

Take seven. I'm continuing interview with the Ruth Webber.

[BEEP]

Before we go to where to hide in Auschwitz, let's go back and tell me about what you thought was going on with the transports, how you didn't realize what was going on, and how you gradually came to figure it out.

Well, one of the ways really is from hearing people talk about it very openly. And I don't know. As a child I kind of accepted things as they were happening because there was nothing I could do about it but try to stay ahead to survive.

For some reason or other, that was the most important thing, is to survive. That's all you heard everybody say, oh, we've got to survive and tell the world what is going on. I mean, this is-- that was it. I mean, if only for that reason, just because it was just unbelievable.

And this idea that you go up in smoke became a reality because people would come-- a transport would come in with a lot of people, and they would move into a certain direction, and then they would disappear. They would never come out. So you realize that something is happening to them.

And seeing the chimneys smoking continuously, especially after a transport, even at my age you kind of put two and two together and realized that, yes, this is where you go, behind that fence that has the blankets on it and the trees covering-- something that goes on behind there, that you go in and you don't come out anymore. Exactly what was happening, I don't know. All I knew is that you come out the chimney.

And as the crematoriums were working, it left such a sweet taste in your mouth that you didn't even feel like eating. During these times I can honestly say, at times, I wasn't even hungry because it was so sickening.

I guess from people talking and kind of putting two and two together, realizing that once you go behind that fence, that's it.

In fact, one of the times, I thought it was going to happen to me. When we left the [? kretzablock ?] with my mother, we weren't just taken straight to the barrack because that would be unclean. So we were taken for showers. And when the group was being moved towards that fence, I also thought that it was the end.

I don't-- I don't know really what happened then because we were taken behind that fence, and we were showered, and we had seen the people that worked with the ovens in the crematoriums, and they were just-- they were so awed-- awed about me. I mean, there were so surprised that a child is still alive.

They didn't know what to do with me. In fact, I had some chicken soup. I guess they were fed very well because the Germans there ate very well. They gave me some chicken soup and bread.

And there was one German woman that took me into one barrack that had clothes all sorted out, and hundreds and hundreds of shirts and pants and dresses and shoes, but not children sizes. They were all women sizes.

So she dressed me, and she gave me a pair of shoes because mine were pretty worn out by then on a heel. They were actually like a nurse's shoe, as they used to wear at the time, with laces in the front. She gave me those shoes because she didn't have any without a heel.

So I really don't know what happened at that time. I don't know why we did not go through the route and went into the gas chambers. I really don't know. But we came out, and we were taken back into the block.

And now tell me about trying to find a hiding place.

Well, the hiding place where, I thought was pretty smart of me, was next door to our block, was a block where they used

to throw the skeletons or the dead people. There were skeletons at the time already. And when the block got full, then they would come with a truck and take it over to the crematorium as well.

This person and I were trying to find a way of making a little hole in between those skeletons and see if we can get in there and hide until the selection takes place or maybe somebody will come and rescue us.

So this is the kind of place that we were playing and trying to find a hiding place among the corpses. There wasn't a stitch of clothes or anything on them, so they were gone through. It was just bones. And we tried to arrange them in such a way that we would have a hiding place in case we needed.

How did the other inmates feel about you being a child there?

We were a small group from our town that kind of stayed together, and they were protective of me. They wouldn't risk their lives for me, but they were trying to be protective.

For instance, there was a certain amount of people that slept in one ,uh, perch. You had to lie, I think it was six in a row. And it was pretty close together because if one turned, everybody had to turn at the same time.

These six people allowed-- or five people including my mother-- allowed me to squeeze in the middle. I wasn't a person, so wherever I was, it had to be tolerated by the people around me, and these were people from our town that were quite protective of me.

And we keep in touch with some of them that have survived, and I'm very thankful for what they have done for me.

Were there incidents where inmates resented you because you've put them in danger, or people who aren't from your town who protected you because you were-- represented their child to them?

I don't know of any particular incident. I think I was resented only for the fact that I was still alive and they had lost their children. I think that was very painful to them that they didn't have their children and my mother still had me. And I felt that many times, but not that I was endangering their lives because they were not protecting me in such a way.

But the unfortunate thing is that, under the circumstances, that even mothers many times did not acknowledge their children. For instance during one selection, the men, and the women, and the elderly women, and the children were all separated at that particular time. And you never know what they wanted to do or what they had in mind they were going to do with us.

And the order was that the mothers of the children to go over to the children's group and take their child out. Well, my mother walked over and with gentle firmness took my hand and acknowledged me and took me over to the group. And she knew that, at least everybody else knew, that this was like signing your death certificate because a child wasn't supposed to be there.

Another child, that was standing next to me, noticed that her mother wasn't making any move towards her, just walked behind me and stood next to my mother. And my mother felt that, well, what's the difference if it's one or two? It doesn't make any difference. So she didn't reject her in any way.

The children that were left without the parents accepting them disappeared. I don't know what happened to them, but I can't really blame that mother either that didn't acknowledge her child. I mean, it was-- the desire to live is so great. It just-- that all you really thought about is to survive. And you were willing to do almost anything just to survive.

[BEEP]

I want you to try to paint a picture for me of what the children's block in Auschwitz was. Define it. It's an incongruous idea that there should be a children's block. And what was it for? And what was it like?

I really, at the time, did not know what it was for. And I didn't find it to be any different than any other block that I have been in. I just was at the time of my life were I just didn't care because my mother had left. My mother left right after, a few days after, I was separated from her in Auschwitz. She was sent out of Auschwitz.

She came to tell me that she was being put on a-- she was put on a list, that she's being transported out to another camp. And my life came to an end at the time. I mean, it just wasn't important anymore.

I realized what it meant to have her around me, her encouragement, her telling me good stories instead of dwelling on what was around me.

So after the point that she came and told me that she was leaving and I was being left alone in Auschwitz, I didn't care what was going on. I really didn't. Didn't mean to me anything. I didn't-- food wasn't important. I was hungry. All at once I became very hungry, but I didn't even care about that.

It was just an existence at that point, and I wouldn't have done anything to save myself. It was just a matter of circumstances that I survived after that.

There was a very unexpected thing that had happened while I was in the children's block. For some reason, things come back to me that I remember, that at that point we were not told to do certain things or made to do certain things. They had a way of coming in and asking for volunteers.

We are going on an outing right now. Would you like to come? They were sending a group of children to a country where there's no war, that everything is going to be wonderful. Food is plentiful and everything is great. Who would like to go?

Well, I didn't care. I didn't offer to go. Maybe that's what saved me because I don't know what happened to the other children. I know some from our town that had gone on an outing like this never came back.

So that's the recollections I have of the children's block, just not caring.

Oh yeah, at one point they also gave us some sheets and pillows and pillowcases, and we had to make our beds nicely. The Red Cross came and looked at us, and I think we were given a special dinner also at the time.

But something very unexpected and unusual happened then too. I mentioned in the beginning that my-- I had seen my father in Auschwitz. Well, word came to me that my father was in the next camp over, in the men's camp and arranged I should be at a certain time behind a certain block that he'll be on the other side in his camp. Through the electric wires we had a meeting.

That's difficult to say. And I looked at him, and I wasn't very nice. I had lost my mother that I was very close with. And I guess I must have felt that he had abandoned us because he just wasn't there when we needed him, when I needed him.

And I must have been very indifferent to him. He tried to ask me what I need, what I want. I told him I don't need anything. I don't want anything.

But then, yes, I did tell them I needed-- stupid thing-- I needed underpants. It's hard to admit that a child that age can't hold her urine, but when you get very scared and you start shaking, you lose control. And it isn't that it's a lot that comes out, but just a little bits, so my panties were always wet.

So I had asked him. I said, oh, that's what I need. So he had given me some thrown over the wires, some cigarettes. I should go into that first block, where the-- have Germans and Poles live, and they have money and they have food-- actually food not money-- and I should exchange it for whatever I need.

I took the cigarettes, I went there, and I didn't do a thing with it. And the next time when I met him, I gave him back the cigarettes. I just didn't want anything from him. I must have hurt him terribly.

He kept telling me to make sure that I leave with the last transport because they were starting to evacuate Auschwitz. And he told me how important it is, that I will not survive if I stay there, that when the last transport goes that I should do everything possible to get on it.

Well, I listened. I don't know if I deliberately didn't do anything about it, or if I tried-- I really don't-- don't know. I've tried to think about it, but I wasn't accepted. He did leave. He didn't survive. I stayed, and I did. I don't know.

But I'm not proud of myself for how I hurt him at the time. It weighs very heavily on me, since it was the last time that I'd seen him.

Talk to me about how your mother constantly conditioned you for survival.

Well, when I was with her, she was always pointing out the way that I could hide or do certain things, like go behind her when there might be shooting, so I would not be shot.

I think the stories and the pleasant memories that she kept telling me to keep me sane, because life was so cruel around me. There was so much constant death and pain and suffering that she was trying to put little bits of good in my mind. I should not dwell on what is going around around me.

By giving up of her food constantly, making me believe that she's never hungry, and never needs anything. By the way, my mother was fasting two days a week in camp, not that she needed to do it, but she actually did not have any water or food. It was something that she promised herself to do so we should survive.

My mother was a religious-- is and was a religious woman, and she felt if she gives up food twice a week that her children will survive. And we did.

So my mother was a very, very strong woman to have been able to do the things that she had done to protect me and to always be next to me. And just give me this extra little bit of desire to survive, that there is a better day. That things will be OK tomorrow, to just get through today.

How did she comfort you for the fear? Can you talk a little about the fear that you had? Oh, we're out. We're out already.

[BEEP]

OK. Talk about how she comforted you for the fear. And talk about fear first, so we have a context.

Well, when you stand in front of a gun and you know that this might be your last moment, when you see people being shot around you and you might be next, then you start shaking. At least I do. My knees kind of quiver, and I can't control my urine. It was just one of those things.

And she would try to get my mind off of what is going on around me at that particular time. She would come up with a very pleasant and wonderful picture of what life was like at home, of the grandparents.

I wasn't always a good child and do whatever she told me to in order to save my own life. We had to go to a forest at one time, and I just refused to go back out. I did. I mean, I felt that was enough, and I didn't want to. She never reprimanded me for it.

So she said, well, if you don't want to go, so I won't go either. So we both stayed. And as it happened, the way circumstances are, the people that had gone into the forest at that time were apprehended and shot. We didn't go. You can say a child's foresight. I don't know.

But she never reprimanded me for not doing what she wanted me to do, and I didn't do it. She never-- she knew, for

instance, that I have difficulty-- that I'm not able to control myself, and she would never reprimand me for it. Ever.

In fact, there is something that we have going between us that is maybe difficult for other people to understand, and I think especially my sister because we had such closeness between my mother and I, that although my accomplishments are not as great as my sister's-- really, because she is more observant, more religious than what my mother would like that I am, and her children are very successful, and she has [INAUDIBLE] or 10 grandchildren-- yet when I accomplish something, it is so much more meaningful to my mother because of what we have gone through.

And it's as if-- we don't talk about it, but it's as if-- my god, the way you were in Auschwitz, from you, you had three normal children. I drove my obstetrician crazy. Will my children be normal? When they were born, I was counting the toes and fingers to make sure that I didn't want anybody around me to know how stupid I am.

I really want to live-- wanted to live a normal life. And I think my mother helped me do that.

We reminisce about the past, but we don't talk about the horrors. I had a very comfortable relationship with my mother after the war, where she allowed me to let out this frustration and to be normal, to feel that my accomplishment will be that my normalcy was not destroyed, that I am the same as everyone else, that I did not survive as a shell but as a human being that can feel.

I really am afraid to lose my feelings. I even now have nightmares, but I'm afraid really to shut those things out because I want to continue to feel the pleasure of my children's accomplishments, my grandchildren. I want to-- this is what I want to accomplish, is to have a normal life and enjoy what I have. My mother helped me do that. She really did.

Your mother is a hero.

She certainly is.

Does your mother feel that it's an achievement?

When I accomplish something, then it's an achievement for her. She takes pride in it. I can feel it. And it's not such great achievements. My achievements, as I said, are not as great as my sister's.

And I think my sister maybe senses that my mother feels that mine is greater. But the only way I can associate it with is if you have a child that is disabled and that finally takes that first step. It's a much greater thing than when your normal child takes a step at nine months.

And I guess it must be difficult for my sister to have to live with this, although she's the one that has the responsibility of my mother now because she lives in Toronto, my mother lives in Toronto, and I live here. And I'm the good daughter that calls and goes to visit. And whatever I do is my big accomplishment. And it must be very difficult for my sister.

Does your mother feel that she saved you?

She had never said it. Never said it. No. And if I bring up an incident where I feel that she had saved me by going with me or insisting on me going somewhere with her, she just-- what else do you expect me to do? You're my child. That's what is expected of me. And that's why I say she was and is a very strong woman.

How do you feel about humankind in general, in light of your life experiences?

About human life?

Humankind. Humanity.

Well, I am concerned that humanity's not learning from the past. That's what worries me. I know that you can't always understand the horrors of what had happened. But maybe with what I'm saying and others like me, it can be understood

a little better, and that humanity can avoid something like this happening again.

I was very bitter after the war, towards everybody. How they allowed me to go through such misery for so long. And then on top of it, I didn't even know for a few months that my mother survived or my father, which he didn't.

And I was terribly angry at everything and everybody because nobody even cared after I survived that I survived. I had to be protected even after that. When we were in the orphanage in Krakow, we were not allowed to go out because some people felt that we should not have survived.

And it was not safe to go out from the house that we were kept in in the garden. That was the only place we were allowed to go. And the war wasn't even over then. It was the spring of '45.

So after surviving all this and-- my god, the thoughts, the hate that I had, the things that I was going to do to the Germans for doing these things to us. It's awesome for a child to even think about these-- you know, I'm even afraid to think about them now myself.

I was going to be a butcher. The things that I was going to do to revenge. And then, actually with the help of Mother, to try to forget the past, I realized that living a normal life and continue being to be able to feel and enjoy, that I was not destroyed.

So I hope that with this interview that maybe others will understand and not allow a thing like this to happen again.

Thank you. Let's stop now. And we have to do one more thing. We all have to be--

The following is 30 seconds from [INAUDIBLE] interview with Ruth Webber.