# United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

## Interview with Esther Raab
## February 18, 1992
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# PREFACE

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# ESTHER RAAB
# February 18, 1992

Beep.

Can you describe for me the transport to Sobibór and you 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. We were like 800 young girls and young men, and we, they, we rode the whole day to Sobibór, and the month, it was December, 1942, December 22, 194...3, 42, 42, I'm sorry. And after riding the whole day in the mud, 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 there's no way 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 had heard, we didn't believe. I-i-it was a 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, 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, we won't have to suffer. I mean, not physically, we didn't, but mentally. You know, it was very hard to sit there and think, I have 4 hrs or 3 and a half hrs or 3 hrs. And as we came close to Sobibór, the whole day, natural without food, without water, but that really didn't bother, we were used to it. The, the SS came out with dogs and started barking, I mean, they never talked, they barked. You could never make out what they saying. A-although I spoke very well in German. I had it in school, and I picked it up more experience during the time, and they started barking, and the SS told us to assemble on the platform, the railroad, platform, and we all assembled there, and I stood in every way, that, and, and you felt already the smell there from the burning bodies, and you saw the fire, but, you, you don't believe. It's, it's just, I couldn't believe it. I myself and so my friends, and all of the sudden, I saw that girlfriend of mine with whom I came walks by with a commandant from camp, that was Wagner [**NB:** SS-Oberscharführer Gustav Wagner], the biggest murderer, and the biggest of all the Nazis that ever existed. He was caught later, in 1979 in Brazil. And he picked, she picks up one girl, and another girl, and I said, "Mira, who you looking for?" and she says, "I looking for girls who know how to knit." And I said, "That's 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 8 girls and 2 men which were fathers of the girl--of some of the girls, one was a shoemaker and one was a tailor, and they marched us out to the camp, and we figured we didn't have no idea what's

going on, what they going to do later with us. And the others they marched out, and at that moment, I don't you're capable of think. You don't plan, you don't think, you don't argue, you don't--you just numb, and that's how I was, numb. And then he took us, all the girls with the 2 men, and they marched us in to the camp, and as we, the, the ------- of the camp was very small, very small because when we came in we made out, up, 20 women and 100 men, so was very small, and, and that's smell, and I thought to myself, "What is that smell?" That smell was...you couldn't take it anymore. And as he put us in, in an empty barrack and then came and, and like the commandant, the Jewish commandant of the inmates, he said, "You know where, where you are?" and we didn't say boo because you didn't know who 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 it right away--"You see the fire, 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, un-until the morning, we laid down we slept, we didn't sleep, but, I cannot explain the feelings we had. If to believe that all those who were with us are not here anymore...or, or not to, we, 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, 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're all dead. Why? It was very difficult, it was very difficult, it was very hard, and inside it builds up right away such 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 have 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 transports, well, usually, most of them used to come in during the night, but there was some in the daytime too, when you heard that whistle from the commandant of the camp, that man, that the transport was coming in, and the men in the camp should get ready to unload the people, and so, that whistle was like somebody would tear out you insides, you knew here are other people, children, our, 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, that revenge, and that resentment, and that anger, and that pain, you know that we have 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, and we were fenced in, and tell us just to walk back and forth, and forth and back, so what they told them that they going to work should seem to

them to be the truth, and that 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 on a smile, your best face you can, it hurted, it was very, very hard. And then some transports usually, when I had to work near the railroad tracks, you know, near the ramp, there was, and, and sometimes when a transport came, we had, they sent us all to the compound, 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, or we knew ourselves we are not supposed to walk out and watch it, and, and sometimes we saw the people the way they were delivered, before they're dead, they torture before they're dead. We saw them leaving and screaming and children crying and elderly people, and, and, 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. Like, for instance, once, I, I was called to clean up the...

We just ran out of film.

Beep Beep.

This will be take 2.

Beep.

This is uh, an incident which is going to be with me the rest of my life. All the people that I saw going, and, and imagining what's going to happen, but once a big shot was supposed to come to Sobibór, usually they brought them, even Himmler was in Sobibór, to show them how efficient, and how perfect they had killing, and how good, and they brought a transport so they took me to clean up the, the quarters, the living quarters of the SS, of some of the SS people, which the windows face the railroad track. And, when I was there cleaning with another girl, the whistle was there that a train comes, and so we knew we have to remain there, we cannot go out, and the transport came in and went everything very fast, the load, unloading of the people, and a mother left a baby, I don't know for what reason, in the boxcar, and Frenzel [**NB:** SS-Oberscharführer Karl Frenzel] who was at that time in charge of the transport, grabbed that little baby, and smashed the head, the skull against the boxcar, and they just threw it in like a dead rat, and that just, I cannot forget. I was at this trial for, about 4 times, and I told them 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, for all the gruesome things that I saw, I saw a

transport come, came, the people probably resisted in the boxcar, I don't know, so they threw in chlorine, into the boxcar, and the whole transport came, so, dead, natural. All bodies were 3, 4 times the size, some even were busted open, and they just deposit them. It's, it's a really difficult to think about it and to talk about it. And all those builded up in me, such a anger, and the 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 under the bunk bed, un-under my head, but they said, "Why you put them??" I said, "With these boots, I'm going to escape from Sobibór." Don't ask me why. Don't ask me how. And maybe it's not, 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, the belongings, and you see the lorries, the wagons, go by, and the older people, or children who were maybe orphans or, were thrown in like cabbage, and then at the end rides Gomerski [**NB:** SS-Scharführer Hubert Gomerski], who was in charge of them, with a 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 here 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 a 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, like cattle, cattle I think you take better care of. All the way to Camp III, to the gas chambers.

Let's stop...

Beep.

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

This was in the beginning when it first started. They, they weren't as well-organized as later on, so the German efficiency, they had a 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, Scharführer Michel [**NB:** SS-Oberscharführer Hermann Michel], we used to call him the, the House Speaker, you know, 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're 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're afraid of sicknesses, and then you'll be sent to work. But the way he said it, it's, in German he said, "Juden, ihr denkt ihr geht sterben, das gelingt euch nicht" [**NB:** “Jews, you think you are going to die, but you won't succeed”], that if the Jews would want to die, but it 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 bel-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, and you always ask why, why, you cannot ask it. It wasn't easy to be in Sobibór or any other camp, I suppose, death 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 Majdanek, that was also a death camp, to show him, and that's when they uh, ordered to shave the heads, from those victims, and they shaved the hair from them, and he went and, and looked, and they got such reward, that they doing such a good job, that after a while they liquidated Treblinka, and they, and all of the sudden when they closed up Treblinka, they brought all the inmates to Sobibór to be killed, they were afraid to do it there. So one afternoon all of the sudden, the whistle, and they lock us in in our camp, 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 sent us to sort out the belongings, and as we started, we always checked very careful, everything, for papers, for documents, for notes, for, for, anything, and we saw that they were from Treblinka, and every, and 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 for 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 in the same story, happened there. And then they expanded Sobibór, and business started booming. Night and day you had transports. You, 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 empty of the belongings, and then you had to pack up, and they had to ship it to Germany. It was very difficult, I, I cannot explain that feeling. And the resentment and the hate, and the, and the revenge. The revenge was so great, the...

We have to reload.

This will be synced with CR-3, Take 4 coming up. Correction, end sound roll.

(Long tone).

Beep.

Can you talk about the choices that the guards had vs. the choices that you 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. They guards could go outside, the guards could have furlough, the guards had enough food. It's altogether a different ballgame.

Did you have choices?

No, I didn't have no choices. 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 Sobibór 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 transports, and change, and we could wash ourselves. And I think this was keeping ourselves clean wasn't so dehumanizing that people had in other camps with the dirt, with the filth. They did it only for one reason. First of all, was a, 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 things that kept us going. We were hungry. Not enough, sometimes we stole something from the transport, the people used to bring bread or, or whatever, but there, 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 very fast, but I, I feel that kept us going, and that's why we thought, even if one makes it and go out, he'll look normal, he won't be right away suspicious. He has a, a striped 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 and about taking revenge and so forth. Once a partisan group approached the camp, and they wanted, I don't know, liberate, or, whatever they wanted to do, but we knew it was a partisan group, and during the night a whistle came, we had all to run out, whatever we had on, and stay barefooted in the snow probably, 2, 3 hours or more, surrounded by machine guns, and everything. They figured if they

should happen to go through, they'll kill us all, but they left the Partisans and we went back, and at that time, they made mine fields around the camp, before there were no mine fields. We were so deep in the woods, that nobody could even know that something goes on. So, we started thinking about uprising and about revenge, and I think that kept us going, although it was silly thought, but, you know, that gave us the courage to survive, to do, because we planned, we planned. The plans weren't worth it, maybe in the beginning, five cents, 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 well, Leon Feldhendler 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 our, if they killed ten from us, they picked out another ten 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 gonna escape." And we tried started planning, and going to meeting, which only a few went because you had to be very careful, and coming back, you felt like you doing something, you planning something, you 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, I'll start to--they have to waste a bullet. And we started organizing and talking and, it, it kept us alive again, you know, that maybe we'll be able to take revenge for all those who can't, who already burned there. And, and, and we promised ourselves, it didn't matter if we'll survive or not, but to do something, not, the, 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 [**NB:** SS-Hauptscharführer Johann Niemann], they almost popped out the knife for him, 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 Sobibór, which Sobibór 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 back every step of the way, but they, they are not here to tell. And that hurts, it hurts. And, and the uh, and time runs out on the survivors too. And...

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

You see, our ca-the other camps were half slave labor camp, and half death camp. Sobibór 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 tran--they just took care of the killing 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 Sobibór to Auschwitz, let's say.

Auschwitz was a half slave labor camp and a death camp. Sobibór 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.

She was there, she came with a transport in my time already, with her husband. She was a seamstress and he was a tailor, but during the film she says that he was in the Partisan group, but she came with her husband, and she had that baby, I would say about 2 wks, and then they finally found it, because they used to come in on...uh,...

unannounced?

unannounced, and they walked in and they saw the baby. They gave her a choice, it's true. They gave 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. So, and she was excellent, shirts and underwear to make from those parachutes.

We have to reload.

This will be CR-4, Take 5 coming up.

There's a squeak.

I think it's----------, it's getting louder now...

Five.

Beep.

Okay, start again and do that whole thing again.

With the...

Seamstress, tell me about what her work was, what she did, what did they...

She came into the camp with her husband, he was a good tailor, and she was an excellent seamstress, and the Nazis didn't wear underwear just from plain material, everything had to be made from silk, the shirts, the underwear, so she was excellent. They brought a lot of silk from the parachutes, and she used to be able, if you told her out of this piece has to come out 3 shirts and 3 under-it came out. I don't know how she did it, but it came out. And then after the, she had a baby, and we all pitched in to help. I mean, first of all was the baby. Second of all, again, to do something against the Nazis, you know, maybe we'll be able. It was a challenge at the same time. And so, she kept it for 2 weeks. And once Wagner [**NB:** SS-Oberscharführer Gustav Wagner] walked in unannounced, unexpected, and he heard the baby, and he gave her a choice, he gave her a choice, just because they needed her, otherwise they wouldn't have. And which mother would give up her baby. And she just spit in his face right then and there, and they shot them both. But, they were such murderers that he had to shoot the baby first, so the mother should, should die with more pain, and so, I mean, I cannot explain what went on in the mind of those people, of those SS people. I mean a human being was nothing as we know, but they took such a joy in seeing blood and hurting. It, it, they weren't...people, they were animals, hound dogs, I always said, they bark like dogs, and they act like wild dogs. It's, it's very difficult, and we were very hurt at that time. When you see things like that, and especial when they took one of us. We were a small group, and you felt like they tear out a piece of you. That here she was, and here--and, and the baby was here, and you know there was a little life, and the, uh, seamstress too, and they tore it out completely, and, you just, you have to put up a face, but inside everything is boiling and boiling and boiling and boiling, and, and, it was very, very hard. Not once we said to ourselves, we wish they would finish up. But then one encouraged the other, especially when Leon [**NB:** Leon Feldhendler] came. You'll see, we'll get out, and we'll get out, and we'll get out, and one looked at the other, and figured the other one is crazy, you know, thinking even about it. And that's how, every day passed by with the hope of revenge.

Tell me about escapes and punishments for escapes that went on.

First there escaped two people, they were *Maurers* [**NB:** German term for masons or bricklayers], they were plasterers, like, and, at that time, there were no, uh, there were no mines around the camp. So they dug a hole underneath the first fence, and they escaped. When they escaped, they always explained why they're doing things to us, they assembled us, and they said, every tenth, and they took out every tenth, and they shot them in front of us, and if somebody escapes, that's what's going to happen, and those two *Maurers* [**NB:** German term for masons or bricklayers] didn't make it, they didn't make it. Then we had, they used to take out people to the woods because they, as Sobibór was announced the best, the most efficient death camp, so they had to expand, and they

had to build, and they had to do, and always kept busy. The Nazis didn't want to go to the Russian front, so they built and they expand, and they said they need this and they took out more people in order to escape from the Russian front. And they took out some people to the woods to cut woods, and they used to make their own logs, everything was done on the premises, and two escapes. They lived a while and they are not alive anymore. They went with the guards for water, and they hid, and, and they escaped. They survived the war even. And when they escaped, that day, I worked in the weaponry. They were low on ammunition, so they brought some bullets which they got from the Russians, and they were rusty, so a few girls, we sat there and we sanded them down, and filled the belts with the ammunition, and all of the sudden, the guy who watched us, the watchman, he was the Ukrainian, but he was a nice guy, but we didn't trust him. He said to us, "You'll see what I'm going to do, one will get killed because of me." And it was true, but you don't know who to trust. And he came running in, and he said, "I have to lock you up, something is going on, and there's not enough time for you to go back to your compound, and we saw those people walking in from the main gate, underneath, with their hands like this. They were beaten up, you couldn't tell their faces anymore. And then, all of the sudden, as they walked out by the weaponry, we heard the whistle, and he came in here, opened the door, and we had to run to the compound. And, assembling right away, and as we assembled, uh, Scharführer Wolf [**NB:** SS-Unterscharführer Franz Wolf who was sentenced to eight years imprisonment at the Sobibor Trial in Hagen in 1966] was such a dog, such a miserable character, I went to his trial too. He followed orders too. And, they marched us off to Camp 3. Camp 3 was where the gas chambers, and they told us to assemble in a half moon, and all those poor guys were standing there. You couldn't tell who was who. That's how they were beaten up. And they told them to pick out another 25 from us. And they were going to be shot with them. First they held a long speech, that some guys of ours killed two, uh, killed one watchman, one Ukrainian, and for this we have to pay. On the way to Camp 3, they told us that we're all going to be shot. But as we came there, they probably changed their mind, or I don't know why, and they told them to pick out. And I can imagine how hard it was on those guys to go over, and choose that you have to be killed. I mean, in the morning he was my friend, and now I have to, to, it was a difficult time. The-if not, they said they're going to take 50. So some stepped out, and they picked blindly, and they shot them all in front of us, in their faces. They wouldn't have let them, and Frenzel went over, whoever may be uh, botched or something, another bullet. And these things were so hard on us, harder than a transport, because here we're like a family, we planned together, we suffer together, we, we do together, and we hoped together. And if you take out such a part from us, it's, it's like tearing out your own heart. It was the, but you had to go away and pretend again, that you didn't see it. Or maybe what happened, happened, and it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy. I always said to myself, if they would kill me, it would be easier for me than to watch somebody that I knew and maybe, and ate together, and stayed

together and suffered together, and planned, it was very difficult, was very difficult.

We're almost, we only have one minute left, why don't you just describe for me Wagner or Frenzel.

I think Wagner, he was caught in 1979 in Brazil. Wagner was illiterate, that's what they said. But he was such a devoted Nazi. And there were days when he needed blood. Like a dog, like uh, needs blood. He needed it. When he used to walk in with his thumbs in his pocket, we knew that somebody's going to go. Otherwise, he won't ask??? Besides what he did with the transport. And we knew also. But at the same time, as illiterate he was, he was so shrewd, that he knew what you think, not what you saying. And...

(Long tone).

Beep.

Why don't we just do the escape now, the planning and then how it happened.

We planned all the time, and we talked about it, and we had the plan ready. It was just a matter of time, because we had to plan when Wagner is on vacation. Because we knew on furlough, if he'll be in the camp, he'll smell it, there's no 2 ways about it. So we waited. In the meanwhile, we knew their schedule with furloughs. By being there, we knew about everything. So, and before Wagner, had to go 28 days before, they brought in a Russian unit from POWs. At first, we did-couldn't understand why, but then we found out they were all Jews. They were POWs, and we got in touch with one of the leaders--every group had a leader, and we told them our plans, and we asked them because, if we didn't know what's going on outside, how far the front is, and what's going on in general, and he told us approximately what's going on, and how far, and he, we needed that encouragement, and they gave us. And I said, "You're plan is good, and it's going to work, and it has to work, and we have to try, we don't have what to lose." And we decided the date when Wagner left, and, the, the date was original the 13 of October, and that day we all got ready, ready, put on two, two sweater, and, and my boots I put on for the first time again, and I got dressed with a coat and a kerchief, and you know, you didn't take no luggage with you, you didn't know where you going, or if you'll make it. And then, some units from military gestapo came to the camp, never used to come on that day, and we thought somebody maybe...slipped out, but they left, and the next day exactly, the plan was, at 4 o clock should start, everybody has to kill his, his SS man, and his guard, at his place of work. And it started working, and I was like messenger girl, going here, oh I killed them, five, I killed, just throwing signals, not talking, but, we couldn't find Frenzel,

and we thought, although the electric wire was cut, the telephone wire was cut, we were afraid that somehow he got out on the outside and, and went for help. And this was before decided, in case anything goes wrong, everybody on his own. And whoever, wherever one can run, or wherever one can jump, should go. Maybe one will survive, and will be able to tell the world. And we assembled like on a normal day, and then Sasha and Liem, the organizers, went up on the table, and they said, "We can't find Frenzel. Something--everybody on his own." But a lot of people were panicky right away. A lot of people didn't want to go, they gave up. And those who felt they want to try, just run in all directions. I saw that somebody put a stepladder behind the par-uh, carpenter's shelf, and that people climbing up, no one explained that this was all split second. And I just jumped up that stepladder. And as I was on top, I noticed a lot of bodies already on the mines, some people went before me. I got a bullet shot from the tower right here, and I fell down. As I fell down, I was so much aware, and the will to live was so great, there's no measurement to it, that I started hopping on dead bodies, and soon as reached the woods, we were in the woods, it, it was, I felt, I did it, I made it. For all those, I just looked back to the fire, the fire was still burning, and to the people in the back, and I figured, I did it for you. We took revenge. What's going to happen from now on, it's a different story because the war was still on. And I had to survive another 9 mos.

When you said everyone had to kill an SS man, what was the plan for that, how did it happen?

If he came in, let's say they called him in, they said his suit is ready to try on, his uniform, so when he came in, he put it on, we had everybody, everybody had sand in his pockets, and a knife, this we all had, because we felt, if you throw sand in the face, then it's easy to stick in the knife because the person gets blinded. So, that's what they did. The minute he came in, they threw sand, they stuck a knife in, and they hit, hit him. And that's how we did it. We didn't have no weapons. The original plan was to assemble, to go to the weaponry, take out all the weapons, and march out through the main gate. But, we, we didn't succeed, the plan didn't succeed, the plan didn't succeed because we couldn't find Frenzel, and had to be everybody on his own, so we did the best we could with whatever we had.

When you got shot in the head and you fell down, how did you manage to get up again?

You get up. When your life is at stake, you get up very fast. You don't think--the blood was streaming and I was running. And I didn't get an infection, all those weeks that I was in the woods. And I didn't get sick without food, without water, for 2 weeks until I reached a farmer where I wanted, where I thought I would find refuge.

Tell me about that, tell me about you dream, tell me about getting out.

You see, in Sobibór, all the time that we planned, we knew, actually, the one thing that we want to accomplish is to kill a few Nazis and get out. And maybe the, they'll close up Sobibór, and all that would end. And, you know, you didn't think where you're going to go, what you're going to do, and, especially when we had planned to go to the weaponry, take the ammunition, and go into the world, and form a Partisan group. If we had weapons, we can--and we had the military people who knew how. We didn't know how. But, like the first day when it didn't come, we didn't, we couldn't run because of the visitors, when, a-at night we laid down in Sobibór, I never tried, nobody tried. You were so numb that everything that you saw around you, that you, your feelings were dead. You just acted like a mechanical thing, you get up, you go to work, you listen, and that's it. And this, that evening we cried, we cried very, very much. And everybody said goodbye because we figured, in our wildest dreams, we didn't think one of us is going to survive. And as I cried, I cried myself to sleep, I dozed off, and I saw my mother coming in through the camp, through the main gate. The way I left her, that how she looked. And I said, "Mom, you know that we're going to escape tomorrow?" She says, "Yes, that's why I came." And she said to me, "Come with me." She took me by the hand, and she led me out through the main gate. And as we came out, she took me into a barn, and she showed me the loft where the straw is on top, and she says, "Go up here, and you'll survive," and that was the end of the dream. In the morning when I got up, I recognized the barn was a friend of ours, my parents'. And they had a farm, they lived in the city, but they had a farm like a gentleman's farm in, in the suburbs, and I said, "You know what? If I'll survive, and I'll escape, I'm going to go to that farm, and see what the, what's there. I'm--," so they all said you probably, uh, thought about your mother, so you dreamt about it, you know how they explain it. But, as we escaped, and they told us to go in groups, not all together because we didn't have any weapons, we had a few, and, if one group was going to get caught, the other one will maybe survive. So, I wound up with 7 men, and another girl from Czechoslovakia. Natural for the girls from other countries was very hard for the people because of the language barrier, you know. And they were right away recognized. So, I walked from, we escaped on Thursday, and it was already Sunday morning, and I just couldn't anymore, my wounds started hurting me, it was probably infected. And in Poland it was so hot, uh, cold, and rain, and mud, and I being, when I...

We have to reload.

Okay.

CR-6 starts here, CR-6...

(Several small tones).

Seven.

Beep.

Let's go back to getting out and making your way to the barn.

Yes. So, uh, on Sunday, I was finished. No food since Thursday night. No water. You s--in Poland, there's a lot of like mush in in the fields because of the rain, used to squeeze in just a half a drop of water, and on Sunday morning, I saw from far away, there's a little deserted house, and I said to them, I'm going here. Whatever will happen will happen. I cannot take it any longer. So one guy said, "I'll go with you." And we started walking, and the other said, "If you'll be able to buy some food, you'll bring it back." And as I approached that little house, a house, a room, and another guy followed us. And I knocked on the door, and there was a little room, a Polish farmer without teeth, I don't know how old he was. The towel was there, the bed was there, the stove was there, those were the conditions. And he said, "You must be from Sobibór." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "You did the right thing." And he said, "What can I do for you?" I said, "I'm hungry, and I have that wound, and I need cleaning up. I had very long braids in Sobibór, and on the way when I took out the pins one day, just fell off because this side. And he said, "Listen, how many are you?" And I said "Two," and then the third one crawled in, and I said, "That's it," and he took us into the barn, and he said he has to go to church. And after he'll--because the people will get suspicious--after he'll come back, he'll feed us. And that, I was afraid he's going for the SS. We didn't trust nobody. And as he left, and came back in a few hours, and he brought us in food, uh, I still have the taste in my mouth. Borscht and meat and milk and bread and cheese, and I said, "My God, that's probably also our last meal." And then he said, "When it'll get real quiet, and you will, you'll come down, and I'll help you out." And then when it got real quiet, he, he lived there with his son. His son was in his 20s. He called us in to the house--I'm telling it fast--and he had a big pot of water boiling, and he said to me, "You go behind the tub there, and wash up a little bit, and wash up your wound, and I'll see what I can do for you. And we came ba--and I came back and he put unsalted lard. He said, "This helps." I don't know if it helped. No infection, infection or anything. And he gave us again to eat, and he said, "What do you want to do now?" I said, "I have to go to one place, and if that man won't, that farmer won't take me in, I'll come back, but you have to tell me the village, and your name." He was afraid, if they catch him, he'll start to--we try and

just...So he said, "My son, midnight, he'll take you out, and he'll show you the road where to go." I told him where I want to go, but I didn't tell him the village either because I was afraid to give away. So he gave us a bottle of milk, and a loaf of bread, and we had some money, and I took out, wanted to pay him, he said, "No, there'll be peo-people that won't give you without money." And the son took us to the woods, and he told us where to go. From there to the village where I wanted to go was probably 15 kilometers, about 10 miles. I could make it easily in a half a day, but we walked for 2 weeks. And then we didn't find the others. The others thought we went in and we are not coming out. Maybe they killed us, so they ran away. Nobody from them survived. Nobody. And while walking those 2 weeks, we just walked at night, and in the daytime we were afraid. We met a lot of Partisan groups, and those 2 guys said, "Why don't we join them?" I said, "If you want to go to the Partisans, you go. I'm going where I'm supposed to--where I want to go. And we walked two weeks, 3 days we stayed near the highway just to cross. There was such a busy, uh, on the highway because the Russians prepared the offensive against the Germans for the Spring, and this was already in October. And we crossed, and then I went up, and I, I recognized the house, in the dark. But I knew that his mother lives across the road, so I said, "Let me go in to his mother. I know she is alone, but, in his house, who knows who can be there." So, I knocked in the window, and the guy came out and said, "Please don't shoot, don't shoot!" He thought we are partisans. And I said, "I'm not shooting. I just want to know where the owner from this farm is." I--he said, "Why do you want him?" I said, "I have something to settle with him." I couldn't tell him I want him to take me in. So, he said, "He doesn't live here. In the other house lives his old mother, and he lives in the city, which I knew he lives in the city from before the war, but, so we went across, and we're went into the barn, we climbed up, and we laid on that loft upstairs, but nobody came. We heard babushka going out, feeding the chickens, feeding the cow and nothing. We stayed there for 3 days, and we got hungry. So we said, "Soon it will get dark, we'll go to the neighboring village. Maybe we'll organize some food by, or maybe some...So we went, and we went a few kilometers, and we got a bottle of milk again and a loaf of bread, and some onions, and we started walking back, and we came back, and we climbed up the loft--I'm making it very short you see (laughs)--and, the bottle of milk, the guy, one of the guys left it on, on the floor downstairs, and I said, "Where's the milk?" He said, "I left it." It wasn't the bottle of milk, but we were afraid to leave it. Any traces that people are here. So, I told him, "Go down, and in the dark, just try to find it." And as he went down and looked, and I said in Jewish to him, "Did you find it?" And as I said, "Did you find it?" like a ghost jumped out from that loft, dressed in white, he said, "Who are you?" And then I said, I recognized his voice, and I said, "Yidl!" That was my brother's name, and he said, "You're dead. You better sit down, and we'll wait." Took my hand, and we waited until daylight. We didn't talk to each other either. In the morning, I told him how, where I came, and he, he was there already nine months or ten months, and I told him about the dream, that mother told me to go

here, that I will find--she didn't say why, she just said, "You'll survive there." And, it took probably, so my brother said, "Listen, he had, as the loft was probably like floor high----------, you could climb down underneath the ground, that's how they made him a bunker, underneath the ground, through the cement floor, a hole. He said, "Let's go in, and when he'll come, I'll tell him that you were sick and one of the men helped you, and the other, won't, we won't say nothing. Whatever, if he'll take you in, whatever, he'll give us to eat, we'll share it, because 3 might be too many. So after a few days, he came, and he had a certain whistle that my brother knew it, that the coast is clear. My brother jumped out, and he said Partisans are looking for him, they want to kill him. I don't know if I'll be able to bring more food or so, because he used to bring the food from the city, food--bread--and my brother said it's not partisans, it's my sister, but she didn't want to say, so she said, she said, I should come out, when I came out, he just went like this [makes the sign of the cross]. He said, "If God put you all together, we going to try to survive all together." And that's where I survived with the other 2 men. I was nine months there. Without the, without a drop of warm water or cooked food, only bread he used to bring us some onions, some garlic, he claimed that that helps, helped. Now they come out with the same thing. Sometimes on the holidays, a little jam with margarine, but he did the best he could. He did the best he could. And, I'll never forget it. I mean, he's not alive anymore. Mom is not alive. I'm going almost every year to back to Poland to visit the children. This is already a grandson of his, the one who drove me in. They all were in the United States. We, we, they all, we helped them all out, they all have a good education, they all nice people.

(Sandy says something in background).

(Long tone).

Beep.

Eight.

Can you tell me again how you felt at the moment of the escape, how your fear left you, and how you felt.

At the moment of, of the escape, everybody was very nervous and very shaky, but there was no way back. You had to go. One pushed the other. It wasn't easy, but, actually, we didn't have time really to think and sort out our thoughts, but it was, you have to go and you, and you try to survive, even if you hop all over bodies, you don't look back. You did, everything happened, split second,

there was no time to think. You were afraid, you were scared, you were nervous, you were shaky. But, you didn't think, just go as far as you can, and those who uh--it was very fortunate for us that the woods were right next--that we were in the woods, and, and the field between the camp and the woods wasn't too big. That's, y-you know, my legs were like rubbery, they couldn't even run, but I did. I remember, I grabbed a girl, to hold on, and when it's meant for you to survive, or to live, you have to believe, I'm a strong believer, my, I never gave up my faith, and I grabbed her, Sarah was her name, and she saw that I'm bleeding and I'm, so she pushed me away and she said, "I want to live," a bullet hit her. It was meant for her to die, it was meant for me to live. I don't know why. She wasn't worse than I am. I wasn't better than she was. It just, you have to believe, you have to have the faith, because I realize that my faith helped me an awful lot.

Were there people who betrayed you when you were in the camp?

No, no, I never had that, no, no, no.

Now let's go back to before the war.

It's, just one thing I want to add on. As I ran with all, with my group, after 3 days, 3 nights of walking, we came back to Sobibór, we walked in circles, we didn't know, and then we started all over again, running. Yeah.

Let's go back to--let's do one other thing, what happened to Sobibór?

They erased every tr--they killed all the people who remained there or they ------- them or whatever. A lot of didn't even go. They didn't want to, they had given up. They lost all their families, they just didn't care. And they erased every trace, they dismantled everything and they planted little pine trees. You know, it's already going to be soon, 50 years, 49 years that we escaped. Those pine trees, the way they plant them, they never grew, they're just the same size. I go back to Sobibór often. Almost every year now.

Now tell me about before the war, how life changed for you, what you remember.

I remember everything. I had a very happy life. We were 2 children. My father wasn't rich, but he was middle class, comfortable middle class. I finished public school, I went to business school, and I never finished because the war came. And I had a big family, lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and, and, besides friends, and I had a very happy life. And all of the sudden, everything was

gone. And I was left alone. My father was shot in 1939 when the first unit of SS came into our city. They picked out--they told the people to report to the main...place there in our city. The rich people, the not so rich people, the educated people, the, the important people, and, it was six hundred and some, and they shot--my brother went with them, and they shot them all--my brother pretended that he is dead, that he got shot and came back. That was right away in 1939 in December.

Tell me the incident where you were in line, and the mistress of the SS ---------.

Yeah, this was, and then they put us in a ghetto in Helm when they make the ghetto. My mother couldn't live there. There were another woman and six children, my mother and the two of us in the room and a kitchen. And, the poor, she couldn't take it, she couldn't, so we had family in a small town, not far from the city where I was born, and they wrote us that we should come there, that it's not so bad, and they, they have plenty of room in their house to take us in. And we moved there--to Silesta?? And we stayed there for about a year. We moved in 41. About a year or longer, and there it wasn't really so bad. I had to go to work every day, to dig ditches. They wanted to dry, uh, Poland had a lot of swamps, and they wanted to dry up the fields so they can plant more, and the, they were sure they're going to stay there forever. So I used to go with my brother every day to work, and my mother would remain at home. We would hide her during the day. In the evening we would come back, and she would come out of the hiding place, and we stayed together until, uh, 42, October, and it wasn't so bad. We worked, we went every day to work, we had enough to eat, not luxuriously , but we weren't hungry, and being my mother was home, she could wash our clothes and help us out. And we stayed there. And there was in charge, he was a Polack, not a Ukrainian, of our, he was the engineer of the whole project, and one day I noticed that his, he had a girlfriend, which lived in our city, and I knew before the war, very beautiful nice girl, and I used, when she saw me in town, she would say hello, and ask me if I need something, and we became, not friends because, who am I to be a friend to her, but just, like, acquaintances, let's put it this way, and then, from there, from this place, they took us to Stafnovushulke. And Stafnovushulke was the worst place I ever went except Sobibór. The conditions were unbearable. So one day they told us to get our belongings, they gave us a half hour, we were going. So we went, and we walked ----------, went 12 miles, in October, in the mud, and the--I did, uh, my mother said take this and take this and maybe you'll be able to sell it, and maybe you'll be able to buy something, food or some. So my brother and I, we had bundles, and I had 2 coats, my mother's coat, a good coat, and my coat, she said, she don't need it right, right now, she has another one, and we walked all that way, the 10-12 kilometers, and we, when we came into Staf, I turned yellow. Just yellow. And I was a young girl, 19, 18 and a half. And they assembled us, and they started picking out, to the left and

to the right. Staf was also a working place. And, as it came up to me, they put me with the older people, and she was walking around there with her boyfriend with the big German Shepherd, you know, and I said, "Wanda, look at what they did to me." She said, "Come out." And I came out, and she took out the lipstick, and she wrote in my cheeks, and she says, "Take off the babushka--I had a babushka to keep warm. And she pushed me in again in the line. And as I went by again, they took me out with the young people. You always felt maybe with the young ones, you have a better chance. So, I have to say, all through the war, I was very lucky. Luck was with me from the first day out. I mean, I wasn't lucky that I had to go through what I went through. But, by being there, I, I was lucky that somehow, somebody lended me always a hand to, to take me out of, of, a dangerous situation. And, she took me out, and I went in with the young people.

We have to change rolls.

Okay.

Camera roll 8, Take 9 coming up.

(Series of short tones).

Beep.

Nine.

People like to believe in heroism and people like to believe in humankind. What does your experience make you feel?

That I tried the best, I wasn't a hero, there were people who were much smarter than I am, and maybe more capable, but I just was at the right place at the right time, and I took advantage. And, I wouldn't say that I'm a hero. I just had made my, up my mind that I, I would get out, but, I didn't organize it. I just was at the right place at the right time, in touch with the right people, and together we did it.

Before the escape and other than the planning together of the escape, were you inmates supportive of one another? Very much so, very much so. It's just because we were such a small amount of people. So we became like a family. If we knew that this one worked very hard, and needs maybe an extra piece of bread, or a little soup, we shared. I think the, the relationship in Sobibór was so

close, and everybody tried to help the other ones so much, that this helped too.

And now, can you talk to me a little bit about the age group who survived primarily. Who were mostly sacrificed? When you say they young and the old, how old were the old?

You see, when you're so young like I was, probably 30 was old, or 35, so really, to judge who was old, and who was--there were older people who were professional uh, professionals in certain fields, if it was carpentry or ----------, but I couldn't say, but after the war, I would say half and half survived, when I think older ones and younger ones, was all, I feel it was a matter of luck. You had to be lucky to survive. God had to be with you to survive. It isn't, nothing that you planned, or you were smarter than the next one--I don't believe it.

Was there spiritual resistance in Sobibór?

Yes, there was a lot of spiritual resistance, and one isn't surprised, and I wasn't surprised either. When you see day by day how many transports that were being killed for no reason, you start asking questions, "Where is God?" But there was s-some who believed and it was, don't ask my why, I was a strong believer, don't ask me why, it just was in me, and because I had that faith, I think it was much easier for me than for the others.

Were you able to pray?

I mean, if you prayed you prayed only t-to see the Nazis dead, that was the only prayer you, you prayed. But, everybody prayed in his own way, I suppose. Deep down. Not out loudly. And there was once uh, you know, Yom Kippur, that's the holiest day of the, by the Jews, and being it was shortly before the date that, that we set for the escape, so they made like services, one of the barracks. So, the ones who didn't believe and didn't want to go in, they stood guard outside, they respected what we are doing, and they didn't go in, but they helped us. So, I feel there was a, a great deal of compassion and caring. There was a great deal of closeness. There was a great deal of respect for one another. And there was a great deal that we tried to help each other.

And now, can you tell me the story of how when the war first came, your mother described World War One, and what she thought it would be like.

You see, when the first, when the war came, started, I mean, we didn't, I never saw a war, I never knew what a war was, I was born after the First World War. And I talked my mother, "How does a

war look? And what's going to happen to us," and so forth, so she said in the first war, what did my mother know? In the First World War, they were fighting near the railroad station, and they brought up the wounded to the city, she said, and everybody sat in the house. I don't know how long it took, but they used to go out. And that's what they said, and my father brought home a lot of groceries, and a lot of flour, and a lot of sugar, and a lot of oil. He said in case we won't be able to get, we'll have enough to eat, until this thing...will blow over. But, it wasn't like that. The first day, when Germany declared war to Poland, they bombed our city. The Polish army was nothing. They weren't, they weren't capable to resist anything. That was a different ballgame. And then my father realized that this is different and my mother - we saw the planes fly. We never saw planes flying before. In a few days, uh, Poland was gone. And then the Russians came to us. Because they had some kind of an agreement that the Russians would go to, to Warsaw, or whatever they had the agreement, and the Russians came, and, and, we had the Russian officer sleeping in our house because he was in charge of the bakery from the man who saved our life, and he came to us and he said, "Listen, you better pack up everything and take your children." When they made a new agreement that the Russians go back to the River Bug, and the Germans come in here, and he said, "In, in Russia, your children can study, they can become something, you'll be all right. The Germans are going to do to you awful things." But nobody believed it. Who, who believed that they'll come and kill us? They'll gas 6, 3 and a half million people only in Poland? You're dreaming? Nobody believed it. Nobody thought that something like this can happen. But it happened. First they came and attacked. I mean, they were so efficient in their killings, you know, and I think, I think they still are--first a Nazi, always a Nazi. I don't believe that they're any different. I went to so many trials in Germany, and the only thing that hurted me the most, that nobody from those murderers said, "It was wrong, what we did. We shouldn't have done it." Everybody followed orders. And I feel, if somebody would come today, and give them orders, they would do all over again, without hesitation. And that hurts. That hurts very much. Especially when, when I went to the first trials, and the judges were older gentlemen, or older people, one Nazi defended the other. And I feel that, that's why it's so important. It shouldn't be forgotten. It shouldn't be forgotten because it can happen again.

Thank you, let's cut. I'd like to ask you [audio cuts off]

Whenever I go to sleep [audio cuts of]

Beep.

Ten.

You see, we liberated ourselves because we escaped, and we made the uprising. All the other death camps or slave labor camps were liberated by the army, with, with, uh, the ----------, with all the press, and, and the world knew Sobibór, nobody knew. If I told them after the war, there was a Sobibór, never heard of it, and never heard of it, and that hurted me so much because I thought it would just be forgotten. It will go away. If not for Richard Rashke [**NB:** author of *Escape from Sobibor*], who found a footnote in the library when they arrested Wagner in Brazil, and he took the story, and he worked on it, and he interviewed people, and he put in his money, and he wrote the book. The book opened the eyes that there was a Sobibór, and that people, that was the biggest uh, uprising in the history of the World War Two. Why not tell it? And thanks to him, Sobibór came out, the story came out, the world knows what's happened, and, and it's written about it, and people, uh, and the book is translated to so many languages, and children learn in school thanks to that. Otherwise Sobibór would have been forgotten.

[Tape Ends]