

And today's a good luck day, right? Friday the 13th do you believe in that.

I believe in miracles already after what I went through.

That's very true.

It's really miracles, yeah.

You're absolutely right, absolutely right.

Whenever you are, you're-- we're rolling.

OK. Today is May 13, 1994. And we are in San Diego, California. Can you please identify yourself?

I am Miriam Wilner, known here as Mitzi. I live in San Diego. 10 years previous, I lived in New York.

Where were you born, Mrs. Wilner?

I was born in Lwów in Poland, now Ukraine.

What-- when were you born? Can you tell us the year? The-- well, we'll leave it aside. I would like to start by talking about your experiences before the war. Can you please describe your household?

Yes. I am-- I come from an Orthodox family. We were five children and our parents. We lived in Lwów. My father was a very learned man. He learned Torah. And my mother was the bread-giver. And she had a grocery store.

What were your father and your mother's names?

My father's name was Isaac, and my mother's name was Frieda Friemet.

And your brothers and sisters?

The oldest sister was Margalit, next was Dora, then was Fanka in Polish. And in Jewish was Feiga And my brother was [? Iziu. ?]

Were they older or younger than you?

They were all older. I'm the youngest.

Did you live in a town or in an urban setting?

No. I lived-- till 1941, I lived in the town Lwów. It's a big city. And then when they organized the ghetto in Lwów, we all moved to a small town, Bóbrka. Because already in 1941, when they organized the ghetto, they didn't give the ration-- the coupons for food for people over 50. This mean, my parents couldn't get already. And in a small town, where my mother's family lived, was easier to get produce. So we all moved to Bóbrka.

Can you please describe what was the social status of your family? Would you consider middle class?

I would say middle class.

And you already said that your father was a learned man. So I guess that you had important religious affiliations. You were Orthodox.

We were Orthodox.

What about political affiliations, did you have any?

Yes. We were very Zionist-minded. And I was a leader in the Jewish scout group. In Hebrew, they call Hanoar Hatzioni. We all children belong to any Zionist organization-- not from the same party, but Zionist-minded.

And did you have relationships and contacts with non-Jews?

Right. I always went to a public school. I had a lot of friends, non-Jewish one. The school that I went was economic high school. For 100 children, only two Jewish children were accepted. And I was one of the-- that had the privilege to go to this school.

Did you find much antisemitism?

Very much so.

In school or in general?

General and in school.

Can you tell me something about it?

It's really you-- wherever you turned around, when they recognized, you they called you right away dirty Jew. That was the name for the Jewish people. You were restricted. My brother, who was a genius, really, when he finish the Jewish high school, he wanted to go for medicine. In Poland, you couldn't get into any medical school.

He went to Italy, to Siena. And he studied medicine there. But unfortunately, he came for vacation home in 1939. And he couldn't go back. So in April '44, he was killed with all my other sisters. I was the only survivor then.

How sad. When did you first hear about Hitler and the Nazis, Mrs. Wilner?

We heard in 1938, '37. And it really didn't hit us right away. It always like-- it's impossible. You cannot comprehend this. You cannot visualize. But in 1939, when the war broke out in September, our part of Poland was taken over by the Russian.

That was, I guess, the-- that they made with the Germans that part of Poland, Russia will take. And the western part of Poland, Hitler took-- Germany took. So from 1939 to 1941, Russia was-- took over our public city.

What was life like then?

The life was if you worked, you could manage. And being my whole family, it's only my father, even, got a position, then, to teach other children. But then the religion was--

Forbidden?

--not forbidden, exactly, but limited, let's say. To the synagogue, you couldn't go so often like they used to be. But was better than by the Germans.

When war approached did your family ever consider emigration?

It was out of the question because you don't have the means. We didn't have the means. It was a big family. And the only thing you wanted to save your life. So we went to Bóbrka.

Were things better when you went to Bóbrka?

In the beginning, was-- we wanted that we could get food. And they took us to labor, to the hard labor, like the young people-- silly, even, sometime to clean the toilet with a little brush, not with a big brush. But to make you feel so low, you didn't have any-- how to explain? Only you couldn't feel that you yourself, you once were somebody. You became a nobody.

And then came the-- they called this Akcja. Akcja meant they get together all the Jews-- how to-- on a big place, middle of the city. They were going from house to house. And this was already in Bóbrka because the German came in 1941.

And between my mother's brother and his son, they had two houses together. They built a shelter, a wall. And when they took us to work, the younger ones, they put the older people and the fragile, the sick ones, in this shelter.

And then the soldiers went with the neighbors, non-Jewish neighbors, to look for Jews. And the neighbors showed that this is something suspicious because this wall never was before. And they broke in and took out. The family was then about 35 people in this shelter. And then between there was my brother too.

And my father told them, when he saw that they will be taking away to the train, he said, my son knows few languages. Maybe you can use him. And they took him out from the group and put him on the side. And my parents and about 200-300 people went to the train. And we never knew where, what happened.

Did you know where the trains were going? Did you have any idea of what was happening?

We tried to get information. And some said to Belzec. But we never heard from none of them. Then they took out from other little towns, must have been about 2,000 people then in one day.

Were you aware of the existence of ghettos and concentration camps at that point?

Ghettos, yes, but concentration camps, we didn't know nothing because they didn't-- in this part of Poland, it's-- we knew that you had from the west Poland that they taking to labor. And they took even non-Jews to labor too. But this we thought just to work in factories or what because they need the ammunition to build.

But didn't know about it?

We knew. And you couldn't believe it. You see, it's something-- I can't-- your mentality is so limited then. That's the horror what you-- I didn't have to-- you pass by. And after this Akcja, you saw people who want to run away. They shot them there. And they were laying on the sidewalk or in the streets.

Right. But you couldn't imagine what was going on. You couldn't believe it.

You couldn't believe it. You couldn't visualize. You always lived with a fear. Your life was a fear because you don't know what in the next hour be with you. You didn't have time, even, to feel sorry for those people because next will be for you too.

Was just survival.

Yeah, just survival because the parents, they took, was before the High Holidays. And I remember like today, we were sitting like you sit shiva. But you didn't know if they alive or not. But you didn't go to the synagogues. You didn't have synagogues because they burned them right away and destroyed them.

How old were you when the war started?

The war-- I was in mine-- beginning 20s.

And what is your first memory of war? What do you remember as a first thing that happened?

The first thing what happened, we heard the bombs were falling. And this was in September '39.

That's when the Russians occupied Poland.

First, the German came.

First, the Germans.

The Germans came into the city. And after the bombs, when was the city bombed, and right away, we saw in the bakeries were lines. And everything was limited. And immediately, it was like a stop.

OK. So what did you do after they took away your family in Bóbrka?

We were-- it's a different story because I had prepared. My best friend gave me her papers. And I had prepared my papers.

Identification, you're talking about?

Identification as a Catholic. My name was Stefania Ptecka. My sisters had papers prepared too. When they made the liquidation-- this was in 1943 or '42.

What-- this was a liquidation of a ghetto?

Liquidation, this mean liquidation of Jews. They came out that non-Jew has right to live. And they again had the Akcja. And all Jews had to go to this place, certain point. And they said that they will send-- they made two lines. They were sent to labor camp. And so they put the Wertvolle Jude, what they call people who are-- who can they use, who has any-- some--

Useful.

--useful, that's true. They put on one line. My sister was a very good dressmaker. And they told her that she will be safe because they need her profession. But they-- the German that she worked for him told her, your family cannot be safe. You and your child can. And you'll be safe.

And as the people that was there-- a doctor, one, and a tailor-- in this tailor's house, he had a shelter. And he put his family there in the shelter. And we four of us, my sister, and her husband-- no, five, we were-- my sister, and her husband, the other sister was single, my brother, and myself. And we went to this shelter.

When they came to the point, my-- that's what they told us later. They said, my nephew, my sister's only child, should go on this side. And she should remain on the other side. And she said, wherever my child goes, I'm going with my child. And they took all those people who were useful, sent to Janowska camp.

And the others had to dig their own grave. And they all bury in this grave. They shoot them, shot them right there and in the grave. One man was very-- he thought that it's no life for him anyway. What the difference? While he had the shovel, he hit the German. But he didn't do nothing to him because the metal part fell away. So he was shot like the others.

How did you learn about this incident?

The people from after I survived. We went. And we have a picture of this big grave. But I don't remember where it is, but I had. Because people who were-- some from this town run away from Janowska camp. And they-- we had-- in the woods, we knew that there is a group of people in the woods. And those who left, run away from Janowska went to the woods. And they lived through the war. And after the war, they went back to Bóbrka. And people told them what happened.

What happened to you and the rest of your family that were in the shelter at the tailor's house?

When we finally-- we heard them coming, and they were-- the soldiers were all over in the house because we were underneath the house, then it stop the shooting. They didn't-- you didn't hear no more the shots. We were there for seven days. We didn't have no nothing prepared because we thought it's the Akcja, like usually, after they take away a few people, the rest is still safe.

So we went out in the morning. And you could see. You cannot imagine. I'm talking now like this would be a book, not a true story because you cannot imagine. People were still laying on the ground, pillows, everything was lying there.

So we decided, early in the morning-- the tailor's family went to their friend, non-Jewish friend. And we had one family who were helping the Jews. And we came over early in the morning and said to her, please, keep us only till we can get to the woods. We want to go to the woods and be there with the rest.

And I didn't look Jewish. And I had my papers ready. This was a Palm Sunday. I got dressed on top of my clothes what I wore, a long skirt like the pace--

Peasants?

--peasant, boots with a scarf, and the palms in my hand. Because in Palm Sunday, you go to the church to bless the palms. And I walked towards a very small town that we had prepared that he will take us to the woods. We spoke to him, promise him reward for it. I was once in his house. All the houses look alike. They don't have numbers.

I felt I'm walking and somebody is with me and tells me where to go. It's-- some people wouldn't believe it, but this was like from God or from-- was dictating me what to do and where to go. And I came to his house. And he saw me. And he looked like a ghost, that I'm a ghost. He really didn't want nothing to do with me.

And I explained to him that my rest of the family is in this in this place. And he will be rewarded if he goes from them. So he put me in a-- for the winter, they used to storage potatoes and all the vegetable, like beets. And it was a cave with straw in it. And he put me in there, in this cave.

And I was there three days because I came Sunday. He couldn't go on Monday to pick them up. So he says, he'll go Tuesday. I gave him the address, the name where to go. He came there.

And the woman said, they all gone. She put my family in a barn because everybody was afraid to have in the house. You couldn't have in the house the Jews. So they helped them this way. But and a boy was playing ball. And the ball fell up on the barn. And he climbed the ladder. And saw the people, my family there.

And he started screaming, Jews are sitting here. Jews are here. And they had to run away from this place because-- and while they were running, the Gestapo took them and shot them right there. That's what the woman told me and told this man.

So I was sitting there. And this gave-- it's no life for me. Then I walked from Bóbrka, from this place, to Lwów dressed as a peasant and carrying, like milk they carry, and walk back to Lwów. Because there, I know people. And I was already not Jewish then.

I had my papers. I didn't have nothing to do. And I got a job as a governess. And I explained to the people that my father is a officer-- was a officer. And they were looking for him. So we had to leave the house. The family spreaded out because they're looking for my father. So they will take the family. Because they look for Polish officers too.

And the lies that I live, my whole life was lie, it was not mine do. I'm not so smart. It was like everything somebody told me what to do, where to do. And I work very hard. But by miracle, I survived.

How long did you work as a governess?

I had a few jobs, not one, because when I saw it's getting dangerous-- because I had to go to the church

Sunday with the family for the mass. I knew the religion very well because I always was in a public school. So when it was Catholicism, you had to sit in the class. So you learn all the prayers. And it was times I really cannot collect together no more because I lived such a life with fear and lies that when you lie, you can sometime give yourself out. I was once caught in the street. Gestapo took me to the-- I looked suspicious.

Stop your roll.

When you're being interviewed because that's a beautiful thought. And I think it should go on the tape.

You were describing when you were once caught by the Gestapo. What happened?

Yes. They took me to the station. I looked suspicious for them. I had the papers, everything was clear. My Polish language was very good, no accent. And they start asking me questions about religion. And the stupid question was how many times the bell rings when you go for a confession. So I answered them, the bell doesn't ring then. And this way, whatever question they ask me, I had the right answer. And as a woman, they cannot prove that you're Jewish. And they let me go. And after this, I change the place.

Did you stay in Lwów still? Or did you go somewhere else?

Yes. I was in Lwów. Because in a small town, you don't have the opportunity to do things. Once, I went to a dressmaker. And she was needed help. She was doing in her house. So I came there to work as a dressmaker, to help her sewing. And I told her the same story, that they're looking for my father. So I changed the place.

And I didn't volunteer to go out too much, just to the church on Sunday. It was a different church than I lived with the-- as a governess. And then I found out that-- through I don't remember to whom-- that friends of my family are hidden in certain place by a non-Jew family.

One was my sister's-- oldest sister's boyfriend, not the one that she married, before she married. He and his family were sitting there. And we were very good friends. And when they told me there where they sitting, one day, I went over there. And they were shocked to see me alive because they heard the whole family perished.

And this man was my husband later. We got married after-- soon the war finished. And when was very dangerous already towards the end of the war in 1944, he always let me know that it's almost the end of the war because they were listening to radio on this. And I went in hiding with them for a weekend.

But this was in the dressmaker's place I was living then. The day when I left for hiding, they came. The Gestapo came looking to her house. Something she was on suspicious for them-- not because she had me, only some political.

Till today, I don't know because if I would be there then, you can be sure that I would not be alive today because they took her away for questioning. And then she didn't come back to the house. They let her go. She didn't come back to the house. She disappeared on-- I don't know where, on the Polish side or something. I couldn't find out after the war what happened. I was looking.

Was she Jewish?

No. No. She must have be a political something or because she didn't have a husband. I don't know what-- where her husband was. And that's what means when we say, it's meant to be. [YIDDISH]. In Jewish, they say this. Never can tell.

So you stayed with the other family?

With the other family. But this was two days or three days. And the war, half city was German, half city was still Russian. Because Russia came back to Poland in 1944.

And what happened?

After the city was liberated, we saw the soldiers from the window on the back of the house. We invite them, the Russians soldiers to the house. And we went to the already my husband's family. He had a sister and a aunt there. And we went to a place where they were bringing soldiers, wounded soldiers.

And we came to the woman who was hiding went with us, who was hiding them for money. Her nerves were shot too because she was scared. Imagine at the same house, they had to give up a bedroom for the German's officers. So in the same household, she had Jews, and she had a German officer sleeping in the first bedroom. It's unbelievable.

How long was your husband's family hidden in there?

He was from 19-- about a year, two years, almost, they were there-- two years.

Could they go out or were they in hiding all the time?

No. They were all hiding in a basement in the cellar. And it's-- when-- it was so low that my husband's knees grew together. He couldn't straighten out when it was already--

Liberated.

--liberated. And we went to this place where they had. So they were suspicious for us too, the Russian. And they took separate each of us in a different room, questioning us how we survived. And because everybody said the truth, so they accepted us there. And we stayed with them till we were able to go out on our own.

What did you do then?

We wanted to go on the Polish side. But then when Russia come, you have to work there too. It's-- nothing is free. So whatever they let us do to have a job until we were able to go on the Polish side illegally. And then we contact my family in the United States. My mother's sister lived here.

Did you know that she lived in the United States before?

I knew because every time she sent us a letter was a \$2 bill in it. And if you don't believe in miracles, this is another miracle. One night, I was dreaming and I saw this envelope. And on the envelope was an address, Sarah Hoover, 1911 Albemarle Road, Brooklyn. But this is a very hard address because ask me today my sister's address, I don't remember. I really don't. And I woked up my husband. And I said, write down this address. And we will write to my aunt.

So the information came to you in a dream of the address? Or had you heard?

Right. In the dream came the address, that envelope. You know how a airmail envelope looks, the blue, red, and--

White.

But I'm telling those stories. But to live the time, you-- it's-- I would not believe that a human being can go through and be normal after. The work, the-- how they lower your standards and your esteem, you were really dirt. They didn't have no respect for nobody.

And even though you were living with-- under a different identity, did you still feel that treatment? Did you still feel it affected you in that way? Were you suffering hunger, for example, or mistreatment, things like that?

No. The times when I was in the cave, the times when we were in-- and during-- you couldn't get enough food. You always were hungry. You always were looking for something. But even was-- when I was in this--

already on the Irish papers, what we call the name, I couldn't sleep in peace. I always was afraid.

I was always-- you don't know tomorrow if you be alive or not, if you catch you, or if they recognize you. You come from a city, a culture city, a big city. And all of a sudden, you feel like a ant on the floor, like a worm hook. You don't have no-- you don't think about yourself, then, as a human. It's like a-- I cannot explain to you that.

It's miracles, I will say, just plain miracles. And I feel that God must have had something in mind that I survive. Because I felt always, we really have to rebuild our nation. And the Jewish people would be proud one day to be Jews. And that's my goal till today.

I am very proud that I'm Jewish, my children are Jewish. And they are all very involved with the second generation. Because somebody has to. We are-- already, our group, survivors, are getting old. And every day here is less of us remain. So somebody has to keep it up not to forget because this is a period of our history that has to be taught again and again. And nobody should forget about it, what happened to Jews from 1939 to 1944.

Were there other members of your family that survived, Mrs. Wilner?

No, not-- only one cousin, who was in the woods. He survived and lives in Israel, has a family. And we are like brothers and sisters because after we were free, he stayed with me. So he went illegally to Israel. And when he came there, they arrest him too. And he was in prison. Of course, was then England.

And he threw through the window names of his-- he had uncles, his father's brothers-- my whole family lives in Israel before the war. And he threw out a piece of paper with a name. And somebody picked it up and told this uncle that he is in this prison. And they start war. And he was freed. And he lives still today in Israel. We see each other very often. All the happy occasions, we share.

Where did you get married?

Got married in Lwów in November the 28th. We were free in June. And we got marry in November.

And when did you leave for the United States?

Oh, United State-- we had plenty yet from Lwów till we reach there.

Oh, you still stayed there for a long time?

Not long time, the same year. And we went to the Polish side because from Russia, you cannot go no place-- to the Polish side. And there, we got in touch with my aunt. And my cousin was a bodyguard of Eleanor Roosevelt. He was a colonel. And you have to guarantee, if you bring somebody over to the United States, that they not going to be a burden to the government. And was the strong papers from him that helped us to go.

We had to go to Romania. I was pregnant then. So my oldest daughter was born in Romania. I didn't want to have a child born in Poland. And from Romania, we got the letters that the first consul will be in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, because this was the 1946. 1945, the war finish completely in the Polish side too. And we came to the United States April 1, 1947.

You came to the United States with your husband?

With my husband and my child.

And your child. And any other members of the family?

Nobody was alive.

What about your husband's family?

Too my husband's family, he had a aunt who was hidden together. She survived. And she went to-- her daughter was in Warsaw too on papers on different name. And they moved to Vienna. She's not alive, but my cousin is still-- her daughter is still alive in Vienna.

What was your physical and mental state when you were liberated, do you remember?

Yes, I remember. I was only crying because I couldn't believe that I don't have no more family. We were very close. And no purpose of living except that I talk myself into that this horrible thing cannot happen again and that we really have to do something, but no laughter in the household.

When my youngest daughter was married, she gave a toast to me. And she says, the one thing only that she is so thankful to her future new husband, that he brings laughter in her house-- in her life because my house never was laughter. It's always whatever happy things happen, I always was thinking, why my family didn't live to see something in their life?

Mrs. Wilner, was your religious orientation affected by the Holocaust?

Mine? Yes.

In what way?

Because I start questioning the God. On the other hand, I felt he had the purpose to let me live. But why not the others? Why can-- how could this happen in the 20 century? It's-- you cannot think one maniac can do a damage like this. But unfortunately, we see now, again, history repeats themselves. And we cannot do much for it too.

Do you think there's something we can do about it?

I am not political-oriented to give my opinion. But I do feel that this barbaric thing what's going on has to be stopped. And we cannot let it go like it happened by Hitler.

When did you start talking about your experiences, about the war, and whom did you talk about it?

I-- for a long time, we didn't speak between us, even my husband. And we didn't want to burden the children. But once-- my children were always very good when we came from work. I was working with my husband. And one of my daughters said to me, why you think we such a goody-goodies? It's only because we don't want to hurt you anymore. We want to give you more pleasure. But then I think it was after my husband passed away.

When was that?

And he's 22 years dead. He died in 1972. We start talking-- I start talking to them. And my daughter taped little by little, not too much. Because it was very hard. With my husband, too, we always-- in our-- between us, we were questioning. But my husband became more religious after the war. And I became less religious. So I am a very devoted Conservative Jew. I have a kosher home. But it's not the same feeling like I had in my home. It's always-- there is a question in my mind.

How many children do you have, Mrs. Wilner?

I have three daughters, all married.

What are their names?

Erica, this name after my mother's name-- my mother. And I have Cheri, it's named after my husband's mother. And Susan is named after my husband's father and my father.

Do you belong to a survivor organization?

Yes. I belong and am active in New Life club. This is like our family, extended family. We have a lot in common. I don't have to tell you. We trying to do our social work for the community. We active in the community. And we trying the second generation should take over. A few are going to the schools to teach about Holocaust.

Even I went to the Grandparents Day in San Francisco. And they were learning about Africa and how the life in Africa was for. Somehow, when my granddaughter introduced me and instead to say, my grandmother comes from San Diego, she says, my grandmother comes from Poland. And the teacher picked it up. And she asked me, would I come to the class and tell them my story of surviving? Because the children are learning how the South African survived.

So it's-- we're trying to do the best that shouldn't be forgotten what happened in our lifetime shouldn't be ever, ever again. It's our purpose. And I'm active in our synagogue and the sisterhood. I'm on the board. And I try to give-- I'm very thankful for to being in the United States. And Israel is my pet. I love Israel.

Did you apply for war reparations?

I apply. But I am-- no, I really didn't apply for war reparations because I was not in a concentration camp. I was only survived because I changed my name and religion. So I cannot. Couldn't-- but lately, it came out that anybody who survived could apply. So I sent it in. But I don't think anything will come out from it.

I think what we did here, we started from zero. And we worked very, very hard to begin here. But the children always had the education was in our mind coming first. We didn't go on vacation till after we celebrate our 25th anniversary. That was our first vacation, to go to Israel.

I wonder, after all the experiences you had and the mistreatment, what is your attitude towards the Germans, the Austrians, and the Poles?

Very bitter. I am still-- the Poles, I'm bitter because-- because of them, they took out my family from the shelter. The Germans, I don't have to tell you. Even the language bothers me.

You already alluded a little bit to it. But do you think another Holocaust is possible?

I hope that this will never repeat. I don't think so. I think having our country-- now, Israel. Before, they used to say, dirty Jew. They couldn't tell us, go from here to someplace because we didn't have a place for ourselves. But now, we have Israel. And I don't think that for the Jews-- a Holocaust, it's a Holocaust now in--

Bosnia.

--Bosnia, yeah. But I hope this will never, never repeat. I don't think so. I don't think so. We work very hard for it, should never again happen.

Mrs. Wilner, what are the lessons that we have to learn from the Holocaust?

The prejudice, that you have to really-- I personally feel that no human being should have the power what Hitler had. The hatred, the hate in him builds up in the other people, bring out the worst instead the best, the worst in a human being. I am not political-oriented. Oriented, I am, but not qualified to say. But I don't think in the United States could something happen like this. I hope not.

Thank you very much for your time.

And I hope Israel will be free and prosperous. That's my wish for Israel because this is our land. That belong to us. Thank you.

Thank you very much.