

We're rolling. [INAUDIBLE]

My-- shall I start it? My name is Helen Meisels. And I was born May the 1st, 1917 in Poland. The town, it was a village. It was called Sladk³w. It was four kilometer from the city. And we went to school to the city.

Which city?

The city is Chmielnik. And we-- every day we went to the-- it was four kilometer one way. And each way we know we walk to the city. In winter we stayed in the city because it was too snowy and too hard for the children to go that far. So we stayed in the city with a aunt. And we had Jewish education and also Polish education.

And we lived there until the war broke out. We lived in that village, in Sladk³w, until the war broke out. We were all grown children.

About how many children?

We were two brothers and three sisters-- five children.

And what sort of work did your father do?

My father was a merchant. And--

Did he have a store?

No. My grandfather was-- well, in Poland you said that he was a wealthy man. But according to America, he wasn't that wealthy. But it was-- he had land, and he had a mill. And people used to bring to the mill grains. And he got paid for making the flour.

And my father knew everything, how to fix those things. He was like a mechanic for the mills and things like this-- for the mill. And he knew how to do that. And then he was a merchant. He used to buy grains, and we produce all different kinds. Like here, they call it buckwheat and all the things. They were all different stones and different things. It was the water mill. It was very interesting.

The water used to go on the wheels, and it turned the stone inside, in the mills. And that's how they make the flour and the grains and everything.

Were you a close-knit family? Was your family close together?

Well, from my mother-- my father was one of the youngest of 12 children. My father's father, the name was Wygodny. It's a strictly Polish name. Wygodny mean comfortable in Polish, you know? And he had six children from his first wife. I don't know it the wife diet or something. And from the next wife, he had six. So they were 12 children. My father was the youngest.

And I did not know-- I knew only one sister of my-- one aunt of my father's family. And the rest we didn't know. They lived all over, in L³dz and somewhere else. So we really didn't know my father's family.

But my mother's family, they were three sisters. One lived with us. She was a widow. And she couldn't remarry because, in the Jewish religion, she did not have any children. And if you don't have any children, you need a halitza. I don't know what you call it. You probably-- you should know. A halitza, that's like a divorce or something. And it's--

A separation.

Like a separation, yeah. And brothers of from her husband's family didn't want to give her a divorce. And she waited for

long, long years until she got the divorce from her husband. And she couldn't-- she wasn't young enough to marry. She stayed with us all her life until Hitler came. You know?

Thinking back on growing up with your family, is there any-- is there a good memory that you experienced, a memory that you experienced?

Yes, a memory that we were running in the water and in the streams and catching fish. And it was fun. It was fun when we were children. Yeah, it was a lot of fun.

Did you have non-Jewish friends? Did you have Polish friends?

Well, we had some Jewish friends, but most of them were Polish friends. And we talked a wonderful Polish. And that how we survived, because of our good Polish speaking and writing and reading and everything. We didn't have-- like most of the Jewish people in Poland, they had like a Jewish accent, something that when they were speaking they recognized this is a Jew. We didn't have that because maybe where we lived in the country, we got all the Polish in the family.

So you spoke--

So we spoke a perfect Polish. And that helped us, I guess, to survive.

You went to a public school?

Yeah.

And to a Jewish school afterwards.

After the public school, we went to a Jewish school. Yeah.

And when did you finish school?

Well, we finished school when I was 14.

And then what--

And then I learned to trade, to be a dressmaker. Yeah.

And you worked in that trade?

And I worked in the trade. I worked for myself. I helped out the family a lot because it was a hard life.

Where were you living then?

We lived still in the village, in Sladk³w, in Sladk³w. And then when the war broke out, we-- not from the beginning but right like the next couple of months or next year, they took us to the ghetto, to Chmielnik, there, where we are going to school.

Before the war started--

Yeah.

Just in the years right before the war, did you notice any increase in antisemitism?

Oh, that was all the time antisemitism. It wasn't increasing. It was never decreasing. [LAUGHS] It was. There was one

boy, he was retarded. He was so antisemitic that he didn't-- he probably didn't know, but he talked whatever it was built in like the parents. And he said, oh, you dirty Jew. He said, you killed Jesus, you dirty Jew-- right in front of you, like in your face, like that, just like that.

It was just open antisemitism. They didn't even-- there were some nice people. There were. There were some nice people. I wouldn't say all of them were like that. But the antisemitism was high.

Did you, before the war began, what did you know about Hitler and the Nazis?

We didn't know anything. We didn't know anything about Hitler or Nazis. And when the war broke out, everybody was running. And my father, he had a horse and a carriage, and he said, let's take up everything and go to Russia because a lot of people who went to Russia, they survived.

But my sister got sick. She had rheumatic fever. She caught, and we couldn't go. So they took us later to the ghetto, to Chmielnik. In Chmielnik, I knew how to sew. And we knew that-- that day, there was one German gentleman in the army that he liked us. And he said, oh, you are-- we were pretty girls. We were three sisters. And one sister just passed away. She was a beautiful woman.

And he said, that's a shame that you have to be killed. That's what he said. I tell you, when he says, when they will take out the ghetto to kill the people from the ghetto, and he says, you run away. That's what he said. Maybe he didn't say it this way, but we knew that he meant that we should survive.

But when we were in the ghetto, and I knew how to sew, and there were people who knew me. And I asked them if they would hide me out for a while. So they did. I did the sewing for them, and they put us like in a haystack, all three sisters. And they gave us food there until we got false papers to go to Germany because the Germans took Polish girls to work to Germany, like a forced labor.

It was not a concentration camp, but it was a forced labor. And we got into a transport like that, to the false-- on false papers. And in the meanwhile, those people hide us out, and they gave us food.

This was outside the ghetto?

This was outside the ghetto because I used to get out of the ghetto and do a little sewing and brought food because they didn't give you food. They just close you up. You couldn't get out.

How long were you in the ghetto?

[SIGHS] I really don't remember exactly, but we were maybe a year or so in the ghetto.

When was the last time you saw your parents?

The last time when I saw my parents? That was like '41. My parents-- my mother died. I didn't-- she died in the war.

In the ghetto?

No, not in the ghetto. She died in the village before we went to the ghetto. She caught-- there came a cousin from L³dz, and he had typhoid fever. And I think she caught it from him or something, or he brought the germ. Maybe he didn't have it or he carry it or something. And she died of typhoid fever.

And then-- and then after she died, we had to go to the ghetto.

So you lived as a family.

We lived as a family together. And we survived in the ghetto. Then when we knew what date they're going to liquidate

the ghetto, [SIGHS] so my father said, well, I guess we have to go because I lived my life. And he was a young man, 42 or 44, or something like this. He married young, and we were all grown children. And he says, [INAUDIBLE] I lived my life. We will go. We have to go.

Did you know-- have any idea what was going to happen after the ghetto was liquidated?

No. I had no ideas what was going to happen. So I said to my father, I said, listen. I'm not going to go like an animal that they should put a machine and kill me. I am going to run away. I was very selfish. I said, Father, I'm going to run away. And if I-- whatever I survive, how many days I can survive, I will still be alive. So whenever they get me, if they catch me and I cannot do anymore, that will be the end. But if I can survive, I will.

And then when we run away, my sister run with me. And those people hide us out in the haystack until we got false papers to go to Germany.

Who gave you the false papers?

It was actually like nothing, like a little slip of paper with different names and things like this. Actually, I kept my name the way I had my name because it was very Polish. But my younger sister and my middle sister, they changed their names. But when we got in in a transport like this, we separated. They separated us. You know, I went to a different transport or a couple of days later because we didn't want to go together. It should be too obvious that we stick together too much.

So I think I went a week later. And my two sisters went a week earlier. And they worked in Oberschlesien, in Germany. And me, they transported to middle Deutschland, to middle Germany. And I worked by Grevenbroich. It was [GERMAN]. And it was by Essen or somewhere not too far, by Munich not too far.

So this would have been in 1942?

No, this wouldn't. I think we left 1941.

1941?

Yeah. Then they put you through, like, to this delouse you, and they do you. They cut your hair. You look like horrible. But we went through all those. And then--

And did they examine you?

They examined, yeah.

And they questioned you about your background at all?

No. No. No background, no questioning.

Because you looked, in quotes, "Aryan."

I looked like a Gentile. I was blonde, blue eyes. And they--

And your sisters, the same?

And my-- no. One sister had trouble, the middle. The youngest looked like me, very, very Polish and very Gentile. But the middle sister, she looked like my mother. She was a brunette. She had some problems. They took her away while she was in the transport. And they thought she's Jewish.

And-- and then, when she said she's not Jewish, and they kept her, still kept her there. Then she got up, and she says,

what in the hell are you going to keep me that long? I'm not Jewish. And she ran out, and they didn't go after her. [LAUGHS] You know? You are so strong. You fight for your life that nothing matters anymore. You just try to survive.

And your brothers?

And my brother? My father, the Polish people told me, when we survived after the liberation, that my father, nobody wants to keep him. If he found a piece of food from pigs or he went in a animal, where the animals were, so that nobody see him. He slept over there. But we don't know what happened to our father.

And one of my-- youngest brother, they killed. And one of my brothers survived. He was very mechanical and talented. And he survived in concentration camp.

Where-- the one who was killed, died in the camp?

The one who was killed was not in concentration camp. He was like on freedom, but nobody wants to hide him. But he was in the partisans, where they'd, like-- you know, the partisan. How do you like--

Partisans--

Partisan, yeah.

--fighters, Polish Partisans.

Fighters, yeah. And they killed him. They killed him. The Polish people killed him for no reason, for no reason. But my brother, one of my brothers survived. Me and three sisters survived.

So you, then, went on this transport of supposedly Polish women to Germany.

Yeah.

And you went to a place near Essen.

Yeah.

And what did you do there?

Well, I was very careful with my German-- I mean Yiddish. We spoke Yiddish at home. Yiddish and German is very close. I mean, not that close, but it's close enough that you could catch faster, the language. So in-- in-- they were Polish-- they were 40 Russian girls in the camp. It was like one big room. It was bunk beds. And 10 Polish girls-- and I was between the 10 Polish girls-- and we slept on bunk beds. And what was the question you asked me?

What kind of work were you--

Oh, what kind of work I did. I delivered thread. I worked in a factory where they make materials. They weaved materials. And you know, I spoke a little more German so they gave me the job because I understand the numbers of the threads and things like this. So I delivered to the people who ate the materials. That was my job in a factory.

Now, were you always fearful that you would be found out?

I was scared a lot of times that I'd be found out. But I had a good relationship with the Polish girls. One wasn't. The one was, you know, one was standing up, and she always was talking about Jews. And she was sort of imitating how the Jews daven. [MUMBLING] you know? She always-- she was very antisemitic.

And one day, she says to me, Helen, you never go to church. And I say I don't have to go to church. I say you have to go

to church. You're running too much with the boys to the woods, I said. So she took a cup of hot coffee. And she went to burn my eyes-- my face. So I pushed her. I got burned. Somehow, she went on my breast. I got one breast burned.

But I never talked to her again. And that was good. Because I fought, so she knew that-- she didn't have any suspicion on me. [SIGHS] But otherwise, I did, after-- the food wasn't good in that camp. They feed you like-- it's very bad food. And they give you a certain amount, you know, and you had to live on it.

So in the evening, a lot of those girls went out, and they stole a sugar beet. And we would eat that. We ate it with coffee. Coffee wasn't coffee. It was burned grains. And from that grains you made like coffee, but it wasn't real coffee. And we had this with the sugar beets.

But the German people found out-- there's a lot of German people who worked in this factory-- that I know how to sew. And they asked me to come after work to their houses. So that was terrific. I did this whole week, and I had food up to here. I couldn't eat it. I brought it for the girls. I had a lot of food.

So we shared with the Polish girls. And then one day, the lagerfuhrer, you know, the man who took care of the girls, he says, Halinczie, come on. You [GERMAN] to the police, that I'm going to the police. I said, oh, that's the end of me. They found out already that I'm Jewish.

So I go to the police. And what can I say? I will see what will happen. I went to the police, and they wanted me to translate from Polish to German. And that was it. So I was relieved. But that close before the liberation, they sent out some girls to middle Deutschland. And the American people bombarded very bad there. And I was on the list. And I was afraid that I'm going to be killed.

Matter of fact, one of the girls got killed, which I knew, that they put her on the list and she went to middle Deutschland. So there was working in the factory a Polish boy. And they lived from the city far away. And he came on the bike every day to work. And his mother was Polish. They were Polish people. But I think they took the German citizenship, and they lived in Germany.

So I asked him. I say, listen, would your mother hide me out if I run away? So he says, I will ask my mother. Because I was Polish, you know, Polish girl. So he asked the mother, and she says yes. So I went there.

He took me on the bike. And he took me to his mother. And his mother was very religious, very religious. And she says, oh, my dear child, did you go to confession? I say no. Well, she says, you-- it was right before Christmas at that time. She says, oh, my dear child, you didn't go to confession. You're so many years here in Germany, so I will take you to confession Sunday. Before Christmas. you have to be holy. You have to go to confession.

So I said, I don't know how to confess in German. She says, I take you to a priest who talks Polish. I said, [NON-ENGLISH]. [LAUGHS] And I said, what will happen to me? I don't know how to confess. So I'd been sitting. I had a little Polish prayer book. And I was looking at it and looking. It doesn't say how to confess or anything.

And the children around that. Oh, you must have a lot of sins, you're praying and praying, they said. I say, oh, I'm praying. You don't know what I'm praying.

So that was on a Sunday morning. And so everybody is going to that confession before Christmas. And she had a little girl about seven-- Angela was her name-- that I remember like now. And I say, Angela, do you have a lot of sins? How do you confess? And she told me the whole story how she confesses, so I had an idea.

So you come to the confession, to the priest. And the priest sit like in a-- like in a jail, with bars. You kneel down. And everybody has-- their next, like. And you say whatever sins you have. And I don't know what he does there, but he does something to take off the sins, so he lets you pray or something.

So when it came, I had to kneel down there. My heart was going that if I would be older I probably would get a heart attack. So I made up some stories, some sins, you know. And he told me after all the sins I have to say a prayer,

[POLISH], in Polish. That means God in the heavens, and on, and the whole story there. I said, oh, my God. There is a God in the church.

So since then, I wasn't afraid anymore. And then we waited like till spring. And I was liberated by the American people. And we had to wait. We couldn't go to Poland right away. So my brother and my sisters were in Poland.

Did you have any-- all these-- you were in Germany then, really, for about three years. You worked in Germany for three years.

Yeah.

Did you have any contact during that time with your sister?

With my sisters, and with my brother once. He wrote me a letter. Yeah. He had some Polish man who was very, very nice to him. Yeah, I had a contact with him. And my sisters, with my sisters too. But we stopped writing because it would be too-- we didn't want to do it anymore.

But my father says, if we will survive, we should come back to our home, where we had our home. And then we should meet each other.

Did you have any idea during those years what was happening to the Jews, [INAUDIBLE] Auschwitz and the death camps?

No. No idea at all. I didn't think that there's any Jews exist anymore.

So you did think that the Jews were all being killed.

Yeah. Yeah. That's what I thought. All the Jews are killed and nobody's going to survive.

Did you, while you were working in Germany, did you hear any antisemitic propaganda? Did you listen to the radio? Did you ever--

No. No, we didn't have any connection with the radio or anything. We were afraid to do this anyhow.

So you basically--

The only thing, I had a connection. There was a man from Holland, and he knew all the politics. And he always was telling me, Halinczie, he says, we're going to be liberated before Christmas. But it didn't happen. You know, the Germans-- I think the Americans were very close, and then the Germans pushed them back. That was before Christmas. And then next year, we were liberated in spring.

During that time, what was the worst incident would you say that happened? Was it the confession? What was the time that you were most afraid or the time that was really the worst for you?

Well, I was afraid when he took me to the police station. That I thought my life is over. They found out I am a Jew. And then the second time, the confession, I was very afraid because I thought they might find out that I'm Jewish.

And do you think that any of the other women suspected that you were Jewish?

No.

No.

They didn't. That was my luck. They didn't suspect it.

Do you feel-- I know it's hard to say for sure, that if any of them had known, that they would have protected you? Or do you think that they would have been too afraid and then [CROSS TALK]?

They wouldn't. They would turn me in. They would turn me in.

When liberation came, was it-- were there American soldiers who came into the camp? Or did the-- how were you liberated exactly?

Well, how was I liberated? I don't-- the American soldiers came in, and that was it. That was it. And we weren't obligated anymore to work there. So we ran out. And they were-- and everybody was going home, whoever wants to go home, like the Polish girls.

And you headed for home because your father had said--

Yeah, I headed for home. And when I headed for home, my brother went to Germany to look for me. And we missed each other. But we met in Poland. He came back. I stayed with a doctor who took care of us before the war, was our house doctor. And then I stayed there, and my brother came and he met me there.

And I lived through a pogrom besides this, in Poland. After the liberation, we went to Poland to meet each other, the sisters and brothers and whatever. And there I lived with that doctor, and one big fat lady is going. And she said, did you hear? Did you hear what the Jews did? I say, what did they do?

She said they killed nine Polish children. I said, what do you mean they killed nine Polish children? Where? She says, they cut the hands and the legs, and they threw them in the river. Nothing happened like this. And there was one building left that was in Kielce. One building was left, where the Jewish-- the survivors, whatever it was, 80 people. It wasn't much there. But I was lucky that I wasn't in that building staying with the Jewish people and I stayed with the doctor.

And there were 40 people killed. And whatever it was left, they went to Łódź and whatever. And they emigrated from Poland.

So you--

So I went through--

You were in Kielce?

Yeah. I was in Kielce when the pogrom appeared after the liberation-- after the liberation. That's how much antisemitic the Polish people are. There was some nice people. I wouldn't say all of them. But that's what happened.

And my brother at that day, maybe we would have been with the Jewish people. He would go there, and we would go and meet each other, who survived and who didn't survive. But we had a little property from our grandfather. And we want to sell it, and he went to that village to sell the property. That's how he missed that pogrom.

And I missed it because I was at the doctor's. And we were very lucky at that day. And then we emigrate from Poland back to Germany. And in Germany we stayed in camps until we had permission to come to America.

Did you ever think about going to Israel?

I was there six times in Israel. I have a big family in Israel, my husband's. My husband has a father-- a father-- I'm sorry. My husband had a brother there living. And we went to the few times to see, and a big family, cousins. And we corresponded.

But my husband wanted to go to Israel, to live there. You mean to live there.

Yes.

My husband wanted to go to Israel. And my sisters went to America. So we were like-- I didn't want to go to Israel, because I had my sisters in America. I wanted to go to America. So we immigrated to America instead of Israel.

When did you marry? When did you marry?

I married in 1948.

And you met your husband [CROSS TALK].

I met my husband in Germany, in the camps. And in 1949 we immigrated to America.

Did you ever talk to your-- or did your brother ever talk to you about his experiences in the camp? Did he ever tell you what happened to him, the brother who survived?

Well, I don't think-- nothing especially. He worked there-- nothing especially that I know, any incidents especially. You know. But he had a good Polish friend, which he communicated. And he was a good-- his hands are very good. He's a dental technician. He's very talented. And that kept him alive, his talent I guess.

What brought you to Chicago?

What brought me to Chicago? I came through the Joint to America, the Jewish Joint, whatever it was. And they put me to Clinton, Indiana. I came pregnant at that time. And I gave birth to my son there, in Clinton, Indiana, a small town. But my husband didn't have a job. Whatever he had, it was not paying enough. And then we decided-- my sister was in Chicago, my middle sister. And they had families, so we decided to move to Chicago.

And we came to Chicago. And that's how we lived here in Chicago.

How would you say-- how did your experiences in the Holocaust change you? How did they affect you?

Well, I would say America's a great land. They took us in. And I would say they're wonderful people in here. And it's just wonderful. It's a big change.

So having gone through what you went through had made you more appreciative of what--

Well, I am appreciative I am alive. And I have a wonderful children and wonderful grandchildren. And I'm very proud of them. And I would-- and I like to have, really, the story to tell, what happened to me that the children and grandchildren, if they want to look back and see what the grandma went through. [LAUGHS]

Have you ever-- after you left Poland, did you ever think about going back there again to--

Nothing pulled me back there, nothing, that it should pull me back. But my brother went there about three years ago. And he said, Helen, do you want to go to Poland? I said, I don't know if I want to go or not. And I decided not to go, which I'm sorry. He went there, and he saw the place that we used to live. And he went all through.

There's very little Polish people-- I mean Jewish people left in Poland, very little. Whoever's left, it's--

Less than 10,000.

Yeah.

As far as your religious beliefs, did the Holocaust have any effect on you in terms of that?

I'm not religious. My husband is. He's very religious. But I don't know how I should-- [SIGHS] there is something. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what to tell you, really, if I'm religious or not.

Was your home religious? Did you grow up--

Very, very religious, very religious. My mother used to wear a sheitel, and my father a beard. And it was very religious. And Saturday, when you went out, you're not supposed to carry anything. If you have a handkerchief, you had to tie it. [LAUGHS] You know?

But after that experience, and the young-- my father wasn't as bad as my mother. My mother was very, very religious. But my father was very well read, and he was more lenient to the children than my mother.

And as you--

And as I-- I wanted to teach my children being Jewish and have all the traditions and everything because I am Jewish, but I don't know I believe as much as my parents did. I don't.

During the time that you were in Germany as, really as a slave laborer--

Yeah.

--it was slave labor.

Yeah, slave labor.

Did you think at all about the Jewish holidays or any kind of Jewish [CROSS TALK]?

Yes, I was thinking about it. It's fun to have holidays and things like that, Jewish holidays. Yes. I didn't know any days. I didn't know what it was coming. I only knew the- you know, the Polish and the German is the same dates, the holidays. So that's all I knew. But I didn't know when the Jewish holidays are.

You had some contact with German people then while you were doing-- while you were a slave laborer, you had some-- as a seamstress, you got into German people's homes.

Yeah. Yeah.

What kind of people were they? How did they strike you? Were they--

They were nice. They were nice. We didn't talk about Jews. We never brought up any Jews, anything like it. We never talked about anything. A lot of people didn't like what Hitler did. They didn't. A lot of people said my son is going to be killed in that war. I'm going to kill that jerk or the other one, you know, who took him. That's what they said.

Not everybody liked that kind. Not enough everybody was the Nazis. They were Nazis, all the people.

But they-- I suppose, too, there was fear. They were afraid to talk.

Yeah. Yeah, they were afraid to talk, of course, especially to a stranger like a Polish girl. You know, I was a Polish girl. What did they have-- you know.

As far as Gestapo or anybody, there was an office of racial affairs who sometimes came to examine the slave laborers to make sure that--

No.

No contact?

No contact with that kind of people. There was a lagerfuhrer that we had. And that was all we had. But nothing-- none of the outside Gestapos or anybody like that came to the factory.

Have you kept in touch with any of the women that you were with there?

No.

They all went back to Poland?

To Poland, to different parts, you know. I never had been in touch with anybody.

Is there anything that I haven't asked or that we have not talked about that you would like to talk about, anything at all from your early life, any memory that you have, or anything at all that you'd like to mention?

Well, as children we were happy children. We had fun. We were going to school. And we were-- one incident I can tell you what I did. It was four kilometer to go to school. And the Polish people, like from Sladk³w, from that village, they will go into the city to do some work or something. They had a carriage, and they had a wagon, and they had, in the back, sticking out like a stick. And if they didn't-- some people took you to the city. They were nice. And some didn't.

So I was running after this. And I sat down on the stick in the back. And he couldn't see me, and I had a ride all the way-- [LAUGHS] to school. That was fun.

That was fun.

That was fun.

And thinking back on the life of the Polish Jews, more than three million Jews, [INAUDIBLE] a life that was destroyed, the tragedy--

The tragedy is more--

[CROSS TALK] a whole way of life.

We had such a big family. No one survived from a big family, big family. From my mother's and from my father's side, no one survived-- very intelligent people. One was a hazzan. He wasn't a hazzan, but he had a gorgeous voice. He was like a hazzan, you know. He was beautiful.

They were people, then no one survived. No one survived.

Did you ever think about why you survived?

I think why I survived, because I knew the language and I was so strong. I didn't want to die. That's why I survived. I just want to do anything to save my life.

And so you were willing to take that chance?

That's right. I was willing to take the chance and see what will happen. And I said, I have always time to die whenever they will catch me. That's what I said.

And meanwhile--

The meanwhile, God was good to me, and I survived.

Well, thank you very much. Thank you.

Thank you.