

Hello, Irene, Mrs. Weiss. We are back now a week later, after our last conversation. Today is May 29, 2020. We are taking up our interview where we left it off last week. And we'll cover the-- cover those topics that we still hadn't explored then.

And I'll start in the chronological part of our interview. And that is, we're back in Kanada, that area in Birkenau that you had been assigned to that you were describing for me. And let's start there. So can you remind me again, when were you sent to that part of Auschwitz, to Birkenau, to start working in the warehouses sorting the clothes?

You say when?

Yes.

You're asking when.

Yes.

So my sister and I arrived in Auschwitz in May, 1944. And I'm going to give you an approximate time. So we were in the arrival camp, which was called the Hungarian camp, for about a month. And then we were sent to this area that was nicknamed Kanada. So May, June, maybe end of June, '44-- something like that.

OK. And how long did you stay there?

Stayed on till-- stayed on till January, '45, when Auschwitz was evacuated. And we were taken on a death march, and walked and partly taken in cattle cars, and it was a very desperate situation in the winter.

We did a lot of walking on the highways, and we ended up in the Ravensbruck--

That's quite a ways away.

--for a short period, which is a woman's camp in Germany. We were not there long at all. It was just this step over to-- less than a week, I would think, and then we were put into open cattle cars, and we were taken deeper into Germany, into a camp which was a subcamp of Ravensbruck. And the name of that is Neustadt-Glewe. It was near east of Hamburg-- very near Hamburg, really very deep into Germany.

Well, it's certainly the opposite end. If Auschwitz is at the southern part of Poland, this brings you up into the northwestern part of Germany, because Hamburg is very much to the north.

Yes. Absolutely.

I want to look back a little bit. So you are there in this place nicknamed Kanada for a good half year, about seven months, something like that.

Yes, about seven months, until January, when--

'45.

--the camp was evacuated. Right.

Did you have an idea when you were being evacuated, why? Was there-- you know, we know now in hindsight what was going on. But what was the news at that time? Or what was the information that you had? And can you kind of share with me how it looked to you then?

Yes. Well, we lived on rumors rather than facts. But somehow, the rumors had a basis. And so the rumor had it that the

Russian army is approaching the Auschwitz area, and that the Germans were retreating. And of course, we read into it that imminently, that we were going to be liberated.

But anyhow, the idea I think we heard is that the front was approaching.

OK. So that was the reason. And when you were then taken out of Auschwitz, about how many of you were there? Do you remember how it all looked? And most importantly, what kind of shoes did you have? It's the middle of winter.

Oh yes. So we were lucky in that regard because we were working with clothing, and belongings, and things that people who were arriving in Auschwitz from all over Hungary. And all the things that people brought with them, we had to touch, and sort out. And if we changed our shoes, they could not keep track of us in that regard.

So we started off with good shoes, but didn't all end up-- at the sidetrack here-- at one point, when they-- after days and nights of walking, they had us stop at a farm. And there was a big loft they are full of hay, and most of us climbed up and were so happy because-- to get off our feet. And the hay was a cover, and it was wonderful.

My sister, who had a pair of good shoes also, put the shoes under her head as a pillow, and also to guard it. But in the morning, her shoes were gone. And a piece of junk open nothing was left for her. And so the rest of the time of a few hundred miles more, she was in desperate shape. So that's was something that I haven't forgotten.

Wow.

So we did start out with shoes, and even a little more clothes than some. But it was a very cold winter. In retrospect, we know that it was the coldest winters, and there was snow, and there was bitter cold. And the fact was that it was a death march. They meant it to be that way, and there was a great deal of loss of life and suffering. And they didn't feed us and they didn't give us any water. And it was-- really people who had survived up to that point were killed or died during the death march and what followed after.

What followed after?

What followed after, that all the camps that were in the way of the Russian army coming in that direction were-- or many, many of the camps on the track of the arriving Russians were also taken out on the death march, so that there were many, many others that joined our huge column or started new columns-- they were on other roads. There was a regular exodus of camp people that were being dragged deeper into Germany.

And so it-- the system that the Germans had, such as they had, broke down. That they no longer fed us or provided for any kind of survival possibility, and kept taking us mostly-- us and others-- in open cattle cars, which was a very desperate way of traveling in the winter. You know, the wind cut right through us, and wetness, and so on, and crowding, and sitting together, and dehydrated. And it was just not a survivable situation anymore.

And they put us into-- ourselves and our particular group, we ended up in this very small camp not far from Hamburg, this Neustadt-Glewe, which apparently was originally built for Russian prisoners of war. And so the barracks were really not standard barracks, they were like small buildings, very small buildings. And there was no gas chamber here, so that was one comfort.

However, because of the crowding and the neglect, and weakened condition from the time we left Auschwitz, and the starvation, and all that, and the crowding, typhus broke out. We became infested with body lice and it spread very fast. And also they had-- they locked us in to these small rooms sitting on the floor because they didn't have those layered bunks. It was a different kind of plan.

But there was a kitchen on the premises, but the rations were nil. It was just terrible. This really was starvation. And the lice and the typhus, so people deteriorated very quickly. Those of us who had a little strength when we left that so-called Kanada section became very weakened. A lot of people began to get sick and die.

About how long of a time frame are we talking about from the time you leave Auschwitz to the time you get to Neustadt-Glewe, passing by Ravensbruck?

Yeah. I imagine that's available. I would guess maybe two weeks because there were stops here and there for just sitting on the highways, depending on-- there was bombing from the air and so on, and waiting for the cattle car to take us further. And I imagine it was at least two weeks of walking and with the random stops here and there.

But when we arrived, it was a terrible camp with no facilities. And the typhus, but also the Germans, they had a routine before, and you could sort of depend on when that ladle of soup was given out, or when that piece of bread was given out. Here, there wasn't any. There was this ladle of soup once a day that was not a soup anymore. It was water.

And we never had this kind of severe starvation up to that point. And so that when we arrived in bad shape, the deterioration was very quick. And it affected all of us, my sister, and my two aunts, Rose and Piri-- Pearl-- they actually deteriorated even quicker than my sister and I.

They were older.

It was amazing because they were supporting us physically and mentally. And all of a sudden, it's this-- it changed. They needed us more than ever before, but there was nothing we could do now. So Piri there caught typhus, and she was removed with many, many others, taken by truck to be killed in Ravensbruck, because this one didn't have a gas chamber. So we lost her.

Rose became very ill with a very high fever. It didn't seem to be typhus. It seemed more like she had some kind of pneumonia or lung problems-- I really don't know, her lungs were affected. We know that because she did survive, but after liberation, she was put in the hospital wherever we were, and was there for maybe, on and off, six months. She was treated for some kind of a lung problem.

So my sister became very thin. And I-- me, too-- and I'm jumping ahead that they didn't have a gas chamber, but they had selection. They had some of their routines never-- never stopped. Feeding us was a problem. They couldn't cope with that, but selection went very smoothly, and they had a truck that came regularly from Ravensbruck to this camp to pick up the dead, and to pick up the sick, and pick up the ones who were selected.

And of course, the assumption is we never see them again. You never saw them again.

Oh, no, no. We watched-- we watched Piri being held by 2 people under her arms and walked up a plank to the truck. And many others were led up that way. She was actually in the little infirmary in that place. The Germans, typically in every camp, had a so-called infirmary. It was very dangerous to go in there because that's where the selections always began. It was not a place to be healed or treated.

But Piri-- we were in these tiny rooms on the floor, wall to wall, people sitting even at night. And she was delirious with fever. And she would get up from the floor in the night and attempt to leave the room, probably to go to the bathroom or something. She was delirious, she didn't know what she was doing.

She also became deaf from the the fever, or the typhus. And so we would see her get up and attempt to get out. In the process, she was walking over people because she was no longer able to know what was going on. And then people-- she woke up people, and they were hitting her, and pulling her, and pushing her. And she would fall, and everybody would wake up, and if she made it to the little hallway there, we could hear the same commotion that she was coming.

So we had no choice. Her sister, Rose, and everybody together decided that, let's put her in the infirmary because what they did have there was a-- one of these-- planks, [INAUDIBLE] so-called bed. And while she was in there, Serena and sometimes me, and my sister Serena, and sometimes me, too, we would run over to the little infirmary, and knock on the window. We could see her in there with the other people-- sick people.

We'd knock on the window, and if she could catch our eye, she would come to the window, and we exchange a few

words. You know, how are you? Things like that. And after a while-- I think she was there a little while. She said that I'm getting better and we could see she could hear us better. She actually was improving. And then very soon after that, the truck came, and they emptied the infirmary, including her.

Oh I see.

So then Rose became very, very ill, and she was lying on the floor. I remember even she-- to this day, she was bright red from fever, and I couldn't give her anything at all. I don't think she-- she didn't have the same symptoms as her sister, but [INAUDIBLE] she had something with her lungs.

So in the end, after this experience, what with her on the floor, and similar situation that was her sister, my sister and I decided to put her into the infirmary. She didn't resist. It was with her consent because-- which was the best choice.

Yeah. You know, there's a lot of choiceless choices, where whichever way you do, is going to be bad. The question is, is to try and figure out which is less bad.

It was just to have a place to lie down when you are alone on that stretch of mattress. And so but we were very much aware that-- watch out for that truck coming. And I don't exactly know how long she was there, but not very long, maybe two or three days. We really got frightened and we went and got her.

They let us-- they released her. I don't exactly know-- the system wasn't working so well. We were on our own making these life and death decisions. But we walked around back to the place where we were and she was back on the floor. And soon after that, it was really very near the end-- this was now probably-- we were liberated May 8 when the-- the day the war was over, literally. And so this must have been very late April, because very soon after that after we got her out of-- back on the floor, the guards in the guard towers disappeared.

First we heard bombing, and shooting, and cannons. And we knew that-- we heard the war not far away.

And did you hear the rumors?

And so we knew that something-- we understood that the Russian front was coming, just like it came to towards Auschwitz.

Question here-- a question here. On that death march, when you finally get to Neustadt-Glewe, near Hamburg, is this mixed when you're in those rooms-- men and women-- or you're separated?

Oh, no, no. We never were mixed with men and women-- never. Not in Auschwitz upon arrival and never after that. This was all women-- all women, yes.

OK. On the death march itself, however, on the road, was it mixed there?

You know, it's a good question. I don't think so. I don't think so. As we left our area in Auschwitz, we were all women. It was a women's camp that we'd joined-- other parts in Auschwitz where it was women. No. No. I never saw men-- that's true.

OK. So if I go time-wise, you are in Auschwitz from May '45 till January '45.

Yes.

And then there's a couple of weeks on the road, and you end up in Neustadt-Glewe-- can I say, sometime around early February, '45? Would that be about accurate?

Yes. It's a good guess of timing, yes.

OK. So then we have February, March, and April-- three months that you are in--

Yes. Right. Three months, which was absolutely torture, devastating, and a place to die of illness, and selection, and just starvation.

Was it worse than Auschwitz in that sense?

Yes. Starvation for three months, and I recall-- and also the tragedy that we-- that Piri was killed and Rosie had seemed to die and not make it. And so then I'm going to finish this little change in our lives. There was selection, and at one point, Serena, my sister, was selected in one of these lineups early in the morning. And she was pulled out, and she really was a skeleton. She could barely walk and-- like everybody else there. And I stepped up and said that I'm her sister, and they said, you can go, too. And so I went with her.

Oh my goodness.

Pardon me?

I said, oh my goodness.

Oh yes, because I was at all times desperately afraid of being alone. I saw Rosie we're not going to make it. Piri is gone. Now Serena is gone. And I was-- I could not-- absolutely could not imagine-- a terror gripped me that I would be alone there. Somehow as I am, all these many years reflecting, I can feel the terror that came upon me of being alone.

All kinds of things went through my head. Who is going to care? Who will I belong to? It's what went into my mind. I mean, everybody was sick, and clueless, and-- I just could not imagine there would be some decisions to be made. I can't make any decisions. How am I ever going to exist here alone? I mean, I had-- this all went through my head in a flash, but I never, never hesitated.

As soon as I said, I'm her sister, and they said, you can go, too, it happened maybe in two seconds. But all that went through my head. And so they took us and others that they picked out that day and put us in a different building on the premises, into one of the small rooms. And I think there might have been between 10 and 15 women that they picked out that day from the whole group.

And they locked us in and we sat down on the floor. And we all looked like skeletons. And nobody was going to survive very long in that shape. And then we were waiting for the truck because we knew the routine. We had watched it. And so nobody talked and nobody examined our situation. I was with my sister, and that's all I was-- happy that I was with her.

And Rosie was in her original room with a very high fever. We thought about her quite a lot, that now she is there alone. But we were absolutely sure that she won't make it. And she would-- in her condition of high fever, and so on, and very, very sick.

So we sat there all day. And the truck wasn't coming, and the door wasn't being opened. And then sort of late in the day, somebody pushed the door, and it seemed that it wasn't locked-- or somebody unlocked it, or whatever. The door opened, and it just-- it pushed it and it opened. And this person-- I don't know who that was, the first person-- looked up and down the hall and took off-- left.

And the rest of us followed. We just left the door-- down the hall back into the building then we came from, and came into the room where Rosie was lying on the floor, and the other people in the room exploded in a way, by saying, the children are back. The children are back. And they kept saying, the children are back. And they were crying, and Rosie was crying.

Everybody was focusing on the fact that the children are back. It seems that they were mourning us, And that they were upset. And what was evident is that they knew we were children, but never, ever called us children. That was not a word

they called us. And we were-- I remember feeling strange that I'm being-- we're called the children. Nobody ever use that word. But they were so happy. And they were so surprised. They had-- we were dead, we were finished--

Yeah. That's right. When you get on the truck, we know what happens. They know what happens.

Yeah. We watched it many times. That was the way they were getting rid of the sick, and the weak, and just the selection that comes from selection. So after that, very soon-- and I don't know days, but very soon-- we heard the war, the noises, and bombings, and so on. We waited to see, and then one day, the guard towers were empty, and--

Excuse me, just for a second--

--nobody believed it.

Yeah. I have a question right before-- OK. One question. Were there any other selections after that?

No. No. There was no selection after that, because very soon-- it seems like the war was next door in the [INAUDIBLE], on the highway, whatever. It really was evident that we were in a war zone. And there was no selection. And as the guard towers were empty, we-- all the women didn't want to go to the big gate because we felt-- we always felt that they'll shoot us, kill us, before they leave.

We felt the same way when Auschwitz was being emptied. To go back to that event, when we were evacuated, the women who gathered-- they gathered us in huge numbers. The women were talking, and I heard the talking, should we leave or should we tried to hide and stay in Auschwitz? There was big discussion about that.

And the women, they were certainly older ones than me, were saying look, the gate is open. They're taking us out. That's one positive thing. And if we stay, there is no way that they will not burn down the buildings with people in it. They will kill us all. They're not going to leave this evidence. It's a terrible chance to take. The gate is open, let's leave.

And so this group ready at the gate in a huge column, we marched out, guarded with the Nazis with the dogs and the guns. And later on, we found out that quite a few people did hide and did stay-- Auschwitz was huge-- and that it took 10 days or so before the Russians actually arrived there and liberated Auschwitz. They had 10 days to forage around in the kitchen, and do what they did, and hide. And they, too, worried-- they were hiding.

It made no sense from the Germans' actions all these years-- months and years-- that they would not destroy the evidence and they would not-- that they would allow living people to stay behind. It just made no evidence-- it made no sense. I think what must have been that the guards and those in charge of all these camps, they were running themselves, so they were really scared for themselves.

Of course. It was a desperate situation. And the kind of efficiency that would have been practiced under quote, "normal," unquote, circumstances just flew out the window because if you take time to destroy the evidence, that's that much closer that the enemy army is to you.

Yes. I am sure that they knew more about just where the enemy was and what route was available for them to get out the other way. But they still-- plenty of them carted us along these hundreds of miles. And plenty of them, their job was to shoot the ones who sat down, or leaned on someone, or rest. They were not against doing some more evil things.

And eventually, they took us to-- stopped at camps along the way, and managed to get these open cattle cars to take us further. They must have had some guidance from above for what to do with these people. And then, as I say, they abandoned the routine of this meager eating, feeding us.

And so I think that in retrospect, it's easy to say we would have done better had we stayed and hid in Auschwitz. We really would have been better off because they did not destroy the barracks, and the kitchen was not destroyed. But I understand that the people who stayed, the first thing they did is invade the kitchen because people were starving. And apparently, did the wrong thing-- you know, people who starved for a long time cannot just gorge on anything they find.

There was a huge loss of life with the dysentery and the illness that set in after they ate whatever.

And ate too quickly, and ate too much, and the digestive system couldn't handle it.

That's right. There is lots of evidence that people who could have survived the 10 days easily had they remembered what not to do. But we were-- I have to come back to the word starving, because we were hungry most of the time-- somewhat less so in the Kanada section. I mean, it was hit and miss, but there was something, sometimes, in addition to the rations.

But about three months of starvation, it is a very painful experience. You hurt. You hurt desperately. And your body is being eaten up, your reserve. But I remember standing outside this little building where we were looking towards the direction where they-- some part of the day were coming with a kettle of soup. And I never took my eyes off it.

And I was desperately aching-- sick, I was sick with pain. And nothing else mattered. I had my-- no feeling, no thought of anything. It consumed me entirely. But what is interesting or memorable to me was the physical pain that goes with it, which I don't think people--

Can you describe it?

It's strange, when much-- many years after, and our children and so on, and were safe, and the refrigerator was full of food, and my kids would come in from outside, and say, I'm starving. And I'd say stop right there. The refrigerator is right there. You're not starving, you're hungry.

There's a difference. There's a difference.

Oh my God. Oh my God. I also think about it, how-- what terrible suffering it is. And so when I volunteered to go with my sister, it was easy. It was both the fear of being alone-- desperate fear of being alone-- but to be in such pain, and then to be alone, it was normal to do that.

So in other words, you knew that you would be-- you would not be alone if you go with your sister and that the pain will end because that's what this whole thing is, it's a selection.

It must have been the better thing, although-- yeah. It was an instant decision. People ask me today, your sister was older, didn't she tried to stop you? No. She never said a word. Absolutely not. It fit-- the whole thing fit.

Well, one of the questions that those of us, and myself included, who have never had that kind of hunger, never known that kind of deprivation, never known that edge of starvation, or edge of death through starvation, is, how does it change a person? What do people become? We hear about it, but we've never experienced it. And frankly, I don't think we want to ever experience it.

No. No. No. No, you don't. As I say, it's-- your mind and body is only focused on that terrible pain. And it is a pain. It hurts very, very much.

Through your whole body?

Your whole body. Somehow your inners are-- I don't know. Your mind and body is hurting, and totally unable to leave that-- to change that feeling. And the sad part is that when that soup came, it was a ladle full of water. It didn't alleviate it. And that was it till the next day, at that time. There was nothing else.

And so it was around the clock starvation. And now how does it affect you? I remember many years later, when we were free and probably in this country by then-- used to show people starving in some parts of Africa. And they showed on television, little children with distended bellies.

That's right.

And I saw that, and their mothers, and trying to put the infant to their breast that was hanging empty. It was devastating. I had to turn away. It brought back all the pain and all the memory. And then you turn off the TV, and they are no longer there.

And the whole world is talking about it. Oh, that so many are starving and no way to feed them. The children are starving. And you see a few volunteers trying to do something. But there are so many things that happen today, and then after the war, and on TV today, people in refugees-- somebody's-- excuse me-- calling, but I'm going to ignore it. You know, it's nothing.

So flashbacks that never leave you. And so it's not just-- it isn't just what happened then. The flashbacks are always there in a way that you never had those experiences, you don't relate to it.

It sounds like triggers-- something can trigger it.

Oh, and it brings its back so vividly. And so I sometimes wonder-- and people ask these questions now-- what effect did it have? How did it change you? You know, your outlook, this and that. Daily-- there are daily flashbacks of innocent things that nobody would think anything about it that I can relate and have experienced, or just know very, very well from observing what was going on. So it's a total change. It's a total outlook.

I really do think that subconsciously, I am really trying very hard to balance both. That is, that thing, which never goes away. But there is the other half of me that participates in normal things, and with the family and children, and [INAUDIBLE] things that are important. In other words, it's a balance. But that other thing-- what is difficult for me is, I can't-- and I don't want to-- explain why I'm, in some ways, quiet, or not too sociable, or a little weird, maybe. I don't know.

I can't explain it because I'm fighting that. That's my private thing. And I only want to show the other side and function in that other, much more average, normal side. But it's there. Actually, what I think happens is that other side that I try to suppress kind of takes a lot of energy.

I can imagine that it would. It would, because it's-- yeah. In order to keep it down takes effort.

That's right. But it's not as though I sit down and say, OK, that saps my energy. That distracts me from being totally integrated in what is now available. I don't sit down and do that.

It takes years to figure out my myself out. Why is it-- why am I the way I am in certain ways? And I don't accept that. But for many years now, I have accepted the fact that, yes, I am-- I had experiences that were horrific in human experience. And yes, it cannot even be told to anyone casually, or even to your family, in great detail. And yes, I have been changed by it. And when I started to accept the fact that, yes, I was changed by it, and it's normal that I have been changed by it, I began to be healthier.

I can understand that. And-- yeah-- I can understand it, and can I say, agree with it, because if you take a normal human being and you put them in an abnormal situation, they don't stop being the normal. I mean, they're not the abnormal. The situation is the abnormal.

That's right.

And what you're talking about reminds me very much-- and this will be a digression, but I will allow it for the tape because maybe it will be useful-- I don't know. I was always interested in the effects of torture. In the '70s and '80s, Amnesty International, which was founded to support people who were prisoners of conscience. That is, they had been arrested not for violent acts, but for their beliefs.

This organization in London had fostered this campaign against torture. And in order to eradicate torture, you first have to identify it and you have to document it. And there were doctors who did such things, who-- actually from Denmark--



who went to various countries-- amongst them at that time was Greece-- that were accused of torturing people. And so they would meet with former prisoners and do whatever they needed to do to be able to measure, and document, and list, and all of this other stuff.

And at one point they felt that it wasn't enough to just document. You have to do something. You have to treat people. And at that point, they broke away from Amnesty because that was not part of Amnesty's mission. What they did is they founded Centers for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims.

And I was a young journalist in Germany. And the first of such centers was in Copenhagen. And I remember going to that center in Copenhagen and talking to both the center director, and to the physical therapists, and to the psychiatrists about, what do they do to treat somebody who has been tortured?

And it was eye-opening, because that juxtaposition of-- you are a normal person. I remember the director telling me that the people that they treat are normal people, and the torturers are the ones who are sick. And the torturers are the ones who are abnormal. And they are taking these normal people and convincing them through the torture that you no longer are yourself. You are no longer somebody who you can identify with. You are now what we tell you you are. And what they told them that these torture victims were, were of course, scum.

And so part of the treatment is to bring a person back to themselves, but also to integrate the experience that they've had. And that is the challenge. The question I had as a journalist was, if someone is tortured, can they ever be normal again? Can they ever laugh again? Can they ever enjoy things again?

And the answer from the doctors was, absolutely, they can. That doesn't mean that everybody makes it. It doesn't mean that everybody is successful in it. But that there is a road that they help them travel on.

And so when you just described that you felt like you were becoming healthy once you could accept that you had been through and that it had changed you, that was part of what they were trying to also bring to the people that they were trying to help. Exactly that message.

Well, it took me many years.

It does.

And I remember when it happened. I think it happened because for some years I have been talking to groups through the Museum and elsewhere about this-- about my experience. And I think through all that retelling what happened, it sort of slowly occurred to me-- and not even so slowly-- that, why am I fighting this?

After I would speak, people come up to me and say, but you're so normal. You're so normal. They want to know, how did it change me? And I'm not as normal as I look. And [INAUDIBLE] I'm normal, and I'm leaving out some of the things that I'm not talking about because it's not appropriate.

But after telling all these things and sort of looking at myself from the inner myself-- wait a minute. I had a horrific, incredible, cruel experience in my life. It changed me, accept it-- accept it. And it felt good. It really felt good. I was freer. I can accept that part of me which is sapping my energy, basically, of keeping at a distance.

I can't tell you how-- I mean, I even don't have the words to explain to you why that makes me happy because we're talking about such awful things. But it makes me happy to hear that.

Well, thank you, because it-- but then you say, even with the accepting, but then I could analyze. And I am still changed in many respects, because like what you said, the people who were tortured, then you analyze what people are like who did you.

Of course.

And so it isn't just the Holocaust, and Auschwitz, and the killing, and all, it wasn't just one individual.

No.

What was this about that a whole nation, a whole continent of people, did this to a whole section of humanity? How could that have happened? And then your outlook on life as an adult, and as your belief in people in there. Are they animals? Are they reliable? Are they just superficially acting nice when life is easy? Can you trust them? That will never leave me, by the way.

I understand.

I can cope with that.

I understand. And that was the basis-- let's say, that was behind what my question was to myself, as to why I wanted to write that article and explore this question. Because once a person-- and I would say, by the way, you were also tortured. If it wasn't Mengele doing an experiment, nevertheless the 14 months that-- from the time you were taken from your home when the Nazis march in to the time you liberated, to me sounds like--

Oh, you're absolutely right.

It's torture.

The emotional torture, the loss of--

of family, of everybody.

--family. I mean, that never left. To this day, that has never left. So yeah.

So my thought, when I remember wanting to explore this is that what a person who has been tortured has seen is humanity at its absolute worst, when all the normal rules we live by our broken. The assumptions you make about living according to certain moral precepts are gone. And then if you happen to survive such a thing, can you come back and enjoy life again once you have seen what you have seen?

Well, on some level, no. That's the part of me that-- I don't know if my family, they understand me very well. They think that I'm-- they see that I had to overcome certain things. But I mean, you'd have to talk to them. I think my relationship with my children is really great because they are sensitive and they understand.

But when it comes to social things, groups, joining groups, or out in the public, and when I was teaching, and other teachers, they undoubtedly look at me as somewhat strange, aside from the fact that I'm an immigrant, and all that. But that part will never go away because of my new understanding of human nature and the world we live in.

And I can somehow live with that because what's happening even today in politics, and so on, everybody's affected by what's going on and how badly human beings behave right now. And since the Holocaust, the world has never stopped being cruel, and torturing people, and people are starving. So the whole world population has to live with that, not just me.

But my mine is irreversible. There is no way that I will think that people-- humanity is great, that you can trust them, that they won't do it again, and that they are really even they're smartest, they're scientists, they're philosophers, they're writers, all who attempt to make us more civilized in their interpretation of life. I throw them out the window the same with the ordinary person who doesn't think at all, because their thinking, and their writing, and their interpretation of what man is like is not true. It's a mirage. It's not true.

They haven't felt it on their skins.

Yeah. It's just not-- it's not the way it is. And it will not be the same in my lifetime, or in hundreds of-- I don't know the answer, but I just accept the fact that we're a primitive group of humans that have a lot of developing to do, and it takes thousands of years. We're closer to the animal than we are to the civilized human. We're not advanced. We're not advanced, except technically. And that makes it all the worse because we can do so much more harm.

Yes. Yes. That's true.

But it isn't just that I-- I don't go around not trusting individuals. I'm very trusting with individuals. But I look at it almost like if you go-- astronauts who go out into space and look down at this blue planet and what's going down, this gorgeous blue planet situated so perfectly up there. And they can see nothing but a bunch of creatures on there killing each other, torturing each other, having wars, everybody's against everybody. It's an animal kingdom. It's not a civilized human development there. I look at it like an alien out there.

Well, you know sometimes a person says something, and you have not one question, but you have many questions? So that question that I had had before when I went to this rehabilitation center in Copenhagen of, can someone laugh again? Can someone truly enjoy life again? I put that directly to you.

Yeah. Well, yes and no. I am a subdued person, OK? But that doesn't mean that I don't-- it's an interesting thing. You're making me think of all kinds of things. My sister, who is now 93--

Serena.

And still is fine, mentally. I talk to her daily. You'd be surprised-- when we talk, the talk is all about our joint experience, the family, the survivors, the children, but it all goes back to that, and we compare notes. But I remember her when she was in this country, and she got married, and had children. I used to visit her, stay there a few days or weeks.

She would be washing the dishes and she would be humming a song. And it struck me way back-- that was many years ago-- I never hum a song. I never sing. I never laugh out loud. I am certain, subdued person.

Were you that way before it all happened? Were you the reserved one at home?

Well, I imagine so. But it was six children in the family. And there was fear beginning in 1938, 1939, when I was eight, nine. I was worried about my brothers and sisters. I always was, just like my mother was. That was built in.

There was illness, and that was the problem my mother worried about. There was tuberculosis rampant, there was malaria where we lived. There were no doctors, there were no-- there was no medication. And everybody worried-- children died. And so it wasn't this really joyous childhood, you know? But I didn't notice that.

But after-- and why is it that-- how come I noticed that? I was thinking, gee, she is happier than I am, is what I thought, when she was singing and humming. And how is it that I never do that? But I am not unhappy. I'm just full of understanding of what a rotten world this is.

Oh gosh. Yeah. Well, that's enough to make one more than sad.

I just watched the news a little bit this morning, and I'm already--

Oh gosh.

--finished for the day.

Yeah. Not to it on again, you know?

But at the same time, I accept that as normal human behavior. What we see there, how governments, and presidents, and

others behave, whether it's the pandemic, or other loss of freedoms, and restrictions, and dictators-- I think that's normal. I'm not shocked.

Yeah. Yeah. So here is another followup question. And this gets us into the Museum, and that is, how-- I wanted to start exploring how you first came in contact with the Museum? And whether your work at the Museum has in any way affected all of these things that we've been talking about?

Because you mentioned-- you mentioned that after so many talks, you started thinking, this is normal that I feel the way that I do. It was it was through experiences like that. But even as I ask this question, I want to back up a little bit before we get there, and finish the chronological part of your story, which is the people are in the towers-- the guards in the towers have disappeared. And who liberates you? And how does that happen? And then we'll go on to the museum question.

Yeah, OK. Who liberated us. Well, so after hearing the war very near, and the-- basically, the guard tower being empty, eventually people waited to see if they might return. We were very sure they'd come back. That they just left and discovered they can come back and kill us all.

But after a while, the women in the camps-- it was a woman's camp-- they got a little courage, and somebody pushed the big gate. There was this huge gate and it opened. But we were desperately sick from the starvation, and we didn't have the strength to get up and get out of there. But there were some who did. I don't know their particular situation.

But there were some who went down that road, and a few kilometers away was the town of the Neustadt-Glewe, just like the camp. It was a big town. And they went down there and came back eventually, and said that there are Russian soldiers there and the Germans are gone. And that there are empty buildings and houses there because the German civilians, many of them abandoned their houses and apartments because they were scared of the Russian liberators. And that's the kind of town it is.

But Rosie was lying flat on her back. Serena could barely walk. And both of us-- we're still hungry, no food. And we were not-- and neither one is able to get on their feet and walk out. It's not possible.

But a few days after this, after the women came back and told us this, a few Russian soldiers came into the camp. Not a whole lot, just like a few-- a small group came in. And we saw them and greeted them, and they-- I didn't understand then, but looking back, they took a look at these skeletons, and there was typhus, and they saw that. And they turned around and they never came back. They never came back into the camp. They didn't come with any help, with any transportation, or Red Cross, nothing. They stayed in their place in Neustadt-Glewe in the city. They stayed there and never came back.

And so what followed was really desperation. The women invaded the kitchen-- that was always typical. And they found the garbage that they used to feed us with, but it didn't matter. These were starving people. And what happened elsewhere happened here. People began to have terrible--

Dysentery.

--and began to die-- began to die. And so we didn't do that. We apparently had learned the lesson, somewhere along the way.

But then what happened-- very vividly, I remember-- in one of the buildings, the big buildings that was held by the Nazis when they were still there, a two-story building, the women went in there up to the second floor and discovered a storage full of Red Cross given food-- canned goods, boxed goods, all kinds of food that the Red Cross, I imagine, designated for the camp people, not for the Nazis. We never saw that stuff.

And what happened then is they opened a window from the top and began to throw canned goods-- huge cans of meat, and smaller cans of sardines, and boxes of cookies, and things-- they began to throw it out the window to people that began. I'm sure you've seen that some time on television-- people below kill each other to--

That's right. That's right. They're hungry. They're hungry and they're desperate.

They're desperate, pushing each other, on top of each other. It was a frightful scene and very understandable. Then there were some who were stronger than the others. And we stood there for a while, Serena and I-- not Rosie, she was lying flat on the floor somewhere. And one of the cans that they were throwing down hit Serena in the head.

Oh my goodness.

Well, she was laid flat. It's a surprising thing that she survived it. So she and I withdrew immediately. We went back to where Rosie was in the building-- a small building-- and we never went near it again. We saw that this-- this can be the end of us. That's the situation-- we absolutely never went near it, didn't even try--

Did you ever get any of that Red Cross food? Did anyone have bring any of it to you, or no?

No, no, no. When it was empty, the crowd dispersed. Some got some, some didn't. And that was over. And then the ones who went to the kitchen first-- the rush on that was over when either it was a gone, or people realized what was happening.

So you can see, we saw the situation, that we were in desperate shape, worse than ever. We're liberated, but nobody cares, and nobody takes us out, and nobody--

And no food, and no attention--

No food, no nothing. Yes. And we're desperately ill. And we can't-- some of the women kept walking into town. Some came back wearing some different clothes or added something to their belongings. They went scouting the buildings that were empty, nobody stopped them. But this went on for a long time. We stayed where we were with nothing, a really desperate situation.

So after a while-- Rosie was in charge. I mean, we needed her desperately because what I'm not covering is Rosie and her incredible strength, and her incredible goodness in every way, that she wasn't never changed from being a superior human being-- one of the rare in Auschwitz and elsewhere. But we needed her, we leaned on her even in her sickness.

She would make the decision-- and she apparently must have gotten better. It seems like she was able to stand on her feet. And she made the decision that we're going to walk out of here. We can't stay here. We're going to walk into the town. And it must have been a sight that-- and there were others. There was a family, a mother with three of her teenage daughters who made it up to that point. She must have been 45, a real old lady. And she was very sick. But she held on for her children and her children clung to her.

And nobody had a mother-- these teenage girls, youngest one must have been my age. She clung to Rosie and our group because she, too-- people clung to her out of-- she was a source of strength. And she was a source of inspiration.

Rosie?

This mother with her three daughters, and some others, we made a group. And as a group, we went down the highway towards that town. It must have been something else to see. And the first house-- we looked around and found an empty house. The town was pretty much deserted. The German civilian women-- there were no men-- they were desperately scared of the Russian soldiers, with good reason, but there were some.

But we moved into this house and found some beds. Then we found some-- a kitchen with utensils. And basically, we found a house that had beds and some bedding. And there was absolutely no food because they, too, went hungry before they left. The German civilians suffered, too, towards the end, because they were losing the war and there wasn't any replenishing of food.

But anyhow, we had a place to stay. And those of us who were stronger went deeper into the town to see, what is in the town? What is there to eat and to have? So I remembered incidents where anywhere they saw that there was a line, that they were giving out something. And we saw at one point, there was a place where people were lining up with utensils, like a pitcher or a bottle-- say, ah, they're giving out milk.

So the family, quickly we found a receptacle, and they put me in line-- here, stand here and see if you're going to-- they're giving out milk. Well, the line was long. By the time it got to me, it was all gone, so that didn't work.

So then we saw the Russian soldiers in the town. And again, Rosie would stop one of these guys and say-- she knew some Czech, and she knew Czech very well, the language then was similar. She was able to communicate. And she said, hey, we're hungry.

So one of them said to her that they are at a certain part of outside the city. And then he said, we are-- the soldiers are being fed that such and such an hour. Be there at that hour. And then whatever is left, you can get.

Oh, we were there, all of us. There was a fence around it, and we clung, looking into the fence. And they were given food. And after that, just like you see in the movies, the Russians were playing the harmonica--

Accordion and balalaika, yeah.

--and other-- what's the other one that's bigger, that you pull up?

The accordion-- the accordion.

And some of them were dancing the Russian dance where do you crouch down and kick your legs out. After, they were very happy. One of them came to the fence, and said, sorry, there is nothing left. And we went back to-- you wonder how did we live?

Yeah, Exactly.

How did we survive?

Where did you get that morsel of food?

Well, we were starving before. And I don't remember getting from any of the sources. So there came a point now where Rosie lost all her strength-- which she must have somehow get enough just to get to this point. We found out there was a hospital in the town, a real hospital. And with her permission, we put her in that-- we went to that hospital and put her in there. They took her-- there were some nurses there.

So now she had a bed and we had a place to visit. And so we came. I mean, we are back to where we were. I don't remember eating. I don't remember anything. We came to visit her at the hospital. She said they gave her tea and nothing else. There was no aspirin. There was no medicine. But she was kind of cared for by people, and she could lie down, and she had some tea, and she stayed there a while.

And the mother with those other children waited-- they were in a building also-- they waited literally for Rosie to come out so that we can all continue together. Rosie was that important. That she was the one who gave moral support. She was the one who made us feel as human as we ever were. We were not subhuman.

She made us feel Jewish. And she made us feel understanding that we were guilty of nothing, and that we were human beings. And it reached every one of us, even those people. So they waited. And after a while, Rosie decided, we have to get out of here. We have to begin to find a way home. But days went on.

So she got out of the hospital and we started walking the highway. There was no bus. There was no train. Germany was demolished. There was no transportation. And nobody took care of the refugees.

When we got on the highway, we realized that there were other huge groups of refugees, just like you see today, walking in a certain direction. Rumors were flying. People said, we know if you go on this road, you will find a train. If you go on this road, there are buses. If you go on this road, there will be food. People followed these hunches. But there was no transportation.

And so we went on a road that they said there are buses at a certain point. And we walked, and we walked, and occasionally, there would be a Russian a vehicle, horse-drawn, with Russian soldiers on it. We would flag them down, and they would stop.

You had no fear of the Russian soldiers.

Oh, we had found out that we had a good fear after a while.

OK.

In fact, we were in great trouble. We had to dodge them. We had to make sure that we knew how to fend for ourselves, because, yes, they made no distinction. I hear from the survivors all the time, all through the years, Russian soldiers liberated them, they brought in every kind of help, hospitals, food, they did everything for them. We had nothing but persecution from them, really very dangerous stuff.

And so they would take us a certain distance, and then-- and again, Rosie could communicate with them, and she spoke even a kind of a Ukrainian language that was in the mountain property that they had. Communication was no problem.

So there was an incident that you might be interested in. So we were walking, and one of us-- actually, it was-- there was a cousin who joined us, a distant cousin who was in the same camps. Her name was Feige-- Feige Mermelstein. She was Mermelstein-- she was really a distant cousin.

Feige found a watch, a wristwatch on highway. She picked it up and put it on. And she was so happy. And we were so happy. Oh my god, we're going to know the time. We had something to go by. It was treasure.

Well, in this group of Russian soldiers-- and some were officers-- who picked us up-- this is not a joke. The Russians were-- some of them-- were very primitive people. And at that time, a watch meant that you were rich, that you were upper class, that you were-- a watch was a treasure-- any watch. Today, you don't even want to wear a watch, you have a computer. A watch was a treasure.

So we're sitting there in this wagon, and he notices that Feige has a watch on her wrist. He motions to her to give it to him. He took it away and put it in his pocket. That was [? the end ?] of our watch, that oh my God.

Yeah. Yeah.

It's an incident worth retelling because we were somehow so exceptionally excited about having something from civilization. We didn't need to know the time, but we had nothing, ever. So it meant something to all of us. And she was so lucky, but he took it away.

So then we hitchhiked. Now we realized we could hitchhike. We tried that a few times, had better luck. Came evening, we were near a forest. And the Russian soldier said, that's it. And the forest had like a little cabin. They pointed to the cabin and said, that's it, get out.

And so we did. We got out, we got into the cabin, most likely a lodge of some kind. There was nothing in it, but it was shelter overnight, when we couldn't be on the highway. So in the middle of the night, we have guests.

Oh dear.

Lights go on, some other Russian soldiers-- that was, we were on a main highway going somewhere, it seems. They come in and there were all of us on the floor, sleeping. There were quite a few of us. We kept collecting people. There were quite a few of us, all on the floor, with whatever-- whatever.

And they are making noises that are not good. They're asking some of the women to get up, stand up. It doesn't look good. They didn't come to visit. And here we are, helpless bunch of women-- sick women. And one of them-- and I don't know-- wasn't one of us wasn't my immediate family types. One of them began to act like she's very sick. She was coughing, she was spitting, she was heaving and she was saying-- and the others picked up the clue. And they said, we have typhus. We have TB, tuberculosis--

Tuberculosis.

We are very sick women. And quite a few started acting very sick, throwing up, showing that we were very sick. And you know what? They took off. They took off. They were gone in minutes.

So it wasn't worth it. Whatever was on their minds to do with you in the middle of the night, they decided it wasn't worth it. And they left you alone.

They were worried. Actually, every time they liberated a concentration camp, they found sick people with very desperate illness that you could catch. There was typhus, there was every kind of cholera, and everything else. They were very worried about that. And so they took off. So that was after nights and days of planning and going, and we made some progress.

What was your direction? What direction were you going? Where were you trying to go, wanting to go?

Always towards the rumor that there is transportation. They said there are buses in that direction. And you know what? The rumor was actually right, but it was very, very far away. And I really can't tell you the direction. But what happened was that many days on the road like that, and people-- other refugee groups passing us and taking a different road.

And I understand now that some of those different roads that they said is a train, the train that was eventually for that group was Russian army transport train. And these people got on there and ended up in Russia. And I had a cousin-- and I know of others-- the Russians still come to Russia and never sorted out who was a survivor, and who was a German, or who was a war refugee, or whatever. That cousin didn't come back from Russia for two years.

And the whole family-- members of family who did come back gave up on him because if you didn't come back in two weeks, you were dead-- two years. And there were many others. The Russians did this. They made a sweep, and they didn't care. So if we had gone some other road, we might have [INAUDIBLE] Russia-- deep in Russia, not in Ukraine. Just that's the kind of cattle trains that were going--

Well, many-- I mean, even Russian soldiers who had been prisoners of war, when they went back to Russia, were sent to Siberia. Why did they allow themselves to be caught?

Right. Right. Right. And some of those, they swept up were [? brought ?] the German civilians or German Nazis who changed their clothing into civilians. But they swept up the refugees. And they were willing to go anywhere because they had to get out of there, so they did.

So we went to a place and another road, that the rumor was that Czechoslovakia, which was now back to being a fledgling back to Czechoslovakia. This is a long story, I'm going to try to make it short. There was an incident in a place, in a city, a town called Lidice.

Oh yeah. I know about Lidice. But tell-- just for the sake of our story--

I may not have the exact town-- information-- but one Czech person killed a German officer, I think it was-- or a German soldier.



It was Czech resistance. Czech resistance assassinated a--

A German.

Right.

Right. So that basically is the answer. And then, the reprisal was mass killing in the town and deportation of many others. What details do you know?

Well, that Lidice was razed. Basically, the reprisal and the Germans-- and this is early in the war-- is that as punishment for this action, they murdered everyone in that village, in the village of the Lidice.

Yes. And-- yeah. And that was one of the more horrific reprisals against a civilian population.

But it would seem that some got away.

It could be. I don't know that level of detail.

Yes. Some got away and ended up in concentration camps in Germany. That some got away-- now I don't know whether-- all those details. But the rumor had it that the Czech government is sending buses to find people who came from Lidice, to pick up survivors who came from Lidice. And they came to search for them.

I can say this-- I can interrupt here. I just looked online in Wikipedia. And what they say is that Lidice was chosen as a target for reprisals in the wake of the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, who was one of the worst of the SS people. And altogether, 340 people from Lidice were murdered in the German reprisals-- 192 men, 60 women, and 88 children. It was set on fire and the remains of the buildings were destroyed with explosives.

After the war ended, only 153 women and 17 children returned. So somebody-- some survived. And you're saying buses were supposed to come and pick them up from some place.

Pick them up-- search for them and pick them up. And that was the rumor. And you know what? In the days after-- I don't remember how long-- we ended up in this town because as we got closer, the rumor got more-- got stronger, and some evidence. We went to that place, and we found thousands of people who heard the rumor. And there were people on the grounds everywhere. People were inside, outside, whatever, that place was--

Lidice.

And everybody said, buses are coming. And there were some system of feeding all these people. I don't quite remember that. Just the other day, I was talking to my sister about it. She said that in the fields nearby, they were growing asparagus. And I know Germans grow white asparagus. [INAUDIBLE] recent years, I've been in Germany where I eat very good asparagus, white.

But frankly, that is something she remembers I don't. I don't remember fields of asparagus. But she says, yes. And, I'm sure that's true. And whatever else-- there was some kind of food, but there were so many people. We were not used to meals. Whatever it was, the basic starvation was taken care of better-- a little better.

And now we were sure everybody who was there-- there were representatives from Czechoslovakia, there were some other officials who said, yes, they're coming. But we were there a long time. And I don't remember whether we were indoors anywhere. I remember outdoor--

Was this still in Germany, or were you already in Czechoslovakia-- this place, that you ended up?

You know, that's a good question. I think it was Germany. It was Germany because they were coming from

Czechoslovakia to Germany to pick up whatever they knew or felt that the survivors from Lidice were there, coming from the camps. Because they them-- I don't know which camps, whether it was Auschwitz, or whatever, but I-- it was understood that there were survivors after that tragedy.

And so one day, lo and behold, a few buses arrived. I mean, it was true. And again, it was the rumors, but also Rosie who said it's a good idea to wait, that it sounds good. I mean, she-- in her illness, she made these decisions, and everybody in our group followed.

And, well, then when the bus-- remember, the first bus arrived-- I don't even know how many buses. But the mob attacked the buses-- the bus. And to get into that bus, they were going-- pulling each other through the window. The door was jammed. And they were-- Serena, and I, and Rosie, had to be together in that bus, we couldn't be separated.

It was-- well, it was, again-- I seen them-- buses like that in India, and so on. Soon, people were on the roof of the bus. It was like that.

The poor bus driver.

Well, also, the poor people who thought this was their last chance to survive and get out.

Of course. Of course.

So after all this terrific fight, we were in the bus somewhere, somehow. And after-- the time lag there was [INAUDIBLE]-- bus took off, I never saw any more buses. But there must have been more. And this must have been repeated over and over until there were no more buses.

We went on the highway, and eventually-- it wasn't far from Czechoslovakia. First we went through what I think-- we stopped that we were in one of the Scandinavian countries that we went through-- I don't know if it was Denmark or one country where the bus actually stopped and the city people-- the women, a bunch of women-- we were in some kind of an enormous building where there was a huge, long, long tables with food on it. And we were invited to sit down and eat.

Well, this is very-- this would be in a totally different direction, because Denmark is North of Hamburg. Neustadt-Glewe, where you start out from, is east of Hamburg-- because I'm looking on a map--

Which country does it look to you like we'd end up?

It wouldn't have been Scandinavia-- it couldn't. It wouldn't have been Scandinavia at all. It could have been-- I'm looking right now to see on the map. But if you're going through Germany, before you get to the Czech Republic, you might be getting to Bavaria if you come in from the west.

Eventually, we went through Prague.

Then it couldn't have been a Scandinavian country.

No, no, no, no no. Sorry. Sorry. We went through Berlin-- Berlin, not Prague.

Ah, let me take a look. You went through Berlin?

Yes, eventually.

So this place-- the buses, were they close to the Czechoslovak border? Or were they--

It must have been. It must have been. Those countries are very near each other.

Yeah. But, no, it wouldn't have been a Scandinavian country, unless you--

OK, so I really have never settled to find out what that was. But we ended up going through Berlin, and I have very vivid memories, a totally destroyed, demolished Berlin, which was-- our eyes were popping because we began to see what happened to the Germans. Berlin was the rubble-- total rubble. And then we ended up in Prague.

With that makes-- that route is very direct. Neustadt-Glewe down to Berlin, you might have passed Dresden. Lidice is in the northern part of Czechoslovakia, and then Prague. So that would-- that is a route. So are you saying--

So what country might we have gone through where they've fed us? It was memorable.

Let me tell you, it was either Germany, or maybe Poland, or-- I would suspect if it wasn't Germany, it was in Czechoslovakia itself.

I see. OK.

Because there is-- the only other country that is close is Poland. And that is not really on the way, it's just close by.

No, it wasn't Poland. You're right. I never-- somehow, I never researched that. My sister and I just say that what happened in the town. And it wasn't a lavish meal. I remember there were cheeses, and tea, and coffee, and some bread. But it was wonderful. It was wonderful. And we sat at a--

It's the first time you felt-- you're treated like people.

We were sat at a table and we had utensils. I think maybe that's where we first realized that we're free, that we're human beings. Up to that point, we were badly mistreated.

Oh my.

So we ended up in Prague. And in Prague, they took the whole bunch of us to the main hospital, Masaryk Hospital. And they dropped us off there. It's a huge hospital. And the hospital took us in because we were sick.

And again-- it was very typical. All these places, they had nothing. They had nothing to eat, they had nothing-- no medicine. The war was long and hard. And these people were the civilians that were also suffering.

And so the hospital had nothing. But it had a lot for us. It had a bed. It was warm. It had some tea. You can stay in bed as long as you liked. You could recover, if you weren't going to die or whatever.

Do you remember the first time you had a bath?

No. No.

OK.

It's so critical. I had a lot of trouble with that because I-- to regress, my sister had very interesting highlights that may mean nothing to others. But in Neustadt, we had nothing. And so these little houses had like tiny little bathrooms that it was not like a mass kind of shower. But it was tile floors, and a broken window in the winter-- a broken window, cold water, no soap, and the place was jammed with us women who came in there. Two little sinks and cold water coming out, and you're standing on that icy floor and the window is gone.

And my sister, to this day, she was a cleanly freak. She would take off her top clothes, whatever. And she would get close to the sink-- first you waited your turn. And she would splash water on under her arm, on her upper body, on her face, on her neck-- ice cold.

And she held onto me. And I was yelling, no, no, no. I hate cold. I hate, hate cold to this day. She stuck my body under it. You have to, you have to. We had lice. And so there we were in this-- she made me. She forced me. She made me wet.

And so it was very important. And yet, I don't remember the shower-- or whatever. It must have been-- we never stopped long enough. This was the longest stop and the bus was waiting for us. So it must have been at the hospital eventually.

OK. OK. I just wondered. Once you get to a hospital, when you're taken care of, cleanliness is certainly part of the regime.

It must have been. But I do remember what I just told you very vividly. It was absolute torture. And she did it. She did it. She was half dead, and she did it.

So anyway, back to Prague. It's an interesting story from here on. Remember, I told you that my mother's brother, Yossi-- Joseph-- he apparently-- he left in 1938, I checked that, and went to Palestine with a Zionist group.

That's right.

And he made it. And he had many traumatic experiences. He was in jail in England somewhere, and then he was in jail when he arrived to Palestine and they swam to shore, and they were picked up by the British. And he was in Acre, this fortress. And eventually, I don't know how he got out of there. And then he was met by the Arabs and the shooting of the refugees.

And I mean, he didn't have a picnic, but he was a young man and he survived. And sometime during the war, when it was possible to volunteer to become a soldier in the British army as a special Jewish brigade-- I don't know who organized it. But young guys like him became, in a Jewish brigade, under British auspices. They wore British uniforms.

And they were brought back to help liberate Europe. Mainly, they said they were Czechoslovakians-- and then they were when they left.

I see.

So these were Czech soldiers-- Czech Jewish in British uniforms, and they ended up in Prague-- thousands of them.

Wow. So Yossi was there.

And Yossi was there. Who knew? Yossi was gone. This was 1938, and now we're 1945. And certainly had no news of his family. He didn't know his parents were dead, his family was dead. He didn't know anybody survived. He didn't know anything.

But he ended up in Prague. And then he was transferred-- his unit was transferred into a deeper part of Czechoslovakia-- actually, a city that's kind of known to Pilsen.

Oh yeah.

Pilsen Beer, and all that.

Well, Pilsen is also interesting because the US Army also came to Pilsen, and they retreated. When Czechoslovakia came under the Soviet sphere of influence later, these armies retreated. And the people of Pilsen were not happy.

I remember, there was some chaos there in the war. I remember that. But I think by the time we came, that was not the problem. But actually, he was stationed in a little town outside of Pilsen-- a very short-- in a suburb on most of Pilsen. And in the name of the little town called Nepomuk.

Nepomuk.

Czech words, Nepomuk, just the way it sounds. Nepomuk.

But you found each other. Somehow you found out where he--

Well, this was another-- you know, life had incredible incidences and unbelievable stories. So he's not in Prague, he's in this place Nepomuk with his brigade. He's stationed there. And we don't know anything about each other whatsoever. We don't know he's back, we don't know if he's alive, he doesn't we're back.

But Rosie gets-- we used the hospital as a hotel. They let us go out in the morning into the city of Prague and come back in the evening like it was a hotel. And we immediately, as soon as we could walk, we got out because we had to find survivors. We weren't going to stay in the hospital. We were desperately driven to get closer to home and find out who survived.

And so Rosie, the way she was, we dressed ourself up in whatever we had, we got into the city, and it was full of refugees, and it was full of soldiers. And it was people coming back, and some of it looked bombed, and some of it was OK. And Rosie stops one of these soldiers in the streets-- she just stops him.

British soldier?

One of these soldiers that just came back. And she stops them-- stops a soldier. And she says, would you know a Joseph Mermelstein? And he says, yes. He is in my barrack, or he is billeted with me. Yes, I know him. Just like that.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah. And so Rosie gets a piece of paper from this guy, and a pencil, and she writes on his shoulder, a note to Yossi. We're in hospital-- Masaryk Hospital. And [? also ?] who is-- that she is alive and the two children, Serena and I.

So she's is writing to her brother. When she's writing to Yossi, she's writing to her brother.

She's writing to her brother because this guy says, I know Joseph Mermelstein. I'm with him in the Nepomuk, in that place. And so that next day, we're in the hospital there. Yossi comes roaring into the gate on a motorcycle. [INAUDIBLE] the Messiah from heaven on a motorcycle.

Who would have thought?

In a uniform from Palestine. He's finding us. We were there a day or two-- just like that.

Wow.

And he doesn't know anything about us, and we knew nothing about him up to that point. And that is when life-- that was liberation. Nothing before-- before, it was torture and just survive. I think back how lucky we were that Rosie survived, that Serena survived, that I survived, while we were in the edge of death. Serena and I were condemned to death. I mean, can you make up a fictional story like that? I don't think so.

No. Like some people who write the truth-- you know, documentaries-- say, you can't make this stuff up.

You can't make this stuff. So he is there on this huge, huge military motorcycle. And it looks like heaven. He's in a uniform, he was healthy.

Irene, can I interrupt just for a second?

Sure.

The sound is not coming through as well as it did before.

OK. I turned around. I'm a little bit-- I'm out of my chair, but I'm going to go back.

OK.

It's very sensitive, isn't it?

It is. It is.

I'll stick to-- no problem.

OK.

So he went back. You know, there was a tearful reunion because Rosie and the rest of us had to tell him that everybody was gone. And he had no idea. But eventually, he went back and made plans to pick us up.

And so after he went back, he rented a place. It was sort of an attic apartment in a Czech family's house in Nepomuk. And I remember them well. It was a young couple with a little boy, little two, three-year-old little boy. And they had this little house and a garden. And they rented to him the attic-- a nice place.

So he paid for-- his salary was paying for--

By the British.

--for you all to live.

Well. I don't know what he did. He must have paid. He had money. He was a soldier. And not only that, there was no kitchen for us there. He came and he put us on the train and took us there to Pilsen, and then transferred us, and installed us in this apartment.

It was wonderful. Nice garden, it was springtime, it was-- everything was growing. And what he did from then on is he brought us three meals a day on his motorcycle. In covered dishes from the kitchen-- were from the army kitchen because he certainly had that opportunity. And so from the British mess, they were these most fantastically wonderful dishes.

There was something called ananas.

Pineapples.

My, that's right. Never ate it, never saw it. And it was not like even ananas today. There is no fruit anymore like there was in those days. And canned peaches, and eggs, and whatever the soldiers ate. Didn't have to wait until it was-- until it was all gone. And it was all-- like in the restaurant, in kind of covered dishes. So he came and he-- three times a day.

Wow.

And he did the next thing. Rosie, her strength-- it was she had no strength. I don't know how she got to that point, all that she had to endure. The next thing was that it was absolutely essential to put her in the hospital because she was very sick. That's all there was to it.

So he took her took her to Pilsen-- the big city-- because this was a little town, and he put her in the hospital there. Rosie was in the hospital maybe three months after that, until he came out of the army and he was ready to move us to a more

permanent housing in the Sudeten-- in the Sudeten.

Well, the area that Hitler had annexed, which was precipitated the annexation of your area by Hungary way back in '38, and then was emptied out. The Czechs emptied out the German-speaking Sudetenland.

Exactly. Right.

And now the Germans were emptied out of there, and the Czechs were back.

That's right. That's right. So--

There were lots of empty houses.

Was there any talk of going back to Hungary?

Not yet. Not yet. Things followed, because now we had communication through him. And I don't exactly know how he did it. Nobody had phones, and nobody had any real-- there must have been public phones. But back on the other end, some of the young brothers of theirs-- Rosie's and Yossi's young brothers-- came back. Not the parents, not the children, not the-- but, eventually.

But first Rosie-- and Rosie was very, very sick. And what apparently I said that to people years ago, in my doctors-- others-- civilians they deflated one of their lungs, apparently, for a long period of time. It was a treatment. So I don't know whether she had tuberculosis, or some kind of other--

Respiratory, yeah. Respiratory illness.

She had something very serious. And they had no medicine. Nobody had any medicine [INAUDIBLE]. But, well, anyhow, I know that was one of the treatments. So she was there, and Yossi kept going to visit her. And strangely, I never-- they never took me, for some reason. And I don't know if Serena even went. But Yossi went regularly.

So anyhow, but we were now in this lovely little town. And the people with us were-- who owned the house-- were nice, and they had this little boy. I actually have a picture of him. Very interesting-- a tiny, little kid. And that, too, we were very happy to stare at a child. Didn't have much contact with children. But it was a nice young couple, and they knew our situation.

So what happened now-- we were desperate as to find who else survived. Just like Yossi didn't know who survived, we didn't know who survived. We had to find out. And so in Prague, there were lists, there were buildings on the walls, lists. There were Jewish agencies with lists. People left lists, and Yossi was checking them.

And the rumor mill, you know, we met survivors who ended up there. Survivors were the best people who knew-- they knew each other, or they heard of each other, or they remembered each other-- anything, anything. And pretty soon-- so what happened was that Yossi made contact with Batyu and people from his former home town, and discovered that two of his brothers were already home, and opened up the mill, and they were living in the building on the premises.

And then they discovered, further from them, that one of the sisters survived, who nobody thought even to look for her because she was married and had three children under the age of six-- she had six-year-old twins--

Oh my goodness.

--and a three-year-old. And she was-- she came in to Auschwitz from-- not Batyu but from another city where she lived with her husband, from Khust. She was deported from Khust to Auschwitz on another day, another time. And we know that mother to these children went to the gas chamber. But she had an unusual, hard to believe incident.

When she got out of the train, her husband was ill-- true-- he was either on crutches or something like it. So he was

immediately separated to go to the gas chamber. And she was holding on to her three kids, carrying some and holding onto some. And one of the Jewish prisoners to see in the Auschwitz album was a striped uniform, who were sorting out the people, or helping [INAUDIBLE], these young guys, if they weren't watched too carefully-- and you probably heard about this. They would tell a young mother, children, let grandma hold the children. That's all they would say-- in Yiddish, or any language that was common.

So one of these young men told my aunt-- her name was Malvina. We called her Malvinka in Hungarian-- Malvinka-- Malvinka [INAUDIBLE] she was married quite a few years, and had these three wonderful children. He told her in the crowd before she got to the front, to the separation, let grandma hold the children. And she was with her mother-in-law, an older woman. And she listened because we knew nothing. If somebody Jewish would had been there, says it's better if grandma holds the children, you listen, right?

Yeah. Yeah.

And so she turned the kids-- little kids-- over to the grandma. She was side by side with her. But she was in charge of the children. And when the separation came, grandma walked off to the gas chamber with the children and Malvinka was a young woman, and she was sent towards the living.

Oh my goodness.

That's why she survived until she got to Auschwitz, and into the barracks, and she found out from those who had come before what happened to their children and what happened to her husband. So I don't think that I can even go into that story.

No. No. No.

That is another kind of survival that might have been worth to her for the rest of her life.

Yeah. Yeah.

But she survived. And so back to the-- Yossi found out that Malvinka returned alone. And she ended up in Batyu, in her father's original home, with her two brothers were there. And the family began to get together-- unite. They didn't stay separated. They began to--

Reassemble--

--move in with each other. So now Malvinka heard that Rosie is in a hospital and very ill. And as soon as she could, there was one train a week or whatever, that she got on some transportation, and made it to Nepomuk, Czechoslovakia-- Pilsen. She made it to Pilsen, to Nepomuk, to come and take care of Rosie.

And so she moved in with us in the little apartment, with Serena and me. And of course, Yossi was there, she found out. Yossi was there. All these people coming back from other worlds. So she actually pretty much stayed in the hospital with Rosie. It was very natural for her to nurse her-- another Rosie-- another Rosie-like person.

They were my mother's sisters and brothers, but she had sisters that they don't-- they don't make people like that, because their humanity was in times when people became animals, even those who were in prison, [INAUDIBLE] survival thing. But not them, not them. They took care of those who needed care.

So anyhow, she took care of us, too. Both she-- again, Yossi fed all of us, as before. She went to see Rosie. He took Malvinka each time. And we spend the whole summer there. And that was then we-- then the boys who were in Batyu, one by one, they came up to see us-- the family reuniting. But only one of them the youngest, who was about 20, decided that he wanted to stay with his sisters because he also needed a mother.

And the other two had-- first of all, they opened the mill and they began to run it. And for a short time-- for maybe like



eight months, six months-- it was a free for all. It was open. The Russians planned to occupy and did occupy that area, and didn't leave it for 30 years. But they hadn't gotten to it yet. They also occupy Czechoslovakia, eventually. But this area became Ukraine very fast. But these young boys-- the rumor had it that, get out, get out, because the borders will be closed.

But what happened to them, we didn't realize until somewhat later. Two sisters-- young sisters-- returned to Batyu out of another family-- sisters survived. And these two sisters were young and pretty, and these guys were very interested. And eventually, these two brothers married these two sisters.

And it was good marriage, it was a good connection, it helped everybody. But because of that, they didn't want to leave. And they got stuck in Russia for the next 30 years.

So this area that had been Austro-Hungarian, then Czechoslovak, then Hungarian, and now it's part of the Ukrainian SSR, which is part of the Soviet Union. And those borders were pretty tight to cross--

Oh sealed. That was the end.

Yeah. Those were sealed.

And they could never, never come out. So they made a big mistake, but their calculation was-- timing was wrong.

And when you say it was another 30 years-- I just want to check an assumption that I have. If it is, let's say, in the late '40s that they go back to Batyu when that becomes part of the Ukrainian SSR. 30 years later is when Soviet Jews in the '70s are finally allowed to leave the Soviet Union through the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, I believe.

Right.

Is this what you're referring to when you say, 30 years later, they can leave?

Yes. They actually left when that happened. And they were-- left and went to what was now in Israel, [INAUDIBLE]. One by one, they left and went to Palestine. Right. That's exactly what happened. But Yossi didn't because he had to get out of the Army, it seems, in 1946-- something like that.

And so we were still in Czechoslovakia. Rosie was in the hospital. But when he got out of the army, he went to Sudeten, like I was saying before. He rented a huge apartment-- a whole floor in a big city called Teplice-Sanov.

Oh yeah, Teplice.

For short, it was called Teplice. And he then got out of the army and was a civilian. And he took us out-- took Rosie out of the hospital after a whole summer. And also, Malvinka, and the two of us, Serena and me, set us up in Teplice-Sanov. And also the youngest brother, whose name was--

Yeah. I wanted to interrupt right now, just to get a roster of who is there. Two brothers are back in Batyu, and we know now how things played out for them. Who is left in the Pilsen area is Yossi, Serena, yourself, Rosie, and the youngest-- and Malvinka, is that so?

Yeah. And the youngest brother, Shia.

Shia. So you're six people-- six people.

Yes.

OK.

And we are a solid family because Malvinka is the mother of everyone. Malvinka lost three children and a husband, and she puts her entire energy into being the mother. And I mean, the mother-- emotionally, physically, she cooks, from morning till night in this new apartment, she goes out into the city, where is the open market. And she-- this apartment is on the fifth floor, no elevator.

Oh my-- walk-up.

And she hauls up these vegetables and anything the market has. And more and more, it's not farming outside the city, and there is vegetables, cauliflower, onions, carrots. And she cooks and cooks, and we eat and eat, and we're gaining weight. And nobody stops to think-- or at least, not me, totally, in the way I should have-- that she lost three children. She just lost her three babies and her husband. That's it. And her life in Khust, and all that-- she was married many years.

Yeah. It's all gone.

And she's functioning like nothing's happened. Not like nothing happened, but you would be surprised how wildly unhappy people were that they work together and that some survived. And they-- first of all, now, everybody has to find a job because--

You're still the youngest of everyone. Aren't you like 14 or 15 at this point?

I'm like 15 and 1/2 by now, 1945-- liberated, now it's the fall. I must have turned 15 in November then. Yes. I am like-- you're right. I am an unnoticed and unimportant fifth wheel there. I am.

And another thing-- I mean, they loved me and they are taking care of me. There's no doubt about it. But I acquired a nickname, which was devastating.

What was it?

I was called in Yiddish, de kleine.

De kleine.

The little one.

The little one.

The little one. And de kleine-- no-- and they were trying to shelter from some terrible experiences, that some of the other people had-- the kleine.

But that's so sweet.

I am desperately not the kleine. I am just like they are. And then they're always-- there telling each other these horrific stories, each of them horrible and different, of the concentration camps. Malvinka is saying, that Shia-- is saying, they're talking. And then they say, well, the kleine doesn't remember all this. See, she's lucky she doesn't remember all this.

Oh my. Oh my. And the kleine remembers everything.

I have news for you older people. I remember more than you. I remember more details. I remember more deeply. It was bad. And then again, the kleine has to go to school.

Oh dear.

Now OK. They were really taking care of me. They treated me like a child. But they forgot I came from Auschwitz.

That's right.

It was terrible.

Well, that's also part of the pain, is that they couldn't have-- she couldn't save her own children. And they wanted to believe that in some way, you might have been sheltered. But you weren't.

Well, they didn't mean harm.

Of course not.

To call me the little one, they made out-- [INAUDIBLE] their child.

Of course.

But it was more like a pet who doesn't know what's going on. And that was not the way. I needed something-- I needed that, and I needed something else. But I didn't get that something else for the rest of my adult life. Not even after I got married. By then, my husband was an American-borne-- he was a GI, he went through the war. But he didn't see the Holocaust. He was in Africa, and India, and finally, some in Europe. But nobody could-- after all those years, and we didn't talk. So I had some introspection of my own.

Yeah. Yeah.

So there you were in Sudetenland. And it sounds like it's temporary because--

Well, yes, yes. Oh there was no doubt that's what we're getting out of Europe. That was a given. And Teplice-Shanov and all of Sudeten became a refugee haven. People came back from Germany across the border, which was very near. And they stayed there because there were empty houses-- again, the Germans were thrown out. The place had thousands of refugees, including some distant cousins, [? that ?] [? were ?] [? there. ?] And including some [INAUDIBLE]-- people from our community originally, from everybody's community.

People came to visit. We had a huge five-bedroom apartment. Daily, people came to visit and compare notes, and Malvinka was cooking. And the young people began to get jobs. And it was full of refugees.

And they went to concerts-- there was a huge park, there were free concerts. In every city in Europe, there are free concerts. They took walks, they began to shop some clothes. And at that time, hats was very important. Young girls-- everybody wore hats. And there was a place to buy hats. I have a picture of Serena, [? too, ?] in hats.

We found blankets. There were people who were tailors. They were seamstresses among us. They set up shop. We would-- survivors. We knew where they were. And people paid them, and they sewed, they had to make rent money.

I have a winter coat that was made out of a blanket. And it looks, you know, it looks beautiful. You know, and they literally took the curtains off the walls. And then when they could buy something from the store, and knew they had money, you know we began to be free. And yet, all these other survivors too.

And then there were weddings. Yes, yes, there were weddings, just what you know and hear. And then they were even-- we were there long enough-- we were there two years waiting to get to America. And everybody was searching. Nobody expected or wanted to stay there.

And we were leaving Europe, no doubt about it.

OK.

Some organized, were organized into Zionist groups. And they were [INAUDIBLE]. And they were heading for Palestine. Others were searching family in America. There were people who went to South America-- a group who ended up in Ecuador, another group who ended up in Colombia, in Brazil, wherever they could get a visa. But it took two years, at least.

So-- so what I'm hearing then is that you were never really in a DP camp, like so many others were.

You're right.

You were in this--

You understand then. A lot of others, by the thousands, found shelter in DP camps, where they were fed and taken care of.

Yeah.

And, you know, there were schools. I know people who had Yiddish schools and Hebrew schools. And all kinds of scientists were there.

Sure.

And they were fed by the--

UNRRA.

--Jewish agencies, UNRRA, HIAS, you name it, the Jewish from America, agencies.

Did you mention-- excuse me for interrupting. Did you mention way back before that you had some aunts and uncles in the United States?

Yes. Yes. My mother did. It was--

Your mother did.

Rosie, the sister, her sister and brothers, and Malvinka. Their mother-- and I mentioned to you that, actually, their mother was my mother's stepmother.

Correct.

You know? But it didn't matter. That wasn't a problem. But they were adults. And they knew that their mother had a brother who, during the First World War or right after, whatever, that brother was a chazzan. And during or before the World War I, probably during, he was able to get out to the United States. They allowed religious leaders to come out, like, he was like called a reverend.

OK.

But he was a chazzan. So he came out.

Well, a chazzan-- is a chazzan a rabbi?

Not necessary, no. Chazzans typically were just chazzans. And in America, too, they were not. If a rabbi could sing also, that was fine. But they hired a chazzan.

So what's the difference-- what's the difference between a chazzan--

The kind that you will never hear again in this country. And those chazzans were like opera singers.

So what's the difference between a chazzan and a cantor?

A cantor, same thing.

Same thing? OK.

A cantor-- he was a cantor.

OK. OK.

That's-- but it's not a rabbi. But they would learned. They had to be very learned, like a rabbi.

OK.

Very religious--

OK.

--and very knowledgeable in how to interpret those religious prayers. Because every prayer, some of it, you know, I came to understand, if the chazzan didn't bring tears to your eyes or didn't give you chills when you sang the certain prayer to God, he wasn't a good chazzan. They were actors, interpreters, emotional. Oh, they were opera singers. [LAUGHS] You know.

OK.

They were fantastic. And every synagogue hired one of those, particularly for the High Holidays. You could not have a High Holiday without a cantor.

OK. OK.

And so what you hear today is what bar mitzvah kids know. [LAUGHS] I could never reconcile after hearing real chazzans, you know.

So tell me, so this was stepmother's brother.

Brothers, sisters, brothers-- but, as I told you, that we were-- we children were not told that, even then we didn't-- I-- we didn't know that. And because their father was so protective of the original-- his original three children from the first wife, he was so protective of them and treated them exactly like the ones from the second wife, it was very good. You know. It was just very good.

And all these young uncles and aunts, like Rosie and Piri, and the young guys, oh, they-- we just adored them, we all. We just adored them. So that was a lot of comfort in that.

So anyway, there was then-- Yossi then-- lots of good things happened. So Yossi, when he got out of the army, was now a highly honored liberator veteran.

OK.

He had every privilege that any person could have. He could have an apartment. You could have a job. He could have anything he wanted. He was a liberator in Czechoslovakia.

So this is-- so in other words, this is Czech authorities' view of him.

Yes. Yes.

Even though it is really the British Army that he had served in.

But this group came to liberate. They came as Czechs, Czech citizens.

Got it.

They came to liberate Czechoslovakia.

And does-- by this point, had the British retreated from this area? Was there any--

No. No, there was a lot, a lot of British soldiers there too. In fact, there were-- I don't think-- there were no Russians at this point.

OK.

You know. But there was Allied soldiers. You know

Allied soldiers.

This was now before it got all separated and divided up the spoils, you know. And Russian got half of Germany, et cetera.

Right.

But here, this was-- it was a-- Prague was very, very interesting. It was teeming with refugees from-- of all kinds, from all of Europe.

Yeah.

And the soldiers, with refugees, with agencies, Jewish agencies from America, from elsewhere, all kinds of languages, and everybody was looking for everybody else, and it was quite a place.

So it sounds like this is 1946, 1947. It is, you know, Czechoslovakia--

Let's see. It's-- it's liberated in '45.

Yeah.

End of '45, we were in Teplice-- already.

OK.

So it's '46. It's actually '46. And I came to this country in the spring of '47.

OK. OK.

We were there two years, just about.

And how did--

So, it was a long time. So [INAUDIBLE] they want to put me in school, because everybody else is getting jobs, whatever it is. Yossi acquires a mill in a neighboring area, out of the city, because he knows mills.

Yeah.

And he acquires a huge mill with dozens of workers. They were-- they-- it belonged to the Germans during the war. The Germans took it away. Now it's his for the asking. [LAUGHS] OK? So he begins to see about the mill.

The younger brother, Shia becomes a mechanic with cars and motorcycles, whatever. And Rosie is recovering. She is home. She cannot work. Malvina nÃ©ni is the cook and caretaker, the mother of everyone.

Serena and I, Serena and I, for a short period get a factory job, mind you, a factory nearby that is making socks. OK?

OK.

And I never knew how socks are made. We knitted our own socks. We knew how to knit socks and gloves, even as a young person.

OK.

But this is machines. And I am very bad at it.

[LAUGHS]

You know, because you have to-- the system is you have to hook on some, like a bit of product into a system of nails or something. Anyhow, I messed it up, so they all had damage.

[LAUGHS] Oh, God.

They went [INAUDIBLE] system. So I quit.

OK.

They weren't happy with me. I just couldn't do it, or wouldn't do it, whatever. I quit, and Serena stayed a while. And they paid her. We needed money, you know? We needed money. Because it wasn't enough with-- but I then-- they put me into a middle school.

OK.

And so the middle school-- I guess, Yossi must have taken me and registered me. It was full of Czech girls, a girls school. And these Czech girls went through the war. And they were undoubtedly discriminated against. The German students were gone.

Yeah.

And it was a very subdued school. It was obvious that these were not schools like in Brooklyn, New York that I entered two years later. And they served us-- there was a-- these girls were hungry. They served us a cup of milk every day at noon, nothing else. But we got a cup of milk, which was a lifesaver for these girls and their parents. Didn't have money or food.

Yeah.

So I began to speak Czech because way back in first and second grade I spoke it.

Yeah.

And to my amazement, in a few weeks I was fluent. I don't know why, but I was.

It came back. It came back.

It came back. It just came back. And one little girl, who was my age, her name was Zora [? Schleglema. ?] Zora decided I was going to make a good friend. So I acquired a very good friend. And speaking fluent Czech, and Zora and I, she would walk me home from school. She just wanted to do that. And it was wonderful for me.

Suddenly I was with someone my age. And I was in a setting that wasn't ideal to the school, but it was good for me.

It's normal.

You know, instead of being--

It's sort of like normal life.

Yeah, instead of being called the little one who doesn't remember anything, so don't worry about her. We-- we-- you know. And on the way home, I remember vividly, there would be a kind of a ice cream shop. Things began to happen, you know, by this time. It was more like a custard place.

We had enough pocket money that we would stop and buy ourselves an ice cream cone and continue walking. And she would take me all the way home. And it was my best time. It was really very nice. And got my Czech going.

And she took me to meet her family. And they were very nice Czech people. You know? Although, I got to thinking years later, her father was a postmaster. And he continued to be a postmaster in the Czech way. So I wondered later, was he a postmaster during the Germans too. That isn't so kosher.

Yeah.

But then I don't know whether he was. I don't know. I didn't even think of asking. But he was now a postmaster. And the idea was that he was always working for the post office. But I don't know.

Her mother was very nice. I remember Christmastime, that first Christmas. I was included in a gift. They gave me a gift. You know? And suddenly I had kind of an insight into another kind of situation. It too my mind off.

So was this your first close non-Jewish friend?

Yes. Yes. Oh, definitely. Definitely. I never had-- I mean, back home as a child I had, but-- but yeah, not only that, but since, you know, Czechoslovakians-- she was a Czech girl. She was very, very nice, very nice. She needed a friend too it looked like.

Yeah.

And, you know, when I left for America, she was very sad. And she gave me a book-- I have it-- with an inscription of our close friendship. It's a book, a picture-- a huge coffee table picture book of Prague, all the famous ancient buildings. And, you know, it is an ancient city.

It's quite special.

I still have it.

It's quite special.



Yes, very special.

It's a very beautiful city, so I assume the pictures must be very dramatic as well.

It's all black and white.

Yeah.

But it's artistic, a huge book, very nice.

Did you ever keep up contact with her.

So basically, I lost touch with her. But anyway--

Yeah, OK.

What happened-- a very important part of getting to America, as I said, Yossi had open doors everywhere. And it became his job to get us the necessary papers, you know, birth certificates, history of who we are, where we come from, all of it which was needed to apply to get a visa. And we had no papers. And he had a lot of people, all his sisters, his brothers, and his [? nieces. ?]

We had to find-- recreate documents with witnesses. And he did it day in and day out. He went to offices, starting in Teplice and going to Prague. It had to be done in Prague.

And he would leave on a train in the morning, and not come back for several days. He would go from office to office in Prague. But every door opened for him because he was this honored veterans-- veteran. And he was fluent in Czech.

And unlike when my father was looking to get his citizenship papers, doors were not open for him. He was a Jew, and this was not what they were interested in helping him prove that he was a citizen. So anyhow, he succeeded.

My birth certificate at the time was all made up with some witnesses. And that was no problem. You know, friends and relatives, they all signed. They knew when I was born. This country needed detailed documents of our existence, which we couldn't have, we didn't have.

Well, I remember--

They were relentless. You went to the American Embassy, and they wanted it. That's all. They didn't say, we'll forgive it.

Yeah.

And so that was Yossi's job for two years. And he succeeded. And so OK back to the uncle-- so all these adult relatives of mine remembered uncle [? Wahlberg ?] His mother's name was-- maiden name was [? Wahlberg. ?] They had, apparently, the mother had kept in touch while it was possible to do through the years.

And they knew he was a cantor. They knew that he lived in Yonkers, New York. They knew all of that.

Now, Serena and I didn't have a clue. And I don't know that would have been good. So they made contact through Yossi and all that. And he sent papers. And so now it was up to the US Embassy to lift their, you know, quota, actually, letting people in.

This country was not so welcoming, you know. You had to wait your turn. And you had to prove. And you had to find a sponsor who guaranteed that they would take care of you if you don't-- can't support yourself. And that was--

So this was your uncle. This was, this man in Yonkers, New York, he sponsored all of you?

Well, he wanted to, but he had to prove his income and his ability to support this many people. So actually, he didn't-- he qualified for his mother's sister's children. I mean-- when I-- his-- his-- you know, his nieces and nephews.

OK.

He qualified for them. But he ran out. The Embassy said that he-- that Serena and I were just too many on his regular income as a cantor. He made very little money in America in those days. And he didn't have property. He had that little house. So he said, no, he couldn't do anything. The law didn't allow.

OK.

So we-- but in the meantime, the others got on a waiting list. And as time passed, the first one who was got notice that he's ready to go was Rosie and the younger brother, Shia.

OK.

And HIAS took up the fee for the boat.

OK.

And they were notified. And they showed up in Prague at the, you know, at the right time, the right place. And the two of them left for America. They were the first two. And they ended up in Brooklyn. And they made contact with a rabbi-- with Chazzan [? Wahlberg. ?]

But they did not stay with him, because it was understood that he was not a rich man. And the idea was not to move in with people like that. The idea was just to get over here. And they got jobs. And there were other cousins they discovered.

Anyhow, and the HIAS and other agencies took care of them. Rosie continued to be sick and living at doctors. She never recovered completely. Anyhow, so months went by. And we're waiting who is going to be the next one.

OK.

And the next one turned out to be Serena and me. And that was 1947, in April.

And who was your sponsor?

HIAS.

HIAS, OK.

HIAS, absolutely.

And that would be Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society?

Yes. That's exactly who it was. And they were, at that time, only taking care of Jewish refugees. Today they take care of other kinds of refugees also. They're still-- you know, they're still very active. They take care of anybody, all refugees. They're active. But they don't have that many Jewish refugees now.

You know, they helped the Russian Jewish refugees. But right now, they do everybody. But they were vital.

OK.

So that is quite an interesting story, Serena and I together, now on our own. We got on a train, had to go to Prague, find the HIAS office, which was-- they told us to come on a Sunday. But the place was locked on Sunday. And we were left out in nowhere, when we got out of the train. And we-- [LAUGHS] we had lots of adventures.

And we met a woman, a young woman in the train on the way to Prague, who was getting out of Czechoslovakia because she wanted to go into-- she was going to go to school in Paris. She spoke French. And somehow, when we got out, she realized that the HIAS was locked Sunday. And she stayed with us and talked to someone.

There was a caretaker, she found somewhere. And that caretaker said there is a search the hotel where all the refugees are staying, to her the address. And she took us to this hotel somewhere in Paris. It was a fleabag, really. And lo and behold, it was filled with Jewish refugees. [LAUGHS]

Prague, in Prague? Yeah.

Stayed there until Monday morning, when the doors will open.

OK.

You know, I mean, every step of the way, you get the picture.

There's a story. Yes. Yes. So, but when you get there, is that the time-- do you ever go back to Teplice, or--

No, no, no.

That's it?

No, no, no. You're out of there. My God, you have a visa to exit Europe. That's gold. That's life.

OK.

Every Jew wants to get out of Europe. Really, they went anywhere they could get-- they would accept them. You don't know how many went to South America, all kinds of countries, because they would take them.

Yeah.

The US had a quota-- very difficult. I'm telling you, with all Josi's help, it took two years.

Was it a Jewish quota? Was it a Hungarian quota? That had been your former citizenship.

Well, you know-- no, no, no, American quota. They had a quota during the war, prior to the war, which country, how much. You know, they had discriminated, not only against how many Jews they'll let in, but many Irish, how many Italians.

This is what I mean. This is what I mean. Are you talking-- was it that-- it was the US imposing a quota on people from--

On the refugees from Hitler, the Holocaust survivors, absolutely.

OK.

They were not opening the doors.

OK.

They didn't want-- you know, later on, we were stunned where they let the Cuban refugees in much later, you know, opened the door. But they did not open the door to the refugees of the Holocaust. It was rationed. It was-- it was a quota.

OK.

And so two years to wait-- they didn't have to do that. Did they? You know? I mean-- and the people stayed in displaced persons camps for years, that they couldn't get a visa to America. They never did qualify for whatever reason. They didn't have a, you know, a Yossi.

So when you get to Prague, and you get the HIAS offices in Prague, you already have a visa in hand.

We are on our way out. We-- as soon as-- you see, HIAS asked us to come on that specific date.

I see.

You see, he said the boat is ready.

OK.

We were told when to come because the boat was ready in this nearby harbor. And to cross the Channel, and we had a date when the boat was leaving.

So did you leave from Bremerhaven?

We-- we left-- we went across the Channel.

I know, but Prague, not from Prague. How did you get from Prague to wherever the port was where the boat was.

We went through- you know it's-- I should have looked it up long ago. We went on a small boat across the Channel, from Prague, and into whatever harbor was waiting for us. Was it Bremerhaven? I don't know what.

Well, first of all, Prague is landlocked. So there can't be a boat.

Oh, yeah. It was a the Channel that there was.

The English Channel?

The English Channel, English Channel. It was like a rowboat type, a small boat, you know.

OK. So you go from Prague to someplace where you get to the Channel. Was that a train trip? I think-- I think they provided a car. They did. We were not alone.

OK.

You know, in the HIAS office, others were coming that were ready for this trip.

OK.

And so somebody took care of us.

OK.

And we went, and we were on a Swedish, a Swedish boat, a ship, called Drottningholm.

OK.

So we went across the Channel, boarded the ship, and eventually were off into the open ocean. But something happened to us when we got to the HIAS office. There were others there, as I say. It was filled with official people taking care of all kinds of refugee problems. It's a big office.

They decided to promote their-- the HIAS in New York and in the United States. They wanted some publicity of the rescue effort that they were doing, which was legitimate. And we were very early leaving, very-- Holocaust survivors who were young like we were, you know?

Yeah.

And they thought we were ideal advertisement to promote their-- and they had every right. They did a tremendous amount of good. So they had a camera crew waiting for us, and reporters.

And when we got there, they said, well, we just want to take a few pictures of you. And we want to hear your story. OK. So the pictures were taken, hundreds of them, as usual. And in Yiddish, there were reporters there. And they spoke Yiddish.

And we gave them a quick story. They kept asking and asking. OK, I'll have to get back to that because we ran into that when we arrived in New York Harbor and we got off. We were already besieged by reporters because of the HIAS publicity.

So HIAS sent our pictures to Washington and New York, mainly to New York, with a story. Here are two orphans, survive-- orphaned children, survivors of Auschwitz, arriving on the Drottningholm such-and-such a time in New York Harbor.

And all the papers in New York-- and at that time, there were maybe six daily newspapers-- they all were ready. They all came to the boat to wait for us, because they knew these orphaned girls, who were in Auschwitz, are coming. And it was good publicity.

Did you not know this? Did you know this when you arrived, that this is what you're going to find?

No. No. And there was the biggest trauma of the many traumas that you're just hearing from me. It was devastating. Because, before the, you know, before the boat docked, you know, those small ships come up to guide the boat in.

Sure.

And on that ship were the paparazzi--

Yeah.

--with the cameras-- a half a dozen or a dozen. I don't know. But before we docked, our names were called on the boat. Irene and Serena Fogel report to so-and-so. And we became terrified. They are sending us back.

Oh, dear.

Who the heck? What do they want? We're on the wrong ship. We're not legal. I mean, to be legal, to be admitted here, they changed their mind. And we're alone, and we're going back. Or what else do they want from us? We were terrified.

So we report to this place in real terror. And the pictures begin to fly. They're taking pictures. And they're taking pictures. And they're taking-- they get on the boat. And everybody leaves the boat, everybody.

Everybody gets off. And all of a sudden we are alone on the boat with the cameras and the reporters-- nobody else. It's empty. It's hollow. And they're pressing us for more information, more story, more story, more story. And they never have enough. And they don't let us get off.

And we know that Rosie, who came weeks ago, or maybe months ago, is waiting, waiting for us at the dock, because she knew when we were coming. She's waiting for us with Shia and some other. We're not coming to Brooklyn without an address. And she is waiting for us.

And these people are not letting you go.

Hours went by. And we figured, OK, she left. We didn't come. Nobody else came off. That was it. And we have no authority to stop it. And nobody else has authority. We're in their clutches.

And I'm not exaggerating. It was hours.

Oh, my.

And we're exhausted. And we finally get off. And there are these lonely two people. And actually there was somebody else there that I-- that's a separate story. They are looking from this building towards the boat. And they're still there.

They're waiting. And they're still there. And that's how we finally got away from everybody, from the paparazzi. But the next day and the next day and for weeks after, every paper in New York had our story and our picture.

And we couldn't speak English. We didn't understand what they said about us. And when we finally did, a long time later, we were stunned. Either they didn't understand, or they wanted sensationalism. It was terrible. It was lies and distortions, and it was horrible.

It was so horrible that we wanted to hide. They said in the articles, these two orphaned girls blew up the crematorium in Auschwitz.

Oh, my goodness.

And we thought, my God. If any survivor is going to read this--

Yeah.

--we'd be devastated. This was something sacred.

Yeah.

This was not anything that we would, under any circumstance, venture to say. We told them that we were nearby, and we saw it, and we heard it. That was true. We had nothing to do with it, obviously. They made it sound like we were the whole-- we were it.

You were the resistance.

We collected-- we collect munitions. We collected-- we had the jewelry because of where we worked there in those clothes. Oh, my God. We put away those things and never wanted to look at it again. But I have some of it.

OK. Oh, what a sad-- I mean, what an unfortunate introduction to the United States, that ends up, you know, after all that. It's sort of like a Hollywood kind of rendition of--

And-- and lovely people were waiting for us with open arms, you know. And we were so destroyed. I remember they

took a taxi. And these were not rich people, but they took a taxi to Brooklyn. And they were saying, what do you think of the tall buildings? What do you think of the city?

Right.

We were-- we were numb. We didn't know. And we never got to see the Statue of Liberty, never.

[LAUGHTER]

Irony of ironies.

Now, you know, you wanted detail. I hope you had enough detail.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

However, Irene, we haven't come to the museum yet.

[LAUGHS]

So what would like to do? Would you-- shall we go on, or do you want to do this again another day? It's up to you.

No, no, no. I think we should go on.

OK.

I didn't know-- these details I have never said in a speech. That's for sure. But it's there. It's there.

And I'm very grateful for it. And now we'll have it recorded for the archives. So it couldn't be better. So I'm very, very pleased that you have gone into this detail. I am grateful for your memory, because you're painting a picture. As I have said before, you are painting pictures and giving us, not only the chronology, but a sense of how it was at each important point.

And so you have not--

People have asked me many times. Liberation must have been wonderful. Tell us the happy ending.

Well, there wasn't one. Was there?

There surely wasn't one.

You know?

And, yeah, you know, people don't have any idea [LAUGHS] of what went on.

Yeah. Yeah.

OK, so we turn to the museum.

OK.

And you have now shared with me, over these many hours, how it happened that you were a young girl on the cusp of teenagehood in Hungary, who goes through these experiences. You end up in the United States, still a teenager. You'll still go to school.

And while on that journey, after you survive it, you're called de kleine by your very well-meaning family, which also survived, the members that did. But in that is the assumption that you don't remember what happened. And that's not true.

So my question to you is when did you first start talking about those wartime experiences? Did you keep it inside for a while?

Oh, very quiet. We spoke to other survivors, various distant cousins that my Aunt Rosie and so on, they had. There was-- it turned out that nobody went to live with the uncle in Yonkers. They settled in Brooklyn. They got an apartment and they all-- all the survivors lived together.

For a long time that was the family. And my sister and I belonged to that family. We reconstructed. There was, you know Malvinka. There was Rosie. There was the boys. And they had lots of cousins in Brooklyn that we didn't know at all.

It was-- in fact, it ended up to be the Brooklyn and New York people who came long before, they actually had a cousins club. And in somebody's basement in Brooklyn, once a month all the cousins got together, the new ones, the old ones, the children, the newly married. There was a cousins club, and everybody cooked and brought food.

And we suddenly had a huge collection of people that belonged to that we never heard of, never knew of. So back to when I started talking-- I'm going to skip over 1949, when I finished high school, which in itself would take a book of drama. But, OK, I'm already, you know, I'm coping, I guess.

But 1949-- and maybe someday you'll come back to this, how I met my husband and married. I married in 1949.

OK.

And we went off-- I have not spoken [INAUDIBLE] except to any of these cousins or people, among each other, you know.

Excuse me. Something is funny. Excuse me. Something is funny with the audio again.

Oh, OK.

Your voice is very distant.

OK. Well, I now moved the phone further, if that's what helps. Is that what it is?

No, no. it's as if your voice is very far away, as if the phone is very far away.

I wonder if we could pause, and I would switch to another one of these portable ones.

Absolutely, we can pause.

Because it might be running low or something.

OK. All right.

I will pause.

Call me back in two seconds, you know?

Sure. OK.