

This'll be a interview with Esther Raab. It's sound roll one, camera one, take one coming up.

Can you describe for me the transport to Sobibor and your arrival there, and what it was like, and what happened.

I didn't come by train. I came by horse and wagon because I came from a small, working camp. And we were like 800 young girls and young men, and we rode the whole day to Sobibor. And the month, it was December, 1942, December 22, 1943, 42, I'm sorry. And after riding the whole day in the muds, and the wagons got stuck in the mud. And we had to go down and pull them out and on the way the farmers were outside. And they said, do you know where you're going?

They're going to kill you, and they're going to burn you. As much as we knew before and as much we heard, we didn't believe it. It was very hard to comprehend, to believe, why take innocent people and just kill them with no reason at all. And as the day came to an end, it was only 20 kilometers, but it took a whole day.

Everybody of us, from us, was so disgusted that we wanted to get over with. If that's what they're going to do to us, let's do it fast. So we won't have to suffer. I mean, not physically but mentally. You know, it was very hard to sit there and think I have four hours or three and a half hours or three hours. And as we came close to Sobibor after whole day natural without food, without water, but that really didn't bother. We were used to it.

The SS came out with dogs and started barking. I mean, they never talked. They barked. You could never make out what they're saying. I spoke very well German. I had it in school, and I picked up more experience during the time. They started barking, and they told us to assemble on the platform, the railroad platform, and we all assembled there. And I stood in every way, and you felt already the smell there from the burning bodies, and you saw the fire, but you don't believe.

I couldn't believe it. I myself and so my friends. And all of a sudden, I saw that a girlfriend of mine with whom I came walks by with a Kommandant from camp that was Wagner. The biggest murderer and the biggest devoted Nazi that ever existed. He was caught later in 1979 in Brazil, and she picks up one girl and another girl. And I said, Mira, who are you looking for?

And she says, I'm looking for girls who know how to knit. And I said, what about my talent? And that was just a split second, and she pointed out to me, he said, raus and I came out. From the whole transport, they took out eight girls and two men which were fathers of some of the girls. One was a shoemaker, and one was a tailor. And they marched us up to the camp, and we figured we didn't have no idea what's going on. What they're going to do later with us. And the others, they marched up.

And at that moment, I don't think you're capable of thinking. You don't plan. You don't think. You don't argue. You don't-- you're just numb, and that's how I was. Numb. And then he took us, all the girls with the two men, and they marched us in to the camp. The camp, [INAUDIBLE] of the camp was very small, very small. Because when we came in, we made up 20 women and 100 men. So it was very small.

And that smell, and I thought to myself, what is that smell? That smell was-- you couldn't take it in. He put us in an empty barrack and then came in like the Kommandant, the Jewish Kommandant, of the inmates. And he said, you know where you are? And we didn't say boo because you didn't know whom to trust. You didn't know what to say. So we had to be very careful. And by looking at each other, we understood what we are supposed to do.

And he explained that either way you see the fire, and you see this, and then they brought us in blankets and bread and coffee. And we figured that's the last meal. And we remained there until the morning. We lay down. We slept. We didn't sleep, but I cannot explain the feeling we had. If to believe that all those who were with us are not here anymore. We didn't know. We were just numb to the whole situation.

Early in the morning, they told us to get up, and they marched us off to the sorting shed the next morning where they told us to sort out the belongings of the people. And then when we found the belongings and the pictures and the documents of the girls and the young men that were with us, we realized. But it's very hard to just put it into your head

they are all dead. Why? It was very difficult. It was very difficult.

It was very hard. And inside, it builds up right away a resentment, such a feeling of revenge, such anger. If I could just kill one for that what had happened, I would feel better. But you had to keep your mouth shut and just pretend you don't see. You don't hear. No emotions. No emotions whatsoever. We didn't even cry. Not one of us.

Can you describe the transports coming in?

The transport when, usually, most of them used to come in during the night, but there were some in the daytime too. When you heard that whistle from the Kommandant of the camp, that meant that the transport is coming in. And the men in the camp should get ready to unload the people. So that whistle was like somebody would tear out your insides.

You knew here are other people, children, older people, people who never did anything wrong in their life, and they're going to go. And you cannot say. You cannot resist. You cannot-- just inside it builded up, the revenge and that resentment and that anger and that pain, you know that, we had builded up inside. And sometimes, they came in during the day. And sometimes so many came in that they couldn't handle.

So they would put them behind our barbed wire where we were fenced in and tell us just to walk back and forth and forth and back. So what they told them that they were going to work should seem to them to be the truth. And it was hard. It was hard. You walk by, and you look at the face, and you know in a half hour won't be here. Can't even tell. You just put another smile, your best face you can. It hurt. It was very, very hard.

And then some transports, usually, when I had to work near the railroad tracks, near the ramp-- And sometimes, when a transport came, they send us all to the camp except for those who worked with the unloading of the people. But a few times we went to clean the houses from the SS. And there wasn't enough time to run back so they would lock us in. We knew ourselves we are not supposed to walk out and watch us.

And sometimes, you saw the people, the way they were driven before they're dead. The torture before they're dead. We saw them leaving and screaming and children crying and elderly people. I cannot explain the feeling that I had, and I wondered why? Why, just why? That why was such a big question, and nobody could answer me. Like for instance, the once, I was called to clean up the--

Boy. We just ran out. That was--

Camera roll two starts here. Camera--

This is an incident, which is going to be with me the rest of my life. All the people that I saw going and imagining what's going to happen. But once the big shot was supposed to come to Sobibor. Usually, they brought even Himmler was in Sobibor, to show him how efficient and how perfect they at killing and how good. And they bought the transport. So they took me to clean up the quarters, the living quarters, of some of the SS people which the windows face the railroad track.

And while I was there cleaning with another girl, the whistle was there that the train comes in. So we knew we have to remain there. We cannot go out. And the transport came in and went everything very fast unloading of the people. And a mother left a baby-- I don't know for what reason-- in the boxcar. And Frenzel, who was at that time in charge of the transport, grabbed that little baby and smashed the head of the skull against the boxcar. And he just threw it in like a dead rat.

And that just I cannot forget. I was at this trial about four times, and I told him what he did. He didn't deny it, but he followed orders. And this I cannot forget. Why kill that child in such a miserable way? Why? Why? It was a human being. I just wish that somebody would do to his children, and he should have to watch. And this is with me. I cannot forget. All the gruesome things that I saw, I saw a transport came, the people properly resisted in the boxcars. I don't know.

So they threw in chlorine into the boxcars, and the whole transport came. So that natural all bodies were three or four times the size, some even were busted open, and they just deposit them. It's a really difficult to think about it and to talk about it. And all those builded up in me. Such an anger and a feeling of revenge. And I remember, after a few days, I came to the camp with a pair of brown leather boots, which not everybody had. Probably nobody.

And I said to the group that we slept together, I took my boots, wrapped them up nicely, and put them on the bunk bed under my head. They said, why you put-- I said, with these boots, I'm going to escape from Sobibor. Don't ask me why, and don't ask me how, and maybe it's not-- it doesn't even make sense, but I'm going to escape with these boots. And I did escape with these boots from Sobibor.

And things like this, every day was something new. Like they took all the sick people, when we stood in the sorting shed and sorted the things from the people belongings, and you see the lorries or the wagons go by. And the older people or children who were maybe orphans were thrown in like cabbage. And then at the end rides Gomerski, who was in charge of that with the pistol and just asks, who is tired? And who cannot work, and who is sick? I'm going to help you, and then bullet, and then a bullet.

And I cannot describe even the feeling. I cannot describe. I don't think there are words really to describe it. I was at his trial too. He said also he followed orders, and I told the judges, if Hitler would come now and give him orders or somebody else, they would do it again. And it was very hard just to watch.

Like winter, sometimes, came the transport, and they were busy, and they couldn't handle so many. They told the people to undress in the snow in Poland. It's very cold in the snow naked, and they chased them like cattle. Cattle, I think, you take better care of. All the way to camp three to the gas chambers.

Let's stop for the truck.

Can you talk about-- you talked once about a person named Mitchell, and a charade that he had telling people to hang up their clothes. Can you talk about--

That this was in the beginning when it first started. They weren't as well organized as later on. So the German efficiency, they had the yard. A fenced-in yard with hooks to hang up the clothes, and they would assemble all the people from the transport, and he would go out. ScharfÄ¼hrer Michel. We used to call them the House Speaker. And he would say in German, Jews, you think you're going to die. It won't happen. It won't happen to you.

You brought here. You give up all your belongings with a number. You'll get a number. And you hang up your clothes, and you go to the showers because we are afraid of sicknesses, and then you'll be sent to work. But the way he said, in German, he said. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. If the Jews would want to die, but that won't happen. And I feel it was their way of doing it. I mean, they were very well organized, and I'm not surprised at myself and other people that we really didn't--

Not that we believed it because we saw it, but we couldn't comprehend it. The way it was done with such a German efficiency, and everything to the minute and to the second. And in you always ask why, why? You cannot ask. It wasn't easy. To be in Sobibor or any other camp, I suppose, that camp, I don't think you could even think straight.

I remember once came a big-- when Himmler came to our camp, they brought 400 girls from Majdanik. That was also a death camp, to show him, and that's when they ordered to shave the heads from those victims. And they shaved the hair from them, and he went and looked, and they got such award that they're doing such a good job that after a while they liquidated Treblinka.

And all of a sudden, when they closed up Treblinka, they brought all the inmates to Sobibor to be killed. They were afraid to do it there. So one afternoon, all of a sudden, the whistle and they lock us in in our compound. Then we knew something extraordinary is happening, and we could hear the train coming in. The Ukrainians took care of it, not our inmates, and we could hear shots.

And we counted the shots. So much and so much. And after the last shot, they came, they let us out, and they send us to sort out their belongings. And as we started, we always check very careful everything for papers, for documents, for notes for anything. And we saw that they were from Treblinka. In every pocket was almost a note, take revenge. Take revenge. We couldn't. Maybe you can take the revenge.

And in times like this and you felt they using you and look at what they do to you. The same thing. So why be here? Why? Just to their convenience, why? And then after a while, they brought the people from Belzec because they closed up Belzec too at that time. And they were-- and the same story happened there, and then they expanded Sobibor, and business started booming. Night and day you had transport.

We used to work 14, 16, 18 hours a day. I mean, into the night. Just the men took care of the helping to unload the people of the belongings. And then you had to pack up, and they had to ship it to Germany. It was very difficult. I cannot explain that feeling and the resentment and the hate and the revenge. The revenge was so great--

We have to reload. Can you talk about the choices that the guards had versus the choices that you, the prisoners, had?

First of all, the guards had all the privileges. They could do whatever they wanted. They didn't have to account if they killed somebody or hit somebody or mistreated somebody. We didn't have no privileges. We were there to serve the Germans probably as long as they would have needed us, and then it would be the end. The guards could go outside, The guards could have furlough. The guards had enough food. It's altogether a different ball game.

Did you have choices?

No, I didn't have no choice. Whatever I was told, I had to do. And maybe better than I could. And whatever they gave me that was to eat, and that's it. The only thing that we had in our favor in Sobibor which other camps didn't have-- I don't know about Treblinka and Belzec-- that they didn't shave our hair. The inmates, and that we could take clean clothes from the transport and change. And we could wash us selves. And I think this was keeping ourselves clean wasn't so dehumanizing that people had in other camps with the dirt, with the filth.

That this is only for one reason. First of all, was as propaganda. If some transports came in, they should see that we still look like human beings. And second of all, they lived so close to our quarters, the German quarters, that they were afraid for diseases. And there was enough clothes so we could take and keep ourselves clean. This was one of the biggest thing that kept us going. We were hungry, not enough.

Sometimes we stole something from the transport. The people used to bring bread or whatever. But that was very risky because most of the time when we walked to the barracks from the working place, they used to check us. They used to check us if we didn't take something or so. But we tried. Sometimes we were successful. But the main thing that we could keep ourselves clean, and that's why we had that courage and that will to do something.

Because when you way down physically and filthy and dirty and shaven and this, you give up that very first. But I feel that kept us going, and that's why we thought even if one makes it and go out, he look normal. He won't be right away suspicious. He has a stripe outfit. He doesn't have no hair. That was one plus that they didn't think about that we had in our favor to think about uprising, thinking about taking revenge and so forth.

Once a partisan group approached the camp, and they wanted-- I don't know-- liberate. Whatever they wanted to do, but we knew it was a partisan group. And during the night, the whistle came. We had all run out whatever we had on and stayed barefooted in the snow probably two or three hours or more surrounded by machine guns and everything. They figured if they should happen to go through, they'll kill us off, but they left the partisans, and we went back.

And at that time, they made minefields around the camp. Before, there were no minefields. We were so deep in the woods that nobody could even know that something goes on there. So we started thinking about uprising, about revenge, and I think that kept us going. Although it was a silly thought, but you know, that gave us the courage to survive. Because we planned. We planned. The plans weren't worth it maybe in the beginning \$0.05.

But we planned, and we saw ourselves outside, and we saw all the Nazis killed. And this kept us going. And every day in 1943, probably in February or when, Leon Felhendler was picked out from a transport and brought in. We were cousins by marriage, and after we told him what's going on, everybody who came in or they took him out, if they killed 10 from us, they picked out another 10 from the next transport. We told them. And he said, we have to escape.

And we asked how, he said, there must be a way, and we're going to escape. And we started planning and going to a meeting, which only a few went because you had to be very careful. And coming back, you felt like you're doing something. You're planning something. You're trying something. If you'll succeed, it would be wonderful. If not, you'll get a bullet in the back. It's better than going to the gas chambers. I promised myself I'll never go to the gas chamber. I'll start running. They have to waste a bullet on me.

And we started organizing and talking, and it kept us alive again. You know, that maybe we'll be able to take the revenge for all those who cannot. Who are already burned dead. We promised ourselves it didn't matter if we'll survive or not, but to do something. Not that the world shouldn't say the Jews went like sheep to the slaughter. It's not true.

We saw a lot of incidents in camp where women hit the SS people. They hit once the Untersturmführer [? Neumann. ?] They almost popped out an eye. He was all bandaged up. They did. They did. But they're not here to tell the story. And I feel that the resistance in general-- not talking about Sobibor which Sobibor had a successful revolt.

The others tried and didn't succeed. You know, this was the only successful revolt, but people fought back. They fought back in the woods. They fought back on the train stations. They fought every step of the way, but they're not here to tell and that hurts. It hurts. And time runs out and the survivors too.

Tell me what a death camp is. Assume that I don't know. Just define it as opposed to other kinds of camps.

You see, the other camps were half slave labor camp and half death camp. Sobibor was only a death camp. There was no such thing as slave labor camp. That was only strictly the inmates that were picked out from the transports- they just took care of the killings of the people. I mean, they didn't kill them, but they helped.

You know, they had to. And of the work in the camp of taking care of the SS people, that's the difference from Sobibor to Auschwitz lets say. Auschwitz was a half slave labor camp and a death camp. Sobibor was just a death camp. No slave there. No work, no producing, no doing, nothing.

Can you tell me about the seamstress and her baby?

Yeah, she was there. She came with the transport in my time already with her husband. She was a seamstress, and he was a tailor. Although, in the film, she says that he was in the partisan group, but she came with the husband. And she had that baby, I would say, about two weeks. And then they finally found it because they used to come in unannounced, and they walked in, and they saw the baby.

They gave her a choice. It's true. They have her a choice that they're going to take the baby, and she can remain because she was very good seamstress. They used to wear underwear only from silk from the parachutes. They didn't use plain materials the SS. She was excellent. Shirts and underwear to make from those parachutes.

We have to reload. We have to do this-- This will be--