

My name is Fran Gutterman. I'm at the home of Ester Wolrich, who resides in Brockton, Massachusetts. And I'm here to conduct an oral history interview. Ms. Wolrich was born-- what year were you born?

1927.

1927. And where were you born?

Radzyn Podlaski, Poland.

That's in Poland. OK. What was Radzyn Podlaski?

Radzyn. You can say just Radzyn. It doesn't make any--

What was it? Was it a city?

It was a city it. Wasn't a big city like Warsaw or something, but it was a city. It was a city. It was plenty Jews there.

It wasn't then rural? It wasn't like a farm?

No. No.

It wasn't a village.

It wasn't a village. It was a city.

What city was it near?

Near Lublin, Lublin, near Majdanek. It wasn't far. Near Miedzyrzec, which was a big city of a lot a, lot a Jews. We only-- in fact, from Radzyn, when the Germans came in, when they occupied Poland, a few months later they shipped us all out, all the Jews from Radzyn to Miedzyrzec, which was a city, a bigger city with more Jews. And that's where we were in the ghetto, in Miedzyrzec.

OK. You had your mother and your father. What were their names?

Malka and Jacob Bober.

Bober, that's B-O-B--

--O-B-E-R.

OK. And what did your father do for a living?

We had like-- my father before the war, he was like a salesman, really. He used to go to bigger cities, buy stuff for small merchants, and then ship it. And we had a store.

What kind of store?

We sold everything, like papers and--

What, wallpaper?

Wallpaper--

Like a hardware, a paint?

It wasn't a hardware store. It was more like we sold, like, merchandise, like, for clothing, but not clothing in the way as those things that they work, the Poles.

Like scarves?

The big scarves, the heavy scarves, the thin scarves, the heavy underwear, and the thin under-- we had everything, like all these things-- stockings.

And your mother also worked?

We all had the same thing. I mean, she was with him. So my sisters worked there. Two of my sisters lived in Warsaw.

OK. So you had five-- how many sisters?

We were six.

Six of you all-- six sisters?

Six sisters. Yeah.

And what were their names?

Their names was Hadassah.

She was the oldest?

She was the oldest. Then was Faigey. She was like two-- they were all two years apart. Then it was Henya. She was two years apart. And then it was Sonia. And then from them to me was quite a bit, maybe 10 years.

Oh, really? So you were really the youngest?

Youngest. And then after me, my father only wanted a son probably. And after me there was a two-year younger, Adele.

Adele?

Yeah.

OK OK. So you grew up in a city?

Yeah.

How old were you when you started going to school?

Probably seven. That's how we started.

You were seven years old?

And what kind of school did you go to?

A public.

So you were in a school with other Poles?

All Poles, yeah.

OK. So when you were going to school, what kind of relationship did you have with Polish students or Polish kids.

I lived in a really Polish area. Some of them were pretty nice, and some of them used to call you, like, Jew or something.

So did you feel the antisemitism?

You could feel it, that they didn't like Jews. You could.

OK. Well, I know that you were 12 years old when the war broke out in 1939. But in '36, or '37 and '38, as it got closer and closer to the war, did your parents ever think of leaving Poland and going elsewhere? Were there ever any talk of that?

No. No. No. Not that I remember. No.

Were you aware of any antisemitism in your city?

Yes. You could see, like, for the last-- when I remember, they used to put up signs. Like you had a store, that they shouldn't go in because it's a Jew. They used to give out little leaflets or whatever you call it.

Leaflets?

Leaflets.

Who are they?

Poles.

Poles?

Yeah. Like they used to say it in Polish, [POLISH] because that means don't buy, it's a Jewish place. This I remember.

And they'd do it in front of your father's store?

Well, by then-- I really don't remember this. But I know they did to big stores.

You had girlfriends?

Yeah, in fact, I have a very close friend, but I'm not in touch with her. She lives in-- she lives in New Jersey. We went to school together. She's the only one that I went to school with the same age. I used to live in number 13, and she lived in number 15.

She's Jewish?

She's Jewish, yeah.

Did you have any girlfriends that weren't Jewish?

Not-- we lived, like I said, and we played with some of them that weren't because we was kids. But close friends, no.

Were there any Poles that lived in your neighborhood?

Yes. Yeah. We lived in an area that was more Poles than Jews, really. Lived in a nice street, so the nice houses and everything, it was really-- it was really a lot of Poles there. But I went to school with them. I mean, they-- see, I looked like another Pole, like not a Jew. So I think something, that nobody really thought of me of not Jewish.

So if people didn't know you, they didn't make an assumption that you--

No. No. Not really. No.

OK. How old were you when the war broke out?

12.

12.

12. And do you recall-- well did your parents ever talk about what the situation was like for Jews in Poland? Do you remember them ever talking about it?

They used to talk, like, World War One, how it was. But nothing-- I don't think anybody dreamed that something is going to be like this. The only time they started thinking about was when it was very, very bad. Like '39, everybody was afraid because they heard that in Germany the Jews had shipped out and things like this. But if it doesn't happen right away to you, and you don't see it really--

I remember when they bombed Poland. OK? And we had next door a German cantor, that he went away from Germany. And the bombs were falling. And I was little. It was on a Saturday. And I said, Hazan, why don't you hide? And he said to me, Meine kinder, this is [NON-ENGLISH]. In other words, this is nothing. The bombs, you'll beg sometimes that you want bombs.

And this always stuck with me because I said-- I could see. I said, why don't you go lie down under the tree. And he just picked up his head, and he said to me, [NON-ENGLISH].

Which means, my--

My child, don't be a-- this is nothing comparing, in other words, what's coming.

Right.

See, because he was somebody that went away from Germany, and he was in Poland. And he lived not too far from us. This I'll never forget.

And you were about 12 years old at the time.

I was 12. Because in August was my birthday, in September the-- yeah. So I was 12 years old.

How did the first word of the war reach you? How did that Poland had been invaded?

We didn't know we were invaded. The war broke out at first, and we were right away, the next day, bombed. And in a few days later, the Germans were in our-- it didn't take long to occupy Poland. The only thing, when they fought was near Warsaw.

The Germans came into your city?

We had everybody. We had Russians. We had this. Like when they were fighting, a few hours we had Russians. Then a few then a few hours later, the Russians were gone and the Germans came in.

So both the Russians and the Germans were fighting.

Fighting.

And who at last occupied the city?

Germany. Germany.

Germany at last occupied. I see. When the bombing started, you knew at that point that war had been declared.

That it was war, yeah, because we had run away. I remember. We went to a little, like a farm. And we were hiding there. You could see from far away the fires, the bombs that's burning.

So when the war began, your parents took you--

Not mine-- it was just my mother because my sisters, two of my sisters were in Warsaw. They were with the biggest bombs because Warsaw was fighting badly.

What were your sisters doing in Warsaw.

They lived there. One of them was married, and one of them just worked. She lived there.

And how old were they?

They were much older. These were the oldest.

So they were in their 20s.

Oh, yes. They must have been. Like if I was 12, they must have been like 25.

This was Hadassah and Faigey.

No. Hadassah lived with us-- Faigey and Henya.

Faigey and Henya, OK. And your father?

My father died.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about that. Your father died before the war?

In April, right two days after Passover.

And how did he die.

He was sick. I don't know, but he was very sick, and he died.

You don't know what he died of?

No.

Do you remember how old he was at the time?

He was in the 50s.

So there was just your mother and your sisters.

And the sisters-- we were only three sisters.

At the time.

At the time.

Because the other two sisters were living in Warsaw.

Yeah. And my other sister was married. She lived in our city, but she-- we see-- I mean close, but she wasn't living with us. During the war, when her husband-- she lived with us already because they shipped us all out to a ghetto. This was very late in the fall.

Of 19--

1939 to '40, they shipped us out to Miedzyrzec, which was-- they congregated a lot of Jews from different parts, and they kept them there, from there.

OK.

Yeah.

So the first thing that your mother and you did was that you went to a farm.

We went away. They said on a farm they won't bomb, so you can hide better. So we used to lay in between the potato-- or in the weeds, where it's high.

In the fields.

You could see the planes touching them. And it was funny. In one little house that we stayed, they threw in a bomb. I don't know how-- miracles that we went out and we survived. But it just only took a few days, and then they occupied it. So it wasn't-- it was a few days of agony, staying with the Poles.

We knew a lot of them because they used to come and trade with us. So we used to-- we stayed with them, used to stay outside with where they kept the cows and everything.

So it was you, your mother, Adele, and Sonia--

Yeah.

--and Hadassah?

Yeah.

OK. So you were there for a few days.

A few days-- and then we came back. They said that the bombing stopped. We came back to the house. And then when the Germans came, in a few months-- took a few months later, they started to picking nice houses. They took away the things. That came in, they just-- whatever they saw, they took if they liked it.

What did you do during that time? You didn't go to-- did you go to school?

No more school for us.

And so did your mother continue to run her business?

No more business either, nothing.

So you just-- so you stayed home.

Stayed home.

And what did people do during that time?

Like, if you were a shoemaker or something, you probably did something. But whoever had something else to do-- and by that time, my sisters came back from Warsaw because Warsaw was very bad. They were bombed. They had no place.

That was Faigey and Henya.

Yeah. And they came back, and they stayed with us because we didn't even know if they were alive.

Did they come with their husbands?

My oldest-- my other sister, I think the husband didn't come with her. She stayed a while with us, and then she went back to Warsaw. But my other sister, the unmarried one, she stayed with us.

OK. So what happened after that?

After that, we stayed till the winter. The Germans took everything away. And then they shipped us to Miedzyrzec, to the ghetto.

Would you say that word again?

Miedzyrzec.

Do you think you could spell it?

Let me see. I can't spell it. I can write it on the--

Yeah. Sure.

It's a very--

Miedzyrzec?

Yeah. That's how it's spelled in Polish, but--

M-I-E-N-D-Z-Y-R-Z-E-C, Miedzyrzec.

Yeah. I mean, it's hard, but that's how it's spelled.

And that was near Radzyn?

Near Radzyn, only 27 miles-- 27 kilometers.

How did you go there, to Miedzyrzec? How did they take you there?

Oh, with buggies and things. There were people that had buggies, and that's how we went.

So all the Jews were sent there?

Not all of them. Some of them, they kept them for working or things. But we had a uncle. My mother's brother lived there. And we figured that we'll be better off there. But my sister and I stayed behind. We wanted to stay in the other. So we used to walk there. You know, we used to walk six--

Walk to where?

To Miedzyrzec.

Every day?

No, not every day. Like to bring things.

Oh, I see. To who?

To my mother.

I see. So you and your sister stayed in Radzyn.

Yeah, for a while. And then they made everybody really go. It was cold, and we had no place to stay. We stayed with a lot of people in one house. And we figured we're going to go.

Do you remember if there was a Judenrat in Radzyn?

Yes. Yes.

So during-- right after Germany invaded--

Yeah. A few months later, they made a Judenrat.

And did the Judenrat decide who would go to Miedzyrzec?

I really don't remember. They probably did, but I don't know. I don't know. But we really figured we were going to be better off than hanging around, staying with my mother's brother.

So you did stay in Radzyn.

I stayed in Radzyn. I used to go forth and back. See, for a while we didn't have nothing that we should-- like work or something. So I used to go buy stuff for cheap and bring it there. And they didn't recognize me. You know, I went like a Pole, all dressed up.

I was young-- Pole. Yeah. So I was dressed up. I used to go with the German buses.

So you weren't really allowed to do this legally.

No, no. Oh, no.

Did you have any papers to prove--

Nothing. I was young, so I had no papers. But it was scary what I did. But I used to do it plenty of times.



What did your mother do in Miedzyrzec?

Really, nothing. Nothing.

Where did she live there? Did she--

We lived with my uncle.

You lived in Radzyn there?

No. No. I lived in-- after a while, we all went back. Right away we stayed behind. We figured we had things. We figured we were going to sell it and have a little money. Because we had, from the store, a lot of things. So that's how we survived.

Did you hide anything? Did you, like any-- any things?

We probably did, but I don't-- I don't-- things like this I wouldn't-- I wouldn't even know. But I used to go forth and back. I used to bring the things. I used to go to on the farms to sell it and get some bread for it, things like this. And that's how we survived, from the things-- or our clothing. We used to sell everything, as long as we should get a piece of bread or something.

But with my uncle it was a little better because he had still a little-- they used to make cotton. I don't know what do you even call it. Like from lamb, the wool, they had a thing that all the--

A mill?

It's like a little mill. It wasn't a factory. But he had a room, and they used to come. They used to make it.

Weave?

Weave, like. And they used to bring food for it. So that's how we really survived, living with my uncle.

So when you were in Miedzyrzec--

In the beginning, you still could go out. But then after maybe a few months, they just closed it up. But I used to--

They didn't form a ghetto right away?

Right away wasn't a ghetto. But you knew, the Jews lived in one place. It wasn't closed. You didn't live in the nice area because it was a big city. This city really had-- it had a lot of Jews. And they-- we stayed in one area. But that area was still a little open. Then after a while, they closed it.

They made wires. And you couldn't go out. But I sneaked out.

Do you remember when this was?

It was, most of the time, in the wintertime.

So this was in 1940?

'40, '41. And then really the bad things started after a while. They really got-- they used to-- they shipped in a lot of Jews, not just from our city but from all around.

They shipped in Jews from other small, small places?

Small places to Miedzyrzec-- and they just crowded them up. It was hell there. Everybody lived together. We had nothing. Sickneses-- typhus was the worst. We were always sick that nobody thought that's going to survive because we had nothing, no medicine. If you got a little, they used to-- I don't know. People, doctors that still had it gave you, but it was really-- everybody was sick then.

Then was the worst, worst thing.

And where did you live? At first you lived with your uncle. When the--

We still-- yeah, we lived in the same house.

So your--

That house, he lived in a Jewish area that that house didn't ship out. The wires were just in the front.

So the house was part of the ghetto.

Part of the ghetto. And it wasn't just us already. There was more people.

You had to share the house with other people.

Oh, there were so many that came in, cousins and things. We all stayed already together. It wasn't already living, it was just--

OK. Do you remember very much about how the whole ghetto was formed, like if they had administrators there? Who ran the ghetto?

Well, they had-- they made like Jewish police, and they made like Jewish things. But the orders were from them.

Was there a Judenrat in the ghetto?

In most of all the places they had a Judenrat. They had like-- if they wanted to do something, they came first. They didn't do it anyways. But it was like Jews some of them knew what-- I don't think they knew what they're going to do, but we had some Jewish people that were a little higher than just the ordinary, plain like me.

But I really don't remember that much who-- if they-- they didn't do really nothing.

Did you have-- how did you get food?

Like I said, we used to bring it in. I mean, the food, they baked, like for the black markets, where people prepared. They had a little extra something they used to bake.

Did they have rations though? Did you get, supposedly, get any--

I don't remember if we had rations there. I really don't. I don't know. But I just know that a lot of people used to go out. Those that worked, they used to take them out and work outside for the Germans for something. They used to bring in little things-- like organized or something.

How about schooling? Did you--

No school. The war broke out, I haven't seen-- I didn't see school anymore. I was supposed to go in the sixth grade, and that was it. Never went back.

How long were you in the ghetto?

We were there till '42.

So you were there two years?

Two years.

When in '42?

I think-- I think we were-- when in '42? Like Passover time.

So you were there about two years?

Yeah.

And during those two years, that was your 13th and 14th years. What did you do every day?

See, what happened to me-- that's how I survived. The Germans needed people to work for them. I used to organize. I used to go out, out of the ghetto. I used to go to my other city, walk and do things. So I brought in stuff to eat.

And you could do this why or how?

I tried. I mean, I wasn't scared. I didn't even think that they'll catch me they're going to shoot you or something. I used to go on German buses, Poles buses, like travel, and have a little bundle with me. It used to be barley or something else.

No one ever questioned you?

Once, they-- somebody stopped me walking. And it was probably-- I just meant that I should survive. And he said, where are you going? It was a German patrol. I said, I'm going home. And he just let me go. If he would open and see that, would have take it or put me in a jail. I don't know. I did a lot of things.

They never asked for you to have-- to see your papers?

No, I was small. I mean--

So children never had papers.

I didn't. I didn't. I used to-- with the buggies in the beginning, when we could still go, I used to go all the time from one city to another to bring in stuff.

And you would do this on your own?

Well, my mother knew that I-- because see, I figured that they're not going to touch me because I was young. One time they took the whole buggy, and they brought it into the-- [? to hide, ?] like to the Gestapo. And they beat everybody. They took everything off. We had oil and things to cook with. We brought it in from another little city, from Poles that they sold, if you gave them away a watch or something. They didn't do nothing to me.

They-- everybody, they used to beat up everybody because they knew what we did. They let me go.

Why do you think they let you go?

I think because I was young, very young.

And they thought you were-- did they--

I don't know. They never asked me what I was then. But I was scared. After this I didn't really go because this I figured that's going to be the end.

You would go to other-- you would go to other towns.

From this city to my city.

How did you get there to these other towns?

In the beginning, we used to go with buggies. Then we used to walk, to walk six--

How would you get the buggies?

There used to be a few Poles' buggies. You used to go out and figure they're going in this time. Would you take me? They didn't even know that you snuck up or something like this. I used to do a lot of things with this.

Where did you get the money to buy these things?

I didn't. It wasn't for money. It's for exchanges really.

So you had merchandise?

Yeah. Some things that we had, or for clothing you knew that they're going to want because they didn't have it, but they had the food.

And you would bring this back to the ghetto?

Back to us.

And you would use it to feed your family.

To feed the family. But I didn't do it for-- then after a few times they got us, and I really was scared. I figured, like one time, after 7 kilometers, I was in a bus. And they said everybody out. And they looked for papers. And I was scared.

I mean, I don't know what I did then. I don't even remember. And after this, I never went back because my mother thought that's going to be-- you know, some day they're going to--

Did children not have papers?

I don't even remember. I just don't even remember. I know I didn't.

Did any of your sisters do this also?

Sonia did in the beginning, but then she didn't. I did it more because, like I say, I didn't look Jewish.

How often did you go out?

I used to go like every week and stop in farms and do a little work for them. So they gave you some stuff for it, like a bread or something. Some of them knew that you were Jewish.

Those that knew that you were Jewish--

They did-- some of them were pretty-- you know, the farmers in the beginning, they didn't-- if you worked for them, you brought them some stuff, they really didn't-- in fact, there was one-- this is a little further, that they wanted to take me to stay with them. But I wouldn't.

They knew I was Jewish. That was later on, before they took everybody out, that they grabbed me for work. See, that's how-- and then, in the following year in the fall, they looked for work, for people to work, and they grabbed me.

Who grabbed you?

The Germans. Like in the fall, work in a big farm that was like hundreds and hundreds of acres that wasn't belong-- it didn't belong to a small-- that they occupied. And they needed people to work in it.

So this was in '41?

'41, '42. And it was hell there. They used to come out with the horses and ride on you if you didn't go fast, or when you picked the potatoes. And it was very, very bad, and I was there with maybe 20 other girls.

Before then, after you stopped going out to other towns because it was too dangerous, and so you just spent your time in the ghetto, what did you do every day?

I don't even remember what we did. Nothing-- just sitting and waiting probably for dead. When I think about it now, because there was nothing that you could do.

Did you have any idea, did you ever question your mother or anyone as to-- did you have any idea what was going on, as a 12-year-old or 13-year-old?

We knew it was bad, but we didn't know that they're going to take us out and kill us, or they're going to ship out to Treblinka and kill us.

You knew that Germany had invaded Poland and was conquering Poland. And then you began to realize that Jews were going to be treated differently from Poles.

Different-- Poles, yeah. But what they're going to do with us, kill us, or treat us like this, never came to my mind.

Did you have any idea why Jews were being singled out?

I know that they just didn't like Jews because I could see that some of the Poles didn't like Jews. I figured the Germans, for sure, didn't like Jews because people were talking about it. But that's the most that I knew about.

During this time in the ghetto, like what did your mother do every day?

She used to sew or help, you know, just sit around, go visit somebody. Like we had relatives-- go out, because you could go out. But then after a while, you couldn't go out so you just--

Go out where, of your house?

The house, to a neighbor or somebody. She wasn't alone or she'd sit and fix or do things because we had no-- you couldn't get new clothes. Whatever you had, it had to be just fixed and do. But it wasn't anyplace that you go. She always was worried what's going to happen to my sister, or it's going to happen to somebody because they used to say that in Warsaw was bad. So she always used to worry what's going to happen or why my sister didn't go when her husband is. She couldn't go already.

Were your-- before the war, what level of religious observance?

Orthodox.

You were Orthodox?

Very, very. My father was a Hasidic Jew, very Orthodox. But he wasn't very, very strict. Of course, my brother-in-laws or something, they didn't walk around with always with the things.

Payos.

No. No. They came in in our house, they used to wear a hat. But probably when they went out, they didn't.

When the war broke out, and you went into the ghetto, were you able to keep any sort of religious observance?

Oh, they used to-- we used to-- they had little shuls. They used to go pray. This was the whole thing. That's where they used to go. But--

People spent a lot of time praying?

Praying. Some of the shuls, you couldn't go. So they made it like in a house. Some of the houses had the Torahs and everything.

So people still continued some religious observance.

Yes. Those that believed. Not everybody believed really. I mean, not everybody was Orthodox, that they prayed.

OK. And how about the other part of your life? I realize the war was going on and things were very bad, but did you-- was there social life or--

There was no social life.

No educational?

No education, nothing.

No cultural?

Nothing.

Political activity of any kind?

No. No. We tried to read the papers to see what happens. If you got a paper, so you only could find out that the Germans occupied this country or they occupied-- it was never something that was good.

People talked a lot about what was going to happen.

Going to happen, yeah.

And what were people's feelings?

We didn't know. The only thing we used to hear, that from this-- like from other cities, they shipped them out. Where they shipped them, what they shipped them, we didn't--

Shipped Jews out.

Yeah.

No one knew where to.

Nobody. No. No.

Smuggling went on.

Smuggling did. That's how you survived. If they caught you, you were dead. But if you wanted to eat or something, it went out. Because that's what I did myself. But then I was really scared, and I didn't want to do it. But I did it for a long time. I used to bring in stuff to feed my family, my sisters and my mother.

Were you aware of any sort of resistance. I mean, in fact, smuggling was a form of resistance.

Resistance-- a form to survive. If you wanted to eat a piece of bread, you tried to get out of the ghetto or do some work for somebody or sell something or give away something. And in return, they gave you something to eat.

But then after a while, this became very, very hard too, that you couldn't do it because the patrols and the SS, they used to come in and they used to just walk around with guns like this, that you're really very scared.

I used to do things that--

OK. So you were saying?

Yeah. And I saw them, and I ran away.

You saw SS?

The SS with dogs. And everybody knew that he was bad, really. He just had a satisfaction if he could hit you.

An SS person?

Yes, person. Gendarmerie, they called him. It was like the police from the Gestapo. And he went after me.

Was this in the ghetto?

In the ghetto. I mean, it wasn't-- it was-- yeah, it was in the ghetto. And he said to the dog, he says, [GERMAN]. See, these things I remember. He said to the dog-- he was like a person, I was the dog. And he bit me.

The dog bit you.

Yes. I had a very, very bad thing on my-- but it wasn't infection or something, and I didn't get sick. So I had a lot-- because I was always out, trying to see what's going on or trying to get things. If you could see something that somebody sells something or this, I was always out. I wasn't afraid.

Were you hungry? So there wasn't enough food?

No. We became-- like we had sores all over the body, itchy. That was from not eating. I used to scratch myself to death, like between the-- that was very, very like, very catchy too.

Contagious.

Contagious. If somebody got it, the next person got it. Used to become on the stomach, in between, was a--

Scabs, a certain--

Scabs, yeah.

Maybe a vitamin deficiency?

Probably. Everybody said it was from not eating.

Were you allowed to bathe? Could you--

I mean, we-- like, we didn't grow up like with houses with bathtubs. We used to bring in the water and wash.

Was there enough water to wash?

We had to go for the water. And if it was in the wintertime, you couldn't even get it because you had to pump the water. We had no inside water. So we had to go for the water. So people weren't-- really, you tried as much to wash the face or wash the hands or try to wash when it rained for the hair. But for cooking, for something, we had to go places to go for water. So it wasn't like here, that you give a touch and you have water.

When people-- you said people came in from-- they started sending-- Germans started bringing other Jews in from other towns.

They congregate them for a long time, for a few months. And that's when they started-- from that city, they shipped them out.

They shipped them out from Miedzyrzec?

Yeah. That's where they went to-- most of them-- the first transport went to Treblinka. Oh, this is a little later because I wasn't there. When they did this, I wasn't with my parents. That's how I survived.

OK. I see. So at some point--

But they congregate them from a lot of cities. They brought them in with nothing. They used to push them in in the temples, in the shuls. Or if people-- a lot of people had bigger houses, they used to bring them. Like, we used to-- in my uncle's house, were probably maybe 20 people or more. There were two little rooms.

It was the gathering, the center for--

For-- yeah, the big cities. We used to be the center for-- and then they just distribute them every place else, wherever they wanted, where they figure they're going to go. That's when-- in the beginning, when there weren't too many people, it was a little better.

But as it became more and more crowded--

More people, it was very bad-- sicknesses. People died. Children, they became swollen. Like you watch the Cambodian kids--

Cambodians?

That's how the Jewish little kids used to look.

So what happened with you then?



Then-- so when they-- they grabbed me to work.

And how did that happen?

I was outside. I was always outside. I was never afraid unless it was dark. I was always outside. And they just grabbed me because I looked good, had nice blonde hair, pink cheeks. I don't think I was shorter than now, but about the same height when I was this-- I was 13. And they sent me away in that place, and it was just plain horrible.

They knew you were Jewish, obviously.

Yes. Sure. Yeah. Yeah. And they sent us away there.

To a farm?

To a farm.

How far away?

It must have been about 15 kilometers.

Did your mother know?

My mother, then they found out.

So when they took you, no one-- they just grabbed you? They didn't--

Yeah. Yeah. And they just pushed us on big-- wasn't-- big buggies, like with horses. And they just shipped us out.

How did your mother find out where you were?

They probably-- this, it was still in the beginning. So people knew. And it was bad. I cried there. The work was terrible.

This was in 1942?

'41.

'41.

'41. That's how I came-- then 1942, when they started shipping, that I tried to go myself to work. From there I ran away.

When you went to that farm for work--

I knew it was slave, slavery because they just-- even it was raining, you had to dig the potatoes. And if you couldn't--

It was to dig potatoes?

Did potatoes-- so everything that was from the harvest, to put away.

And where did you-- what did you do at night?

They brought us in in a big thing where they kept horses or something.

A big, like, barn?

Barn-- and stayed there. They used to cook a little food to give you. It was bad. I ran away from there.

You ran away from there?

So how long did you work there before you ran away?

I must have been maybe two months there. Then one night, a girl and I, when everybody-- we were outside on the fields where they put away the potatoes. And it was very, very dark. I said to this girl, you know something? We're not going to go back. We'll just stay behind. We will hide in the big things where they hide the potatoes. Then when it's going to get quiet, maybe we'll start walking. Because we know the farms pretty much. We knew where it is.

She said, OK. This was, I think, a Friday night. And we figured it was very quiet. Maybe two hours later we didn't hear nothing. Everybody went home. I said, let's start walking. So we walk. We go into a Pole. And this Pole says to us, you are those that went away.

We went out so fast. I don't know where we went, but we found some trees. And we had very little clothes, but it was dark, and we stayed there. So we didn't know what to do. So I said, we have to walk. So we started walking. We saw wires. I said, those wires are no good because this brings us in in a big place where there's a lot of Germans. I knew that.

We walked the opposite way. We walked. We finally came to a main road. And every time we heard somebody running, we figured they're after us. But we made it. They looked for us, but somehow we made it. I came home. My mother wouldn't keep me in the house because she was afraid people-- they're going to come and look for us. So maybe for two weeks I stayed in somebody's house.

And this was already winter. And then the spring came. I said-- we had a lot of people that my uncle knew, Poles that had farms. I said, why don't I go work for them? It was like in June, July.

Of '41?

This was '42.

'42?

This is before they took my parents away. And I said, OK. And I used to come home every Sunday. I used to work for them. They loved me. They used to teach me how to ride a horse. And I was with them. I had a lot of food to eat.

You worked at some farms nearby.

On farms-- I did everything that the Poles did. And they really-- they liked me because I was a very good worker. And I was just like one of them. I wasn't afraid for nothing. And then there was a big, big farm that the Germans came to look it over, and I wasn't afraid. I used to go with them on the fields to do everything what they did.

And every Sunday I came home. One Sunday I come home, I hear the city was very boiling. They said something's going to happen. They're going to ship out. People knew because they shipped out another place. My mother said to me, please go back. If they'll ship us out, you're going to come.

Nobody thought they're going to ship them to kill. You can bring us things, bring us clothes. And I didn't want to go. She says, go. You stay there. And then everything, when it's going to be all over, you'll come back. You'll help us. And I listened to her.

This was-- I went back Sunday. Monday I went to work. Tuesday morning, we hear something. Some of the Poles that came in the city, they said they cleaned out Miedzyrzec. They shipped everybody out. I became hysterical. And that Pole, he liked me. He said, please don't cry. You're going to be all right. Maybe they're going to be all right.

He didn't know what happened. This was already probably August, just before the High Holidays. I felt terrible. Then people were talking. The Poles were talking that something very bad happened. They said, you don't go back. I said, I'm going back. He wouldn't let me. I went out.

I came back to the city where my uncle lived. He just thought the--

So you went back to the city to see--

Yeah, after four days. Just blocked-- nobody was there. One of my cousins, he went away probably. And one of my aunt there was hiding. Because if they knew something's going to happen, everybody had little places that you stuck in. And my mother and my sister, they didn't, and they just took them away. And from then on, I didn't want to go back already to the farm.

I went back to the farm. I went back, and I stayed for a while. And then they said again, they're going to make judenrein. They're going to clean everybody out. I says, I'm not staying in farm because they used to come already, the Germans, to those farms. They knew there were Jews, and they used to take them out. I said, no, they're not going to take me out. I'm going to go myself.

I went back to the city, didn't find nothing. So I found a uncle, a second cousin, a third cousin. And I stayed with them. And then the High Holidays came, and it was very, very bad. I was all alone already.

Was this still in the ghetto?

The ghetto. I came back to the ghetto because some of the people survived. They didn't clean-- those that hid came out. I met people from my-- no, from no place. And I said, no, I'm not going back to the farm. I want to be. So that Pole said, you want to stay with us? We'll hide you. I said, no. I said, I'm going to go with everybody.

He says, please stay. They didn't have children. He said, we'll keep you. So I was always-- I decided maybe I would do it. But then I said, the others know me. How can you stay always hidden? I says, no. I'm going to go back with my people.

I came back, was nothing. Was quiet because the big shipping was out already, and there's just the few. And then they started to congregate again, bringing in remnants from all other cities again. I found out-- and they said in a few weeks, it's going to be again. They're going to make-- clean it out.

So I found a cousin. And I knew that he had made something, you know, where you can hide. I came back. He says, it's too many people. He can't put in so many. So I had another. He was the first cousin of mine. Bot of us stayed behind. Everybody went in and hide.

I said, well, that's going to be it. My cousin came out. He says, come. And he grabbed my other cousin too, and we went in there-- underneath toilets, with furniture on the top and things. We stayed there. And we knew the next day that they're going to come and look.

We could hear voices looking. And here is children, you could choke him. And we heard that the next one they found him. They took him out.

They found the hiding place.

The hiding place-- and ours was just maybe two feet away. We survived. So my cousin used to say, I think because of you, that I took you in-- because he saw I had no place to go. He took us in, and we survived. Came out again--

There was two hiding places in your house?

It wasn't in a house. It was outside, under mud, under toilets, under-- it was terrible. But everybody want-- I don't know

why you wanted to live, but somehow everybody wanted to go. And for a while he used to go out because he worked for the Germans, was a cousin. And I stayed in the house a whole day, black with mice-- you name it, everything was there.

And I stayed there. And then they said, over the winter they're not going to do nothing. This was already very late in the fall-- came out again.

This was in '42?

'42. We stayed there. And it was bad. They used to come in and just like this, and this cousin, I watched him, I could see the way they shoot them.

Germans used to come in and shoot.

They shoot. They go crazy, went crazy, was-- wasn't too many. Was still Jews, but not a lot. So I stayed with my cousin. And one day, from one house I went to the other. And they say-- that German, that particular three Germans, and he always had the gun in the hand. So my cousin-- we stayed put. My cousin knew that he's coming. He ran. And the German saw him. And I could see him when they shoot him. That's the cousin that hid me. And a few minutes later, I saw him took away. So I had nobody again. Just with people--

But you couldn't really stay out in the open then? Anytime Germans came in, they--

Came in, they shoot. If they didn't feel like, they didn't shoot you.

So you never really knew.

We didn't know. Like this particular time, I watched him. If he would stay with us, if he wouldn't run, he wouldn't be shot. I don't know if he would be living now, but he wouldn't shot him. He was maybe 30 years old. I could never forget that picture.

I said, don't run. His name was Shlome. I said, [NON-ENGLISH].

Stay here.

Yeah, stay here. And he said-- he was afraid. He figured he'll come in and we'll be dead. So it was the other way around.

But they wouldn't necessarily come in the house then to shoot you.

If they felt like looking around, doing for things.

Any time you saw Germans, you knew to be careful.

Careful. You just felt that could be they're going to do something.

You knew that your mother and your sisters were gone.

Gone.

Did you have any idea where they went?

We knew already, Treblinka.

Did you know what Treblinka was?

They said everybody died there. What it was, really, what did they do, no. I didn't find out what they did till they took

us, they took me.

Did you know-- was--

We just knew that everybody didn't come back from there. That wasn't a working place.

Had you ever heard of concentration camps at that point? You'd heard of labor camps at that point?

Yeah, but we were with labor. They used to-- if they came in, they needed work, or do dirty work things, they used to grab the Jews and do it.

So you knew that they-- already they had been sent to Treblinka and that they were somehow killed there?

Killed, yeah.

Did you understand what was happening?

No, really, no. You know something? When I think about it sometimes, I say, gee. You know, a person is just like, I don't know, not human even to not realize that. Oh, when I came back, I was terrible. I didn't care if I lived or died. I didn't eat.

Came back from where?

From that place, when I found that my parents, that mine-- I could see the blood on the steps. And I knew they were shot, or some of them. Maybe they weren't-- that some of them that went away were shot. You could see blood all over. That's when I really-- and then I don't think I cared already, what's going to happen to me. But somehow a person-- I don't know why you wanted to hide. Maybe because you really wanted to live.

I-- I-- I-- I don't. I really don't understand that, what a human being can go through and do certain things when you know already that all your loved ones are gone. You had nobody. And you still want to do things that you want to survive. It's very hard to understand. I don't understand it myself.

Perhaps as a child--

Maybe. Maybe. I was young. But I knew that you could see they went around. Then they knew that they really hated-- I knew already that any chance that they have, they're just going to kill you. It just was a matter of time when they'll get around to you.

I didn't hear nothing from my sister in Warsaw. Because you had no contact really.

You believed, then, that your mother was dead and that your sister [CROSS TALK].

Yes. I knew already. Yeah, because I figured maybe they shot him then and there because I saw blood.

But there were people that had lived.

Nobody came from there. Just people knew that-- my cousin knew that they took them all out because he ran away. Maybe he was hidden very high that they couldn't find him. Because when they came, they said Juden, out. Everybody went out by themselves.

Did your cousin know whether your mother and sisters had at least not been shot before they were sent?

I don't know. I really don't know. I don't think he knew because he felt he's going to stay there, up there, up the roof, the attic and not just go out. And that's what it-- he stayed behind. And that's how-- but I never-- after a while, I didn't even

know what happened to him.

What was-- do you know how they were shipped to the camps, in what transportation?

They probably took them-- they congregated them in a big place or cars.

Were they trains?

They had-- you had to go by trains because it wasn't around there.

So there was a train that ran through?

Probably. Yeah. The train wasn't close. I'll come to it, the way I went to the train. And then this-- I came back to the ghetto, and I didn't want to go no place. And then it came, I think, April or March. They said now they're going to make it Judenrein. And there wasn't too many-- clean it really out.

This was in '43?

Yeah, the beginning. And I said I still want to hide. There was, like, a house, a little pantry. There was a wall here and a wall here. And there were a few boys, I didn't even know them. They made like a wall. We went in there, was maybe 20 people, people in this side and people in this side. We stayed there for two days.

One day, you could see they had little-- it was like you could see through. When they walked in with those big guns, with like knives and this-- I don't know-- they walked in from a different part. And they just cut through here.

The pantry?

The pantry. And nobody said nothing. And they just went out. See, everybody just like died. And they went out. They knew that people were hiding. After I saw this, two days we still stayed there. They took out people, a lot of different people that they found. And they congregated them. And they shipped them out. We didn't know where either.

Did you have any food while you were there in the--

I don't even remember. I don't-- we probably had something, a little because you couldn't survive just days and days like this. Then two weeks later, they did the same thing. And I said, no, I'm not hiding no more. When I saw, I said, I don't want a knife go through my body or something. When they said, Judenrein, I just went out.

Everybody went on the big place outside. They had a big marketplace. They congregated us. They shipped us. We walked to-- the train was maybe a few miles out of the city. They kept us all there. You had to take off your-- just wear certain things that it's white. If you ran away, they could see you.

Then I didn't realize why they made you take off things that they shouldn't be dark. You had to wear something, just a shirt or something what it was under.

You had to wear light clothes.

Light clothes. I don't think-- I think they said to take off the shoes. I don't even know. But then I had somebody again that came to me. He said, would you like to come with me to make papers because everybody figured I don't look Jewish, and maybe they can just run away.

So another Jew came to you?

Yeah. And I said no. I just don't want to go no more. He begged me. He said, come. We'll run away. Maybe we'll survive. He didn't know where we were going to go. And finally they ship-- came nighttime. They put us on the train.

There was a lot of people. I could hear men. Men knew. They said, if we go in one way, we go to Treblinka. We go the other way, we go to Majdanek-- didn't know. Finally, when we were in the train, the train was moving a certain way in a certain road. I could hear. The boys were talking. We're not going to Treblinka. We're going to Majdanek. And that's where we went.

So they knew that meant that they were not going to die.

To die. We didn't know. We probably-- Treblinka, plenty died. I mean in Majdanek, plenty died. But it wasn't in Treblinka that-- we knew that the Majdanek people work too.

Treblinka was just a death camp.

A death camp. And they took us to Majdanek. And they took us out. They assorted us because there were elderly people. Because I have a very close friend that lives in Florida now, she was with me in the five. We were set up to five-- her sister, her brother, and her, and me. The mother and the little brother, they took away. Her sister and me, they pushed in another side.

When you got off at Majdanek--

They separated us.

OK. You went in trains?

Yeah. We came--

Closed cars?

Cattle cars. You could die. You beg-- you couldn't drink anything because we went-- people died in the train. It was just impossible.

Did you remember how long you were on the train?

I don't know. I don't remember. And it shouldn't have been that far because it's not far. It's only maybe 100 kilometers from where I was. And there they separated us.

How did they separate you.

Well, there were Germans. They said-- they saw you were young, probably they pushed you in one side. And the older, like my girlfriend's mother and the brother, the young little boy, they pushed in the other side. And we, her sister and I, and we-- they brought us into the camp. They put us in blocks. But this was-- it was bad there. It was so bad that you wished you were dead.

So bad where? In Majdanek?

Majdanek. They didn't feed us. They gave us a little water in the morning or a little tea, and at night a piece of bread. And they used to wake us up, maybe, 3 o'clock in the morning to stay in Appells, shivering. I don't know why it was so cold there. But you could have died there.

Why did they wake you up?

Oh, just to punish you. I mean, they didn't wake you up for some-- just to punish you, to wake you up. And you stayed and shivered till maybe 7 o'clock. And 7 o'clock, you went, probably, to work. They counted you. They-- just to punish you.

So one night, they gave me a piece of bread, and I hid it. This I'll never forget. And I figured, in the morning you're more hungry. At night you go to sleep, you don't-- you don't feel that much hunger. You-- I drink that water or whatever that thing was that they gave you.

I wake up, that piece of bread was gone from under my head. And I started crying. So the one that took care of us, she came over. She said, why you cry?

The one that did-- that took care--

That was the whole thing from-- she must have been a German, that took care of the whole block. There must have been a few hundred girls in one block. She didn't ask no questions. And she just hit me. I was going to tell her that somebody stole my bread. And for this I was supposed to get 25.

25 what? Lashes?

Lashes. And she did. But she only gave me three. OK? And then I had blown up the veins with blood. Probably from the 25 I would have been dead.

So in other words, she hit you three times and then stopped and it swelled.

I don't know. I don't know why she stopped. Maybe-- I don't know. Maybe-- but they give you more than that. And this was because I cried that they took my piece of bread away, which I didn't want to eat the night before. I figured I'll save it for the morning.

Who do you think took your bread away?

I don't know. I just-- I cried. I got hysterical. I cried. And then somebody ran away from there, and they got him, and they hung her. They used to take us, middle of the night, everybody watching the way they hang her. Majdanek was mean, bad, very bad.

What did you do during the day?

They used to take us to work on fields.

What kind of work?

I don't know. When they grew things or just some work I don't think they needed, just to punish you.

Did you walk to the fields?

Oh, yes. Yeah. Walk and walk back.

Majdanek was a labor camp.

It was, like, partly. They had crematoriums there too. They really-- it was mostly-- I think it was like Auschwitz.

When you got there, were the crematoriums there?

There must have been. I haven't seen him, but I knew that the people that they took and they didn't survive, they burned them there because there was a lot of people that came with us.

Did you have-- when you first got there and they picked people and they selected people to go in this side or that side, did you understand what that meant?



I think I did. By then maybe I did. I don't-- you know something? When I think about it, I really don't know if I understood. But I just knew that the others weren't-- you didn't see them already, so they were gone. Because we used to come meet with them. Like on the fields, that we saw men that came with us that you didn't recognize already what they looked like after a while. But we were there only, I think, three months, which it was too long.

And when they said they're going to ship us from there, I was happy. I didn't even know where they're going to send us, but this was really-- death was better than being there, especially when you worked and you could see Poles walking and talking. And they were free. And they used to-- for any little pickup they had, you get over the head.

Poles were there?

Pole. Because we worked. It was Majdanek, Poland. It wasn't too far from the city that I was born. It was Lublin. So when you worked, you could see free Poles walking or riding.

Did they ever ask you what you were doing there?

No, they didn't. No. No. No. We were always with Germans with things. I mean, you couldn't talk to nobody. I mean, you couldn't run away. You couldn't talk to nobody. The only way-- you couldn't even talk to your next-- to the girl that was here because you got, right away, over the head.

Poles never said anything they saw you?

No. No. No.

When you were in the camps, did there continue to be selections on a daily basis or on a weekly?

In Majdanek, when they shipped us out, they selected who's going to go and who's not going to go. And they shipped, not everybody, to Auschwitz. Some of them they shipped in different places. But with the first transport that they shipped, I didn't go because they undressed you, and I had like a little rash here. They didn't send me.

A little rash rash?

Rash.

On your chest?

On the chest. And I said, oh, boy. And I cried because all my friends were going. For two weeks later, they did the same thing. And they took me already. And that's when they shipped me to Majdanek-- to-- this was in the beginning of '43.

This was in the beginning of '43. They shipped you to where?

To Auschwitz.

To Auschwitz.

Auschwitz-Birkenau.

So when you say-- you had already been at Majdanek about three months.

Majdanek-- three months.

And did you first come to Majdanek in '43?

I think so. You know, the dates get mixed.

I'm sure. It's OK.

I really don't remember dates.

That's fine.

It was the beginning because we came, I think, by the time--

When you went to Majdanek, what season was it? Was it winter, or do you remember whether it was cold or hot?

It must have been very, very cold because it was very cold there. We had no clothes, and that's why I say that it was just like death.

OK. You were there three months.

Three months or 10 weeks. I don't--

Whatever.

Yeah.

Then you were sent to Auschwitz.

Auschwitz.

And was it-- what was the season like then?

That was already-- that was, like, May, right after Passover.

OK. So it was around May.

May-- must have been May.

In '43.

Yeah.

That you were sent to Auschwitz. And would you describe that to me? You were picked to go there.

I picked-- we were picked to go there. And they packed us in, and we didn't know where we were going. We didn't know it was Auschwitz. I mean, they just packed us in in trains, with coats and things. And I get very sick on a train when they packed us in. And I got white right away. I thought I'm going to die.

So there was these Germans that watched us inside. You could see that I'm just blacking out. I couldn't take the train or the coats from there. And they pushed me in the other door to get a little fresh air.

It meant for me that maybe I should live. You know, everything that happened a little good to me, I said, gee, somehow I'm going to-- I'm going to come out.

Was this when the train was already--

Going.

--going.

Going. But everything was closed because they lock you in just like you were cattle. But Germans were there with you, in the front of the things. But they walked back, forth, and back, just like-- they used to step on you. And finally I made it. And they brought us to Auschwitz.

And they brought us into Auschwitz. They took us off from the trains. We saw trucks from far away, naked people. Didn't know-- all naked. They were Greek Jews.

Greek Jews?

Yeah. Then we found out. And they made place for us, so they burned them-- all naked.

What do you mean they burned them?

I mean, they put them in the crematoriums to make room for us.

Did you see them?

No, but we-- there were trucks. When they brought us in, they were going out. And they brought us into the big places where they washed you and they took off your clothes. And they-- so there, you went through the same thing. Took off your clothes-- they sprayed you. They-- the men did all the shaving. Took off--