

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Ruth Webber
February 24, 1992
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PREFACE

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RUTH WEBBER

February 24, 1992

Beep.

How do you remember the changes in 1939 when the Germans came, the changes in everyday life, if you remember any of them. Uh, persecutions, the effects on your family.

Well, it was 1939, and I was only 4 years old, so my recollections are only that just prior to the Germans uh coming into our town, we heard a lot of planes, and uh, our parents would uh take me down because at that point my sister was in Warsaw studying, uh to uh the basement for protection, and they would put a uh, a mask on us made from uh, from cotton. Um, that was prior to the Germans coming and, and then within a few days, uh, we all were standing outside, and a soldiers on motorcycles and had, uh, uh...cars and, and with big heavy uh hats, um, marched into our town. That's my first look, recollection of seeing Germans. And then, things started changing almost immediately. My mother and father were very protecting of, of me, so, we were not allowed to uh, I was not allowed to go outside, other than to my grandparent's home, which was uh 3 doors down, and uh, everybody was afraid. We started uh getting people, Jewish people, coming in from other parts of the country, and uh, we had to share our homes and our means with them. Uh, we always had a full house of people. And then, the cruelty started. Then they started coming in into the homes, and, and, and just taking people out for, as I overheard, for no apparent reason. In fact, one of those times it was uh, at my grandfather's house, it was um, my grandparents lived in a a in a home where there was a courtyard, so there was a big door at the entrance of the uh, from the street, and you walked into the courtyard. That door was closed for the night, and there was banging on the door, and my uncle happened to have opened the door for them. The Germans marched in and walked over to an apt where a poor tailor lived that hardly could make a living, pulled him out and shot him. We don't know why they didn't take my uncle. So that was the first beginning of what I overheard at that age. And then I saw changes in my grandparents place mostly. For some reason, which I don't know why either, but I came one afternoon into their house, and my grandfather and grandmother were sitting on the side crying, and when I looked at my grandfather I couldn't believe it. His beard was shaved off. And my aunt was sitting in the corner crying. I couldn't understand why, and uh nobody took the time to explain it to me. Um, since that time I haven't seen my aunt leave her hou--leave the house. It was only in the last few years that I have found out from my mother that at that particular time she was raped, and that's why she did not leave the house, because it was a traumatic experience for her. And these are just things that were happening

around me, personally, that I saw and felt the first week or two or three, I don't know, before the ghetto was formed. Um, my father was very upset. Nobody paid much attention to me, except to make sure that I'm safe and that I'm always around them, that I don't wander off, and uh, that was the beginning.

Tell me about the ghetto.

The ghetto was formed around the area where we lived, so we didn't have to move, other than give up some of our uh, rooms and so forth to accommodate other people. Uh, there was more and more people coming in to the ghetto, but my father was a photographer. Uh, he was quite well-established in the city, not only among the Jewish people, but also among the gentiles. Uh, and uh, he still had permission to leave the ghetto during the day, and had to come back at night. Our studio was taken over by the Germans. They uh, ran the business, and my father was there just working for them, so it was really not our business anymore, and my mother, too, had to go in, start going in. Um, my sister, as I mentioned before, uh studied in Warsaw because she was uh very talented uh musically. She was a pianist, and when the ghetto formed, my father had sent someone to bring her back home, and um, other than that, life was a little bit more like normal for me because I had my sister at home where I didn't have her before. There was people coming in and she was practicing and playing and in fact there was some Germans that would come in to listen to her at night, and we would have to put up sheets in the windows, so nobody would see that they came in. So um, that part was still a very, we were still a very close family, and uh, everybody was always mentioning who was shot this time, and who was shot that time, and, and, friends and families and um, just disappeared. They would um, uh catch people in the streets for working details to other parts of the country, and we were always concerned that my, I had two uncles, that they would be caught, and uh, that uh, my father would be, so actually, from day to day we, there seemed to be such terrible tension in the house. It uh, I, I just felt like I was always in the way because I was a nuisance I suppose. I was not allowed to go anywhere, and yet, I was supposed to always entertain myself, and, and stay out of people's way, I guess, they had no patience for me. (Sigh).

Describe the importance of working and how your parents realized that very early.

My father had the foresight that uh, if he is going to have employment and be a productive citizen, that he'll be safe, and so will my mother. So there was a um camp that was being set up outside of our city, it was called Voltsehoff, uh, a uh German company I think, that was making electronics, uh, set up a factory with free, free labor, so my father through some protection was uh, and money,

was able to um get to uh places for my mother and my father to work in that factory and to live on that uh, uh camp, working camp what they called. My sister through friends, acquaintances and um, was um taken to a gentile family to continue her education because they felt that it will be very important for her to continue her uh musical training, and if she will be going to camp, then, certainly there wouldn't be any piano, not knowing what was waiting for us. So, a family outside of our city, a uh, actually a duke and duchess, have accepted her as another one of their daughters, and my sister had spent the uh war with them. Um, with continuing her education. I was uh, my father had worked out for uh str--

We have to stop. We have to reload.

Beep.

Describe the work camp, the life, and define what a work camp is when you tell me, and then tell me how it is that you ended up in that kind of environment and what it was like. Be sort of basic about it.

Well, um, children were not allowed. They were, were supposed to not exist because it was a working camp. So my father and mother had their specific work to do. I think my mother worked in the kitchen, and my father uh worked in the factory. I was supposed not to exist. So, uh, certain days, uh yes I was allowed to walk around in, in the camp, but whenever there was a lit--first of all, the camp was supposed to have been maybe for a hundred uh people to work in the factory, but when a lot of people have heard that there was a place where maybe you could survive through the war, uh then they would come into that camp, and it would swell with people. There would be, instead of a hundred, there would be two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, and the Germans would allow this to happened because um, at any given time they would come with a truck, and just load up whoever they could find in camp that particular day, and ship them out to Treblinka if they didn't have an, a full transport or anywhere else. And, uh, there was a lot of, because of that, there was a lot of uh elderly people there too, and children, and they were the first ones that went out with these transports. Uh, being that my father was known in town, and, and he was a little bit influential, he would hear rumors when these uh, trucks would be coming in because there was more people than there were supposed to be. So, obviously, I would have to disappear. I would either go with my mother into the forest, and it was in, uh, in the winter. It was probably sometimes around the November or December, and uh, it was very cold, and I would spend sometimes days and nights in the forest with my mother just walking around, and trying to uh keep warm. Occasionally we would knock on a farmer's door. Some of them would tell on us, and we

would have soldiers looking for us, and some of them were kind enough to let us come in and they would take my shoes off and dry them and give me something to drink, uh, so there were some that were a little bit kind to me, but unfortunately a couple weren't nice at all. One in particular told us, my mother wanted to buy some milk, buy, because she had money at the time, and the woman shut the door in our faces and said she didn't have any, and we continued walking and then she in turn went to the police station and told on us, that there was a mother and a child, probably Jewish. The German at the police station was not there at the time, and a Polish um...policeman, I guess, came after us, and when he saw us, he told us that one of the farmers had uh come to the police station and told them about us, and that we should go to the camp that is just on the other side of the forest because that might be a safe haven for us. So that was a good one. And he even gave me a piece of bread, and we uh, we thanked him, but mother and I knew, or mother knew, and she told me, that we cannot return back into the camp because the selection at that particular time has not taken place yet, so it would not have been safe for me. At other times, I would be hiding in a, it was a big, like a warehouse, where they kept some cars, and they had an office built in, in that big warehouse, and on the uh roof of that office, there was um, a distance where I was then um, six, I could not stand up, I had to kind of crawl around on my knees, uh between the ceiling of the big warehouse and the office. That's where I had to uh lie during the day, very, very quietly, because if had moved or walked, they would have heard me in the office. There were a lot of mice running around at the time, and rats, so whatever food I was left with, I had to eat it as soon as it was brought up to me. Otherwise, it would have just disappeared. In fact, there was two other children that originally had used the same hiding place as I did, and um, they refused to stay there. So, unfortunately they did not survive. But I stayed. This time I was good. I wasn't always. And, uh, uh, occasionally my father would come up for the night and spend with me a couple of hours. I wouldn't be alone. Or my mother would come up during the day when she wasn't missed and uh, that's how um I spent my time at that camp. One of the selections that were going on, I was hidden with other children in a uh, hole in the uh, in the ground where they kept potatoes, right off the kitchen, and uh, we were there, uh, up until the point when they were uh putting the people on the trucks already. The selections have been made, and somebody must have uh, saw us going in there, and they had told uh one of the Germans and there was potatoes lying over us, and we were actually hidden, but somebody told them exactly where we are, so he came up, and he uh uncovered us, he pulled up all these potatoes away. And, he looked at us, there was a few of us there, and he said uh, he was there with his handgun, and he said, "Stay here. It's not safe for you to come out yet." I, I, I guess he had enough people for this particular transport, so he had a change of heart, and he decided to leave us there. We were children, so we ran out. My mother was working in the kitchen peeling potatoes, and she saw me coming, so a couple of the ladies and my mother grabbed me and put me into a barrel with sauerkraut in it until the trucks were pulled away,

and uh, I was saved that time. That was a good camp. One of camp, one of the times, we were caught in the selection, and we were standing in front of the gate. I don't know if it was inside the gate or outside the gate, and we stood and we stood and there was a line of uh Germans standing with their guns, and waiting, and we were waiting and waiting, and then we were told to kneel. We were lined up in rows of five, and uh my mother said to me, "If they start shooting," she changed places with me actually, she went in, in front of me, and she said, if they start shooting make sure that you get under me and stay there and don't move. Well, we stayed there all afternoon and for some reason they decided not to shoot, so we were let back into the camp. One time we were caught also in this selections, and we were taken to a ghetto. Um, that was a terrible place. People were lying on the street and dying and the filth and the dirt, it was, it it's just absolutely unbelievable. (Sigh) My father was still left in Botschov?? when my mother and I were caught. My mother was caught only because of me. She had permission to stay in the camp. She had papers. I didn't, but they caught us together, so we both, my mother wouldn't have let me go alone, so we went together, and my father arranged with a Pole, being that he was still working outside the camp occasionally in that factory, he arranged with a Pole to bring us back to Botschov. There was an underground connection, I don't know exactly how I...and we were just a few days in that ghetto, and somebody got in touch with us that we had to make our way to escape from the ghetto, and make it outside of the ghetto, and um, get to the tr--uh, below, the, this particular ghetto was on a hill, and then there was a big uh, uh whatchamal, uh, whatchamacall, uh, uh, can't even think now, uh, I'll get back to that. Anyways, uh we were supposed to make it outside of the camp, uh outside of the ghetto and follow that Pole to the railroad station, and then...

Let's stop because we just ran out.

Beep.

Why don't you back up into that story a little bit, so that if I can't cut the two together, you start again.

Uh...

The terrible place in the ghetto.

Oh, the ghetto. The ghetto in the hell. Uh, as I mentioned it was a terrible place. The filth and the dirt, and the people just lying on the street and dying. It, it was just a horrible thing to see for human beings to, to be in this kind of a situation and place. Anyways, my father had made

arrangements for somebody to take us out of there. And, uh, we were told that we have to make it out of the ghetto, and the ghettos were not as tightly watched as uh camps, uh, down the hill, because this particular ghetto was on the hill, over the fence, and then he would be waiting for us and we would follow him to the railroad station, and there he would give us the tickets, and we would be on our own. It's not that he in any way endangered himself. I really, I guess, didn't want to go down that hill because I personally have no recollection of that. The only thing, I had a conversation with my mother recently, and I have terrible nightmares about this particular place I guess. I keep running down that hill, and I'm just suspended in, in air, and then I come down and, and, and it's, it's quiet, it's as, as if nothing had happened. When, when my mother had told me that, when she fin--finally made me come down the hill, and we made it over the fence, the uh, there was a street uh in the city, and Polish people were walking back and forth, and it's as if they didn't see us, that we were escaping from the ghetto. It was just unbelievable. We followed that man to the railroad station, and uh, during the same time I guess, there was always things going on but there was some sabotage that was going on, so they were very watchful in the stations for uh, uh people that were involved in it. And there were two uh Germans from our town that had known my mother. As I had mentioned, my mother was a very beautiful woman, and...we were well-known in town, and these 2 Germans had known my mother, and they had a huge big dog that they always went with. We came to the gate of the uh, uh at the railroad station where they were checking you. We showed them the tickets, he looked at my mother. Obviously he must have recognized her, but he just told us to go on. We got on the train, and we squeezed in, and again, when the train was moving, they had made their way through the train to look for um these other tourists. My mother made me kind of move away her, from her slightly because she said to me, "In case he comes and he recognizes me again, and this time he takes me, you stay on the train." So, uh, he came by us, he looked at my mother again, and he continued walking. We made it to Bot--back to Botschov, we got off this station, and we made our way along the railroad tracks back to camp. Well, it was in the, it was at night at that time, which was to our advantage, but they also were checking the, the rails at the time because of the sabotage that was going on, and a train was supposed to have come through with maybe ammunition or soldiers, I don't know which. So they were checking the train, um there were uh 2 soldiers, manually using that platform, and as we were walking along the railroad, it was all clear, we, we had nowhere to hide, and here this this manual uh train is coming, and they, the moon was bright, so my mother made me lie down parallel with the uh, with the earth, the hill that was leading up to the railroad, and my mother and I lay still there, and they passed us by and they didn't see us. We made it back to camp, and uh we stayed in camp I don't know the time span, until the camp was being um liquidated, and we were sent to uh Starhavitz??, my mother and I, and my father was sent to, I believe, Tregine??, but I haven't seen my father up until Auschwitz again. Towards the end of Auschwitz, and during the time I was just with my mother.

Go back and tell me about some of the things you used to imagine. How did you pass the time when you were in the office. And who was below you when you were in the office?

Um, Germans, um, doing um a lot of office work, because that was their office of running the uh, the camp, so that's the people that were in the office. How I spent my time? Uh, dreaming. When mother would come up to stay with me for a few hours, she would uh tell me stories of home, of of the wonderful things that we had, the wonderful times we spent together, pretending that um, the family was still alive, where she already by then knew that the rest of the family that was left in, in the ghetto, um when we left for Botsohov, they had a liquidation of the ghetto then, and uh, they were all taken to Treblinka, all of them. Actually, of what I heard mother say later was that they did have a hiding place for them, but my grandfather coughed, so he said he didn't want to go because he will cough and they'll find him, find the hiding place, so my grandmother said well she's not going to go if he's not going, and my two uncles, my aunt, and my other grandmother weren't going to go into the hiding place on their own, not knowing what was waiting for them in Treblinka. So they all left with the first liquidation of the ghetto, and anyways, that's how I spent my time in, in camp, with the stories, and the encouragement, and the, the love that my mother was able to give me. Day in and day out. Uh, in the first camp that we were, food was not a problem because uh, uh I guess my father still had money and there would be food brought in from uh the Aryan side, from the polish side, so food at that camp was not a problem, but in the other camps, when we were in Stahavitz, and then in Austratzalager??, and in Auschwitz. I mean, our portions were so small to start with, um, when I finished mine, my mother's was always waiting for me (crying). She, she actually made me believe that she was not hungry, and whatever she had she shared with me. So, that's why I'm here.

Can you talk about the time in the cornfield, when you saw other kids playing.

Oh yeah. One of the times, in, from Botsohov, when we were in uh, in the forest waiting out a selection, that was in the winter, and the, and during the day we had to find a place where we had to stand still because we couldn't move around, we would be seen, and that was near, I guess a farm, and maybe it was also near a school, I, I, I don't remember that. So my mother found a place uh to hide in um, in a cornfield or maybe it was um, like a, a starting field of trees that has, uh, low trees that were just coming up next to a field, because we didn't want to go too deep into the uh forest because then the trees were tall, and there was no way to hide, they would see our shadows. So as we were lying there, some children came out on the field to play ball. And one of them kicked the ball, and it landed in front of me. The child ran over, looked at me, picked up the ball, and went

back to play. I, my mother and I just couldn't believe that this actually happened. So we stayed there until it got dark and then we kept on moving. And how many times did we come back to the camp, and the selection still wasn't taken place, so again we would have to go out.

We have to reload.

Change film, camera roll 4 is up; Sync take 4 is up.

Beep.

Can you tell me about the time when there were 2 kids among the 180, I don't know where, which camp this was and how the SS were having a debate over what to do with you while you were -----
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Oh, well what this particular incident happened when we were taken from Starhavitc uh to the Austritzerlager, and um, I guess people from Austritzerlagen needed more workers for the um, um, iron works that they had, and brick factories. So, um, the people that were in charge had heard that uh, from Botsohov, people were taken to Starhavitc, so they were trying to get their own from the same town, who, whatever was left, back to Austritzerlager. And, uh, they came with a truck, and uh they announced that so many, so many people they need to take back to Austritzerlager, they need more workers. So, my mother was one of them, on, on the list, and uh, there were 2 children involved also, myself and another child that were from Austritzer originally, that were in Starhavitc. So, we got on the truck also, and um, for some reason, the uh camp commander, uh the, the German counted us as one because we were part of this group that came originally from Brotschov. When we came to Austritzerlager, the, the German uh at that camp did not want any children, and he didn't want us too, and he didn't want to have anything to do with counting us as one because he felt that he had enough as it is. So here we're standing, the whole transport, and the two of us are taken to the side, with a German ready to execute us, and these two Germans, the one that brought us, and the one that is supposed to accept us, you would think we were cattle or something, were arguing, should these 2 children be shot or should we let into the camp as one person? The person, the German that brought us defended us by saying, "Well, in our camp, which wasn't exactly true, the children carry messages. They peel potatoes. Um, and the one that was supposed to accept us said, "I have enough children. I don't need this." And so it was going back and forth, until finally I guess the one that brought us won out the argument, and they decided to let us into the camp. It's these kind of uh situations that I cannot believe myself that happened to me and that I have survived. I guess the answer in my mind is that because, as these incidents came

up, they were in my favor, and I survived. But how many children had gone maybe through a hundred of these situations, and one of them was not in their favor, and they're not with us anymore. So, I consider myself very fortunate to have survived because, out of fate, I suppose. That's the only way I can rationalize it for reason for surviving.

What were some of the things that you witnessed as being in work camps before -----, and ended up being transported to Auschwitz.

Well, one particular incident was uh, I have seen a lot of dead people around all over, and I guess when you see so many it doesn't really make that much of an impression. One of the times in Austritzerlager, I was in the um, outhouse, in the bathroom, which was on the corner of the uh um, area where like, it was a big area in the center of the camp, and then all the barracks were around it. Mostly actually on two sides . And the uh outhouse was at the corner, and I happened to have gone into the outhouse, and uh, all at once there is a commotion, and everybody is rushed into their barracks because that's where they were supposed to go, and um, I got stuck in the bathroom. Well, I got up on the seat, and I looked out of the little window on the top, and what had happened is some people had tried to escape, and they were caught, and, I guess they were wounded. And there was some shooting going on, and they got about, I think 4 people, to dig to-graves, just outside of wire, the fence of the camp, and they brought these uh people that tried to escape that were uh shot already, but they were not dead, and they made the other Jews bury these people that were not really dead yet, and they were begging not to be buried, that they're still alive, that they should do something to kill them. But they didn't do anything, they just buried them alive. And these people had to do it, or else--these poor people that were picked to do it because otherwise they themselves would have wound up in...dead. That was a very very traumatic experience. I can still hear the screaming (cries--pause).

Do you want a break now?

No, I'm fine. I'm fine.

Tell me how you think your parents had the foresight, somehow knew and somehow managed to rescue both their daughters.

My father was a very protective parent, and uh, there was a lot of unrest going on because I heard stories that actually weren't planning on having me either, since I was born in 1935, and there was already talk of war. So, I wasn't actually a welcome addition at this particular time. But I came

and they accepted me, and I think I brought them a lot of joy. Anyways, um, my father made arrangements, for instance, we had an aunt in Brazil, that if for some reason we are sent to parts of the country, and we don't make it back for one reason or another, that uh, there was a gentile left with information to get in touch with my aunt, and she would take my sister especially because she was sure that my sister would survive. Uh, that my aunt will um take my sister and this particular man to Brazil, uh, as a reward for uh getting in touch with my aunt, if, for some reason, my father and mother don't survive. That was one of the things that my father arranged. My father arranged for my sister's uh being with a family that had a piano, and that made sure that my sister would get a continuous education, that was his foresight also. He wanted to make sure that her education goes on because it was very important to him. And um, he was, I heard a story, my sister has a mark on her forehead, a burn mark on her forehead. You have to understand that our homes, although um we lived very comfortably, we did not have any running water. We had water standing in the corner of the kitchen, uh, a wood barrel with water that they uh a man brought every day and filled up the water for us. So, eating fruit without being washed was unheard of in our house, and it wasn't just washed with water, but it had to be washed with boiling water, and my fa-- my sister wanted an apple, and my father went to wash the apple with the boiling water from the kettle, and she pulled on his sleeve, and it spilled and it burned her. So even in those days, my father was so protective of us, that he wanted to make sure that we grow up healthy, and that everything that we eat is clean and without any germs. So he, he really had a foresight, and he was very, very protective of us.

We're just about to run out. I won't make it through a question.

Beep.

Can you describe the transport to Auschwitz and the arrival there.

I remember being shoved into cattle cars. It was um, very crowded, and uh, my mother maneuvered me over to the uh wall of the uh car because that gave me a chance to breathe. You see, being little, I mean, it was in 1944, I was about 8, and uh, I was small. I'm not really that tall now, but I, I was undernourished, and, and skinny and uh so here all I could see was the uh people's feet actually. So, it was a little bit hard to breathe. And my mo-my mother maneuvered me over to uh, the wall of the car, and um, that's where we stood. We were squeezed in and we were given two pails. I think one was for water and the other one was for elimination. I I I'm not quite sure, but I just remember those two pails. And, uh, they shut the door with a bang, and the train started moving. At and, I think we were on the go for about 4 days. I'm not sure how much, but we did

stop on the way, and uh, I, I remember either people leaving the train and getting water or Poles bringing water to the train--to the uh cars, to the cattle cars, I don't remember, but I know that we were given some water and some bread. And, um, oh, but when the train started, then we all had to sit down at the same time because one person could not sit and another stand. You, you couldn't breathe. You were on the floor, and you, you had all these mass of people around you. So we all sat down, and then when some people wanted to stand up, we all had to stand up at the same time. I was little, and I would be picked up to look out of the window, because there was a little window in the cattle car, uh, with uh steel grates on it, and uh, they would ask me to uh point out landmarks because we really didn't know where we were going. Being that we were coming from a working camp, we were told that we were going to another working camp. We really did not, of the conversation that I remember, that we were going to Auschwitz, not that I knew what Auschwitz meant, but uh, this, the, the story was that at the time that was going around is that we were going to another working camp. And, uh, on the way to Auschwitz, we, the train did stop a couple of times, and the doors opened and uh, we were replenished with some water. And uh, then finally, very early in the morning. Was just about uh, I think we arrived in Auschwitz, and again I was picked up, and I was uh, starting to give the people the landmarks around, and uh people started screaming and crying and uh, I suppose they realized where we were. I didn't know. Didn't mean to me anything. Then, finally, there came--the train came to a stop, the doors opened, and uh, screaming, "Raus, raus!" "Get out, get out from the train!" When, when I came to the platform, it was very, very foggy. Could hardly see anything, and slowly as the fog lifted, it was to the left of me that I saw a fence, well, uh, uh, straight ahead of me there were um fences that I, I, I've never seen before because they were rounded off with electric wires. I didn't know what that meant. But to the left of me, in fact I...tried to recollect it when I was there this spring, but I, I, I couldn't make it out. I saw this big fence covered with uh, with blankets, and people would peek out to see this transport coming up, and as the um fog lifted a little more, we saw the chimneys. These huge, enormous chimneys, with the smoke billowing from them. That was my first glimpse of Auschwitz. We were taken off the cars, the cattle cars, and we stood on the platform, or sat down on the platform with our little bundle of clothes, whatever we had left. As we arrived, for 24 hours, without any bread, without any water, without any anything. It was uh, in the summer in 1944, I guess they didn't quite know what to do with us at this point. Should we go straight into the crematoriums, into the ovens, or if we should be let into the camp because we did come, what they call an iron paper--we're from a working camp, so we should not have gone through a selection. And, um, also, Mengele was sick, or had a cold or something, so he wasn't available to do his usual selections. So we were waiting for 24 hours. And then finally the decision was made, it wasn't very, too many um, transports that came in without a selection. We were one of them. I'm saying that only from what I have seen after I came in and I saw what was happening to the other, all other

transports that I'm saying it, I have no uh, history or, or information of actually what had happened before I came to Auschwitz. Um, we were, the decision was made for us to be allowed to go into the camp. And, uh, we were given then something to eat, and uh, they gave us the number. We were all given numbers. And uh, the people that were peeking through the uh, uh blankets from that area, and what we called Canada, the, the people that came to uh help the uh transports get off the trains and uh get off the cattle cars and, and um, um help with the selection and take all the clothes and everything else or tell us what to do. Um, we were very surprised that the few children, there weren't many of us, but the few that did come with the transport were given numbers and were allowed to get into the camp. So that's how we got into Auschwitz. The men were separated from the women. And uh, my mother and I were taken to uh, -----, we used to call it, it's B-2-B uh lager. And, we stayed there for a few months. Oh, wait a minute, before we went in, we were taken in to be showered and bathed because we were, I guess, full of lice and dirt. So, the clothes, everything was taken away from us. We were taken into a big hall, and uh, and the row kind of moved on completely naked. And this was actually the first time that I have seen my mother completely naked. And all the other women. I, I, I've never seen it, and, and, they were just standing there and kind of holding their hands together, and the Germans walking back and forth with their little um, whatever you call it that they were hitting with, a leather strip. If you didn't move fast enough. And uh, we kept on moving down the line. The only thing that was left for us was the shoes. We were allowed to keep our shoes, but the shoes we had to immerse in some kind of a liquid, and go on into a huge room where water came down from the ceiling. That was the shower. We were shaved completely. Hair shaved off. And we came out on the other side of the building. At least that's what it seemed like, I, I don't know, maybe we went in a circle, I don't know. It's not standing anymore so I couldn't find out exactly. And we were each thrown a piece of clothes, and it seemed that it worked out that the tall women--

Let's stop and reload. We just ran out.

Beep.

Okay, why don't you describe registration, what that involved.

Well, registration was that at first um, after the 24 hours, they decided to let us in to the camp without a selection, and we were all given the numbers. And the few children that came were also given the numbers, which was very unusual, and we were uh shown or told to go into a a huge building, where, where we were undressed completely undressed, and uh we were allowed to keep our shoes, that was the only thing. We were completely shaved, and uh, kept moving in line

towards, that I later found out was the showers. There was a lot of crying from the people because, I guess they knew that it might not be just a shower. Uh, for me, I was shocked to have seen for the first time my mother completely naked. And everybody else around me. And they were kind of trying to, to hide from all these Germans that were walking back and forth, and uh, disregarded all this mass of, of, of women, completely naked. Uh, we uh, were uh, encouraged or, or pushed into going into this room where there was uh showerheads uh in the ceilings, and water came down, and we were, we got our showers, and then uh, it seems to me, I don't know if I'm right, we came out on the other side of the bldg. We had to dip our shoes in some kind of a liquid to disinfect that too, so we were pretty clean once we got out of there. At the other end, we each received a piece of clothes, a dress, and uh, it was as if it was set up, that a tall woman would get a real short dress, and a, a little woman would get a long dress, and they weren't willing to switch because obviously it was more favorable to have a lower dress, a longer dress because it was more protective, and, with everybody feeling um, so upset going into the bldg, and crying and, and not knowing what is waiting for us all, when this group came out at the other end, everybody started laughing because they looked at each other, and they saw what they looked like with the shaved heads and the, the pieces of cloth over them. It was so comical, in spite of all this horror that was going around us, that the women started laughing. And uh, that really was comical. And then we were uh told to go into a um, we were led to a barrack in uh Lager B and uh, it was called Be Zvei Be, which is actually B-2-B, but I guess either in German or in Yiddish it is Be Zvei Be. And I had tried to ask my mother what block we were in when I went to Auschwitz this spring, but uh she said she wasn't quite sure if it was 16 or 17. But, it really didn't matter, nothing much is left of it. We were a few months together in that um block. I uh, contracted the uh, the measles, a child's disease, and I was taken to the hospital. It was a rather severe case. My mother came to visit me every day, and I was uh, on the higher -----of the uh bunk, bunk beds, and uh, like always, she was always there throwing up because there was an opening between the uh, the ceiling and the wall, when it came down like this, there was an opening and she would throw bread up to me. I, I guess I kind of expected it from her, I, so um, I don't know how long I was uh in the hospital, but um, not long enough because when the nurse in the hospital heard that there was going to be a selection in the hospital, she discharged whoever was able to possibly walk. I still had all my uh spots on me, and I had uh, I guess, was still running a fever, but she discharged me, and uh, the procedure was that you left the hospital, which was at one end of the camp, and that was in the winter, and you would go down the center of the uh, uh camp, and they would let off whichever uh block you came out of to go into the uh, hospital. Well, mine was pretty much at the other end of uh, the uh camp. When I finally made it into the uh barrack, and some of our friends and my mother took one look at me, hearing they couldn't because, hear me they couldn't because I've lost my voice so I couldn't talk at all, and uh, according to the people they, it's their favorite story to talk about me how I looked at

the time. I was green and um and couldn't speak and none of them believed that I was going to survive. Well I came into camp, into the barrack, and stayed a couple of days, and there was another selection, there was a selection for uh, they kept us very clean and very healthy, for a, a skin disease, it was called Schvierzba, in Polish, I really don't know what it is, it's some kind of enzyme, and they had a special block for that too. So, they mistook, and they, that would come up on the uh, the wrists and under the arms, uh little pimples, and they had a special medication for that, but you had to go to that block. Well, they mistook my spots from the measles for that disease, and they yanked me to go to that block. And every time you were selected into a certain area, these were the areas that had the selections to go into the uh, the gas chambers if they didn't have enough people that were coming in, in a transport. I mean, these were the first that were selected. So when you went anywhere out of the ordinary, it was bad. So when I was going to be taken to the Kutzablock, my mother wouldn't let me go by myself, so she came along with me. So again, she endangered her own life, for a maybe of saving mine if any way there was a possibility. Because at this point really, it didn't really matter if she was there with me or not. She would just be one more person that would be in the same situation, but she went along with me. We had difficulty getting out of that block because instead of the uh spots going away with this medication, it spread because it became infected. And on top of it, I caught uh pneumonia so I was coughing, and through some miracle, I got throu, through a selection by holding whatever dress I had, we had to parade in front of the doctor to see that we have no more spots on us, and I had a whole infection under my arm, so I would put the, that dress over this shoulder, and squeeze through, and, and, and I got out of that block with my mother. We came back to our regular block for a short time and um we were separated. I was taken into the children's block. Now, during the time that I was with my mother, and every morning at four o'clock we were stay, standing for the appel, where we had to be counted, until about nine when the sun came out, and then we were again put into the block. Occasionally, the blockeldest, the woman that was in charge of the block felt sorry for the couple of kids that were there, and she would allow us to wait inside the uh, the block, and come out as the Germans got closer, as Mengele got closer to count us. Occasionally, there were rumors, for instance, that they, they were needing more people for the crematoriums because it was getting slow, the transports were coming in slow. So, what was on our mind, what we shared with the children, I didn't share that with my mother, was finding places where to hide. In Auschwitz, we were to hide. Under a blanket, they would find it because they would strip the beds. Uh, the um, there was nowhere to hide in the barracks. But the barracks, the barrack that was next to ours was a place where--

We have to reload. That was quick.

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, um, 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 that you go up in smoke became a real, 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, the chimneys smoking continuously, especially after a transport, even at my age, you kind of put 2 and 2 together and realized that, yes, this is where you go, behind those, that fence that has the uh, the blankets? on it, and the trees hovering, 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 uh crematoriums were working, it, it left such a sweet taste in your mouth that you didn't even feel like eating. During these times, I can honestly say, I, at times I wasn't even hungry because it was so sickening. I, I guess from people's talking and, and kind of putting 2 and 2 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, for, I 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 in in the crematoriums, and they were just, they were so odd, odd about me, I mean they 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 a um, one barrack that had clothes, all sorted out, and um, hundreds and hundreds of shirts and, and pants and, and, and dresses and shoes, but not children's sizes, they were all uh women's sizes. So she dressed me, and she gave me a pair of shoes because mine were pretty worn out by then, on a he, a he, a heel. They were actually like a, a nurse's shoe, as they used to wear at the time uh, with laces in the front. Uh, she gave me those

shoes because she didn't have any on the, on uh, 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, and went into the gas, 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 of the dead people. There were skeletons at the time, already, and uh, when the block got full, then they would come with the truck, and take it over to the crematoriums. 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 uh, 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 need it.

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

We uh we, we were a small group from our town that kind of stayed together, and they were protective of me. Uh, they wouldn't risk their life, their lives for me, but they would try to be protective. Uh, for instance, uh, there was a certain amount of people that uh slept in one um uh bridge. You had to lie, I think was 6 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, 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, uh, 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 put them in danger, or people who weren't from your town who protected you because you were, represented their child to them?

Uh, I don't know of any particular uh, uh incident. I think I was resented only for the fact that I was still alive, and they have lost their children. I think that was very painful to them--that they didn't have their children, and, and, and my mother still had me. Uh, and, and I felt bad, 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 uh did not

acknowledge their children. For instance, during one selection, the men and the women and the elderly were men and the children were all separated at that particular time. And uh, you never know what they wanted to do or, 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 uh, with gentle firmness took my hand and acknowledged me and took me over the group, and she knew that at least, everybody else knew that this was like uh 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 uh, 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, I can't really blame that mother either that didn't acknowledge her child. I mean it was the, the, the desire to live is so great. It, it, it just, it's all you really thought about is to survive. And you, you, you were all, you were willing to do almost anything, just to survive.

We have to reload.

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 uh, I didn't find it to be any different than any other block, that I had been in. I just was at the time of my life where 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 is being transported out to another camp. And, mmm, my uh life came to an end at the time. I mean, it just wasn't important anymore. I realized uh what it meant to have her around me, uh, here encouragement, her uh, her telling me good stories instead of dwelling on, 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's, it was just an existence at that point. And I, I wouldn't have done anything to save myself. It was just a matter of circumstances that I survived after that. There was a uh, a very un, unexpected thing that had happened. While I was in in the children's block, uh, I, for some

reason I rem, things come back to me that I remember that at that point, we were not told to do certain things, or, 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 is 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, and 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 pillow cases, 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 there is something very un, unexpected and unusual happened, and too, I mentioned in the beginning that me, I had seen my father in Auschwitz. Well, word came to me that my father was in the next camp over in the man's camp. And uh, arranged w-to, 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. (Sigh) That's a terrible thing. And, I, I looked at him, and that was 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 (crying), 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 him I needed, ah, stupid thing, I needed underpants. It's hard to admit for 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 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 they uh uh have uh Germans and Poles live, and 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. (Crying). He kept telling me to make sure that I leave with the last uh transport because they were starting to evacuate Auschwitz. And, uh, 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, I really don't, don't know I tried to think about it, but I, 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, how I hurt him at the time. It weighs very heavily on me since it was the last time that I've 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 um I could hide or do certain things, like go behind her when there might be shooting so I would not be shot. Uh, I think the, the stories and the pleasant uh memories that she kept telling me to, to keep me safe because life was so cruel around me, uh, there was so much constant death and pain and, and, and suffering, uh, that, she was trying to put little bits of good in my mind. I should uh 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 2 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 that she gives up food twice a week, that her children will survive. We did. So, uh, my mother is very, was a very, very strong woman to be able to do the things that she had done, to protect me, and to always be next to me. And uh, just give me this, this extra little bit of, of uh desire to survive. That there is a better day, that that things will be okay, tomorrow. To just get through today.

How did she comfort you for the fear? Can you talk a little about fear that you felt?

Beep.

Talk about how she comforted you for the fear, and talk about fear first, in whatever 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's, it it was just one of those things. And she would uh 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. Uh, if we had to go to a forest at one time, and I just refused to go back out, I, I, I did. I mean, I felt that was enough. And I didn't want to. She never reprimanded me for it. If, 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 that 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 had difficulty hold, eh, that I'm...not able to uh 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 have such closeness between my mother and I, that although my accomplishments are not as great as my sister's really because um, she is more observant, more religious than my mother would like that I am, and um, her children are very successful and she has, ----- or ten grandchildren. Yet, when I accomplish something, it is so much more meaningful to my mother because of what of what we have gone through, and 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 their toes and fingers to make sure. Yet I didn't want anyone around me to know how stupid I am. I really want to live, wanted to live a, 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 my feelings. I, 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. Uh, my achievements I said as 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 then finally takes that first step, it's a much greater thing than when uh 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 uh, whatever I do is my big accomplishment. And, uh, it must be very difficult for my sister.

Does your mother feel that she saved you?

She has never said it. Never said it. No. And if I bring up an incident where I feel that she she has 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's, 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, uh, I am concerned that humanity is 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, um, it can be understood a little better, and then humanity can avoid something like this happening again. I was very bitter after the war, towards everybody. How they allowed me to, to be, to go through such a 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 our house, 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 it's awesome for a child to even think about these, you know, I 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 uh, maybe others will understand and not allow a thing like this to happen again.

Thank you.

Let's stop. We have to do one more thing. We all have to be quiet--

The following is 30 seconds of room tone for interview with Ruth Webber.

End room tone.