition that we were and the clothes that we wore, we all looked like skeletons already and ridiculous really. So, she says, "Girls, don't worry." She says, "I'm going to visit you again," and she says, "It's late now. I must run to the barracks before they catch me after the allowed time to be outside." And, then she came. And it was the eve of Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre night. And she came with candles, and she got up on the bunk bed and the candles were lit, and nobody knew Kol Nidre by heart. I mean, we were – how could we remember? We remembered the chanting, just the melody. So, we were chanting the Kol Nidre melody, and it was kind of an outpour of a feeling for unity, because it was something that we had in common from not from this period in Auschwitz, but from another time. And, of course, we couldn't have that much time to spend with her so, she just brought the spirit of the holiday to us, and kissed and she says, "Don't give up." I remember, "Don't give up." And we parted company. And when we stopped our chanting, the barracks was divided in four sections, and the extreme left of our barracks, there was a group of women from Italy, Jewish women from Italy. And when we stopped the Kol Nidre, they started to sing "Mama Son Tanta Felice", like an expression of their longing to the life that they had been deprived of just like we. Ours was a religious expression of some thing that was meaningful and traditional. They maybe did not understand. I'm sure they were Jews. They should have been familiar, but their reaction to this chanting in a very quiet voice coming from the other side was just so overwhelming that I will never forget it. So, what I think about it is that in the worse times, when you have a little spark of normalcy, when you can't think what life is really like in normal existence, when you think in terms of the holiday and observing the holiday and preparing for it, or whatever connection you have, you know, with something that is near and dear to you, if you can create it in the most horrible situation, it still can be very, very uplifting. I shouldn't…cry.

Q: Do you know that Italian song?

A: I know it, yes, but I don't know the whole thing. I know…

Q: Can you sing a little bit of it?

A: I don't know if I can sing now after all this crying. I don't know the words. I know it goes like this: [Sings first part] I don't know the words really. [Sings on 'la']. And then it starts [Sings on 'la']. And, then it was a beautiful very beautiful song, and the word "Mama". Mama, you know, inasmuch as it starts "Mama Son Tanta Felice", which means Mama, I'm so happy, but you know when I think of this melody and when I heard it for the first time, you know, and it kind of reminds me of *Mein Yiddishe Mame* to a certain extent, it's a different mama, it's a different situation, but it's the longing for home. It's the longing for mother. It's the mother who, in my opinion, that it represents the home, and the security and everything, and this is what they really needed and this is what they wanted. So, I'll wipe my eyes.

Q: Are you okay?

A: I'm fine.

Q: So, if we can go back to the ghetto now, for… If you can explain to people, because they don't – there are different ways in which ghettos function, different ways people moved. When you have to move from your apartment that you were living underneath the gentile, the Polish Catholic, were you forced to moved out and forced to move into a particular place or did you choose the place?

A: Well, we couldn't choose much really. You see the Judenrat was formed, and then Judenrat was basically the administration of the ghetto and the people, and they were responsible for all the demands made by the Nazi authorities or whatever. Whether it was a demand for contributions or whether it was a demand for labor or whether it was – whatever the demand was. So, my father, due to the fact that he was very familiar with figures and very familiar with the German language was asked by the Judenrat to supervise the working groups that were coming daily to work. They gave him this job, you know, he was not part of the Judenrat. He was not a member of the Judenrat, but rather than to have the soldiers come every morning and catch people in the street, whoever was available and most of the people who were caught in the street where not even fit for the work that they wanted them to do. So, the Judenrat came to the conclusion that it would be much better if there was like an employment office where the authority, the Nazi authorities would come and say, "We need that many, so-and-so people tomorrow for work." And, that this number of people should be sent for the daily work and eliminate this *Lapaniki*, as they call them, that they can – *Lapać* means to drag, to drag people off the street. So, they gave my father the job. My father – they gave him a list of all the people who were registered because food was rationed, so in order to receive food you have to register with the Judenrat, whether you were a local person or whether you were a person who was brought from a different area to town. All those people had to be registered. So, the first job my father was given is to register all the people who are able to perform work. Now, in the open ghetto, there were still people conducting business, because once things had settled down there wasn't that much business. You didn't deal in extraordinary things, but you know, the guy who was selling

shoes and galoshes, as long as he had a supplier who provided the merchandise to him, he could do it, or the guy was selling sweaters or whatever. The bakery had to be run, you know, and all that. So, first of all, the Judenrat gave my father the entire list of people who were able to work, and on this basis, my father could prepare a list. Let's say there was a demand for 200 people or 100 people whatever it was, and he has arranged it in such a way that everybody had to perform the work once a week in the beginning. Assuming that you were designated to come to work on Tuesday, and either you were too busy or you didn't want to, as long as you were able to pay another person to fill in for you, it was okay. And there were – those people who didn't want or couldn't go and were able to afford it were more than happy to pay for the day's work to another person, and in most cases, the people who were filling for this person were people who were displaced, who needed the day's work, because when they went to work they got paid from the man whose place they have taken, and they have gotten a bowl of soup and some bread on the job. So, this worked extremely well, and it was calm due to the fact that Father could – what do I want to say – he communicated with them and there were no beatings and there was no chasing and there was no running, and it was calm and it was good. As a matter of fact, you know, he sometimes used to come home and say, "It's such a shame," he says, "I had so many eager people today who wanted to go and work, and there was none of demand for them to be sent." It was just – that was in the beginning, because later on the whole thing didn't matter, you know, no matter how orderly you were. But there were really people coming there every morning and sitting there waiting for someone who came in and say, "I'm not going to work today. Who's the guy who's going to be in my place and take it for the day?" It was a perfect kind of an arrangement, and it was peace and calm and wonderful, and it went on like this because the jobs were meaningless in the beginning. All they did was to humiliate the people, to get them out, the permanent people in the community, and kick them and beat them, just like the incident with my father, and just make life difficult. But when things began to kind of become more or less orderly, they came to the conclusion that they needed the Jews not just for the manual work of sweeping the street, giving the permanent people a broom to sweep or whatever to humiliate them, but they can use them performing manual work in factories. They started to make demands for labor force for the factory. So, this whole thing changed about, too, because, from that group that was trying to kind of find other people to fill for them at work, they realized what is going on in other parts of the country, where people, if they are not employed, are been resettled, taken away, that they seek themselves employment and in order to have the *arbeitskart*e, they went to work. So, there's this *arbeitskarte*, which is the certificate of employment, protected you from being deported later on. So, you know, everything was kind of a gradual change from a bad situation into a worse situation, and constantly changing because the demands were greater and greater and greater. First they took away your money, and then they took away your valuables and your furs – do you know that as a child in my picture with my two sisters, I'm wearing like a three-quarter coat that already I was growing and it was time for me to get a new coat. And then the war broke out and I still had that coat. It was very warm because it had a lining, a fur lining, that I was walking in that jacket in the street and a German soldier ripped off the fur collar of my coat, telling me that a Jew does not wear

fur. It was not a fur piece. He did not even know the lining there was like a shell would you say, right? But just by ripping off a collar of my coat… So, you know, they were imposing all kinds of things every day, every day. First, you know, that they confiscated the valuables from you. They took everything you had. Then they made you wear the armband with – the white armband with the blue star, the Star of David, and no matter how old you were, whether you were ten years old or whether you were an old person, you had to be identified as a Jew. And if they caught you without the armband and, even though for us to mix in with the Polish population wasn't so difficult because we weren't really locked in or fenced in, but nobody, nobody dared to even to take off the armband. We kind of felt that this is what we have to, and this is how we have to work, and it's going to be all right, and the Judenrat really, the people who were in the Judenrat were people who were leaders of the community before the war. They were decent, nice, elegant people who were friends of my parents, who were members of the Zionist organization, who worked together, you know, and they just assumed this responsibility to have a peaceful Jewish community, for it to continue. But you never knew, every morning was a different demand for the special assessment of funds. They came that unless the community's going to produce so and so many zlotys, you know, for whatever within 24 hours, there are going to be measures taken that everybody's going to regret. So, of course, each and every family was assessed with some contribution in order to create the funds that were demanded. So, life wasn't easy, but Father was pleased that he could occupy peacetime in a very constructive way, and he was instrumental in creating, so to say, a controlled atmosphere in the ghetto, where Jews did not have to be grabbed in the morning, you know, whether they were on their way to a morning service or running – there was no synagogue, anyhow, because the synagogue was burned on Yom Kippur day in our town. They thought that Kol Nidre night – they didn't realize that Kol Nidre was the eve before Yom Kippur, and they knew that the Jews are going to be congregated on Yom Kippur in the synagogue. So, they came in the evening hoping that the synagogue is going to be full of Jews, and torched it. But nobody was there and nobody prayed in the synagogue anyhow; everybody had their prayers in home in, you know, and gathered in private homes or in the quarters of different organizations that they had, like small little clubs. They weren't really "clubs" as we know them in the United States, but, you know, a gathering place for different organizations because there was the general Zionists and there was the *Betar* and there was the revisionists and, you know, that was the group of *Jabotinsky* and there was an orthodox group of Jews who I don't remember the name of their organization. So, you know, it was more like gathering out of sight where you couldn't be too obvious and not too many people at the same time could be found in one particular place.

Q: Do you remember approximately what year the synagogue was burned?

A: That was 1939.

Q: It was 1939, right at the beginning.

A: First Yom Kippur.

Q: So, let me go back to my question about the moving. When you moved from the house to this more modern place…

A: That was very modern by comparison with what was available. So, we moved and this apartment has been given to us by the Judenrat because they knew which homes were in the ghetto where you were permitted to live and, on the basis of how large the family was, they were so to say – it's like my father, who was running the department of supplying the labor force to the factories, there was a person who was in charge of allocating living quarters for people. So, I really don't know who was in charge, but anyhow, when we were forced to move from that apartment, we went to live in that one room which was a large room, a very large room, but it was not – it must have been a store at one time or another because I vaguely remember seeing a stove or anything like that. It was kind of – it was a large space, but nothing to it, and then when we had to share it with another family because it was such a large space, it was not a home of any kind. This is why my memories are so… not quite clear. All I remember is that it was a large space. It was our second move. It was our – we had another move yet. From there, we had to move to another one which was a courtyard also full of Jews, and there, it was all very, very hard, because we were so many families. Not just in our apartment, we always had to share an apartment with another family, but there were – every single apartment had additional people and depending on the size, you know, you were allowed to a room and then you shared the kitchen facilities or whatever. So, that was the third move, and then finally, this for the last year or so in the ghetto, this apartment on the border of the ghetto and the outside of the ghetto was available, and this is, I'm sure that it's, it has been wonderful, it has been a blessing to be able to be by ourselves, but then Mother was working, and every apartment has something that was so painful and so horrible. Mother was working with people as I told you before, and she was the one who had helped to organize the soup kitchens for the people who were coming, brought to the ghetto and they were bringing constantly people because they needed people to work in the factories. So, and there were a lot of destitute people who had nothing so, providing for them, everyone to live, was one of the most important things. Providing for them a job where they could go to the factory and even though at the time we weren't paid anything, anymore – once you went to the factory, you were not paid a penny, and by that time, everybody was anxious to have an employment card. So, nobody was willing to give the destitute people any help. So, they organized the soup kitchen, and Mother was there working every day, and one day she came home and she was sick with Typhoid.

Q: Typhoid? Typhus or Typhoid?

A: Typhus, typhus from lice. She must have been bitten by a lice working with the poor people, by a louse, and she got very, very sick. And I was always there, in no matter what situation, I was the one who was the most trained to be of assistance, and I'll tell you why. A very logical thing – my oldest sister was not home. She was away in school when

she was growing up. She left home very early at the age of twelve. So, she wasn't around home base, you know, to be taught or to observe or to learn. Renia, my little sister, was a little thing. So, I always – it seems like my parents kind of felt that I am of more help to them than anyone of us. So, I remember that when Mother got very sick and the doctor came to see her – you know, we had Jewish doctors in town and they all were friends. It's not just like – they didn't come as a doctor. They came to help you because they were doctors and they had the medical knowledge. And I remember how the doctor sat down with me and he said to me – it was like the fourth or the fifth day, and it takes like six days, twelve days from the time when you get sick until you go through the crisis. So, in the beginning, you know, he just was coming in every day to look after her and gave her whatever kind of medication he had available. I don't know. But then, towards the eighth day, he sat me down and he said to me, "It's going to be very, very difficult for your mother for the next four days, and I want you to know that you, that it's up to you how much attention you are going to pay and how much time you are going to spend with her in order to assist her and pull through this difficult period." And, he explained to me what kind of symptoms to look for, that her fever is going to get very, very high, and there is very little medication that can be acquired because, you know, it's not normal times, and he will try his very best but he doesn't know how much he can do, that I have to always be at my mother's bedside, that she does not need food, but she needs that constant presence by her side, because the fever is going to be very, very high and I have to watch her very carefully and I have to have a basin of cold water and I have to have washcloths to change her compress on her head. That was the only thing you could do to kind of bring down the temperature. And, you know, I listened. You know, somebody said to me that I am very good in doing thing, you know, the right way. I am always following instructions very carefully because what I am taught; I was always told very carefully how to proceed in doing things. So, if you follow instructions, you follow instructions. But, anyhow, this was his advice and I didn't know what to anticipate really, but I listened very carefully and I got prepared. And the tenth day was not so bad. Mother was still aware of the fact that I was around, and the doctor told me that nobody should be in the room with her, just I, and to keep the shades in the window closed so that the room is dark. It should not disturb her, so that she has a lot of sleep, because this is very, very important, but at the same time, I shouldn't allow her to sleep for too long, because this is very bad for her. Mind you, I'm only fifteen years old or sixteen, whatever – and, you know, the worst day was the night of the eleventh, the eleventh day of her sickness. When I touched her, the heat was unbelievable and she – she was kind of delirious, she didn't know what was happening, and she was talking and she was saying, "Take her away from me. I just don't like her. She is so ugly. She is so horrible with the black clothes on." I'm sitting there with the person that I love so much, and here is this horrible responsibility on my shoulders, and the doctors gave strict orders to everybody. He said, "Pull the mattress out of this room, put it in the kitchen somewhere, and stay if you want. If you want your mother to live, you have got to give her total and complete peace and quiet." It was something that I'll never forget because, if you think in terms of fighting back, you know, and having that strength to realize that this is the moment, and asking for this death to be taken away. I mean, after all, who is there in the black thing looking

horrible? You know, and that was very, very difficult – later afternoon, usually the temperature was rising. In the morning, the temperature was not as high, but as the afternoon set in it was always very, very high and it was getting higher and very bad, and I was changing her compresses and holding my hand on her hand to just give her comfort, for her to know that somebody is with her, and finally the following morning, she opened her eyes. And I could see that she feels better because for two days, she didn't even – her eyes were just almost, not completely closed, but I could see that the temperature was really getting her down. And, you know, then she got well. I felt good that I have a mother. That was wonderful, very happy, that I was capable to do the job. My sisters, of course, no doubt, were just as happy as I was, and Mother went right back to work as soon as she felt better, she resumed her obligations that was the community and the people in the community and so forth and so on. Then, more and more people had to be employed in the factories so everybody who lived in town outside of the very old and the very sick had to go to work, and Mother was working also in the factories in a department, and my little sister was working in the factory, and Hania, my older sister, and myself were working in the beginning in a brick factory because they needed brick for construction of new space for the manufacture of arms, and Father was in charge of the *arbeitsamt*, making sure that if somebody was sick and couldn't go to work, that he found someone who went to work that day, and then came the liquidation of the ghetto.

Q: Can I ask you something?

A: Yeah.

Q: You were fifteen or sixteen years old taking care of your mother. That must have been really frightening.

A: It was. It was very frightening.

Q: Who took care of you once that was over? Did anybody think about this happening?

A: No, as a matter of fact, I remember, when the doctor came and she felt better, and the doctor came and he says – as I said before, the doctor was a friend. He didn't come because we could afford the luxury of a doctor, you know. He came by because he was a friend and he wanted to assist her. So, I say to him, "She didn't eat in two days. What should I give her?" Not that we had that much food, but the food was Russian and so we have bread and we have a jam and saccharin, and Ersatz coffee and stuff like that. He says, "She shouldn't be eating anything heavy, and I know that you can not cook her soup or anything like that. I'm going to see to it that I get for you a little bit of farina, like, grits or whatever." And, he says, "And, I'll show you how to cook it, because you cannot prepare anything that she won't be able to eat." I still remember how I pulled out that little pot and he told me how much water to put it in and put it on the stove, and he measured it with a teaspoon or a tablespoon, I don't remember, and how he taught me how to prepare that tablespoon of farina. When to put it in, "When the water comes to a

boil," he says, "Put it in. Stir it. Cook it for about two or three minutes until it becomes thicker in its consistency. Let it cool a little bit, and feed your mother, and give it to her three times a day." And, then he said to me, "And when she feels a little better..." I still remember the order of the food that she was supposed to eat. He says, "And when she feels a little better, make sure that you get hold of some beets and because if you cook the beets the beet juice is going to be very helpful for her blood circulation with that." Beets are for blood, whether it was circulation or anything, to strengthen her. This is how much I remember. It was a responsibility, but it was nothing. It wasn't a burden. It was something I did with the greatest of love to make sure that Mother survived. Well, Mother was the best, in my opinion, in the world. There haven't been too many people like her who have done so much for others, and yet she was the first one to be taken away from us, and she was the first one to go to Treblinka, by some freak accident. So, what am I to tell you? Then, three years later, or a year later, when we were in camp already, my two sisters got sick with Typhus, but by then I was already experienced. Then my father got sick, and then I got sick. So, it was – I was the nurse going from one to the other, but the cases, as they were coming along, there was a lot less to work with, and there was no advice from a doctor anymore because the doctor wasn't there anymore. And, but somehow we managed, and somehow we survived. So, the ghetto was liquidated in October 1942. Up to that point, things were not the best, but things were not the worst, because when you went to work, you received some food at the factory. There was always soup served during, you know, we worked 12 hours. There were two shifts for the Jews. Normally, the factory worked on three shifts for the regular workers. The Jews were working 12-hour shifts. So, there was always food, a bowl of soup, that was served during the working hours. So, in a way, you know, you didn't have much to eat in the morning when you left for work, but somehow somewhere along the line, your soup came along and a little coffee and it was okay. It's, it's the kind of existence where you really are so limited to what you can do, and what you can say and what you can think, and it isn't like I'm going to rebel or I'm going to strike or anything. You had no choices. There are no choices. All you had to do was just kind of constantly submit to everything that is imposed on you and you have to do and do and do, and try to deal with it in a way that you don't break down emotionally or physically, because I could see that anybody who couldn't deal with it didn't last too long. They didn't have to be in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the worst experience, but even here. There were two friends of mine who came from Lodz ghetto, twin sisters, beautiful girls. One was a redhead, I mean, there wasn't a person in the world who wouldn't notice her, you know? She had the wonderful personality. She was friendly and pretty and everything, and the other was very dark – dark hair, but bright, well brought up, nice, wonderful two girls. And up until the time they were in ghetto, their parents were with them, and from the ghetto they were employed, and for one reason or another, the people – their parents – did not survive. Those two girls didn't last long at all. First of all, they came from most likely a wealthy home and therefore they didn't know how to take care of themselves. So, outside of being hungry and having very little to eat and not having their parents around to care for them, they didn't even know how to wash their underwear that they were wearing. I mean, all you had was one set. If you're lucky, you have two, right, for a change, but no matter

what, if you have one or two, we always managed somehow to keep ourselves clean. Those two girls, you could see them fade away. There was nothing. They just couldn't manage. They had each other and they couldn't help one another because they were both helpless.

End of Tape #3

Tape #4

Q: You spoke a few minutes ago, prior to telling the story of the two sisters who could not withstand what was going on, and you said people had no choices, but in some ways you really describe choices. You chose to have a certain relationship to what was happening, or didn't you? It was that you chose not to be defeated in what was going on, in so far as one could choose those kinds of things.

A: I wouldn't call it choices. I don't think that choices would be the right application in this particular case because you couldn't predict what is going to happen, not from one day to another. From one morning to the end of the day, you never know, you couldn't anticipate what is going to take place. So, I wouldn't say that, that choice is the right description of the situation. I feel that you have to have a very strong desire to live, and if you have a strong desire to live, I think that one can manage, under the most adverse condition, to live or try to kind of survive in a way that one doesn't break down and one doesn't emotionally. The worst thing was breaking down emotionally. Physically, from one day to another, we were really losing our strength and it was quite obvious, but no matter what your physical condition was if you were not outright sick, and you did not give in, but you had this feeling that you would overcome the difficulties because you want to survive, then this was, in a way, your strength that gave you hope. Hope was the most important thing because, if you had hope, you didn't breakdown emotionally. Once you broke down emotionally and you were resigned completely that life is not worthwhile living, or you would find yourself in a situation that who needs it anymore to suffer so much. Everybody that one loved is gone and to just remain alone in this world. There were many situations like such situations like this. Some people did not survive because they didn't know how to manage. Some people did not survive because they were too aggressive and for this they were punished by being killed or clobbered to death. Some people did not survive due to the fact that they were physically so exhausted that they came to the conclusion that, whether they go to work that day and drop dead on the job or whether they will not get out of bed, but quote-unquote-unquote, it was always they – what do you call it? The bunk bed or the berth or whatever that you slept in, it just didn't make any difference at all. And it was women who were older who had families whose children were taken away from them like in Auschwitz, who didn't know whether their husband survived or not, to them life was meaningless. It took a very, very strong individual really to have this very strong desire to live when it came to who had the family life or already had responsibility to a husband and children. And, it is, I think, young people like ourselves who – maybe that was that instinct of a survival, like a young puppy who is in a situation that is not familiar with and the momma dog is not around, and they have to somehow either hide or whatever to get out of the situation. Quite often I think about it, in such a way, that instinctive in a way animalistic, which is maybe not the right expression. The desire to survive, without logic, without anything, but just that instinct, that feeling that I have to manage, I have to be aware that it is a very dangerous situation, and somehow I must get out if it. So, this was very important, and then it was very important to have someone who was able to assist you, and there were

people who were willing to assist you – not because they knew you, not because they wanted to, it was just that it was – it just happened. It happened so that you were at the right place at the right time, and somebody who was right there near you who was willing to help you. And this kind of a situation we found ourselves in Auschwitz. We came in 1944, in July. By the middle of October, it was a pathetic thing to look at us. We were hungry. We were beaten. We didn't have any clothes. I worked in a detail where they took us out to a river to cut underbrush because it was the beginning of underground activities in Auschwitz and people were escaping, so in order to clear the view for the watchtowers, there was marshland, so they took us out to work there. And I still have my shoes on my feet that I came in, which were good shoes, and I remember I left the shoes – I was working in the marshes and I sunk to my feet, and I came out of it with the tops of the shoes because the bottom were so rotten already that they got stuck in that mud. And it was October, and I was strong when I came in, you know. People that were good – they were all good. There were no bad people because we really had to depend on one another so much that nobody had much, but still, if they saw you in that situation that you really needed help, they were trying to assist you. So, I remember coming back in from work and it was very cold, and somebody gave me clogs, wooden clogs, and I couldn't walk in them. They were rubbing my feet and I walked barefoot, and it was just horrible. And when we came to the barracks, somebody gave me a regular boot, which was a very good, laced up boot. It was too big for me. It must have been a man's shoe, but all she had was that one boot so she gave it to me and then somebody else gave me a high heeled pump, ladies' shoes. It's a funny story. It was ridiculous, but if you think in terms of the situation I found myself in. October, which is very, very cold, and you have to stand – it's an uphill, and you can stand with bare feet because you'll have pneumonia, plain and simple. So, I was like this, one leg up and one leg down. It was funny. We laughed, but I wasn't cold, and those days were kind of very, very bad. There was an underground activity already. The Nazi supervisors were very aware of something going on in camp, and due to the fact that there were special work details where they employed only Christian Poles who were political prisoners, they were afraid that by leaving them on their own, that they would establish a contact with the underground activities, I mean, those who were with the underground, and there's going to be an uprising. This was the time when the front was nearing, of course, because we were moved to Auschwitz from the ghetto to, at the time when the Russian forces were already close to Warsaw, but the front didn't move until later on in the fall, and for this reason, you know, we remained in Auschwitz. Here, the Nazis were afraid of the underground activities, of the Russian front approaching and everything, so they came to the conclusion that they ought to take and break up the Polish work details – work units and bring some Jews in for them not to be as comfortable and not to be able to do the work that they were afraid of, as far as uprising. We were supposed to go to work one morning and the barracks were administered by three people. There was a *Block Älteste*, and there was her assistant, and there was a *Shreiberin,* who was a secretary kind of, who was counting the people in the morning when they went to work, and counting the people in the evening, and they were all old-timers. Do you know what I mean? Old-timers is that they were brought, for example, the Czech – the two girls, the *Block Älteste* and the assistant, was from Slovakia

and their transport was, I think, the very early transport, because one of them was so horrible. She was so horrible. She was just so full of hate for everything and everyone that she was just so rude and she – the Nazis didn't have the *Aufsehers,* who were overseeing the work and who were taking, and the guards were taking us to work did not have to worry about so much about punishing us, because half of the job was done by this particular woman. I mean, she – on the one hand, you know, I can think of her as suffering so much for two and a half years prior to our arrival or two years, whatever it is, and the first group, I think, was of 500 women and very few survived. So, she must have lost everybody who dear and near to her, and therefore, you know, she was afflicting all her anger and the pain on everybody who was coming, and to be tough and rough kind of gave her the security of the job indoors. She didn't have to go to work, and the story that I have to read is kind of describing of what life was like in one day, because I called it "One Ordinary Day in Auschwitz." So, anyhow why I'm talking about it is because by then this *Sonderkommando* had uprising, one of the crematoriums was damaged, and the Nazis came to the conclusion that most of the gas chambers should – no, most of the crematoriums should be dismantled because there is – they don't – I mean, the front is so close and they didn't want to leave any evidence. And, this woman who was the secretary of the block went with a report to the main offices, because after each counting in the morning and in the evening, she had to report to the headquarters on the amount of the people who was in the barrack because food was allocated on this basis. And, usually we went to work, you know, and we had not seen her. On that particular morning, she returned immediately and she kind of walked over where we were like nine people sleeping in my section, in an upper berth, and I was like close to the end, and she pulled me and she says, "Take your two sisters and follow me and don't say a word." So, I mean, she was a Polish girl, and when we came to Auschwitz, she asked us where we are from, and I told her, and we had, knew some people – she had some friends who came to live in our town before the war, and they lived in the neighborhood. So, kind of there was a little bit of a contact right there that we had established. And she says, "Don't say a word. Take your sisters and follow me." So, I pull my sisters and I say, "Let's follow." We follow her and we come to where the main office is and there on that big square are woman, maybe a hundred, well-dressed in good garments, jackets, decent shoes, I mean not – I mean well-dressed in the sense that they had good clothes on. You know, they had a warm jacket and a warm skirt or whatever and good shoes on, and here we come in shreds, and I come with the high-heeled shoe and a combat boot, what I called it, and there was a German and she says like this, "I cannot be with you. Go join the group of the women. There is going to be – they need 20 women or 22 women…" I don't remember, it's around 20, but 21, 22, it's not important. "…to work in offices. Remember, whatever she asks you whether you know, you do know," and she says, "And, Renia's going to stay here with me. And, you go with Hania." I mean, "The two of you go." That's what she said to us. So, we go and we have a dress on. We don't have any undergarments whatsoever. In Auschwitz, we did not get any undergarments. Whatever *entlausung*, you know we went through that, how do you call it, *entlausung*, the process of getting rid of the lice, when they took you to the shower room, and they took off your clothes and dumped it in a big vat of disinfectant water and they dried it somewhere, I don't know

where, and when you came out from the shower the threw at you a garment regardless whether it was something that fits you or doesn't fit you. You know, we were running nude through the whole camp to go through to that shower room, and then of course, fortunately, you know, we managed, because we used to look at each other and kind of whoever was taller has exchanged the dress or whatever was thrown at you with a person that could wear it. And so in this respect, the whole group was aware and very cooperative; but never undergarments. At the time, when we came in, we had nothing, outright nothing. So, I'm in a dress. I can remember a long cotton dress and these shoes, and we are standing with my sister. We looked like two set of stepsisters, like Cinderella next to the stepsisters, who were always so dressed up. And, I think to myself, "How in the world are we going to get a job here?" And, that SS man who came to look for workers walks through the group. He told us to line up, you know, and we lined up and I was standing next to my sister and he's asking my sister what kind of qualifications she has for an office job and she speaks German very well, and she says that she worked in the office when we were in camp and Father was working in the *arbeitsamt*, whenever there was no transport and he couldn't manage to have all the lists for the following morning, one of us always went to assist him so that he could – you know, he was not a young man anymore. I mean, he wasn't an old man, but you know, being alone and so forth, it was very difficult. So, we kind of were acquainted with office work. So, my sister tells him yes, yes, whatever he's asking her, whether she can do this and this, and she says yes, yes, and she speaks a very fluent German, and fine. So, he tells her to go here, and he is asking. I just happened to be next to her, but there were other women before her. So, he puts one on this side, one on this side, one on this side, one on this side. Then he says to me, "Do you know how to type on a *shreibeshim*?" – on a typewriter. So I look at him, and I say, "*Ich bein eine sehr gute machinenschreiberin*." And, whatever. And, he looks at me, and he waves to go next to Hania. So, I figured okay, whatever's going to happen isn't going to matter, but I'm next to my sister and everything is okay. And, he goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, then he looks at our group and he starts counting and he says, "*Genug*." And he tells everybody go, and we all went, which *genug* means enough. So, he counted and we were 20 – I don't know 20, we were 20 or 25. Whatever we were, but this was the number because we were to replace 25 Polish political prisoners in that work group that was dealing only with property that was brought to camp by political prisoners. The political prisoners' property, whether it was a dress a sweater a hairpin, when they were taken, put in Auschwitz concentration camp and given a uniform, every little item they brought with them had to be registered and stored, so in case they were transferred to a different camp, that each and every item had to follow them or, if they died, that their property was returned to the family. So, they had to keep a very close account of the property of the women political Polish prisoners. While the property of the Jews who were brought to camp, to Auschwitz, was confiscated, and the good things were stored in Kanada, which was this unit known, you know, where they stored the stuff, and selected the good things to be sent to the Reich, including all valuables and everything, and the rest of the things were distributed to the prisoners, you know, when they ran out of uniforms. So, we are there and he's just about to march us off, and I know already but we are qualified for the

job. Now, the job is not anymore where we have been. The job is all together in a different area and very close to Kanada and we are being marched out somewhere else, and my sister Renia is not with us. And, then I see fellows standing in the back with my sister Renia, and the *Block Älteste*, the woman who was in charge of the block, and they kind of push my sister Renia and the *Block Älteste* comes running with her and she says to the man who was selecting the people for work, she says, "Please take her with you. Her two sisters are there, and she can make a very good *Lieferant* (ph)" A *Lieferant* (ph) due to the fact that there were no phones in camp, only the headquarters had phones, any messages that had to be carried between barracks were done by people who were the so-called runners between the - how do you say that? – those who, that made it possible for the barracks to communicate with the main office and other departments. But, "She's a very good *Lieferant* (ph)," and he looks at her and he sees the pathetic-looking thing and he looks at us, and he says, "Okay." And, he pounds and he marches us off. Now, we are coming to the new place to work, and there is no room for us yet because the other women whom we are replacing are still there. They have not been transported to another place and it is their job to acquaint us with the work that they have been doing. So, as we were entering, the girl who stood guard to the entrance of Kanada, a little girl whose name was Fela (ph), she saw the difference between the other women, the way what they looked like, and us, and she knew that this is like, you know, like something non-existent, because the people who worked in Kanada, they have access to food because the food was brought with the transport. So, it's not really that – it was confiscated. It was taken out of the trains. It was brought to Kanada, anyhow. So, they had good clothes and they had – so, as we were walking by she says, at break, she says, "You come to me. I've got to see you." So, we nodded our heads and we said, "Fine. We are going to come." You know, in a situation like this, when you see that somebody wants to see you, you knew that somebody wants to see you for a different reason, for an important one, let's put it this way. So, at break, we went to the barracks and by then, she had a whole crew waiting for us. She had good coats, painted with a red stripe, because if you didn't have a uniform, a striped uniform, you had a red stripe painted on the back. So, they took us like to a little enclosure. There were four women. I never saw them in my life including that little girl who stood at the gate. They dressed us with everything, panties and bras and socks and shoes and skirts and jackets, took off our numbers from the tattered clothes and put them on the new jacket, because we had to return back to the barracks that same day. There was no room for us to stay here. Well, we worked all day. We got acquainted with the job. It was a job inside, office work, "office" quote, unquote, but still it was indoors, and working indoors made a great deal of a difference, and we went back to the barracks, to the original barracks to the group from Starachowice, and when we came in nobody could recognize us, nobody. Because we looked so different. We had all these clothes and everything. So, you know what we did? We undressed and we shared our clothes. Mind you, three people – everybody had something different of a different size. We took everything that we had on and gave it – shared it with the people who were in the barracks because we knew that we are going back the next morning and the girls told us, "Don't be afraid to leave those things to anyone you want to. We'll have new things for you tomorrow." They didn't know that we were going to be back and forth, but they

knew that for one week, we'll be moving around because it was a small area, you know, it was kind of a camp that was pretty much separated from the rest of the camp, and they knew that it would take about a week before the other women who were training us for the job will leave. So, that was such a blessing because within this week, in the morning, we were leaving the barracks in the worst clothes there was, and coming back in the evening, and we went through the same routine every day. And, you know, it was just the most wonderful thing. We didn't help much. The group was, I don't know how many we were, about 200, and you can do just so much, but somebody has gotten something, you know, that was helpful, and that was the most wonderful thing. There you are. Here is a woman that we don't know, that was a kind of a, you know, an acquaintance that you run into, and just a conversation with a person that you know some people that she knows or that she was fond of who were from her hometown, and that was all. I mean it was not a friendship of any kind. She was not even willing to show any kind of friendly association because, in order for her to keep her job, she was a barker is what I call her. She never hit anybody like the other one, but she barked. She was yelling and yelling and calling you the worse names in the world, but this is about the extent of her being tough. This was her toughness, and when she had this opportunity, mind you, and to be there and then to go and bring the *Block Älteste* to make sure that Renia's going to get in with us, a miracle, that's my mother watching over us, and I'm not kidding, because after the war when I returned back to Poland and I went to see my hometown to find out if there is anybody left from the family – because people were coming, maybe somebody was seeing, somebody had, and there were about twenty Jews who had come back and settled back in their homes in one area, but the Paliszewski family, with whom my parents were so friendly, with whom we had kind of always a home away from home, insisted that since they didn't see us for such a long time, that we can stay a whole day with the people, but for the night we should come to them and we should spend the night with them and they'll give us an opportunity to talk and, one of the women, I had a picture of her with me when I went back to Poland, you know, when we went to Treblinka, she went with us. That was in fact a finding mission in 1979. She said to us in 1945 – I was with my sister Hania in their home and I sat around and I could see the Christmas tree, the corner where the Christmas tree was and all the presents that they prepared for us. You know, they didn't have small children, so, you know, that whole fun of the holiday, we were their children. So, it was kind of coming back, and she says to me, "I want you to remember my children. Two days before the liquidation of the ghetto, your mother was here. She brought with her your Passover silver, and your Passover wine cups, and she said, 'I know that I cannot burden you with any property, but if you don't mind, I would like you to hold them. I know that we have almost no chance to survive, but I am willing to give my life with the knowledge that my three girls will survive the war." And, you know, since what we had in 1945, right after the war, and I feel that all the difficult situations that we went through, in moments where we really felt that it's the end, we reached a point of no return, that it was really my mother who was watching over us. It's a miracle how three young girls, with such a difference in age between the oldest and the youngest, could hold on and go through the same period, and yet survive. So, I feel that it's not only that, you know, some people say divine providence. I believe in divine providence, you

know? But at the same time, I also feel that these last words that the Paliszewski's who were her friends had heard from her were so true, and the mother went down and she brought me the silver and the wine cups, the Passover wine cups that I still have. This is the only thing I have from home, because everything else that was placed with different people are gone, and thing, you know, there were some things that they had taken that were not such a tremendous responsibility. They didn't want to take anything of value, because they figured in case they are compelled to leave their home, they shouldn't have this obligation to worry about our property. So, the warm sweaters and the coats that we left with them because, once we went to work and we were coming back to the ghetto, we met with Polish people at work, and if we knew people who were willing to take a message to them, they have seen to it that something was sent to us, even in this slave labor camp in Starachowice, even after the ghetto, you know. Even, they could, whatever they could afford to send us and assist us in any way they were very, very helpful. But you had to have willing people who took the message to them, and trust them so that they would not endanger the safety of the family. So, you had to be very, very careful, and that's the way it is. But that very night when we were in Starachowice, let me finish this – is there were about 20 Jews and five children who survived Auschwitz from my hometown, and they were coming back to town, and in the middle of the night a group of radical Poles, and there were many of them in this particular region, the NSZ, the most radical, not Communist, but fascist group in Starachowice, attacked that community, that little group of people who were there, and two of those children that survived Auschwitz were killed that night, two adults, I think – I don't remember exactly. I know that there is a record made of the amount of people who were injured, even with the names, I didn't commend it to my memory, just recollecting. I know that there were five children who survived Auschwitz and two of them were killed that very night. That was June 1945. And then they came knocking at the door at the Paliszewski's house, and they said, "Open the door." It was like two o'clock in the morning. And they said, "We know that the Laks sisters are here with you, and we want them." And, the lady of the house, who was in the other bedroom, and – because the friends were basically her young daughters, she was a widow by then – walked over to the door and she said, "How dare you to disturb my sleep. Yes, they are with me, but as long as they're under my roof you are not going to lay your hands on them, and please leave us alone." You know, they were a very respected family. I mean, they weren't just anybody. They were a very respected family. So, it was quiet and we didn't know what happened. We just knew that somebody was knocking in the middle night, demanding that we are, so to say, given to for whatever reason they wanted us. And, the following morning, one of the young women, before she went to work, went to find out what happened that night, and she came running back. She was like a ghost, as pale as a ghost, and she says, "Girls, please don't leave the house, just stay here. There is something terrible that has happened, and the people who were here looking for you have attacked that small group of Jews." And, she didn't have the exact number or anything, but "there are people and children killed, and just stay until the situation clears." And, we stayed there for the whole day, and in the evening, when she came back from work – they lived also very close to the railroad station, within walking distance. It wasn't that far away. She came – in a small town everything is close. So, she

came from work and she went straight to the station and she bought tickets for us to go back to Lodz because we just came for the day to find out what's happening, and for the train, she knew exactly when the train will be coming, and she asked the man who was – the head of *Doroszka*. You know what the *Doroszka* is? It's like a horse and buggy that you put the hood up to protect himself from – like in Central Park they have those buggies – and she placed us, when we heard the whistle of the train in the distance – she took us into *Doroszka*, covered up, took us to the train station was when the train was already standing on the track, put us in the train, and was waiting there until the moment the train started to move, to ascertain that we are safe, and that we can live in safety. And this is how I left Starachowice, and promised myself never to return. It's again, we are talking about things that we are jumping back and forth, but it's… I don't know. I think that talking about the things that are very important at certain particular moments is better then to kind of go in a chronological order that I may forget later on to speak about it. And, by the way, that job lasted from the end of October and until the middle of January, which was two and a half months, and that was two and a half months in an environment that was working under the roof, in the company of very intelligent Polish women, and after the war, I found out that 50 percent were Jews, Jewish woman under assumed Christian names, that showed you concern and care and shared with you the packages they were getting from home and created, not only a home environment for you, but a kind of an intellectual environment, as well, where after work, because we were a small group of 50, it must have been 25 women, because we were a small group of 50, we didn't have to stand and *Zählappel.* Everything was right there within this unit, which was separate and apart from anything that was going on in Auschwitz. We were only responsible for clothes and the suitcases and the pocketbooks and everything that was brought by the Polish political prisons. So, in the evening, we used to sit and discuss and talk and sing and kind of create a kind of a lighter situation, and also having a little extra food and not being outdoors working in November and December, when conditions were horrible, outright horrible, or be transported like everybody else to another camp at the time, you know, they were mostly transporting people to different camps, and us they kept until the very last moments when the liquidating completely, abandoning Auschwitz. So, in a way those two and a half months gave us self-esteem, brought us back to kind of a little bit of a normal life. We had a little bit of extra food, and we had this group of women who were not as… desperate. I mean, they were political prisoners, they suffered. They suffered. They were not treated, you know, a lot better than the Jews, but the mere fact that we didn't have to go with the command and morning count, and we didn't have the dogs, and we didn't have the – no, the SS that led us to work, no – the soldiers who were watching us, you know, and we didn't walk in the rain, and we didn't stand in the rain – that whole combination kind of gave us an opportunity to kind of become human again. Human in a sense that if you regained a little bit of your self-esteem, because you were not beaten, and you were treated like an equal and you were not called those horrible names that sounded so terrible for a 15-year-old person, to be beaten and be called a whore and stuff like this, that I wouldn't even have dared to bring it out in the presence of my parents, expressions like this, and this is what was, so to say, a daily routine. So, this kind of a thing was really a turning point that prepared us for the death

march and then for all these next six months that were not so good, but on the other hand, they were not so terrible that we gave up hope. So, you know, it's like a good month and a bad month, and a good period and a bad period, and if you combine it all together and you have this support, so to say, of someone that loves you and you love them and you are aware of the fact that you have to help each other, I think that this is a secret of survival.

Q: I don't know how long we have. I have a feeling that maybe we should stop here.

A: That will be fine.

Q: And go back when we meet again. Do you really want me to continue with the camera?

A: It's fine. Whatever you want. If you feel that it is good to continue and worthwhile.

Q: No, I think it's important…

A: I'll make myself available.

Q: …that we continue and start again with the liquidation of the ghetto, especially given the story you've told about your sense of your mother and what you learned about what she said. We need to go back there and know what happened and what that break, which was really significant for all of you, cause that really changed everything.

A: So, you want to do it right now?

Q: No, no, we won't do it now. I think that when we meet again, that's where we'll begin. Thank you very much.

A: All right. Thank you.

End of Tape #4

Tape #5

Q: Good morning again, Chris. Welcome back to Washington.

A: Good morning.

Q: What I'd like us to do is start with your – a few months before the liquidation of the ghetto. Somebody had escaped from Treblinka and came back. Can you talk about what happened?

A: Yes, of course. That was about in the summer of 1942 when transports to Treblinka were being sent en masse from Warsaw ghetto. They just started the evacuation of ghettos, and I think it was Warsaw that was the first one – the first transport. It was like, I would say, September – not September, but August 1942, when on one afternoon, we were sitting in the backyard with some friends talking, spending some time together, when all of a sudden out of the bushes, a young man appeared and he was very disheveled. He was unshaven and he was filthy, and he was very, very frightened. And when he saw us, he wasn't quite certain whether he should come out or not, but when he saw us, he somehow dared to come out and say, "*Amhat*" (ph). *Amhat* was like a password at the time for making sure that the people you're encounter are also Jews. Actually, we used to say not *amhat*, but *amhut*, with a "u". I mean like, and of course, we answered immediately "*Amhut*" to him, and this kind of got him a little relaxed, but he was still, very, very nervous and he was just so strange looking. We had never seen anybody in this kind of a condition. We asked him who he was and he started to tell us this story how he came with his parents to Treblinka, how they were brought on the transport to Treblinka, and how his parents were separated from him immediately upon arrival, how he was put to work to unload the belongings of the people that were brought to camp, and how he realized that that was the end of the road, so to say, that it was an extermination camp. So, he somehow managed after the work to get under a cattle car and he suspended himself, I mean, he went under the cattle car, got a hold of the axis – whatever – and when the train started to roll out, because the trains were bringing in people, unloading and leaving the camp site, going back for more transport, he got himself under the car and held on to the chassis and when he realized that the train was already out of the camp compound, that he dropped to the ground. It was already evening, and he remained lying there on the tracks for a while to ascertain that nobody was around, that he was not going to be pursued and he walked to the woods nearby, not knowing exactly where he was and which direction to take, and he just walked, and he walked mostly at night because during the day he was frightened. He didn't know really, you know, what kind of a situation he may be confronted with. Therefore, he walked at night which was very difficult for him to know exactly where he was going, but it didn't really matter. All he wanted was to escape, and it was, like, on the second day or the third day that he came to us and he was very hungry and very thirsty and he asked for some food. We sat there, you know, we were teenagers, and we watched him, and he himself wasn't much older. He must have been seventeen or eighteen years old, and he had that wild look on him, you know. We

knew something shocking – he must have gone through something very, very shocking. So, we went home and entered the house, and we told my parents that there is a guy there who acts like crazy, and he's telling us stories that we just don't believe. So, my parents came out and asked him to come in, and he sat down. They gave him some food to eat and then they started a conversation, and once he got into details my parents told us to leave. Most likely, they didn't want us to be aware or know exactly the details that were taking place, you know, in camps like Treblinka. So, I would say that after this encounter we kind of began to realize that something is happening, that inasmuch as living in the ghetto was so different from the normal life that we led before, and being forced to work in factories was also something that we have never planned on doing, especially forced labor. There was another aspect to our lives that was unpredictable that may come into the picture soon, and of course, within a few months which was from August to October, our town has gone through the same thing. The Nazis came to liquidate our ghetto in Starachowice; that was in October of 1942.

Q: Can I ask you something? Did your parents ask all three of you to leave, all three sisters or did Renia stay also?

A: I don't remember, because we were basically… We're friends. You know, like you live in a neighborhood so, it's summertime and you are confined always to the small apartment. You like to be outdoors especially in the summertime. You need it and you want to be with your friends. So, we were like a bunch of kids, I don't know six or seven. I don't know whether both of my sisters were there, one of my sisters was there, but this is what happened at the time, and this is how we came to know that there is a camp, an extermination camp, at Treblinka where they are gassing Jews.

Q: Do you have any recollection that when your parents asked you to leave the house, you had said to your parents we don't believe him. You knew something had happened because of how he was acting, because he was so strange, right? But given that they asked you to leave, do you have any recollection of when they asked you, you thought, "Well, maybe this is really true"? Did you talk to each other?

A: We kind of sensed something, but you really don't want to believe it, and it's maybe, you know, a mature mind can comprehend much better then a young person. And sometimes in a lot of cases, even grown ups didn't want to believe. People sometimes would say, "Well, it must have been such a shocking experience for an individual to be separated from his parents, not knowing where they are or what has happened to them that all of a sudden they lose their mind." So, you can't really tell. To us, the story was very, very strange. You know, when you believe in humanity and you believe in goodness and you are brought in a way that you have to conduct yourself properly and behave in a certain way, those things are unbelievable because things like this were never done before, even if you grew up in an environment that was anti-Semitic does not mean that you were being murdered. There hasn't been such a thing before. So, considering that we were all too young yet, one on hand it seemed crazy on the other hand, it was very real, because

the manner he ate that potato that was given to him – I mean, we shared with him whatever we had – that he was gulping it down. You could see how hungry he was.

Q: The day of the liquidation of the ghetto, do you remember what kind of a day it was? Was it cold? Was the sun shining?

A: This, too, has been a different experience for me and my older sister than for anybody else because, as I said before, we were working in a factory and that was the brick factory that we were working. Usually, there were two shifts, so it was a twelve hour working shift, and that very day, we left for work for the night shift. So, actually what happened is that like the day before, we left home, and went to work without knowing that that was the last time that we were together as family, that it was the last time that we had seen our mother, and it was the last time that we functioned as a family unit, because the night of – while we were in the factory, SS groups with collaborators from – they were uniformed Latvian soldiers – came to liquidate the ghetto. They took all the people out, chased everybody out of their homes into the marketplace, and there was a selection. The people who had employment cards were put to one side. People who were without employment cards – children, and elderly and mothers – they were put to another side, and they were beaten, of course, and those who remained in their homes who refused to leave the house were shot to death either in their beds or at home. So, everybody was out in the marketplace in the middle of the night, and my sister and myself were at work in the factory. So, actually only Renia and both of my parents were there while the action took place. So, the details that I know of what has happened at the time came from my sister Renia and from my father. The replacement for the shift on which we were did not arrive in the morning to the factory because they were still segregating people. Therefore, we had to remain in the factory for another twelve hours of work. So, we worked that day a double shift, and we didn't know what happened. We just couldn't understand, and in the morning, the factory was like on the ground floor, and on the upper levels were offices, and in one of the – in the office there was a school friend of mine, a Christian, a Pole, who lived not far in the neighborhood and he knew the Jews are working two shifts. He didn't know who was at work, and he came a little earlier and he came down and he says, "Something horrible happened in town. They are taking away the Jews." And, he looked and when I saw him, I walked over and I said, "Tell me what happened." So, he says, "Come up to the window upstairs and you will see it by yourself." The window was facing a railroad siding from where the cattle cars where standing and where the people were brought from the marketplace, and of course, it was such a shock, when I looked out the window, that I will never forget it because the people were crying, they were beaten, they were chased. You could see mothers, you know, holding their babies. You could see men carrying bundles on their backs, and for that fleeting moment, for that minute or two, whatever, because I didn't want to jeopardize his job, and he for sure, you know, wouldn't want to anyone to realize that he made it possible for me to come and look out the window. So, for that one moment, all I could see was like a chain of human bodies moving in one direction, you know, beaten and pushed into the cars, and I was trying so hard to look and see whether I see a familiar face, I couldn't see anything. I just couldn't

see, whether it was because I was so shocked, or because I was – I mean, it was too far of a distance for me to see, but just a feeling of that mass of people being driven and being pushed into the cars and listen to the cries and the moaning and it was horrible. I came back to work – you know, we worked the conveyor, like a conveyor where we were placing wet bricks on the conveyor belt and they were sent to the kiln upstairs – and I knew that something has taken place. I only hope that whatever has taken place, that it will bring us back together. That was the morning. We came after work, they never took us back to the ghetto. They took us to the camp in Majowka, and there we found Father, and we found Renia, and Mother was not around. They just couldn't find Mother anywhere. But Mother was employed in an electric plant, which at the time had it's own facility, like a little small barracks for the people who worked around there. So, we were hoping that, due to the fact that this was her place of employment, that she could have been taken to the other facility, and it took a whole week to inquire. You know, it wasn't so easy to make contact. It took a whole week to inquire who was sent where, you know, which camp, because there were three camps. There were the camps Strzelnica and then Majowka, and this was the electric plant, which eventually, you know, they took the people from the electric plant and brought them to one of the two camps. And we found out that Mother wasn't around. And talking to people afterwards, trying to find out what happened to Mother, we were told that she had a friend who was a widow and she was all by herself, and she got very hysterical because she had nobody and she was so lost, and Mother kept her company and she tried to keep her calm, and she told her "Don't worry, I'm with you. I'm with you; I'm going to take care of you." So, she took care of her and they both went to Treblinka, just to show that she died the way she did, trying to help other people. This was 1942. So, she was the first victim in the family, so to say, and I have difficulties to kind of understand why a person who has done so much good for others has been taken away from us, and she was the first victim. We came to the camp. Of course, the group was not sent immediately to the camp. We had to go through inspection. They had to check what we had on us. Not that we carried a lot to work with us, but due to the fact that my parents met that young men at the time, Mother insisted, especially since it was getting a little colder, that we wear three outer layers of clothes and good shoes that we have a good coat when we go to work because normally, she wouldn't have even thought about it. So, we came in and, of course, whatever we had, a watch or whatever, a little ring, or whatever – what does a teenager have? – it was taken away from us, and we remained with the clothes at least we had, some extra clothes to wear and we had good shoes on our feet. So, they took away the valuables from us and they placed us in different, different, in the barracks. There was barracks for men and there were barracks for women, and then the following day, they separated the group, because the people who worked in the munition factories went to the camp at Strzelnica, which was much closer to the factory, while the rest of us went to Majowka, which was a larger camp, and from there people were sent to many different places of employment, whether they needed in the steel mill, whether they were needed in the brick factory where I was in the beginning or whether in the electric plant or wherever. So, this is – we were separated. Father and I had remained in Majowka, and Hania and Renia were sent to Strzelnica, and as I mentioned to you that due to the fact that Father was running that

employment office in the ghetto, he was put in charge because he was familiar with the work in Majowka, and Hania was assigned the same job in Strzelnica. Whatever Father was doing in Majowka, she was running the office there and the work usually – I mean, the assignment of the work came from the Jewish management, came from the Judenrat which was very, very helpful because at least, you know, we had more contact with her, and it was easier to maintain the contact between one camp site and the other. So, that was the liquidation of the ghetto. It was such a sad sight. I must have been at the window for a minute or maybe for two, but to just watch that like moving bodies, you know, a group, a chain, an unending chain, and we were – I don't know whether we were five thousand Jews, or - usually it was like ten percent of the population in a small town like ours was Jewish – and Wierzbnik and Starachowice were two communities, separate communities until the consolidation. So, Wierzbnik was predominately Jewish, and I would say that there must have been, I don't know, at least five thousand Jews living in the community. Fortunately, because of the need for employment and the Jews were working free of charge, you know. There was no pay or no compensation whatsoever for work. We were magnificent cheap labor force, that a lot of people were saved from – especially those who were young and able to work, and survived due to the fact that from 1942 until 1944, until the time when they took us to Auschwitz, that we were working. And of course, the mere fact that you lived in the same community and that you knew people, Christians and in some cases, Christians who were willing to assist you on their very own, and in some cases, Christians with whom some people left valuables, and they were kind of disposing of the valuables and helping and sending to the people some extra food or some clothes or whatever they needed. So, that was very helpful because those people – those Jews were brought from large Lodz or from Plotsk or from the other places, in the beginning to our ghetto, they had nobody to assist them. They had nobody to help them. They were total strangers and they depended on the assistance of the Jewish community, but once the Jewish community was decimated, they didn't have anyone to turn to.

Q: Can I ask you something?

A: Yeah.

Q: Because I think people – I think it would be very interesting for people to understand what it was like to try and find out what happened to your mother. Do you remember who told you? Did your father tell you? Was your father the one who actually found out? Or did all four of you…?

A: No, Father was – Father definitely, Father was the one who found out. I mean, I could see – I could see how terribly, how he felt, how terribly affected he was by the loss of Mother, and due to the fact that we weren't there, you know, sometimes I thought to myself, "If we only would be there." Because when you separate men from women, and you go through a selection, I can't imagine that Renia wasn't of much help to Mother, and she kind of depended on Mother to take care of her, and Mother was taking care of

her friend, and Father wasn't even there to know what was happening, and I don't even know in what way Renia managed to be later on in camp. I don't know, and she never told me. I don't even know how this happened. I mean, it isn't like that Father was holding on to her and brought her with him.

Q: Because he wasn't there?

A: I mean, he was there, but he was on one side of the marketplace with the men, and the women were on the other side. So, every once in a while when I think about it, I feel that maybe if we were there with Hania, we kind of could have managed to get her with us. I think so. I don't know whether it was destiny. I don't know whether it was just meant to be that way.

Q: Did you get very depressed when you heard this? Did you get anguished? Did you...?

A: Of course, we missed her. And every time I think about it, I always see it in one way: that I never said goodbye to my mother. Whether I was anguished, I don't know. We were – we had to get up in the morning and go to work, and when we came back from work, we had – we just had to have a meal and go to sleep and we were lucky to have a parent, and in one way or another, in the beginning, I didn't give up hope. Somehow in the back of my mind, I was hoping that, no matter what, that Mother is going to somehow appear. We all knew – we all knew that what is happening when people are taken away from the ghettos. We all knew, but when it comes to someone who is dear and you love dearly, you have hopes that it's not – they did not – this kind of thing could not have happened to your parent or your sibling or whoever. That maybe by some chance they wound up in a camp somewhere and maybe after the war you will be reunited. From what we heard, is that she was put on the train with her friend, and everybody knew that the train went straight to Treblinka. So, inasmuch as, on the one hand, we knew what has happened, on the other hand, in my own mind, I was still hoping that a good person like her deserves to live.

Q: So, by that time, Treblinka meant something like what this person was telling you?

A: By that time, Treblinka remained a reality. I mean, it became a reality. We knew that this is the end of the road.

Q: One of the reasons why I ask you that question is because, when people in ordinary circumstances in normal life lose somebody, the time of the funeral and the mourning is a time when – people need a certain kind of time. But in traumatic situations and in situations like you were in, there is no time. So, there is no space.

A: There is no time. There is no space. There is no assurance that this is what happened, and that it happened when it did happen. But one thing was certain: when the war was over and the people who survived from the community got together and they kind of gathered

all the information that was available, everybody knew that the transport from Starachowice wound up in Treblinka. Treblinka nowadays is a very kind of very awesome place where you don't have any barracks, and you don't have any crematoriums. It's just an architectural artistic, architecturally interpretation which received the prize from the Polish government, and what it consists of is huge rocks and little rocks that are supposed to represent communities from which the people were brought for extermination, and there is a huge, huge stone – not a granite stone, but a whatever the stone is, with the carved name on it "Starachowice" and it's huge. It's almost up to my shoulder. And every time I go to, to Poland, I make my way to Treblinka with a little flower. That stone is the only thing that I have to remember Mother, just remember her and remember the people who, our neighbors and our friends and everybody else who lived around and found the same fate as she did. So, you have to make peace and you have to go on living. It's really tragic because it's not only my mother, but think of all the wonderful people who lived in the community and think of all the little children and they did not survive the war because of the Nazi madness. [pause] Then, of course, we had to be confronted with another thing. We went to work every day just like before, but the living conditions were different. As long as we were in the ghetto, we had a family life, not as comfortable as before, but still in all we were a family unit and that was very, very important. Here, we were separated. My two sisters were somewhere else, and I was with my father somewhere else. We maintained our contact, which was wonderful, and due to the fact that, as I said before, we were in our hometown and we knew the people who were involved, who were assigned to different jobs, you know, in administrating the camp, but if anything we needed very badly; they were always cooperating. But, life was all together different. We lived in barracks. The food was prepared in the kitchen. So, we had to have the meal whenever it was available. We didn't starve, not like in Auschwitz, but we certainly get enough food, but in comparison with Auschwitz, the slave labor camp, was much, much better and you kind of have to accept whatever the situation was like.

Q: Where did you eat? In the barracks, or…?

A: No, there was like a mess hall near where the kitchen facility was, and they were preparing meals for people as they were coming and leaving for work, you know? So, there was an advantage to that because Father was always waiting for me to return from work so we could have a meal together. Inasmuch there was separate area where the barracks for men were situated and the women were, it's still, you know, meals we could have together. At the time, the camp, the Nazi commandants who were in charge of the camps, were changing all the time. I don't know why, whether it was due to the war effort, or whether they were sent out to the front, or due to the fact it kind of was tied in with the munition factories, and depending on the job that they had to do, you know, that they were also in charge of the camp. We were guarded by Ukrainians, and the camp, inasmuch as it was a labor camp, was also fenced in and we had watchtowers, and the Ukrainian guards were in the watchtowers. We were led to work always guarded by the Ukrainians and brought back from the work. If the distance was a very long distance,

then they put us on trucks, and they took us to work. Otherwise, they marched us to work. Sometimes, the camp commandant was a kinder individual. Sometimes, it was a vicious individual. And in 1943, spring of 1943, a typhus epidemic broke out in the camp, and people got very, very sick, and they lost a lot of people. They didn't have enough people to send to the factories. Inasmuch as they were bringing more people from different smaller plants that they were liquidating. And I remember one day, Hania was with Renia in Strzelnica, and I was with my father and the epidemic broke out first in Strzelnica, and both of my sisters took sick, but Renia was first. And when the camp commandant, who was at the time, his name was Meir, and there was an ubershtopfuhrer (ph), who was over this camp commandant. His name was Aldoph, came in one day to Strzelnica, and they told everybody to leave the barracks, and whoever remained in the beds, they were walking with machine guns, both of them, and shooting people who did not live the beds because they were not able to get up. And the rest, they put outside and they told the people to run, and those who couldn't run were shot either shot on the spot or they were put on a truck and taken outside – outside of the camp to the woods and they were shot there in the woods, and then buried in a mass grave. And Renia was already sick with fever and Hania sent her to the laundry room where there was a lot of steam, and Renia and another friend of Renia's who was more or less her age, the two of them were told to go to the laundry room, because there nobody came in to look, and it was kind of steamy and hot and all that, and two days later, they told me to go over to Strzelnica because – after they took out the dead people, and they cleaned up the barracks, and I was told to go and take over the office in Strzelnica. Hania was sick and Renia was sick. So, I took care of the office and I took care of them. And it wasn't easy. It was not easy, but with God's help, they pulled through.

Q: Can you give us some details what you had to do?

A: Well…

Q: Did you feed them?

A: There wasn't that much food really, but it's water and I had the experience from taking care of my mother before. So, in a way, I was familiar with the routine what to do. I think Father got in touch with the Paliszewskis, and they send out some medication, and so this helped quite a bit. So, they got on their feet, and no sooner Hania returned back to work, and everything was well, I came back to Majowka, and my father took sick. So, it's from one situation into the next. So, I took care of my father and, because he was working in the office, so his quarters, his living quarters, were with the head of the administration of the camp and the barber in the camp, and my father and the man who was in charge of the kitchen, I think, there were four or five beds in that smaller room. So, if you was in the barracks, I wouldn't have been allowed to go into a regular barracks, but due to the fact that he shared this small living space with other people, they wanted to keep them apart from the rest of the camp to protect them from diseases that otherwise you were susceptible when you lived with a lot of people together. So, I took care of him, and there

was still medication left over, and that was good. And he pulled through, and I was so pleased when the crisis was over because I was more worried about him than about my sisters. And I don't have to tell you that I was the last one, right?, to get sick. I must have been already like into the fourth day of my typhus fever when Father returned to work. And I slept – we had a women's barrack, and I had a friend who was also a neighbor, and she was like ten or fifteen years older, and she was a very meticulous person, and she always told me, "I want you to be right next to me. I don't want – I don't want you to have a straw sick (ph) and I don't because the bed bugs, and their lice and everything is sitting in them. You are going to be sleeping on bare boards, just like I am, so we don't invite any problems or any diseases and this will keep out – this way we'll keep ourselves clean." Her name was Fania Hershtein (ph), and she was really wonderful to me because she kind of taught me how to survive under such circumstances, and so we had the corner bed on the upper level. But people were going to work, so there was not all the time the same person around you, and this was the only place that you could stay. They had an infirmary, but who wanted to go to the infirmary. You knew that once you are going to go to the infirmary, you'll never come out, whether it was in our camp, the slave labor camp, or in Auschwitz. So, I was there in that corner on that bed, and I remember the last two days of my sickness. I had a terrible throbbing in my head, and the pain was right here and I felt it in my temples, and I thought that my whole head is going to just break open from that pain. I was aware of what was happening because I remember what was being done to me. On the other side of the space where we slept were two sisters and they were from a village not too far away, and they were working on a different shift that Fania was working, and because I was crying that my head hurt so badly, one of the sisters was holding my – put her hands on my temples and was kind of pressing against my temples, holding it tight, and this seemed to be relieving that throbbing, that terrible pain, and I remember when she did it and I felt so comfortable, and that I felt so much better. And then I do not remember anything at all until the next day when, all of a sudden, I felt that somebody came into the barracks and pulled me out from that bed, from that spot where I slept, and put me – you see, I was like in the corner and facing the entrance to the barracks was a window, and there was also a bed down there. Somebody pulled me out from the top, because I heard yelling, "Everybody out of the barracks!" and I just wasn't in a position to get out bed. I figured whatever's going to happen most likely will happen, I figured. I didn't figure – I don't remember, but I remember that I did not leave the barracks, and somebody pulled me out and placed me somewhere else, and then I felt like straw sticks (ph) were being thrown on top of me. You know, it was like that sack filled with straw, and then I heard this German yelling, "*Aus, aus!"* That means get up, get out. And, then they came in most likely with bayonets and the rifles because I could hear above me that poking in the spaces to make sure that nobody is around, and then I could hear some poking in front of me, around me, but I didn't – nobody hit me and nobody hurt me. And, when the day was over, the following day, and I felt better and I was aware of what – I was told of what took place, that it's the same thing as in Strzelnica, that people were shot, those who couldn't run fast enough, and were taken away to be shot in the woods. I just couldn't figure out what happened. About eight years ago, a guy from Israel came for a visit to Vineland, and he was in charge of a federation

project. It was a sister city of Vineland that we were supporting in Israel, and his children were also very involved in the rehabilitation of the community. So, he was brought to Vineland to speak about what was accomplished with the money that Vineland community was sending to Israel, and he came with the chairman of the campaign here to us because, once he knew that it was Vineland and I live in Vineland, he says, "I remember Rozka Laks. I would like to see her." So, you know, when they discussed that whole idea in Israel, so he was promised that when he comes to Vineland, he's going to see me. We were sitting at the table. I had served coffee and cake, and his name is Penhurst Hoffnitz (ph). Unfortunately, he passed away three years ago. And he turns to me and he says like this, "Do you remember," he says, "during that typhus period in the camp when they came to Majowka and they told everybody to leave the barracks and you were so sick?" he says. "I came to look for my sister, and I saw you, and I pulled you off that bed and I placed you on the lower bed, hoping that you will be much safer in front of the window than somewhere in the corner hiding." Now, this revelation was something. I mean, in front of Miles and in front of the local chairman of the JA Campaign. It was such an unbelievable story. I knew that somebody had done something for me, but I never knew who the person was, and it was Penhurst, and I didn't know about it until he came to the United States. So, those are situations beyond one's control, without even knowing why they happen, how they happen, and in what circumstances they are. I don't know, I have many interpretations when I think about it. When I think about Mother and her dedication and work for Israel, and this being connected with federation and Israel, I just don't know. I really don't want to get that mystical. But, I'll never forget it. I mean this is such an eye-opener. So many people used to ask me, you know, after the war, many people asked me, "So, who was the person who did it?" I can't remember, but somebody did it, and it was Penhurst, and you know, it just came out so naturally. He says, "Do you remember?" So, when people say, "How did you survive?" Now, how do you explain what survival meant? There are no words to describe, I mean, why and how. And in what way, whether it was up to a total stranger or to a friend. When I think about it, I always feel that there must have been like an angel, a guardian angel watching over us that kept us together all three sisters throughout. I mentioned last time about Fela – Fela Berlant (ph), who made it possible for us to be transferred from Auschwitz to better working conditions. Now, Fela Berlant was a Jewish girl from home, and she didn't really know us from Adam before, and it just happened so that she made it possible to take us from the worst conditions where we were almost, so to say, reaching a point of total starvation and give us – place us – in a situation for the next three months that made us feel like human beings all over again, that gave us self esteem all over again, gave us the opportunity to kind of go on with what was meant to become – with the things that we were confronted with in the following months, and so it's destiny, maybe, or for sure.

End of Tape #5

Tape #6

Q: Chris, you were in some ways alone with your father. I mean, there were other people around with whom you were friends, but you indicated that your relationship with your father changed somewhat in the context of that camp, that in some way you got closer to him then you had before. Can you describe that relationship with how you understand what happened between you?

A: Well, Father was, so to say, the head of the family like in most European homes, and he was a disciplinarian. He was a very meticulous individual – everything had to be just perfect with him. He didn't spend much time with us when we were younger. So, basically, I only thought of him as a parental figurehead, you know, that is a parent. That we have certain responsibility as children, and he has responsibilities of a father. So, the time we spent together – I mean, the time that we experienced as children, speaking of parents were more so with my mother than with Dad. Father was away a lot from home, and when he came home he was busy also preparing the work that he was doing. And also, we were much too young for him to really be involved with us. When we got a little older, I said he was in the free time that he had with us, we were singing and we were harmonizing and we were discussing things, you know, because we were a little older, he always wanted to know what we are reading and he was kind of interested more so in our development as people rather than to give us guidance. It's Mother who did the job. And, it was during the job when we were together especially in Majowka where I was with him, that I could see him as a person, as a person who has the patience and who does care and who was loving, and who was concerned with our well-being and on occasion he mentioned Mother, I remember. But I'm sure that it must have been very painful for him to speak about it. I used to always say to him that we'll find Mother, Dad, don't worry. We'll find her somewhere. She must be somewhere. So, I don't know whether I believed in it or whether it was just that hope, but this could have kind of encouraged him to on occasion speak about it. He was very, very busy because he had a very responsible job. People were dying, and people were sick, and some people were shot, and he had to provide the work force every morning, regardless of how many people were available. It was his responsibility. So, it's not like under normal circumstances where you get up in the morning and there you go out and the people were waiting to go to work. Every once in awhile there were five missing, ten missing and he had to find them, you know? And then, of course, he had to discuss those things with the administration of the camp, the Jewish administration of the camp, and they in turn discussed it most likely with the Nazi authorities and when there was a shortage of people, people were being brought from other camps to Starachowice, to Majowka or Strzelnica. When the transports came, and a few hundred people at a time, and he had to get everything ready for the following morning because there was really, there were a few hundred people. There was really a shortage in manpower that I used to be with him in the office until very late to make sure that he concluded his work, because cross-indexing the files and putting everything in place and who arrived and from where and who was gone and, you know, it wasn't easy for just one person to do it. So, in addition to the work that I have been doing, I have been

also helping him to the extent that I could. So, I had this comfort of being around him and to really get to know him. He was just a wonderful person, and because I kind of was optimistic about Mother being somewhere in life, that we'll someday be reunited, I guess maybe it was a comfort not only for me, but for him as well. We didn't have much time for fun or anything like that, but the moments that we had together were very, very important. You also mentioned something about culture or spending culturally the time in camp. Another kind of a semi-private facility was of the dentist, where he had his equipment that he brought from the ghetto – actually from his office from before the war – and all he had really was that drill that was operated with a pedal; it wasn't electric. And a chair, of course, and he didn't fill cavities, but if you had a toothache, he pulled the tooth out and that was it. So, he had this office in one barracks, a separate area. I think it was not far from the other barracks where my father was. And next to it, he had his living quarters. So, in the evening on occasion, when we felt the need for some kind of a cultural thing, that was the best place to meet. So, we used to there to his office, and he had a friend, a very lovely lady. No, she was his wife! Right, Leona was his wife. And we used to get together and there were people who were singing, and there were people who were reciting poetry. So, on occasion we used to have like an evening of this nature. There was a fellow, I don't know where he was from, but he was – whether he had a singing voice or not, I don't know, but he was whistling "Zigeunerweisen", not singing – but to a point that every note was perfect, just from the whistling. The whole thing from beginning to end, and that was the biggest treat of all because the music you are familiar with "Zigeunerweisen"? It's a very sentimental song. "Zigeunerweisen" means gypsy airs, so actually there is a nostalgia for the freedom of being out in the open, you know, the life of gypsies. So, there is this beautiful music, there is the longing for the open spaces, and it was to me – it was just like putting myself into a dream world without dreaming of something beautiful. There was no future whatsoever. If we could not dream, or if we could not think of pleasant things, we would not have survived. Some people were thinking forever about a good meal. Some people had different things on their mind. Most people were thinking about the family they lost, and still to be able not to give up hope and to dream was one of the important aspects of survival. So, those evenings were very, very important. We couldn't do them too often. We had to be very comfortable with ourselves and knowing that whoever was in charge, the commandant, whether he was a Ukrainian – in most cases a Ukrainian – or the commandant in charge of the camp guards, I mean, that even if he were to come in, that he would not get angry and disperse, make sure that we are punished in one way or another. So, some of them came in and they just sat around and listened.

Q: How many would get into the office? Was it a big office?

A: I would say twenty, thirty people.

Q: And, it was men and women. I mean, people came from the men's barracks.

A: Right. Right.

Q: For people who don't know the gypsy air, "Zigeunerweisen", could you just sing the first couple of bars? You don't have to whistle it.

A: Well, it goes like this. [Sings on 'la'.] And so on and so on. I mean, I just love it. It's one of my favorite songs.

Q: But you haven't learned to whistle it yet.

A: No, I didn't.

Q: Do you remember, when you were sleeping, did you have bad dreams in Majowka?

A: I have bad dreams now. I don't remember, but I have the bad dreams now.

Q: You have bad dreams now about?

A: I have bad dreams now a lot of times. I wake up and I scream "Momma". I mean, that's the first thing. I usually wake up, I sit up in the bed, and I scream "Momma," but it takes me so much to bring it out that I must be going through tortures before I bring it out. Once I bring it out, then I'm awake. I dream about running away from dangerous situations. I feel I'm being chased by the Nazis. But for one strange reason, I'm always running with my two little children, with Jeanette and David as little children in my arms. I can't interpret it in any way as feeling that I have to protect my children as a parent from a dangerous situation, but basically it was my fears of the Nazis that my children did not have to be involved. It's maybe because, knowing that the responsibility of a parent is to guard your own children, so this is why I'm always running. Quite often, you know, when people in the beginning used to ask me how come I don't have any more children, in a joking way I used to say, "Because I only have two arms." If I had a few more arms, maybe I would have more children, but for running away from difficult situations when I am threatened with being in camp or being – that Nazis are always after me, I'm running with my kids, two little kids.

Q: If you don't remember dreams, were you always tired in Majowka? Did you feel as if you got rest?

A: No. You don't feel tired when you're in situations like that. You are driven. You are driven because you are driven because – actually, because you are driven physically by whoever supervisors the work because you have to make sure that everything is done on time. If you fall behind, you either punished or there is another whatever outcome of the situation – in most cases punishment or beating or whatever. And when you are young, I think that you can manage a lot easier with difficult situations than when you are older. I could see that women who were five or ten years older, no more, let's say we were fifteen or sixteen, they were twenty or twenty-five and they were already married or had a

family, and the family was taken away from them, that they did not have that drive to survive. Especially when they were alone, if they didn't know what happened to the rest of the family. For them, life was very, very difficult, very difficult, and the working conditions were very bad. People used to work in front of machines in heat that was burning through their garments. We couldn't get other things to wear. Food wasn't adequate. Bed bugs were all over. They were falling off the ceiling in the middle of the night with like parachutes. Lice were on your body and in your clothes, in the seams of your clothes – no matter how hard you tried to maintain a certain degree of hygiene, you couldn't manage. So, you tried your very best. We had like long troughs with running water in the barracks and outside of the barracks. So, during the summertime, we used to wash ourselves outdoors because it was so much better, but in the wintertime we used to bring the – I don't think that we had the running troughs in the barracks, but we had a pan of water and we used to wash ourselves and on occasion if anybody had contact with the outside, because when went to work in the factory, you met with the Christian population of the town, and there were people who maybe weren't willing to give you outright something as a gift, but they were willing to take a message to someone who was willing to help you and by getting something in return they would bring it to you to the factory. And some people even if they didn't know you at all, but they felt that if it can help you that they were willing to do it as well. So, there were all kinds of different situations. So, on occasion you had a piece of soap and so you could launder your undergarments and keep yourself clean that way. What we used to do is when we worked on the night shift in the summertime, we used to sleep outdoors instead of in the barracks during the day because – in the summertime only, not in the winter, of course, it was cold. But, we came back from work in the morning. So, we took a blanket or whatever was there on the bed and spread it out outdoors on the grass, right under the fence and we slept outdoors. So, at least we didn't have to cope with the bedbugs. It was better sleep and we got some sunshine on our bodies, got a suntan free of charge.

Q: Did it smell?

A: Smell what?

Q: The people the barracks because people could not wash very much. Was that something distinctive that you remember?

A: No.

Q: Noise in the barracks?

A: No. We had to be very quiet because once you entered the barracks, everybody was tired. Everybody had to sleep after a day's work. I mean, I used to go to sleep on occasion and if my father needed me I was always ready.

Q: Besides this woman Fenia – Fania, rather, who was helpful to you, since you have contact with your two sisters, did you see them?

A: No.

Q: You didn't.

A: Not too often.

Q: But you were able to see them?

A: Not too often.

Q: And you were separated from them for a year, two years?

A: For about a year, and then they – the situation was constantly changing depending on where they needed the labor force. So eventually, they eliminated completely the electric plant. They eliminated completely the brick factory, and they were concentrating mainly on the ammunition aspect of it, because the main production was the manufacture of shells for – anti-aircraft shells and, you know, the very large shells. So, the men worked with the big shells, and the women, you know, they had to be cut – I don't know how to say it in English – but they were placed like in a machine that was sized to the millimeter and there was like – it was turning the metal shell for the exact size to file it down to perfection, and this is was what women were doing. Also, women were working on the premises in camp, you know, cleaning the barracks, taking care of the laundry – not personal laundry, but whatever, you know, the kitchen stuff and all that, and for example, later on, when I stopped going to the factory, to the brick factory, and I was helping Father quite often, he used to send me to work wherever there was a shortage of people. I mean, I was the standby – wherever another person was needed and he didn't have it. So, this is how I was filling in, and because of that I had a very nice, very pleasant experience one time. It was like maybe two weeks before they send us to Auschwitz, an order came from the office – from the factory main office – that they needed someone who knows how to type. Father didn't have a typist on hand to send to the factory. So, he says to me, "I would like you to go because it's for a day until the find someone. They need a typist for tomorrow." So, he says, "Whatever you do will be all right. I have to send a person." So, I go with the group in the morning to work and they tell me where to go, and I come in and I enter this room and it has like in a classroom, small desks, and in front there is like a glassed in area and there is this head of the office. I don't know who he was, I never saw him in my life, in uniform you know – a Nazi – and I come in and I'm very strange and I don't know where to go, and the guard who brought me in is taking me to the front right in front of the glassed in office, and there's this huge, huge type machine, and with paper inserted in it and all that, and as I walk, I can hear like people call my name, and I turn here, there is a friend from school, there is a friend from school. I just didn't know whether it was real or not, and I come to that big typewriter and the German

comes out and he says to me do I know how to type, and I tell him yes, I do. And, he tells me that I have to prepare all this for today. So, I sat down, and fortunately he wasn't there for too long, you know, he just came to organize the work and make sure that everybody is at their desks, and I worked. I don't know how good I was or how bad I was. It was only for one day, so I never returned. But during a break, those two guys with whom I was in high school came running to me and they threw me up in the air. I mean, from happiness, they just picked me up and threw me like a ball, and they said, "You are alive. How wonderful to see you!" Now, you will ask me the names of those guys. There isn't a single name I remember. I only remember that in the very back, at the last desk in that room, was my professor who taught me Latin. I couldn't stand his guts, and I don't think he liked me either, and he wanted to fail me because I didn't like him. He was teaching history for one year and then he was teaching Latin. And every professor in school liked me a lot and they saw a potential in me, and he always looked for the negative, and he always said that I am not a sincere student. And everybody else… None of the professors where really as vindictive when it came to an exam as he was. I remember when – every once in a while he'd ask questions, especially vocabulary, new words – so, when I got up, he used to keep people for two minutes, for three minutes. He used to keep me sometimes for fifteen minutes. He kept me as long as I couldn't give him an answer. I used to come home and cry and Mother would say, "Look, the only way to overcome this is for you to be very, very prepared, not just prepared. There is nothing because if he made up his mind that he's going to fail you, you better be prepared for it." His name was Kaifash (ph), this I remember, his name I'll remember forever, and he was sitting there in the back, and I hadn't given him the courtesy to even say hello or look at him. Well, he was just awful. Even the director of the Gymnasium liked me a lot and he was so helpful in getting me tutoring jobs and everything, and everybody believed in me. Just this one he wanted to fail me. So, I don't want to say he was anti-Semite maybe he had a different – whatever. Anyhow, he was the one that I wasn't even excited to see, but with the other two fellows, it was just so wonderful. And of course after that day, I never came back to this particular place of employment because most likely it was only a temporary kind of a need for whatever it was for the job, and a week later the camp was closed completely. There was a breakout from the camp at night. People tried to escape because, once they closed the camp, we knew that we are not going to be going to work anymore. So, young people cut through the fence and cut the fence and tried to get it out, and in a very short while the watchtowers noticed it, and they threw all the reflectors in that direction and they were shooting and a lot of people were killed, a lot of people escaped, but we lived in a very wooded area where the reactionary Polish partisan groups were operating, and Jewish escapees had hardly a chance to survive, and those who were caught not only were they pursued by the Nazis and the Ukrainian guards, but the Poles hardly gave a sympathetic ear to the place of the Jews and they were sending them away if they did not turn them over to the Nazis, so a lot of people lost their lives this way. Quite a number survived. Among them was my future brother-in-law, Hania's husband, who was able to make it and he joined the partisan group and he survived the war.

Q: That's Victor, right?

A: No, Victor is my other one.

Q: That's right, I reversed them. So, they – did they know each other in the camp?

A: They were from the same town.

Q: Was that an organized breakout?

A: No. It just, of course, people knew. If – As I mentioned to you before, we lived in the same community. So, there were contacts to be made, whether contacts for extra food, or contacts for a garment, for a coat or a pair of shoes, or whatever. There were also contact with underground activities, and that *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, JOB, what they called it, the Jewish Fighting Organization, was operating at the time after the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto because this was already the end of 1943. So, they were reaching out to different camps to let the people know what is happening and not to give in and if you have any way of survival, I mean, any way of escaping from camp, that this is something that you should do, and there's no doubt in my mind that there were people who knew what was going on because even the group from Krakow that I knew – Vushka Liebeskind (ph) and her husband was one of those people that were involved with the underground activities – and their main job was sending out messenger to still existing Jewish communities, whether it was in camps or in forced labor camps or even in Auschwitz, they were trying to make contact with those people and tell them to try to escape because this is the only way, and they were very instrumental in even sending false documents if you provided for them a photograph, they send a document for you. I remember, when we were asked to send photographs to – I mean, to make sure that we have photographs for documents, and I remember somehow I managed for all of us to have photographs taken and I had given it to somebody, but it was such a short period from the time when there was the breakout at camp and two weeks later, when they put us on the train to take us to Auschwitz, that we never received the documents. When I think back about it, I'm not so sure if we would have really tried to escape. Knowing that Father is somewhere else, that he was not with us – if it was just the three of us, maybe it would have been a different situation, although for one person it was a lot easier than for three – but having Father in addition to it who, always being male was always away, a distance away, sometimes a greater distance, and sometimes a very short distance, but never together, that this would have been a good decision. And in July of 1944, they took us to Auschwitz because by then the Russian troops were already on the other side of the Vistula River and, of course, it was… by then they were liquidating most of the camps that were still in existence. Majdanek was already liberated, and the world I'm sure became aware of the atrocities that were committed in camps, and we were never told that we were going to Auschwitz, we just were loaded on trains and to an unknown destination.

Q: When your sisters came back, when Hania and Renia came back, were you living in the same barrack, the three of you?

A: Yeah.

Q: So, you were all put on a train. Were the men and women separated at that point? Your father is in another part of the train?

A: Yes. Father is in one with the men, and we are with the women.

Q: And your father is about how old at this point, because you are what? Sixteen? Seventeen?

A: No, close to eighteen by then. So, Father is, I think, Father was born in 1892? They were married – he was an adult during the Second – First World War. So, I imagine somewhere around there.

Q: So, at this point, did you …

A: He could have been what, forty-five, fifty.

Q: Well, that's almost fifty.

A: Fifty. Right. Fifty. Something like that, right.

Q: Chris, underneath what you were experiencing – you know really terrible things are happening – do you have any idea that there are other extermination camps, that people are being killed. You know in certain circumstances they get killed indiscriminately, in the hospital if they're doing a selection or liquidating, but do you have any idea in your head, or did you put that out?

A: No, it's not that we put it out. We knew that there is no way out for us anymore. And no matter where we were, whether we were in this camp or whether we were to be taken to another camp – because up to this point for whenever we were – when we were in Starachowice, whenever a group was brought from a different camp to us, they were to do exactly what we did, so we thought that this was the way, that if we are transferred to another camp, we will be taken out of the familiar environment where we had still some help from the outside, to a totally strange environment, that things will definitely get worse, but it will be again a slave labor camp. We did not know yet at this point that people who are working are exterminated. We only knew that people – those who were taken to Treblinka or those who were taken to Belzec – that those people were exterminated.

Q: You knew that?

A: Well, we knew from that man who came in 1942.

Q: Did you also have an idea where the Russians were? You mentioned a couple of minutes ago that…

A: We knew where the Russians were because there was an uprising in Warsaw, the Polish uprising, not the uprising in the ghetto, but the Polish population. They were hoping that the Russians are going to cross the river. And when we were brought to Auschwitz in July 1944, within three weeks there were a lot of Christian Poles who were brought from Warsaw to Auschwitz, and as a matter of fact, that was the first time when in there were a lot of Christian Poles in Birkenau, because up until that time they were mostly political prisoners, and they were placed, the men in particular, in Auschwitz. They were interrogated in Auschwitz. They were killed in Auschwitz. They worked in Auschwitz. Only women were in separate part of Birkenau of which I had mentioned before that we worked for a brief period, for three months. But a large group of Polish Christian women from the ghetto – not ghetto, but the Warsaw uprising was brought to Birkenau at the time, which was August, end of August into September, and from them, we found out what was happening.

Q: So, there was the uprising in the camp and clearly some kind of liquidation, and a group of you – about how many people were in Majowka that you can remember?

A: I couldn't tell towards the end. I don't really – I would say that there was either one carload of women or two maybe twice as many for men.

Q: So, there were more men in the camp?

A: Of course, there was always more men than women in camp.

Q: A significant difference, do you think?

A: No. I would say maybe women represented one-half, not one half of total, but let's say if we were to categorize a group as a whole, I would say, like, one-third and two-thirds, that kind of thing.

Q: How do you remember that day that you were put on the train to go to Auschwitz? You don't know where you're going.

A: Well, I remember it in so many different ways. I remember – I mean, I don't know what happened to other people, but I remember very well what happened to me. We were not allowed to – I mean, we're closed up and the people who tried to escape were either – some of them were killed on one side of the fence, some were killed on the other side of the fence, some were killed in the woods. And the rest of us had remained in camp, and

there was a woman whose husband worked in the infirmary, and she was with us, and they were from Plotzk or from another town. There was a husband and a wife, and he was either a doctor – he had some knowledge of medicine because he was working in the infirmary. So, I really don't know if he was a doctor or he was not a doctor. And he came to the barracks – that was thing about the slave labor camp: on occasion they allowed you to go to see the family, you know, if there was a husband and a wife, or a brother and a sister, or whatever. So, he comes in. It was like two days prior to taking the transport to Auschwitz of which we don't know anything, I mean, where we were destined to go. He comes in and he brings to his wife a vial with cyanide, and he pulls out of the pockets several vials and he says to me, "I don't know where we are going, but I know for sure that we are going to die," he says. "Now, I brought it for anyone who wants it. I am going to use it myself. I am going to give it to my wife. If you want one, you can have it." It was a little thing, you know. And I remember, I couldn't – I just – it didn't register immediately, and I thought, "What is he talking about? What do I need that for?" And, then I say, "No, no thank you. I don't want it." And it's not because I wanted to live. It's not because I knew better. It's because I knew that I cannot do away with myself if I have a father and I have two sisters. And here I had an opportunity and people did take their lives in the cattle cars on the way to Auschwitz.

Q: You saw that?

A: I didn't see it, but from the people that we met after the war, when they started to talk about this one and that one and this one. But here I was given the outright opportunity to have that little vial with cyanide in it.

Q: Do you think you actually would have taken it had you not – if your family wasn't there, if you had been alone?

A: I have no idea. I don't think so. I wanted to live. I wanted to live in the worst possible way. I was young and I never gave up the idea that somewhere, somehow there is a future for us. I believed so strongly, and I think this is what really gave us this courage to manage in the worst situations. In that world of helplessness and hopelessness, if you did not have that desire, it just – you just gave in and that was it. It – you needed courage for that. I feel that the courage that I had was from my two sisters and I think that they had this responsibility. We all had this responsibility for one another, all the time. And, it's not – it's this being together, and worrying about another, because once we got off the train in Auschwitz, when we were brought – we were told to step out of the cattle cars and we stood there on the ramp – it wasn't a big transport. It was a small group of people. And being a working unit, not a group, a transport from a ghetto that was liquidated, they most likely felt that they are going to utilize us as labor force in Auschwitz, as well. We were not destined immediately to go to the gas chamber. So, Father stepped out and his car was like the car, the last car, and ours was the first car, where the women were. So we were separated, and I still remember waving to Father, saying goodbye, and he was waving to us. It was such a strange encounter coming to Auschwitz. It was just so awful.

We were traveling for about two days. We had several stops because every time a military train had to go by and they needed the tracks, they put us on the side track in small communities. We never knew where we were until finally, we came in. We pulled into a brightly lighted area, and it was like the middle of the night or a little later, and there was always such a mist around Auschwitz because it was - you know, there was a lot of humidity. So, we couldn't see the fences or the electrically charged poles, but all we could see was the big, big light and the mist, a mist all around. The mist was kind of like in a dream. You didn't – you saw shapes, but yet you couldn't see them clearly, and not until daybreak did they take us out – I mean, they opened the doors and we left the cattle cars, and they took us to the barracks. No, before they took us to the barracks, of course, we had to go through the routine. So, we took our – all we had, like a little knapsack that they let us carry, because that's all we came with. It's not like we were coming from home like most of the transports that they brought a lot of personal belongings. We came from a camp. We didn't have much. So, it was like a knapsack or something very small where we carried a few personal things, and they brought us to this huge room, I remember, and there were the girls at one desk for registration, and then at the next desk the girls who were tattooing the number, and then there was the next desk where they were shaving or cutting hair. So, first we went through this – I mean, we went through this routine. We had to say where we came from and our names, our age, and everything, and this is how the process started. From your name, you become a number. So, they tattooed this number on my arm, and we stood all three one behind the other, and it was A14176 for my older sister Hania, it was A14177 for me, and it was A14178 for Renia. Now, after the war, we found out that the A was a new series, because the numbers were so tremendous by then, that they couldn't manage anymore. So, they introduced the A and then they introduced the B, I think, for the men, when they introduced the A for the women. We always stood next to one another. So, therefore, now if we – just in case we forget which number is ours, we have on following the next one.

Q: Did you also get a number that you had to sew on to your uniform?

A: Yes. I remember. So, this was the next stage. And I was very, very upset, and I just didn't know, and I started to cry. I started to cry and the girl who was tattooing the number held my skin tight, and she says, "I'm going to give you such a pretty number," she says, "that you'll never regret that you had it." Because, if you remember, some people had their number right here on this side of the arm, and the numbers are so big that they start at the elbow and end at the wrist, because in those days, people who were tattooing weren't experienced enough. When we came, which was still towards the end, it was July 1944, the people who – the women who worked at certain jobs, they were very, very experienced. So, this was the next thing. From there, we went to the benches where they were cutting hair and shaving hair, depending on the individual. I mean, they stood with clippers and they also had scissors, and here I am crying, and the girl who puts me down on the bench and she pushes my hair back, and she says, "Don't cry. I'm not going to shave your head. I'll just cut it short." So, my hair wasn't cut short – I mean, my hair was cut short, kind of cropped because I had very long hair. My sister was so gorgeous. She

had such beautiful waving hair. She was just such a beautiful, beautiful woman – girl, and they cut her hair short and Renia has always curly hair so whatever they did was okay. And as my older sister gets up from the bench, there was a door with a glass in it, and she walked by and she kind of put her hand on her hair and kind of pushed a wave in place, and there was a German guard right behind her. He grabbed her by the collar and he put her down back on the bench and he said to the girl who was cutting hair, "Shave it off." So, there she is. She had her hair short, and because she dared to look at herself, to see like any human being when there is a change that's coming about you, that you want to see what it looks like, so for this, she had her hair cut – I mean, shaven. Now, from there, we had to leave everything behind.

Q: I'm sorry, we have to interrupt because the tape is through. We have to go to the next tape.

End of Tape #6

Tape #7

Q: Chris, when we stopped the tape the last – a few minutes ago, you were talking about your sister who had gotten a short hair cut, and then had looked in the mirror and the SS officer grabbed her and said, "Really cut her hair."

A: Shave it.

Q: Shave it. So, she was shaved then?

A: Right. It was not a mirror. It was just like a glass in a door that was open, and you could see the reflection in it. And he grabbed her with such anger and sat her down back on the bench and he said, "Shave her head." So, her is the beautiful girl who is tall and attractive, and the hair is the crown of her, so to say, and she's completely without hair. So, we are pushed from this point into the next room which is the shower room. Now, we don't know where we are going. We heard stories about gas chambers. We never knew what they looked like. Nobody could describe what a gas chamber was like inside. We only knew stories that people are being gassed and that they are shower heads to make believe that it's a shower room. So, from this point, we are driven into that room with shower heads in it. If I remember correctly, we have to undress right then, or maybe before, right after the registration when we reached the next step. It's not quite vivid in my head, you know, and we had to be undressed.

Q: Can I interrupt for a minute? When your hair was shaved, was your bodily hair shaved also or only your head?

A: At the time only the hair, hair was cut, nothing else, and then we were without clothes, which means that either we had to undressed right before entering or maybe before the hair being cut. It seems to me right before entering. And we entered that room where the shower heads, and all of a sudden, you know, while we were inside, the cold water came from above and it was really very, very cold and we all screamed because it was just piercing through your body, and the water didn't run too long, and we forced out of this area into the next area, and there we came to a large room and there were women sitting behind a huge table with all kinds of dresses piled up on top of the table, and you were not handed a garment to wear. Things were thrown at you. So, each of us received a dress, a print dress. They did not have uniforms at the time that we arrived. I don't think they were giving out uniforms anymore. There were so much clothes that was confiscated from the transport of the arriving people who were put to the gas chambers that they didn't see any need for uniforms anymore. So, they threw dresses at us. And those were inmates, those were girls who were working there in the sauna, in that shower room. We never – as I mentioned before, size – there was never a question of whether it was your size, the right size, the wrong size. So, no sooner did we get our clothes thrown at us, if somebody was tall and had a very short dress while another person was very short and had a long dress, and someone was very skinny and had a big dress or vice versa, a

heavier women a very tightly fitting dress, that we were exchanging among one another, with each other, so that at least we made those things fit. They were smelly dresses because all they did is they took the discarded clothes and they put it in – they had such huge vats with disinfectant fluid in it. I don't think they ever washed the dresses. I think that all they did was they soaked them in that and then they dried them because I remember that the dress was kind of damp, whether it was damp because it wasn't dried enough or whether it was damp because the dampness was always there and it was lying somewhere, you know, where it didn't dry out completely. I don't know, but we didn't get any undergarments whatsoever. The only thing we have gotten was just a dress to wear and nothing else. They allowed us to wear the shoes that we brought with us. Now, in most cases, we recognize each other. I couldn't find Hania. Not only that she didn't look the way I knew her to look and to be, she was wearing a crazy print dress and because she had no hair whatsoever and she was very tall and very slim. So, it was like a pin, a long stem with a head, a small head on top. It was heartbreaking to see that transformation that only was like within a half hour no more, from such a beautiful girl that she was, so attractive and so pretty, to see such a pathetic looking creature. I mean it was just horrible. It was just horrible, my heart was breaking, and we were handed [coughs] Excuse me. We were handed like white pieces of cloth with the number that was printed on our arms, and under that white cloth with the number was a triangle. In our case, it was a yellow because it was for the Jewish prisoners. So, my number A14177, and we had to sew it on, on the garment, and the dresses also had a big, red, wide stripe on the back. From this point on, we were taken to the barracks, but all morning was basically from the unloading of the train and going through the process until we were brought to the barracks.

Q: Can I interrupt for a minute? The sauna, was it a big room, a small room, were there were a lot of people?

A: It was a big room. It was a big room. There were people in there, and the fear of the unknown when you come into something that you are not familiar with and you don't know what to expect. So, basically if you are there with other people around you, you only see that far, and nothing beyond. I don't think that it was in anybody's mind to stand there and try to figure out, you know, the size of the room or whatever it is. We were afraid as we entered. We were frightened by the blast of cold water that came on us. It stopped just as fast as it came. So, basically it was a big shock to the mind and to the body simulatenously, you know, because first you don't know what to expect and then the big shock of that icy cold water coming at you. That was the way we were brought to the barracks, and more or less on our way from the sauna to the barracks, sized up the situation – what the camp looks like. I mentioned before that we arrived and it was dark and between the mist and the lights, you really couldn't figure out where you were. In daytime, it was a sunshiny day so we could see that there were different areas fenced in, which meant that there were different sections of the camp. We were also passing by an area where there were men. A lot of people during the day when the saw others moving along the roads, they used to come close to the fences to look whether they will spot

someone who is familiar or whatever, and we were brought to the barracks, where Fela Berlant (ph) was the *schreiberen*, and she, of course, counted the group, accepted the group, made sure that everything was in order, you know, and they brought us to the designated part of the barracks that our group was to occupy, and we were told so-and-so many women to a space, and that was it. Now, there was no official introduction of what, how and when because this was a very simple thing, you know. Towards the end of the day we heard the voice of the woman who was in charge of – the assistant to the barracks' *Älteste*, the girl in charge of the barracks, her assistant, to *Zählappel*, to get out of the barracks, outside for counting, and counting was twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, before we had to return back to the barracks. In the beginning, they kept us for a whole month in a quarantine, as if to say that we were bringing some kind of disease from the outside, to protect the people who were on the inside. It was ridiculous.

Q: Were you in a separate barrack?

A: No, that whole barracks was for all the people. Some of them must have arrived earlier than – a few weeks or a few days or whatever earlier – because we were only placed in one small section, and the barracks were divided in four sections. There were bunk beds. There were aisles and bunk beds in each side. In the middle was a small stove with a pipe, and then to the sides, there were like four wings, and each wing had an aisle and there were bunk beds on both sides. So, we were taken, as we entered the barracks to the right, the first aisle. This is where the whole group was placed.

Q: So, the entire barrack was a quarantine barrack?

A: Yes.

Q: And does that mean you had to stay in the barrack all the time?

A: No, we were allowed to go outside, and we weren't working the first two weeks. We weren't working at all. We were sitting outside. There was nothing to look at, not a blade of grass growing in front. It's dust, when it was dried and it was mud that you were sinking in, because it was a clay ground, and we used to sit sometimes trying to take care of our clothes in order to get the lice out of it, because the dresses that we have gotten, inasmuch as they were disinfected, they were full of body lice. Fortunately, we went through typhus already so we were immune already at least to one disease that we didn't need. After two weeks, they took us to a place to work and there were huge rocks, and they told us to take the rocks and transfer them to the other side of the big field. So, we did, and the couples who were German inmates, German women inmates, they were beating us. They were always in charge of the working units, and hollering and cursing in language, in a kind of a language that we never heard of, we were never exposed to, you know, the names that we were called – the worst possible names. But, this wasn't, you know, you accept when you find yourself in a situation like this – to survive, people were doing all kinds of things that, sometimes to protect their own lives maybe, by being

mean, mean, bad or whatever to others, by mistreating other people, that they felt that they are going to be protected, that it will give them a certain security and that they will survive. So, I don't know the motives why certain people behaved like human beings while the others behaved like beasts, and the assistant to the *Block Älteste* was a very, very mean woman. She was beating everybody and she cursing and she was hollering and from the moment we entered the barracks, she told us, "You're never going to get out alive of here. Whoever gets out of here is through the chimneys." That was degrading, you know? And the chimneys were quite visible because there were five crematories in Auschwitz and you could see them, and you could smell the burning of the human bodies and the smoke, it was permeating the air, because in 1944, the transports were coming from all over and predominately from Hungary, and those people, most of the people, went straight to the gas chambers and to the crematorium. So, you have to kind of condition yourself to a new situation, and on one hand, you are shocked and on the other hand you are trying to kind of make peace with yourself that, well, this is the next stage, and not to give up hope, that you survived the other situations, that you are going to survive this one, as well. Yet there was – inasmuch as there was a lot more hope maybe in a way, as you were really fooling yourself to a certain extent, here you had the answers right before you that there's hardly any hope. You were hoping against yourself. I remember one night, it was a clear night and they didn't allow us to get out of the barracks right after the *Zählappel*, the counting. Normally, we had a very brief time to go to the bathroom, to visit a little bit with each other outside before we entered, but that was time that they were bringing a lot of transports and burning the people, and they just didn't want for us to be outdoors and witness too many activities. So, I remember it was a very clear night and the smoke, the dark smoke, was coming all day long. I could see it. It was the time of the quarantine yet, and we weren't yet taken out of the camp to work somewhere else, and the smoke was always there, coming out of the chimneys, and then at night you could also see fire – not the smoke so much as during the day, but you could see fire. And, you know, I was looking out this little window and I thought to myself, such little tongues of fire were escaping towards the sky, and I thought myself, "It's like human souls trying to go to Heaven." Fortunately, I didn't have – I wasn't separated upon the arrival from my sisters, and I hoped that Father, who was in good health, if he was put to work, that he's okay. So, I didn't have this immediate fear that somebody very close that we loved was burned in the crematorium, and yet it was so horrible to think, so horrible to think of how many people who never experienced life, who were either teenagers or even little children who came to this world never had a future, and it's just heartbreaking, now that I'm an adult and I am a mother and a parent, and I see how many innocent lives have been lost because of Nazi madness. It's just terrible. It's just terrible. And, this was their way of breaking you down spiritually – I mean, physically due to the fact that they didn't feed you enough, but spiritually. And also, you know, you kind of lost that feeling of – how am I going to say it – of self-worth. I mean, there was no future whatsoever. I mean, you were like a pawn in somebody's hands who was to determine whether you are going to live or whether you are going to die, and you were a pawn without committing any crime. You were not there because you committed a crime or you because you had done something wrong, or because whatever reason, but because

you were a Jew and that was the Final Solution and Auschwitz and Birkenau was the place to bring the Jews for the Final Solution. When they finally started to take us out after the month of isolation, where they called it – I'm getting upset – quarantine, and they took us to the front, outside of the camp to different places of work, we could see groups that were passing by as we were marching to work, and in some cases – among them there were women – we usually tried to communicate in passing to find out where the people were from, so that if they mentioned a familiar name, you called somebody's name from that town that you knew, and if they were among them, they answered and this is how we found my aunt who was from Radom. They were coming from the opposite direction and they asked, "Where are you from?" And we said, "Starachowice." And, she started to call our names, and she says, "Remember, I'm here, too, and I'm still alive." That was my aunt Rosha Laks from, she had the same name as I, from Radon. She survived the war, by the way. And so, there was always the unexpected, sometimes good and sometimes bad. When we were coming back from work, we had enough time to go to the bathroom. You know, the bathroom was also a barracks that, that you only were allowed a certain number of minutes at a certain time, because it was just one facility for twenty barracks that were in that particular area, and if people had diarrhea and they needed to stay a little longer, the couple was always running back and forth. You know, it was like – it really wasn't a bathroom. It was a – what do they call it in the military, those places where there are holes in the ground? I don't know what to call it.

Q: A latrine?

A: A latrine yes, but a latrine – there is a name for it. I don't remember. It will come to me eventually. So, she was running back and forth, and if any one woman needed to use the bathroom a little longer. She was hitting, outright hitting, clobbering the people with the rubber hose or whatever she had in her hand. But again, there was an advantage in this advantage because when you went to the washroom or you went to the bathroom, there was always a queue because, you know, this was your time and five minutes later was a time for another barracks, and because there were so many new transports coming at that time, 1944 in July, that we could inquire of where the people are from and whether they know anybody that we were looking for. So, sometimes people used to find cousins or aunts like in our particular case. Not that we had seen my aunt anymore in Auschwitz. It was just the one time when our paths had crossed. So, that was the advantage, inasmuch as you were beaten. Food was delivered daily to the work place, and in the evening at *Zählappel*, we were getting our bread and the coffee in the morning. We did not have individual dishes, but they had these bowls that they filled and since we always marched five abreast, five, you know, that a bowl full of food was given to one person and we had to pass it around and everybody took a gulp and passed it to the next one, so there was an orderly distribution of whatever was given in that bowl, whether it was soup or the coffee in the morning, quote-unquote, you know. God knows what they had in there.

Q: With that distribution of food, did you all decide we'll each take on sip until it's all through?

A: Right.

Q: So you talked amongst each other?

A: Not really. It was kind of an accepted thing that that's the way it should be, not to take two gulps when the other person – for the other person to be deprived of it. But distribution of food, for example, of bread was – they did *Zählappel* in the evening before we entered the barracks. And the piece of bread was mostly sawdust, and I would say a size of maybe two inches by an inch: an inch thick, an inch wide and two inches long. I wrote the story about a day in Auschwitz which I called "One Ordinary Day", and it's a very – it was a very typical difficult day, and we went to work and we worked cutting down marshes along the river to clear the view of the watchtowers because it was October already of 1944, and there were underground activities, and people were escaping and some people were successful, and some people were not, and those who were not successful were brought back to camp and there was a public hanging or they were shot or whatever, but we were cutting the marshes and it was pouring all day and we stood in *Zählappel* and got wet and went to work and even got wetter, and we stood in the mud that was coming up to our knees and the capo was in a horrible mood and the German SS men who were escorting the group with the dogs were horrible, and after returning from work, we were told to sing, and we couldn't sing. I mean, we sang but not for marching, and they wanted us to march in good step with the clay and everything on our legs. So, they sicked the dogs on us, and the dogs tore the clothes off the people who were on the outside of the columns. It was just a horrible, horrible day, and then we came to our barracks and we lined up for *Zählappel* and it is still raining and my sister Hania is in front of the column of the five girls because it was always right in front of the barracks. It was a long line, always five abreast. So, if we were marching, we were facing this way, but when we were standing in front of the barracks, there was one in the front and four people in the back. And Hania was complaining that she's dizzy and that she's not feeling well and that she has a headache and this and that. And we were counted, the food was brought, and Saranka (ph), the woman who was so rough and rude, was the one who was distributing the food. So she was placing five portions of bread in the hands of the person that was in line up front and the person in the front was to pass the bread over to the people in the back, and Hania was up front that day, and as the bread was placed in her hands, instead of turning around and passing the bread to others, she took the bread – the five portions of bread – and she brought it to her mouth. She was hungry and she had all the bread in her hand, and when I saw it I was right behind her, I started to scream. I said, "Hania, don't do it. It's not yours. It belongs to all of us." And, it wasn't a matter of not wanting her to eat my bread, but we were only three. There were two girls that were no relation whatsoever to us, and I kind of scared her so that all of a sudden, I could see that her eyes have turned like this in her head. She looked at me, and I could see how her eyes turned around and she became pale and she fell to the ground. And when I looked at her lying there on the ground with her hairless head, and by then it was already almost three months in camp where we didn't look anymore like we looked three months earlier

when we came from the camp. So, between her lying there with a shaved head and her face as, you know – without much flesh, she looked like – her face was like a skull, and I thought that she had died. So, I fell to my knees and I started to cry, and I tried to shake her, and I held her hand, and I said to her, "Please don't die." I said to her, "I'll give you my bread. I'll give it to you today. I'll give it to you every day." And she did not respond, and then the woman who was distributing the bread saw a commotion at our end and she came running and she saw what happened. So, she started to holler for someone to bring a bucket of water, and she poured a bucket of water in Hania's face. So, when Hania opened her eyes – because she basically fainted from hunger and from exhaustion and everything – and she opened her eyes and I was holding onto her hands, and she had this smile on her face, not knowing at all what has happened to her. So, I picked her up, and I propped her up, so to say. I was holding on to her from one side and Renia from the other. And at *Zählappel*, you have got to stay in line, be in perfect alignment, and inasmuch as she was rude and ugly and unbelievable, that assistant to the *Block Älteste*, she didn't say anything. She didn't reprimand us. She didn't holler. She did nothing. We just stood for the rest of *Zählappel*, and then when we went to the barracks, we all went to bed and lied down in our wet dresses. There was no way how to dry them and where to hang them, but we were nine people in that space, so we kind of cuddled together, hoping that the clothes on our bodies will be dry the next morning when we have to get up and go to work again. So, these were the different experiences. From Father we didn't hear at all, inasmuch as we were hoping that somehow no matter what, we would be able to make contact with him. People told us that there was a way of contact men, because there were always male inmates that were coming as electricians, as plumbers, to the camp. So, that if we were to know where he is, because there were different villages around. There were different factories where they employed people. That if we know exactly which campsite that he is at, that maybe there would be a chance for us to find out. While we were in Birkenau in that barrack, we couldn't know anything about Father, and we ourselves were already reaching a point where even our feelings and emotions were dying in us. Forget about everything else. You know, you have compassion for people, you try to assist others, and so forth and so on, and then you reach a point that not only your body gives up physically, but even your emotions and your feelings. That's why so many people tried to end their lives and ran to the electrically charged fences. Because if they were alone, they couldn't cope with this life anymore. That was enough for them. So, it was at a point now that there was almost no hope, and it is Fela Berlant (ph), the *schreiberen*, who went with a report to the headquarters and found out that they need clerks, office clerks, and came running and told us to follow her without a word, without too much commotion that we were able to secure a better position that brought us into a new life – a new life that we didn't even know that existed in Birkenau. So, we recovered physically, mentally, for a short duration. So, we had three months of horrible experience, and then we had about two and a half months – November, December, until January 14th – that put us back on our feet and we were able to again withstand the difficulties of the death march that followed. And this, too, was a difficult thing inasmuch as we were in a much better situation than anybody else because we had good shoes and we had a warm coat and we had gloves and we had scarves and we had hats and we had clothes on us. It

was not like the situation when we first came, the first three months, that outside of one dress, we didn't have anything. And another thing that helped us to pull through that period of the death march was that the Polish women with whom we worked had some supplies because they were always getting some food from home. So, they had a little bit of sugar that they divided between the people as we were leaving the camp, and it is the combination of snow – it was snowing, it was cold, it was terrible – but it was the snow that kept us going because no matter how tired you were, you rubbed your face with the cold snow, you were more alert, and by mixing the snow with a little bit of sugar, it gave you a little bit of energy, which was also very good. But here we had a problem with Renia because she just could not walk. She was very sleepy and we knew that no sooner will she sit down at the edge of the road – there were so many people driven at the time from every field, from the men's area and the women, so it was whoever sat down or bent over or ran into the field to relieve themselves or whatever were shot to death – and Renia couldn't walk and she started – she was delirious – and she started hallucinating. So, Hania and I grabbed her under her arms and we dragged her. As bad as the snow was, because it was very cold, it was very convenient for walking because we didn't really have – we weren't forced march and sing like when we were going out to work in the fields. We were all kind of sliding on that snow, and Renia didn't have to walk. She was just sliding along. And they brought us to a huge barn. I remember that, and the barn was – I mean, it was supposed to be a shelter, but it wasn't really a shelter. It was as huge barn where the Nazi soldiers, the SS men, could keep us contained in one area, locked in, but the boards were missing and there was no roof, you know, and the wind was howling and blowing and it was snowing. But we were kind of together for the night, and then we marched for another two or three days. And dead bodies were strewn all over the road, all along the road. It was men and women, because so many thousands of people were driven out of Auschwitz. Only those who were not able to get out of bed remained, but everybody else was just driven out of Auschwitz until, I think, about 40 kilometers from Auschwitz. They put us on a train. It was a flatbed, and it was full of snow, and we traveled from that town, I don't remember the name of it, but I know it was about 40 kilometers from Auschwitz, and they took us to Ravensbrück

Q: Let me go back to Auschwitz for just a moment. You so often express a very powerful drive to live when you describe who you were then. Were the three of you, since this was the center of your lives, I'm sure each of you had other friends or people that you knew, but I'm assuming that this is closest, that group.

A: That was a family.

Q: Were you all sharing equally in that hope, or did one of you get less hopeful and the other one pull them out? Do you have any recollection how you operated emotionally together?

A: There was never a discussion about it. It was an instinctive kind of a reaction to situation. If I was – if I was – if I could be of more help to one particular situation, I did it. If Hania was in a situation where she could be of help to the others, it was the same thing. I don't

know what was on my sisters' minds. We didn't have conversations. We had each other, the physical being. There was no conversation. I mean, on occasion, yes, when we could, when we were allowed and we were not beaten and we were not exhausted and when our mind was functioning in a way that you needed, but what you thought about basically were the immediate needs and how are you going to manage the next day, to pull through it, and in what way this is going to happen. I know that at one point I developed a boil in my leg, and they took me to the infirmary and I was in the infirmary for several days – I don't know whether it was a week or whatever – and it was a friend of my mother's who saw my name, who was working in that infirmary, who was a nurse in that infirmary, and when she saw my name and asked whether I know Pola Laks, I told her, "I'm her daughter." That she saw to it that I was returned back, when I was through, that I was returned back to the same barracks from which I came. Because normally they never send you back. They send you to the crematorium if you did not recover, and in most cases people did not recover, but due to the fact that she kind of found out that I'm the daughter of someone she knew or was fond of, that she took care of me and she sent me back to the barracks. So, I was very fortunate to be reunited with my sisters. There was a situation where my little sister disappeared completely and we didn't see her for 24 hours, and I don't even know where she was. And, then all of a sudden she appeared, but… And whenever I ask her, she says, "I don't know. I just don't know what happened, where I was." So, there was this constant fear of "are we going to be together? Is something going to happen to us that we are going to be separated? What is going to happen?" For one reason or another, whatever the situation developed good or bad, we somehow managed to remain together. It wasn't that we were so smart or that we knew how to manage. It was really without knowing, without knowing, and still I'm told today, I think it's providence. I think there is nothing else that one could really explain why things happened to us the way they did.

Q: You would not describe the three of you as having a leader in some way – that one of you was more…

A: Well, I think that we all shared a certain responsibility. On my part, I felt that my responsibility is to take care of my two sisters. I'm sure that they felt the same way about me, but there was never a division of duties or whatever. I mean, we had our portion of food that we shared, and we did not – fortunately, we were not confronted with any kind of a disease that would have separated us for a long period, only the boil on my leg, which fortunately healed fast and I was returned, but otherwise, in the three months that we were in Auschwitz – Renia was beaten once very, very badly because she dared to dip her pan into a cauldron with soup as it was delivered to the barracks. The deliverers were people who went to the kitchen and two people carried the cauldron of soup. So, she was nearby and she had a cup in her hand, and she dipped it, and she was beaten terribly.

Q: Did she have to go to the infirmary?

A: No. She was black and blue and swollen, but she didn't have to go.

Q: The day – I can't remember was it you and Hania who were going to the new job – and Renia was behind, right? The *Block Älteste*, who you described as an extremely brutal terrible woman, or am I wrong? Was it only the assistant?

A: The assistant was so brutal. It was different. The *Block Älteste* was also a Jewish girl from Slovakia, but she was a different type. She was very – maybe she had understanding, but we did not come into contact with her that much. In the administration of the barracks, there were those three women – the *Block Älteste* – they were all Jewish women who came in at the very early stage. So, it was 1942, 1943, you know. Fela was the *schreiberen*. She had a big mouth, and she hollered all day, but she didn't hit and she didn't beat and her toughness was expressed, you know, as I said barking, because this is like some dogs barks and they don't bite. So, basically she didn't do any harm to anybody outside of hollering and then was this other women who never held her arms steady, but like a windmill. Her arms were going and whoever was in the way got beat up. And she was the one who was insulting and was calling us horrible names, and calling us whores, and God knows what. So, when I think about it now, and I know that she came with the first transport of women to Auschwitz, and they were 500 or whatever the number was, and small number of them remained, you know, survived and at the point when we came, that she must have been very bitter and because she lost everybody. She felt that this – that we have to go through the same kind of a suffering that her group did and she was inflicting the pain on us, which gave her the security of the job that she had. But there was a human aspect to her that I see now that I'm older, that basically she didn't have to be so helpful when Hania fainted. She could've just walked by without any reaction whatsoever, and yet she made sure that she revived her by throwing the bucket of water and allowing us to stand there, and not being sympathetic or having any kind words or anything. It was all in the same manner, in a rude, hollering manner. But I explain it, so to say as, the human side of her by sheer demonstrating her willingness to assist.

Q: Okay, let's change the tape.

End of Tape #7

Tape #8

Q: Before we say more about after the death march to Ravensbrück and your experiences up until liberation, Chris, explain what the *Effektenkammer* was, this new job that the three of you had. You – the last time, you talked about how important it was for you, what it did in terms of changing your self-image, and feelings of self-esteem with the people you were working for. I also want to know whether you understood the place of that work *kommando* in the structure of Auschwitz, how Auschwitz was being organized, or did you simply know the structure of that particular *kommando*?

A: I wasn't even familiar – I didn't even know that a *kommando* like this exists. About Kanada we heard, because of all the belongings of the Jewish transports were going to Kanada, where the good things were separated from the worn things and sent to Nazi Germany. But I never knew there was such a thing of *Effektenkammer*, where Christian Polish women were employed and they were in charge of the belongings of political prisoners that were brought. Everybody had a different assignment. There were groups. Like, there was, again, the administrative part of the operation; there was the group that was storing the clothes; there was the group that was… kept whatever other belongings were. My job was with another girl, a Christian girl – her name was Ioasha, Ioasha Haborra (ph) – and we were in charge of suitcases. So, I walked into the room, a large room that had lots and lots of shelves, and the shelves were full of different sizes suitcases. None of them were real large. Some were satchels, some were like knapsack kind of canvas bags, and some were a small suitcase and all of that. We were very welcome by the group, the 20 Jewish women, or 25 Jewish women who were sent to replace the other – other Polish women who were sent on transport, and they treated us very, very well. I think I mentioned before that they were mostly intelligent women, educated women and they were very kind to us. We found out later on that there were many among them who were Jews on assumed papers. So, I would say that we were like 50/50 or maybe even more Jews, but some of them were under false papers and considered themselves Christian, I mean, considered themselves as Poles rather than Polish Jews. The job we had to do was, when a person was released from Auschwitz, a Polish political prisoner, that we had to make sure that the belongings she brought, that her personal belongings that she brought – her clothes and so forth and so – were transferred with her, or if she was released from the camp, that everything went with her as well. During this period that we worked together, we had to gain the confidence of the Polish women that were there before because, as we were getting more and more acquainted, and as the underground activities were kind of increasing and there was more contact with the outside, that we had to be part and parcel of what was happening, and I'll give you an example. There were women who were working in very important departments, and it's only there that we found out what was happening. There were women who had access to the lists of daily transports. There were women who worked in the laboratory were Dr. Mengele was doing experiments on the children, and they had every record what was being done to the children and so forth, and other very important operations performed by the Nazi on the campsite to which nobody was privy and it

never left the camp. And yet, through this *Effektenkammer*, every once in a while, a list came in, a piece of paper came in that I never witnessed openly where I would be able to read or see what was written, but let's say on two occasions Ioasha and I had to rip apart a suitcase and glue in a letter, an envelope, into the lining of the suitcase or place an envelope once in the bottom of a pocketbook. And it went with the person that was released from camp. Now, how did I know what we were doing? We were just told that this is a mission that we have to fulfill and that we should not ask any questions. How did they find out about it? I remember, there was a woman Krystyna Jevulska (ph), an inmate, and she was a Jewish woman from the Lodz. But she came to Auschwitz under an assumed name as a political – Krystyna Jevulska (ph) – as a political prisoner, and she had contacts on the outside. The family that she maintained contact with was sending to her packages, food packages, monthly so nobody could suspect that she was Jewish, because if you have family outside and they send you food packages, then you definitely – Jews did not have anybody who was sending daily packages. And I remember one day – we ate together most of the time. We didn't have to stand on *Zählappel*, and sometimes we didn't eat the food for the camp, but they give us some provisions that we could prepare a meal by ourselves. We were a small group. So, I remember one day, a package came for Krysia Jevulska (ph), and in the package was a hard-boiled egg, and the joy and the happiness was indescribable. I mean we didn't know why was everybody so excited. Well, after a while when things had simmered down, we were told that in that letter – in one of the letters, I don't know which one, whether the one in the suitcase or the one in the pocketbook that was sent out, a message was sent to the family that was sending to packages to Krysia that if they receive this letter – because of course there was important information that had to be sent out in that concealed envelope – that if they receive this information that should include in the food package that they are sending one hard-boiled egg, which will be an indication that they know what is going on and that they received it. So, in a way, it was so important to know that in all that horrible experience that each and every person that was incarcerated went through, that some news about what was going on in camp was reaching the outside world. I mean, I'm only talking about the department of the suitcases. In what other ways things were smuggled out, I don't know. I'm sure that they never used the same system, because they would be caught sooner or later. So, there must have been different departments. Departments must have been sending news out. That was, so to say, the only possible way of contacting – for the inmates to contact the outside, the outside world.

Q: But, it must have been very complicated because, if you are only having the property of inmates who are there, and they get them back when they leave, so whoever in the underground or the resistance in Auschwitz wants to get information out, they have to know who's leaving.

A: No, the idea was that the person who was leaving, they would never put something with a person who was not trustworthy. And the woman was told that, once you are out of camp, this is – you have something in the suitcase or in the pocketbook or wherever. They never – for her not to be afraid, I'm sure they didn't tell her where exactly it is, I mean, in

which place and how to do it, but they must have told her that somewhere – I mean, it's not that I did, you know, it's how I knew about it – that she was aware of taking out of camp something that was very important for the people who were outside to know, and this is how we got the hard-boiled egg. That was only one time in my being in that *Effektenkammer* which was just unbelievable. But we had a wonderful three months that, as I said before, that we regained not only our physical strength but our self-esteem, and it gave us hope that somehow there is a chance that we'll be able to come out of this hell.

Q: Do you remember you and your friend being told by a particular person to put this letter into this purse?

A: Oh, sure.

Q: Do you know who it was?

A: It was – always, there were people who were in charge. There was Maria, who was the capo, she was a Polish – she was a Polish political prisoner, a very wonderful person.

Q: What was her last name? Do you remember?

A: [Shakes head.]

Q: She was the head of the *Effektenkammer*, or she was…?

A: She was the head of the *Effektenkammer,* of the fifty women who worked there. Maria, and she – why I know Maria because Krystyna Jevulska (ph) was writing poetry, and she wrote a poem about all the people who were involved in different jobs, and she described them – who they were and what they did, and her poetry was also sent out. She passed away. She lived in Germany after the war. She's gone, too. It's a shame, you know? I had the last interview with her that was done in the '80s. She was sick by then with cancer, and she really gave the interview of her life, you know, who she was – the Jewish girl from Lodz, Landa was her name, her last name, and she came to live in Warsaw and how she was arrested in Warsaw and her contacts with all the people. I think she was a Communist, a member of the Communist party. She was like – I would say she was the inverse of a university student right before the war, and university students had all kinds of organizations and Jews were not very welcome in too many organizations, university organizations. So, most of the young Jewish people were so infatuated with the ideology of Communism that I think she was one of the members. She speaks about it briefly in that interview, but not much. Beautiful woman, just great personality.

Q: Were there ever selections in the *Effektenkammer*?

A: Never.

Q: So you very quickly felt safe?

A: Immediately, there was never a selection. There was only a fear of being transferred to a different camp. And, there was no guarantee because the other, the Polish women who we replaced, they felt very secure there. There were no selections, but they took them out because they wanted to bring a new element so they shouldn't feel so very comfortable with each other. The Nazis must have suspected that something is going on there. Plus they had contact with the men outside of the camp. The *Effektenkammer* was near Kanada and therefore, the unloading of the… There was a lot of moving around there.

Q: Did you ever – a woman by the name of Katya Songer ever come into your *Effektenkammer*? She was head of the camp offices.

A: No.

Q: Or a woman names Tsipi?

A: [Shakes head]

Q: Did you ever hear the camp orchestra?

A: Sure. We they were playing when we were marching out and marching in.

Q: Did that anger you, bother you, was it good music? Do you remember anything?

A: You know, when you are kind of brainwashed that this is the way to function and you get used to that routine and you hear that orchestra already and you know that you are approaching the barracks and pretty soon you'll get your ration of bread. That was the most welcome thing I would say. I don't know whether it was or it wasn't, but that's another thing, the orchestra. They performed for the Nazis with concerts of Wagner and then they played marches for the groups leaving the camps. I don't really remember exactly. I remember the orchestra, I remember the marches, but that's all I remember about it. I remember when Mala committed, cut her veins, when she was caught after she escaped and she was brought back, because they called everybody to witness her hanging. When we were in *Effektenkammer,* or no, when we were in *Effektenkammer,* there was another hanging of the courageous four women who were bringing in Rosa Robota, and Sapirstein, and Weisblum, the four girls who were working with the explosives and they were bringing each day to camp and giving it to and giving it to the *Sonderkommando*, so they could build a bomb and blow up the crematorium. But we did not really actually witness it. So, you know, there were so many different activities of courage and trying to make the world aware what is happening and what is taking place. Some of the news came out, because after all, young Karski came to the United States, and I love that man. I mean it's unbelievable how courageous that man was to be able to be smuggled into a camp and out and be an eyewitness and bring the news to Britain and

bring the news to Roosevelt in the United States without a note on him. He had to commit everything to memory because he couldn't do it any other way. And the courage of that man to do it and then to be so disappointed that it took so long before some action was taken on the part of the British and the American government to somehow assist and help in this situation or find an answer to whatever or to send airplanes to bomb or whatever. It wouldn't have mattered if some of the inmates would have been killed in the process, because we were all dying. One way or another we would have been dead. But they would have discovered in 1944 about the atrocities and how many millions of people were killed and they could have stopped, even if they had done it in 1944, you know, hundreds of thousands of people could have lived.

Q: Did you think when you were there, why isn't the world doing something?

A: Yeah, I thought about it – why the world isn't doing something, why God allows for it to happen. I mean, there's all kinds of things that go through your mind. Again, I'm going to say that you just have so much time to think. Otherwise, you are like a robot.

Q: You just keep going. Or you don't.

A: That's it. I mean, one track mind. If I do such and such, maybe I'll get to the end of the tunnel.

Q: In you description, it appears as if you – if you and your sisters hadn't gotten a job in the *Effektenkammer*, who knows? You were …

A: We wouldn't have survived.

Q: You wouldn't have survived?

A: No, definitely not, because at this point another two weeks, and I don't know who would have broken down first, but anyone of us, if one of us was gone then the other two would have followed, and it doesn't really matter in which order.

Q: Was there anything else about the *Effektenkammer* that you wanted to?

A: I think that this is pretty much what we want to cover and the mere fact that when we left the _____ the *Effektenkammer,* we were dressed warmer and so forth, and it was easier to cope with the death march which was not easy again, and was very difficult emotionally and physically and all that, and finally, when we arrived in Ravensbrück, I don't know whether the trip on the train was for two days or for three days or whatever it was, we were brought again for registration, because there were not normally a transport that was transferred, had papers and the number of inmates and so forth. This was such a disarray that no documents followed us. So, we had to register again, and as we approached the registration desk, right then and there, we decided we are going to change

our names to Christian names. So, we became – we assumed the last name Gorska, and the first name – Hania and Reina remained the same – and I changed my name to Krystina because I wanted to have a true Christian name, and my sisters called me Krysia because it's a nickname for Krystina, and until this day I'm Krysia to my sisters and Krysia to my nieces and nephews and to my grandchildren, because they hear "Krysia, Krysia" and they like the sound of it.

Q: Did other Jewish women do the same thing?

A: I don't know. It just happened. Sometimes all those things – you don't plan anything. We didn't plan anything. We didn't have a strategy to follow. Everything was on an impulse. You either took advantage of a situation, maybe, if you knew what was happening or just sheer coincidence, but here we knew that, after we were with the Polish women, the Polish *kommando*, we knew that Polish political prisoners have a better chance to survive than the Jews, but it didn't matter when we came to Ravensbrück. Ravensbrück was designed for 20,000 women and there were 80,000 of us when we came in. The conditions were deplorable. There was no standing room. It was something awful, and after the death march, even though we had warmer clothes and everything, we wouldn't have lasted more than two weeks in Ravensbrück, between the beating and no food whatsoever and the tortures that were inflicted on us by the camp inmates, by the capos, by the *Aufseherinnen*, the SS women in uniform – it was just unbelievable. So, I kind of block out completely Ravensbrück from my mind because it was of short duration and the only thing that I remember of Ravensbrück was that we changed our names. That's the only thing. And the next thing I remember from Ravensbrück is that the uniformed men walked into the barracks and asked for 50 volunteers. And because, as I said, there was standing room only and we were always – we never pushed like other people, so we were always the last ones to come in, always in the draft and near door and God knows where. So we were sitting on the floor and I turn to Hania and I say, "What do you think?" And she says, "Let's go." And then we came to the conclusion, because he said he's coming the following morning for the volunteers, he took everybody's name and that's it, and then I said to Hania, "Well, do you think we did the right thing?" And we came to the conclusion that if we remain in Ravensbrück, we are for sure dying within two or three weeks. If this 50 volunteers are going to be taken to die or to be killed, then it will happen immediately, but there is also a chance that they need 50 volunteers to go to work somewhere else. And he came in the morning and picked up the 50 volunteers, they put us on the truck, and they were all women from all over. There was a woman from Hungary, and a woman from Yugoslavia, and from Czechoslovakia, and we were Polish from Poland, and they were German women, I mean Jewish German women, and we all were on the truck and we were traveling for a half hour, for an hour, and we were still on the truck. Nobody stopped the truck. So, after two hours, we came to the conclusion, we looked at each other and we came to the conclusion that they didn't have to drag us for that long to kill us, that we are going somewhere where they want to make use of us one way or another. So, they brought us to Retzow. Retzow was a military camp. It was a Luftwaffe, the air force, that was brought back because it was in

Mecklenberg, which was the northern part of Germany close to the Baltic Sea between Lübeck and Hamburg, and they needed people to work in the airfield to dig ditches – not ditches, but trenches and so forth, and do the work and cleaning. So, the first transport that arrived was basically for administrative jobs or for cleaning offices. So, they were the ones like the girls from Slovakia who were experienced administrators, so they got the good jobs, and we took whatever it was. Hania was cleaning offices and Renia was like a valet to a German SS woman, and I was also cleaning offices, and Hania tells this very nice story from Retzow that she was cleaning offices. Among the space that she had to clean was the office of one of the officers, and he always left papers, and he had the radio there and everything. And Hania, realizing the situation, that papers are always there, pretended that she doesn't speak any German. So, he's talking to her and he's telling her what to do. So, she says, "Nicht verstein" (ph) and – Hania tells this story and I always laugh about it – "Nicht verstein" (ph), which means in kind of a broken way, "I don't understand anything." Because no sooner did he go out, she went to look at what was on the desk or she listened to the radio. So, one day he was still suspicious. He wanted to know what's going on. So, he comes in and she's there on the floor scrubbing the floor with a brush, and mopping up the floor, and he says to her, you know, he wanted to catch her, "Did you hear what they announced on the radio?" And she says, "Nicht verstein." So, he looks at her with contempt and she says, "So gross ker faxen and so dom" (ph) which means, "So gross ker faxen" (ph) – so tall, because – and so stupid. So, this is Hania's favorite story from it, but she heard every bit of news every day. When she came in the morning, that was the first room she had to clean. So, she heard the news and then she went to work. And Renia, because she was kind of a valet to the SS woman who was in charge of the entire group of supervising women in camp, so she liked Renia a lot, and she says, "How can I help you? Would you like to have some food? Are you hungry?" And this, and, Renia says to her, "Not really. I don't want you to give me anything, but my middle sister is a very good cook, and if you just could see to it that my middle sister gets a job in the kitchen, then it will be just wonderful." So, she went to the chef and she told him that she has a girl that she would like to work in the kitchen, that she's a very good cook and that she knows how to prepare good food, and for the food especially that – not for the camp food, but for the SS people. So, they gave me a job in the kitchen, and the kitchen was whatever had to be done. Either I was in charge of the big kettle where we cooked for camp, or I was preparing hamburgers for the German men in uniform that were in the Air Force, or we used to cook that farina every morning for breakfast for the military. So, that was good because you couldn't be hungry anymore, and we were cutting up the bread that was rationed for the eventual groups of people that came after us. We were the first ones. We were there for a few days, and they brought about a few thousand women to do the outside work. I remember once there were girls sweeping the floor outside and I was standing and frying hamburgers for lunch or for dinner for the Germans, and I saw the girls outside the fence. It wasn't very far and the window was big and wide open, and I was flipping the hamburgers and I was every once in a while flipping one outside, and so help me, I still remember, there is a woman who lives in Miami and she's Hania, also Hania, and she always says, "I grabbed one of those hamburgers you threw out the window." So, you know, you didn't have to – you just had

to be there to take advantage of every little situation, and you know, it didn't do – I mean, I haven't done any heroic deeds. I saw people are there. I figured whoever grabs it will grab it.

Q: What would any…?

A: The chef was not in.

Q: So, nobody saw?

A: So, nobody saw, and whoever was in charge was an inmate like myself. So, if she was angry or mean, she could have done me in, but the chef wasn't there. So, I figured, all right.

Q: Of course, some functionary could have been watching a hamburger fly out the window.

A: Could have been, but I don't think that I would have taken that much of a risk if I would have seen there is a danger because, I mean, there is a little logic to doing things, and it wasn't happening every day. It just – this particular situation, because there's still this girl who always reminds how I was throwing out the hamburger, and how she was lucky to grab one off the ground.

Q: Were you able to somehow get food so you could bring it to your two sisters?

A: Always, that was my job. That was really my job because in the beginning, I was in charge of the kettle, the big kettle. So, what we did is we were lighting the fire – there was like a huge, huge metal container, and under it was where the fire was burning, and we had to all night we had to feed – I mean, the wood, place the wood so that the kettle would be cooking. So, this meat, to prepare a meat base for a soup, you had to cook it for hours and hours because I don't think it was beef, I think it was horse meat at the time. And that was prepared for the soldiers. So, there were several of us who remained in the kitchen all night, not all the time because there were shifts, you know, sometimes one group of women and sometimes another group of women. The week that I was working at night with the other women, then at four o'clock in the morning, we were separated from the camps because, due to the fact that we were cooking for the soldiers and cleaning for the soldiers, they didn't want us to live in the campsite. But under the kitchen in the basement, they set up cots for us to sleep in and wash and keep ourselves clean. So, in the morning, like at four o'clock in the morning, before the chef came in, we used to have aprons – big, heavy canvas aprons – so one of the girls was standing there with a hook fishing out the tongs and the other small parts of the meat that we were able to get out, and put it in the apron, in one of the aprons, and two of us were on the look-out each way, and one was running with that hot stuff in that canvas apron. We used to come in – We were all in one room, the 50 of us, all in one room. So, we dumped it like on

whatever it was, I don't remember, whether on the bed or on the table and we started to rip it apart and eat it.

Q: So, all 50 of you, as many as could share would share?

A: Yes. There was always enough. Then, I mean, when I wasn't in the kitchen at night, I remember how we worked – but there were other girls that were on that shift, you know, then they did it. So, this is the way we survived in Retzow. And then, of course, we started to see the airplanes flying, and I remember when they threw leaflets, and they were announced that Roosevelt passed away and Harry Truman became President, because we came to Retzow in February. We came at the end of January to Ravensbrück, and two weeks later, like end of February, and this must have been March or April. I don't remember when Roosevelt passed away. This I remember, and they were always sounding the sirens because of the fear of the attacks from the air, and so, I was watching the women. We were all so happy when we saw those silver planes. It was such a delightful thing, and especially when it was on a weekend, on a Sunday, when we didn't work, because there was no personnel there. And the way people reacted to situations, you know? Hania used to get a hold of any food that was available and she was eating and eating and eating and eating like there was no tomorrow. There wasn't a problem anymore with food, as I mentioned to you, because I was working near food and we were not that starved. There was another girl – this was also a very unusual kind of a thing – but she used to fill a bucket with water, undressed completely, and she stood there and she was washing her body. For the duration of that period, from the time when the alarms sounded until the alarm sounded again that it's over, she stood there and she was washing from head to toe, just pouring water on her as if to cleanse herself from God knows what. And you watch people behave in situations that are so strange, and you can't figure out why people would do such things, a nervous reaction of one kind or another. Hania's eating was not because she was hungry. It was a nervous reaction, and of course, before long, we find out that the war was over. It was the beginning of May – fourth or fifth of May – when we could see that the whole thing is getting out of control, even the people who were in charge of the camp were not paying much attention, and everybody was trying to kind of escape. We were getting packages by then the Count Bernadotte has arranged through the Red Cross to send packages to inmates in different campsites like Bergen-Belsen and whatever was close by. So, they were care packages that came, and in the care packages was chocolate and cigarettes. So, the Nazis took out the cigarettes and chocolate and distributed the rest of the food – crackers, sardines, whatever was there, which was okay, maybe it was better, because otherwise we would have gotten sick, God knows what, and then Renia, Hania knowing what was going on and Renia sensing from that woman for whom she worked that something is going to happen soon, all of a sudden is very patronized by that woman. The war may end soon, and after all, it hasn't been so bad in camp, and if a question comes up that – how the Germans behaved, I hope you are going to give a kind word - this kind of a thing, these kinds of conversations. By then, they were trying to kind of save their own skin. Then, they came in the morning and they said the came is being evacuated. Now, where evacuated, nobody knew. Now, I find out

that this constant moving from one camp to the other was for the Nazis to save their own skin, because if they wouldn't have had the prisoners to move them around, they would have been compelled to go to the front, and they wanted to save their lives. So, as long as they were in charge of the prisoners, they had a very legitimate excuse why they have to remain. But by then, when we saw they were losing control of anything that is happening, and we were taken out from the camp and we came to that main road that led to this community, there was so much going on. People from everywhere going in every direction with little wagons loaded with household belongings and God knows, and you could see uniforms, German uniforms, thrown along the road. People were trying to get into civilian clothes to escape, not to be caught in uniform. So, it was just a horrible thing and we were driven and driven and driven and then, and the *Aufseherin* for whom Renia worked, she had that knapsack full of cigarettes, and she had her big cape and she had other things that she carried, and we all had a little bag with whatever. We had some sardines and some crackers, as I said before. And she says to Renia that it's hot and she would like for her to carry the cape for her. So, Renia took the cape from her and threw it over her arm and we were just marching. And in the group that left Retzow was Helen – Helena, and I don't know from where she was or we didn't know her for too long of a time, but she was a tall, blonde woman named Helena, and she too had a big mouth, and she spoke German very well. So, she saw Renia holding on to that cape. So, she made sure that we lagged behind a bit, and before we had a chance to look around, she had the cape over her camp clothes and she was hollering "Get out, and get out of my way and get out of my way." And, she was pushing and pushing and pushing, pushing us towards the woods, the small group of women. There was like a little forest, and because there were civilians and there were the camp prisoners and there were the Germans who were trying, some in uniform and some already in civilian clothes, there was such a commotion, there was so much coming and going, you couldn't figure out what was happening. But we wound up in the middle of the forest by night. So, we made a fire, a very small fire so that it wasn't visible. We were very deep in the forest by then, and we – I don't remember – to keep ourselves warm. How we opened the sardines I don't remember, but we had some of the sardines and in the morning, we got up and we walked. By then, it was quiet already. We kind of wound up on the other side of the forest instead of near the road. And there was a huge, huge estate with a magnificent home on top, and people were working in the field. And we came out of the forest and we saw the people, so we figured well, if there are workers in the field, maybe they will help us in whatever way. Usually the fieldworkers were also either prisoners from a camp, but from the distance, we didn't know who they really were. And they noticed us and they saw us with the tags with the numbers and everything. So, they came running and they asked where we are from, and there was a guy who was from Kielce, and Kielce was the city to where Starachowice belonged; it was part of the district. And of course he says, "Nosha polachki!" (ph) "Our Polish girls," you know? So, when we heard that, we didn't even admit that we are not Polish, that we are Jewish, Jewish Poles, I mean, Polish Jews, and due to the fact that we already had our names changed, so we could pretend that. So, I was Krysia and Hania and Renia, and there must have been maybe twenty men and women working in the field, and this man from Kielce he was in charge of the working

group, and he says, "Oh, did you come from camp? Poor girls, poor girls. You must have suffered so much. Come with me to the house." And we went up to the house, and the house – the only person who was left in the house was the German woman who was in charge of the operation, because the graph (ph) or whatever was down there – I mean, it was a mansion. It was such a huge estate that it didn't belong just to a wealthy man. It belonged to a very, very important, I would say, kind of individual. So, he comes in and brings us and we are dirty and tired and I don't have to tell you what it's like being on the road for so long. And he says to her, "These are my girls, and you make sure that they are – that they get clean and washed and prepare for them the best meal there is." An outright order from a person that was only a field worker, but because nobody was around and he saw most likely what was happening, so that woman was very, very frightened. We were three and there was a Russian girl and there was Helen and I think there were two more girls, I don't remember exactly how many of us were in there. Now, I had a piece of soap to – and got into a bathtub with such fancy fittings and all that and a terrycloth towel to wipe myself, and then we were brought into the dining room, after we were all cleaned up and we walked around a little in the field. And the people who were working in the field were not allowed to come into the house. It was off limits to them, but this man somehow felt that now he's in charge because he was the head of the working crew and the owners were not around and the whole place was empty with the exception of this one woman. So then we come into the dining room and – this is funny, but you know how things change from one to the next – so, here's that huge dining room with a banquet table with the upholstered furniture and the heavy drapes, beautiful white drapes hanging from the huge, huge windows. It's a beautiful estate, and that woman is so frightened and she's bringing bread sliced up and then she's bringing butter in, and the butter is laid out in little patties with the family crest. [Bursts out laughing.] I'm laughing because it's ridiculous. It seems like it's in the movies. With the crest of the family on the butter… And then she brings the food. I don't remember what we ate but what strikes me very funny is here I am again in the dining room with her with a damask cloths on the table with the fancy china and with the napkins and even the family crest on the butter, which we did not have at home but the table was always set for eating in a proper manner. So, here, in addition to what I remembered from home from a way back, was that butter which was cut in small pieces with the family crest on it. In my home we had a beautiful butter dish with a cover. It was because the butter came in a block. So, it was a personal dish with the block of butter in it. It was either a block or an oval, depending on where you bought it. If you bought it in the market fresh from the peasant, it was always like an egg, a large egg-shaped thing they kept in leaves for it to stay cold, you know, when they brought it from the village and it had a cover over it. So, that was kind of a remembrance of what it was last being at home and finding ourselves in this environment all over again. And we were there for about four or five days, because we were liberated by the Russians, I mean, this area was liberated by the Russians. And the Russian officers came to check on the inventory, to take over as far as livestock is concerned and everything else, and they found us and inasmuch as the officers. So, jabusky (ph) – immediately, they wanted to make sure that we come to work for them. So, the man who was in charge of the working group came and said, "We are going to home and you are coming with us.

We are all going to make our way back to Poland." So, that was May – first week in May of 1945.

Q: So, your first meal after the war starts, when you go back home, is a formal meal with whatever you had, and then you end your experience in even more…?

A: In Germany. The war experience, and then the journey home starts. Also, not an uneventful – a very eventful journey home.

Q: We have to change the tapes.

A: Don't tell me that [laughs].

End of Tape #8

Tape #9

Q: Chris, can you tell us who's in this picture?

A: In the back row, from the left, is my Aunt Lodza (ph), who was my father's sister. She married a man during the war, and they both died – they were both taken to camps and killed. Next to her, leaning on my father's shoulder, is Aunt Regina. She was a beautiful woman. She was a wonderful, wonderful, full of verve and just an exciting person. She was just beautiful. She too was married during the war, and she and her husband perished also. There is my father who, when we were brought to Auschwitz, he was separated from us. He lived until the end of October, and the day he was taken – after his selection – to the gas chamber, we finally located him. Unfortunately, it was too late. Inasmuch as we sent him the letter to him to let him know that we are alive. I guess that if he knew that we were still around, maybe he would have had the strength to live through the war as well. That was October 1944 when we were already in *Effektenkommer* and we had the ability to make contact with him. Then further down is my Aunt Rosha. She was the youngest of my mother's sisters. Regina was also my mother's sister. Rosha was my mother's sister. She attended the university. She was a student of – she was a pharmacist when she graduated from college, and she too perished. Next to her is Dora who – the dark lady – who was my father's sister. She survived the war. She was in camp in Plaszow. She lived in Sosnowiec and went to Plaszow camp. Now, below here is my Aunt Angia, who again is my mother's sister, and she was a single woman and she also perished in the war. Then comes my Grandma Sarah, who was widowed in the '30s, and this is the mother of my mother, and she was a very intelligent woman, and a very educated woman, and when she married my grandpa, Leibush (ph) Tannenblum, she became very, very religious, and anything about religion that I know is because, in *katshrut* (ph), in observances, is because she always wanted to know how much I know about being Jewish and leading a Jewish life and she was always teaching me whenever I was coming for a visit. And next to her is my sister Hania, who is sitting in my mother's lap, and Hania must have been a year, a little older maybe, my mother holding onto her. And, that's the family. So, as you see from the whole group, there is Dora on the extreme right in the standing row behind and Hania who is the baby. Everybody else perished.

Q: And, this one?

A: In this one is my father, Isaac Laks, and my mother, Pola Tannenblum Laks. It must have been at the very early stage, could have been at the time that they were engaged maybe or maybe right after the wedding, but that was when they were very, very young. Even my mother's hair kind of tells me she could have still been a maiden at that time rather than a married woman.

Q: And this picture?

A: In this picture are the three girls, the three sisters, Hania is of course the tall one. She was always very tall and very attractive, and she – that was in the wintertime, of course. It must have been a Hanukkah present or something – a new sweater and a new hat and a new scarf – and she refused to wear a coat; she wanted to wear the sweater. And then it's me. I'm the one in the middle, and then it's Renia the youngest sister.

Q: Can you tell us – do you know how old you each are there?

A: Well, I would say somewhere around – I could have been ten, I guess. There is no date on it. That picture was sent to our Uncle Moish in the United States, and I don't have the original. My cousins made a copy for us, and they sent it to me. So, maybe the original has some kind of inscription on it with a date, but this one doesn't have it. So, I'm not certain, but Renia is – I guess that Renia is about six. So, I am about ten – Renia is about six and a half, and so I'm ten and a half, and Hania is three years old.

Q: And, this picture?

A: This picture – this is the old house that we lived in, I would say, up to 1935 or 36 or something like that. And we moved out of this house to a new apartment because this was really in a bad condition by then. I mean, inasmuch as it was very comfortable on the outside, but it needed a lot of work – comfortable on the inside, it needed a lot of work on the outside. So, here's my father and my older sister Hania and my mother and then Renia and I. I think that picture was taken later than the three sisters, because we all seem to be much older here in it. '36? I don't know, but anyhow it was still in the old house and I don't remember exactly when we moved. I know that we moved right before the war. Three years, you know, you don't remember exactly which way it went.

Q: Go ahead.

A: This is Hania on the left side and I'm on the right side, and we were reading something or whatever. It must have been taken already during the war, either right before we went to the ghetto or in the ghetto, but this is a war picture of the two of us.

Q: Do you think you're thirteen or fourteen, something like that?

A: No, I'm older here.

Q: Older?

A: Right, I'm older here. It's not 1939. It could be 1940, '41 maybe, but it's definitely not from before the war.

Q: Okay.

A: This is in Buscostruitz (ph). It's a park where my mother was going every year, and the gate is to that beautiful park where the facilities where she was taking sulfur bags. She was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, and she's in black because this must have been the year that her father passed away – my grandfather. She was with him when he died. He died in her arms. She took him to Krakow to see a specialist, and they came back to the hotel room and he just passed away in her arms. He asked her to be brought to the window for some fresh air and that was the end of Grandpa. So, she never forgot that either – the loss of her father. And I am with her, standing right there. Every once in a while, I went with my mother or went to visit Grandma. It all depended whose turn it was to come along with Mother. She always took one of us with her and the other two went to Grandma, because my aunts were just wonderful us. They loved when we came for a visit.

Q: Chris, this is what year? 1930?

A: I'm what here? Six years old, seven years old – I don't know. Is it 1930? If it's 1930, then I'm six years old here.

Q: Go ahead.

A: This is my handsome husband, Miles Lerman and myself. This is the wedding picture. We, of course, while I was not the bride in white, I was glad I had a blue dress, which was pretty to get married in. It was right after the war. It was December 1945. We met. We fell in love. We got married, and thank God, we are still together, and I hope for many years. Now, we have a wonderful family to be proud of.

[new picture shown]

Q: This picture?

A: We came to Poland on the fact-finding mission, and there was a group from the museum. At the time it was no museum, just a council, and the members of the council were from different walks of life, different groups, different religions. So, Miles came up with the idea that in order for them to know what the council is all about, it would be worthwhile going to Poland, and Eli Weisel was the chairman at the time, and Miles took the chairmanship of organizing that trip. So, we were in Poland visiting the places of annihilation and, due to the fact that one of the Paliszewski sisters was still alive and this is Maria Paliszewska, we took her with us. We went to visit her and we brought her with us to Warsaw. I just wanted to present her to the group, for her to meet the Americans who came to visit Poland to learn about the terrible story of the Holocaust and to present her to the group in her kindness and her generosity and her understanding that she showed her family. So, she went along with us everywhere we went, include Treblinka. She insisted that she comes to Treblinka, because she, too, felt that she wants to visit the place where Mother lost her life. Her mother was killed. So, her we are with Miles on the left and then Mrs. Paliszewska is in the middle, and I'm on the right, and the name of the

community is right on the big rock, it's like chiseled in the rock. It says "Starachowice." And around you can see small rocks and bigger rocks and smaller rocks and each represents a community, a destroyed community.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was in 1979, when the council was – or '80 – I think it was. It was right in the beginning of the formation of the council.

End of Tape #9

Conclusion of Interview