

I'm starting again. All right.

OK. So, the coat was hideous, for me. First of all, it was a man's fabric. I was very unhappy, but I understood. I was commuting by train, at the time, in winter to school. And so that was the coat. And that was significant, too. So--

What color was it, by the way?

It was a deep gray, kind of a dark gray.

Oh. Mhm?

And men wore a very dark-- nothing colorful about it. And it was not my idea. The city girls who went to school with me had nicer ones, with golden buttons and-- you know [INAUDIBLE]-- I was definitely a country bumpkin, in that.

So that's the coat I put on. And we jumped out. And then they shouted, yelling that men should go to one side and women to the other side. And then my father and Moshe-- 16-year-old-- they lined up in a big line, alongside one side of the platform. And they disappeared then. Everything was very fast. [INAUDIBLE]

And the women and children and elderly women-- the crowd moved up. And you couldn't see the front. The entire platform was filled, and the crowd was moving. And all of a sudden, we were in the front.

Mhm?

Now we knew what was going on in the front. And there were about a dozen Nazi soldiers, in the front.

Had you seen German soldiers, up until that point?

No, I did not. I did not. But yes, as we were tumbling out of the train, they were all over. And they were blocking the crowd, you know, we got to the edge of the platform. And several were standing right in front of us. Others were on the side. Some of them were a little bit into the crowd. But they were all stationed there to make sure the-- what turned out to be the selection-- that was going smoothly [INAUDIBLE] to go smoothly.

So, what they were doing is, one of them-- which apparently turned out to be a doctor by the name of Mengele-- he was holding a stick, a small stick. And he was separating people with the stick. And the way it went-- very quickly, very, very quickly.

So, women and children to one side, and also older women to that same-- to one side. Anybody who was holding a child, going to that side, even if it was a young woman. And they immediately went off on another road. They kept going. They disappeared from the big crowd.

Young women without children went to another side. And that happened in seconds. It was not [INAUDIBLE] not minutes; seconds. OK?

So, when we got to the front, the first person who was taken was my sister, actually, because she stood out to one side, alone. My mother and two little boys, immediately-- like, it was done it one move-- to the other side. She kept going.

My younger sister and I were sort of right next to it. Everybody was together but kind of a little bit next to each other. So my younger sister, Edith, who was about a year and a half younger, all of a sudden-- we're holding hands, she and I.

All of a sudden, the stick comes down between us. And she's sent to my mother's side, and I'm sent to my older sister's side. And I am, all of a sudden, stunned. I'm-- I'm--

I went over to the side that I was supposed to go, but I-- I stopped, and I didn't leave. And that's when you see me in the

picture in the Auschwitz album. I didn't-- I didn't continue, because I turned sideways and looked to see if Edith caught up with our mother. And that's not possible to see. They're gone. She's just going by herself in that direction.

Immediately, other people follow. I mean, there is not a pause between, now I'm finished with this family. There is no pause. You keep going. She's gone.

And we had this-- interesting-- you always build in some hope that it's not as bad as it seems, or there is hope. And as soon as they separated the men, and then we saw the separation of the women by age, and we saw barracks there, everybody assumed that it's a work camp. And if they take away women and children and older people to one side, it means that they will not be working. The young ones will be working. We all assume it.

And we think, well, there will be some reunion, at times, no? Because we have been saved from the being machine-gunned, we can cope with this.

Yeah.

And so why should we not think these things? It's very civilized and normal. But I am seeing something in the flesh, that they're not so keen on keeping children with their parents. They just took away my little sister, and she will never connect with our mother, because the crowd is flowing. And how is she going to catch up, in this big crowd that's moving?

And so, I couldn't leave. What happened, here? Why did they-- she belongs to my mother. She's alone. And I'm-- that's-- and the wheels are turning in my head. I-- I can't leave.

And they were so busy, nobody-- nobody said, go, you know? They were busy. And I'm there a few seconds, not very long, but I'm standing long enough to look and hope. And I am in despair, absolute despair, that she's alone. I'm absolutely sure she's not going to catch up.

Finally, oh, somebody motioned me to go, and I went where my sister went.

Does your coat play a significance, in any of this?

Oh, yeah-- oh-- back to that. Yes. Why did he think I was an adult? Why did he think that I was not a 13-year-old? Because my hair was cut, and I had a kerchief on. I had this huge coat, and, yes, I was holding on to a child, but I-- he decided that I was work material, that I was a young adult or a woman you know. Often, with children, they took the mothers too, for sure. But he did what he felt like doing. This combination of two girls seemed to him like, one is OK for labor and the other is too young-- whatever-- in seconds, all seconds.

And it was because of my haircut, the kerchief, and the big coat. I didn't look my age, for sure-- not with the haircut and a kerchief. It was like the other married women, you know.

So that ugly coat, that ugly coat helped.

Oh, that ugly coat, but also I think the kerchief and the no hair. If I had come with my long hair, blonde hair, a little girl, I would not be alive today. It was the kerchief and the coat, but mainly the kerchief and the hair-- lack of hair. Because how many other Jewish women did he-- he came through, just looking just like that, with a kerchief? Most of them. So that's why the cut hair in the ghetto gave me this first chance. That's the story.

I see. And that photograph that you-- you just mentioned a photograph.

Yes.

Does that mean there's a photograph of you at Auschwitz?

You-- you haven't seen that?

I have, but I want to say it for the tape.

Oh, I see. Yes. So I had no idea that photograph-- somebody was photographing the entire arrival of the train and the entire separation and processing. I never saw it. And I don't think anybody else. It would seem, from the pictures, that the photographer was on the roof of the train that was still standing there.

And so, I was caught in that moment when I'm somewhat turning towards where my sister went. And I'm just standing-- standing there. And I had no idea.

And what's in that album is this train and the way it was-- everything that happened there from the time the train arrived until the entire thing was cleaned up, from the arrival of these passengers, was being photographed. Now, I understand that other trains from other ghettos were coming. I mean, there were-- like, every few minutes, there was a train coming. And the pictures of people are also from Beregszsz ghetto, from [? Bilke ?]. But it's all melded together, you know, in-- there were people from Munkcs, people from the Beregszsz ghetto. But our train that we arrived in got heavy covering, because a lot of them are from Munkcs.

And, to finish up what happened with this picture-taking, that we found out after the war-- like, 20 years after the war-- didn't know that album was available. Nobody knew, until it was given up by the person who found the photographs after the war and an album was made from it, an Auschwitz album.

But, if you look in that album and follow where the people who were separated ended up, so you see women and children going in the direction-- which was the direction of the gas chamber. And then you see people, women and children, sitting in a wooded area, waiting. And what they are waiting for is the backup of people being gassed. And they have to wait their turn.

Oh.

Because, when the Hungarian Jews arrived, there was always a backup. They couldn't keep up with the burning and the gassing. And a whole lot of women and children are sitting in kind of a wooded area.

When I saw the photograph, I saw, your figure is quite distant. How did you recognize that that is actually you?

Well, I have the coat, which was unmistakable. And I had my head covered with a kerchief. And I remember, very distinctly, how I got to that corner and why I was waiting there and how I was leaning, to see where my sister went. And the entire incident was exactly the way I remembered it-- and why I was standing there, and why I was not with anybody else. I mean, I recognized what I needed to recognize. And, of course, I know all the details. I know the coat, and I know-- not just the coat-- I recognized myself, as I came out of the train, and how I got to that corner, and why I stood there-- and why I, after that, had to run to find my sister.

Because I was sent towards her, and she had already left and was also out of sight. And as I was running, I thought to myself, yes, my sister is way up on the road, and I have to catch up to her. But I'm going to run and catch up with my little sister. She's on a road with a lot of other women and children, and she's alone. And she's not going to be able to do what I'm doing-- sorting it out, to find my sister.

And the whole time, I am really crying, and finally I'm shouting, to my sister. And way up on the road, with young adults-- she's with young adults-- mind you, very few. This is another thing.

I see her up the road with maybe a dozen young women. And my little sister was in a huge crowd, where she was being sent.

Oh, my. Hm.

You know. And so I'm thinking, look, she is just as far away from my mother as I am from my sister. And I'm thinking about all this. And I am devastated. I shout and shout, and she hears me. And--

Serena, Serena, wait for me. She turns around and stops. And I run up, and I said, they took away Edith from me. I don't know what will happen to Edith.

Now, they separated me. I don't know why. She'll never catch up with our mother. I-- it was just terrible. I-- I don't know what I did. Why did I let go of her? Why did he take-- I'm just babbling, on and on and on, that this is a terrible thing that happened. And I forgot all about what happened to me and her, but--

What happened to Edith? This is terrible. This is just awful. Now she'll never catch up, and we're going to lose her. And this is terrible-- terrible-- and I'm babbling and--

So this was one of my real traumas, in-- (EMPHASIS) the trauma-- for me, when I arrived in Auschwitz. That is imprinted in my soul. I never forgot it. It was the biggest kind of raw pain that--

Yeah.

[INAUDIBLE] You know, the others are with our mother. You know. My brother is with my father. Now, I am with you. She's with no one. That's terrible. That's terrible-- that's awful. What's going to happen to her.

What was the feeling like, when you saw this photograph after the war? It's not just any photograph. It's a photograph at this moment that you just describe, which is so significant, that moment when that-- that hits, that-- that huge wave of how horrible this is. Wasn't that weird, finding a picture of yourself right at that time?

I looked through that album. I didn't know it existed, and all that. I looked through it carefully, because it's, you know-- it's people-- the sequence of pictures were exactly what happened. The train arrives. You get out. Everything that happened, happened-- what's photographed in that picture was exactly what I experienced.

And so, it was of great interest to me, that somebody captured this-- that it showed exactly the way it happened-- that I don't-- if I think, sometimes, that this was a nightmare and maybe I'm imagining this whole thing, it's here. It's really true. My impression, the first impression, was, my god, this is true. This is exactly how it happened. I didn't dream any of it.

You didn't make it up.

I didn't make it up. I had to convince myself that what I saw really happened. And here is the proof.

And not only that-- every step of the way is exactly the way it was. The men are standing on one side, there. We're jumping off the train. We're lining up. We're being separated. It's all-- it's all exactly like that. That's what amazed me.

Now, next, I wanted to see if I recognized anyone. I didn't know what train it was or who was--

Yeah.

[INAUDIBLE] And when I came to that picture with me with the big coat, oh my god. That's it. That's it. That's me. That's when it happened. That's what happened.

Wow.

I know. I-- I can't describe to you any better than I'm saying it-- the astonishment, the memory, the realization-- what happened-- the real proof that I lost my little sister and I wouldn't leave, and-- you know?

So then, I continued to look more. I couldn't find anybody else. I figured, if I'm there, let's see-- maybe they caught

somebody else that I know. I looked, I looked-- I couldn't find-- there were lots of people-- crowds--

After I was done with looking at that beginning with the train's arrival and us jumping out and getting to this point, I couldn't find anyone-- put it aside. But I kept coming back to it. And-- looked and I looked and I looked. And I got myself a magnifying glass, to see if I could see faces better, and-- nothing.

And then, one day, one day, I stopped dead at the picture where my mother is sitting with the two little boys, in this wooded area.

[GASP] She was amongst those waiting?

Oh, yes. On another page of the album-- not together, you know, because, when they took my picture, she was already gone.

Yeah, yeah.

And see, these photographers followed the ones who were going to the gas chambers. They followed the ones-- young women-- they followed us into the bathhouse. They followed us into the processing of the young people. They followed us to the barrack. They continued to finish the process of arriving, separating, and arriving into the barrack. It was all there.

And I got distracted with the next step and the next step and in the barrack and, you know, looking at faces-- anything that-- since I was there, see, but it never occurred to me that my mother would be in it, because, by the time I am in the picture, she's gone. In other words, I-- one day--

And this still was not a complete recognition of what I continued to recognize. I recognized the two little boys. And I stopped in my track. Gershon and Ruvayn [INAUDIBLE]. I recognize the two little boys, but I did not find my mother.

I did not find my mother. I thought, well, she has to be there. She went with them. Where is she? And I'm even looking at Edith, in the surrounding crowd. Where is she?

Well, I gave up with her. There was absolutely no picture of her, in that group, I could tell without a magnifying glass. But the little boys-- where is my mother?

And I gave up. And I never said anything about it to anyone, because, unless I find my mother, I'm in trouble, here. How did they get here without her, what's going-- you know, I--

But I was absolutely sure and then-- took it out again. I looked at that many times for hours-- this time, again, with a magnifying glass. And all of a sudden, this little profile pops out, kind of almost completely hidden behind the children-- behind the two boys-- but she has a little profile sticking out, there.

Oh my god, that's her. She's sitting there, with the two children. And she's completely hidden, except half of her head and the profile is sticking out. And that's enough. There she is. Yes, yes, that's it. I found them. I found them.

OK? That's how it happened. And I understood that this whole bunch-- the photographer-- followed them. They followed-- there were two photographers. I don't know if they separate or what, but they-- they were followed to the gas chamber. The young people were followed all the way until they were processed and ended up in the barrack. It's all there.

And it's not from one train; it's a mixture of more than one train. And that makes a lot of sense, because the trains kept coming. When one was being sorted out, the other train was waiting on the other end of the platform and [INAUDIBLE] [? they ?] moved right up. You know, they just-- there was no big time lag between the trains coming. They were lined up.

And so, that's how I found myself and everything fell into place. And I then attempted to look at the men separated on the side. But that was, even with a magnifying glass, impossible. Because, first of all, they were in hats, and it's taken from the top. There is--

You can distinguish a few people that I dismissed, you know, as not the ones. It was a group picture without distinction of heads and people. But if they were standing there, and we were being separated at that train, and we were being separated-- they had a-- they were looking right at the place where the separation was taking place. They were--

That's where the lens was focused. That's where the-- yeah.

Yes. But they could see how their families were torn apart, because they had the view of that. You know. And so I can imagine what they went through, because they were watching that.

Ah-- you're saying about the men. The men could see this.

About the men. So, if I was in the picture and my family was in this train and this picture, then he, my father and brother, are standing there. That's them, among the others, you know.

Yeah. You know that they're there. You just can't see them in the photograph.

No. I tried. No, it wasn't possible. There are some people, on the edges, that, if you knew who they were, you would recognize them. But it was not clear, not at all. So--

What is it like, for you to have this visual proof of those moments? Because that's so rare.

You know what? I had-- again, it was so unusual, unbelievable, that it was happening, that, when I saw this, like, more than 20 years later, I had to keep saying "it really happened."

OK.

This is how it happened. All these moves-- the train, the separation, me standing there, my mother-- I-- this is what I remember, exactly. And now I'm sure I didn't make anything up. This is really happen. I had to convince myself. You know? [INAUDIBLE]

You know, that's what-- when people search for genealogical documents about their families, about various members that don't exist anymore-- whether this is connected to the Holocaust or just goes back 100 or 150 years or something like that, when they're trying to find their family tree-- very often, that what you just said is that it's visual confirmation of something that you knew. Let's say, if there was family stories about a particular person, and then you find documents that that person had a birth record, a marriage record, death record, that means that person really existed. You know? It confirms the story.

Mhm.

And that's what I'm hearing you say, right now, is that you knew this, but still a person in their mind, when it's such a out-of-- unreal and horrific world, you doubt your own memory. And what you see is, this confirms my memory.

That's exactly right. And, because I so vividly remember the real thing and the emotions that went with it, all those emotions came back, with the added realization that, yes, this is what I remember exactly and this happened. I just-- and that's what you're saying and I'm saying. Why did I need confirmation?

But it was, in a way-- and I used to describe this, before, when I began to speak to some family members, I described these things like this. And then, it was imprinted in my memory. And here I see, I was right. I was-- everything I said--

Now I just-- all I have to do is show them the picture and tell them I was in this crowd, and then I was in this crowd, and

then I was here. And this is how it happened. I don't have to convince them very much. I have-- you know?

It's very weird. It's very sad. It never goes away.

Is the picture a curse or a gift?

Oh, it's a gift. I need to know-- I-- I need to know, in a very, very sad way, how it happened-- what happened. You know, later on, when we were in Auschwitz and they were telling us that everybody died, we didn't believe it. We didn't. And I, as a child, I was dreaming that, when this is over and I go home to my hometown, everybody's waiting for me there. They're all there. I don't know how many times that was a daydream. You know?

And this one-- later on, of course, I was told-- but to see the route, to see the way, to see the numbers, the many others, it can't be denied anymore-- can't be-- can't say it's a dream-- it was a dream. You know, it's sort of a confirmation, [LAUGH] in a way, [INAUDIBLE] a proof-- proof which I didn't want to believe.

You know, you have to have some-- I hate the word "closure." It's not closure-- never closure. Some kind of-- like, if someone had gone with them but, the last minute, was saved from the gas chamber, and she knew them and she came back and told me this is how it was, it was almost like that. I saw what happened. They show it to me in pictures, and I remember, up to that point, what happened.

Well, there is a particular pain that people who don't know what happened to their families-- and this goes, I'd say, beyond the Holocaust, but people whose-- let's say, in South America, who had disappeared, you know?

Yeah. Yeah.

And they never knew where that child might have been buried or where the final moments were, or-- this unknowing is an added sorrow.

Yes, yes, yes. Yes. Absolutely. And to this-- if any of that is still very, very painful, it's still the fact that my little sister went into that gas chamber alone. That has never left me. Because I am convinced, from what I saw at the moment-- I saw-- I-- you know, I assessed the situation, right there when I wouldn't leave, because the crowds were going-- huge numbers of crowds were going all in that direction-- women and children and grandmothers. And I knew that it only took a second to be overwhelmed in the line and that she would not. She would not find them.

In a way, you know, the thought that I get when you tell me this and then retell me this is that your intuition was telling you something that you could only really process and understand the significance of later. Because your intuition is telling you, something's very bad here. Something is not the way it should be. It's very, very bad.

But you, at the same time, don't want to think that that's a gas chamber-- that this is a--

Oh. No idea. I'm thinking, what was said quickly, by people in the train, that it's a work camp and this separation, it's-- see, the Germans did it so cleverly.

Yeah.

Why would people coming from civilized life think, when women and children, elderly, are separated, and young people are separated, and it's a work camp, see, barracks-- why would we think that there won't be some kind of reunion-- and that actually it's comforting. They will not be working.

Yeah.

Women and children-- how nice of them. And, you know, and people said things like, well, we can do that. We can do that. We can work.

And all of a sudden, at that point, when she was taken from me, said, hey, families, children are separated from their parents, here. That's what got into my head. No, there is something wrong with this.

And nobody asks your name. Nobody knows who belongs to whom. Nobody-- you know, there is no way, unless you're old enough to ask, how is she going to get--

That's right.

--there is no documentation of any kind. So she's lost. And I knew that immediately. And that is why I was absolutely overwhelmed with grief.

And, in the meantime, I forgot that I was separated. I totally forgot that I was standing there alone. But I knew I had a sister, and I knew where they sent me. She was on that road. And I knew to get her attention.

There is that difference in the year, the year and a half, between the two of you, where you're just old enough that you can bridge that distance. And your little sister is just small enough and young enough that-- how will she make her way through that crowd to your mother?

Well, you know, I have heard-- I've told the story. And I've heard from people to say, well, you know in the end what happened to everybody. So, in other words, why is this still the most painful thing that you feel even today? Because I need to know. I just need to know. And also, it was the first, deepest trauma, arriving in this place.

Mhm. Yeah. I'd like to go on, if we can? I mean, as you say it, I feel it. It's also, when you love a person-- and you loved your little sister-- what happens to them in their final moments matters.

It's amazing how much it matters. It really is amazing. It's such a-- painful, painful. And it cannot be remedied. I mean, it keeps coming back and coming back.

Well, I appreciate that you have gone over this in such detail with me. Because I know that, as the whole interview, this brings up some things. But it is-- thank you for it, because-- thank you for this gift. I mean, it's for the whole interview, but also for delving into this part, which is, as you say, the most painful part, and sharing it with me-- and, by that, sharing it with a much wider group of people who will listen to this.

Well, you know, the suffering, the separation, the cruelty that was imposed on Jewish people is also a very deep pain to me. My family, sure. But all our Jews, all our people, all those million children, all those mothers-- [INAUDIBLE] you know, 6,000 murdered, a day-- some people say 10,000 when the Hungarians were coming into Auschwitz. [INAUDIBLE] an unimaginable slaughter.

And nobody stops it. Nobody there to say, what are you doing? Don't do that. It's like a license to kill. And one man, sitting there, as the trains arrive, tells who will live and who will die as soon as possible, as soon as you walk down the road? All that is-- I am a wounded person, to be sure.

Mm. Mm.

Yep.

Shall we go on?

Yeah. Yeah, let's go on.

OK. So, when you find Serena and you meet up with her, what happens then? And when do you realize that what people are saying about the gas chambers is the actual fact-- the truth? When do you stop thinking, this can't be?

Yeah. Yeah, there is a timeline, for sure. You know, we-- we were then-- [SIGHS] well, [LAUGH] it's very-- you



explained to me something that I understand better now, that my age at 13 and 1/2-- that I was still clinging to parents and I was a child, as opposed to my sister-- because there is a very big difference. It's not that she doesn't understand, but she understands--

Many times, she says to me, when I'm telling her of my side of it, she says, I don't remember that. I don't remember that. You know? And I remember every inch of it. [LAUGH] Somehow.

So, my separation trauma isn't over. And for what I'm going to tell you-- from now on-- my separation anxiety continues for days, because I have been torn away. And-- you know. But I didn't understand, until-- you really helped me understand that, because I had a conflict.

Here I had this enormous pain, being separated. And at the same time, I'm telling myself, I am brave. I am brave. You know, I'm--

Well, you are. You are being brave. All of that is true. [LAUGH]

I wasn't brave, I was-- I was-- [LAUGH] this was impossible. That wasn't-- I don't know. My sister tells me one thing, that, the first few days, I was crying a lot. She says I was crying all the time. Now that, I don't remember, you see? I said, no, no I was brave. [LAUGH] I was very brave.

Oh. Oh.

I didn't complain. I was just hurting like the dickens.

Yeah.

So anyhow-- but you helped me understand that. So, there is more pain of separation coming.

OK.

So you said, what happened after?

Yeah, what happened after?

Well, so, they had a very efficient processing of all these people coming. And the processing was done by our Jewish prisoners-- [? our ?] [? young ?] [? men ?]. And, in fact, the Germans-- their cruelty and their insisting on using us like animals, and demeaning us, never stopped. They used our Jewish people to do the most humiliating things to each other. So, the shaving, the nakedness, was all done by our own men who came before and were assigned to do this. And so you had--

So you had your head shaved by a man?

Oh, yeah-- well, this is the thing. My hair was shaved already, so I actually skipped the station. Because it was, like, stations. You went from place to place.

But they shaved our body hair, our pubic hair. They shaved everything. And you stood naked in front of a bunch of boys, who touched you there with a razor. And I was a child. The humiliation was plenty. But 25-year-old, 27-year-old, young single mothers whose babies were taken away, standing there, naked, with men doing that? Just think about it. Out of home, out of life-- the religious or not religious, just like animals. Yes. We were standing there, naked, in rows, and-- one after another, naked. And then showering, naked-- all supervised by men-- our men, you know? Our young guys. Just think of-- [LAUGH]

You know, either you're going to close your mind and think it's not happening, or you're dying. Or-- you know? So my next terror of being separation-- see, I am here-- it's the separation anxiety that I am now comparing to my sister's. She

did not have that. I don't know why I--

This thing just happened to me, to full understanding, many years later. And you explained it better. I didn't know why I was so distraught, and she seemed to function better about that.

So anyhow, so-- you know, hundreds of women, and we're going through the shaving and separation, and finally, in the bathhouse, a shower and disinfection. And then they line you up. There were kind of long desks with clothes on it. You walk by and pick one of each-- and none of it-- not your size, not your-- nothing. You know, [INAUDIBLE] just one size fits-- garment-- no underwear, no socks, no shoes.

Sometimes they let you take the shoes that you came in. In our case, they let us take the shoes or they don't let them take-- they get some wooden clogs or somebody else's [INAUDIBLE] size.

Anyhow, this is the thing. When you finally get your clothes and got through all this, you've got your clothes, you're at the exit door. And you're pushed out. And when you're pushed out, you begin to line up and waiting for the entire group to be ready, when they are ready to march you off into the camp itself and into a barrack. OK?

So I skip a step, when it comes to cutting the hair. I didn't have to cut my hair. So I'm pushed ahead, to the next station.

My sister has to have her hair cut. Now I lost her. And I'm not at the same place where she is. And, when I am finished, I'm pushed out the door, and there are already lots of women who are-- also been pushed out and ready. And I'm not moving away from the door, because I'm waiting-- when she comes out. I'm not. I'm just standing by the door.

As the others are stepping away from the door and beginning to be lined up, I am deliberately falling back, falling back. I want to be close to the door when she comes out. But she's not coming, and she's not coming, and she's not coming.

And it looks to me like I'll have to line up and leave without her. They're counting people off to go to the barracks. Every time the door opens, I call her name-- "Serena?" Because now I have a problem.

All these women look alike. Everybody is shaved. Everybody's wearing the same uniform. And I don't know who's who. It's impossible to tell. She can walk right by me. I mean, it wasn't just my problem. Mothers, daughters, sisters didn't recognize each other-- totally, totally transfigured.

Wow.

And, every time the door opens, I yell "Serena, Serena"-- because I'm not going to recognize her. And now I'm crying. She's not coming. She's not coming, and I'll be counted off.

And here I am-- the separation. I can't go through that. That cannot be. I cannot do that. You know? [LAUGH]

Yeah.

That's trauma. So I had a couple of terrible traumas, upon arriving, because I was no longer with my family and I was being torned further-- further apart alone. So, and I'm crying, and I'm calling her name every time the door opens. So, a woman from our town-- a young woman, who knew me very well-- Elsa-- Elsa Klein.

It seems that Elsa Klein came in that transport on the other train-- on another train. But she was mingled into this train. She was-- you know, [INAUDIBLE] pictures and everything-- was mangled. And, as I am yelling for my sister-- Sery, I called her-- Sery, Sery, Sery. She heard this. And she looked at me. And she-- oh. She recognized me.

She knew exactly who I was. She said, don't worry. Sery didn't go through all the lines yet. She's still in there. I saw her, and I'll help you.

Oh.

You know, she was-- and she knew me very well, and my family. And, when Sery came out, she caught her. She recognized her better than I would have, but she saw her in there in the process.

And so, I had my sister. But that period of waiting and being counted off-- and, had I been counted off, it would have been the end. I would not have seen her. She would have gone to another barrack, and so on. And I wouldn't have been alive. [LAUGH] There's no doubt about that.

So that kind of fear was running through you-- that, I cannot be separated from her. And there was a chance that you would be.

A big chance. I saw the process. You know, as soon as the women came out, they were lining them up, away from the door. Because they were going to get them all who were in there and then march them off. And we were far from the barracks, really. This was the arrival place and the sorting out. And they take you deeper into the actual camps, with the barracks.

So, there was no chance that, if I left, that I would see her coming out, or that we would end up in the same place.

But you did. In the end, you did. You ended up together, after she finished all her processing.

Yes, because of the help of this--

Elsa.

--girl from our town. Elsa waited, and Elsa got me together. And the funny thing is, when Elsa-- in the end, I was not with Elsa, for the rest of the time. She actually was, somehow-- they separated people into different barracks, and eventually they sent people to different camps. And-- in other words, I never saw her, after that. She ended up elsewhere. But what she did for me was amazing.

But, in the separations area, for me, things all of a sudden got so much better, and that I could now relax about being alone and being-- you know, it was a very, very frightening place. [INAUDIBLE] and I wasn't just afraid of separation. I was afraid of life unrecognizable. [LAUGH]

Of course.

So I want to tell you that, because-- again, I had some incredible luck. Why I survived, at the age of 13 and 1/2-- it was all about attaining some emotional comfort-- that I could no longer have to tremble and have this fear.

So, finally, they marched us off. They put us in a barrack. The first night was unbelievable. There were, like, six or seven of us on this bunk-- one blanket. All of us are new. All of us-- everybody's pulling on the edge of the blanket. We're freezing.

We're sitting up, leaning on each other. No one can stretch out. Everybody's wide awake. We're like caged animals, freezing, huddled together.

And, the next day, they throw us out at 5:00 in the morning, freezing. Our clothes is gone, you know? Just-- just terrible-- so terrible that you can't think it's terrible. [LAUGH] You're just existing.

They didn't have any jobs for us or things. The crowds kept coming from the trains. They had to wait until they sorted out all these thousands of people that they have to put here and there and everywhere.

And, in the morning, they threw us out. And the women sat on the ground, on the ground outside. They let us just sit there. And some walked around. Some sat with-- [INAUDIBLE] people-- we were freezing, to begin with. And that was the next day.

And Serena and I were walking around a little bit. And, all of a sudden, she recognizes my mother's sister-- or my aunt recognizes her. I don't know what came first.

They ran into each other on the crowded ground. She was-- not Rosie-- Rosie's sister-- called her "Piri"--

"Piri"-- mhm?

--Piri got herself a job, that morning, immediately. The kapo who was guarding our barrack-- her barrack-- her barrack-- asked her, somehow, with others, to go to a kitchen area some distance away and haul in the bread-- the rationed bread-- that day, into the camp.

Well, that's a privileged job. It was a privileged job. How Piri got it was incredible. I don't know how it happened.

But she was coming back, with her arms stretched out and full of these loaves of bread that looked like the size of bricks, you know? She had a load. And she was walking to the barrack, to put it in the barrack-- because, later on, the kapo was giving out the bread ration. She was bringing it from the source.

And with this, she was carrying-- she and Serena practically bumped each other in the grounds, out there. I was right nearby, but she-- they recognized each other.

Well. And Rosie wasn't doing this job. She was in the barrack, or in the other side of the field-- I mean, they were together, my two aunts. They were together in the barrack-- but not in my barrack-- well, not in my barrack. Well, actually, it was-- yeah, I guess not in my barrack. Right.

Anyhow, when we met with her and Rosie, well, all my anxiety disappeared. Because they were like my parents. I had the fondest memories of them-- that [INAUDIBLE] their love and their-- and they were adults. I called her Aunt-- Aunt Rosie, Aunt Piri. And, all my life, I addressed her in the formal fashion, you know?

Yeah.

And I never-- I changed my mind, after a while in the camp, that I could leave the "Aunt" off and just call her Rosie. It was such a big decision. It just didn't fit. How can I just--

[LAUGH]

It was, like, Aunt Rosie-- and in Hungarian, and it's even more important. If you know Hungarian--

How do you say "Aunt Rosie" in Hungarian?

"Rosie nÃ©ni."

"Rosie nÃ©ni."

"NÃ©ni." And anybody-- any adult to any child can call "nÃ©ni," even if it's not on an aunt. It's the way you do it. And a grown man is, in Hungarian, addressed like an uncle. [INAUDIBLE] like, let's say, [HUNGARIAN] bÃ¡csi. Everybody's a bÃ¡csi.

"Everybody's a bÃ¡csi."

And everybody's a nÃ©ni. And you use the-- not the "you," simple "you," but all the other gradations of honorary--  
[LAUGH]

Well, English doesn't have that. Other languages have the distinction between a familiar "you" and a formal "you" that

you use as a sign of both respect to someone elder or someone who you don't know.

Oh. And it goes down the entire grammatical structure.

Of course. And if you know-- for example, when you learn in German, they do it too-- and the Hungarian. If you don't learn that and have it right, it is incredibly rude and disrespectful to do it otherwise

Of course.

It's built into the respect of the language. You cannot mistake that. This is essential. [LAUGH] You know? So I called her "Rosie nÃ©ni" for a very long time-- and "Piri nÃ©ni."

OK. So here we are, these people who represent parents and love to me.

Yeah.

Oh my god. You know? And it's really-- my emotional state would have killed me, if I hadn't run into them, because I was a wreck. I was really a frightened wreck. So what they did is--

Piri already seemed to have had some connection with a kapo that she never knew till that moment. She said to [INAUDIBLE]-- they scooped us up, the two of them, and they went to the kapo, and they said, look-- we want these two girls to be in our bunk, with us in our bunk. So, explain-- do us a favor. See if anybody from our bunk would like to change into another bunk, and let them come into our bunk. At this point, it doesn't matter. All bunks are the same. [INAUDIBLE]

And they arranged it. The kapo asked all of them, together-- they talked to the women in that bunk and said, would you please do us this favor? You know, let them come here, and you go there. And they did-- whoever it was. I have no idea.

But, from that moment, we were with them in their bunk. And so, the next night, if I happened to-- we all still sat up, knees pulled up-- didn't have room. But if I happened to lean on one of my aunts, they didn't shove me off angrily, because that's what they did. They couldn't support another person. [LAUGH] I don't blame them. But if I leaned on them, it wasn't so bad.

Yeah.

They took it.

It was family. It was family.

It was family. And that raw anxiety and fear left me. Now, I wasn't free, and I wasn't looked upon that way by the Nazis, and my concern about being recognized as a child by the Nazis never ended, because now I didn't have my kerchief and I didn't have my big coat, and I was just very recognizably a child. And I was in trouble a lot, you know? And they had to hide me, and they had to protect me and hope that, every day when they lined up to count us and to look at us carefully, that they didn't pull me out of line, on the line, because I observed-- we all observed-- people being pulled out of line. And that was the end of you. Just a motion with a finger. You come out of the line, and you were marched to the gas chamber. That's it.

They always reduced the numbers. They always took out more-- they missed somebody at the original separation.

Had your aunts been in the camp longer than you? Or had they been on the same transports?

They came from the BeregszÃ©sz-- they came from another ghetto. [INAUDIBLE] even though they were neighbor towns, we were taken to the MunkÃ©cs ghetto. They were taken to the BeregszÃ©sz ghetto, which, when the train went to the opposite direction, it was close to [PLACE NAME] and to everything--

But they took them to Beregszsz. And so we were not together in the ghetto. But we arrived-- they arrived the night before.

I see.

Rosie told me, when we discussed when they arrived. They-- it must have been not that morning, not that-- the day before, but in the night. They arrived in the night, because that had a significance. That was very, very significant, whether you arrived at day or night.

Did they know what was going on with the gas chambers?

They were told. And we all denied it. That's all there is to it. We just-- you know, I don't know if it's even possible to put yourself in the position where you're coming from home and certain rules and certain presumptions-- and, the very day you arrive, your family is marched into a prepared gas chamber, and--

No, you wouldn't. It's too much for a human brain to take.

No. You just can't-- you can't. And so we all denied it. But, because they arrived at night, and I think that denying it for them was a little harder, because what was seen at night was much more evident-- you know, like, you saw fire from the chimneys and [INAUDIBLE] you had to try hard, to deny. [INAUDIBLE] denied--

And, in fact, Rosie, who was so, so sensible-- long after that, when we all knew it, we all accepted it, we all understood-- she said, [INAUDIBLE] we were located, some time later on-- our workplace was adjacent to gas chamber number 4. We were just the fence separated from the actual gas chamber and crematorium.

And we witnessed women and children, long lines, heading into the gate of the gas-- into the gas chamber. We knew-- we saw. And Rosie, at one point, said, you know, we see them going in, but we don't see them coming out on the other side. And even I was stunned, at that point. All this time, you still think, this is-- they're coming out on the other side. And what we saw, when they went in-- the fire in the chimney was billowing and making a noise like a storm, [INAUDIBLE] burning bodies in open pits, right there. And in the night, when they arrived, they saw being bodies dumped into it, dead or alive, into the fire.

They saw everything. We didn't see that. And, months later, she would say such a thing-- that, we don't see them coming out. And that is an incredible denial. Because she was not a child. She was the one who had been in Poland and was retrieved.

Yeah. Yeah. She knew things. She knew things.

But, you know, you couldn't-- you could not believe that they brought you here to be killed. You could not.

Yeah.

And your children, and your grandchildren, and your parents.

Was there a smell?

You know, I've spoken to survivors, and they all say so. And I was stationed-- and Serena and all of us-- very, very near, like I describe it-- I do not remember a smell. They all say there was a smell. I do not remember a smell. I don't know why. Maybe that was my denial. I don't know.

Or maybe it's not something you remember. That's just as legitimate as people who say they do remember. I was just wondering.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I don't-- I can't say that I did. But I saw too much. I saw everything, after we were stationed in this place.

So we were then stationed-- we were in a camp where we arrived for about a month. And then they began to assign sorting out these thousands of women for various work places. Some were sent out of Auschwitz to other camps or to other kind of assignments.

They used the people for slave labor, wherever. Some were assigned to some kind of labor within the camp, and they had to go from one barrack to the other. We were, after a month, assigned to work what was nicknamed "Kanada," in the camp.

Ah. Kanada.

[? That's it ?] Yes.

Tell us, what was Kanada, and why was it nicknamed that way?

Well, first of all, we didn't know it existed. We didn't know anything about it. You know-- but, in Kanada was-- that was Birkenau. And that's where the gas chambers were. Four of them were right in Birkenau, back to back. One of them--

And there were-- they apparently had built barracks just for the purpose of housing the materials, the stuff, that came out of the hundreds of trains. And people were going to the gas chambers and left clothing and stuff behind-- a lot of it. And they had these barracks, there, to put this stuff into the barracks. And from the train, a lot more stuff that came out into those barracks.

And then they needed workers to sort them out and to get them ready to return to Germany. Because they used all of it, [INAUDIBLE] [? back ?] shipment to Germany-- all that clothes-- whatever was usable would have to be sorted out. And it was sent back to Germany.

And we were assigned to do that. And we had no idea-- because, you know, rumors would have it, in the mornings-- you know, the kapos would say, we need 1,000 women to go to a workplace-- or, I don't know how exactly they framed it. And the rumor would start. You think it's a good place? Should we volunteer?

Ah.

They'll pick us anyway. You think we should go-- we should not? They had no idea, but there was rumors. OK.

When this announcement was made-- 1,000 women, to come to a place-- and, at this point, because they were separating us, they needed to ship us to workplaces. People had a chance to volunteer. You know. So I remember Piri saying, I hear rumors it's a good place. Rosie had no opinion. I think we should volunteer for this. And the rumors, back and forth.

So, OK, she said she heard something. Rosie agreed. We lined up, all four of us. And [INAUDIBLE] the very same time, they tattooed us. You were designated for here. You are going to be tattooed and go whatever this place is. That's all it was-- no idea.

Aha. OK.

In the meantime, you're always looking for some hope. This is so desperate. Oh, they're tattooing you? That's a good thing.

Why do you think that's a good thing? Well, they don't take our name. They don't know who-- [INAUDIBLE] they don't

have documents. This is the way they'll keep track of us. And there will be a name to go with the tattoo.

And now they can't deny we exist. This is our name. This is our--

In the future, after all of this is over, did you ever find your name listed among Auschwitz records?

My daughter Leslie has done an immense amount of research. She is an expert on Holocaust and all things related to it, because she spent all their adult life researching-- and not only in this country but in all the Russian republics and all over Europe. That was her job, and she was able to get to [INAUDIBLE] in Auschwitz. She saw the archives there, and so on.

And we found that, in the beginning, there were some names correlating with the numbers. But, after a while, they abandoned that altogether. And what happened when she did find names-- we found out that, like, for example, Rosie, she was called Rosie Mermelstein. And we knew her age and whatever more information.

It didn't coincide with our Rosie Mermelstein. You know? And so there were so many Rosie Mermelsteins and so many other that it was hit-and-miss.

I see.

But I understand that some people actually were able to trace it. It depended on the rush. It depended on who you were dealing with or if the records were accurate. There were some who could connect with it. So there was some reason to think that that will be a record of your existence.

Mhm?

But, [INAUDIBLE] to who you are-- because, you know, your-- everything that you had-- papers and names and location where you come from-- was destroyed, you know. So--

All that Hungarian citizenship that your father was so busy trying to acquire--

Oh, my god. That was long-- that was long confiscated-- in the ghetto. They took all our papers. There were fires, bonfires. Any books you brought, any papers-- it was burned, long burned [INAUDIBLE]. We should have known then, we didn't exist anymore. [INAUDIBLE] what my father worked so hard for. We didn't come with papers anymore, anyhow, to Auschwitz.

So here you get a tattoo-- which is, in essence, a comfort, because it confirms that you exist-- that there has to be some roster--

Yes, but nobody knows who we are. This is connected with the name. And I was thinking that we exist. [INAUDIBLE] [LAUGH] We've got to make sure that there's some record that a human being lived here-- whatever they call you-- [INAUDIBLE]. And it was foolish. We didn't understand. We did not.

And I don't really know why they tattooed. It certainly wasn't to keep a record of our names or who we are or where we come from. It was some kind of bookkeeping for them, it seems to me. I don't really know. Not everybody was tattooed in Auschwitz [INAUDIBLE]

Yeah, well, the later transports, we read, particularly in November of '44, when, really, we're coming close to the end of the war, many people then were not tattooed--

Yes.

--by then. But, in the beginning that's different.



[INAUDIBLE] Yeah, yeah.

So you're sent to Kanada, which is Birkenau, which has these four gas chambers and, it sounds like, a huge warehouse of goods--

Yes.

--that have been confiscated from the trains.

Well, it became-- it sort of was a city of its own or a region of its own. And we had no idea what it was. From what Piri heard, it was a good assignment-- if you were able to absorb what went with that.

OK.

And, unfortunately, to get used to what went with that, for me was devastating. Again, I feel-- you could-- I mean, everybody suffered. Everybody suffered cruelty and starvation and-- and dehumanization and knowing your parents and family are killed. And [? a ?] just unspeakable place to be, and almost sure that you'll never get out alive. And, you know, everybody did.

Yeah.

But, to be there and see the process of gassing and to see the thousands of people go in and not come out-- to see it day and night had an entirely different effect. Those who were not near it-- Auschwitz is an enormous piece of land-- acres and acres. And if you were far away, in barracks, you could always deny-- half-deny, deny--

But what I went through and we went through, with actually seeing the process and hearing the people pray and cry and scream, and then silence-- I I'm not going to say that-- I don't want to say that I was affected more than others. But, if you saw it, and if you heard it, it was another experience than if you heard it far away. They told you, just like when we came in, into [INAUDIBLE] Auschwitz [? was, ?] you can deny it. You can deny it.

But we were there for eight months--

Wow. [INAUDIBLE] and what I witnessed and we witnessed was about two months, for sure-- two and a half months-- where 400,000 Hungarian Jews were brought into Auschwitz, in two months. So it was [INAUDIBLE] trains kept coming, day and night, day and night.

And we saw the flames, and the people going in there, and the screaming and crying. We saw it day and night. That was our view. That was our sound. That was our vision. No one had to tell us it wasn't happening.

And I think that we suffered a kind of agony that cannot be described, because nobody had ever experienced anything like that.

No. [INAUDIBLE]-- no. Your-- it's-- there is-- when people witness somebody being murdered, the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Yeah, there's-- one person being murdered, and it stays with a human being for life.

But it was-- what it was is the absolute realization that they're killing our Jewish people deliberately, with a plan. The plan is smooth. It's working. It's happening day and night. It's an enclosed area whose purpose is to kill [INAUDIBLE] they're brought in here to be killed, for no other reason. The trains are coming.

This is a killing place. This is some kind of-- [INAUDIBLE] I, as a young girl, I concluded, this is not on Earth, and it's not in Europe. And it's not anywhere-- that, somehow, we're on another planet and nobody knows about it. It's a big

secret. We didn't know about it.

And all the Jews are being killed. And all our Jewish children are being killed. And it will never end, because nobody knows this is here.

And we are captured here into a fenced-in, electrified fencing. We can't go out. We're guarded by cruel monsters. And the only people who are in charge of this horrific event are a bunch of soldiers. They're not even civilians. Nobody is charged with anything.

You got off the train, and you're marched in here, and you're little children and your parents and your elderly-- day in and day out. You build up-- I built up a story of where I am and why I'm here and that this is a planned destruction of our Jewish people and our own families. It happened to them, in the way that I see it happening. , And even though we had more food, we had more clothes, we had more comforts, in retrospect-- I don't know-- maybe, even there-- nobody asked me-- but, in retrospect, what effect it had on me for the rest of my life and forever-- I think, I would have rather have been in a faraway camp from this, so that this would not have gotten imprinted upon my soul. Because that was not bearable. And so--

I can't imagine it. I can't imagine it.

No, you can't. [LAUGH] I agree with you. But I was-- I was impressionable, for sure.

You were 13 and 1/2.

But I sorted out. And I made a fantasy story out of it. But it was, we were captured into a killing place that no one knows about. And we're guarded. And we're-- eventually, all our families are being funneled in there. And the fire was constant, day and night.

Well, your fantasy wasn't far from the truth.

But I thought, we're not on this planet. It couldn't be-- cannot be [INAUDIBLE]-- and [INAUDIBLE] close enough to the-- the location is close enough to the platform where the trains arrive. And, day and night, you hear the hissing of the steam engine, [INAUDIBLE] they're coming. They're all-- at night, you [INAUDIBLE] hear you hear--

We worked night shifts and day shifts. We worked around--

What was your particular job?

So our particular job was, they dumped the belongings that people brought on the platform, when we arrived. There were trucks waiting for it, there. Our men prisoners, our Jewish prisoners, loaded them in the trucks and brought them to this prepared place, a barracks, to be sorted out. But first, they dumped it on the ground between the barracks, because they just had to go run back for more and more and more.

And so, the accumulation outside, between the barracks-- you will see some pictures, in the album-- the stuff is as high as the roof of the barracks, all the way up on the roof, outside. Our job was to bring the stuffing to the barrack, out of the weather, and then, when it slowed down-- eventually, in about two and a half months, when the Hungarian Jews were done with it. That after that, the trains came but much less-- then we would be in the barracks, sorting it out, for eight months, to make use of it for the Germans. And the thousands and thousands of people who were killed in the gas chambers, their clothing and belongings were also brought to this place. [INAUDIBLE]

So what were some of the items that you would handle?

Well, if you see [INAUDIBLE] in the museum and in pictures, you see mountains of shoes?

Yeah.

You see mountains of suitcases--

But I'm thinking of you, particularly. Is there anything that you remember that you would find? Was it papers? Was it photographs? Was it-- and whatever-- you know, besides the photos that we all see now--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--were books. There were pots and pans. I don't remember-- I remember books, but typically, they took away these things, you know, said, get out and leave everything behind. But, depending on where the people came from, they brought things and then they left them in the train. Because-- you know, and--

That's what they were told.

That's what they were told. And so it all came here. Like, would be mountains of eyeglasses, mountains of toothbrushes, mountains of baby shoes, mountains of all kinds of boots, mountains of various kinds of food products. And we could eat it, because they couldn't keep track of us-- you know, broken [INAUDIBLE], spoiled rice, spoiled sugar-- but, every now and then, something very delicious.

And the women-- we ate it, yes. And that was a-- and we could change our underwear, and we could change our socks. They simply could not keep track of all that. There was too much. And we were physically, in every way--

There were showers that we were able to take. And you would have thought, well, this is a huge improvement-- and it was. And it was a survivable condition-- if you could look away and not see and not hear and not understand what was really going on here-- a genocide.

Yeah. Yeah.

And I-- for some reason, I don't-- I shouldn't put myself out as I was the only one who was sensitive, but I was extremely troubled. I was extremely sensitive. I was extremely affected. I just think that that's the part that Auschwitz means to me-- that my suffering, my-- to this day, to this very day.

You know, it's very difficult to explain that part to other people, what you feel. But this was not-- I witnessed genocide of our people.

Yeah.

And I witnessed-- you know, it-- you see people, women, holding little babies, holding little children-- grandmothers, holding onto little children-- the gorgeous children. They are talking to us, as they're waiting. They're talking to us-- in Hungarian-- say, where are you from? What's your name?

We're inside the building. We're not supposed to touch them. But we're inside this barrack-- barrack, facing this road where they're entering the gate to the gas chamber. They are talking to us, these gorgeous children-- hundreds of them.

And I know that, in a half hour, they'll all be dead, and we'll be sorting out their clothes. And the chimney is belching fire. You can't go on like that very long.

No.

No amount of extra comforts that you have-- and that's my-- that's my Auschwitz story. And I need not say anymore. And the effect on me is-- it-- it-- it-- it's understandably horrific. [INAUDIBLE]

Did you ever have nightmares, later?

You know, I didn't have nightmares. I don't understand it. I think I [INAUDIBLE]-- [LAUGH] I lived it too much in the day. My daily absorption of what was going on, and my fantasy of where I am, sort of-- it took over. The nightmare was in the daytime, in a way, really.

And so, I still-- to be honest to what I experienced-- had I-- in the end, [INAUDIBLE] had I had a very rough, starving time for the entire eight months, elsewhere, I probably would have not made it. I would have died of some illness or something else. But the trade off--of the advantages I had didn't outweigh what I came away with-- we came away with.

It was a high price. It was a very high price.

Very high price. And it's not the kind that I can say, oh, once upon a time this happened. No, it happened to my people-- all my babies and all my people.

And then, in addition to that, we found out that-- you know what they did? They used our own men to pull the bodies out of the gas chamber, to cut their hair, pull out their gold teeth, separate them with pitchforks-- because they were mangled. It was hard, hard labor, [INAUDIBLE] getting them into the gas chambers, dealing with the ashes. Our own men had to do that.

And then we found out that, for a while, my father was picked to work there. And when I tell you that my father was a gentle person-- he was killed, there. He was killed because they--

First of all, what we heard from someone who was also killed after-- that he wasn't doing it very well, and he wasn't suitable. So they shot him.

But typically what they did to these, our men, is, they had them do this work for about three months, and then they marched them off into a field and they shot them and picked new ones from the newcomers. Because obviously they couldn't do the work. But to find out that my father, my kind of father, the kind of person that he was-- to imagine that, for him to be aware and participate in the murder of all his people-- his children, his family-- you can't live very well with that image.

No. No. What about your brother, who had been with your father? Did you ever find out about him-- what happened to him?

Well, he's another painful story, because he would not have been picked for that job, because we know that they picked stronger people-- although my father didn't seem so strong. I read, there were some of-- they were called "Sonderkommandos." a couple of them survived.

I read the book of one of them. I learned a lot, how they worked, who they were, how long they lived, who these people were. But the emphasis was that it was heavy labor. And he was a slight 16-year-old, you know-- a skinny kid. So, he must have been separated. This is all-- makes sense.

But what we don't understand-- my daughter and my sister-- my daughter, especially-- she has had opportunity to be in Auschwitz museum, where they have lists in Israel, Yad Vashem has lists. She contacted the Red Cross, who do search. She searched here at this museum.

He disappeared, entirely-- no record of him. We asked survivors. Nobody knew or heard of him. He-- to this day, we know he died but we don't know how and where, because--

He vanished.

He vanished. And, since there is no follow-up there, to-- but [INAUDIBLE] it's also terribly painful. I'm not finished with losing my family, one way or another. Why should I be finished with that?

But Leslie, till just recent months, she was in Russia, in the Ukraine. She had access to documents there. She came back

with some documents-- for example, she came back with the birth certificates of all my family, from Ukraine. They had these places where people helped her to find it. She has copies of it.

That's amazing.

Yes. Oh, she dug deep. But, because she was an American, assigned to do work in this Russian republics and in the Ukraine, the people there in charge of these things-- especially if you paid them-- they were happy to dig for you. And-- and it took years. She went there. She was working there and made many, many, many trips to these places, until recently.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

For those who will be listening to this later, the explanation for why the Ukraine is because your hometown where you were born is now in the Ukraine. And so birth records would be there. Is that what we should assume?

Well, yes, but it wasn't simple at all, because they had-- when, you know, the Ukrainians then occupied it, after the war right-- they changed the places where records were kept. And she would [INAUDIBLE] go to this city or that city. Where were the-- you know, the Ukrainians weren't so happy keeping records.

But there was a chaos, there. But she managed. She had a lot of help from a lot of people. She was able to work with local diplomats and Jewish survivors. I had a lot-- I have about-- when we were deported, even my grandparents when they arrived-- how many people, how many trains--

For example, to emphasize the size, the number of Hungarians-- you know, the Hungarian tragedy is extra tragic, because the war was over a year later.

Yes.

In some areas, six months, seven months later, as the war proceeded. But they managed to kill 400,000, because they kept the gas chambers going day and night. And so, somebody has a record of 114 cattle trains arrived in Auschwitz from Hungary-- 114 long cattle trains-- 14-- 114-- in two months.

Amazing.

And that many-- 114 trains, with thousands and-- 400,000-- mostly in Auschwitz-- they had to do a lot of killing. The killing was day and night, around the clock. And that's what I'm talking about, that I witnessed.

Yes. Yes.

Not just an occasional--

No--

--killing.

It was a 24-hour operation.

It was a weird understanding which was-- I could not understand [INAUDIBLE] the weird awareness that nobody knows that this is going on, and that this is a special-built case just for killing. And, since nobody knows-- and the soldiers are in charge, and they have-- not too many, either.

Mhm?

We weren't mobbed with soldiers-- where are we, and why is this happening? And why is this not stopped? And why

are they doing this to our Jews? And why are they making us-- treating us this way? And why are they using our own people to kill their own people? And-- you know? And participate in it.

And why are they treating us like animals? And where am I? And what is this? And-- [LAUGH] you know--

All of these are huge questions that I don't know that, even up till now, have been sufficiently and satisfactorily answered. You know?

[INAUDIBLE] I never intend to. I just live with explanations of the Holocaust, by many, many types of people. And some come close to understanding the tragedy, and some-- even though they know the facts-- are very far from understanding this incredible tragedy in the 20th century.

You made a very good distinction, there. You can know the facts and still, in some ways, not know the truth.

Well, and [INAUDIBLE] this kind of truth and emotion is exceptionally difficult. And 6 million is not an understandable number. And so, I--

Well, you know, I'm telling you about some deep feelings. I think I'm normal. [LAUGH] I have always been questioned about it. People say, oh, you're so normal.

Yeah.

And I say, yeah, I'm not crazy. I haven't lost touch with reality. But there is something not normal, for anyone to know such things. That's what's not normal.

Exactly. Exactly. It's, when you put a normal person into a surreal nightmare, it can't help but affect you, because you're a normal person. An abnormal person would not be affected, but a normal person is affected.

So--

Well, we're--

I am almost 90 years old, and I'm totally affected. And I still think I'm normal, but I have a very special understanding about human beings, which is true and shouldn't be there. I shouldn't think of people-- of what they can really be like and what they really are like.

And when people ask questions like, could this happen in this country, my answer is a profound and strong "yes."

Hm.

What happened happened here-- some other way-- can happen in any country. And I grew up-- now, as an adult, reading, understanding what the world is like, it never stopped after Auschwitz. If the Jews were done with, Hitler succeeded. His genocide was a success. You know, and the few thousands of European Jews that survived, you can consider that a complete genocide.

But, even as Auschwitz ended, genocides and mass killings continue in Asia, Africa, China. And it's continuing today, and it never stopped. It's just another form.

And there is something about mankind that is not right. And so I can't say that we learned from this, and I can't say that it will never happen. It sort of-- it never stopped.

And so there is something that I need to deal with, about how I view human nature and human beings, and--

How do you view human beings?

Oh, very, very unflatteringly, for sure. [LAUGH]

Mhm?

Well, I lost trust in human beings. So that's a terrible thing. You know, in nice times, people are polite. There is a veneer of civilization.

But I don't care if they're Americans, Germans-- whatever-- what-- Chinese. The veneer is very thin. And it comes off quickly. And when it comes off, it's cruel and barbaric.

And is that our true nature?

That is the man's nature, and he's not civilized, and he is not altruistic and-- I think he-- I will go as far as, evolution is proceeding, but you can't see evolution-- but man's evolution to this so-called higher civilization hasn't arrived-- hasn't-- it's in the process [INAUDIBLE] they're stuck at the level that they can revert to killing their own kind, killing other people's babies, without-- you know-- doing the cruelest things that-- in evolution, they're not there yet. And if they don't destroy the planet, thousands of years from now, they'll evolve to a better level of civilization-- and not in hundreds of years, because that doesn't count.

And so it's sort of a, I give up. This is it. [LAUGH] This is where you were born into. Unfortunately, as a 13-year-old, I was unhappy enough and unlucky enough to be caught up in a stampede of killing. And when it was over, people want to forget. And even the ones who survived, there is an instinct to go back into life and-- happy they survived. And young people married and had children. I married-- had children-- we're interested in petty things, like everybody else. Life goes on. Memory fades.

But I feel that I was tainted. [LAUGH] But I go on, also. And--

Well, you know that-- when you say things like that, it begs the question, how do you come back to a normal world? How do you have children? How do you resemble-- can you again live a life that can be fulfilling and authentic and sincere, when you have seen and gone through such things? And--

Well, yeah, right. [LAUGH] Yeah-- go on.

Well, all of that [INAUDIBLE]-- can you laugh again? Can you take joy in things again? Those are all questions that come to mind, as I hear you speak.

Mhm.

And did you-- and did that happen for you?

You know, as I am condemning man at his stunted evolutionary development, I think the thing that people like me-- what I just told you, and it's still very painful, and it will never go away-- somehow, I am able to have another side.

Mhm.

You know? And that's also kind of an evolutionary thing. Because, if I weren't able to do that, then there would be suicide, and there would be mental illness. And somehow, you know, not too many survivors are any worse, emotionally, mentally, about suicide and mental illness than the general population, who didn't-- I mean, I don't know statistics, but I see plenty of people who grew up in normal times, in the United States, and they're not normal.

[LAUGH]

Yeah. Yeah.

And then I see a lot of survivors who are doing pretty well and actually our children-- [INAUDIBLE] not my children, ever, because my daughter has entirely devoted her life to the facts of this, the memory of this, the retribution, the outcome, the trying to make it whole again, and restoring human Jewish life in the Russian republics [INAUDIBLE] and so on. That's her job-- and restoring Jewish communities.

But, there are a lot of-- quite a few children of survivors who blame their unhappiness or their need of psychiatric care because their parents made them mentally ill because they are survivors. And I dismiss that. I will not agree to that. But that's not why they're sick. [LAUGH]

Mm. Mm.

I mean, to make-- I'm not a psychiatrist. There may be some surviving parents who don't understand that the way they raised their children has a bad effect, because they are so terribly affected by it. But--

But, I guess, the question that I had-- I'm sorry I'm interrupting. But the question I had was more, how were you able to integrate both of these aspects, both the--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--yeah, your belief in-- or your loss of belief, your loss of trust, in human beings, and yet to have a family, to have normal human connections again, to reach out, to love and be loved, and all of what that means.

Yes.

Because those are opposite ends.

Yes, well, and, you know, my sister also-- she married. She has children. I just am-- you know, there is another path. I became a teenager in this country. I came at 16. I was suddenly distracted by what was happening to me here and how I have to adapt to that. You know-- sent me to high school. I had to function.

I was growing into a young lady. I realized, I looked in the mirror and I said, who am I? I've got to comb my hair. The girls at school wore lipstick. Well, how do I fit into this new situation? [LAUGH] you know? Who am I, what am I, where am I--

And you become distracted by the new pressures on you. And after-- I think that, for me, I married. I was not even 19. [LAUGH] And, by the time I was 20, I had my first child.

And that was such an incredible healing, such an incredible emotional healing, that I'm sure all mothers who have babies feel like that. But I was too young to, somehow, think that everybody felt that way-- that this miracle that, after all that, I had this, my own miracle, [LAUGH] you know, was so strong. And, you know, the devotion to that child-- so strong-- and the taking care of him and making sure--

I did use a lot of my experience, in ways that, deliberately, I hope, it helped. For example, when he was born-- I don't know whether I'm giving myself too much credit. But I did feel this-- that I don't want him to have fear and resentment of people. He needs to start a new way. If he does not-- he should trust people. He should not be disillusioned in people. And he should never have that feeling.

It's a new world. I'm not in a concentration camp. He should have-- make up his own mind about people, as he grows.

And one of the things I did is, I kept him very clean and dressed him in a very beautiful way-- even though he was a boy-- in a fancy carriage. And I would put him in the carriage and push him in the street. And people would stop and look in the carriage, the way you do, and they, oh, what a nice little boy. And he would grin.

And I [INAUDIBLE] OK, keep him attractive. So, everybody who looks at him, they'll say nice things, and he will



smile. And he will have good feelings about people. Don't leave him with nose running and whatever, because he may have a glance from someone who thinks, oh, this isn't a good mother, or not-- you know, in other words, [INAUDIBLE] good vibes from all people, from the carriage on up, that people can be trusted and they smile at him.

So, isn't that interesting, that you have-- because of what you went through, because of what you saw and you experienced-- have, in some fundamental way, lost a trust in people, but it was incredibly important for you that your son would have such a trust.

Oh, absolutely, because it's a terrible feeling. Mine is deep and justified. I don't carry it on my shoulder all the time, but the way I observe political things, group things, associations, even philosophers-- people who study human nature-- you know, and deep, ancient ones-- religious people, who think they have the answers-- none of that rings true to me-- none of that at all. That's all. [LAUGH] They have a veneer, but when the veneer comes out, I know exactly what people can do, and I'm not going--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

When the rubber meets the road--

[LAUGH] Yeah.

--as you saw it, you know, you get lice in your hair, you have no way of changing your clothes, you-- you know, all of this dehumanization, step by step-- you see what we are capable of becoming and what we're capable of doing to others--

To the ultimate, to the ultimate, and, you know, in uncivilized jungles in Africa but in the most civilized country in Europe in the 20th century, in Germany, France, Hungary. So, the die is cast. These people are finished. They have made their-- they have researched their understanding of what is man, what-- you know, who is man, and all that, from politics to science to religion.

They have a system that they think is working. And it isn't working. It's a veneer. But I don't want this for my child, who is brand-new in this world. It's a terrible feeling.

I want him to trust. And I had that in mind, with the first one-- and, in particular, that he should be attractive, so that he should get attractive vibes. Because that would condition him to trust.

And did it work?

Yes, it worked. [LAUGH] It really worked.

[LAUGH] Wonderful.

There is a funny saying, that everybody laughs when I tell my children and grandchildren-- we eventually moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan-- University of Michigan-- my son was born there. And my husband was getting a PhD there, you know, and the child was born there.

So we lived in this house that we rented. And he was maybe two years old. And we had a front porch. And I put him out there, in a playpen. And I was at the window, [LAUGH] 99% of the time.

So I hear him. He's standing in the playpen. And it's very close to the sidewalks, you know? [INAUDIBLE] edge of the sidewalk.

And I hear him say, "Hi, man. Hi, man."

[LAUGHTER] "Hi, man." And the people stopped, surprised, and they laughed, you know? Who did this--

Because we taught him words, you know, he knew that that was a man and that was a woman. So that's not the complete story, but it is a bit of an example that he wasn't frightened of them or anything like that. He greeted them.

I don't know whether what I'm saying worked. But I'm very proud of my children. You know, they're excellent character and very introspective and very honest and smart. And they all devote their life to helping humanity in one way or another.

And I think that I honestly feel that they're the kind of people who contribute to society by knowing what's right and wrong and having high ideals and high character.

Well, I have a feeling that your children feel the same way about you. And I wouldn't be surprised at all.

Well, in my old age, they pay a lot of attention to me. So I'm really happy about that.

Yeah. Well, Irene, you know, there are lots of parts of your story that we're not covering.

That's right.

There is a section that I would like to, but I don't know if this is the right moment for it. Let me share that with you, and you tell me whether we do it now or we do it another day. And that is your experience at the museum and being part of the museum and working as a volunteer there and so on.

Uh-huh?

That's easier than everything else that we have been talking about.

Yes.

But my question is, do you want to do that now? Or would you be willing to do that-- to talk to me about that, to some degree of detail, on another day?

I'm looking at the clock. I think maybe another day.

OK.

I can give you a morning or whatever it takes. I'm certainly locked in here. And yeah, I--

Thank you. Thank you, because we've really talked a lot today.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[LAUGH]

Enough, enough. You've get the message. You get the idea. I guess, you know.

[INAUDIBLE]

Sure.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

[INAUDIBLE] large part in my older years. You know, [INAUDIBLE]--

OK. So what I'll say is that, for right now, we're going to pause this interview. It is May 22, 2020. And, when I stop recording, we'll set another date and time and continue.

We'll finish up with the horrible place that you landed in, in Kanada, in Birkenau, and talk then a little bit about liberation. And then we'll go into your experience with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Does that seem like a plan?

OK. Yes, yeah, it's a good plan. Yes.

OK. So I'm going to stop recording right now.