Greta Fischer oral history interview
RG-50.071.0001
Unedited transcript created by a USHMM volunteer

We spent a month in France. We were supposed to get some orientation for the work we were supposed to do. And then one day we got the assignment. The assignment was that six people, eight people from different nationalities were put into two …. And the assignment was to go into Germany and look for unaccompanied children. Everybody knew that there must be children roaming around but nobody knew how many children, what kind of children. So our first night in Germany we spent in Dachau, which was a terrible shock to all of us. And I remember going around and asking everyone – I spoke German – where's the concentration camp. And nobody, nobody knew where it was. At the same time there were people in the streets selling rings, earrings, broaches, and you knew uh where it came from. And so then we started to look into opening the children's center. The assignment was to look for the children at the same time to open a children's center. So we looked. Two people would go out everyday to look. And it was very difficult. All the institutions were filled. The hospitals were filled with wounded soldiers. And then the American army, we were in the American zone, they requisitioned for us Kloster Indersdorf. Kloster Indersdorf is an old Catholic cloister, built in the 1800 century, Beautiful chapel from the 11th century. Completely unsuitable for the purpose we wanted it for, for children's center. But it had beds, it had a dining room, it had equipment. So we decided to start the children's center there.

Where were the children? Did they come to you?

The children came, as soon as we cleaned up the place, and it was quite interesting because we started cleaning the place. It was at one time an orphanage home. The Germans chased out the nuns, there were Catholic nuns there and used it as kind of a store room. So when we came it was in bad shape, bad repair, but we started cleaning the place. And some of the nuns came and asked if they could help. And we were somewhat reluctant, we weren't sure. Jewish children, non-Jewish children. But as soon as we opened, people brought us children. First of all, people brought us children from German institutions, babies, we had babies, children from forced laborers where the parent, the mother, was not allowed to marry and the child was taken away from her and the child was placed in a very mediocre German institution. And you know German institution. They heard Germany had lost the war and there were people wanting to take care of children. So they brought us the children. So we took some of the nuns to help us, who were really very wonderful. And then other children came. There were lots of lost children around who heard and they came.

They were not all Jewish children.

They were not all Jewish children. There were Polish, many Polish boys and girls. The stolen children they would call them. Where the Germans had taken whole schools from Germany – from Poland, from Czechoslovakia, from Yugoslavia, into Germany. They would tell the children they would go for a school holiday. And then they would parcel them out into Germany to farm workers. They had to do all kinds of menial jobs. They had to look after the babies, they had to wash and cook and clean, they had to work in the fields. And this took a couple of years. At the same time, they would indoctrinate them to become Germans. I think that those children, had Germany won the war, those children would have been permitted to live as a second generation to be slaves to the Germans.

They had plans. Oh their plans were very, very well worked out.

So I would imagine that all of these children, that came to you, had very, vey sad stories.

Oh, terrible stories. And that was one of the things. The first thing was to give them food, to give them clothing, which was difficult, food, plenty of food, and listen to their stories. And we listened to their stories days, night. It had to come out. It had to come out. And sometimes it would take hours, you know, to sit with them, because you could not interrupt. We also were very conscious to write down their stories.

What did they say, what kind of stories?

Well, each one, each had terrible story to tell. Terrible story. Their suffering, their separation of their parents, of their small sisters and brothers. You must understand those who survived, and especially the Jewish children, were really extraordinary strong people. Their will to survive blocked out absolutely everything. Their will to survive and the rage to live, blocked out absolutely everything.

That's the way they overcame all their problems.

Yes, I think so.

Some of these children had been in camps before.

They had not only been in one camp, they had been, I remember one boy he had been in 14 different camps. And I often wondered how they remembered. You know, the stories of the different camps. And they were very specific. There's one boy, this boy who had been in 14 different camps. In one of the camps was the camp of uh, no I can't think of the name now. . . in Czechoslovakia. . . Isn't it funny I should forget, my parents perished in that camp, too. I can't remember the name at the moment. It will come to me. Uh, Theresienstadt. And this boy – and I was terribly interested because I knew my parents perished in Theresienstadt. And when he told me the story, his life was saved by somebody I know, he was actually a boyfriend of mine. In Czech. This man would give him his food. He did not survive, this man, himself. But

this boy survived. And I became very close to this boy. He's now in England, we was one of the children who was sent to England. He went to school. And, he did very well, he's a professor, was a professor in the London School of Economics, and has a family, has two boys himself. And I saw him a few years ago in England

I was especially attached, very, very close, very close to this boy.

These children were unidentified, most of them.

The big children knew their identity, they knew their past history, but the small children. The Germans had changed their names many times in order – just before the Allies liberated, won the war – in order to divulge their identity. And later on we found. . . we lived in the village, in the small village of Kloster Indersdorf. And we were given billets also by the American Army.
And we lived in the house of a German major who had taken his life when the Germans (sic) marched in
And one of the staff members went to the attic and found very, very valuable material. He found lists of names of children, which they had changed the names four or five times. So we – not we, but there was a tracing team you know UNRRA, we were under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Org. And they had many teams. We were the team for this particular purpose but there were teams looking for relatives, we had team to identify children, and we worked with these teams. And because we were a children's center we had such a very population. I think at some time we had up to twenty different nationalities of children in the camp.

How many children?

We were from 300 – 350 children most of the time, although the place only housed about 280 children.

We started with the UN team, which was an international team, which were all professionals, professional people and I would say very special people. Each one in professional know how and also in devotion, resourcefulness and commitment to the cause. But we engaged displaced person, of all the different nationalities that we had, in order that the children should speak their own language. Like the stolen children were forbidden to speak their own languages. So we engaged Polish displaced persons, who also went through the wars, who also had been in camps, and I was particularly responsible of training some of those people to work with the children. And some had training, we found teachers, we found the gym teacher.
We were very aware. We wanted to give the children as normal life as possible. And I think that today, I think we pretty much succeeded in that. We had very high standards. We had to eat with forks and spoons, we had a dining room, and uh there were about eight people to a table and (always one grown person would eat with the children.) And we had knives and forks and we discussed amongst ourselves what kind of life would they children have if their parents would be alive. And

although they were to begin with like little animals they knew. They knew better. But you know when you are very hungry you don't always take the trouble to take a knife and a fork and a spoon. You just take your hands. And we insisted on some of those things. One of the stories the children would always take bread from the dining room. . . because they were always afraid there would not be a next meal. And we could assure them a hundred times there would be bread. They always took bread from the dining room. So we had somebody standing by the dining room and say you don't have to take bread, you will get bread whenever you want bread. But you know, I saw some of those youngsters now, many, 30 40 years later, some of them still take bread, a little piece of bread under their pillow in order to make sure that there will be a next meal. The fear. . . never disappears.

I imagine that some of these children were also aggressive.

Very aggressive. They were very hostile to the environment and we always felt very sorry. I mean, at the begin we didn't realize. But then after a year, after two years we felt all the security we could give those children were not enough. That they, we shouldn't stay in Germany, we should you know help them to leave Germany. They should be brought up somewhere else. But the world was closed, the world was absolutely closed to these orphaned children who had suffered so much.

Some of the polish children, who were non Jewish, were returned to their own countries. They were the little babies. Some German families wanted to adopt some of the children, which was possible, which was made possible. But all the countries wanted their children. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Estonia. All those countries wanted their children.

Now there were liaison officers who would determine the nationality of the children. Which was very difficult some times. And they would sometimes would cover – this was Polish and this was Russian. It was not quite sure. But somehow they made the decision, we did not have to make this decision. And we would send, take children home. There was a transport with a lot of these stolen children who went back to Poland. And many of those children found their parents.
Some of them did not. And they did not want to stay in Poland They would want to go to a country where they could make a good living.

Most of the Jewish children and many of the Polish children wanted to go to America.
Now why was American so attractive – because they were liberated by the American soldiers. And the American soldiers were very, very good to those children. Too good. Because they would promise them so many things which later they couldn't keep.

Did they not promise them to some of them to adopt.

They promised some of them to adopt. They wanted to adopt. I have correspondence of letters, which were written by American high officials

[Film cuts out]

Remember the children cassette two

The stolen children that very few people know about

Getting back to the children, Greta, were they aggressive? Did they have revenge in their hearts?

They were very aggressive. I told you that there were different kinds of children, Jewish children and non-Jewish children. Now we had a little boy, a beautiful child a Russian child. He was the mascot of a German officer and every time he went through the corridors, those long, long corridors, he would call Heil Hitler, you know Heil Hitler! And the Jewish children, they were terribly sensitive to that, they would nearly kill the child.

I once entered a fight, I don't know how I got out of this fight, to separate the two groups, the Jewish group and this little boy. And it took a long time until we explain to this child that he could not do that.

The other aggression was also this cloister was Catholic, with Catholic nuns who were beautiful people and helpful, but to the Jewish children it was very strange, why should they be brought up by Catholic – they were not brought up but they saw them around. The other revenge was going out and steal apples and pears. Now Germans came to the center to complain that the children stole apples and pears. And myself and there was another social worker, Andre [Marx], he was from Luxembourg. He himself had suffered a lot during the war.
And I think we felt very strongly and we gave quite some lessons to the German that the least he could do is not wait for the children to steal the apples and pears
But to bring to us the apple and pears. And that's what really happened.
One guilty German brought us three little pigs, tiny little pigs.
They were pets, we brought they up in the cellar but the pigs grew and one day somebody decided to slaughter the pig. Now I was summoned to Military Government. It was absolutely forbidden to take anything from the Germany economy. I was summoned to Military Government that I had ordered to slaughter a pig. Now I hadn't ordered, but okay, I went. And I think maybe they would have put me in prison if the American soldier had not at that moment got a home leaf and forgot all about me, so I am still here, I was not convicted.

The other things was we had to go through the ?? when we went to Munich, Munich was the place where we processed the children, let's say later on, for their passports or for their papers. Now whenever we went through the ?? the boys had already their pockets full of stones. And would throw the stones on the population. And

although we identify and could understand, we did not want them to spend their life, to be so hostile, so we'd talk to them and would try to prevent this kind of behavior.

How did they react when they learned that you were Jewish?

Well, this was a terrible story. I'll tell you the story. The Polish children, this particular group who were so indoctrinated by the Germans
The boys and the girls stayed together in two big rooms, we had like big dormitories, big rooms. And we would go at night, in the evening we would go and say goodnight to the children. We used to get care parcels with chocolate so we would always go in the evening and say goodnight with a piece of chocolate, which was a big treat.

So one evening the conversation came that next day a group of Jewish children was to arrive. And then the girls, the Polish girls, heard, they said they would not stay with Jewish children in one place, that all Jews were terrible people, they were Satans, they had horns. . . they were afraid they would kill them all. So I gave Andre [Marx] a sign and I said we must tell them we are Jewish. So we told them we are Jewish, You cannot imagine the hysteria, of those children, they started crying and chanting, It's not possible, and you are good people, and you are helping us. It took us months, it took us months every day to go over the same story that there were Jewish people, there were Catholic people, there were all kinds of people, and there were good people and bad people. But that we were here to help them. And also helping them a little bit to see what had happened to them. That they were taken away, they were youngsters, and I mean someone had taken away, I don't know if they were so aware that it was Germans who took them away. And the re-eduction was a very, very difficult part

The center was in the German village, Greta, so how would it be the village people react?

Well, as I told you it was forbidden to take things from the German economy. But when you have a house full of children, we were provided through UNRRA, there was a warehouse. But the warehouse was not really equipped for children. Nobody really knew in all this confusion what to expect. So I needed some material for children's clothes, for baby clothes, so Andre [Marx] and I we would go to the village. There were little shops there and we would say we were from the Children's center and would they have some material. And they would say, well we don't have any material and we were not Nazis, but go down the road and they were Nazis and maybe they can give you something. We were quite persistent, we would take a risk we said you open your draws and we would ask them to give us some of the things. And some would, and some would resist. But by the end of two years we had the total village working for us. I had furniture made, you know some of the little children, were always short of staff, we never had enough hands to go around.

So sometimes the feeding was such a problem. By the smell of food, you would bring food into a room where there were many 10 or 15 babies, they would start screaming by the smell of the food. So feeding those children was a problem. So we were very innovative. I think it was I who designed a half round table so we would sit the children around and one person could feed four or five babies, you know 1 2 3 4 5 it would go very quick.

We had the whole village working for us. They made sledges, they made toys, they made, a big problem was the problem of potties. Little children in order to be trained, need potties. I got a gift to begin with from a German major, From an American major who had requisitioned for me, glass potties from a German institution, I remember I was happy as I don't know what for this gift.
But the glass potties broke. In due of time, you know you wash them and they break, so what do you do next? So we had tinned milk, came in big tin boxes, so when they were empty, I went to the village and I had them little boxes made around, wooden boxes, I had them designed with Bavarian designs, and they became the potties. They had one, sometime. . . The glass potties you know the children could go, they could move themselves forward and backward. The wooden boxes were too heavy and to begin with they were very annoyed they could not travel on their potties.

So you know we had to be very innovative. For instance, clothing. Baby clothing. The boys and the girls, we taught them to make their own trousers and their own skirts from army material which we got from the Halbe. But when we went to requisition the material, like the soldiers. . . I saw huge rolls of red material which was the flag material which the Nazi flag was red. And there were huge rolls of blue and white cotton material, which the Germans used for their bedding. Now we requisitioned or the Army requisitioned for us this material. And we made clothes for the babies and the small children. We designed a red heart and blue and white little you know pants, or vice versa, we had red pants and a blue and white checked heart, and you know the children looked adorable, they looked like little French sailors.
But all those things were very problematic.

But later on all requisitions had to go through channels who had headquarters and many times the requisition came back unavailable, So in the meantime we had already found some kind of solution for the problem.

They were very, very restless. They became very restless. And we became very anxious, we were very anxious to let them go, but there was no way of keeping them, absolutely no way of keeping them, so we would make, give them papers with lots of stamps, you know there were different countries, there were different zones. . . And the Russian zone was the zone that was more difficult,
We gave them food, I made little rucksacks for them also from the Army material, the camouflage material, I would sew on their names, big labels their names, so people knew they came from Kloster Indersdorf. And they went.

And some, quite a few, we would get news that they found somebody, not always parents. But a brother, a sister. There were also fantastic stories.

The way of the communication at the time. You know somebody would sit in a lorry and would see somebody in the street and would shout to him, I have seen your cousin. And it was many times true. They would then go after the direction and find somebody.

We would call it the displaced person's newspaper. You know everything by word to mouth.

And many came back having not found anybody, usually they would bring other children with them. There was a beautiful story. One little boy, one not so little boy, found in Czech found a little boy who was asking after a sister. And he remembered that in Kloster Indersdorf there was a little girl with the name so he brought the little by back and it was really his sister. . .

Now we became very know, Kloster Indersdorf became very known, people would come to us for children, sometimes there was tremendous reunions, but there was also heartache

They wanted to get out of Germany, many wanted to go to American, but American, only a very few could go because there were quotas. Each country had a quota to come to America. The Czech quota was overfilled, the Polish quota was overfilled, So actually no body could go to America. The world was closed, the world was absolutely closed. And in everybdy's mind the question always was Where can we go? And one little boy expressed it beautifully, he said, "It was terrible we lost our homes, it was terrible we lost our parents, but the worst thing is we have no country, we are stateless, and we are nobody. Nobody really knows about us. And nobody wanted us." And you know they had built up so much hope that once they would survive, the whole world would be at their feet. Which wasn't true. I think this hope made them survive, many of them, they put so much hope that the world would be at their feet and there was a lot of disappointment. A lot of disappointment. There was depression, definitely, lots of depression. Children who wouldn't want to eat, or children who cried a lot.

We had no suicide in Kloster Indersdorf, there may have been some, we had no suicide.

One thing that was amazing too, is the remembrance, the good things. You know, we knew, we know today that the very early years of children are important. And I very strongly believe that those children who had the early good years, they were stronger than some of the others.

We, I don't know what occasion, we had a party, we celebrated. Of course we celebrated all the holidays, we celebrated Christmas and Chanukkah, according to

what every child's nationality. And that was always, everybody celebrated each other's holidays.

We had this wonderful party and the children helped to prepare but when we finished the party there was a terrible mess and nobody wanted to help to clean up. To clean up? We are not here to clean up. There are German servants, they should clean up. Because we did have German servants too, to help you know with the cleaning. And we felt there was something wrong. So we again tried to be the educators, we got them together, we talked to them and said okay, you feel that way, But we don't think you can live with this hate in your heart. And I think if you prepare a party, you must clean up. We are going to have a repeat performance for the party and, and you are going to clean up. We had the most wonderful party, which they prepared, we didn't prepare a thing. It was much better prepared than we did, much more luxurious, with table clothes, and don't ask me where they got those things from.

(cuts out)

I don't know where they got the stuff from. You must understand at that time in Germany with a package of cigarettes you could buy half a country. So they got cigarettes and would provide food, and drink, and white table cloth, and we had a wonderful party, and they cleaned up after the party. So some of the things we wanted to get across to them did get across to them, that you could not live with hatred to much, but it took a long time.

The other thing, we used a lot of theatre to unburden them.
Drama. For instance, they would do to some of the boys, they put them in a step ladder with their head in so they couldn't move their head, and they would do all kinds of cruelties to them In order to play out the cruelties they had experienced on themselves A type of group therapy.

And a lot of it came out in that, that was very important.
We also, we tried everything in terms to unburden them. Some of the children would tell their story not just once, many times, which provoked another reaction, which sometimes we were a little bit worried about. It became very automatic. At first the first story came out with a lot of feeling. But then, you can't have feelings over and over again. Their stories became very automatic. They would talk about those terrible things like our children would talk about a fairy tale. And sometimes that bothered us. But they had to tell their stories many times. Uh, if they get went immigration, if asked when visitors came, when reporters came, we became very famous, and you know people wanted to hear all those stories. So their stories became quite emotionless, which sometimes a bother to us.

Interviewer. . . .

There were many children who could not talk, absolutely not talk, who really had forgotten. I think it was a psychological reaction. They really blocked out their stories. We had a couple of youngsters who were completely blank. We tried to help them to remember. But it took a very long time for some of those children to remember.

How long before they could leave Germany?

I was there from 45 to 48, which is 2 and a half years at least. The end of 47, one of the first offers came from France, a small group of children came from France, and I think France, who had been war torn themselves they understood, they took a small group

Nobody really wanted the children, nobody really wanted the refugees. The world did not believe the stories. I went, part of my family was in London and the first time I went to London I was telling my friends and my family all the things I had seen, and nobody wanted to believe. My family believed me, but friends, It Can't be, it can't be that human beings can do these things to other human beings. It's impossible. And I really don't know why the world was so closed. I mean, you have documentation now, a lot has been written about this time

It was bureaucracy, it was fear, it was. . . bureaucratic procedures, passports and borders. . . And to protect themselves. I don't really know.

So the first invitation came from France.

From France. Then I know a group went to Sweden. I think there was a small group, not from our children, but children who came directly from concentration camp was invited to go to Sweden.

How did they make the selection? That must have been a . . .

There was a big apparatus. UNRRA was a big international organization.
I wonder today if 48 nations could sit down and make a plan for refugees. I often wonder about that today. So that 48 nations could site down and make a plan was pretty good. First of all to go into Germany and rescue those people and then make a lot of effort to get the children out. And then there were some successes. One of the first children to go from Kloster Indersdorf was a group of 42 children to England. Now everybody wanted small children but the real sufferers and survivors were not small children.

How old were they?

They were between 15 and 18 and over 18. Now, many of the surviving children have survived because they made themselves older. I don't know if you know, the small children usually with their mothers were sent to be killed in the crematorium.

They had to go with the mothers, the strong ones went to the right, the weak ones went to the left, and most of the small children with their mothers were killed. Now when they looked more manly or when the mothers put long pants on them, they put them, let them survive because they wanted to use them as forced laborers or for some purpose. Also later they were taken into the children army when the situation in Germany became bad some of those children had to be fighting in the German army. So to begin with they had to make themselves younger, uh older, then when the immigration law said 18, they had to make themselves younger.
And we also, we were sympathetic to helping them, to make themselves younger. Maybe today I can tell that, but at the time, I think I was very honest, even at the time. Because I remember a Canadian. . . when the Canadian offer came. A Canadian social worker came to Kloster Indersdorf and I shared with her my concern that some of them were older. And she was very, very angry at me and told me I could absolutely, that was unacceptable. But today, I think, it was alright what I did at the time, I don't know (laughs) So some of those children did come to Canada

When was that? In what year?

The offer came in 47. And at the time there came the request for a social worker who had worked in Germany to come to Canada and help with the integration. Now I was very attached to those children, very attached, and I applied for the job

Though I was not a social worker, I had worked during the war in England with children and had worked with Anna Freud also, so I felt myself qualified, and I really wanted to see happened with those children. So there was a lot of correspondence between Kloster Indersdorf. Actually at that time, we were no longer at Kloster Indersdorf. We changed Kloster Indersdorf for Prien, which was better facilities. We had small houses for the children and you could give much better individual attention. We had houses for babies, we had houses for toddlers and we had, like, houses for the big children.

But I want to tell you the story, to go to England. We went to the airport many times, at least 4 times. Every time we came to the airport there was no plane so we had to go back to Kloster Indersdorf. This was the first transport was 46, that the children to England went around the middle of 46. At one time when we came to the airport there was a group of children from Rosenheim which was a big other camp. But they also had children there. But not particular only for children.
And a lady who came with the children said, Could I please take her children also to Kloster Indersdorf, because she couldn't think that they could come another time because they had no transportation and they were difficult situation.
So I Called our messing officer and I asked him if we had enough food to bring another 20 or 25 children.
And he said over the telephone, No, no, no! I took the children, decided to take them if the situation was so that they couldn't get out anymore. So I took them.

And I told the messing officer, you said we had food! It was very difficult communication, you know telephone at that time were terrible. So I said I understood he said we had food.
The children had food. They stayed with us for a couple of days and after a couple of days we again went to the airport and everybody went.
One of the workers went to England and when she came back she told us how disappointed the English people were because they were expecting small children. They had prepared, you know like you do in nursery school, an individual towel and a tooth brush for small children. And I remember, we were talking about using drama for those children. We put on a skit, the children coming to England with white beards, and with sticks, the little children coming to England. (laughs) But it was really very sad, because you know, that was. . .

Also the children who came to Canada, were in their teens?

They were all in their – no, there were few young ones, there were quite a few young ones between 11 and 13, but the majority would also be older children.

Were they all Jewish children?

They - not all, not all, but the majority, because the offer came through the effort of the Canadian Jewish Congress, who had a project I think to bring English children during the war to Canada, or French children also to bring during the war to Canada, which never materialized. So they had a quota for so and so many children. Canada took over 1500 or something
I always knew 1116. But when I was here now at the conference they were talking about 1500 children so it's possible

Well, I had to go to England to wait for Canadian visa, because I was stateless I had no passport. And although I tried very hard to get the Czech passport in Germany I was not successful
So I went to England and I waited in England for Canadian visa. Then the Canadian visa came and I was asked to travel to Marseilles to meet my children in Marseilles. So I traveled from London to Marseilles, and there I met the group of children, children whom, I, most of them didn't know, I knew a couple of them who also had come from Kloster Indersdorf, because the children came from different camps then. There were, by that time, there were a few more children's centers. There was one in the British zone and one in the French zone, so the children were selected from the three zones.
And we took the boat in Marseilles. We were told we would be on board the boat for a week. But we were on board of the ship for three weeks.

How were the conditions?

Terrible condition, terrible condition. It was a small Yugoslav boat with immigrant women whose husband who had already been in Canada for government contract

And I think we were supposed to go by boat to Canada but we went to America and I sent a cable to a friend of mine, actually Lillian Robbins who was the first director in Kloster Indersdorf and who got an assignment to China, was back in the States and I asked the captain if he would cable her that we would like to leave the boat and go by train to Canada.
I also delivered a baby on that boat. There was no doctor. There was a lady who was supposed to be the nurse, but I doubt if she was a nurse. And when it came. . . this lady was terribly anxious. She was a Polish lady whose husband was a poet, and she expected her second baby, and she was very anxious.
And we were in the same bunk. There were bunks, three bunks.
And I would assure her, don't worry I know what to do. My father was a vet, I know what to do. And I knew what to do. And I remember when it came very close to the birth, I went to the captain and I asked for a private little room. And the private room was occupied with somebody who was sick
And I was very anxious to bring this pregnant woman into this room. I remember cleaning this room. My father used to. . . some kind of disinfectant, some purple (braids/brains??) I think you call it Hippomongali, you put it in water and it comes . . . water. And it was a disinfectant. And I scrubbed this little hole with this. And the lady was a very intelligent lady. The baby came, and I suddenly had this little head on my hand. And it was a wonderful experience. I wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world. And then I, we made baby clothes. The whole boat was busy. I tore up a nightgown of mine. And I had bought a lot of wool before I went on boat. I said, "What will I do on the boat with those kids?" So I bought knitting needles and wool and everybody was knitting for little Radnick. They called the child Radnick, the name of the boat, which was terrible I thought. But, so my friend had a doctor coming when we were arrived in NY. My friend had gotten permission to come on board the ship. She brought the doctor with her. And he examined the little baby. And I was complimented, everybody was fine. So, this family lives in New York and I am still in contact with them.

So, what about the children you had on this boat?

Well, the children they were very curious youngsters and sometimes I was a little bit anxious you know, on board the boat, but nothing happened, nothing happened. We were, we, it was very rough at times. The German ladies were not very friendly to us. The captain was very nice. I could communicate him, he was a Yugoslav. And I speak, I spoke Czech at the time, still a little bit, so we communicate and he would give me apples for the children, which I would cut up under the blanket in the evening and would distribute them. And we arrived in NY. We went through customs, we had problems in customs because. . . accused of being anti-Semitic.

(Film cuts out)

So you arrived in New York and then you go Toronto and then Montreal, I suppose.

That's right. We continued by train to Toronto. And I did not know that the children were supposed to stay in Toronto. I had to go on to Montreal, I was engaged to do a job in Montreal. And suddenly we were met at the station, the Jewish community, which was very moving. And everybody was terribly nice to us. They didn't know what to do for us.

But suddenly I heard that the children were to stay in Toronto and I was to go on to Montreal. And this was a terrible shock to all of us. I think we cried, all of us.
We were so close, we were so close. And we were the only. . . they were my only security, and I was their only security.

You know, something familiar in this new, new world. Because Canada was a new world for me too.

These children stayed in Toronto? Part of them.

All of them. All of them stayed in Toronto. Canada spread out the children, they were mainly the big cities. Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, the big cities. Now everybody wanted to be in Montreal. And I think that must have been, at the time, when they thought they should spread them out. So this group was designed for Toronto and I was just our bad luck.

How did these children adjust to their new families? They were quite, quite old.

Yeah, they were quite, yeah they were quite old.

And also they had memories of their own families.

Of course, of course. You see. . .What happened to that particular group, I don't know. But then I came to Montreal. And I felt also very lonely. Nobody met me at the station. And I arrived here with a terrible sore throat and a stiff neck. And I remember being at the station - I didn't know what to do.
So then I found some kind of a boarding house where I stayed the first couple of nights. I must have arrived on the weekend or something like that. And I think on Monday morning I went the first time to work. Jewish Family and Child Welfare Bureau which Address I had, you know, on a piece of paper. And I came to the agency and I met the director. And I started to uh get oriented a little bit. I remember the first day in the office, nobody approached me. So I could a little bit identify also you know what must have happened to some of those kids. I remember I had no lunch this day because no body came to tell me that there was lunch hour. So I just sat in this office all day long until somebody came, not a social worker, the secretary who then became a social worker with whom I still very, very close, one of my closest friends here in Montreal is this person who then came to say hello to me, you need anything or something. I made wonderful friends here. But then the children. . . because in my first interview I guess with the director, although I was promised I had a job, he felt that I was not qualified enough as a social worker. So I

had to work on two jobs. All the children came to a receiving home, there was a receiving home on [Jean Mosse?] in Montreal, where all the children came there. And people from the community came and would look over the children

To be adopted.

I don't know if they were talking about adoption at that particular point because I think very soon the community got aware that there were no little children. They would have adopted little children, maybe. But when they saw those not so nice kids, you know, they were still pretty raw those youngsters, between 15 and 17 and not dressed Canadian fashion, although very quickly people came forward with clothing, and we could always recognize the refugee children because they were dressed to kill, much more Canadian than the Canadians, too flashy, too, too, too, too too. You know what I mean?

So there was clash of attitude and culture between. . .

Absolutely, that's right. And also when the, the idea of living as a family, they were reluctant, they were afraid maybe of adoption, because they had such glorified memories of their own parents, they didn't want to replace their own parents with another set of parents. In a way they wanted a good home. In another way, they were afraid. So there was always this conflict. And many, there were many, there were many, many changes. They went in a home, they didn't like the home, or the home wanted that the children should maybe learn a trade, the children wanted to go to school, the children wanted to study. And there were many, many conflicts. But

Many perhaps, were overprotective also

Well, some of them were overprotective and some of them were underprotective. You know, those children also presented some kind of a threat to them, in some ways. They were so wise. You know they had children of their own in the same age, some of them, and uh there was also conflict between the children. They had to have everything and there they had nothing. And then their English was very poor. I mean most of them knew some English, but most of them had to learn English. And then in order to go to school they had to be tested. Now, with all their life experiences, and their life experiences were bigger than my life experiences, many. You know, many times today I think of myself at the time. I was young, I was well meaning, I helped, and I helped a lot. I wanted to help. But their life experiences was much more than my life experiences in some ways, you know, going through the camps and all the horrible experiences. So in the tests, in the psychological tests, Jewish vocational services, psychological tests, certain English words they did not know. So the tests, you know, was not such a good result for entrance in a particular school.
Or some child wanted to apply for a scholarship. The worker thought he was not good material, and I think because of my involvement I would often take the part and fight for a child, I knew this child, I had confidence in this child, I knew his ability much better than the test. And there were many conflicts in work with

colleagues sometimes because of that. And also there were some you know, their manners, some were quite arrogant, some expected too much. And then there was the conflict of the religious group, which were also strange to me, I mean, I'm Jewish and I was brought up as a Jew, but I was not extreme Orthodox and we had extreme Orthodox youngsters who wouldn't want to sit with a woman, you know you not supposed to look at a woman. So they would have the interview and they would not look at me. And they asked certain things that was difficult to provide for them. They had to have special facilities, sometimes, you know, in living, they had to have very special homes which would observe all their customs. So, there were tremendous conflict and Jewish Family and Child Welfare Bureau was responsible for the integration of these children. And we would, there were many social workers. The social worker we assigned, each child had a social worker. And we would work with them on a budget. How much for stamps, how much for cigarettes, how much for housing. And they had to live within this budget, which was terribly difficult for them, too, you know, to manage this money. Many would leave the foster home and look for a room and board – and a job also. And a job. Many would do all kind of job, and go to school much later. But there were also many very successful cases where family accepted the child with all the shortcomings of a child, you know of this particular child. And were very tolerant, very understanding, and this child really became part of the family.
They would send him to school, they would educate him, and I think today a child like this would consider, and I know cases like this, where they would be considered their own son or their own daughter who has married, who the children are now the grandchildren of this family, very beautiful stories.

They must have a terrific drive to live and succeed -

Absolutely. I think most of them have become very successful, in terms of material success, having marriage, many marriages also did not last because of that many were married their own kind, others turned also away from Jewishness, they didn't want to have anything do, they became a different religion some of them. But they were very, very successful.

I have talked to many. Some of them have still nightmares, have still terrible memoires of that past, some of them want to forget the past, some of them know they mustn't forget their past. Some of them never talk to their own children. Only in the last few years, you know, many of the second generation had problems because there was some kind of secret in the family and they were very curious about their parents and parents would never talk about their past.

Why would they not talk about their past?

They wanted to protect their children. Why should they know about all those terrible things? That was, I think, well meaning. And not understanding that the past

The past must be remembered, that the past is part of your existence. So, I think only in the last few years, when many of the second generation also came to treatment, they were unhappy people sometime, a lot has been written about that time. It's much more is coming out now about all those stories, I think.

Do they feel an urge to stay in contact with each other?

They're in contact, when anybody is in trouble they're there. They don't always necessary, are today, the closest friends. But I know if something happened, like if one boy was very ill, or one boy died, one boy was hospitalized, they rally and they help, they help. The English group is coming out with a journal. It's called the 42 (*sic – '45*). They keep in contact, and they bring news. I was in England a couple of years ago and we had a wonderful reunion. I think 30 turned up. They all turned up without their spouses, they wanted to be alone with me. And it was a wonderful, moving evening. I also brought a lot of photographs. I had a lot of photographs. We took photographs of each child with their name on for identification

When they arrived at the center?

At the center, at the time and I had copies of those photographs. And those photographs for them was just. . . And I have gotten lots of invitation. I got invitation to marriage of their children, to the birth of the first grandchild, to the bar mitzvah of their son. I went a wonderful bar mitzvah last year in Israel of a boy who recognized me in the Holocaust gathering in Israel, that must be 4-5 years ago. And he recongized me, I did not recognize him. You know it is easier for him to recognize me, I don't have changed as much. But the youngsters, 30-40 years later, for me, was very difficult.

Interviewer – unclear

I met many of them. It was very moving. After my presentation at the end of the conference, many, many came forward, I was surrounded and hugged and kissed by so many and it was very, very moving, And for me this was really, really, sort of closed the circle for me, it was a wonderful experience and wonderful thing for me that I got this invitation to participate in this gathering.

When you were surrounded by these children, did they have any questions to you, about their past?

Well, we, I stayed two extra days in order to see many of them in a more intimate situation and I was invited to dinner in the home of one of them, and he invited some other youngsters to come over after dinner. And so we went back. And we were looking at the time the children came to Canada and the reluctance of the Canadian people first to accept those children, because they thought they must all be very disturbed youngsters, maybe they all would need psychiatric care or things like that. Which turned out not to be true. They were very strong, quite healthy

individuals. Uh, we were laughing about the situation that some of the ladies came with dolls and teddy bears and diapers for little kids. And there were those ugly adolescents, you know, which really turned them off a little bit but on the other hand they wanted to help and they did help. And we were talking about how funny life really is, that it really is a give and a take. With all the negative aspects there is always something very positive. And I think the contribution that this population – not only this population, but in general when you think of this terribly vast country of Canada who had so much space, those people really were very important ingredient to the development of the country and have really made tremendous contribution.

But it's sad, however, that it takes such a sad experience to prove. . .

It's very sad, it's very sad. And we really hope that this conference will make this clear, because I think I said it in my presentation that those people are extra-sensitive to some of the terrible forces which are operating today in the world which, if not watched, it could still tear the world apart another time. And I think this, because of that, it's terribly important that we keep that alive and that we, we mirror that, it must not happen and that really with so little people can help each other and be very happy with this beautiful country, which is a beautiful life.
I know youngsters are very appreciative about the time, the opportunity they had in this country, that I know. They feel very Canadian and very protective of this country.

After all of your experience, you still believe in humanity?

I do, I do. If not, I have to leave right now! (Laughs) I think so, I think so.

Thank you, Greta Fischer, for telling your story.

It was a pleasure

Remembering the Children, cassette 5
Jake Jolah (?) Producer

Out takes

After the conference, did the children come to you and. . . try to reminisce or to remember?

Well, I found myself surrounded by at least 20 – 30 people, all hugging and kissing me. I did not recognize all of them but of course they knew who I was. And everybody exchanging addresses.

So I decided I am going to stay in Toronto another couple of days, because some of the people stayed in Toronto too and that we would get together. So we met in the

evening in one of the boy's houses, I was invited for dinner, he has himself three children and a lovely wife, and we had lovely dinner, and after dinner 5, 6 other people came. And we were sitting, reminiscing, talking about that time, uh some sad memories and some very funny memories. They remembered when the people came to the receiving home, these little dolls and with toys, waiting for the little children and here were those ugly adolescents with bad manners who were also disappointed that the people did not accept them at first sight. And they were also reluctant, afraid, you know, to go into a new home, because they know their shortcomings, they also know that they couldn't change their habits that quickly.

What feeling do they have now towards humanity?

Well, I think they still have the feeling that they are, they can weather any difficulties. I think they have this feeling of, that they are quite powerful. That they can go without food for days, they can do anything they like. They have a lot of confidence in themselves and I think they have proven some of their confidence by being so energetic that they did extremely well in all their adventures. Many became professional people, many went into business and into building and all kinds and they were very, very successful.

Now, when we talk about their personal happiness, maybe they are not so communicative, because I think they question, I think they're quite confident that there is a lot of good in this world, because they experienced, beside the terrible things they experienced from the Germans, they experienced a lot of good things, of the people here and other people who wanted to help them. So I think they have confidence in human nature, but I think they are also very perceptive that there are things in this world today which could provoke anther situation similar to what had happened to them. And I was very strong in telling them it's their responsibility. They were a witness, and if you are a witness, you have a responsibility. And I felt the fact they were at the gathering was a proof that they care and they are willing also to put up a fight for the future, at least also to give this feeling across to their own children, that something must get across that things like that must never happened.

What about you?After all you have seen. . . do you still believe in humanity?

Well, I am an old lady, and I think I do. I think I do, I think I do.

Greta Fischer, thank you very much for telling us your story.

A pleasure.

[Film cuts out]

Where did the children come from? Were they brought to you?

To begin with, some of them were brought. Later, the children came. The children were roaming the streets. Uh, I talked about the displaced persons newspaper. Somebody knows something, he would transmit it to somebody else. So somebody heard about the children's center, and they heard about some good people there who maybe would send the children to America, so children came.

They were abandoned?

They were abandoned. Well, the little children, were, as I told you the stolen children, they were sometimes discovered by army officer. He would find a group of 40, 50 children, somewhere in the country, working for some German farmers. Now he would round them up. I remember one evening it was quite late, somebody knocked at the cloister with the big door, and there were 60 frightened little girls there, they were mostly girls. Some officers had found those children and brought them to us. The Jewish children were roaming the streets. They were just going, they were liberated in that part. They got a lift maybe with some of the soldiers to a certain point. Then they were looking for relatives, they were looking for food. Then they met somebody. There was no order for the day, you know everything was kind of spontaneous. There was a big confusion in Germany also. Soldiers coming back from the war, and other soldiers coming to help in the liberation.

You said these children were frightened I suppose you must have been easy on authority.

Very easy on authority, very easy on authority. There were certain rules, and even with the rules, we were very. . . I mean, we understood, you know. We wanted to help those children, and we extended ourselves, we were everything to these children, you know, a mother a nurse, a doctor, everything. And mainly, the emotional part, to help them with their stories, to tell us the stories. Some of the stories were such dreadful stories, you would never believe, you know, the things they went through. Some of them lived in hiding for months in a little hole underground. They would come out at night, to go for food, mainly for water. Then they would allocate the water, each child, they were not only children, the children, grownups together in hiding. Then one story I remember they stole some potatoes and a small potato must have fallen out in front of the hole where they were hidden. So next morning the Germans shot into that hole, they killed about 18 people and a few stayed alive and one of the children who came to us stayed alive too. They were looking for about two months for another exit, at the other side, because they didn't dare to come out the same exit where they entered. But they still had to come out at night to steal food and to be very careful not to be caught.

And these stories, there were many many stories.

Oh, millions, millions of stories. Unrepeatable sometimes. The stories, which the human mind doesn't want to accept, you know. We cried many times with the children. But you don't have children when you cry with them.

We had to be very brave ourselves in many instances. We would talk amongst ourselves too but in a way also we were also somewhat numb.
We didn't permit ourselves, really, to feel, in some ways, because it was too terrible. We wouldn't have been able to do our jobs. And the other thing which helped us was we were so busy, every minute of the day we were asked to be there for somebody. Was it for the baby, was it for the premies (?) was it for the big children, was it look for material, was it to look for food, was it to fill out requisition?
Every minute of the day, and it kept pretty normal, I think, we had lots of fun. This friend of mine, Andre, we worked together, we would have a saying. He had an idea and I had an idea and he would always say, "You go and do it!" So I would call Andre "You go and do it!" That was our joke. You know. And there was an American girl, very prim and proper. I would call her Marian Houghton, Brass Button. We had a nickname for each one of the team. We had fun too, I wouldn't say –

What was yours?

I don't know, I don't remember.

You said looking for material, you had to go to Dachau. How did you feel, weren't you reluctant to go to this camp?

Listen, that was an ambivalence. We were terribly curious, and we were very frightened. Now there were no more inmates at Dachau when we came, but there certainly was a terrible smell, you know a terrible smell. The smell was from the furnaces where they burned the people. That was always the difference I felt, when I came from Kloster Indersdorf which was this beautiful, quiet little village, the war had passed by there, that gave you the impression, and then you came to Dachau, this terrible smell.
I couldn't stand the smell, it made me ill. So we went into Dachau, we were curious, we saw the machinery, there was not yet a museum, but it was empty and we certainly understood the conflict. You know, there was Dachau, was responsible for the death of so many people and there I was looking for material to clothe children who will be growing up, for what I didn't know at the time.

So you had to overcome your feelings, the babies were more important.

Always, always, there was no question about it. We would sometimes go also in empty houses, one of the things which was precious were light bulbs. You couldn't buy a light bulb for anything in German. Sometimes we would go to an empty building and find a light bulb. I remember we used to wear American uniforms, a battledress, and I would put the light bulb in the battle dress not, to not to break it. I remember one evening I opened my battle dress, I forgot I had light bulbs in there and they fell. It was tragedy! You know, two such precious things would be broken! Things like that, hundreds, hundreds of stories.

What made you did what you did?

Well, I spent the war years in England. The Blitz in England was no joke either. My parents did not want to leave Czechoslovakia. Uh, all this together in combination. And it was, I always wanted to work with children from the time I was a very little girl I would pick up – we lived in a small town in Czechoslovakia – I would pick up little kids, I would take care, I would wash them and clean them, and I love children. And there was always a little bit of the social worker in me, I think from very small. And the youngest of six children.

But still you dedicated your life to children.

Yeah, yeah. Not a bad way to live a life.

So you are not only a mother of one or two children. . .

No, quite a few! Quite a few, I worked with all kinds of children. In this country too, with very disturbed children, I worked with the Talmid ??? babies, here in this country in rehabilitation. And there were always some children around.

A lot of things you did were very daring. Were you ever afraid?

I don't think, I needed a challenge. I think I always needed a challenge.

In other words you were not thinking of your own self.

No, I think the challenge gave me satisfaction. I like a challenge. Now I am working with the elderly, so also a challenge. No more children. No, children, too, but

They say the elderly are also like children

I think that's a mistake. I think it's a mistake. It's not true. Old people have something very beautiful too. They have a life behind which we sometimes forget, that they have contributed already a lot and then suddenly they are very helpless, this is true, but you must not forget their contribution I think, which is quite precious.

Well we should certainly not forget yours.

Well, thank you. (laughs) Oy, my voice.

[Interview continues, without sound]

[Looking at pictures from Kloster Indersdorf]
Some of them, the good ones. . .
This is the, from the small village of Kloster Indersdorf.

So that's Kloster Indersdorf. The cloister. Built in 18th century.
That's the chapel of the cloister.

So that's you on the right, eh, Greta?

Yes. Looking younger

Surrounded by all men (sic), there's one other woman there.

That's me, yeah. And that's Andre. He used to scrounge.

[Cut to picture of child]
He would say Heil Hitler all the time. A Russian child. Identified. Two Polish boys.

The blond one is the child in the search.
Except that their parents. . .

I was trying to develop some series in terms of personality, which child, which nationality.

This one looks like she could be French.

No I don't think so.

You know, we had a diphtheria epidemic because the vaccine was overdue. . . And she took a little girl home to France.

What was interesting was, you know, I worked a lot with disturbed children too, that those children [Kloster Indersdorf children] who were terribly deprived picked up much faster than if I think of the treatment of the very disturbed child.

……

Do you remember where she went?

She went to Russia.

I only made a selection [referring to photographs] I have millions more. I didn't bring all of them here.

Never enough hands. You know, I was telling Jack before that for years and years, I never looked at those things. And we started talking, and my staff gave me hell. Said, Why did you never tell us of all those things? And then, it sort of came out.

We had made in the village, all those little wooden beds.

Of course, these babies were just traumatized.

This was somebody from London. I can't remember. I really don't.

That little girl looks like a doll. Doesn't she?

And the sores, definitely. And also scabies, and all sorts of skin diseases.

That's a marvelous shot with potties, again.

That's the glass or the wood?

No, that's in between, I think, what you call, not china. . . Enamel. You can see. And I hated them, because they would you know, the thing would come off and they would be very difficult to clean. But you can see also how primitive, those were some old wash stands I think from the time so we just put bowls on.

You know, some of the pictures remind me. We had those little stands, they were low tables and there was a hole in them, we put the little washboards in there to teach them how to wash themselves their own hand. And we had the visit of General Eisenhower. And one little boy, rather retarded child, really the child was quite backwards, was very intensively he takes this little bowl and instead of putting it where he is supposed to he put it on the pale beige trousers of General Eisenhower.

You know we taught classes in German, in Czech. And we also gave them some vocational training. . .

The selection must have been very hard to do. . . How could you decide which one was going and which would stay. . .

We participated in the selection but it was not always possible of course and there was never enough places. And I think we were privileged because we were a children's center, there were lots of children in the other camps, too.

Remembering the children, cassette 7.