

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Helen Plackta Novak on April 24, 2017 in Rockleigh, New Jersey. Thank you very, very much, Mrs. Novak, for agreeing to meet with us today, and to tell us about your experiences and your story and that of your family during the Holocaust. I'm going to start the interview with asking questions from the very beginning to try and get a sense of what was your life like before World War II even started. So my first question is very simple. Can you tell me the date of your birth?

January 4, 1924.

OK. Where were you born?

Poland.

What part of Poland?

Lodz.

In Lodz. And what was your name at birth when you were born?

Chaja.

Hela?

Chaja Plackta.

Chaja Plackta. And your mother and your father, what were their names?

Rucheleh.

Rucheleh. OK, that's--

My mother.

Your mother, OK.

My father was Aaron. Aaron.

Aaron, OK.

Aaron.

And what was your mother's maiden name?

Jurkiewicz.

Jurkiewicz, OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

We were five sisters.

Five?

I'm the youngest.

You're the youngest of five?

Of five.

Can you tell me your sisters' names? Do you remember?

I have it there, but-- Kucia, Fela, Bella, Mania, Hela.

Hela, OK.

In Polish, Hela.

In Polish, Hela. In Yiddish, Chaja, yes?

Chaja.

Chaja. And how much older was your oldest sister from you? When you were born, it was 1924. How old was your oldest sister when you were born?

The oldest or next to me?

The oldest.

No-- she was from a different father.

Ah, OK. Was she grown up already?

Oh, yeah.

OK. OK. And which one were you closest to when you were growing up?

My sister was four years older than me.

Minna? Is that Minna?

Mania.

Mania.

Mania.

Mania. And tell me about your family, and how your father supported your family, and your mother. What was his work? What was her work?

In Poland mothers don't work. Only fathers work.

OK.

Not mothers.

OK. What did he do?

A weaver.

A veaver? What does that mean?

You don't know?

No.

They make--

Oh, he was a weaver. Excuse me.

I just said.

You did. And I didn't understand. A weaver.

Because I have an accent.

I am used to it. And I have an accent. But I just didn't understand. So I'm sorry. So he would weave cloth.

He worked in a factory.

OK. OK. And was this a textile factory? A fabric factory where they made--

Yeah.

OK.

Yeah.

Well, Lodz was known for textiles. Before the war, Lodz was the textile place of Poland. Did he own the factory, or was he a worker?

No, he was a worker.

He was a worker, OK.

My mother was old enough not to work.

OK, she stayed at home? Your mother stayed at home.

Five sisters, five children.

It was enough work. It was enough work. Did your parents live in a Jewish neighborhood in Lodz?

On our street was a temple, a beautiful temple.

Do you remember the name?

I don't know the name because I was very young. And my grandfather was making-- you know.

Oh, he was--

A shofar, shofar.

OK, at the temple.

I don't know if you know about this.

The one who blows the--

The shofar.

The shofar.

Yes. And he went home from the temple. And they saw that he is Jewish. They killed him, the Polish people.

Really?

They killed him in the ghetto. He fell down, and dead.

Oh, my goodness. Do you remember the name of the street you lived on?

Zydowska Ulica 34.

Zydowska Ulica 34. And that translates into English as Jewish Street, isn't it? OK. So tell me a little bit about what your neighborhood looked like. Did you have your own home, your own house or apartment? Tell me. Tell me what was it like.

You rent an apartment, a one room.

All seven of you in one room?

Because it's in the ghetto.

We're not talking about the ghetto. I'm talking before the war, before the ghetto, where did you live? Before anything bad happened?

That's what I told you.

In Zydowska Ulica? OK. And even then, before the war, you all lived in one room?

We couldn't afford-- on the third floor.

On the third floor. And how did you-- where did everybody sleep? Where did you do cooking? Where did you have--

Everything in that room.

Everything in that room.

It's a very poor living.

Yeah.

But we don't know different.

OK. What about your parents? Did they both come from Lodz? Were they both from Lodz?

Yeah.

OK. And how do you know how they met? How your mother and your father met?

I cannot remember. I was young.

Yeah, yeah.

I was a child.

You were the youngest. You were the youngest. I will ask many questions where you may not remember.

Oh, yeah.

And that's OK that you don't remember. Please forgive me if I keep asking such questions. OK.

I don't mind. I'm here for it.

Thank you. Thank you. Tell me now about-- was your father-- were your parents and your family very religious people?

No.

No?

No.

Even though your grandfather was a shofar at the synagogue?

My grandfather was an old man and he believes in it.

OK. And--

But not my father. He had to work Saturday.

He had to work on Saturdays?

And Jewish people don't work Saturday. Well, he had to make a living.

Who owned the factory? Was it a Jewish person or a Gentile person?

I don't know.

Was the factory far from where you lived?

Probably.

Did you ever visit him there? OK.

No. I went to school.

OK. We'll come to that. I want to find out about how school was for you. What language did you speak at home?

Yiddish.

Yiddish, OK. And were your parents-- did they have enough time to tell you stories of their own childhoods? Do you know--

Maybe.

No?

I don't know.

You don't know. Did your father have any brothers and sisters?

Yes.

And how many? You don't know. And what about your mother? Did she have brothers and sisters?

Yes.

Did they live close to you?

Yes.

OK. Did you see them much?

My grandma was living next door with my grandpa. And then they have to separate the couple--

OK.

--because she lived with her daughter.

Ah-huh.

And then they had to separate. So the father went to a son.

Mm-hmm.

The grandpa went to a son.

OK.

And the grandma came to us. We were seven people. She was eight. I slept on chairs.

You slept on chairs?

I gave my bed for my grandma.

How old were you when that happened?

12, 10.

OK.

By 13 I was already in the ghetto.

It sounds like a very hard life before the war. I'm going to ask a few questions about your living standards. Did you have electricity in your home?

Yes.

Did you have running water? Plumbing?

Water from the sink.

OK, so you didn't have to go outside to get it?

Yes.

OK.

Yes, you have to go outside.

You have to go outside to get it?

Yeah, outside there was a well there.

Outside?

In Europe, yes.

OK.

You have to bring up on the third floor.

Not easy. Not easy.

And the clothes that you washed was on the fourth floor. You had to go upstairs to hang this up.

Explain that to me. Did you all help? How did people wash clothes when you had no water and no washing machines?  
How did people wash clothes?

There was no washing machines.

OK.

No.

Was there a laundry in the building?

No.

So how did you--

Hand wash everything, hand wash.

Everything.

It's hard.

Yeah. Yeah.

It was a hard life. Well, when they start pushing us in the-- we lived in the same place as the ghetto.

Ah, that's why I was confused before. That's why I was confused. I thought you had to move from one place to another.

No, my sisters were married. They had to come to us. That's why we were seven people.

I see. I see. How did you heat your home? Was it with coal?

It was on the oven.

How was the oven heated? Was it with coal? Did you heat it with coal briquettes?

Coal, yeah.

OK. Did you have a telephone?

Very poor life.

Did your parents go to school? You don't know. You don't know.

I don't even know.

What about you? Tell--

They knew Polish. They knew Polish.

OK.

We lived with Polish people--

You did?

--in the building.

In the building, yeah? It wasn't just Jewish.

No.

OK. And how were these neighbors? Were they friendly before the war?

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. Did you know some of them by name? Not much.

What I went through, I cannot remember from the people.

OK. OK. And tell me about your school. You said you went to school. When your father was at work you never visited him, you went to school. What was school like?

He didn't have a business. He worked for a factory.

I know. I know. But I wondered whether you had ever seen him at work, and you said, no, no, I was in school.

How can I-- going to somebody with only walking?

OK.



So I didn't go too much.

Tell me about school. Tell me what was your school like. Was it a public school?

Yeah.

OK. Were there children who were Jewish and not Jewish in it?

Right.

OK.

We learned Polish.

You learned Polish there?

And if you want Jewish, you had to pay. Who can afford it?

OK. OK. Do you have any memories from school, from going to school?

No, I remember that life.

Did you play with any of the other children?

Yes, I played with the guys, ball.

Yeah? Did you play with neighborhood children or children from school?

No, neighbors' children.

Neighbors, neighbors. Was the school far away from your home?

No, not far.

OK. Did your parents read any newspapers?

Yeah, but there were Jewish papers, there were Polish papers.

Which ones did your parents read, or your father read? Which ones did he read?

Polish.

He read the Polish papers. OK. Did your father have any political interests? Was he interested in politics at all, in political things?

He had no time.

OK. OK. Some people did, some people didn't. Was there a particular Polish newspaper that he often read?

If you buy, you read.

OK.

They were not young. Because I--

You were the last one.

Yeah.

Yeah. What did people think in the community about Jozef Pilsudski, who was the leader of Poland? Until 1935, Jozef Pilsudski was leader of Poland. Was there any talk about him at all in your neighborhood amongst your parents?

The Polish was just as bad as the Germans.

OK.

They put us in the--

In the ghetto?

In the ghetto.

Tell me about that.

We had to stay in the line for a piece of bread, one bread for eight people.

Oh, wow.

And I was jumping like this, Ma, I'm hungry. Ma, I'm hungry. My mother didn't know what to give me. So she took coffee-- you know, dry coffee, and she put water in. And she made, like-- you made for meat.

Yeah.

Oh, so she made like a little bit of a--

That's what I ate.

Oh. Oh.

I went through a lot.

OK, let's talk about those things. Do you remember-- did anybody talk about Hitler in your neighborhood? OK. When did you first hear about Hitler? Was it when the war started?

Yeah, 1939.

OK. What happened to you and your family when the war started? What happened. Tell me. I mean, I know what happened in general. But what happened to you?

We were in the ghetto. We couldn't move. They were watching us. And I worked in the ghetto. I braided straw.

OK.

And I dipped it in water to get softer, and I braided, that they should make for the shoes. They were watching us [INAUDIBLE] that we should not run away. That's what I did. And I didn't get paid.

And you were just a girl. You were just a child.

And I worked in the ghetto.

At home or in a factory?

No, in a factory-- in a--

A small place?

Where the school was. So they made this.

So they made from the school, a workplace? Tell me about how the Poles pushed you into the ghetto. Can you tell me about that? When did it happen?

I know I was young. And my sisters lived far away. They had to come. They were married.

With children?

They had children.

OK.

One sister came with a child in Auschwitz.

Oh, my goodness.

And they wanted the child. And she didn't want to give the child. So they took her with the child and they cremated her, a young woman, five-year-old boy. Another sister died cancer in the breast. She died why else? Because we were in the ghetto.

OK.

So the brother-in-law had the child. And he was a policeman in the ghetto. And he had to bring his child to be cremated.

When you were in the ghetto, what happened with all the Polish people who lived in your building? Did they leave or did they stay?

No, they left.

They left, OK. And what kind of-- was it--

If you stay in--

May I have your attention please? May I have your attention please?

This is for all the people.

Yeah, I know.

They want it. But for me it's better I don't go.

I understand.

I go for the rabbi because he's very nice.

Yeah. Tell me about-- what did your father do when you were in the ghetto. What kind of work was he made to do?

I don't know if he worked or not. I don't even know.

OK.

We had no place to go. You cannot move. They made this. They covered everything. And the Polish people were watching. We should not run away. So they just as bad as Hitler.

No one was kind to you? No one was kind to you from the Polish people?

No. Polish people don't like the Jews, just like Hitler. He said that the Jews are very smart, so he cremated them. This is just the ghetto.

Yeah.

From the ghetto, I went to Auschwitz.

How many years were you in the ghetto?

I don't know. Maybe three years.

How did you get anything to eat? How did you find food?

We did get a bread. We had to stay in the line. And if they saw somebody with a long nose, they took you out, the Polish. They said, no bread.

So it was Polish policeman in the ghetto, not German policeman? Did you ever see German soldiers when you were in the ghetto?

Soldiers?

German soldiers?

No. Everything police.

OK. And the police were Poles? Did you ever see German soldiers at all?

Oh, yeah.

OK.

I was in Bergen-Belsen.

OK.

This is my end, Auschwitz.

And then Bergen-Belsen.

And then from Auschwitz I went to Bergen-Belsen.

OK, we'll come to that in a little bit. But I want to find out more about what was life like in the ghetto. Did your mother

also work with you where you made the straw for the shoes?

No, I did this not in the house.

That's right.

I went to the school.

To do it. What about your sisters? What did they do?

Well, I had two sisters who were manicurists. And I had one sister. She was a--

Friseur? She made hair? OK.

So I learned from them.

Oh. And did they work in the ghetto as manicurists? Or how did they feed themselves?

No, before the war.

Before the war, OK.

Now in the ghetto you couldn't move. You had to sit in the house.

OK, so were you the only person who went to work in the ghetto?

Yeah, my older sister too. My older sister is working too.

The same place?

No, she was sewing.

OK.

Sewing.

OK.

And I didn't have a trade because I was young, so I was braiding. Blood was running because straw is very hard.

Did you have to soak it in water?

I soaked it in water.

OK. And what did you make from that straw? What did you make from the straw that you braided?

I didn't make. Other people make shoes, around the shoes.

Oh, so they made the soles of the shoes?

No, on top.

Oh.

On top, that the people were standing outside and watching us that we shouldn't run away.

OK, so you were making shoes for guards? The shoes were for the guards?

The Polish were the guards.

Yeah.

Not German. Then from Auschwitz-- no, from ghetto, we went to Auschwitz.

Did your whole family, all five sisters, did anybody die in the ghetto? Did anybody pass away?

One sister.

One sister.

Yeah, she had cancer on the breast.

Ah-huh.

Here she would live.

Which sister was this? What was her name?

Fela.

Fela, OK. And what about your mother and your father? They stayed at home? They didn't do any work when there was the ghetto? So how did the family-- again, I come back to it-- how did you eat? That's a lot of mouths to feed. That's an awful lot, and if nobody works, and there's long lines for bread.

I told you. We couldn't move. We couldn't go no place, only for bread. You had to stay in the line.

And was the bakery in the ghetto too?

Yeah.

OK.

They gave a round bread.

What about potatoes? Did you ever get any potatoes?

I don't remember. I know bread. I was screaming for hunger. My father died in the hospital from hunger. On his foot was written down, umarl z glodu.

And what does that mean?

You understand.

What is umarl z glodu?

Umarl z glodu, he died from hunger. And my grandma-- my father was in the hospital. He died. My grandma died by us. I gave her my bed. And she died from hunger. So the next day was both funerals.

How did you bury them?

It was a terrible, terrible life. My grandpa was killed. And then the grandma died. And that's the way it was going. All my sisters were cremated with the-- one died. And the oldest, I don't know. She goes someplace, and they killed her over there.

And your mother, what happened to your mother?

My mother-- I came to Auschwitz with my sister and me. They were all gone. And I wanted to take my mother. We put lipstick on her to make her look younger. And they wanted to take my mother. And my sister started to cry, and me. So they beat her up. And they put her on the ground. And took my mother and cremated her. That was already Auschwitz. Such murders. Five-year-old children they cremate.

Did you know about that when you got to Auschwitz?

We knew.

What else can you tell me--

We went in for a sh-- I didn't-- I was lucky.

OK. You said you went in for a shower.

The people went in for a shower. And instead of the water, they put in gas. And I was outside. And I heard the crying, screaming. And then it was quiet. They were all killed. And thank God that they didn't take us, not me.

And your sister? Did she stay with you? You said--

No, Auschwitz, no. My sister was in a different camp. And I was back in Belsen. And she was in a different camp.

I see. I see. So when you got to Auschwitz, how many people were with you from your family? Your mother? Your sister was with you? When you got on the train, you got from Lodz to Auschwitz. Was the whole family taken at once?

No, they were taken before from the ghetto.

OK.

They came with trucks and take boys, 15, 16, 17, a full truck they take them to Auschwitz to cremate. It was a terrible war.

You mentioned before that your father, your grandmother, were both buried the same day in the ghetto.

No. Married?

No, your grandmother--

Yeah.

--and your father died the same time.

No, my grandma.

Your grandma, that's right. And your father and she were buried in the ghetto. Is that what--

My father was in the hospital. And my mother's mother was in the house.

Yeah.

So they both died the same day. There were the funerals.

Where did you bury them? Where were they buried?

We had places.

In the ghetto?

When you die, you go out of the ghetto.

Were you able to go with them to the--

Yeah.

Yeah? So there was a Jewish cemetery you could bury them in?

Yes.

Can you describe it to me? I didn't know that if somebody died in the ghetto, you were able to leave it to bury your loved one.

I think that there was. My father died in the hospital.

Did you see him there?

How could I go? They would take you, let you go out when you're dead. They take you.

OK. So how do you know what was written on his foot? You said, "died from hunger" was written on his foot. Did you see that? Or did somebody tell you?

Somebody told me.

Somebody told you.

Yeah. I didn't see.

Did you ever see your father after he died, before he was buried?

No, he died in the hospital.

And the hospital was in the ghetto?

No.

OK.

No, the hospital was not in the ghetto.

OK.



It was away from the ghetto.

OK.

I'm sure you're going to have more from Lodz.

Yeah. I have talked to people from Lodz. Tell me, did the name, Rumkowski, mean anything to you?

Rumkowski, he was the president.

Did you ever see him?

Rumkowski? In person? No.

OK. Did you hear about him?

Yes.

What did people say?

You see, I told you right away.

Yeah, yeah.

What were people saying about Rumkowski?

Rumkowski was good.

Was he? Yeah?

But the Polish took over everything.

I see.

Like the Germans, they took over. They helped a lot the Germans. And I don't like them.

I can understand. I can understand.

It doesn't matter if they're young or they're old.

Tell me, when you were in Auschwitz, what were you doing? Were you put to work when you were in Auschwitz? Did you have to work in Auschwitz?

In Auschwitz I don't remember much, in Auschwitz.

Were you there long? Were you in Auschwitz long?

I don't remember.

OK. OK. And were you all alone?

And from Auschwitz they sent us to Bergen-Belsen.

OK.

Over there I was the rest of the years.

OK.

Until 1945.

So you were in the ghetto about three years in Lodz. And then you were in Auschwitz. And you don't know how long, but not too long, huh?

It was not too long. They sent us to Bergen-Belsen. And they didn't make any place to sleep, so we were outside. And I have arthritis in the whole body.

Oh, my goodness.

Such a pain. I can feel pain in the legs. I'm very bad.

So you were in Bergen-Belsen most of the time until liberation. Tell me about what was Bergen-Belsen like. I know you said you slept outside. And Bergen-Belsen is far north.

Until they built pryczys, pryczys. I think prycze is in Polish.

It must be. Was it a barrack? Was it a building that they built?

They had to build. In the meantime we were outside.

OK, and what did they look like, these pryczys? What did they look like? Describe them for me.

Wood. Wood. We slept on wood.

How many people in a room?

What do you mean a room? There was one room for everybody.

OK.

We didn't have rooms.

I meant--

Everybody was at the same place.

OK.

Wherever you would lay down, you were laying.

Really? And what kind of work did you do in Bergen-Belsen? Describe for me the things you had to do.

In Bergen-Belsen I was already 18, 19. Because when I was liberated I was 20.

Right. Right.

The 15th of August-- no, what is now?

April.

April, I was liberated.

OK.

1945. And I hide myself in the toilet.

Before liberation?

There was a line outside. And I said, oh, no good. Either they're going to kill us now-- I says, I'll take a chance. And I went into the toilet, I close myself. Two days I was in the toilet. And when I open it's quiet. So I went out. All the Germans were away.

Were there any prisoners left? Were there any prisoners left? Were there any prisoners left, any people?

Oh, people.

Yeah.

Yeah, I found three sisters. Well, they know me from Poland. And we went to Lodz. We had to see if anybody--

What did you find when you went to Lodz?

I found an uncle. He had a barbershop. And he still had the same barbershop. So I went up, and I find out that he is alive, my mother's brother. And he lived with the brother-in-law, from the wife's brother. And he didn't let me sleep there. I don't know why. To sleep on the floor, he didn't let me. And I had nobody.

OK. Can we cut for a second?

So I went in the building--

Hang-- so your uncle didn't let you stay. What did you do?

Not my uncle.

Your-- OK.

The brother-in-law of my uncle. He didn't let me. So I went in the building. And I sit on the steps. And I was sleeping.

And was this in your neighborhood?

Then he changed. My uncle told him.

Yeah.

I don't want my niece should be killed. So I was sleeping, but then on the floor.

Just excuse me for a second. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

OK, where were we? So then this brother-in-law let you sleep on the floor, finally, after your uncle spoke to him. And then what did you do? Did you stay in Lodz after that?

Yeah. My uncle was already my-- he was going out with my husband's sister.

OK.

My husband had three sisters and a brother. They were lucky to be alive. So I stayed already with them.

Where did you meet your husband?

Well, he found out in Germany that the sisters are alive. So he came to Lodz. [LAUGHS] My-- I was a sister to him.

Yeah.

Yeah, so she said if you're going to marry my brother, I'm going to marry your uncle. We took a rabbi and we got married. But I was wearing that schmutter. You know what a schmutter is?

Tell me what a schmutter is.

A schmutter is a piece of garbage. That's what I was wearing the whole years. And my husband fell in love with me.

Even when you were wearing a schmutter.

He worked and he bought everything for me, a bra and underwear. We took a rabbi, and we both got married at the same time. And we all lived together.

Tell me, was your husband also from Lodz?

Yeah.

OK. And tell me a little bit about his story.

He was in another camp.

He was in another-- did you know--

For men, just men. No, I never knew him.

You never knew him until after the war. OK.

He came to see the sisters, and fell in love with me. And I made the dinner for all of them.

Yeah, OK.

And he didn't like mushroom soup. He didn't like. But he liked my food. I cook good. I bake good.

How did you learn? You didn't have food for so many years. How did you learn?

I learned from my mother. I was young. And my sisters lived in the summer in the country. So I cook for them. And I was a young girl.

Did you have a favorite dish that you liked to make?

I know everything to make.

Yeah?

Chopped liver, gefilte fish, matzo balls, everything. I baked. I cooked. And I have three sons, and two don't talk to me. I have one son in Florida. He's my life. I have a son, 70.

Excuse me, let's cut. Yeah, so let's go back to Bergen-Belsen, OK.

I did everything. I carried the dead people. They were laying like this. They put them on a wagon. I carry. I did everything. They came in. And they brought soup, one soup a day. So I was right way on top. I was young. I was right away on top, and helped to bring it down. And everybody in the line-- and it's such a--

A little bowl? Or something?

No, no, a big one, with a handle, what people have on the belt. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

So everybody was standing in the line. And I gave them to eat. And the end was for me. So I gave it to my friends and I had. That's what-- I helped in the room. In the room, they took off a blanket for my friends. I went to them, and I took off from them, and gave it to my friends.

Tell me, were other people in Bergen-Belsen--

How come I don't hear this?

Can you hear me now?

Yeah.

OK. Could you trust other prisoners, other people, in Bergen-Belsen? Or was everybody looking out for themselves?

Everybody looked out for themselves. But I helped a lot. And I help here people too, believe me. But here the people are very bad.

Oh.

In Bergen-Belsen I did everything.

How did you get the job to be the person to give out the soup? Did you find it? Did someone choose you? How did things like that happen?

They chose me.

They choose you? OK.

Because I was fast.

Was it-- OK.

I help here too.

Yeah.

I take my own medication, everything by myself.

That's important. That's important.

Yeah, but then [INAUDIBLE]. The aids are very bad here. They think that I can do everything. I cannot.

Let's talk some more about life in Bergen-Belsen. Were there men and women together, or were they separate? Were there any men in the camp in Bergen-Belsen?

Just women.

Just women.

A big group, everybody had their bed on wood.

And did you get assigned places, or was it wherever you could find a place?

No, everybody has to have their own, but the people, they were stealing.

What kind of things would they steal?

The blankets that we were covered.

OK.

They probably were cold.

Yeah.

So they took off from my friends. Then my friends came to me. These girls took from me. I went over there, and I took from them, and I gave to my friends. You don't take off from somebody. Everybody is cold.

What did you wear? Did you have any kind of things on your feet, any shoes on your feet when you were in Bergen-Belsen? What were the shoes like? Were they clogs? Were they-- what did you--

No, they were shoes taken from Auschwitz. From Auschwitz everything you had to bring there.

OK.

You know, from the ghetto, you think you're going someplace, so you grab from the house, things. You come to Auschwitz, they took away from you.

So what did you wear when you were-- tell me what that schmutter looked like, the one that you were wearing for so many years.

I went in with my sister. She came out. She was small. She was wearing a long schmutter. And I'm tall. So they gave me a short schmutter. And I went to Poland in that schmutter. Yeah.

And you wore it for three years, you say? You wore that schmutter for three years?

Yeah. From Auschwitz-- no, from Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. They didn't give you nothing. They can't.

Yeah.

Then I got sick.

Where did you get sick? When did you--

In Bergen-Belsen.

What did you get? What happened?

On the lungs. I forgot the name.

Tuberculosis?

No.

Pneumonia?

Pneumonia.

Pneumonia.

I was in the hospital.

In the Bergen-Belsen hospital. What was that like? Tell me what that hospital was like.

Did you believe me that I don't remember?

I believe you. I believe you.

Thank God I remember everything.

Yeah, yeah.

I cannot forget. If they show here pictures, they have to take me out. I get hysterical. And they're showing pictures to the old people. For what? Show it to the young people. They show it-- today too, the rabbi's talk.

Yeah, yeah.

He'd be surprised that I'm not there. 2:30 they start.

Yeah.

But they were afraid that I'm going to get nervous. She came in and she asked me.

Did you get nervous? Are you nervous?

No, no.

Good.

I'm glad.

I get a Xanax every day in the morning. You know what a Xanax is?

Mm-hmm, it's a pill.

Every day I get. And at night, a sleeping pill, 75 milligram sleeping pill.

Tell me, after the war, when you were back in Lodz, did you have nightmares? Did you have nightmares after it all ended? Did you ever have nightmares about what happened, about Auschwitz?

Oh, yeah.

Yeah?

That's why I couldn't sleep. Everything is in my head. That's why the doctors gave me sleeping pills, 100 milligrams I took at home.

Wow.

And I came here. I'm too weak. So they cut it off. They gave me 100 milligrams. I couldn't-- I was numb. So they cut off.

I see.

75. And I didn't sleep. See, I have the mind that you coming. With the pill I didn't sleep.

I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I know people get nervous before the interview. And it's hard. And I realise that.

Yeah, but for me it's better that I get that off my--

Chest, yeah.

--off my chest, yeah.

But tell me this, did you talk much about what you went through over the years, or did you keep it inside?

No, I talk. I talk here with-- I have two friends. I talk to them. And the woman feels for me. And the American people, they said whatever happened happened. And they don't want to talk to me. A few people don't talk to me because I'm a holocaust survivor.

Oh, yeah. What about your children when they were growing up? Did you and your husband tell them about what--

We sat in the evening. My husband worked very hard. And still we were sitting and telling them.

Let's go back to Lodz. When you're back there, you meet your husband. He takes care of you. He works hard.

He worked. And he didn't let me. I didn't have a trade. I was 20. I didn't learn nothing. But he didn't let me. He says, what, you're going to go and wash floors for people? I'm working. You went through-- because we understand each other. But I took care of the kids and him. I cleaned. I cooked. I baked. I never went out to eat. I did everything from scratch.

Yeah, yeah, you had nothing. You had nothing. You had no family. Did you have one sister who survived?

Yeah, but she died.

When did she die?

She died a couple years ago, she died. She was four years older than me.

That was Mania?



Mania.

Mania, OK. And did Mania live close to you here?

Oh, she lived in Passaic.

OK. So she was in New Jersey.

And I lived in Paterson. The Jewish families paid for me.

Yeah.

They helped. They helped.

That's good to know.

Oh, yeah.

That's good to know, yeah.

I had two aids a week. The Jewish family paid.

How long did you stay in Lodz after the war?

How long? We came 1948.

OK.

My second son was six months. And the one was two years.

So they were both born in Poland?

Not in Poland.

Where?

Germany.

So tell me about what made your family decide to leave Poland. Why did you leave Lodz after the war?

I'm going to live with the Polish people but they're enemies?

OK. But when you're in Lodz in Poland, at that point Poland was already occupied by-- well, it was a communist government. And was it easy to leave Poland to get to Germany?

Yeah, it was easy.

Was it? OK.

I had to go back in order to go to America or to Israel. I had to go home from Lodz back to Germany.

Where in Germany? Where did you have to go?

Leipheim. Leipheim.

Leipheim? OK, was that near Bergen-Belsen, or is that somewhere else?

No, Bergen-Belsen was a camp.

I know. I know. I know.

But then we lived in an apartment.

OK, in Leipheim, were you in a displaced persons camp? Why did you go to Leipheim? What was the reason to go there?

Because we couldn't live in Poland.

OK.

But why Leipheim and not someplace else?

Because from Germany they send you either to Israel or to America. So my husband said, I'm a tailor. He has a lot of factories. In Israel, you have to work outside. But he was a good tailor.

OK.

Right away everybody got coffee and danishes when he started work. He was a good tailor.

Oh, yeah?

Because they had a little factory at home.

His family?

Yeah, they had whole-- [? whole ?] sisters work. And my husband, not the younger brother, no, my husband, the father, and the sisters, they were all working. And they worked in America too. And I was watching all their children.

So in Lodz they were tailors, and in America they were tailors. OK. How much older than you was your husband?

Seven years. I was 20. He was 27.

OK. OK. So before the war, he had already learnt the trade? Before World War II, he had already known how to be a tailor?

Sure.

OK. OK.

Because they had a factory at home.

OK.

Four daughters.

Yeah.

No, three daughters. Laura, Marsha, Anja, three daughters. There were three daughters and two sons-- three sons. One

son was killed.

But many of them survived from his family.

Oh, from his family, yeah. He didn't know. But he heard in Germany that the sisters are alive. So he came.

OK. OK.

And his older sister passed out when he opened the door. She loved him. And she made--

The match between you. What was your husband's name? We didn't--

Maurice.

Maurice Novak. OK. Maurice Novak. So when you left Poland, did you go by train to go to Leipheim, or did you go by car, or how did you get there? When you left Lodz to come to either Israel or America, how did you go?

They didn't take money from us.

No, no, no. Did you take a train? Did you take a bus? How did you get--

Oh, one of my brother-in-laws was a very smart guy. He was in college in Poland.

OK.

So he had to find a person to take us out from Poland because we were all over there, our names and everything. We had to have a-- how do they say in English?

Smuggler?

A smuggler.

You had a smuggler.

My brother-in-law paid for all of us. And we left at night.

Why would you need to be smuggled? Why couldn't you go freely?

Oh, no, no.

Why not?

Because we belonged in Poland. Our names are in Poland.

OK. So you left at night.

With children.

My goodness. My goodness. Did you go by truck? You don't remember? When you left at night--

I think we went with the train. But he paid everything, the guy. My brother-in-law paid him.

OK.

That's the way we run away from Poland. I went to a doctor. And I came back from the doctor, they saw me going up from the window. They were shooting. I came up, and I said, I'm not staying in Poland. They worked already in Poland too.

You're saying people were shooting at you?

You're Polish.

After the war?

So I said, I'm not staying here. I'm going back to Germany. And then from there they send the people wherever they want, either Israel or America. And my husband wanted-- so we all came here.

Did you have any relatives in America before you came here?

Yeah, my husband had, an aunt.

OK. Did that help you get here? Was it difficult to get permission to come to the United States?

No.

No?

No.

No.

They asked us where we want to go.

OK.

And we said America. And we came.

OK, yeah.

I came on a boat.

Do you remember the name?

With two children.

Not easy.

And a husband who I am what I pass out. He was sick. He was on the bottom on the ship. He was on the bottom because he was sick. They gave him whiskey. And he was choking.

Yeah.

He was very sick. The whole two weeks on a boat with two kids. And a guy comes up to me. And he says-- in Polish he said to me, Mrs. Novak, your husband is dying. And I had to schlep myself with the two kids. I came to this country. The other one was two years and the second one was six months.

What was the first place you lived when you came to the United States?

Paterson.

Paterson, why Paterson? Why Paterson, not Brooklyn? Why?

That's what they accept us, the Jewish family.

So when you're talking about "they," who organized your trip to the United States? Was it HIAS? Was it the UN? Was it the displaced persons camps? You don't know. OK.

Wherever they pushed me over there, I went.

OK. So what was the first place that you lived in the United States? What was that like?

Paterson. I lived on Ellison Street.

Was it an apartment?

A furnished room.

A furnished room? For four of you? Your husband, and the two children, and you? OK.

And then my sister-in-law I lived upstairs. I lived downstairs. They went to work. I watched the children. She had a daughter. Another sister who married the uncle, she had a daughter. She brought the child to me in the morning. And I took her in the bed, laid there. I had to dress three children to go to school. And then I had to have a girl-- I had to pay her to take them to school.

How long did you live there? It was not easy.

Oh, from there-- we were a nice few years there. And then we were in Paterson, on 23rd Street. And then we moved to Fair Lawn.

To Fair Lawn?

A lot of Holocaust survivors were there.

OK.

We all speak Jewish. We get together. We played cards. To have fun. We went to bingo.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you weren't alone. You weren't alone. I say you were not alone when you were there.

No, no, no, they still call me.

OK.

Yeah, but this is the month that we were liberated.

That's right.

And one of the girls had birthday the same day.

As liberation?

The 15th.

Yeah.

The 15th, 1945, she had birthday. So every year I call her for her birthday.

Tell me, when you left, you were in the toilet for two days, hiding. Remember, you told me? And then it's quiet. You go out, and it's quiet. No Germans are there.

Nobody.

What kind of soldiers did you next see?

I don't know if they were Germans or-- I don't know.

How did you know you were free?

Because all the Germans left.

And did the allies come? Was it Americans? Was it British soldiers who then came?

They are liberated-- the English.

The English.

They threw down-- I told you. They threw down cigarettes and chocolate. And everybody was grabbing.

Did people get sick from the chocolate?

No.

No? No.

Everybody likes sweets.

Of course. Of course. And then how did things change? Did someone take care of the prisoners afterwards? After the English liberated, were people fed? Who fed everybody who was in the camp? How did things get organized?

That's what I'm telling you. I had three friends, three sisters.

OK.

And they were lucky.

Yeah, that they also--

And they said they're going to Poland. So I went with them. But we never paid.

How did you get to Poland from Bergen-Belsen? Train? Truck?

With the train.

With the train.

They didn't take money from us. The way we were dressed, they saw. They know what happened. So they took us for

free, all the way.

And this was the German train system? When you were in Bergen-Belsen, did you learn German?

I understand.

OK. OK.

You know what they did? They took the good-looking girls, and they had sex with them. And then they cremate them. It was a terrible war, to take children and cremate them.

A little bit about your husband's business when you were in Paterson. Did he open a tailor shop?

No, he worked in a factory. How could he have a--

OK. He worked in a factory.

They send them to a factory. They were already-- he had friends. And he worked in a factory for years. And then when he came home-- and he didn't drive. That was tough.

Yeah.

So when he went to work, I took a guy and I learned.

You learned how to drive? And did you then drive him to work after that?

No, the people who lived around always picked him up and bring them home.

OK.

And he had to work on River Street to pick up from a guy from a cleaning store, to pick up stuff to fix. So when he came after eight hours-- we brought a machine, he sit and he fix it. And then he had to bring them back. It was a very hard life.

Yeah, he really worked.

A hard life. He said you're not going to go to work. What are you going to do? Wash toilets? He was a good husband.

I'm glad to hear that.

I'm here. And he is in--

Yeah.

My sister-in-law, one of the-- because he was a rich man, the husband, he owned houses. Well, I wanted to say something.

About your sister?

Oh, the sister-in-law, yeah. She bought graves for him and for me. She paid. Because she worked. She didn't give him the money because he was a rich man. He bought buildings, furnished rooms. So he was rich. Her money, she did what she wanted. She gave the daughter. She bought a light for me, a good one. How do you call?

A chandelier?

A chandelier, she bought for me.

Well, that's a very kind thing to do.

And she bought-- we all lay in the same thing. And over there is the ashes from Auschwitz. It's written down in a big [POLISH].

A big statue there? Yeah.

All our family are there, all of us together.

So let me repeat. Your father died in the ghetto, in the hospital. Your grandmother died the same day at home from hunger. Your mother was taken immediately when you came to Auschwitz. And she disappeared.

No.

She was cremated.

She was taken with me and my sister. But they want her to cremate. And my sister started to cry.

And then they beat her up.

So they beat her up.

Yeah.

And she fell on the floor.

And one sister died--

And they took the mother and they cremate her.

Yeah. And one sister died from cancer in the Lodz ghetto. One sister survived with you. That is Mania. Mania survived. And the other two sisters-- what happened to your other two sisters?

They were cremated.

Also in Auschwitz?

No. The one--

With the baby.

She didn't want to give the baby. So they took her too and cremated her. And the oldest one left Lodz. And she went in a different country. She was killed there from the Russians. Yeah, yeah. And I was alone. But I had another family, three sisters and another brother my husband had. He died too. And he didn't smoke. I don't know why he died. But we were all living in Fair Lawn.

Yeah, in Fair Lawn. What kind of a-- this sounds like a strange question. But before all of this happened, you were a child.

I said.



Yeah, you were a child. And by the time it's all over, you're a young woman. You're 20 years old.

Now, 22 I have a son.

You already have a son.

He wanted to have a family.

Did you want that too?

I did everything. He deserved it. He was a good man. I watched my next door neighbor's child. She gave a few dollars.

I'm glad to hear you had that kind of kindness.

[CROSS TALK].

Yeah. That is a big thing. It is a huge thing to have someone take care of you, who also went through so much himself.

That's why I knew we were going to get along because he went through what I went through.

Yeah.

If you would go up in my room, you would see my husband and me. I have pictures on the wall.

In general, when you came to America, and you lived in Paterson, and then in Fair Lawn, were there people who wanted to hear, or did they not want to hear? Throughout all of the years.

Oh, I had friends. They call me. They send me packages. That brother that I told you is so smart. His wife died. So he married a Polish woman. She sent me yesterday, a package. I couldn't believe it. She sent something that you can rub it in like this wherever you have pain, and the pain is gone.

Did you ever go back to Poland? Did you ever go back to Poland?

To Fair Lawn?

No, no, not to Fair Lawn. Did you ever go back to Europe, to Poland, after you came to the United States?

You pay me. If you paid me I wouldn't go. It comes to me a Polish woman. And I told her once. I said, you know, you people, the Polish guys, you know what they said to the Jewish people? [SPEAKING POLISH] You understand me?

What does that mean?

He understands me.

But I don't understand. What does that mean?

[POLISH], that means they're against the Jews. [SPEAKING POLISH]

I don't understand.

You don't understand [POLISH]?

No.

They want sex. I told her. She was quiet when I told her this. [POLISH], this is against the Jews. But the young girls are for us. But I told you that's the way they said in Polish.

Was this in the ghetto? Was this when you were in the ghetto? This was when you were in the ghetto.

[POLISH] you don't understand?

I do.

You understand [POLISH].

That's very bitter.

This was Hitler.

Yeah.

When I watch television, and they showed him, I turn right away a different channel.

Is there something I have not asked you? Something you would like to-- is there something else you would like to say that you would like to share about what you went through that we didn't talk about? Is there something else that I haven't asked you about your life?

It was very, tough, very tough, very tough. A nice big family and to be left alone. And my sister died.

Well, I'd like you to know that many people do want to know. Many people do care.

I know.

Many people want to understand.

Are nasty, nasty.

Yeah. Well, some are. But what you have shared today, and that you agreed to talk to us, we very much value that.

I know.

We know that it costs you. I know that before an interview a person is often nervous. I know that it brings back some of the memories. But we're very grateful.

I have it always in my mind. So when I put my head on the pillow, I have everything in front of me.

Thank you. Thank you for sharing this today. I appreciate it.

Well, you make pictures?

I will tell you. I will finish our interview. And then we'll talk about what we do with it, OK. I'll say this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. Helen Plackta Novak on April 24, 2017, in Rockleigh, New Jersey. OK, so this is a photograph. It looks like it was taken in the 1960s of Helen Plackta Novak and her husband, Maurice Novak. OK, so this is the same photograph, but from a closer view.

And that is Helen Plackta Novak and her husband, Maurice Novak, both of them from Lodz. OK, this is also a photograph of Helen Plackta Novak and her husband, Maurice Novak, taken in later years, probably the 1970s or 1980s. It could be the second half of the 1980s. OK, so we've seen the date of the second photograph. And it is April 19, 1987.

<https://collections.ushmm.org>

Contact [reference@ushmm.org](mailto:reference@ushmm.org) for further information about this collection

And it's Maurice Novak and Helen Plackta Novak.