

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back, and I'm the Director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo, New York. We are at channel 4, and this evening our guest is Krystyna Rybicka, who was given an award by Yad Vashem for her participation and her parents' participation during the war in saving Jews.

And so she is with her family among the Righteous of the Nations. Krystyna, will you please tell us your story? Tell us where you were born, where you lived, about your early years before the Nazis came into power.

OK. I was born in Poland in a small village, but later we lived in Warsaw. I have one sister. And we were going to school. We were still school children, let's say, before the war, and not aware what may happen.

We, as regards the problem of Jewish people, we didn't know any Jewish family. We didn't have any contacts.

What did your father do? My father worked in this cooperative movement, which was mostly in the helping farmers to organize this cooperative, because Poland was of these small farmers country. He was actively involved. This was in professional and ideological work, in a way.

And my mother was also working, all her life in as in bookkeeping, in another cooperative, in fact.

We have a picture of you and your family in the years before the World War.

No, during, during the war.

Oh, it's during.

During the, war. Yes.

So when did your happy, normal life change?

No it changed in September 1, 1939 when Germany attacked Poland.

What do you remember of that time?

Well, I remember because that soon were one biggest events that we were in Warsaw. All men able to serve the army left Warsaw in the idea that they will join army somewhere, among others, my father left. And we stayed only very old or very young boys stayed. And the others that we soon had to move to the basement, which basement was usually a storage for coal, or for winter, or so. Because there was all the time bombardment, and that was just within the house where we lived was in one place some soup was cooked for everybody.

And we just survived. And still we believed we will somehow, as children, we will win. And then when the first some note was put that after-- there was Warsaw siege. And that finally Warsaw gives up. We couldn't believe that. We couldn't take it. And then Germany entered.

And how did your life change after that, after the Nazis came into power?

Well, what you say, how life changed?

Did you continue at school?

No. There was, first of all, there was a curfew that was a terror everywhere. Well, originally we went out of this basement. That was no gas, there was the city was greatly destroyed, no cooking facilities, not heating and so on. Little by little it was recuperated. And then we started going to school. And then they said that the general education school will be closed. That will be only professional schools, vocational schools were allowed to exist.

So the schools turned into private lessons at home. The school teachers came and met in different houses, and we were in a relatively small group. And by the way, we have excellent high school education in this way. We were enthusiastic in learning, and--

And who paid the teachers?

Oh, I tell you, I can't tell. I don't remember how was it, how was it organized. Really, this was our parents thought about. The first time you asked me this question, yes.

You were young.

Yes.

And what about food? Did you have enough food?

Well, we had, happily, it was my father was working. This was this institution was still functioning, like so it was accepted as a normal legal institution. So there was, after this first period, we could somehow live decently I would say.

And did you know what was happening to the Jews? They were already put in ghettos?

We know that was, I even cannot tell you exactly when it started, when that was the order that Jews have to move to one area. And later on, the wall was built around, which was I don't know-- 3 meters or more, and covered with heavy wall with glass.

And we lived in northern part of Warsaw, Å»oliborz was the part called. And going to the city, the streetcar passed part near the wall of the ghetto.

And then was in 1942 or '43 was the end this, and that was all some shooting, we heard.

When the ghetto was liquidated.

And the fire and the smoke. And the smoke, and that was all one-- one was also thinking--

Do you remember the Warsaw ghetto revolt?

Well, I didn't know. We knew that there was shooting, so we knew about that. But we didn't know much about it. I read later, after the war, this.

Let's look at the picture of your family now.

Oh, this is Jana.

Oh, well, perhaps you can tell us about Jana at this time then.

And then so, OK, then in school, in I think it was in '41, a new girl came to our group. And we were very friendly with her, my sister and I. And we went to visit her, where does she live. And it appeared she has a bed in an efficiency room of one lady. And she said her mother stays near Warsaw. There was a convent and institute for blind people, so that she lives there.

And the girl came to be in school. She decided, and when I saw her condition and asked, I remember the question I asked her. What do you eat? She said, oh, I can cook some oatmeal. And so, then when we left, I said, well, we have normal family apartment. And she can stay with us. And we came to parents, and I said, we should take her to us. She shouldn't stay like that. We are very close with her as friends.

And my parents, in fact, told me long after the war, once remembering they said, you know, as you are always, you decide something, and you want to be done immediately. And we, said let us think at least overnight. And they said they didn't sleep all night. They were more aware than we were of the responsibility.

Of the repercussions.

Yes, and that. And finally, first my father, said, we decided what will be will be this, but we should not say we are afraid, we are coward, or so, and we cannot help her. And she moved in, and she was calling my parents like mama and daddy. Daddy Statulek was special name used in our family, and she always used. All after the war still it was the same. The same relation.

And the neighbors didn't suspect anything?

I think that they knew. I think they knew. But I have to say that this was we lived, this was like a cooperative, it was about 150 apartments. I may say there was, among others, a family, a Jewish family. He had a pharmacy before the war. Then German took this pharmacy. And there were two girls also with our age. And in this house where we lived, there were a lot of quite Catholic, strong Catholic people.

And I know that they used to call before the war, this girl the Jew, Jew, like this. But there was no information. So they lived in this. So I would say the people who were not so even friendly, still there was no-- this is another example.

As I learned later from my father, that there were still few others in the whole cooperative, few other Jews.

And the Germans didn't come to take them away?

What?

The Jewish families?

No, no. No, this family survived, survived on all through the war--

In the cooperative living?

In the same apartment they always were. Yes. Yes.

That's amazing, isn't it?

They were, of course, this was not religious or Orthodox, that were--

Where they could be noticed.

Yes. So no, no. This is not this type, this was intelligentsia people, who were not--

But didn't you all have to register for food and would not the Germans have found them out?

No, they had Polish name, Fabicki, and [PERSONAL NAME].

So it didn't make any difference.

Yes, and the older girl was Krystyna and the younger was Janina, Jana.

So it didn't make any difference. We have some more pictures, perhaps you could tell us about.

Now, then so Jana was with us all the time. And in 1942, when we went for vacation to a school of agriculture, the

director, my father knew the director. And he invited. He said if girls want to come for vacation, many other our friends went also, they can come and just work. It was not work for money, just work for pleasure, working in summer at harvest, or in the garden, or this.

And those were our vacation. We went with Jana. And in '42, it was decided among my parents and her mother that it would be safer if Jana will stay on the countryside, and not return. Because '42, it started really more and more repression, and looking for Jew everywhere. And some posters very drastic.

So I returned home, and she stayed over there. But when the autumn came, the school was for the peasant girls. And they had their own classes, some professional, or some basic school. And she had nothing to learn in this school, of course. So she worked. She was spending time as a cow girl.

And then the director of the school had to be in contact with German administration in the nearest village, because he had to get food supply and so on for the existence of the school. And one of those German, whom he knew already told him once, you know, my colleagues started paying attention to your cow girl. She doesn't look like your Polish country girl.

So he immediately called my father, of course without telling. Because you couldn't talk over telephone. And my father came, and brought Jana home. It was dangerous there. So she had to disappear. And she stayed back with us. And this picture of her.

And did she go to school with you?

Yes, this school, which I said. Was we had in homes. But she was, well, she once said that she was our cousin. But she clearly looked different. But--

Well, you're light, and she was dark.

Yes, yes. Yes, but well, as I said, this was not the only single case.

Now in the time when she was in the countryside, when I came home, there was-- I came home, and there was another girl, another child. And the girl was very, very nice. Her name was Roma. And then the-- I remember even my question. I asked my mama, where did we get this Jewish child from? Because this was the typical Jewish really, Roma looked like this.

And my mother said, oh, she's going to be somewhere in a convent. But there was a need for a shelter for her for a while. It was supposed for one week. She stayed I think two weeks or more. She got sick in the meantime and so on. So later on, if you want the story, we didn't know what happened to her. Because Jana was always with us till the end of the war.

But with Roma, she was later taken. This was my aunt who brought her to us. And then she took her out. I even didn't know her last name. That was the principle during the war that one should know as little as possible, as little name as possible, and particularly children were not informed anything.

Sure. I understand.

And we were only I remember that we were desperate. We liked Roma very much. And when I remember her mother persuaded us that it would be safer, even for her, we cannot leave a child at home. She cannot go to school. She really-- everybody who came asked, oh, where did you get this Jewish child from? That was so typical a question.

And she said someone could notice her. How can you keep her? Even she will be at the window, so someone may notice. And that would be much more safer. She went to a convent. And we didn't know what happened to her. After the war, we even asked my aunt. But she said, oh, she met her family, and they emigrated to Sweden, and never gave us any information. We were even somehow surprised. It appeared in a way my aunt was in contact with them, and somehow

pretending she kept the child. And she needed some help from them or so, what we learned.

But we learned in a very, very-- we met them later. I immigrated to the United States in 1970 with my daughter, Monica. And my parents came to visit us. And when they came, my daughter was in college, and I was in another city. When they came to see my college, they met also her friend, a Jewish woman also who emigrated in this time and whose mother just arrived from Warsaw also.

And when they came from New York it was in Amherst, Massachusetts. They stayed in New York with friends. And they talk about them, and mentioned the last name. And my mother heard and said oh, Laks, you say? Ardos, he was a chemist who worked in this and that company. Yes? Oh, you know him?

And did they have the daughter Roma?

Yes, they have. So where are they? We didn't know what happened to them. They are here. Roma is in Washington. And they were in Brooklyn in this time.

So you had a--

So then we met with them, and we met with Roma. And in fact, Roma's parents didn't even know about her stay with us, because it was relatively short, and the child forgot. She was the most time with this in the convent. Moreover, then with the war, when the front passed in 1944 and '45, the convent was evacuated and moved. I even don't know how they met finally. But they met all together, and they emigrated originally to Sweden, and then to the United States.

We have a picture of your family. I think that's the one that's--

Uh-huh, when they-- oh, this is-- we are still with Sienna and my sister and I. This is old picture.

Now, which one is you and which one is your sister?

I am in the middle. Jana, is this with black hair, in here to the right. I don't know, to the right, yes? And to the left with shorter hair is my sister, Zofia.

And this is during the war? And where is this--

Yes. That is this--

Where is this taken?

That was in Warsaw, somewhere, somewhere out there we went. Well, we lived like--

An everyday life.

Has to go--

And we should have a picture of your--

Oh, this is my parents much later picture. This is the golden anniversary in 1972. So this was in 1973, I think, they came to visit me the first time. And there will be this picture when they met Lakses. And--

Oh, before we get to that, the war has ended. And the Warsaw ghetto has been dissolved. And what happens to you after the war then? And what happened to--

After the war, we finished. We finished school. We finished university. I studied and my sister biology, and Jana medical school. And she got the medical doctor degree. And we worked all us. She worked in medical academy. We

worked in the research in Polish Academy of Science.

And did her parents come back?

Her father was in England, in London. And for a long time, it was no way she wanted even to come to meet him, and was no way. And then he was dying. She got a permission, and came too late. That was-- and her mother is still alive. Her mother is close, almost close to 100 years.

And where do they live?

She is in Poland. And her brother is in Poland. But Jana, I and Jana, we decided to leave Poland in 1970. And I had some chance to leave for a meeting in 1970. And she had also chance to leave in 1971. And since then, we are together here. My sister is basically in Poland, now is temporarily in Norway. But--

But all this time, you were like sisters?

Yes. Yes, Yes.

You kept in touch with each other?

We keep in touch. And we are really particularly, I and Jana, we are here in this country.

Is she a practicing physician now?

Yes. Yes. She is.

And where is she?

In Boston, she's in Boston.

So will you tell us the story about the Yad Vashem recognition, and the medals, how that all came about?

The last year I came here, last year in April, but the year before I was in Chicago. And in Chicago, there was a group of Jewish people who looked for the Polish righteous people. And my friend from Poland worked with them. And she told me, you should apply for this recognition.

And I said, even OK, well this is for my parents, not for me, basically. Because they were-- this was their final decision.

Your parents had already died.

Yes. And that was I would like to have, because this is recognition associated with this commemoration plaque in Yad Vashem. And she said, well, but we-- this is the plaque, I think. But she said, we made it the rules here that one can apply for himself only. So she said write this story, whatever you can tell about this story, what your family did, and what is your role and so on.

So I wrote it. Then Jana and Roma were asked for this to send a letter. I don't know whether you want.

I'd like to read those letters which affirmed that you and your sister and your parents hid them under very difficult conditions. This is from Jana. And she writes I am writing this letter on behalf of my friend, Krystyna Rybicka, maiden name Kielan. I met Krystyna in 1940. We both were attending school in Warsaw. At this time, I was living alone. My family was in hiding in different places on Polish side of the town.

I became a frequent guest in Krystyna's house, preparing homework together with her and her sister, Zofia And soon her parents, Maria and Franciszek Kielan, invited me to stay with them. From 1941 until 1944, I lived with them, treated as

one more daughter, and introduced to the neighbors, and to other members of the family as a daughter of a friend living in the countryside far from Warsaw.

Undoubtedly, I put them in a difficult and dangerous situation. It was hard to explain why I cannot stay with my family, also with my black hair and black eyes I never looked as a Polish girl. I stayed in Maria and Franciszek Kielan's home until a Warsaw uprising in 1944. During the uprising, I was with Zofia in the Polish underground army. And after the uprising fall, we were taken together to camp, in Pruszkow.

I stayed with the Kielan family until October 1944, when the war was almost finished. After the war, I have remained very close to them, and continued to be regarded as one of the daughters. I would also like to mention that Mr. And Mrs. Kielan helped other Jews during the war time.

That's really an amazing testimonial. And then you have a brief letter from Roma Laks Kaplan. I'm writing to you on behalf of Ms. Krystyna Rybicka of 1237 Linden Lane. During the terrible years of 1941 to '42, Ms. Rybicka's family endangered themselves by helping me to survive. I, though only six years old, had escaped from the Warsaw ghetto, and had been placed with a Christian family.

She escaped as a little girl?

No, with her parents. They went out. They were all in the ghetto originally.

Unfortunately, I became quite ill, and this family no longer wanted to keep me. It was at this time that the Kielan family extended the sanctuary of their home to me. I fully remember their concern and love, and the tender care they extended to me, a critically ill six-year-old Jewish child whose discovery meant death to the entire family. Since I could not stay with them indefinitely, they arranged for me to be cared for by a group of nuns, an arrangement that lasted until the end of the war.

Now how did your father have access to the nuns?

This was-- I don't know by whom it was arranged, how was it arranged. This was what he told me. And then as I tell you, I was surprised that my mother knew the last name. I only knew Roma.

Were it not for the Kielans, I could not have survived, and I would not have been happily married for 34 years with two wonderful grown children. Any help that you can extend to Ms. Rybicka will be most deeply appreciated. It was due to her and her family that I am still alive, a debt that can never really be paid.

And this is 1990. So with these two letters of testimonial, you sent them to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

Yes. So they were sent. And then I got this recognition of the righteous, and received this like diploma, whatever you call it.

Oh, the diploma that was projected on the screen, and maybe we could see the medals now. And--

Then these medals.

And these are metals of recognition.

Yes, to the righteous people. But then we were invited by Mr. Harvey Sarnier from Chicago, who was very much impressed when he learned about this righteous people, and he organized a number of excursions to Israel, because one has to come personally to put this commemoration plaque on. The trees are not planted anymore, so that is--

Oh, they don't plant trees for the righteous gentiles?

No, I think that was one was the problem the space in general, but the other these trees not always grew well. That is

why--

So, now they have plaques?

The plaques, yes. Yes.

Oh, and we have a picture of the plaque too.

Yes. And--

Let's see Franciszek-- well, it's in Hebrew.

Then I asked the director of Yad Vashem, Dr. Paldiel, to make this plaque not for me, but for my parents, basically. So that is Franciszek and Maria Kielan and mentioned the daughters Krystyna and Zofia. Of course, the parents were mostly responsible. But the situation was if whoever would inform German, the whole family would be killed. This was always the case that in such cases, they killed all children in family.

So you were involved. You brought a young girl home.

Yes, yes. That was it.

You told me before a story about a girl by the name of Nina.

Oh this was my-- one of the first contact of a friendship with a Jewish girl. This was still before when ghetto was still open, that people could go in and out. Only they had this band with David star. And my new school, friend where I was so very much impressed by her personality, and so on. And she told me, you know, I had a friend in my former school. And she is now in ghetto, and she is coming to visit us, and I would like you to meet her.

And this was I met her in my friend's home. She stayed, I think she stayed two or three days even. And then I remember when we accompanied her back to the streetcar to return to ghetto, I said to my friend, couldn't be anything done that she will not return, although nobody was aware of what is going to happen? Nobody, even she didn't. And apparently, the family of my friends offered the help, but she refused, because she said, I cannot leave my mother. My mother is in ghetto.

So she went back to the ghetto. Did you ever see her again?

No, no. Did you know her last name?

Maybe I knew. I don't remember. But my friend knows of course.

So you don't know if she survived.

No, no. She didn't survive. She didn't survive. This was-- they would have any-- they would have any if she would survive, even after the war, any contact or so. She would be--

So you, was your sister with you when you got the award in Jerusalem?

No, my sister is-- no I was only, because I was in Chicago by myself.

So did they invite you? Did they send you a ticket to come to Jerusalem?

This was private activity of Mr. Harvey Sarnier. In fact, as he said, he started to study the history of General Anders who went from this group of people who were arrested by Russian and Polish people, and then they went through Middle East. There was the agreement made with Polish authorities in England, and with Stalin. And Stalin agreed to let these



people go out. And among others, there was a number of Jews who left.

And Mr. Sarner started studying this history of these Jewish people who came with General Anders, and by the way, get acquainted with I would say colorful Polish history, and fighting on every fronts, and so on. And then later, he realized that he learned that there were more people who helped Jews during the war. And there is very small proportion of trees or this commemoration plates.

And then he learned that first people were not allowed to leave Poland for years after the war, and the second that they had no money. He looked. He applied for a Jewish and Polish organization to help these people, but unsuccessfully. And finally, he decided he will finance it himself, and organized a number of trips, and trips are something very, very special. Because it is made with his love to those people. And those people treating them, as he says, just like a symbol. But this is not--

[CROSS TALK] acting extraordinary.

Yes, but he is extraordinary.

So he took you to--

It was that he wrote me that there will be a group from the United States. Most are from Poland, or from he made even from Lithuania a group.

You mean survivors of the war.

Were there any other Righteous Gentiles?

Righteous. This is the--

Oh, these people were all righteous.

Always righteous, yes. This is the people whom he would come to take--

So how did you feel when you got this extraordinary honor in Jerusalem?

Well, I don't know how to say, how did I feel. I feel very glad that it was for my parents, because I considered that basically they deserved it. And I felt even slightly confused that originally I got that, when it should be for the family. But finally, this was happy that this commemoration plaque was for them.

That's a very interesting--

And I was on the other hand, I was very impressed by-- I read a lot before going to Israel about history and so on. And the trip was really marvelous.

How long were you in Israel?

One week. One week.

Very, very hurried.

No, well, but still.

But you saw enough to give you a taste.

Otherwise, I don't think-- we talked. I may tell you that I talked to Jana who also was in Israel before.

At the same time?

No, no before she was. And when I came home and I was so impressed, and we considered, well perhaps, we will move over there.

Ah, the two of you.

And then yes, but but the one thing is that we both seem to have had our share of war already in our life.

You're afraid because it's not peaceful.

Yeah, just having that all in our life--

That was quite enough. Now we have in conclusion, we have some more interesting pictures. Maybe you'll tell us about this.

Oh, this is the picture when my parents met Mr. And Mrs. Laks, which was-- this was really touching.

What city is this in?

This was, I think this picture was on Staten Island, where I lived in this time. And then they invited us. They were on vacation upstate New York. So for two days, we drove over there, and stayed with them also.

But you saved their daughter's life.

Yes. Yes. And they were, as I said, they were not even aware. But of course when Roma was told, she recalled that she stayed with us.

And she was just a little girl.

Yes. Yes.

I bet it was traumatic enough for her to remember.

And my parents, they went to Washington also, and Roma lives.

And now we have another picture.

Who is this?

And this is Jana. This is relatively recent. It was in late '70s. And this is her son, Yashel.

Joshua?

Yashel.

Oh, Yashel?

John.

Oh, John.

Janek or Yashel.

And where does she live?

She? She's in Boston.

And you're very close, you're still in touch with each other?

Yes. Yes, of course.

So this is the saga of how you save people, where they got married, and had their own families.

And she has a daughter also who just finished medical school. And the daughter is in right now in Seattle. But she is going to come to Boston.

Did she married a survivor too?

Her husband was in Russia during the war. There was a large part of those people who could escape just going to Russia.

But some of them didn't survive the difficulty.

Yes. Yes. Yes, yes.

So this is your story, a very wonderful story.

That is a simple, simple everyday life. But I think it's perhaps worth to mention that there were people like this, and some were like. Among other, Jana had of what I learned after the war, an aunt and two cousins. They three were everyone with some other family during the war. And one was even going out, was recognized by Germans on the street.

I think the mother, and about one sister, one daughter, there apparently was an informer. German came, killed the whole family with children, who gave her shelter.

Who hid them.

Only one survived.

Oh my goodness.

So this is in a way, is like little nothing. And then the almost next door, you see the stories like that, very, very close.

It's amazing how after all these years you're still in touch with the two women, or especially with Jana.

Oh, yeah, we are [INAUDIBLE]. I was very, very close with Mr. And Mrs. Laks since I was here. My parents were in Poland, they treated me almost like daughter, you know?

What do your children say about these stories that you tell them? Are they believable to them?

No, of course, they know the stories. It's well known in the family, so they knew the person. So that is no--

I think that--

That is simple obvious thing.

But there were many people who became informers, like you said. You could get the three eggs if you turned in a Jew.

I may tell only one thing, what Harvey Sarnier told me, which made me feel better. Because that is a number of these stories about Polish antisemitism. He said that there is a book about the war history written I think by a rabbi even, or anyhow someone. Unfortunately, I don't remember the name. I should ask him and read it.

And he said the author is not too much with great love for Polish people. But he still-- he was a scholar and studying, and he said that the number of informers were the lowest among Polish people, despite known antagonism, comparing to other nations. Yes. That was which surprised me. But he said, and this was the sources that not that the author wanted to say especially good things personally. He doesn't feel like this.

But this was the--

He said, yes, that he said that from his study he concluded that that was so. There is the antagonists and his is on both sides still.

But you and your family and these two women are testimonial.

Yes, but still--

Well, you took it for granted. But people who were presented with this situation and thought about it overnight, as your parents, didn't affirm, did not take the chance. And you could have all been killed.

Yeah. Yeah it's.

We have to wind up this tape very soon. Is there anything that you would like to say in conclusion or in summary?

I don't know what may I say. In summary, I would like that that was less antagonism between Poles and Jews. That is what I would like. And among others, I thought some people said that I should even come for such interview, or so. I think that one of the reason I wanted it is, is not that I am somebody in this story. But just to show that there are such cases, and that maybe it will reduce this antagonism.

In the Talmud, it says if you saved one life, you've saved the whole world. And here you saved two lives. So you've expanded, you and your family have expanded on it. Thank you very much, Krystyna.

Thank you.

OK, good.