

OK, tell me. Yeah, all right. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Helga Niedrich on July 16, 2014, in Orlando, Florida. Thank you very, very much Mrs. Niedrich for agreeing to speak with us today. I much appreciate it.

You're welcome.

We're going to start the interview at the very beginning. I'd like to know a little bit about your life before the war, your childhood, the family that you were born in, and so on. So my first questions are these. Could you tell me your date of birth, the place you were born, and what your name was at birth?

OK, I was born April 20, 1929 in Czechoslovakia, which is now the Czech Republic. And the city was called Witkowitz.

Witkowitz.

Witkowitz. It's there Moravka Ostrava, Maehrisch-Ostrau.

Did it have different names in Czech and in German? Is Witkowitz the German name for it or is that the Czech name for it?

It's the Czech name.

OK. Do you know what the German name for it is?

I don't remember.

OK. Tell me a little bit about the place. Was it a town or a village?

Well, we moved quite a bit. That where I was born was a big city and we moved to a smaller one which I liked very much. It was called Leipnik in German, Lipnik in Czech. And then the Czech started-- They didn't like the Germans, and they gave us a hard time, and my father at that time was a shoemaker, cobbler I believe you call them. And so we split and we moved up to what they called Sudetenland, which is a German--

Part of Czechoslovakia?

Yes, it's part of Czechoslovakia but it's very German. And it's also the part that Hitler annexed to Germany in the war. So we moved there.

What did you mean, or what was involved with having been given a hard time by the Czechs?

Well like I said, my father was a shoemaker, and as time went on they gave him less and less business.

So the Czech population.

Yes.

So it wasn't a government regulation.

No, it was just the Czech people, yes.

OK. OK.

And so--

So he couldn't make a living.

Exactly.

OK.

So we moved to the German part of Czechoslovakia and my father got a good job at an office-- Well, because he spoke both languages perfect. Now I can't think of the place of the office. Justice of the Peace, I believe we called it. Well, I'll think of it later. But anyhow, he got the job there because he could translate all the books from Czech to German. So he was an office man and he was very happy then.

Well that's quite a jump actually from being a cobbler and then becoming a civil servant.

Yes. Yes. Yes, he was-- That was more his style anyway. He liked that better. And I went to German school, of course.

OK, we'll come to that.

I have to make an adjustment.

OK, fine.

I'm going to take the sticky stuff off.

OK. I wanted to ask you before we get further away, I wanted to still stay with the beginning. So tell me what was your father's name and your mother's name?

My father's name was Anton Mader and of course my mom was Mader too after she married him. Before it was Bartel.

And what was her first name? Marie.

And so your name at birth was Helga Mader?

Yeah.

Now tell me why is it that you hesitate? He's got a list. Because I was-- He wasn't my real father.

I see. Did that make a difference in your life?

Yes, it did. It did, because he didn't like children. He had been married before and his wife died of cancer. And when he married my mom, they were OK, but he, like I said, he never liked children so him and I just never were close.

That must have been very hard for you.

Yeah, it was. He was very intimidating. And yet he never, he never touched me or anything. He never spanked me or nothing like that. But I could tell that he doesn't love me.

And what about your mother? Were you close to her?

Mom, she was good.

OK.

Mom was good. Mom loved me very much. I was the only child.

Well, that was going to be my next question. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No.

Did you have any stepbrothers or sisters?

No.

So it was the three of you.

Yes.

And did both of your parents, your father, the father you knew, did they come from Witkowitz? Did they come from-- What was the small place you moved to?

No, they did not come from Witkowitz. Well, actually Mom lived in Moravka Ostrava, so right next to Witkowitz. And my dad, he came from some little village.

But you didn't know the name or where it was.

No, I don't know.

Did you have any aunts and uncles from either side that were part of the family?

Not really, nothing close. My grandma had brothers, but we never got together. We'd never been close.

Was that your mother's mother?

Yes. And actually my grandma raised me.

Really?

Yes.

So she lived with you as well?

Pardon me?

She lived with you as well?

No, I lived with her.

Oh, so tell me about this. How did this develop and when did it develop?

Well, like I said, my stepdad didn't like children. We lived in the same town and my Oma, which is Grandma, you know, Oma, she was crazy about me and so she took me in and raised me.

So you didn't live with your mother.

I did not live by my mother or stepfather until Hitler, until the war started.

Really?

Yes.

So your first 10, 11 years were--

10.

10 years were with your grandmother.

Yes.

But then tell me where was this? Where did she live?

It was in Leipnik.

So you stayed there when your stepfather and your mother moved.

Yes.

I see.

But then my mom got really worried about me because Leipnik, where my grandmother lived, was the protectorate-- I don't know how you say that in English-- it was the Czech part. And she worried about me being a German kid. Not that the Czech children bothered me. Once in a while they did. They called me names and stuff. But altogether they were OK. But Mom worried about it because Mom belonged to the National Frauenschaft--

The National Association--

--of the ladies.

What kind of organization was that?

You know it was not a bad one. They took care of the hungry. They took care of the small village like that. They took care of ladies that were pregnant and the husband was out at the war fighting. They did good stuff.

It was like a charity organization.

Yes.

OK. Before we go into the war, I want to talk a little bit then about Leipnik.

Is that the town? I want to learn a little bit more about how large was it? How many people were German? How many people were Czech? How many people were let's say other nationalities? Tell me a little about that.

Leipnik, I would say it was about 7,000 people. A nice little setting. I just loved it. And there were hardly any Germans.

Really?

Really. And they wouldn't even give us a room to go to. They tried to make us go to the Czech school because there weren't enough children to have a German school. And even so we begged, just let us have a room or section of the Czech school, and they wouldn't go for that.

So you went to Czech school?

Pardon me?

Did you go to Czech school?

No. That was a lot of reason we moved, too, because my stepfather said, she's not going to Czech school. She's going to a German school. And the Czechs wouldn't go for that, so we left Leipnik. It was a beautiful city. I loved Leipnik, especially since I lived there with my Oma until I was maybe, well, almost until I was 10, when Hitler marched in.

OK, so I'm still talking before then. When did you actually start school? It must have been--

I had a private teacher come to the house.

So you never went to any school before you left Leipnik?

No. I had a German teacher come to the house and give me private lessons.

And why was that?

Well, because they wouldn't give us a German school. They tried to force us to go to the Czech school and my parents said, no way. So we had to hire a German teacher. They came to the house every day and gave me private lessons until we moved to the Sudetenland. Then there was everything German.

OK. Again I want to still focus a little bit on Leipnik before we get to the Sudetenland. You said there were hardly any Germans in Leipnik, and it was a town of 7,000. Did you have playmates amongst the children?

Yes.

OK. Well how did you find them if you didn't go to school?

I didn't understand that.

Well, most kids find their friends when they start school.

Right.

And if you didn't go to school, how did you find friends?

Oh, I see what you mean. Well, there was-- How did I find them? My next-door neighbor was a boy. He was a Czech boy and he was my friend. He came over and played with the erector set. And then there was the farmer lady. She was a widow and she had two daughters. They were older than I, but they were my friends. I loved them. Buschenka and Maruschka, whatever their names were. They were my friends. And the rest of the time I had to take the train to the next city to go to German school. After two years of private lessons, my third year of school I had to go to Radonitz.

Radonitz.

Yes.

And that was a larger town?

Yes. It was a larger town, beautiful town, and they had a German school. And of course I had to get up very early in the morning to catch the train. Opa would always walk with me to the train station to be sure I get on the train and not miss it. And then I have to drive to Radonitz to go to the German school.

And what was that like going to German school in Radonitz? Do you have memories of that, of some of your teachers?

Not the teachers too much. I had nice girlfriends there, but I had to drive home again, I mean ride home on the choo-choo train. And in the winter it was kind of-- I had to get up really early and then walk up to the train station in the snow and cold.

So were your grandparents upset that there was no German school in Leipnik?

Not really. But they agreed that I should not go to a Czech school, that I should go to a German school.

And did it make a difference to you? Did you think one way or another, or did you obey?

I don't remember if it would have made any a difference because I was a kid. Kids were kids. We played. I don't think so. But my parents--

Did your mother come visit you often when you were living with your grandmother and grandfather?

No, but they lived in the same town and she came once in a while.

But you said you only started living with them when they moved to Sudetenland, with your grandparents.

Yes. Yes, that's when I started living with them, and I didn't like it. I was so scared of my stepfather.

No, excuse me. I understood it the other way around. Excuse me?

I was just talking to Jeff. She's doing this a lot when she's talking. Can you see it?

She's rubbing her arms.

Yeah, that's OK. Where was my mind? You said you lived in the same town as your mother and your stepfather but you lived with your grandmother and grandfather. So this is something I didn't fully understand. When your mother and your stepfather lived in the same town as your grandmother, was that Leipnik?

Yes.

OK. So in other words, you went to live with your grandmother even before your parents, your mother with her husband, moved to Sudetenland.

Yes.

So it wasn't their move that made it so. It was because of your stepfather?

Well, Mom didn't want to leave me alone. Mom wanted to have me with her. So when they moved, she made me move with them.

With whom?

With my stepfather and her. I had to leave Oma and had to move with them to the Sudetenland.

OK, I understand that. But in Leipnik you didn't live with your mother and your stepfather.

No.

Why not?

[SCOFFS] Like I said, I didn't like my stepfather. He didn't like me.

I see.

Besides, they were kind of poor in those days. It just didn't work. I just wanted to live with my Oma and get spoiled.

And tell me a little bit about your Oma's place. How did she and your grandfather make their living?

They were both retired at that time already. My grandfather was a postman, a postman delivering. He was retired. And Oma of course too. They were both in their-- I don't know how old they were, but they didn't go to work anymore. They got their pension.

And what kind of a place did they live in?

Apartments.

OK. Describe it for me a little bit. Was it in the center of town or was it on the outskirts?

Center of town.

How many rooms did it have?

Well, they moved a couple of times. One time they probably had the kitchen and two rooms. And the last room, let me think. The last-- Where they lived the last that was the Judenstrasse. No, no, no. That was the Richtofenstrasse.

So there was a street called Judenstrasse?

That's where the Jews lived. We lived close by at one time. That was my favorite apartment. But before we lived on Richtofenstrasse and we had two rooms, a big kitchen and a bedroom or whatever. Only two rooms upstairs.

So aside from the few Germans and the Czechs who lived in town there were Jews in Leipnik?

Yes, there were Jews in Leipnik. They had their own street. They call it the Judengasse. And they had a synagogue. And we went through there many times because there was a shortcut where Oma wants to buy her groceries. And we also went to a Juden delicatessen store where we bought matzos and fish and different things.

So she would shop in--

Yeah, we would shop there before. Yeah.

And how did you converse with the shopkeepers, what language was used.

I believe it was Czech.

So even with the Jewish shopkeepers it was in Czech that you would speak.

Yes.

OK.

I spoke both. I spoke perfect Czech. Now I can't even think of any Czech. And German, of course.

And do you know if there was a large Jewish community or a small Jewish community?

I don't think it was a large one.

It was kind of small when we used to go through the Judengasse. They would sit outside of a small like it wasn't a street what they call here. They are all-- I don't think a car could have passed through. And they looked like poor Jewish people.

Do they look different than Czechs? I mean, were they Orthodox or were they more-- Was their dress the same?

Some of them were. The men. The men, because I see them go to the synagogue. The only thing I remember later on they started wearing a yellow star. And I ask Oma, what's that? And she says, well, they are Jews. I didn't understand what that is. Why are they different from us? She said, Helga, they're not different. They are people like you and me. She was good. So that was it.

So you asked a question and your curiosity then was satisfied.

Only when they started wearing the yellow star. Before that, I wouldn't know who is a Jew and who's a Gentile. I mean Jews don't grow horns like they say.

OK. So did life change for you in Leipnik? You said the Czech kids sometimes would call you names.

Yeah.

What kind of names would these be?

And it was getting close to when Hitler was going to march in. And of course, my parents were all for Hitler. You better be or you know-- So they decided we better move to the Sudetenland, to the German part, and so they took me away from Oma, which I hated.

So she stayed Leipnik.

She stayed. She stayed. Yeah. She always stayed. She never moved. And they didn't harm her. But like I said, Mom was in the Frauenschaft Party.

So that was a Nazi organization?

Yeah. Yeah.

Was your stepfather a member?

My stepfather was in the SR. And he wore a uniform and then once a week they had a meeting. I don't know what they did. And once in a while they marched through the city. It was so silly. And Mom was just at the office.

What office was she in? Did you work in the same office as your stepfather?

No.

Where did she work? Well, she lived-- No, wait a minute. I get confused. Yeah, she worked for the National Women's Party. And it was, you know how in Europe the cities have a square, the city square, we all lived, I lived on the square above a bank. And Dad worked for the peace of justice.

How would you say it in German?

Amtsgericht.

Amtsgericht.

Yes. And there was all on the square. And Mom worked at this side for the Frauenschaft.

Oh, so she was a paid employee.

Yes.

It wasn't that she was a volunteer for them. She was a paid employee.

Yes, she was paid, yes.

OK. The Sudetenland is a large area, it's not just one city or one village. So what part of the Sudetenland did you live in when you had to move there?

Well, they don't count it like here we have the counties. Oh wait, yeah, there's sort of a difference. Czechoslovakia is divided into Bohemia and Moravia.

Right.

And Bohemia is Prague is the capital and Brno is the capital of Moravia. So what did you ask me?

So my question was when you moved to the Sudetenland what town or village or city did you move to?

Oh, OK. It was a tiny little village, but it had a square and it had a church and a restaurant. But it was cute. It was called Stadt Liebau.

Stadt Liebau.

Yeah. They called it Stadt because it had a square, and then the streets they--

They kind of went out of the square.

Yeah, right. It was cute.

Were there any Czech people who lived there?

No, they were all gone. But there were two Jewish families, and the two boys that went to school with me.

So when you moved to Stadt Liebau, then you enrolled in school. But when you say the Czech were all gone, had they recently left, or what happened?

Yeah, but there wasn't really too many Czechs. But if there was a handful, they might have moved. I don't know.

I guess I'm trying to find out--

I hear that.

I guess I'm trying to find out how much of that-- You lived in an area-- The whole of Czechoslovakia was a political cauldron in the late 1930s. It was, you know, with the negotiations of Hitler wanting to annex Austria, going into Austria and then wanting to annex the Sudetenland. And the negotiations with Britain and France and Chamberlain coming back to Britain and saying, peace in our time.

All of that had to do with the part of the world that you were living in. And I'm trying to get a sense of how much this political turmoil was evident in your life. Knowing that you were a child at the time, but whether or not you could sense

things in the air or whether or not you could see things that were going on that looked strange. So asking you about the Czechs, if they had recently moved. Maybe they moved when Hitler annexed Sudetenland. Would that have been the case? But I don't want to say that because I don't know.

Yeah. And I don't really know either because there wasn't too many Czechs living up in the Sudetenland, so if they moved I wouldn't know.

OK. So the language in the streets was all German?

Yes, that was German.

Did it make you feel more comfortable or did it not make any difference?

Didn't make any difference to me.

OK. And were you happy in Stadt Liebau?

I was, except I had to live with Mom and stepfather, so that was not as pleasant as living with Oma in Leipnik. But I went to school.

What was school like?

School was OK. Of course I never liked school too much, but who does? The only good thing was when Hitler's birthday came on April 20, like my birthday is on April 20, there was no school. So I didn't have to go to school. I had a holiday.

On your birthday.

On my birthday just because of Hitler.

Even though it was part of Czechoslovakia still, is that right? Do you remember the year you moved to Stadt Liebau? It might have been 1938 or '39. I think it was probably '38. I think Hitler came in in '39. So that's when we had to move. And it was in the winter when he came. Because I remember everybody was out in the street, and the German troops came marching in and we were waving and yelling Heil Hitler and all that stuff. So I believe it was '39.

And it sounds like even before Hitler came that the Nazi party was in favor, that people were positive towards that.

Yes. Yes, because there was something-- My mom and my stepdad, they would-- I was too little to understand, but I remember they would go places and talk for Hitler I think.

Talk for Hitler-- that is, give speeches in favor of him?

In favor of Hitler. My Mom was a good talker, speaker. I don't know. I never went with them so I really don't know.

Did they talk about things at home?

Yeah. They were all for Hitler and they thought Hitler would be the best thing. I didn't pay too much attention to that stuff.

Did they want you to join any youth organization?

Oh yeah, you had to, because if you didn't you were an outcast. They might think you're a communist. And the Hitler Youth was fantastic. I wish they had it here.

Tell me about it.

OK, us girls, we had our Hitlerjugend. There was the girls and the boys. And we both had uniforms, which was so cool, you know.

What was the uniform like?

Oh, we had black skirts, white blouses, and a black neckerchief with a thing you pulled up. And that was about it. Oh yeah, and a jacket. A nice leather jacket. Oh, I was so proud. If you didn't join, they would look up on you, especially in that little town where everybody knows everybody. They might think you're a communist. But that was fun. But us girls, we did a lot of singing and marching. And we didn't sing political songs.

What kind of songs did you sing?

About flowers and spring, and really neat songs. And we would go camping. And like Christmastime comes we would make little things and give them to the people, the poor people or any people. If some lady had a baby, which they usually always had, you went there with flowers and sang a little song and gave a lady a flower or baby stuff. And the boys too. The boys did a lot of wood stuff they made out of wood.

So they did some little carvings and whittling and things like that?

Exactly. They all had those little jigsaws and they made little toys for children. And then Christmastime they went around and gave all the ladies-- Because the husbands was in the war and the ladies were stuck with kids, and so that's what we did. It was really fun. And be, 7 o'clock in the winter you had to be at a house.

In the evening.

Yes.

Why?

That was the rule.

It was a curfew?

Curfew. That's what you call it. And 9 o'clock in the summer curfew. And you got caught you were in bad trouble. I know I got caught by my teacher one time. I was scared to death because he threatened to tell my stepfather. And he didn't, but anyhow I was scared to death. So there was no-- Like here with the teenagers, you know-- I think in a way it was a good thing.

So it was like Scouts in some ways.

Like Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. Very nice. Nothing politics or stuff.

How old were you when you were part of this?

You had to be 10 years old.

You had to be 10 years old.

Yes.

OK, so kids younger than 10 were not really--

I don't remember. I often thought about that if it was like here. Because I was a den mother for all my three boys here. I loved it. I think we had to be 10. And we would march and sing and just have a good old time. It was very nice.

Was it sort of like a break? What was your home life like when you lived with your mother? Was the atmosphere heavy?

I would say sometimes. With Mom I got along very well. There was no problem. My stepfather, finally at the very end of the war, he had to go too. He got enlisted in the war and he was practically an old man. But at the end of the war they took everything. They took young children, 15, 16. Then they took old guys. And Mom and I were living alone and we just had a ball.

So when he wasn't there.

Yeah. It was so nice.

Did she get along with him?

Yes, but argued a lot. They argued very often, very much. I was scared to death.

What was it that they would argue about?

Any little thing. He was in a bad mood, didn't like supper he started yelling. And Mom was crying.

When Hitler marched in, did he March to Prague through Stadt Liebau?

No. Prague is so far away from us. Prague is in Bohemia, and Stadt Liebau is Moravia. So no, he came to our little village. I remember them marching, the soldiers, you know. There was no war or shooting or nothing. They just took Czechoslovakia over like nothing.

And people in the village, in Stadt Liebau, were very positive about this.

Oh, yes. The streets were full. Everybody was greeting him.

What were the attitudes towards Czechs in the village?

Nothing. We really didn't hate the Czechs. It did bother us. It didn't bother me.

I know, but in general. I'm not talking about you in particular. I'm talking about the attitudes in the town amongst so many of the other German residents who were pro-Hitler. Did they look down on the Czechs? Did they just think they were not running the country properly? What were their views?

That's a good question. But like I say, I really can't tell you. You know I was, what, eight or 10, and stuff like that didn't interest me.

Was there any talk about the Jews?

Not at that time. That started later. But really no talk. We didn't know anything except we had two Jewish boys in my class, poor, poor Jewish boys. And one time they were gone. And we asked-- That was maybe in my third, yeah, must've been in my third year.

So like in 1940 or '41?

Yeah, it was pretty much at the beginning. And we asked the teacher, where is Fisher? And I don't know the other one's name. She said, oh, they moved. That was the end of it. Overnight they both got taken. And we believed it and that was

the end of it. I never gave it another thought. Now I did many times, but those days we didn't know.

When you say now you did many times, what are the sort of thoughts that come to your mind?

Pardon me?

Well, you said at that time you didn't give it another thought, but in later years you did. And I'm asking what are the things that you would think about in later years?

Yes. Yes, I think about it a lot. Now I know where they went. But at that time I believed my teacher, they moved.

So is it that part of the thought is that your teacher lied? Is that something? Or--

She might not have known herself. They kept that pretty secret. Now you would think how come two families move overnight? In those days I didn't think anything of it.

Did your grandmother come visit you from--

Yes.

She did.

Yes.

And she would stay for a while?

Yeah, but she didn't get along with my stepdad.

He sounds like he was a pretty scary personality.

My stepdad? Maybe not to other people, but it's just the way-- He practically ignored me. Like I mentioned, he didn't like children, so he very seldom spoke to me unless I did something wrong, and then he would preach to me. We just never got close.

And tell me what kind of a personality did your mother have?

Mom was cool. She was a sweet lady.

What are the things that she found important that she wanted you to know about?

Now that I don't know. I don't know. She--

Was she outgoing?

Yeah, she was outgoing.

Was she fun to be with?

Yes, she had a good sense of humor.

When you lived with your grandmother, your grandfather was also there, yes?

Yes. Did he survive the war?

No, he died before.

A natural death?

Yes, old age.

OK, and your grandmother?

My poor grandmother had breast cancer and that's how she died.

And was that during the war?

Yes.

So there must have been a huge loss for you.

Yes.

When Hitler finally annexed Czechoslovakia, how did life change in Stadt Liebau?

You know in Stadt Liebau it didn't. There was nothing changed. Little hick town. Nothing changed. But what I heard, what they say that Hitler built all of these autobahns that appeared. They did all kinds of good stuff in Germany but not in the Sudetenland, so I never saw a change.

When you were little, were you also-- I mean, I don't want to put this in a pejorative way, but did you also accept the view of the adults that Hitler must be a pretty good guy?

Yes. Yes, that's all I ever heard, so I thought if they say so, he must be in good man.

And I take it most of the other kids must have as well.

I suppose so.

Was the German military stationed in Stadt Liebau?

No, no, they never did. They marched right through and I don't know where they stayed. They never stayed in Stadt Liebau.

So did you feel the war at all? Through 1941 in 1942, did it sound like the war even affected where you were living?

Yes. First of all, the food became on rations. Let me see what else. Oh, everybody had to go to work. I went to school until I was 14. The men were all at war, so the ladies they had to do all the farm work. So when I was 14 I had to go. I had a choice. Either I go and live with a family and help babysit or I go and work on a farm. Of course, I chose the farm. I don't like babysitting. I went to that one farm which I loved. Her husband was an only child and he got killed in the war. That wasn't supposed to be. I don't know how--

Her husband was the only child?

Yeah, the only child.

Was he a young man?

Yeah.

And so was there a rule that a family that had only one child that child would not be sent, would not be drafted? But he was.

That's the way it was, and he was drafted after all. And they had a farm, and he was drafted and killed. And they had three little children. It was awful. I worked for them in the fields.

What was their name? What was the family name? Morbitzer.

Morbitzer?

Mm-hmm.

And was most of the economy for Stadt Liebau, was it farming, was it agricultural?

Yes. It was mostly farming. You know how it was in the old days. Sometimes I think of that show-- Oh well, I can't think of that. Well, it was mostly farming, and then we had a factory that was making material. Then we had a factory-- Now that was in Leipnik they were making matches. There were several factories making things. We had like Little House on the Prairie, only not quite that bad. But it reminds me of it sometimes. We had a couple of grocery stores where they still would weigh the sugar on the scale stuff. You're too young to know.

And we had a wagoner that made wagon wheels and we had a butcher. And we had a baker that made bread. And a cobbler, a seamstress. They all had their little jobs in those days. you didn't go to Walmart and get everything.

You had to either make it yourself or get it in one of these small places.

Yes. It was fun.

Did you ever visit your grandma in Leipnik again?

Yes.

So when you asked her, when you saw Jews wearing the yellow star, was that in the place where she lived or the place where you lived?

Place where I lived.

In Stadt Liebau.

Yeah.

OK.

Yes, I went to the protectorate. I needed a pass from Sudetenland to drive into the protectorate.

Where she lived.

Where she lived. And I always went there at Christmastime and when school was out. That's where I was at always.

So when school was out, you'd spend the summers there?

Yes.

OK, so it wasn't like she was completely estranged from your life.

No.

But you needed a special pass to go.

Yes.

So in 1942 you turned 14, is that right, if you were born in '28? And that's when you had to decide whether you'd be a babysitter or go to work on the farm? So how many years of school did you finish?

Eight.

OK. And how did people speak, how did your teachers teach about Hitler and the party in school?

Actually, they didn't say too much. They taught what they were supposed to, like history or geography or math or whatever. They did not say too much about Hitler, no. But we had a big picture of Hitler in each classroom.

Did you have to swear some allegiance in the morning?

No. No, we didn't do that. What did we do? We did something. I don't remember. But did we pray? I doubt that. That was another bad thing about going to church.

Well, I wanted to ask you about that. Were your parents religious people?

No, they weren't. But I had that-- It drew me for some reason into the church. I was born Catholic. Nobody went to church in my family.

Grandma and Grandpa too, they didn't go?

Nobody went to church. I think I was the only one that always wanted to go to church. And you know Catholic churches are, there was in Leipnik, are always open.

That's right.

Nobody steals even all the gold and stuff. And I remember going in there by myself. And I happened to go by and go in that church and sit there for a little while. I always had that. It always drew me into. And outside that church there was a big cross, and there was a statue of Jesus. And I saw the little old ladies with the babushkas, the farmer ladies with their long black skirts, they would go and kiss his feet. So I thought, well, I have to do that too. I didn't even know who that guy was on the cross, but I went and kissed his feet. And my father, of course, my stepfather, oh, he was an atheist.

Was he?

Yes, through and through. So he didn't want me to go. Oh, that was another thing. We had Catholic religion one hour a week where the priest would come to the school and teach us the Bible.

And this was in Stadt Liebau?

Stadt Liebau. And we needed the parents' approval if we are allowed to go. So I came home with my paper and I said, Dad, will you please sign this that I can go hear it? He says, no. You're not going to go to have a Catholic religion. He didn't sign my paper. I cried. I was the only child in the whole school in Stadt Liebau that was not allowed, and I felt terrible. I felt ashamed. I felt awful. And I went to my priest. He was a young, nice, nice man. And I told him and I cried. He said, Helga, I tell you what. You sit way, way in the back like you're not here and listen. And that's what we did and my dad never found out.

And your mother's signature wouldn't have helped?

No. I guess not. She would have said yes.

That's a cruel thing, a very cruel thing to do. So do you remember anything from those one-hour lessons per week?

No, it was mainly Bible stories, the regular things. I don't remember, though, but I remember I used to go and listen. I was so embarrassed. I was the only-- Everybody else could go and I-- Oh well. I did go.

So as the war progressed, in the beginning it was young men who were drafted in the war, like the farmer where you worked. Tell me what kind of work did you do there?

Field work.

So what would that be? For somebody who's never gone and worked on a farm, what is involved?

[LAUGH] Bringing in the sheaves.

Bringing in the sheaves.

That's exactly. And feeding. Taking care of the horses, and feeding the pigs, and feeding the cows and horses, and bringing in the hay and the big hay wagon. Had to sit high on top. It was so much fun. I loved it. I always wanted to marry a farmer.

Really?

Yeah, that was my dream. Digging in the fall. We dug up potatoes, and in the spring they brought in the hay. And then the weeds and whatever. It was fun. I loved it.

And you lived on the farm?

No, I lived home. It was so close that I just ran home every night. And it was a good thing, because farmers never starve, and she would give me all kinds of food.

That was outside the ration. OK. So that must have helped you your whole family.

Yes, yes. Well, there was only Mom and I because he was fighting on a Russian front.

Tell me, when was your stepfather drafted? What year was he drafted?

That I don't remember, but it must have been pretty much to the end.

Would that be '43 or '44?

Probably. And then he ended up in the Russian prison and he didn't come home for a few years after the war.

Do you remember, did anybody in the village have a radio or did everybody have a radio?

Oh yeah, everybody had a radio.

And what sorts of programs would be on the radio?

Well, the news, especially when they sunk an enemy ship or the Germans progressed going further or there was [SPEAKING GERMAN]. Big deal. And then they would play the "Deutschland, Deutschland, Uber Alles." And do you know that my stepfather made us all stand up when they played that hymn?

Even if you were at home?

At home. We were eating supper and listening to a radio, and all of a sudden they start playing "Deutschland, Deutschland. Uber Alles," and he would stand up and we all would stand up until it was over. He was really a Nazi, my dad.

Sounds like he was very fanatic.

Yes, yes. He didn't wear the badge. He didn't kill no Jews or anything. But he was a fanatic for Hitler. He definitely was.

So you would get those types of programs over the radio. You'd hear those types of programs about the progress during the war and what ships were sunk.

Yeah. We even had a map on the wall with pins, and that was pins of how far the Germans are into Russia or whatever.

How old was he in the '40s?

OK, he was born '89, no, '98. He was born '98.

So 1898, so that means he was at least 42 years old.

He was in his 40s, if not older.

Would you have remembered-- So you're a teenager by that point. In 1943 you would be 15 years old. Do you remember radio broadcasts about Stalingrad, about the Battle of Stalingrad?

I remember it was a horrible thing. I remember my mom coming into the bedroom one time crying and all upset. And she says, Helga we've gone into the war with Russia. She was scared like she knew that--

So that could have been in 1941.

Probably.

June 1941 is when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. So that's two years after the war starts, almost two years after. And then the Battle of Stalingrad is two years after that. So she was upset about the attack on Russia.

She knew that we'd never make it against Russia. And we had in Stadt Liebau a camp, well, at the outskirts, with British soldiers.

British POWs? British prisoners? Were they prisoners?

Yes, they were prisoners of war. And my girlfriend and I had a crush on a couple of them. They were so cute in their uniform. Of course, they couldn't speak German and we couldn't speak English, but we would walk by. And then one said to us, he spoke a little bit German and he says, Germany's going to lose the war. We said, no way. He says, oh yeah, Germany's losing the war. I said, Krystal, I guess he's right. It doesn't look good. We were afraid as two little girls, what if we lose the war? What's going to happen? It was scary.

But would this be close to the end of the war, in the middle?

Yeah.

When your stepfather was taken-- or that is, he was drafted later on and he fought on the Russian front, did you ever get letters from him? Did your mother get letters from him?

That I don't know. I really don't remember.

Do you remember saying goodbye to him?

No, I just remember being happy that he's going to be gone. And I think my Mom was, too. Just two of us living together, that was nice.

So within all this turmoil, at least at home at that point it was quiet and it was peaceful.

It was peaceful.

After he left, how did life go on? After your stepfather was off to the war, how did life proceed for your mother and yourself?

Well, we certainly didn't miss him.

And was there still no problem with food at all?

No, because like I said, I worked for that farmer lady and she supplies us pretty well. Gave us a piece of bacon and a pot of lard. When she baked Saturday I always got a bunch of cakes, kolaches, and what they ate. Czechs have the best food. Austria. We were the Austria-Czech. Austria there's good food and Czech is good food.

Sometimes my mom cooked. My mom was a lousy cook. She loved to read and so she would read and stir the soup over there.

And it wouldn't come out right.

No. But we weren't hungry during the war. After the war we were hungry, but not during the war.

So in 1943 and 1944, that's when the war turns bad for Germany. Certainly after the Battle of Stalingrad. When did, aside from the British prisoners of war saying you won't make it or you'll lose the war, were there any other signs of trouble or any other signs of this may not go well for Germany?

Well, people didn't dare say it, you know. You didn't voice your opinion. I went to visit Oma and Opa in Leipnik, and they both said, Helga, we're losing this war. I didn't understand really what's going on. But my Opa, he knew exactly. He says, that war is lost. They will lose. They weren't for Hitler, Oma and Opa. They didn't like him and they knew that we're not gonna-- A lot of people knew that we would not win a war, but they were afraid to say it. It's not like here, free speech. You gotta watch what you say.

Did you ever hear of people who were German who disappeared or who were arrested or got in trouble? German

I heard of it, yes, but I didn't know anybody personally. But I know one thing that is worth mentioning. A lady with two children got on the wrong train. She got on the train with Jews by accident. She didn't know. And when she was on the train it was too late. And she looked around, what's this kind of people? They all wore the yellow star.

Anyway, when they finally get to their destination, she got out with her kids. There was this SS and she said, you know I think I took the wrong train. This is not where I wanted to go. It was Auschwitz. And SS man said, well, I'm sorry, you're here. You're staying. She died at Auschwitz. They would not let her go even though her husband was an officer in the German army because she saw. She found out. And if they would have let her go, she would have gone home and spread the word. So she couldn't go. She had to go with the Jews.

And she died.

Yeah.

And so how did you find out the story?

It was just-- I don't know how we found out. But it just spread out and everybody knew that story about that poor lady with two kids.

When did you know it, during the war or after?

During the war.

During the war?

That was during the war. That was when they were gassing all the Jews.

And during the war did people know about that?

Well, if they knew, they didn't say, but somehow later on somebody got it out.

So again I repeat, did you find out about this lady's story during the war? Or did you hear it only after the war?

Now that I don't remember if it was after the war or during the war. I think it must have been after, because during the war I didn't even know there was-- that they're killing Jews. No. We didn't know.

Did you know anything about internment camps, or concentration camps, or prison camps?

No, no, no.

No?

No.

Did you travel? Besides visiting your grandparents in Leipnik, did you travel outside of Stadt Liebau?

No, we didn't travel. First of all, nobody had a car in those days. Only very, very rich people. So we didn't travel much, no. Just as far as you can go on the bicycle. No, we didn't travel.

Were there newspapers? We talked about the radio and the kinds of programs that would be on the radio. Did people read newspapers in town?

Yes. Yes, they did read newspapers. I never did, but I remember I had to go buy Opa a newspaper.

Do you remember which one?

No. It might have been a Czech one.

OK. So if your grandparents didn't like Hitler--

No.

And they didn't get along with your stepfather--

No.

What did they think of your mother's views? Did that ever come up?

Mom-- I think Mom was-- Mom knew the war is lost at the end too, and of course, she only talked to me about it, you know. I don't think Mom was-- She wasn't a fanatic. Let's put it that way. She--

What kinds of things would she say to you towards the end of the war?

I think she'd realized the war's over soon, that we're not going to win. Anybody should have seen that. She was frightened what's going to happen to us. Especially she was frightened because she was in the National Ladies Association, or whatever you call it, and I was in the Hitler Youth. And she was worried what's going to happen to us if we lose the war?

Again, I can understand that fear. What I'm trying to also get a sense of is how do people know? How do people start asking, they start questioning, we may not win the war? What happens in life? How do things change that tell you things aren't going well?

Well, you really didn't talk about it to outsiders. People were afraid. Practically to the last minute they were saying we're winning, whether they were ignorant or were afraid to open up or speak.

But what signs would you get, or what signs would she get that it's not going well? What were the signs?

That was when we started to the war with Russia. That was a biggie. And she didn't think we could win against Russia.

Did she get news of your stepfather being captured?

I don't know. I don't know whether she did or didn't. I guess I didn't care or I don't remember.

All right, then let's go towards the end of the war. What happened? Did you ever hear in April 1945 what was going on in Berlin, about the Russian offensive on Berlin?

In 1945, could you be specific about a month?

Well, Hitler committed suicide in April.

In April. Yeah. Let me think for a minute. I can't remember if everybody was happy or not, but we knew then. We knew the war was lost, and I recall April '45, that's when I got to Theresienstadt.

Well then maybe you were occupied by the Russians before then. What happened?

Yes.

OK, then tell me at what point did your lives change completely?

OK. OK, let's say it didn't look good. It looked like we lose the war, and Mom was at the office and she-- Oh yeah. Yeah, sorry. I was running around steady with my girlfriend and we both knew the Russians were very, very close. Whether the war was over or not, we heard the cannons and shooting. And some of the houses were burning. And there were Russian airplanes over Stadt Liebau, our little town. And they were bombing our little Stadt Liebau. And there was a lot of fire going on, and I said, Krystal, look, the Russians are coming. And we were scared because we heard of what the Russians do.

What was it that you had heard?

The raping. So anyhow, she says, Well, I better go home. And I says, Yeah, I better go home too. We knew something bad's happening. And so I ran home and she did. And my mom, she comes running home from the office. And she says,

Helga, pack a suitcase. I says, why? We have to flee. The Russians are coming. They are only a couple of kilometers from Stadt Liebau.

And I think, OK, and I get a suitcase. What do I pack? My books, my toys. She comes and throws everything out. She says, take clothes, take food-- mainly food. So I had to repack. And while I got the suitcase all packed, of course I snuck a few books and stuff in, I couldn't close it. And Mom comes running home from the office and she goes on the suitcase, she sits on the suitcase so we can close it. And there goes a big boom! The Russians were right down the street and they were shooting with their Molotov or whatever cocktail. I don't know what they were doing. But anyway they were shooting at Stadt Liebau.

So we finally closed the suitcase. She says, Come, we have to run. We went out the back door just a little bit as far as-- It's all surrounded by forest. It's really pretty. And we went to the back door, ran into the woods dragging that heavy coffer, and just go it. And once in a while we turned around. And in the meantime, a lot of other people had joined us. They were fleeing from the Russians too. They didn't want to stay when they come in.

And they were bombing and shooting and we turned around and the city was just burning. All you could see is fire. We never went back. I never, ever went back to Stadt Liebau. The way I left my home, that's the way, and there was a nice Hitler bust in my bedroom too.

And so we kept on going through the woods, and more and more people joined us. And we didn't know where we're going to go. Then we heard a rumor-- there's always the rumors going on and stuff like that. They said if you make it to Prague before the Russians and the Americans are coming to Prague, we'll be safe. We got to get over the bridge to the border and on the other side are the Americans. That was another rumor constantly. So we just kept on going. And I don't know how long we kept on going. It was just forever and ever.

Were the British prisoners of war by that point still there?

The war was still there.

The British, they were there, those prisoners of war.

Yeah. Well that I don't know because we never went back so I don't know if they-- They probably let them go. I hope so.

Yeah.

Well anyway, they would have been-- Yeah, I'm sure the Russians let them go. So we came, ah, we just kept on going, and more and more people joined us. And then we started running out of food too, and then we joined all kinds of German troops. They still had some rations they would share with us. And they told us the war is over but there were still some skirmishes go on here and there in the woods and stuff.

So we just kept on going. We didn't know where we were going. But we did try to get to Prague, which is-- that's poking me-- which is a long way away.

Do you know how many days or nights you were in--

Yeah. I don't remember how many. But it was-- I almost think it was almost a week. Because we stopped once in a while and rested until the Russians were on our heels again. Then we got ready to run again. And at one time we came to a big, big meadow and all around was forest. And there was a pond. We were all tired, and the farmers, they were escaping too with the horses and the wagons and the grandma sit on top of the wagon with the feeder bins and everything. Like when I see Gone With The Wind and the fighting Atlanta that always reminds me.

And so anyhow we came to that pond, and I said to my mother, Mother, you sit here and rest. I'm going to go down to the pond and wash my socks. I don't know what teenagers do sometimes. I had white socks and they had to be washed.

So I go down to the pond and I'm scrubbing my white socks. And all of a sudden shooting all over the place and everybody starts running. We were surrounded by the Russians. They said Vlasov truppen. I remember that. But I don't know what it meant.

You didn't know what the Vlasov truppen were?

No, I heard of Vlasov truppen. Even though the war was over, like I said there were still little skirmishes going on here and there, and they apparently had us surrounded and they started shooting at us. And so everybody started running again, the farmers with the wagons and the German soldiers, and I couldn't remember where I left my mother. The heck with the socks. I see everybody is running, people are shooting, and I see the German soldier he's running like this and I'm running like this. He says, Girl, duck. You cannot run like this. I said, oh. OK. I run like that.

And I remember a girl that I later met, she was in the meadow too, and she was lucky and got shot in the leg. And I thought, Why didn't I get shot in the leg? I'd have something to brag about all my life. But I didn't. I made it out safe. So then we started going again.

Can we cut from that?

It was just this quick.

Hang on just a second.

I can't see. I'm sorry I cannot see.

Yeah, of course, the spotlights are all on you. Are we going?

OK, so continue. You're running and running.

Running and running, and then we came to Prague and the running us over. But I got very, very ill from not eating right and stuff. And they-- How did we get there? They drove us, they herded us at Prague to the stadium.

Who was "they"?

That was the Russians and the Czechs. The war was over.

But the Vlasov army collaborated with the German army. They were not enemies of the German army.

I have no idea. But that was just like--

A skirmish.

10 minutes, 15 minutes it was over with.

OK. And then you continued running.

We continued.

So did you get to Prague on foot?

Yes.

OK. Yourself and your mother.

Yes.

But you weren't captured by anybody.

No.

OK. When you got to Prague, where did you go?

Well, when we went to Prague, somehow we ended up at the stadium. I don't know if we got herded in there or they didn't know what to do with all these farmers and soldiers and refugees. I mean, the war was over, but there was no--

OK, so there were people who were running Prague-- In other words, it was whoever had captured or was running Prague at that time. Are they the ones who made sure you got to the stadium? You don't remember that part?

No, I don't remember that part. I just remember running, keep on running from the Russians, and somehow we ended up at the stadium. And the war of us over.

For you.

For us, for Germany. The war was over. In fact, they chased us to one street and there was four or six Czechs, and they were holding the German flag. And somebody had another knife, a big thing, and he went and he just went like this.

Stabbed it.

It was like a stab in my heart anyway. I knew it was all over and done with. Another kept part of my life. So we ended at the stadium.

And what happened then?

We stayed there I bet a week. We had no idea. Nighttime-- Oh, that's a reason I hate fireworks. The Russians would do fireworks every night. They were celebrating their victory. And ever since, I cannot stand fireworks on the Fourth. It just gives me the willies. We were laying on the bleachers. The whole stadium was just crowded with refugees and German soldiers and what have you, and the Russians were all around.

Nighttime you could hear the women scream. That's all you heard. They were just going around with flashlights and picking out the girls, the ladies. Oh, can I go back for a bit?

Absolutely.

I forgot something.

Well, this happens. You know I'm glad you want to bring it up now.

Before we went to Prague, while we were still on the run and the Russians were all around us, the war was over and I was in the wagon. My mom and I, we were lucky we got a wagon with a German soldier and a couple horses. And he said, you know, ladies go lay in the wagon and I'll walk. And we were so tired from walking and walking days and nights, so OK, we did.

And we stopped. It was nighttime and there were shooting. And I said, What's going on? He says, We better wait a little bit, there's some Russians around. So we stopped. And the next thing I hear or feel somebody grabbing my arm, [SPEAKING RUSSIAN] and I look up and it's a Russian soldier. He wanted me to get out of the wagon I was so scared. In my days, we were brought up different than teenagers nowadays. I mean, I was still playing with dolls for all I know. And thank God a German officer comes and a Russian officer because there was a lot of commotion all of a sudden. And the Germans said, what do you want?

And the soldier, he was afraid because they were not supposed to rape. If a Russian officer catch them, they were in trouble. But they did anyway if they didn't get caught. And the German officer said, you Russian pigs, you're not going to rape any of our German women. He was mad. And a Russian officer agreed, and he said, OK. And so anyhow I got saved. But then he went after my mom, and my mom, of course, wasn't a young girl like I was. They got to take my mom. So anyhow they were happy to have somebody.

But then at the stadium it was much the same thing. There was nobody to protect us. I would lay out the concrete, my mom laying on top of me, while the Russians were going with the flashlights and picking out whoever they wanted. And then you could hear the screams all night. I think that was the worst thing. And then they have the fireworks going, victory. So anyhow we stayed there maybe a week at the stadium.

The next day finally they brought in a soup kitchen. And oh, before that, like I mentioned, I was sick. I had-- I don't know how you say it nicely, diarrhea. I don't know. Is that OK? And Mom, there was a field hospital and Mom took me up there. And there was German soldiers, doctors, and Mom asked if they have anything for me, beg, and she was always so worried about me.

I was sick, and I had to lay on the floor. There was no room. And I was laying on the floor and next door me like here a German doctor had to amputate a German soldier's leg. And I never forget that. They actually had a saw, and all I could remember is there was a bucket, and I heard the plops. I heard that leg fall in the bucket. I'll never forget that.

But anyhow, I only stayed a night or two. They gave me some kind of medicine and I felt better later on. So I joined my mother at the stadium again and then we had soup once or twice a day. That was water with a couple of potatoes swimming. But it was warm. It was soup.

When your mother was taken from the wagon, did she come back the next morning?

Yeah.

Did she say anything?

She only said, seven Russians.

Oh my gosh.

And you know I didn't know much about that. I was raised very sheltered, didn't know anything. And those days were different. But still I knew something was happening. So we stayed in the stadium I believe it could have been a week, could have been a week. It was terrible. The nights were terrible. At one time, there was a latrine a mile long. And you lose all your-- you know what I mean.

Any inhibition.

I had to go. And I remember that very clearly I said to my Mom-- I sort of made me a landmark where my mom is, but they do in parts, so I said, Mom, I gotta go. So I went down to the latrine. And a few feet away from me comes the firing squad. And I think now what? Are they gonna shoot me that I fall in? And a German soldier, I don't know what he had done wrong, he was standing there blindfolded. They executed him right in front of me. I was watching it. Anyhow--

Who were the executioners? What with uniforms did they have?

They were Russians. And the guy that got executed was a German soldier. I don't know what he did, but I watched that. And then when I went back to my mom I started shaking and crying. It just hit me that--

Was that the first murder that you saw?

Yes. Yes. I never seen anybody get shot that close to me, so I it really hit me later on. But it was so I watched. And I don't know why I watched, but you do. You get fascinated. And they kept shooting. I knew the guy was dead, but they kept-- I think they just wanted to unload all their bullets because they kept shooting and shooting and shooting. And I think, you're wasting your bullets. That guy is dead. So I went back to Mom and cried. So anyhow--

And then one day finally they said, you're going on a train. You're going to Germany, another rumor. So they marched us from the stadium to the railroad station and they loaded us--

[DOG BARKING]

Let's cut for a second.

And they loaded us up--

Hang on.

My dog.

I know. And so one day from the stadium what happened?

Yeah. They marched us to a railroad station, loaded us up in cattle cars, just like they did with the Jews, and we thought, well, that's the end of us. And they drove us out of Prague. I don't really know what Theresienstadt is. I know it's close to Prague.

North of Prague.

Yeah.

North of Prague.

So I don't remember how close we got, but then they unloaded us and we had to march across the five. And that's where they went straight to Theresienstadt.

And tell me what did you see? When you got to Theresienstadt, what was the image in front of your eyes?

Well, we went right away to the camp.

So the camp. So what kind of-- There's the Theresienstadt camp and then there's the rest of the town. What did the camp look like?

It was scary. The town, I think they used that as a ghetto, the town, for Jews. And they made it look so fancy and nice when the Red Cross walked in. They saw the Jews having coffee and playing the harmonica and having fun. No, they walked us straight through.

To the camp.

To the camp.

What did camp look--

It looked scary.

What does scary mean? How did--

The building itself is when you're seeing it it's a horrible thing. Besides, while we were being chased I heard it down there they were on each side. Now I don't remember if they were Czechs or Russians. Could have been both. They were with their hitting on the people. I know my mom got-- I was more in the middle. I was always pretty lucky. But my mom got hit over the head and she was bleeding a little bit, but she was OK.

And they herded us all the way down to the end. And at the end there was like a half circle. And it looked like a grave, but it wasn't. And there were three flags-- the Russian flag, Czech flag, and a typhus flag. And that looked awfully scary. But you know how it goes down, down, down through how many gates? But they took us all the way down. And all the way along they beat the heck out of you, you know? It was, I guess I had-- So that's how we ended at Theresienstadt.

So aside from your mother and yourself, was the group of all women, or children, or who made up this group of people?

It was mainly women, and there was some German soldiers, but I cannot remember any kids. And I have often thought now what happened? There must have been kids. There wasn't. I don't remember any children.

Because if you take a woman and she has children, do you split them apart? She gets sent there and the children somewhere else?

That didn't happen with us. They separated the men and the women, but there was no kids. A lot of young people and old people. But they came from everywhere.

Could you estimate how many people there would have been, how many prisoners there might have been?

No, I wish I could. As much as I remember, and I may be remembering wrong, there was 200 women in that one big cell.

So you were herded into a cell?

Mm-hmm.

And was that like a barracks kind of building, or was it a separate building?

No, it was not a barracks. It is brick or concrete. It looks like, well, Maria Theresa, the queen--

The queen of Austro-Hungary.

Right. She built that for a military prison.

Mm-hmm.

And it has walls that thick. And escape wasn't very easy, even though some tried. And I think a couple succeeded while I was there. But it's an awful-looking building.

So it was a brick building. It was a very thick brick building and had a room or a cell?

Cells.

Cells. And in one cell 200 people would be--

That's what I recall. I may be wrong. I may be wrong.

But a lot of people.

Yes.

Were there 200 cots?

Well, they would--

In bunks.

Bunks, yeah.

They were in bunks.

Just straight bunks.

So they herded you in there and then what happened?

Then they stripped us. Well, if we had any luggage that was gone right away.

What had happened to your heavy luggage with your books and toys?

That disappeared somewhere along the line.

OK.

But then we had to get naked completely. And there was some ladies that shaved our heads. I was lucky again. By the time I-- We stood in line. By the time it was my turn, they were so tired of shaving heads they let me go. And I had braids. But I don't remember my mother. No, I don't think her head was shaved too because we are always together. And then they gave us the same clothes, the striped like the Jews before us wore. And that's the first time we ever found out about the concentration camps.

How did you find out?

There was a couple of Jews left. And then later on, well, I get to it later on, but we had to take care of them. But before we did, no.

So there were Jews still there in the cells?

There was a couple of them there. I remember because one of them gave me a nice, thick army blanket, and I was so grateful cause even though it was April or May-- May 24th, yeah, never forget.

What was May 24th?

That's when we got chased into Theresienstadt.

So that's already the war is over.

Oh yes.

The war is over May 8th or May 9th.

Yes.

So then you were still in the stadium in Prague?

Oh yeah.

And that's why they did the fireworks?

Yes.

I see. Did you ever learn that Hitler had died?

I believe we may have heard of it. Somehow, somewhere we did. Nobody seemed to care.

OK, but you don't recall, you don't remember hearing about it.

Mm-hmm.

OK. And when you got to Theresienstadt, were these men or women, the Jews that were still there?

There was a few. There wasn't many. But at the city, in the ghetto itself, there was a bunch them, and they were all sick.

OK. But the one who gave you a blanket, was that a man or a woman?

A man.

A man gave you a blanket.

Yes.

And he was still in that cell.

Yeah, but not long. I guess he-- I never saw him again afterwards. He must have got out or probably went into the ghetto, but not the camp any more.

And why does May 24th stay in your mind?

Because that was the day they chased us.

Into there. OK.

Into the camp.

And when that man gave you the blanket, did he also tell you what the place had been?

No, he didn't. We didn't speak at all. So we were there for 15 months. And you know we didn't know it wasn't a death camp. We thought it was, but it wasn't. It was just like a holding camp. But we didn't know because they said, you're going to die here just like you killed the Jews. We believed it. I thought, oh well, that's it.

And is that how you found out is because the authorities in control of the camp said the Jews were here and you killed them as Germans and so on? Is that how you found out the Jews had been there?

Yes. And that's the very, very first time that we ever heard that Jews were in concentra-- We never knew. We never heard of Auschwitz, or Dachau, or Treblinka, or Theresienstadt until then. Then we found out what really happened.

Did people believe it? Because it came from the enemy, did people believe it?

Well, some of them didn't want to, but yes, I think they did.

And you believed it.

Oh yes. Oh yes.

And your mother believed it.

Yes. Yes, we believed it. We believed it because we had to take care of the Jews that made it through.

Tell me about that.

Well, after we was in Theresienstadt the first few weeks we didn't do not nothing except in the morning we had to stand out, winter or summer, so they could count.

Yeah. Roll call.

But then later on they put us to work. We did all kinds of chores, all kinds of chores. But since you want to know that--

I want to know about all of them, all of the chores.

But that was one of our chores. We had to go-- Did they take us by bus? No, we had to walk. We always had to march. Schnell, schnell, we had to march to the ghetto. And the ghetto was the military place at one time from Maria Therese.

The military barracks. It had been a garrison town. Theresienstadt had been a garrison town.

That's what it was. And in those buildings they had all the Jews lay that made it through the war but were terrible, terrible ill. They were like on their last leg. So that was our job, Mom and I and of course a bunch of women, but Mom and I we always stuck together. We had to go-- They made hospitals out of these buildings and we had to take care of the sick Jews.

Were they men or women?

Men. All men. And I had five rooms. My mom had five rooms. Everybody had a certain amount what they had to do. You had to wash the floor and their feet. And that's the first time I saw what happened to Jews in concentration camps. They were walking skeletons. And don't laugh, but I only weigh 71 pounds. And every time I look at myself I think I look just like commandant at Auschwitz. I really do. I'm skin and bones. It's ugly. But anyway--

So that one time I come in the morning, we come, we had five rooms. And I go to my first room and I had to wash the floor. I had one bucket to wash the patients, to wash the dishes, and to wash the floor.

One bucket of water.

One bucket of water. And there are doctors and nurses who are all Russians. They were intelligent. They were nice people. They were not regular-- So anyhow, I walk in my room and one is dead. And I get all excited. What am I going to do? And the Russian sister came in, nurse, and I said, nurse, nurse, he's kaput, dead! She says, eh, kaput, kaput. Wash him off. I don't see why, but anyhow she says, wash him real nice and clean, then they'll take him away.

So I take my bucket and I start washing up. Now first of all, I ran next door to my mother. (Crying) Mom, could you help me? There's a dead Jew. I can't-- I'm supposed to wash him. I can't help you, she said. I have my own work to do here. I got people to take care of. You just do it. But I've never washed a dead person before. And I've never ever seen a dead man, a naked man before. Well she wasn't going to help. She had her work.

So I was brave and I started washing that poor man. And you know I turned him around. Of course he was laying in a puddle of diarrhea. And as I washed his rear end, his buttocks, the skin just peeled off.

Oh dear.

Because God knows how long he's been laying in that mess. But I washed my first dead Jew. I did it. I think about it so many times now, you know, and I think I watched only, what, 15, 16? Now I would hug them all. It's just now it really, well, ever since I grow up it got to me. When you're a teenager, you just want to get things done. OK, so I got rid of-- I got him cleaned up and they took him away. They had like a thing you push, and it was like layers, and there was all the dead people laying like--

Did he have a name?

Well, he might have but I don't know. And so then there was-- After I cleaned him up, I had to take care of the other guys. And there was one he called me Helga. He just loved me. He was still in pretty good shape. And they got good food from the Russians. He had scrambled eggs and toast and I don't know what all, and he wouldn't eat, so he was going to give me that. Well after washing a dead person, I couldn't, I just couldn't eat scrambled eggs even so I was hungry. We were always hungry. Oh God.

But he was OK and he wanted me to sit on his bed and talk to him. He was such a sweet Jew. And I did, as much as I didn't have much time. But I said, I gotta go. I gotta clean everybody up. No, sit, sit. Eat, eat. I couldn't eat his eggs. Well then, feed me. OK. So I fed him.

OK.

I liked him. I don't remember his name. I don't know if he was a German Jew or a Polish Jew or whatever.

But you spoke in German.

How did we speak? Yeah, we spoke German. Yeah, we spoke German so he must have been a German Jew.

What did you talk about?

Now I would ask him a million questions. I'm so stupid. But I was young. Well I'm still--

No, no, no.

You know I had five rooms to take care of and wash the patients with the same bucket as I wash the floor. And Mom did the same thing.

But how could you wash a patient with the same water--

No, no, we changed the water. Me I just had that one bucket.

Oh, I see. I was thinking how could you wash the dishes and the patient? OK.

We did wash--

So you changed the water.

We changed water but not the bucket. It's still not sanitary.

No, it's still not sanitary but--

Yeah, but that's the way it went.

And if you had five rooms, how many people would be in each room?

I would say three or four.

So it could be you'd have about 20 people.

Yeah. And we had all day, early in the morning till late at night. That was one of our jobs. Then we had one-- That was actually not a bad job because I got to see--

Did anybody else talk to you besides that one man?

No. I don't remember.

Did they ever talk to you as far as conversation? Did you have anything--

They were full of hate against us. And I don't blame them. I mean, the way they stare at us, they were-- They hated us, and that's-- And who knows how many lived through that? They were awfully sick and just skin and bones. I don't know if they ever made it. I hope.

And then my other job, they were going through a disinfecting. The ones that were ready to travel to their home place, wherever that was, they had to go to a disinfecting place And it was a train. The wagons were made into a disinfecting place. So it was like 50 men, 50 women. I worked for that. That wasn't bad. That was a good job. But the men I felt sorry for.

There's another thing I can't forget. I had to tell them to take their clothes off, and I had some contraption where I would draw the clothes and they all get disinfected. They had lice and whatever. And there was a little Jew, he reminds me of a rabbi. Little old Jew with a long beard. I love those rabbis, they're so cute. And I told him, take your clothes off. Can you imagine a poor Jew, a rabbi, take his clothes off in front of a shiksa? But he had to. And he was sitting there like this, trying to cover himself up. I feel so sorry for all of this now.

Anyway, he did. And then they would throw their clothes in my contraption and go to the next caboose and get disinfected and get new clothes. So they were on the way home to wherever they came from. But it was Israel, some of them, back to Israel. Some of them tried to go back home if they had a home. That was one of my jobs.

Another job when I lived in Theresienstadt, the Russians they would pick us up in the morning and bring us into the ghetto. And you know they had all the military in there, and they wanted their rooms painted nice and clean. These dumb Russians. So we went. He says, now you paint this one blue, and this one green, and that one the red. They were crazy.

They didn't know how to flush a toilet. We had to pull it. They had those pulling things. But they had so much fun pulling and pulling until it was broke. Some of them washed their face in the toilet. Those were the Russians they came from way like they had those mustaches we called them Mongol. You know what I mean? They didn't know nothing. They were like--

Well, they had come from a primitive kind of environment.

Yeah.

And so they weren't used to seeing these things.

They didn't know nothing. But there was a Russian officer, I don't know their ranks, but let's say he was a lieutenant, and he was very, very good. His name was Anatoly. I still remember. He saved the ladies from getting raped a lot of times. He was on the ball. He was a good, intelligent little-- just a little guy. And he always told us what we have to do. But we painted the whole town.

All those colors.

All those colors. Whatever they wanted. What else did we do? I don't know.

So Anatoly. How would he save you? That is, how would he protect you?

Yes. He always while we were working, those little Russians they were always sneaking around looking for a girl. And then Anatoly was right behind them. He knew. And I saw him many times to talk to some regular or private Russians, not ranking, you leave those women alone. He was nice. He was good to us.

And then they cooked for us. That was good. That was the best. They made that yellow peas. They made it like a thick--

A soup or a stew or something like that?

Yeah, something like that. It was so good. Maybe because we were so starved that anything would have been good, but they cooked that. If we worked for the Russians we got fed. They always fed us, and that was good. And we even made friends with some of the Russians. Some of them were really nice. They were human. They were nice. They could talk a little bit with us and, yeah, you could make friends with some of them. But you gotta be careful.

When you would come back to the cell after you finished your work, and your mother would come back to the cell, would you ever talk about what you did or what you saw or what you learned?

Yes.

What are some of those things that you would talk about?

Well, all the daily stuff. And Mom, of course, she always worried about me.

Had her personality changed after she had been raped?

No, she just tried to be always close to me and watch over me, and we tried to be at the same job if possible. But I cannot imagine having my own kid going through stuff like that. So now I understand her better because in those days, to me some of it was an adventure, and I got mad at her. I said, Mom, I'm OK. Don't worry about me all the time. Now I understand. But it was good.

Let's see what else was interesting. Then we worked at a vegetable field, like tomatoes or potatoes, and we weeded and whatever you have to do. Radishes. And of course we eat like--

You ate whatever you could find, yeah.

And we had a Czech couple, a young man. He didn't care what we were doing. He was young and so stupid. Before we get back to camp, we would steal whatever we could.

Excuse me just for a second. Adjust the glasses. You just--

We came out like this with tomatoes and potatoes. All the ladies, they came in with the big--

Big breasts being filled with the vegetables.

And then, of course, we had those pants, so they would tie the pants and throw all the potatoes or whatever into the pants. So we're marching back to the camp, and I spoke perfect Czech, and at the gate there was two Czech officers. In fact, I had a crush on both of them, but one looked better than the other. And he called me kinde. Instead of kind, he says, uh, du kinde. Go. Sometimes it gave me a bunch of cherries. I had it made.

But one time we're all marching in big and fat. He always let me go, always let me go, but one lady's pants had opened up and all the potatoes were running out. So it depended in what kind of mood they were. If they were in a good mood, they let you have it. If not--

Were there any punishments, or did they just take it away?

There used to be sometimes. There used to be that they got a little beating. But that didn't stop us. We were so hungry I have to-- And the food was awful.

Except for those peas, except for the yellow peas that you told me about.

That was delicious. But I meant at the camp. In the morning we got a thin slice of bread, black coffee. And then noon we usually weren't at home. We were out some place working. And the evening was the same thing. Soup. At one time, for weeks we had soup that was just water and a few potatoes swimming in there, and no salt. Now why they didn't give us any salt I still to this day don't know. No salt.

And then they started feeding us cooked blood. And I still don't know what kind of blood, whose blood it was either. But it was cooked. It was hot. No salt. If there would have been a little salt, it would have tasted better. The looks of it, the smell of it. But you know we were hungry. We were so hungry.

And as younger people, we had a better chance stealing from the fields or getting little tidbits from somebody, but the older women, they had to stay in camp all day. Old like me or in between or whatever they died. They died. They were too old to go out to work, so they laid in their bunk bed for weeks and months and they passed away. They couldn't make it. Oh, it's not that somebody didn't bring them a potato or something, but it wasn't enough to survive on, you know.

Did people talk about the soldiers and the prisoners of war-- that is, their fathers, their brothers who might have been soldiers and what's happening to them? While you were in Theresienstadt, did you hear anything of what was going on in the outside world?

Not really. But first of all we were not allowed to write to nobody. And yeah, bits and pieces came. Then later on we were allowed to write postcards which they, of course, read through. What you call it?

Censorship?

Yes. Yes. In fact, I got some and they're written in Czech.

Really? You still have some of those postcards?

I still have them someplace that my mother wrote to my grandmother. We had to let her know finally where we are, that we're still alive. She didn't even know if we're alive. And then when they finally allowed us to write to our relatives, we did. And so my mom wrote to my Oma in Leipnik where we are and we're doing fine, but if she could please send us a package.

And of course Oma did. It came with cookies. And you know that of course was gone in 10 minutes. You share. So that was a nice day. But I think the first half year or so we weren't allowed to tell nobody where we was.

So your grandfather had died, but your Oma still was alive.

Yes.

OK. So she died after the war.

Yes.

From the breast cancer.

Yes.

Did the Jews that you cleaned, the man who spoke to you and wanted you to sit and talk with him, did he tell you anything of what he had been through?

Never. They never talked about that. And I don't know why I didn't ask him, either. Now I would. I think I just wanted to get my job done and be out of there. I don't know.

Did you find out more things? Did you find out about Auschwitz while you were into Theresienstadt? Did you find out about the other concentration camps?

You know I can't remember for sure where I found out about, when and where I found out about the others. Not in Theresienstadt. But somebody must have said that there was more. And then when I was in Israel I went to Yad Vashem.

Yad Vashem.

Yeah. And you know that where they got all the black-- I saw Theresienstadt too. It's in there too. Some of them I had never heard of except the big ones, Treblinka, the big ones. And of course, I started reading a lot of stuff about the Holocaust later on. I love to read those books. But I learned more about Treblinka and, yeah, all those books. Dachau. There was more than I thought there was.

So you said you stayed in this camp for 15 months, yes? In Theresienstadt. You were there for 15 months?

Yes.

And what happened after 15 months?

It wasn't good. In a way I was lucky because I spoke fluently Czech. They finally more towards the end and when they sort of how shall I say? It wasn't quite as strict as in the beginning. They quit beating up people and the kapos, they were a little nicer and everything. They started taking people out of Theresienstadt into the farming. And I got the most best farm you can imagine. And it only happened because I was there working for a few days and I was doing-- love farm work.

And the lady of the farm, she had one young son that was supposed to inherit. It was actually a plantation. It was pretty nice and fancy. She heard that I speak Czech, and she asked the manager of Theresienstadt if she could hire me that I could sleep there cause I'm such a good worker, and so they hired me out. I had the best food out there.

But you didn't get wages. You just got fed.

Oh no, no. You're lucky to get something to eat. But anyway, farming food, oh God, and I ate on their table with them. Yeah, they were, oh, Pani [PERSONAL NAME]. She was a nice little lady. I loved her. Her husband was dead, and her and her son was running the place. They had a German shepherd, and that was all I needed. My love. And I asked if I could take it for walks and stuff. And a goat. I had my own room that was so cute. And I had lilac and everything. And a goat got up in my room and ate my lilac.

But anyway, I walk there in the garden. Whatever job there was. And I had the best food. Oh, that woman could cook and bake. So I was hired out. That was nice. It was very nice. Except while I was hired out they made transports of emptying Theresienstadt. So they would have a transport that would go to British side, one that would go to a French, one would go to the Americans, and one to the Russians. And wouldn't you know Mom wouldn't go with anybody

without me, and she was in the camp. Mom said no, so all those transports went until the Russians then Mom said, if you get my daughter back from the farmer, I'll go on that last transport. So we ended again camp with the Russians.

So where did they take you?

Oh, some northern German. I didn't like it. Worked again on a farm.

But in the East German section, then. In the Russian zone. Theresienstadt So when they were having transports out of people from Theresienstadt, it was actually to Germany but in the various zones that had been occupied by the Allies.

Yes.

I see. And so you were taken to northern Germany. Do you remember the name of the place?

Not really. It was really a hick town. There was a farmhouse, and there was nothing for kilometers. There was another farmhouse. It was crummy. I didn't like it.

OK.

I'm trying to remember a city that would have been a little bigger.

Schwerin maybe? Rostock?

No. I don't even know Germany too good. I don't like Germany. I'm trying, but I can't recall.

It's OK.

Had a found a dialect I could hardly understand. I hated that place.

OK, so what did you have to do there?

From when on?

From when the Russians took you or you went into the Russian zone and to north, in Eastern Germany to the northern section, what kind of work were you doing there?

Farm work.

Farm work. They put of all with the farms.

And how long did that last?

Probably a year, not quite a year.

So 15 months, a year and three months in Theresienstadt and about another year in this place. Then what happened after that?

What happened--

After that. I mean, after that year.

Oh, after that year. Oh, my mom was with me at that farm and they were really mean to her because Mom is an office woman, I'm a farmer. My mom has two left hands as we call. So she was more of a babysitter than anything else, so they didn't like her. Mom split. She split and went to the English zone first, and then she wrote me to come too, so I said

goodbye and went to the English zone.

How did you do that? Was it easy to do or difficult to--

No, it was not easy to do. By mistake, by I don't know, by God's grace or whatever, she had to go over the border, sneak at night. There was always somebody that knew the right place where you can go from one to the other. You can go from the Russian to the British or whatever. And she had to sneak over there with a bunch of other people at nighttime. A certain path through the woods someplace. And she got to go to the British zone. And she got a job there at a nunnery.

At a convent?

Yes, convent.

A lady who had not gone to church got a job at a convent.

There she was. At least she had some good food because she worked in the kitchen. But let me go back to Theresienstadt. At one time I was very, very ill. I had a contagious something, and they put me in the cell by myself and I hardly got any food. I probably would have starved to death but Mom was lucky in Theresienstadt and got to work in the kitchen. Not in the kitchen for us but in the kitchen for the Czech officers. They had the best food. So Mom, they were making some meat and stuff and knedliczki. Do you know what knedliczki are?

Sort of a knodel, which is bread that's put together. You describe it for me.

Yeah, you're exactly right.

Made into a ball.

Make it to a ball and then you throw it into water.

And so it's like a matzo ball almost.

Almost.

Not quite.

Exactly. So anyway, they were making knedliczki. And I was in that cell by my lonesome, starving. So Mom was going to bring me some knedliczki. She could visit me once a day, usually in the evening. So she had a couple of knedliczki she was going to bring to me, and a Czech officer walks in the kitchen. And my mom don't know what to do with the knedliczki, so she runs into the bathroom.

And then she thinks, well, that guy might tell me to come out, so she throws the knedliczki in the toilet. And you know, they wouldn't sink. They floated. And she was scared to death that that Czech officer will make her come out of the bathroom. What's she doing there so long? But he didn't.

So once the coast was clear, she took the knedliczki out of the toilet, and you know they were the best knedliczki I ever ate.

Oh good God.

Yeah.

Well, if they got you healthy--

I'm here.

Yeah.

But I wish I knew how to make them.

Yeah.

They're so good. With a pork roast and sauerkraut. Oh!

So did you then follow your mother to the British zone?

Yes, I followed. She wrote me a card. I can't think of the word. Just a little-- I knew what she meant, let's put it that way. In case somebody else would have read it, they wouldn't know what she's talking about. And I went the same path and I got the same way through the, you know, snuck through the border.

Mm-hmm.

And I made it. And I went together with my mom again.

And so when you're in the British zone you're then at that convent as well. And you never went back to Stadt Liebau.

Never.

Did you ever go back to Czechoslovakia?

Yes, one time. And I don't remember, it must be 10 or 15 years ago. I took my husband.

So that was the only time?

That was the only time I ever went back. And I never went back to Stadt Liebau because the Russians made a military place out of it and apparently everything is torn down. So some people went and they told me it's just not the same. It's not Stadt Liebau anymore. It's a military place now.

And your grandmother. How did you find out about what happened?

Mom found out, maybe through Red Cross or somewhere. She was in Germany by then too.

I see.

Laying in a hospital near us, so we found her.

So when you went back to Czechoslovakia, it was a good 50 years later when it was the Czech Republic. If you're talking 10, 15 years ago, that would make it around 2000. A lot had changed there by that time.

A lot had changed for the worst.

Tell me what makes you say that.

Well, remember the Russians took over again Czechoslovakia. Now they're free, but--

That's right.

Well, when they were in, nothing got built. They just actually destroyed it. The homes, the houses, they were the broken windows and the stucco peeling off the walls. We went only to Leipnik, but it broke my heart to see that my favorite

city in such a bad, bad shape.

So does that mean you went before it became free to Leipnik? Or did you go after the Velvet Revolution? In other words, did you go to the Czech Republic when it was already independent or still under--

No, no. It was independent. And my husband went with me. Because all those years I've been telling him about Leipnik. It was my favorite because that's where I grew up with my Oma. I had nothing but good memories. And I just loved Leipnik. It's an old city, even got some old city walls from the 14th or 13th century, parts of it. It's really cool. And my river, the Becva. I brought some water home Yeah from my Becva and some rocks. That means more to me than--

Just like I brought from Israel. I came home with a bunch of rocks. But anyhow, I had told my husband about my river, my park, and where I used to take Valdi-- that was my [INAUDIBLE] and all that stuff. But finally he said, OK, let's go to Mom first where she lived on the Russian border in Germany. And then we go see your Leipnik. I was so happy. It was all the same only uglier.

Run down.

Yeah, run down. Very badly run down. But still you know I remembered every rock and everything. I took him to my river and where I used to swim when I was a puppy. And my little park where-- I didn't have dolls. I had my dog in a baby buggy and push him around. He loved it. Push him around in the park. People would look, let me see your dolly. Here goes the black dog. But it was so much fun because I finally could show him all the places I used to play and walk and Leipnik was just so much memories. So he got to see it. That was nice.

So you're in the British zone now with your mother, and at that convent, and how long did you stay there?

Well, I didn't really. There was a problem with food stamps. There was a problem of getting permission to stay. You need all kinds of papers and stuff. So I don't know who suggested it, but I needed a place. Now she was at a nunnery, but I had no place to stay. I didn't want to stay at the nunnery and cook.

So we went to some office-- Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I have to go back. I found my girlfriend, my one favorite girlfriend, in northern Germany. Not at the bad northern where I was. Maybe it was north, whatever it is. It's called Braunschweig. She was living in Braunschweig. I found her somehow. And I said, let's go and see Krystal in Braunschweig. Krystal was engaged, and they lived in Braunschweig. It was OK. And so we went to visit her. Oh God, we had so much to tell because during the war we were all separated and stuff.

I stayed in Braunschweig. I got a job with a beautician. Father, mother, and daughter were all hair cutters. They had the salon downstairs, and upstairs they had the house. It was not an apartment. Very nice. And upstairs they were living. And they said, yeah, they could use some help. I won't get paid much, but I can have money. So that was wonderful. So my mom left me there. And I lived with them, and they were nice people. She had two children. And a husband got killed in a war, so she had two little girls. And I just helped with housework and I got \$40 a month.

You got paid in dollars?

Well, there was marks. vierzig mark.

Vierzig mark, OK, so 40 marks a month.

Yeah.

What happened to your stepfather?

He came back. He was in Russian prison, and I suppose he suffered some, but also because he spoke Czech somehow he could communicate with the Russians. You know to Slavic languages. A word here and a word there you can make it out. So he survived and he came back. And what did he do? I guess he snuck back to Mom.

So he found her.

He found her. And they never got married or-- Well, they didn't get divorced. Yeah, they got divorced for some reason. Yeah, they got divorced because he found a girlfriend with a bunch of kids. All of a sudden it was OK and he didn't want me. And he married her, but that doesn't last. My mom married somebody and was very, very happy, but the guy was sick and died. And then they got together again. They never got married together but they became very good friends. So they visited each other, went to the woods to pick mushrooms and berries and stuff like that. They became friends.

Did they stay in Europe?

Yes.

And you? What did you do?

What did I do? I met my husband at the nunnery.

Did you really?

Yeah. I think my mom wanted me safe. Yeah, she was there cooking in that place, and he was on construction at the same place.

Construction.

Yes, because everything just bombed out in Wurtzburg. So she met Heinz. Heinz was my husband's name. And since she worked in the kitchen, she could always sneak him a little food, you know. So they became good friends. So Mom thought, he would make a good husband for my daughter. She invited me to come on vacation. I got a week or two vacation, I don't remember. And I went to Wurtzburg to see Mom and she introduced me to him.

And I had to go back. I was only on vacation for a while. But we started writing letters and stuff. And I guess there was some chemistry between us. In those days anyway we were happy. We've been married 61 years.

Was she right?

Was she what?

What was your mother right?

In a way In a way. So I married the guy.

So you married him. And did you stay in Germany or did you leave?

No, we stayed we stayed in Wurtzburg for a couple more years. Yeah, we married, and 10 months later or 11 months later, I had my first son, Kurt. And then when Kurt was two years old we immigrated to the United States.

To what part of the States?

Oh, You would like it. I don't. Boston.

I was born there.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, his sister and brother-in-law went first, and they had to sponsor us. And they lived in Salem. So we stayed a year in Salem. And then my husband had a friend in California, so we moved to California.

And your husband's last name was Niedrich.

Niedrich.

And tell me, you mentioned that you went to Israel. When did you go to Israel?

The very first time I went 1979.

You mean you've been more than once?

Five times.

Five times. What draws you there?

First of all, I love the Jews. When I went to Israel, when I got off the plane I felt like I'm home.

Really?

Yeah. And a lot of times I wonder if way, way back I would have some Jewish family or something. Because in those times when they have to-- well, in the real long time ago when they forced them to become Catholic or whatever, I often think maybe I've got some Jewish blood in me. I'm a wannabe.

And there's something that just draws you?

If I wasn't so old I would go again. I just love it. Really, I feel like-- The airport was different the last time. You didn't get to-- It's better now but in those days you go down the steps of the plane and I felt like falling down and kissing the ground. I really, it was amazing. I cried and I felt like I'm home. And you know what drew me the most? The Wailing Wall.

Really. I cried. I could have sat there all day. Very strange.

Did your children ask you about your life? Did they ask you about your childhood and your experience?

Once in a while. Now my youngest is interested. I think he knows just about everything. We're very close. And my oldest son that is gone, he was a little interested. But my middle son, he couldn't care less one way or the other.

And with your husband did you talk about the war and what had happened, what had happened to him, what had happened to you? Did you have such discussions?

Yeah. We talked about it. He had his own story. He escaped from prison. Now was a British or French? He escaped from someplace. I think from the coal mines. That would have been in France, wouldn't it? I don't know. He told me a hundred times, but the story changed all the time. Yeah, we spoke about the war sometimes, but he knows my story, that's for sure.

You said you learned about Auschwitz and about the other camps later. Did you have anybody to talk to about the things that you learned?

No, I just read books about it. I got a book called Theresienstadt that's upstairs from some painters that lived in Theresienstadt. And they drew pictures and hid them for later on to be found. I read a book about Auschwitz. I read about Treblinka. I really got into all that later when I got older and understood more.

What did it do when you read those things? Was there a connection between what you read and the childhood you had growing up in Stadt Liebau where there were all those Germans who were for Hitler? Was there a way of explaining to oneself?

I don't know. I don't know how to answer that.

Because I think that one of the difficult parts when you're growing up as a child you have people who are in authority who you believe. They tell you things and you believe them because what else can you do? And then when it turns out they're wrong, how does one-- and wrong in such a big way-- how does one come to terms with that? Or is that not a question that was important for you?

Probably not. I don't know. I don't know how to answer that.

Is there anything else you would like to add to your story for today?

You ask whatever you want. I don't know if I have the answer.

Did you think it's important for people to understand about what you went through, about what you experienced, about what you saw?

Yeah, I do.

OK, what is it? What is it that you would like to add to what we've talked about?

Well, I still don't know what you exactly mean. If I could do anything good for the Jewish people, do a mitzvah, I would do it. Now if this interview with us, I don't know where it's going to go, but if it does any good or maybe more proof that there was such a thing as killing Jews, I'll be very happy about that. Because some people still deny it. They still deny the Holocaust. Or they want to forget it. Or they don't teach in school about it. And it will be forgotten. And I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't want that to happen again ever. Do you think they're teaching that in school?

Some places do teach about the Holocaust. And some places do not. Some countries do and some countries do not.

How about our country?

I think that in the United States schools, from what I've heard, is that yes, it is taught in schools at various grades. Usually in the upper grades. But that may not be true across the country. It may be different state by state or jurisdiction by jurisdiction. But there is an effort. And I really thank you for that thought, for that wish. That it would be that people would not deny, that they would know.

Right. And also the older Jewish generation, well, the old people like me, the ones that survived the concentration camps, they're dying out. And then it worries me it might be forgotten and it could eventually happen again. We don't want that. I don't think it would, but then you never could tell. I would let them live in peace. Why is everybody after the Jewish? From day one. No, I don't want the world to forget this part of the Holocaust.

Did you ever feel anything like, well you know, did you feel like shame or guilt because you were German?

Yes. You know I am sometimes.

Yeah?

Yeah. When people ask me where I'm from, I'd rather say Czechoslovakia than Germany. And in a way it's true. I'm not really lying. I was born in Czechoslovakia. I only lived in Germany from let's see, Kurt was born-- When was my son born? I only lived in Germany like four years or something like that, and I really don't-- I love the food. I love the scenery. I loved everything. As for a beautiful country it's nice. But I would never want to live there.

I very seldom mention Germany. My husband was German through and through, and he would say to me, you go to the Juden land I go to the Fatherland. Because he went to Germany while I went to Israel. But now I lost my thread.

Well, I was asking did you ever feel any sense of shame or guilt?

Yeah. Yeah, I do. I do. And I would rather say I'm from Czechoslovakia and I'm not lying when I have to say I'm from Germany. And I'm old enough to be in that time when everything was happening.

But here's the thing from what you've told me in your story, you never did anything that would have been hurtful to another person. So how is it that you feel the guilt or the shame?

Well, they might think I killed a Jew. I think I've only been two or three times when I went to Germany when my husband went every other year. And I would sit in the train, and I'd look around, and I look people at my age, and I think, did you kill a Jew? Did you kill a Jew? That's the way I felt. And I just don't want to be-- I don't want anybody to think. That's why I don't like Germany. I couldn't tell my husband why I don't want to go home. But Germany is not my home. Czechoslovakia is my home, not Germany. You go.

Well, I very much appreciate that you've talked to us today and shared your story with us today. Very grateful for it.

I'm glad to do it.

Thank you. Thank you. And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Helga Niedrich on July 16, 2014.