

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Stefa Kupfer
March 10, 1992
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Stefa Kupfer, conducted on March 10, 1992 in Beverly Hills, California on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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STERA KUPFER

March 10, 1992

Beep.

Tell me what you remember of your impressions when the war began. How life changed.

Well, the whole summer people were whispering and men were politicking and talking about there's going to be a war. Uh, our, my life was very beautiful. We lived in a nice house, my father had a good business. We just lived a very, very nice life, comfortable life, uh, was the usual luxuries of middle class people, you know, a maid and well-dressed and then going on vacations and, and having good times. But there was always talk and the men were always whispering, the children were not even supposed to hear, but we knew something is cooking. And then, just prior to 9/1, my father left. Uh, he left to escape the Germans. Rumor was that the children and women were, will be treated civilly. The men would be put to work, or sent to concentration camp or whatever they would do with them. So, my father along with a few men, got a bus and a driver, and decided to leave town, and go to the other side so to speak, you know, to the Russian side, which would be occupied by the Russians, and see what happens. Maybe come back, maybe what--. And everything changed. My mother had to go to the store, which she never did before. I was left with my little sister to take care of her. I was 10 years old. She was one, exactly one year old. And, then the rationing came in and, and we had to wear an armband, a white armband. There, there were every day there were different, different um rules coming out, you know, wearing a white arm band with the blue star of David, and there was a curfew, and number one, no school for Jewish children. 9/3 was supposed to be a school day, which never happened for the Jewish children, we couldn't go to school. Uh, my mother tried to get us private tutoring during that time, which was an older cousin who has graduated already from gymnasium, and she was qualified enough to teach 3rd, 4th, 5th grade. Uh, the children were left more or less to themselves. The parents were busy, either worrying or doing something or being...occupied otherwise. Um, but basically, for myself, we stayed in the house for about 2 years, I think, maybe a little less, until the whole thing changed.

Tell me, describe for me the Germans, your impression of them, and describe the Gestapo, and how you saw the-----, what you thought of them.

Okay. They were walking, well, when they first came in, they came, the army came in, they were throwing candy to the children, and the parents said, "Don't pick it up, it might be poisoned," and they

ob-obviously knew about it because they took a bite out of it to show it wasn't. But after they marched in, very quietly, not one shot was fired, we watched the Gestapo with the dogs, with the two German shepherds on each side, with the polished boots, with the, with the hat, with the pride, with the, with the -----very scary. Just to look at them was scary. They even confiscated a couple dogs from our neighbor. They were Dalmatians. To this day, when I see a Dalmatian, a beautiful Dalmatian, I cannot help but think about this horrible thing because, they just took it, I don't know, in order to give it back maybe later or what. In the meantime, they took them. They were walking with those dogs, they were walking with the German shepherds, and they, they were carrying a thing, I don't know, it was a stick or something, next to them like, God they were, they were like Gods, they were like, they thought of them themselves, and we were petrified, just to look. You know, you were afraid to look at their faces. And the children were afraid to look at their faces. There was such power. There was such, and such fear in us. It was such, you thought, if you just looked at them, they would smite you, they would just throw you against something. Because when are we, we heard about the stories where they didn't waste a shot on a child because the children were just thrown against a brick or a or a stone wall or something and smashed their heads. So as children, we were very much afraid, very much afraid to just look at them. Uh, nothing you could do about it.

Did your mother know what was going on during this time, and how much did she tell you of what was going on?

I don't know how much she knew. She prob--she didn't tell much. She didn't want to, I don't know, the, the, the upbringing of children in Europe was such, you don't tell, you don't upset the children, you don't tell the children. The children are protected. The children are gentle. You don't upset children. But, every day, there were people called to go to, to labor. You know, to pull stones out of the river in order to make little bricks to build the roads. You know when I was in Europe, and I saw the roads built in a sort of uh pattern, um, with that scalloped pattern, I know that the Jews built that road, out of the stones that were pulled out of the water that they had to manually make into squares. This is what they were doing. And there were some people that couldn't do that kind of work. There were sick people, there were older people. Some people never came back from that work. Either they dropped, or they got sick, or whatever. So, the, the first year and a half when they came into my town was mostly this sort of thing. They were catching people to, to go to work and, and confiscating merchandise from the store. They would come with big trucks and confiscate a lot of--my father had a hardware store, and they needed a lot of stuff from the store. And they would always give my mother a shine or a, a, a bill to collect a hundred years from now, whatever, nobody believed it. Uh, so this was mostly what was going on, there was a lot of hunger, there was, food was not available. Uh, people stood in line for hours to get a piece of bread, you know, that was hard bread or, or, or so soft that it was almost raw.

Either way. Personally, we were in a lucky position because, before my father left, he provided, he called the mill and had delivered, had them deliver a sack of white flour and black flour, and also told my mother to buy a sack of salt and sugar. Apparently he remembered something from the first war. And, personally I was not hungry. We took the flour to the baker, and he baked bread for us, so I was quite fortunate as far as that goes.

Tell me about your responsibilities when your mother went to work.

When my mother went to work, I had to take care of my little sister. I couldn't go to play. Naturally she wanted to run after me. Uh, she was a year old. I trained her to go to the potty, and to this day, she reminds me that af-after a while, I also taught her how to carry the potty out. She still remembers this. I (laughs), I was trying to-----, I guess. So, we went along most of the time until my mother got somebody to stay with us. Uh, she could very well afford it, and she got a woman to stay, clean the house and stay with the children, and this gave me an opportunity to go out and play. Not a whole lot because we didn't want to be very visible, but in the backyard a little bit, we did.

Your family refused to register, am I right about that?

Yes.

Tell me about that.

Okay. One day, there was, there was an order that everyone should come to the city hall and register. I don't know why, my mother said, "I'm not going to register." Neither she nor her parents, nor her sister registered, including the children. We had no idea what it was for, but we just didn't. The day after, there was another order. All people that registered had to come to the city hall, was whatever, if they wanted to carry something, they'll be sent out. And I'll never forget, I was in my grandparent's house standing with my aunt in the window, and we saw people, it was a rainy day.

Wait, we have to do this one again. We just ran out. So we'll have to start that again on the next roll.

Okay.

Beep.

Now when you tell me about what you did refusing to register, just start at the beginning as though you

haven't told it already.

All right. You have to ask me the question again?

Okay. Your family refused to register. Tell me about that.

Okay. One day, there was an order. Everybody has to come and register at the city hall. My mother for some reason refused to go, and also her sister and her parents and the children. I don't know why, but this was her decision, and we didn't register. The following day, there was another order. Everybody that registered yesterday, come to City Hall, and get your belongings. So, I remember standing in my grandpar-parents house with my aunt in the window, and it was a rainy day, and we saw all these people going with little packages, with little bundles in their hands, carrying children, children by the hand, going in the direction of the river. We had no idea where they are going, but later we found out, they were all going toward the River -----, and across the border to the Russian side. For some reason, that one day, they opened the, the border, and the Germans got rid of these people, and the Russians accepted them. We felt very, very sorry for them. Look where they are going. We are still in our home. It's warm, it's not raining, we have what to eat. Poor people, they went. Little did we know, that these people would remain alive because they would remain side, maybe they'll be sent to Siberia later on, all this, we didn't know. We were safe in our homes. We didn't know. We didn't know.

Now describe to me the escape that you made on the train with your sister.

Okay. At one time, they were going to erect the ghetto, and people between 18 and 40 could go into the ghetto. Everybody else was going to be sent somewhere else. Nobody knew where. My mother had two children, ten, my, at that time, 11-1/2 probably, and 1-1/2 or 2. Well, she knew she can't go with the children into the ghetto. So she decided to do something about it. My aunt, she had a sister who lived in a different city, and the action was over in that city. In other words, they went through their selection, and she said to me, "Get on the train, and go to Krasno," this was the city where my aunt lived, "find out if they're alive, maybe we can join them." I knew they weren't at their old address. This I knew. So, I got on a train, and I went to Krasno, and I looked up the Jewish Community Center or whatever that was called at that time, it had a different name in Polish. And I went there, and I asked about the family, and they told me, "Yes, they're alive, they, they survived the selection and they're working in a factory." And they told me where to go, and I did. When I came there, my aunt said, "Just stay with us. Don't go back. We have to be here. We are working." And, I had a cousin who is a year older than I. She says, "Somehow we'll interchange the two of you, and you stay with us. Don't go back, there's no future there, you'll all

get killed. Just stay here." I said, "I can't do that, I have to go back." So, I went back. It was a Friday night, I came home. And, I don't know what made me say it. To this day, I really don't know. I said to my mother, "Tante Malca said we should come to stay with them." My mother took my word for it. So the next day, she contacted a Polish lady, who was going to take my sister and me to Krasno, and my mother, and come back, and take my mother later. She didn't want all of us to travel together because we would be recognized, especially my mother, you know. Children is different. And, so it was, she packed up a suitcase, she gave me a briefcase with some stuff, I didn't know what was in it, and we went to the station, and as soon as the train started moving, some people said, "I think these are Shverga's??? children travelling." My father was very well-known in the city, and they recognized the children, and the minute the woman heard this, she disappeared. She got out of the compartment, and she disappeared. I didn't know what to think about it, but when this, we came to the station, my sister and I got off, and right there, at the stairs, there were two very tall Secret Service men, and they asked me my name, and they said, uh, they asked me my name first, and I said, "Stefa Nevayetska." This was my neighbor's daughter's name, and they said to me, "So where are you, who are you coming to, where are you going?" And I said, "We are coming to my aunt, but she's not here, and I don't what to do." I was petrified. I knew what all this meant. Um, they did not wear a uniform, but we knew Secret, uh, you know, what Secret Service looked like, and, I'm looking around, I don't see that woman, and, I didn't know what to do, and an-anyways, they asked me if was Jewish, I said, "No." And, again, they asked me what, who are we coming to. I said, "Well, my aunt is not here. I don't know where she lives, and I don't know how to get to her house." I really don't know what spoke through me. I wasn't prepared for it. And, as a child I never lied. I still don't to this day, but something spoke through me, I, I really believe it, and they said, "Well, then we'll have to take you to the police." I said, "That's a very good idea. Maybe you can help me locate my aunt." And, inside I was praying, I was hoping they won't ask for her name, because I didn't have a name for her. I couldn't, could not have said her real name. And I was not prepared for name, but they never asked. And we, they, well, they started walking us, and they were asking what was in my briefcase. It was actually a big schoolbag that I had, leather, and I said, "I really don't know. My mother packed it." And, one of them said, "Oh, a couple days ago, a girl just like you, Jewish, came here, and she had a bag just like yours, leather bag, and you know what was in it? Five kilos of gold." I said, "Well, I don't think I have 5 kilos of gold, but you're welcome to open it up. And they opened it up, and I almost died on the spot, because what was in that bag was some tomatoes that my mother picked from the garden, and a big Jewish bread, like a twisted challa. Now, everybody knows in Poland that only Jews eat a twisted challa for Shabbat. Polish people never eat a twisted Challa Shabbat. They may have a twisted bread for Easter, but not Shabbat. When I saw this, I was sure that they would know who I am. I must have had a guardian angel, oh maybe, my dead father was watching over us. They

didn't see it. They didn't acknowledge it. They didn't pay attention. They closed the bag. But they questioned us, again and again and again. Your name. Where did you come, this...In the meantime, it was a hot day, and my little sister got tired, and she called me by my Jewish name, that she is tired. "Soluna, I'm tired, I can't walk." And I said, "Stefa cannot help you. I'm tired myself." She said, "Soluna," and I said, "Stefa." Now any Polish man knows that Sala, Sara, Soluna, is a Jewish name. Stefa, Stefa is a Christian name. They didn't hear my little sister. I truly considered this a miracle. Finally, they said to me, um, "Okay, you can go. You can go." So, I said to myself, "All right, we'll go, and they'll follow me, and they'll know exactly where I'm going," because I knew where my aunt had an apt., even though they were working in a camp, they still kept an apt. So, we were going around and around in circle, and the heat was incredible, but we walked around, and I kept looking back, but I didn't see them. Finally I decided to take a walk. And we walked to the apartment.

We have to reload.

Beep.

Why don't you pick that up, and then I want to jump right into -----.

Okay.

Remember where you were, you and your sister starting to walk.

Okay. We started to walk towards my aunt's apt. When we came there, the house was locked. There was nobody in the house. There were 2 outhouses, so I decided to go and sit in the outhouse until the landlady would come because we were afraid to sit outside. We sat in the stinking outhouse for a long time until the landlady came. When she came, we came out, and she has met me before because at one time that I was there, my cousin took me to the place, and she knew who I was, and I ask her could we come in, and she says, "Yeah, I'll let you into your aunt's apt.," and she let us in. Nobody knew where we were because the lady that took us across never showed up, and we were sitting in the apt all alone, the 2 of us, until somebody from the family came, I don't know how many days later, sitting there crying we were. I didn't know about my mother, if she is alive, she didn't know about us, if we were alive, she had no idea what happened to us, she kept going back to the woman's house, and she must have been hiding from her because her husband only kept saying, "Because of you I lost my wife. She never came back, which in retrospect, I realize that she did come back, because nothing did happen to her, nobody caught her. So my

mother didn't know what happened to us, and she subsequently went into hiding for a few days in order to be uh out of the ghetto so she should be uh, uh reconnected with us. Now, the way we were reconnected is another miracle. My mother went into hiding, and then after a few days, she sent a man into Krasno to look for 2 children. She had no idea where her sister lived. She had no idea what happened to us. The poor man was walking the streets. He, he didn't know who to ask. He didn't know where to go. Finally, he approached a young woman, and asked her if she knew about Eddinger family. And that was my cousin. Why he asked her, only, I don't know. She brought him over, and he told me, "Your mother is alive, I'm going to bring her in, in a few days." And, he did. At night, he bandaged her face, supposedly that she has a big toothache, and she came with his wife's uh Ausweihs?? and we, we, we got reconnected. Now we stayed in my aunt's apt for a few days, and my mother talked to Mrs. Olefska, who was the landlady, and she said, "What are we to do?" She says, "I'll tell you what. Your sister paid a month's rent. She only stayed here 2 weeks. She didn't want any money back. You can stay for 2 weeks of the remainder of the month, for what your sister paid. My mother said, "Fine. Very nice." After 2 weeks, she said to Mrs. Olefska, "What do we do now?" And she said, "I don't think I can throw you out. You have nowhere to go. I'm going to keep you as long as I can."

All right. Now I'm going to interrupt you. Describe Mrs. Olefska for me, and then just tell me in general what she did for you, your mother and your sister.

Mrs. Olefska was, well, first I have to say, she's an angel. She went straight to heaven. She was a beautiful, physically beautiful woman. Tall, with swept up hair, beautiful smile, deeply religious, with a heart of gold, obviously. The woman went to mass every single day, and if she sold a piece of jewelry for us, what my mother gave her, and my mother would say, "Take a little money from this," she would not accept it. And Mama would say, "Take a little money when you go to mass, and give it to the poor." And she would say, "There are no poorer people than you. Your children have no fresh air. You have no light. You have no freedom. Nobody is poorer than you." She wouldn't take a penny, never, she never took a penny. She did it out of the goodness of her heart. She was incredible. And we didn't even have a chance to thank her, because after the war, not after the war actually, after the liberation, when my mother went back to her, and, you know, just, just to tell her that we're going back to our hometown and, she says, "Please, don't stay in touch with me. Don't ever come back. I don't want my neighbors to see you. I am afraid for the safety of my, of my life. My Polish people, my Polish brothers, will not forgive me for saving a Jewish life." She was in jeopardy, and we never could say thank you. (Cries)

Tell me for how long she hid you, and tell me some of the logistics of hiding, how hard was it for

her?

Well, at first we were in this room. I don't exactly know if it was a year or two or maybe 18 months. It really is difficult for me to put a time on it, but it was for a long time. So at first we were in my aunt's apt, but because housing was scarce, people were on her back uh, to rent it out. You know, why don't you rent out the apt, it's an empty apt, and she always found an excuse, but finally a member of her family, a distant member of her family said, needed an apt, and she had to let them have it. So, she put us up in an attic. It was actually an attic room, you know, one of those, and we were, had to be extremely quiet because we walk upstairs, you can hear it downstairs. That is...so we were quiet, we were either walking on tippy toes or just sitting on a bed. She would bring us a pot of soup and some bread, and again her goodness. The bread was sometimes 2 or 3 weeks old because, you know, bread was rationed, so her brother would go to the army to buy bread. He had to go to the other side of town to buy bread. And it was stamped with the date, and we were laughing about it, sometimes it was 10 days old, sometimes 2 weeks old, was hard as rock, and so she came up with the idea that she's going to buy some apples, and if you scrape apples, and put them on bread, it will soften the bread for the children. This is how concerned she was. But, this too had to end because somebody else needed the room upstairs. A young student wanted the room. And, she did not have any excuse not to rent it out. Can I get a tissue, uhhh, please, I don't know if you can stop. I feel I'm dripping. Take 4 is up. Okay. Beep.

Let's just back up a little bit to the food, and also tell me how she respected your mother's religion.

I will. Okay. I told you that she cooked soup for us. Now, my mother was very orthodox. Mrs. Olefska was deeply religious, and she respected my mother's religion also. She knew that it had to be kosher. So she took one pot, which she said she'll scrub it out real good, and she won't use any fat at all. So, she cooked potato soup for us every single day, she browned some flour first, never tou--and she had one spoon, she bought a new spoon, and she had this one pot, which she always used only for us. My mother didn't have any un-kosher food for the duration of the hiding. Never in her life for that matter, but this is how she respected my mother's religiousness. This by itself should tell you something about her character.

Beep.

Talk to me about what it was like to have to live in hiding, to be in the darkness, what you did -----
-----.

First of all, we had to be very very quiet. We could not talk. In fact, after the war, none of us had voices. We were totally hoarse. We lost our voices from whispering. As a matter of fact, uh what I gave up, I gave up my childhood. We were never playing, we would never go outside, uh, after a while, we went into a basement where we were hiding. We could hear children play outside. We could hear music played in an upstairs apt. We could hear people walking. We had none of this. We had no sunshine. As a matter of fact, I developed a goiter. My neck became totally swollen. One day my mother said to Mrs. Olefska, "Look at her." And she says, "Oh, my God, even if she lives through, she'll be a cripple." So, being summer, it must have been the next summer already, on a very quiet afternoon, Mrs. Olefska came in the basement, and she says, "You have to come with me." And she took me, it was very quiet day, there was nobody on the street. She took me out on a hill, and she says, "You have to sit in the sun. You have no sun. Maybe that will help you." And she did it quite a few times. Uh, I have a perfectly good neck, thanks to her. Um, to pass the time, I taught my sister how to read the newspaper, so the first time the newspaper came, the 2 year old read it before we did. Including the obituary and the matrimonial, and the lost and found, and the...ads, and all the politics and everything. We tried to remember songs. We used to whisper songs to each other. And one day she said to me, "Let's write it down. Maybe when we live. Maybe if we live, we could sing these songs." So, I, I, I used to sing a lot when I was a child, and I had an older cousin who used to teach me all the newest uh, what you call it uh, the newest songs. And, we wrote down like 23 of them. Um, oh we also watched the rats go by. Mostly we just sat around. I taught myself how to knit. Took apart an old sweater, and I found some knitting needles, and taught myself how to knit. I read everything that was there. Mrs. Olefska being a very pious woman, she had some religious magazines there, and Saint Anthony became my saint, and I prayed to him too. Uh, I don't remember anymore a saint of who he was, but I adopted him. He was from Padua. So, many times when my mother had to leave for a while and didn't come back immediately, I would pray to my father, I would pray to God, and I would pray to St. Anthony, whoever would listen. Ah...

What about fear? Were you afraid a lot of the time?

The fear was constant. The fear was non-stop. The fear was that somebody will come into the basement. The fear was that somebody will listen. The fear was that somebody will give a cough. My sister developed uh whooping cough, which is a horrible cough with a lot of loud coughing. We taught the little one to put a large pillow over her face. I don't know how she didn't suffocate. When the attack came, she coughed into the pillow. The fear was constant. A, a wrong word from somebody. Uh, I don't know how, but somebody must have noticed some action around the basement, although they were very careful. The woman that lived upstairs in the apt that we

previously occupied said, said one day to Mrs. Olefska, she says, "You know, after the war, after the war is over, I wonder about those Jews that are hiding here. I wonder what they would, how this would come out, what, what would happen, how they would behave." And she was so innocent she did not expect anything, or suspect anything, she says, "Why, um, I think it will be all right." This gave it away, she didn't realize, and immediately the woman went and told on us, but another miracle happened. The Russian front was coming closer and there was bombing, and Mrs. Ol--and, I have to tell you, I have to describe the basement. There was a staircase going down from the house, and there was a door going out into the backyard, into the garden, and it was always locked. We were locked in, except for when they came to take our pail, and to bring us food and water. This one day, Mrs. Olefska's brother came down, and he said to my mother, "You know what, I'm going to leave the door to the, to the garden open tonight. There's a lot of bombing going on. What if the house is bombed, and you're caught in the fire. You have to have an escape, you can't, you, you are locked in. So, he left the door unlocked, I mean, the door was closed, but not locked on a lock. This was the same day when the woman talked to Mrs. Olefska about us. Naturally, it didn't take long as she went and told, and, at night, we hear people coming down the stairs, knocking on the door. -----, "Jews, open up!" We were in our night clothes, and I said to my mother, "The door is open, let's get out, let's go into the garden." At first Mama was hesitant, but I started running, she came after me with my sister. We were in our night clothes, we hid in the bushes, and a second later, they were inside, and we could see the flashlight going around. They found our bed. We were sure they were going to search more, and then we heard them laugh, they says, "Oh the old man is probably sleeping here. He is afraid of the bombs. There is nobody here," and they left. Call it what you want. That's a miracle. After this, she took us back in for one day, and she said, "You can't be here any longer. It's suspicious. You have to find a place." And she told us where to go. There was a woman living alone in a field. She was a maid in the city. She built herself a little house, a two-room house, a little bedroom and a kitchen. So she lives all by herself. The child still is coughing, go to her, and tell her, it used to be said that if you have whooping cough, a change of city, a change of climate will help. She says, "You have the perfect excuse. Go to the woman, tell her you are coming with a sick child, and Mama did that. She went to the woman, said, told her this, and she rented us the kitchen. She occupied the bedroom, and we had the kitchen, and my sister was coughing, and this was a very rigid excuse, you know. Well, after a while, my sister stopped coughing. It went away. And the woman, everybody was suspicious. She says, "Well, the child is not coughing anymore, and why don't you go back." So my mother said, "Look, they're looking for me. They, you know, they want to send me to labor, uh slave labor in Germany. You know, they took Polish people also. And, since I have no husband, I cannot leave my children with my brother or sister all day. My sister was not very good to my children. So I really don't have where to go, and I'm running away from the

Germans because I don't want to go to slave labor." Never mentioning being Jewish, you know we had papers and all this. She says, "Oh, you're just telling me this. You, you don't have a brother." Momma said, "Why, you want to meet my brother? Okay." So she wrote to a man, who used to be a customer in my father's store. He also used to be a customer after my father was away, and Mama had the store. And, she wrote to him to come and see us, and be, be a brother for the day. Now, there's a whole story about this man, too, maybe I'll tell you later, but now I want to tell you how we came. Anyways, he came, and she was at work. He brought a bottle of vodka, he brought food for us, he never came empty-handed, and he wanted, waited for the woman to come home from work. And, he was, he was a nice Polish man, with Polish looks, with Polish speak, speech, I mean, you couldn't mistake him for anything else. And, he came and Mama introduced him as her brother, and we were his nieces, and he spoke to her, and he said to her, "You know, I have a very nice wife, but she doesn't like my sister, and she doesn't like her children, and you have to help this woman out, otherwise the, the Germans are going to take her for slave labor into Germany, and what's going to be with the children. And he gave her Schnapps, and she was in a good mood, and he left her the whole bottle, and a big salami on top of it, and he left. And, to this day, I think she's convinced that he's the brother. So, she accepted this. She let us be.

We have to reload.

Beep.

Because I realize you're going to select what you want to select, but I think it's important.

Yeah, go. Go ahead, tell me about that.

Okay. Well, first I want to tell you that for the longest time I didn't speak about all this because I didn't think that my story was that important, compared to all the other horror stories that I have heard from other people. But I feel it's very important to know that people like Penny Olefska and Pandish Vitsky??? were truly one in a million. Not only that they helped because in helping, you risk your own life. You could be caught in the same fate-----the Jews. But, pointing the finger, that was the easiest thing to do, and lots and lots of people did it. More, the Germans could not distinguish who was Jewish and who was not. They didn't know. They didn't know. They couldn't recognize, especially if you were blond and had blue eyes, and didn't have an accent. Nobody knew. There is a lot of Polish people with black eyes and black hair and and, even crooked noses. They couldn't tell. It was the Polish people, 99.9% who were pointing the finger. And for a measly 5 slake, for a head, they would get it. But people like Mrs. -----, Penny

Olefska, and Pandish Vitsky??? were truly angels from God. They risked their lives, they risked their lives of their families, of their possessions, of everything. They truly believed that they had to help. Penny Olefska told us a story that when she was a little girl, she was crossing a pond, coming home from school, and the ice broke, and she was drowning, and a man was passing by and pulled her out, was a Jewish man. When the, when this happened, she said to my mother, maybe he saved my life in order so I should save Jewish lives. How many people do you know that would feel that kind of gratitude. Such a mission in life. I mean, this is, this is incredible. This is an example that, that people all over the world should, should take how to care and how to sympathize, and how to feel with a human, with a fellow human being. How to help other people. I just had to tell you this.

Tell me now about your mother, and her ingenuity. How did she, tell me about some of the things she did to sort of plan for taking care of you. Like -----.

Yeah, well, before my father left, he, as I told you, he provided for food, and told her to buy clothing and shoes, it's going to be scarce. And since she had this store for a while, whatever money she had, she bought dollars?? for it. And she wrapped it around, women at that time used to wear a corset, and the corset had like stiff, so, I don't know what you call it. She would take this, wrap the money around it, and put it in that corset, she always had money on her, so she would remove it and from time to time exchange it. And Mrs. Olefska's brother took care of this. So, we actually had enough money to live through. Of course, you realize that we didn't pay for our keep, only for our food. And then we, she sold jewelry too. She had lots of jewelry, and uh, she sold that too. Money to survive. Um, and, and...

All right, tell me how you ended up back at Mrs. Olefska's in the basement with the German -----
----- So, you have to describe this for me as though I don't know anything else.

Okay. We, at one ti--at one point, we had to come back into the basement. Oh, I know. We had to leave the woman, the woman's house, even though she believed that Ishbitsky was our uncle and brother, she said, "Look, enough is enough, I need this room for myself, you have to leave." So, Mama went back to Penny Olefska because she was in touch constantly. She was the one that provided us with food. She says, "What are we going to do?" She said, "The only thing to do is we can get a sled, and send you to Ishbitsky." Okay. It was wintertime, and she ordered a sled for us. It was early Sunday morning, which was a big mistake, but we got on the sled, and we went into the Ishbitsky's village. When we arrived, we arrived just in time for all the people to come out of church. And, everybody said, "Aha! 3 Jewish women are going to the Ishbitsky." They knew.

The whole village knew that the Ishbitsky's against Germans, that he is in the underground. She, he does everything against it, and they knew that we are going straight to him. And they knew what he is, but nobody would give us out at that point. So, he rented us a place for one month. Not in his house, but somewhere else. And, we stayed for a month. After this, he says, "You have to go back. You cannot be here because there's too many people that know about you." So, he rented us another sled, and sent us back to Krasnow. And, under the disguise of darkness, we went back to Penny Olefska, and she took us back into the basement. Was a month later, it was quiet there. We came back. The front, the Russian front was coming closer. And, the street got evacuated, and the Germans occupied the houses, and Mrs. Olefska was still upstairs, but she told them that one of the basements, they could have. The basement was divided into 3. One part built, and like 3 different rooms. One part belonged to the tenants. The 2 other rooms were like adjoining rooms that belonged to the Olefskas. So, they were next door to us, and we could hear the radio, we could hear everything that's going on. We, we knew all the politics, we, we could hear how far the front is because the radio was on all the time. My mother understood German. And, one day, I don't know how it happened, we hear somebody is coming, so we quickly ran into the next room. The next room was full of Olefska's stuff, her bedding, her food because you know, they expected bombing so they put everything in the basement. It was filled to the ceiling, so we climbed over this whole thing, we hid in the corner. Sure enough, the Germans went next door. I, I, I don't know, that they didn't hear us run, they didn't see us, it's a miracle. We hid there, we closed the, we just closed the door, shut the door, we couldn't close it, we just shut it, and we hid in that corner, and we sat in that corner like 3 mouse, 3 mice. We sat there for 2 or 3 days. Uh, eventually we got very hungry. There was no food. So we found some stuff that Mrs. Olefska took down, and we started eating from it, and Mama said, "For God's sake, this is not ours, we cannot eat this food. It doesn't belong to us. But we were children, and this took like 2, 3 days. The Germans were behind the wall. Finally, Mrs. Olefska's brother came, he couldn't stand it any longer. During the day he came, he looked around, I don't think anybody was in the basement, maybe they went on some exercise or something, nobody was there, and he knocked on the window, he real, he realized the door was closed, so he knew we were inside. He knocked on the window, and we opened it up, and he said he's still alive, and he said, "Give me the pail." That was the first thing, "Give me the pail." Because we took the pail with us because otherwise it would be obvious that somebody was there. And one by one, he pulled us out through that window. This is actually when my mother hurt her arm, which later became infected, which later is another story. He pulled us out, and he told us, "Look the Russians, the Russian front is around the corner. The street is evacuated. Nobody is in the street. Just go to a public bunker. There is a public bunker in the middle of the city. Everybody is going there. Go with the children, say you are from...ever, from whatever you want to be. Mama said, "Okay." So we went to the public bunker, and everybody was there. I

mean, people from villages, people from houses, people from, from all over, from the city, and mama said to me, you know, we have no food. Go out and see if you can get some food. I was the least suspicious-looking one. So, I went out, and came back, and Mama says to me, "-----". They were whispering that we looked very pale. It was summertime.

We need to reload.

Change film, Camera Roll 6 is up; Sync take 7 is up.

Back up to going to shelter. Okay. Beep.

And give the context. Here we were 3 pale Jews in hiding for so many, for more than...

Okay. We went, okay, we had to go in the public bunker. We were in hiding for a long time. We were pale.

Wait. Let's just wait till this truck goes by.

Okay, let's do it again. Sorry.

That's okay. We went into the public bunker. We were very pale, and when I came back from where my mother sent me, she says, "Oh, they recognized us. They are whispering. They're saying we must be Jewish because the children are very pale. We've got to go." So we left. Mrs. Olefska's brother told us something before we went into this bunker. He says, "If you really, really have no other choice, I'll give you a place to go. There is a crazy professor that has a house. He's crazy. He's harmless. If you have no other choice, go to his house." He told us where it is. So, we went to his house. We came there, and he says, "Welcome. God sent me guests." Fine. So we stayed in the house, and middle of the night, I hear him run naked, never saw a naked man in my life at that point, and he's pulling my mother by the hand, "Come, I've got to show you something." And don't forget, when you are frightened, everything frightens you. So, he's pulling my mother by the hand, I'm behind my mother, my sister behind me, we're all running. Says, "I've gotta show you something." There's a holy light burning. And he's pulling her to the window, and he has a gas line going, with a flame. The holy light is there burning because he got company. In the meantime, we died 100 deaths, because we have no idea where he's pulling us, what he's going to show us. But we stayed in his house. We stayed in his house until the Russian front came. And then this house had to be evacuated too, and we went to some village, I have no recollection of

what. We came there, but that time we weren't so pale anymore. We came there and we went into the bunker. Everybody was in the bunker again because there was bombing, and there was kapo???, and they befriended my mother. And, the women were making plans after the war, we're going to go to the big city, they're going to open the store because the war was toward the end. And when the Russians came in and my mother told her who she is, she wouldn't believe it. And she would not have anything to do with her. She wanted to have no part of her. Well, it's, that's okay, the Russians liberated us at this point.

Tell me who you Ishbitsky??? was, tell me what you know about him. What did he do?

Okay. Ishbitsky was my father's customer. He had a farm, he is a farmer in the big farm. He used to be a customer. He would come and buy from my father. When the war started, and my father wasn't there anymore, he used to come and buy from my mother. He many times brought us fresh eggs and butter from the farm, and, of course, Mama paid him for it. And, he also used to like to go into the back room where there was storage. And, every time Mama would home from the store, and bring fresh eggs and butter and chicken, whatever he brought from the farm, she would say, "Now Vishbitsky came and he brought us this, and he also went into back room, and I know that he filled his pockets, but I cannot say anything to him. I actually didn't see it, I just know he does it. But I didn't see it with my eyes, and I cannot go and touch his pockets." So he was actually stealing. My mother said never a word.

Wait. Let's cut for a minute.-----

Take 8 is up.

But the truth of the matter was that um, he maybe felt some gratitude.

Beep.

I want you to---

-----false start; that was take 8.

Tell me more about how difficult it was in Poland to be a rescuer, and how many denouncers there were. I mean people cling to the rescue stories because they're the hope for humankind. The rescue stories are, how do you feel about that.

Well, the rescue stories are wonderful. Not enough. There were not, there were some rescuers, no question about it. But there were more people that denounced people, that pointed their finger. It was very difficult to be a rescuer. You faced the same, I think I said that, uh, you faced the same penalties. Even worse. They were hung for everybody to see. Uh, yet a lot of people did it. A lot of people did this for money, but a lot of people like in our case, did it out of the goodness of their heart. They just did it, they thought it was a Christian way to do it. It was, it, but most of the population pointed a finger, pointed us out. The Germans could not distinguish who was and who was not a Jew, except if they pulled a man's pants down. Women, for sure they could not distinguish. Uh, so, I think that it wouldn't be for the Polish people, there would be a lot of people alive, a lot of people were in, in the woods hiding, a lot of people were running, having, hiding in cemeteries, hiding all places. Germans wouldn't go looking there for them. But they went there after they were told where to go. Simple as that. Hide and go seek.

What do you know about the pogroms after...

After the war? Well, we came back to our hometown after liberation. It wasn't, it wasn't after the war, it was after liberation, the war wasn't over yet. We couldn't go back to our house because our house was part of the ghetto, it was uh leveled. They built a road there. Our house and my grandparents' house was gone. They built a road. And we lived in an apt in the city. There was a few people that were rescued. There was a father and 3 daughters that were in hiding, and other people came, coming out like from the woods or from the partisans, and I have to back up because there was a group of people in hiding during the occupation about 20 people that were hiding in a woman's basement, and the local army, the Polish Underground, knew about them, and they came to kill them off. That was during the occupation. At that point, they bought their lives with gold and silver and money, whatever they had. They just bought themselves out. Besides, they convinced the attackers, there was a barrack up there. They convinced them if they get killed, the woman that was in her house, what would happen to her. So somehow they let it be. These same people showed up at the man's house, the man and 3 daughters who came back and lived in their house, they came there one afternoon and they said, "This time, you cannot buy your life with money. And they shot them. There was also a young boy there visiting. He was shot. One of the girls survived. Somehow she was in another room, and she hid under the bed. After this, we left our hometown because nobody was safe. We, this time we were running from our own Polocks.

What, list for me the things you lost???

I lost my track. What?...I lost my father, I lost my education, I lost...I lost who I was, of of what I could have become. My parents had great hopes for me. There was a piano coming into the house, I was going to start music. My parents had, they were going to send me to the best schools. I lost friends. I lost family, I lost, I lost grandparents, and aunts, and uncles and cousins. There's, there's no family. I have friends now that I consider family because I don't have any family. Um, I'm not even going to talk about uh, material possessions. My parents had a beautiful home, and a wonderful business, and they were very wealthy, and...gone with the wind.

Okay. I am your -----.

Camera 7 is up; Sync take 9 is up. This is the first time we haven't changed tape, and that's going to be the 3rd camera roll with this sound roll.

Beep. Beep.

Tell me what is the legacy of a survivor.

The legacy is that each and every one of us has a story to tell. It's never enough, no matter how many books have been written. Everyone is different. And it is our obligation to talk about it, and to talk about the rescuers because if it would be not for them, there would be no one to tell this story. There's a lot of doubt about the Holocaust. Believe me, there was one, and if you don't believe the survivors, ask the rescuers. And, if we lead a semi-normal life, this, this is a victory. We did survive, and if Hitler would see us now, he would turn in his grave, grave 100 times, because we did survive. He did not. And, we are just, just as good as anybody else, and I don't think any people deserves what happened to us. It is an obligation to talk, and it should never happen again ever.

People have this saying that Jews went like sheep to the slaughter. How does that make you feel?

They did not have a choice. It was very systematic. It was...some did and some did not. There were some people that were fighting. People, there was a Warsaw Ghetto uprising. There were people fighting in the, in the woo--in the woods. There were Partisans, there were people in the Underground. Most people did go like sheep. Unfortunately. They were very systematic about it. How do you fight somebody with guns. How do you fight with bare hands against guns. I mean, they were mighty. They stripped you of your dignity before they killed you. When you have no dignity, there is no life. They stripped you of whatever you believed in. You were nothing. There

is...how can you fight this. The ones that did are very courageous. A lot did not survive. The ones that did were very courageous. (Sigh) I don't know, um, I, I, I don't have the vocabulary to sum it up properly. Um, the only thing I know is history should never repeat itself. Not this history, for sure. And I hope there's more people like Mrs. Olefska, and Vishbitsky, and others that I don't know about. Because if it wouldn't be for them, I don't know who would survive.

Thanks. Thank you. Are we done? Room tone. Room tone?

The following is 30 seconds of room tone for interview with Stefa Kupfer.