Immediate grandparents, whoever you can remember.

I was born in 1930, and when I was born, it was Czechoslovakia, in a village called VelkÃ© Komjaty. As I was growing up, in 1939, it was taken over by Hungary, and of course, the name changed to Magyarkomjat.

And I come from a family-- we were six children, mother, father, grandmother, and my mother's family lived in another part of the Carpathian Ukraine. I was the fourth, and then I had two-- a younger sister and a younger brother.

Would you state your maiden name and your married name also and then your sisters' and brothers'?

My maiden name was-- I went the name of Rosie Berger, and my married name is or was Risa Stillman. My older brother was Nathan. My sister was Helen. My other brother was David Berger.

Then I had a younger brother, Leiba Berger, and a smaller sister, Haichu Berger. They were around-- I really can't remember the age difference between my younger brother and sister, but I believe there must have been like about three years' difference. And my older brother, Nathan-- when he was 17, he went to the nearest town nearest, which was Nagyszollos. And he was learning a trade.

My sister, at the age of 16 or 17, went to Budapest. Having lived in a small place, there really was not much work for young people, so she went to Budapest. And then later on, my other brother, David, followed her as well.

We had a very, very nice family life. It was a close, family although making a living, as I recall, during the war years was very, very hard. But we sort of stayed together, and there-- my mother was a wonderful person. She always tried to teach us, no matter how hard times were, to always look on the brighter side. And as I said, it was-- my grandmother was living with us. She was elderly or so I thought at that time, being a child, and quite ill, and again, we tried to take care, nurse her back to health.

And my parents were extremely religious people and had great, great values for life and morals, wonderful moral values. And they were just-- I look back, and I realize how very, very much they taught me as a child, especially for the concern of your fellow human being.

And anyway, life progressed. We went to school. We heard the rumblings of war. At that time, in the 1940s, '43, '42 and '43, the news started trickling out from different places about the Jews in Poland and Germany. And how perilous the times were.

And as a child, I remember listening to them. The parents were trying to talk among themselves so they would not upset us children, and they were telling us what they were doing, what the Germans were doing with the Polish Jews, killing them, deporting them, and all that. And I especially remember one evening. I was at a rabbi's house. I must have gone over for some reason.

And there was a very, very frightened young woman who came in, and there was such a hush throughout the house. And the rabbi and his wife told me, please, don't tell anyone that you saw this lady here. And I, of course, didn't know what was going on, and later on, they told me that she had escaped. She was escaping from Poland, from one of the ghettos, and trying to make her way to that part of the region.

And in any case, we, again-- being children, we were affected by it, we realized, because we could see the fright in our parents' eyes. My brother was drafted into the service, my older brother Nathan that is. You could see the fright in the eyes of the parents.

And then you, of course, had very little access to news since at that point radios were totally forbidden, and so were newspapers for Jews. And we started hearing about the deportations, and I remember my mother had packed a little suitcase and had it-- for each of us and had it sitting there just in case that we have to leave.

Unfortunately, that, against all hope-- we kept on hoping that day would never come. Unfortunately, that day did come, and the German SS people came. And this was after Passover. I believe it was in April. They took our whole family. They stormed into the house and told us, you can't take anything with you, just your personal belongings, a few personal belongings, and not knowing-- everybody was frightened and, not being able to do anything, you had to cooperate with them and follow them.

And at that time, we were taken to a ghetto and to Nagyszollos. And we were there from after Passover till after Shavuot, which I really-- it have been about May. And again, life there-- everybody was hurled together in one room. There were many, many people. Nobody-- even people that didn't know each other.

And we were sitting there, waiting to see what the next step was. Of course, the day came again where they told us, everybody get ready and march, and at that time, my family and so many, many other people were marched to the train station.

The streets were virtually deserted. There wasn't a person out on the street, and at that time, it just felt so eerie that in a very, very busy town you wouldn't see anyone on the street. Of course, being so young at that time, I really didn't understand the reasoning, the logic behind it, that everything was done in such secrecy and didn't want the public, most likely, to know.

And as the story has been told so many, many times, we were hurtled into the trains and practically on top of each other. There was no room to stand or sit or lie down and no sanitary facilities, no water. People were starting to get thirsty, very little food, whatever we were able to bring with us. People were very kind with-- if one didn't have a piece of bread and the other one had it, they did share.

I remember a couple of men standing up by the little opening that was in the cattle car, pleading with-- when the train was stopped, pleading with the guard, please send us a little bit of water, send us some water. And all I heard was some very, very loud shouting and very horrible words, you swine, you go back, and just terrible, terrible words. I do have difficulty even today remembering.

Unfortunately, I really can't remember how many days we were-- nights and days we were in that train. It seems like eternity. And there were always the-- the story was that they were taking us to work. We were going to go to a work camp, and so people said, well, of course. So the war can't last forever, so we will go to work, work camp.

And we arrived in Auschwitz on a very cool morning, and all of a sudden, it was just-- it was horrible to see all the SS men walking around with the dogs, with these big dogs, and shouting and yelling. And that's when the sorting started, to the right and to the left, and my mother started screaming, you can't-- I want my children with me.

And so an SS man came and just pushed her aside. My mother and the two smaller children went one way. My father was pushed over the side with a man, and I was pushed over on another side. And from there, we started marching to a barrack building.

And it was just indescribable, painful sadness. And again, we walk into one of these barracks, and right away-- they were very, very efficient, very organized, I must say-- started cutting off your hair. As soon as you were cut off your hair, they gave you tattoos and, of course, your prison uniforms.

Do you have a tattooed on your--

I did, but I had it removed when I came to this country. My cousin, who's a physician-- he says, you don't need that with you, have it removed. So I had it removed the first year that I had arrived here.

After we were sort of processed, again, we marched into the camp, which was called Lager B, and that's when everything started opening up. And my thoughts, my eyes-- everybody told me that my mother and the children would be going to another camp. We were designated to go to work.

And the first hour I was there, I saw this horrible smoke and the flames coming from some distance from where I was. And there were people in the camp there already. There were some Polish people there. Then suddenly, I asked-- I said, where is that-- what is all that smoke? And one of the women tells me, that's where they're burning your mother's--

I had a hard time believing that because I didn't think that human beings were capable of doing anything like that to other human-- innocent human being, children, young children, babies, people, living people. I said no.

And I refuse to believe it. I said, oh, what a horrible thing to say to me. I said, you're not telling me the truth. And so anyway, she says, you'll find out if you don't believe me.

Much to my horror, I did find out that it was true. I remained in the camp for several months. We did go to work. We had to get up very, very early in the morning for zahlappell. Appell. To me, it seemed like probably 2 o'clock in the morning. It probably was like about 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning.

Of course, food was a big, big problem because you lived on a piece of bread that you received the night before and a little bit of soup when you came back from work. We were taken by trucks to fields where we were digging ditches and, of course, from early morning until late at night constantly watched by guards.

Everybody tried to obey to the nth degree, but of course, there were some guards that-- they just enjoyed hitting somebody or pushing somebody or punishing somebody. But it's pure sadistic pleasure that they got out of it. Again, that--

Excuse me. Was this an Auschwitz?

This was an Auschwitz, yes.

In Birkenau.

Yes. Again, we-- it was every day, and in between, as people started getting weaker for lack of food, a lack of medicine, and sicker, everyone-- once a week, we had what they called the selections, inspections. And again we were stripped naked, and Mengele himself would be standing there, who would, of course--

A little louder, please.

OK. Mengele himself was there and selecting people for the crematorium. There are so many incidences. There was a young girl, a beautiful, beautiful young girl. She had a terrible infection in her leg. Later on, I found out it was gangrene.

I can still hear this crying and screaming, the pain that she was in. Several of the people tried to protect her and tried to keep her so she would not be-- they couldn't report-- we didn't want to report her illness because we knew that she would be killed immediately.

So we tried to keep it a secret, and we tried to protect her from it. But unfortunately, they found out, and they were not too many choices. They did take her.

There were people who could no longer stand it, and they would run up against the fence, the barbed-wire fence, and, of course, be executed. And this happened daily. The guards were brutal, always shouting, always-- they walked by you, if they were close enough to you, slap you in the face.

We kept on going, and I guess when you're young you are a little naive and you think, well, tomorrow it will all end. Some miracle will happen. Another thing that, in retrospect, I keep on thinking back, we were still-- we never lost our faith. We were still very, very trusting in God, although later on, I said, how could you have done that to so many people?

But we did. We kept our faith. We kept on-- we kept on praying. We tried to keep the holidays, which was, now that I--

it was just part of your life. It was part of your upbringing. And we felt terrible that we had to work on the Sabbath. But of course, we kept on saying, God will forgive us. We really can't help it.

I stayed in Auschwitz until possibly September or October, and again, they went through the process of picking selections and put us on a train to an unknown destination, of course. While we were being loaded on a train, I saw many people who were left behind and who were destined for the crematorium, and they were screaming and yelling and just praying to God, please save us, save us.

From there, we were taken to Belsen-Bergen, and that camp was another horror, people who were almost dead from starvation, people who could barely walk. All you could see is the sockets of their eyes.

From there-- we only stayed there a short time, and we were again taken on the train and were taken to Braunschweig. This was-- must have been-- this was in December because I remember--

Of 1944?

Yes, of 1944. It was extremely cold. We were housed in a huge stable and were performing clean-up work on the streets. It was apparently bombed repeatedly, and we were cleaning away the debris on the street. We, again, worked from early morning until late at night with very little clothing. I remember I had a thin dress on in a very, very thin, little coat, no stockings. My feet were frostbitten. My hands were frostbitten.

We, again-- and again, with the dog, constantly being guarded by dogs and SS. They were just brutal in every way. We had several deaths every morning, people that just didn't survive the night.

I must say that there was one kindness shown by a German lady to me. While working in this debris, clearing out, they were living, these people-- this was in a residential area, no doubt. These people must have been living in the cellar. And she saw how terrible my feet were, my legs, and she ran out for a couple of seconds and put down a pair of stockings. And I think those stockings saved me for the rest of the winter.

Before we went to Braunschweig, while we were in Bergen-Belsen, we worked for a short time in the fields, gathering potatoes, and there were some men as well working from another camp nearby. And I just wanted to say this because I've never forgotten it. One of the men was on top of the roof of the building, a small shack there, really, and, with a hammer, trying to repair the roof.

And it was Yom Kippur day, and he kept on chanting the Kol Nidre. While he was hammering away, he kept on chanting the Kol Nidre. And that was-- it was just-- we felt a part of it. We felt that we were at the services even though we were cold, we were gathering potatoes.

Only a few feet away, as we were carrying those potatoes to a pile that were going on a truck, one of the men took a couple of potatoes and put it in his pocket, and the SS guard saw it. And he started beating him with a club to the point where he was not able to move anymore. And they made us watch that. And then he took his pistol and shot him.

Needless to say, you sort of lost a little bit of faith. Here is one man on the roof chanting the Kol Nidre, and here's another one being brutalized.

Anyway, I was in Braunschweig, and at that time, there must have been about maybe 200 of us. And again, the cold, the lack of food-- it was unbearable, and we didn't think we were going to last much longer.

From Braunschweig, we were taken to another town, and that was-- I never was able to learn the name of the town. We were taken at night. We were working in an ammunition factory, which was underground in a salt mine. We were taken there at dark and worked during the night and brought back in the morning. But the trucks were all-- they had the canvas on the sides, so we never were-- I never was able to learn the name of the town.

And I myself-- I had a terrible infection on one of my-- on a foot, one of my feet. And with having to go down in the salt

mines, that irritated it just even more, and I was just in terrible pain. I still remember that horrible pain.

It was just eating a hole in the back of my foot, and at that point, I didn't know how much longer I would be able to go on. And working there, we had some benzene, and one of the people working next to me-- she told me, she says, take a little bit of benzene, and apply it to your wound. And it did help, though. It did. It cleaned it out.

There were German civilians working in that ammunition factory as well, but of course, they were not allowed to have any contact with us at all. They were not allowed to talk to us, and they're not even allowed-- we were not even allowed to look up at a German civilian, so we were guarded constantly.

This was getting to be towards the end already, and people were losing-- I found a lot of people started losing their minds. They just went totally insane, and it was such a horrible sight, women, seeing them losing their minds. They were just not able to-- and again, people started dying.

We were there until April, and in April, again, we were herded into the cattle cars, as always, unknown destination. And we were just out in the open fields, going back and forth, back and forth, and we just didn't seem to be going anywhere, again, no food and no water. And we were jammed in like sardines again, standing room only. You couldn't sleep, many, many deaths.

And, however, at that time, you could hear-- we heard a lot of bombing going on and a lot of planes flying overhead. And again, I haven't the faintest idea as to where that was. It was in an open field. We were there for about four days. This was towards the end of April.

And finally, they emptied all the wagons and took us out in an open field with machine guns pointed all over, machine guns. I had later learned that the Allies were quite close by. And the SS had no place to take us at this point, so they had gotten orders to shoot everyone.

But at the very last moment, there was an SS officer who came on a motorcycle with orders. What had happened was that there must have been a negotiation between the Red Cross and the Germans because at that time, they put us all back into the cattle cars and went to, again, a small town. And we had gotten food already at that time and even blankets, and that was just a whole new, different world. And the following--

Still with the SS guards?

Oh, yes, yes, still-- except for when we got over to this new place, we were taken over by the Wehrmacht, and it was no longer the SS guards. And we were taken-- the next day, we had marched to a station, but at that time, the Wehrmacht were telling us the war was over.

And so we were walking, and there were many SS women and men still shouting horrible things at us, [SPEAKING GERMAN], schweine, and all that. And then we discovered that, yes, they took us to Denmark because we were taken over by the Swedish Red Cross.

Needless to say, after that, you started looking around for people who were still living, trying to get together, finding out who might be alive, who survived, and so forth. We did go-- we spent a couple of days in Denmark, and then go to-- went to Sweden.

And only then did we realize that we were liberated. However, the terrible pain of realization that so many people perished and so many of your close family perished as well just took a very, very long time to try to bring yourself to the realization that that was a part of it that-- that they won't be coming back even though you were sort of hoping and dreaming that they, too, survived.

And of course, only after we were liberated we realized the enormity of the horrible, horrible crime that was being committed against the Jews.

And you found absolutely no one from your family?

Oh, yes, my brothers and-- two of my brothers and one sister. One of my brothers, my older brother, who was in the army, then was deported to a concentration camp. He survived, and my sister and my brother, David-- they were in Budapest during the war. So they did. My mother and father, my grandmother, of course, my younger brother and sister-- they did not survive.

If you don't mind, we did not-- for the record, we did not name your parents' names as well as your sisters' and brothers'. We named those, but your parents-- you didn't mention their names. If you would-- yeah.

My father's name was Morris Berger, and my mother's name was Rose.

Rose?

Rose Berger.

And your grandmother, who was living with you?

Yeah, Zlata, Zlata Berger, yes.

What was your father's occupation? How did he make a living?

My father was a shoemaker.

A shoemaker?

Yes.

As far as school, you went to Czech public school?

I went to Czech public school, and I also went to a Hungarian public school. So I went to both. Yes, yes, Czech and--

As far as mingling with the non-Jewish world, you did mingle with non-Jewish children at--

Yes, yes, definitely. I had a few-- we definitely did. I had a couple of friends who were-- I consider them my very, very good friends, and they were not Jewish. However, we had sort of a couple pieces of land right by our house, which we grew corn on and whatever--

Vegetables.

--vegetables and so forth. And I remember the father of my very good friend-- and this was when the situation was started getting so desperate-- came over and asked my father-- he says, that part of land-- I want you to sell it to me because it will give me more land, and my father said, I really can't sell it to you. I need it to feed my family.

And he said to him-- he says, well, if you're not going to sell it to me, he says, one of these days it's going to be mine free. So that was the father of my very good friend, but yes, I did. Definitely we--

Did feel any discrimination when you were going to school when the war started already?

Yes, yes, I did, definitely, definitely. There were name-calling.

Name-calling.

Yes, yes, definitely, although many of our-- but a few of our neighbors I felt were very nice and very sympathetic. But

at school, I definitely felt it. I felt it from the kids, and I felt it from the teachers as well, yes. It was a very difficult situation even then because you were singled out.

Had you returned at all after the war to your hometown?

No, no, I had not. No, I never did. I somehow-- well, first of all, I don't think I could have because that was-- after the war, it became Russia, and they were very strict about traveling in that part of the country, that part of the area.

And somehow I never had any desire to return. I felt that it-- even though that's where I was born and I lived part of my life there, it was a very, very unhappy time. It was a very painful time, and I have not returned.

How was your treatment in Sweden when you were-- after the war? And what kind of life was going on there?

Oh, the treatment in Sweden was wonderful. The people were very, very sensitive and very kind, and of course, they nursed back to health and to some sort of semi-normalcy. I have nothing but the kindest and most wonderful regard for the Swedish people.

We did live in what you call-- I wouldn't call them camps, but in--

--dormitories.

--dormitories, right, and then a few months after, everybody started feeling a little more normal and healthier. They provided school for the younger people or whoever wanted to go, and they were just wonderful. Individual families were fighting for us. They wanted to have us over to their homes and befriended a lot of people. Excuse me. And they were very, very kind, very, very kind and very helpful.

Did you befriend any family in particular while you were there?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did, several families. And of course, since we moved, too, I lived in three, four different places because as time went on, some people started immigrating to the United States. Many went to Israel I, too, wanted to go to Israel, and that was my aim.

But I knew that I had an aunt in Cleveland, Ohio, so I wrote to her. And by some miracle, she got the letter because all I-- I knew her name, and I knew the city that she lived in but, of course, no address.

Anyway, and so my family here pleaded with me, you seem to be the only-- at that time, I was-- they only knew of me being the only survivor. Please come here. You can always go to Israel after you've been here here. If you're not happy here, you can go there.

So that's how I ended up in the United States. However-- so as I said, as the dorms started-- the places started emptying out while many went to Israel or the United States, so we would end up in another city in Sweden as well, which was very nice. But they were wonderful. They provided us with--

Did you work at all while you were in Sweden?

No. No, I was not. No, I did not. No, I take that back. I worked for a very short time at some sort of a factory until they found out how old I was. They felt, no, I should not be working. I should be at school. So I really can't say that I worked in Sweden.

Did you study English while you were in Sweden?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did.

You have a wonderful command of English.

Well, thank you. Yes, I did. However, I really was not fluent, and when I came here, I could not communicate too well. However, it took me much less time to learn the language or to get to a point where I could communicate. And so I do realize that that helped immensely. I spent two and a half years in Sweden, so it did help quite a bit.

I don't know-- you've interviewed a lot of people, I'm sure, and even though so many years have passed and, as I said, I really can't remember places or dates-- it was a very, very horrible time-- I know it has left me-- it's never escaped me. I very, very seldom talk about it or I don't talk about it at all, really.

But it left me with a life where it's affected me terribly. It just-- it took something away from me. I find that I experienced very-- laughter is almost impossible for me. Joy-- not the kind of joy where you could enjoy it freely without any reservations. Somehow there's always something with me that-- it left me with a sense of sadness for the rest of my life, really.

Coming to the United States, did that change--

No.

--life for you?

Well, it changed life for me physically, definitely, but emotionally, mentally and emotionally, some, but not totally, really, not-- I can honestly say that emotionally, it changed some but not-- that feeling has never been able to leave me, that sense of sadness has never been able to leave me. It's just with me all the time.

Coming to the United States, how did your life continue? Did you find out about your living brothers and sisters while you were here, or was it still in Sweden?

No, it was in Sweden. I wrote to my sister in Budapest, and of course, again, she was no longer at the address that I had remembered. But I did write to her and did get a reply from her that, yes, she-- she was there and did not-- I've experienced very, very tough, times but-- so then she told me, while she was in Budapest, she kept on going back to [PLACE NAME], where my brother and his wife were living and, after several months, found out that they, too, came back, my brother and his wife, who was married at that time.

His wife also survived?

Yes, she did. Yes, she did. And that's how we-- and then after I came to the United States, I brought my brother and his wife here, and at that time, they had a child already. And my sister and her husband came to Canada in 1956, so we see each other. I'm glad that they're all here.

And you came to-- did you come to Cleveland when you came?

No, I came to Youngstown. I had a cousin living in Youngstown, and they felt that I should stay with them. And so yes, I did. I lived in Youngstown for about a year and a half, and I did-- after being here for three months, I got a job in a supermarket. And I also went to night school to take a few courses to continue my education.

And after that, I moved to Cleveland to stay with my aunt for a couple-- for a couple of years, and I met my husband in Cleveland in 1951. I came to America in 1948. So then I moved to Cleveland, and I met my husband in Cleveland. And we married in 1951.

And children?

We have one son. I have one son. My husband passed away in 1969, unfortunately, but I have one son who lives here in Scottsdale, and he--

Is that the reason you came?

That is the reason, definitely, yes. We were living in a small town in Lorain Ohio, which very few people most likely heard of, but anyway, but that was the reason that I came to Scottsdale, yes.

I hope you enjoy living here.

Oh, definitely, definitely, very, very nice people.

Your son's name is?

Mitch, Mitch Stillman.

Stillman. And what is his occupation?

He's a stockbroker. And he's married and just had a little baby, six weeks old, so that's pretty nice.

Yeah, that's wonderful. And you have been trying to sustain yourself all these years as a widow?

Oh, definitely, yes.

Working at--

Working, definitely. I've been working. And also I find-- I lived in a small town-- I lived in Lorain, Ohio, which is about 25 miles west of Cleveland, and yes, I was working there as well. And also, I was very active in the Jewish community with Sisterhood Agudath at the Temple and so forth.

And I was hoping to do the same here, and I do belong to Har Zion Sisterhood. Unfortunately, I don't have time to be as active as I'd like to be, and I'm looking forward to the day when I retire and I'll be able to do these things.

Well, I'm hoping that we covered everything. If anything stands out in your mind, a certain event, if you can think back, you could still add on to your experience. Unfortunately, it's impossible to cover everything.

Well, it's impossible, definitely. You've heard-- things were happening every minute. I think we-- really-- and I mean every minute. I mean very, very brutal treatment.

You fought for your life every minute. You fought for your life every minute.

You fought for your life, definitely. You fought for your life emotionally. You tried to remain strong through faith, through hope. You tried to stay out of sight. You tried not to make any waves.

But many times, that didn't help either because it all depended on the mood of the guard. And unfortunately, they were very, very vicious, very vicious, no-- I couldn't treat an animal the way they treated human beings.

Unfortunately, we're living through another war at the moment, and we're always on guard for anything happening, particularly to the Jewish people. Do you think anything as horrible as that could ever happen again?

I'm hoping that nothing as horrible like that can ever happen. Unfortunately, I can't say. What hurts most is that mankind has not learned from history. It hasn't softened his heart.

There's famine going on. There's brutality going on. Throughout the world is what I'm talking about, inhumanity from one human to another. And yes, at first, I said, this was-- there'll be nothing but love and kindness in the whole world after this, and I wish I was more optimistic about it. I really do.

I'm not talking necessarily to the Jewish people as a race that's something like this would happen, possibly not, but it can happen to another country, to another race. We can see what Saddam Hussein did to the Kurds. And here, too, it's just genocide.

So what do you feel? Unfortunately, I'm not-- because I just felt that human nature is not changing. There's still some time when they're around.

We have to be very alert, I think, to what's happening and what can happen.

Yes, yes, yes. I really don't think that it would ever happen to the Jewish people where they would be led to the slaughter like sheep as they were before. That I don't think will ever happen again.

Do you think it's because that we are more prepared or more aware?

More aware, I think.

More aware.

Yeah, more aware, and I don't know about possibly prepared, just more aware.

Mentally maybe.

Mentally more prepared, yes, yes, right. I think everybody was just caught, well, defenseless and helpless, totally.

Well, I thank you very much, Risa, for taking the time and coming and telling us your story, and I hope that your experience and many others will prevent some brutality somewhere along the way.

I pray to God, yes, that that should be the