

End of [INAUDIBLE] room tone. OK.

Roll four take four.

[BEEP]

So my sister went to the camp and it was horrible. I felt so guilty. My parents were very upset. She was a child. She wrote a postcard about a month after she was taken in which she said that she's fine, not to worry about her. And one of the most amazing thing that happened I still to this day I don't know how it happened, she came back to our ghetto three months after she was taken.

When she came home she told us that as soon as she got to the camp she told everybody that she didn't belong there. She was 13 years old. I don't know how she convinced them to send her back to the ghetto. Auschwitz was operating. I know because I was later in camps myself. And if you got sick in the camp, you were sent to Auschwitz. It would have been the logical thing for the Germans to send her to Auschwitz. Maybe that's the German bureaucracy. I don't know. She came back to our ghetto.

We had a Jewish community council if you will or whatever you call it, a Jewish government. The head of the government was notified that she was coming back, and lo and behold, she came home. This must have been May or June. I remember the summer of '42 because it was a difficult summer. But it was such a joy, of course, to have her home. And all the people in the ghetto-- she became a bit of a-- you know, she was so well known because it was an amazing thing.

And in August of that year-- in the meantime things were getting really-- things were getting bad. People were, again, being taken to camps. But what happened in August, and now I understand it, there were orders posted all over the ghetto that on a given day-- and it was in August, I don't remember when, I remember it was a very hot day, we were all told-- all the Jewish people in the ghetto were supposed to come to a big stadium.

There was a big-- must have been like a field where sports would be-- they would have some sport activities, but it was a big place. And we were all told to come. And of course, the signs were very specific. Anybody not showing up would be killed instantly. I don't know whether some people didn't go, whether some people went into hiding. I know that my parents talked about it and decided that we have to go.

And I remember-- and we were told to dress well. And I remember we were walking in this street, through the city, towards the stadium, all the people, all the Jewish people in the ghetto. And I do remember-- I remember the Poles were standing on the sidewalks. And I don't hate all the Poles. I always-- I make sure that I say that because there were some decent people among them.

But unfortunately, the majority were not decent. They were very antisemitic. And there we were walking in the middle of the street like cattle and they were standing on the sidewalks and they were jeering and they were calling us dirty names. There were some who were standing and who were crying. I remember that too, and it makes me feel good always.

And we went to this big place. And I remember it was hot and it was a long day. There was no water, no food, not that you can't stand it for a day. But I remember my brother was still a child. He was crying. And I don't remember how-- it was such a long day and it was about 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning when we finally came to what must have been some kind of a table with some people-- officials standing where they were looking at our IDs.

And my father was working, so was my mother, so was I. We were all-- at this point I was working and my mother was working and my father was working. But apparently his work was considered important enough that he was told to go to one side and the five of us were told to go to another side. And after that we didn't see our father.

And towards the morning, we were-- again, those of us who were sent to the other side were marched down again the

street towards two big-- apparently in the meantime they had emptied two big apartment houses and that became apparently a transit camp. And we were all shoved into this camp, this apartment house.

I now know that this was the first big evacuation, a euphemism of course for a transport to Auschwitz. I didn't know it then. We didn't know. But we sensed that it was something terrible because the treatment of the people was ugly. The soldiers were pushing us and beating.

And I remember one thing that I'll never forget. There was a woman holding a little baby, a child, I don't know. Maybe was a year old. I don't remember. And the child was crying. And the soldier took the child and took the child out of mother's hands and hit the child against the wall.

And I still remember the blood and probably the brain. I don't know. The whole skull kind of exploded and the woman was shrieking and he was beating her. And my mother pulled us away. She didn't want us to look at it and I was crying. We were all very, very upset. We knew that something horrible was happening.

That was during the day because we had come in early in the morning from that stadium. So during the day I don't know how my mother was able to do it, how her mind was working, but she was probably trying to do something. And she convinced my brother who was a cute-looking kid-- he had dark blond hair and big green eyes and I suppose the Germans would say that he didn't look very Jewish.

And so she told him-- and he spoke a good German and a good Polish. So she told him to go over to the guard who was standing at the gate, at the entrance to the apartment house and pretend that he's all alone here and that he wants to go to his father. And I remember that she kind of told him what to say. And he went and I kind of followed him but I was standing away. I didn't hear him, but I could see him.

And then I-- so he must have told him that he wants to go home, that his father is home. And I remember that that German soldier looked at him, he looked down at him, and maybe he was a nice human being, maybe he believed him, maybe he took pity on the kid, but he opened the gate and he said to him run. Run home. And my brother ran out.

And that evening at night, it must have been late at night, a militiamen came and took my sister. He just came in, found us, and he said-- he just came in and he said to my mum that she's such a brave kid. Let me take her home to your husband, and he just took her.

In the meantime, my father must have been doing something, trying to get us out. And he managed. This was the one time he managed to do it. And we were-- it wasn't that night. It must have been a night later-- day later because I remember being there another day. It was a difficult time.

But at night, somebody came. Somebody must have risked his life for money or for whatever-- my father must have given him whatever he had. And they took us. And it was very-- it was nothing heroic for us. It was just tricky. We went upstairs to the roof and through the attic. No, we went up through the chimney on the roof.

And then that house was connected to another house where there was a bakery, and the houses were connected so you didn't have to be an acrobat or jump. All we had to do is just quietly get up the chimney on the roof into the other chimney and then down to the bakery. I do remember coming down and we were all covered with flour from the dust. And I think it was at night and they kept us because there was a curfew. They kept us till the next morning. And that morning they dusted us up.

We've got to reload.

OK

[BEEP]

I do remember that my mom sent my younger sister first and then I went home. You had to make sure that you are not

conspicuous. We probably looked a little bit ragged. And then my mom came home. And it's funny. We were already covered with lice. The place was already dirty. We washed. But it was so good because we were still together, a family, six of us. But by that time there were rumors in the ghetto and things were getting really bad.

Something happened. I want to tell you about my father because I always remember that my father-- I loved my father very much. My father was really a decent human being. The man who was the head of the ghetto had worked for my father before the war for a short time and he was very fond of my father. My father didn't have any dealings with him during the whole time. Very little. And if he did, I didn't know about it.

But this particular time, apparently the head of the ghetto, his name was [? Monic, ?] would be [? Moshe ?] maybe today or Moses, Merin, M-E-R-I-N. Yeah, sure there's some documents on him. He was the head of our ghetto and then I think he was killed by the SS men in [PLACE NAME] in '43.

Anyway, he had a lot of contact with the SS men. He probably knew about many things that were happening. And he either met my father or called him in and offered him a job of a militiaman. And my father was a traditional Jew, a believing man. And my father looked at him and he said to him, how can you how can you ask me to take that kind of a job?

And [? Monic ?] said to him, look, Aaron, you have a family. If you work as a militiaman, you can keep your family a little longer in the ghetto. And there is a war going on. And the war may end in a month, in three months. And the longer you can keep your family together, the better your chances for staying together as a family for surviving.

I don't know what [? Monic ?] knew, what this Merin knew, but he knew probably more than many people. And as I said, there were already by that time many rumors. And my father said to him, but I couldn't do that. I could not-- I would not do that. I wouldn't go to other people's houses and take people for transport, to work, or whatever.

And the guy got very impatient with my father and he said, look, he said, I'm trying to help you. I am trying to help you. And anyway, look, it's your God. My father said to him, look, I'm a believing man. It's against my principles, against everything I believe in. And he said, but it's your God who's doing it, who is looking down at all our misery and he's not lifting a finger.

And my father said to him, I don't know who's doing it, but even if it's God, I'm not going to be his-- he used the Hebrew word [SPEAKING HEBREW] I'm not going to be his angel of death. And I know about it because my father came home and he told us. He felt he wanted us to know that he had this chance and he didn't take it, and he wanted us to understand why. And he didn't do it. And I think he was right, of course.

And things got bad. After that we were sent to a closed ghetto. That was in the end of 1942. We were told to move. People had to leave their place of wherever they were living. There was a special area assigned for the ghetto. It was called Srodula. It was a little village next to our city.

And I remember that we were able to take all our belongings on one cart. I don't remember how we got there, whether was a horse and buggy or whatever. But we took all of our things. By that time there wasn't much to take. And we were put into this ghetto and we were given a hut that had one room.

I don't think my sister was there already. I think my sister was taken just shortly before that again to a labor camp. Today I'm grateful because I think that that's why she's alive. I lost my other sister and my brother, but my sister Pina was taken at the end of '42 to another labor camp in Germany.

And in 1943 very early, must have been January or February, January probably, I too was taken to a labor camp. And of course, by that time, nobody was trying to stop it. We knew that-- my father must have understood that it's not-- that it's OK. It's better this way.

And I was sent to this labor camp in Graeben near Striegel in Germany, which was in lower or middle Silesia. I come from upper Silesia. That's how the Germans called it. We, by the way, became part of the German Reich immediately

meaning the area where I lived. And I remember one thing as we were going to the camp which I thought was interesting because we were still dressed in our clothing and we still look pretty OK and we were picked for looks and healthy teeth.

So among us there were some really very pretty girls, really. And as we were walking down the street in that little town of Striegel towards the camp, I remember the Germans were standing on the sidewalks and they were-- I don't know whether they never saw any-- this was a small town. Maybe they didn't know any Jewish people.

But they kept saying, these are Jewish girls? These are Jewish women? They're so pretty. They look so nice. I don't know what they expected. Maybe they thought we have horns. But they were so surprised to see us look like normal people.

Graeben was a labor camp, so it wasn't terrible. It wasn't terrific, but it wasn't terrible. I worked in a flax factory 12 hours a day, one week on a night shift, one week on a day shift. The work was hard because we did the work that men-- German men did before they were taken to the front.

We didn't get much food. For those who don't know what a labor camp is, I'd like to describe a little bit how we lived. We lived in a barrack where there were bunks in the barracks. The bunks were small, narrow beds. There was a straw mattress, a blanket. We had showers. Not always was the water warm. Often it was cold. But we washed because we knew that we need to keep clean.

We were given a loaf of bread-- a pound of bread probably a week, which those of us who had a lot of self discipline cut into seven pieces and had a slice a day. Most of us actually didn't last for seven days. The more disciplined ones ate it up in five days. Those who didn't have any discipline ate it probably in two days. I usually lasted about five days. I wasn't so big. Maybe it was easier.

We were given a soup a day. In the beginning the soups were not too watery. There was some kohlrabi, some vegetables, sometimes piece of potato in it. Once a week we were given a little jam, a little margarine. Once in a while in the beginning we even got a small piece of horse meat or some beef or something. Later on, of course, we didn't. And black Ersatz coffee, which is like a substitute coffee. We were always hungry, of course. I remember some girls literally crying themselves to sleep.

We've got to reload. We've got to reload.

Six.

[BEEP]

I was working in a flax factory as I started to tell you before. And I worked in the first-- it's hard to-- I don't know what they call them. It was a fully automated factory where the flax came in on big-- by train. That was by-- is it like wagons. What do you call the train? It's not a train where people-- not passenger train, but--

Freight.

What?

Freight trains.

Crate trains. And we would have to unload the flax from there into the first department, if you will, that had big combs. Like they had machines that looked like combs because the flax had little-- there were seeds in little balls on the flax, and they were trying to save the seed because the seed was what they used to make oil for cooking or whatever.

So it was very important to unload-- our job-- our task was to unload the flax and then send it through these big machines that were combing off the seed and then it would go to the next department where it was cooked. The final--

the last department in that factory already produced a thread that was put on spools.

This is how it was done, and it was a fully automated factory. And what that meant is that they only needed to work us-- to work the people who worked in that first department which was called [NON-ENGLISH] I don't know what that means in English. [NON-ENGLISH] must be department and [NON-ENGLISH] must have been the name of that first place.

And as long as they rushed us, the whole factory was working. So the SS men were forever standing over our heads making us work. Because if we worked fast, they did. And this is-- and I did both. Sometimes I unloaded the trains. Sometimes I was at the machine.

In the evening-- at night-- the night shifts were the hardest because it was very cold. The place was open. It was winter. We were not that well dressed. And it was really a-- it was a miserable place. It was hard. But there were some things. We had a Kapo. We had a girl who was in charge of us, and she was not like some of the Kapo that you read about. She was really a very nice person. She was older than we were. She was about 23 at that point. Very beautiful girl. And she was always walking around trying to help everybody.

In the evening around 12 o'clock we used to get a break when they would bring the soup from the barracks because that's when we got our soup when we worked. And she would ladle out the soup to everybody and we would huddle around her. We would sit around her. And sometimes we would sit around and talk, and sometimes we would be quiet.

And sometimes when it moved her, [? Salka-- ?] her name was [? Salka ?] [PERSONAL NAME] would sing. She had studied voice in Italy, in Milano I think. And she had a very beautiful soprano. And I remember, that night, that particular night because something happened that she started to sing to us and she was singing Schubert's Serenade, and it was just so beautiful. She had a really beautiful voice.

And I remember that it was such a good feeling to be sitting there. It felt so warm. For a few minutes I forgot where I am. I felt-- I thought I was somewhere where it's beautiful and where the sun is shining. And suddenly I noticed that we were not alone. And I remember I turned my head very slightly because I was afraid-- scared.

And I saw this SS man standing and he was looking at her, at [? Salka. ?] And she wasn't aware of it at that point. And I could see that he was really enchanted. He was looking at her with really-- with rapture almost. And suddenly she must have noticed that he's looking at her and she stopped singing and it got very quiet.

And he suddenly started walking towards her and he pushed us aside. We were sitting down on the ground so he was kind of pushing us aside. And he walked over to her and she was sitting too and he picked her up and he started beating her. He started hitting her on the face. He was hitting her and screaming at her and he was beating on her really and screaming so loudly. He say, you have no right. You have no right to sing like this. You have no right to look like this, you dirty Jew. And then he walked away.

With all of that I was just thinking that I was-- there was still a child in me. I was 16. We were allowed a postcard a month. So I wrote to my parents once a month and I think I received a postcard a month. And we were allowed to get a little package from home. I don't remember what my parents send me. Maybe they send me something-- some food or something, whatever they could. I remember getting one or two packages.

But I do remember that because I was working with this flax and I was wearing my coat-- at that point we were not given any of the prisoners uniforms. We were wearing our own clothing. And it was tearing at my coat-- tearing at my clothing. So I wrote to my mother and I'm thinking today how could I do it, but I wrote to my mother and I asked her to send me if she could a pair of overalls.

And I suppose only a mother does that. I don't know how she did it, but I received-- the last package that came from home I received a blue pair of overalls. And it was obvious-- because she may have written me but it was obvious that she-- I know now. I have a cousin who was with them and she survived Auschwitz and she told me how my mom did it.

She took a sheet, an old sheet, a linen sheet. I don't know where she got some dye in a kind of a royal blue. She dyed the sheet and she made me a pair of overalls. And she sent it to me. It was her last gift to me that she sent me her overalls.

And after that there was no mail and we knew something was happening. We knew that something happened. There was no communication. Most of the girls in my camp were from the same area and communication stopped so we knew that something had happened to the ghetto.

And about a couple of months later, must have been around Yom Kippur, a transport of women came to our camp from Auschwitz. I don't know how many. Maybe 50, maybe 100. And among them were some-- at least there was one or two that I knew, may have lived on our street. And I remember we were so anxious to find out what happened.

And I remember walking over to one of them when we could, and I said, what happened? What happened to the ghetto? What happened to my parents? Do you what happened? And they were so hardened. They had gone through Auschwitz.

And I remember she said to me, you mean you don't know? You don't know what happened? They were all cremated. They were all killed. They went they went to gas chambers. You mean you don't know about Auschwitz? You don't know what they're doing to us? It was really Yom Kippur. I'm sorry.

OK, let's stop for a minute. [INAUDIBLE]

Camera roll six. Tape 12.

OK.

So what I just wanted to say is that how I made peace with God. I think in that way that I do believe that God was not in Auschwitz as I said. I agree with a professor whose name is Fackenheim who said that God was not in Auschwitz. And maybe I do remember one thing that when I talk to a rabbi years later and I told him about my disagreement, my [NON-ENGLISH] if you will with God, which is kind of like having a court case with him, and he said, Bella, you never lost your faith because one doesn't have a [NON-ENGLISH] with--