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Ready to come up.

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, on January 14, 1985, we're continuing our interview with Sylvia Malcmacher of Cleveland, a Holocaust survivor from Vilna. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section.

Sylvia, what concentration camps or work camps were you sent to from the ghetto? And when was this?

The ghetto was still going on. But because of my older sister, she being a furrier after the war-- I mean before the war, the Germans took out all the furriers and put them up in a big work place in two big buildings. And they worked first for the German soldiers on the fronts.

Because of her, my family got the break. She worked it out that she could go out, and she took us along. So me, my father, my younger sister, and her, we all left the ghetto after being a year in the ghetto. We left the ghetto, and we were outside the ghetto with 2,000 Jews.

This 1942?

It's, yeah, about that time.

About what month?

Can't remember.

In the fall?

Sometimes. And there, we lived in a little basement room because everybody wanted to get out. And it was lucky for the people who could get out from the ghetto. And my father and my sister-- my father not being a furrier, but still went there to that place-- they went out to work in a special place. And he went out to work. He did odd jobs there. And my sister worked. And because of her, we were out of the ghetto.

How was your sister able to get the whole family out? She say you were all furriers or what?

No, the thing was like the same thing happened, like my father took over her thing.

[CROSS TALK].

Right. My father took it over. And if one member of the family was a furrier, but most of it, the men were. So she got lucky. And she got us all out.

Twice it happened.

Twice. She got us all out. There we worked-- my father worked, and my sister worked. I didn't work and my younger sister didn't work. We stayed in that place. My mother helped. She baked bread and did a lot of work to help to support the family.

And my older sister, I come back to her. She brought in from outside a lot of food from the Gentiles. As I said, there are too, she was hiding her yellow star. And she looked a little bit like an Aryan. So she could pass by. So she helped with this.

And the ghetto went on. We heard about the ghetto. The ghetto went on. But we were outside the ghetto. We had our own police, the Jewish boys, you know, who watched that place. But it was-- life was a little bit easier there.

Were you sent from there to a labor camp or to a concentration camp?

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Before-- yeah, concentration camp. Before that--

What concentration camp were you sent to?

Before we were sent to that concentration camp, we lost our younger sister. The way it came about--

Her name?

Shifre. The way-- she was 11 years old. The way it came about, the ghetto, people started to say that how come we are living there without any really problems and they had to supply that many people to send away? On March-- this I won't forget-- on March the 17th, it came out-- then already in that place was one gentleman who was the commander who watched over it-- it came out in the morning, we used to come out and they counted us all on Appell.

So it came out that all the young people had to go-- all the young and all the old, up till 14 years-- no, up till 16 years had to go across the street. It was like a big hospital there. And it's just going to be like inspection. If the people are not sick-- nobody knew that anything was going to go on there.

There, I was lucky to be spared too. I don't know why. Just lucky. I was-- to my father's passport, I was written in younger because if I were older, I had to have my own passport. So when the thing came out that all the young people till 16 had to go to the hospital, so I was on that list because I was already in '44 I was 18. But I was written in younger. So I had to go there too.

So in the morning when we stood in-- we were counted, all the people till 16 and the older people. So I was one to go. So me and my sister went over to that hospital for inspection.

As we got there, I kind of lost her because the young-- she was seven years younger. She was 11. So she was in one place. I was in one place. And as I walked to that commander, every time when we stood in that counting in the morning, he kind of stood by me and he-- I looked older. I was older.

So he said, how old you are? Every morning, and I said, oh, I am 16 or 15. I don't remember exactly what I told him.

So then in the hospital, when I came through the line, he said, you go back to me, just by looking at me. And I said, why should I go back? I didn't know that in the next 10, 15 minutes the SS will come and take everybody away. I said, why should I go back? I said, I don't want to go back? I have my sister here. I don't want to go back.

And that Jewish, like it was-- not a real policeman, but the guy who took care on the whole thing heard it. And he said to me-- maybe he knew that something was going to go on. And he said to me, if he tells you to go back, don't ask any questions. You go back.

It was across. And I didn't want to go back because I know my younger sister was there. And he said, don't any questions-- don't argue with him. You were afraid to argue. You just go back. Your sister will come later. You just go back.

So three girls from the whole group he sent back. And I was in the three. I don't know why. Why I was lucky, I don't have any idea. I wasn't smarter. I wasn't older. I wasn't-- I don't know.

So I went back. And then everybody in that place said, where are all the people? I said, I don't know, they have to go through the inspections. They'll come. I said, he sent me back. His name was Goloshchekin. They gave him a nickname, the German guy. And they couldn't think why I was sent back.

I said, they'll come. Everybody will come back. Because nobody knew-- after half an hour, we looked through the windows and the big trucks with the black uniforms, Germans came. And they took everybody away. And that was the end. And I never saw my sister again.

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And I was spared just-- that time, I was spared just by a miracle. Just-- I don't know why. He just noticed me and he sent me back. Otherwise, I would have gone away with her. So that was in March.

We never saw her again. A lot of people went then. Mothers with young with young kids, with little kids who couldn't go by themselves, everybody went.

It was March of what year?

March of '44. March-- we stayed in that place till '44. The ghetto was liquidated in '43. The ghetto was liquidated in '43.

When the ghetto was liquidated, a lot people ran away. And they came to us in that place. Kalis. It was named. And they hid out by us.

But the ghetto was liquidated in '43. And we stayed on outside the ghetto till '44. In March of '44, those happened when my younger sister went away and she never came back.

What happened to you next? Where did they send you?

In May-- then in May, in May 1944-- see the Russians got closer to Vilna by then. And they thought they have to do something with the few remaining Jews because the Russians-- we went in May. And I think in June or July, the Russians occupied Vilna in '44. So they had to take out the people.

So in the 16th of May-- now, this I'll never forget either-- in the morning, we went out. And they announced that they are going to send us to work, to Arbeitslager. So we took the few remaining what we had. And then I was, my older sister, and mother and father, we all still were together.

And we packed up a few bundles. And they sent all of us from that place, all the furriers, about 2,000, they sent. We went to the railroad station. This I'll never forget. I looked back at that building. And I thought to myself, I think that's the last time I will see it. [SOBBING]

So the 16th of May, they send us out to Riga Kaiserwald. That was Latvia. When we came there, we were still all together, except my younger sister. When we came there, right away we put our belongings on the ground. They took away everything. They took away our clothes. And we stayed there for two weeks, I think, or three weeks, not too long.

My father was separated from us. But we still could see him that he was there. And me and my mother and older sister. He went to work, but he came every night back.

And we really didn't work there because there was just Durchgangslager. I don't know how you say it. It's like people went through there. And from there, we got sent someplace else.

So they took away everything. We stayed there for three weeks maybe, or two weeks. And it was already no food and no clothing. They gave us right away those striped jackets. And in the morning we had to get up for Appell. And we were chased and beaten.

But from there we all were sent out. And luckily, my father was sent out with the same transport to a lot small camps. There, we were all together. And then in May-- in August-- I mean in 1944 in August, they send us to Stutthof.

Before you tell us about Stutthof--

Yes.

--I want to go back and ask you about the furriers.

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Yeah.

2,000 furriers.

Yes.

What kind of furs were they working on? That is, were they taken from people in Auschwitz and sent back? Were they were raw furs.

Raw furs. Raw furs. And furs they got from the people.

All right, now I want you to tell us as much as you can. We've heard many stories about people who were taken to Auschwitz. They had to leave all their clothing. The clothing was bundled up and shipped out. We've never had the opportunity to find out the other end. What happened when the clothing from Auschwitz reached its destination point where the Germans wanted it remade? Tell us about the incoming furs. What they looked like, how they were packed, how they were marked.

I really wasn't in that factory.

Whatever you know from wherever you heard.

Yeah, it came in a lot of raw furs. From where it came? From Germany? Lot of raw furs. They made it in-- I mean fur pieces. And they made it in fur coats. Warm, it should be warm for the soldiers on the fronts. That's where it went.

A lot of fur came already ready furs, I guess taken away from the Jewish people from town because nobody had anything left. And it was worked over like short jackets, long coats.

Now would these incoming furs be fur coats, women's coats?

Women's coats.

So they--

Yes.

The coats arrived, the fur coats worn and used.

Yeah, they did that because coats, fur, you can cut over. And it was done everything for the soldiers.

Fur trimmed cloth coats?

No, just fur coats, just fur coats. Just for the men, for the soldiers. It wasn't made like for women to--

No, I meant incoming.

Yeah, incoming all kind of furs, pieces, raw furs, regular furs, fur collars, everything. And that's why they had that factory to work on it. And everything was done--

Were there any shipping labels that you ever heard of?

No, I don't have any idea.

So you don't know if they came from Auschwitz or wherever.

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No idea from where it came. But a few thousand people worked. So it must have come a lot of furs.

It was a steady stream.

It was a steady stream. And it was a survival for a lot of us because when the ghetto was liquidated that's it. There were no Jews left in Vilna, except that place, and except a few Jews who maybe hid. But that was just to count on the fingers.

Sylvia, beside the furriers, were there any other groups that the Germans kept for working?

It was one other place. It was called HKP. There it was like the same thing. But I don't know what they did there. It was in a different section of town. And I know, even now, I met a lot of survivors who were there.

But it was the same thing that before the Russians got closer to the town, they liquidated that place. And they liquidated our place. So as I said, on May 16, we left Vilna and started out all over the concentration camps.

All right. You left Kaiserwald in Riga, Latvia.

Yes.

What happened after that?

We got sent to Stutthof.

Where is that?

Danzig. It's in Poland. It's like Gdansk. It's close to Gdansk.

It's now Gdansk under Polish rule.

Right. Right. They took us on trains. We were going back and forth maybe three days. I don't know if it was that long a distance. But I guess we couldn't go through. The trains didn't go through. But we traveled packed like animals in the trains. And we traveled back and forth, back and forth until we came to Stutthof.

Were the four of you together in the railroad?

Four of us together, yes. We were all together.

What happened to the family at Stutthof?

That was the end of everything. We came in Stutthof. There it was a horrible place. It's like Auschwitz. But I wasn't in Auschwitz. So now I know. But it was terrible. A lot of people--

It was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz--

I heard-- yes. I heard-- when I was there I didn't know. But now, I hear that it was ovens there too.

Gas chambers?

Gas chambers. That's what I heard. When I was there, we came. The same thing, we got stripped. We got our heads shaven off the hair. The men got shaved off the hair just with a strip in the middle. And there we got to be like--

You know what was done with the hair?

It was shaven away, took away. They made out of that soap-- no.

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Out of hair?

No, no, not from hair. From the skin. I don't know.

I've heard--

I don't know because what I hear now.

They made blankets--

Blankets.

--out of human hair and socks, special insulated socks.

I know they were shaven away and taken away.

The socks primarily for tank and submarine crews.

That-- so when we came to Stutthof, there it was just horrible. First of all, it was a lot of sickness going around, like typhus. People were dying there constantly. It was no morning or no night. I was there together with my mother and my sister.

What kind of work?

First of all, my father was taken away there. That's it. There, we didn't see him anymore. He was right away put aside with the men. And I never-- since we came, I never saw him again.

Work, we came there, and we stayed in the camp. They didn't send us to work there. But they-- we didn't have no morning, no night. Every five minutes, we had to go out and they counted us on the Appells.

Food, we had to stay in line maybe for an hour for that little water they gave us or peels of potatoes. People were dying every second. Me and my mother and my sister, we stuck together.

And I have to say it again, my older sister, she went for food. She stayed one time. And then she risked her life and went again in the line to get another.

But if the girl who gave the food, if she would recognize her, she would never get out of there. But she took the risk and brought another little soup, whatever it was, to give my mother, my mother should have it.

There we was like two weeks in Stutthof. And one morning, we stood on that counting thing, on the Appell it was called. In front of us, we saw a big German, tall, big, fat. And they said that they need 100 girls to take out from Stutthof to go to work someplace else.

And so we all stood in line, my mother, my sister, and myself. My father I didn't see him since we came. But we all were hoping that we're all going to be all right, after all we saw. So when my mother came in line first-- she was a young woman. In '44, she was 44 years old. But no hair with a little scarf-- if you had a scarf. So when she came in line, the guy looked her over and right away put her aside, on the side.

What does that mean she was taken or not taken?

No, no. She was not taken to go to work. See, we didn't know which is better. If this one was better or this one was better, we didn't know. But she was put at the side.

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Then my sister went. And I guess her luck was not to be to survive, I don't know. She had a little sore on her foot. If she would left it without being tied, they wouldn't even see it. And she would come with me.

But she took a rag and she tied it around her leg so when she came in front, he asked her, how old are you? She said 22. In '44, she was 22. I was 18.

And he looked her over. She was a young, strong girl, no hair. But otherwise, he looked her over. And he saw that rag on her foot. So he didn't even ask her, what is it? Or why do you have it? Automatically, he figured that it's something wrong.

So he put her on the side with the mother. And I still didn't know which is better. Then I came. And he looked me over. How old are you? I said 18. And he put me right away on the other side.

After the whole group was selected, 100 girls, it was all 100 almost Vilna girls, because we came with the same transport. After everybody was selected, the 100 girls, they took us away. And they put us in a separate barrack. And my mother and sister went-- stayed in Stutthof.

In the morning, they came. And they send us away for work. But we didn't know where we going. So then I was already separated from everybody.

And in the morning, when they transported us from that barrack, I looked and I saw my mother and sister by the gate. And that was the last time. [SOBBING] They couldn't join me because first of all, they would be beaten to death right away.

And second of all, they didn't know that I am going to another camp. They thought that they took me away to get shot because I know from people who came later to Stutthof and they met my mother and sister. So my mother said to them that they took me away, and she doesn't know that I'm still alive because they didn't tell us where are we going.

So from then, we went to MÃ¼hldorf. That was the concentration camp that I worked. And I stayed till I got liberated.

Sylvia, did you have any knowledge of what happened to your mother and your sister?

No. That's another thing. When I came to MÃ¼hldorf, there were 50 girls like myself. They all were from Vilna, separated the same as I was from their sisters. And so we came there, and there were 200 Hungarian women in that place.

Where was MÃ¼hldorf located?

By MÃ¼nchen. It was in Germany.

Near Munich.

Yeah. It was in Germany. By Dachau. By Dachau. By Dachau.

Right. Southern Germany.

By Dachau.

Outside Munich.

There, we came. And the Hungarian girls took us in. They were very nice to us. They tried to-- because they were there before, they tried to help us. They brought us whatever they could. Whatever they had, they shared with us.

And every morning-- that's why--

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What kind of work were you sent to?

I was sent to like a Baustelle. I really don't know what they did there. But all the men and just us girls, the 50 girls, the men worked like tunnels, they digged tunnels. I don't for what the tunnels were because I never saw anything coming in there. Or it was for ammunition to hide? But it was digged, big tunnels. And like over it, like bridges, cement bridges. That was-- they dug with all kind of things. This was the men's work. The women helped.

Were these tunnels in mountains?

Yes. Yes. Yes. Arbeitslager. I don't know what-- for what I can't tell you for. But they were watched by the SS. And the girls were watched by the SS.

And the girls-- I didn't work there too long because after awhile on the Appell in the morning when we had every morning, they took me out. I don't know why. I looked strong and young. They took me out.

And since they took me out, I didn't go anymore with everybody to work on the Baustelle. But I worked in concentration camp, in camp. I was washing clothes for the Germans. And that was even worse than to go out.

Worse than helping dig tunnels?

Worse than helping dig tunnels because we had-- a few girls just had to wash the clothes by hand, first of all. There was no machines. No nothing. We had to scrub by hand.

Not even a scrub board?

We had to scrub by hand, the clothes. And it had to be cleaned because every morning somebody came in from the Germans and inspected it. If it was a little dirt, we had to do it again.

And we had to dry the clothes outside. And it was winter. So wet clothes, you take out, the hands got frozen. You had to hang the clothes outside on lines.

And through the whole day, they would get stiff, frozen. At night, you had to take them in and the morning again in that way for a few days till the clothes got dry. So my hands were frozen. And this went on for the whole time I was there.

Now these were shirts and socks and underwear--

Underwear, underwear--

And sheets. All for the SS.

Plenty lice they had.

Bedding.

Everything, that was all for the Germans. This was my job.

What kind of soap?

Pieces of soap. There wasn't-- there was no soap powder.

No. But do you have any indication that the Germans were using soap from human beings?

No. I didn't know then. I didn't know then. But pieces of soap. Pieces of soap.

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And that's the way I survived. I was in the camp. I didn't go out. But it was worse than going out because it was very hard for me to wash clothes by hand. I never did it. And the drying thing, I was frozen stiff. Frozen stiff. Got to be sick plenty times. But I was afraid to tell that I'm sick because if you were sick, then that was the end of you.

So as I was started to say, every day some people came, new people came. So we were so-- I don't know, dumb? Maybe dumb. That's the word I can say for it. That every morning when a new transport came, I was running to look that, oh, next day, my mother and sister are going to come.

That was the whole-- for me, the whole hope that with this transport they didn't come. I was so childish. And so, I don't know, stupid that next day, maybe because I wished so much, that the next transport my sister and mother is going to come. If they didn't come today, because all the day, every day, some new people came, that next day they'll come. But they never came. And I never saw them.

But no more transports came from Stutthof?

No. Came people from all over, but not from there.

Sylvia, you were there near Dachau until liberation?

Until liberation, yes.

Tell us about liberation.

I stayed--

This is now May 1945?

Right, right. I worked that washing the clothes till then. And I was a good worker because I was afraid that if I don't do good my job, I'll be sent away someplace else. And I figured, I better do a good job. I don't know if this helped, but--

So when the-- before the liberation, the whole concentration camp, all the people were sent out. A few people, like a small percentage, still stayed in. The Germans still needed those people, the people who worked in the kitchen. Like the few girls who washed the clothes, we stayed in.

A day before everybody left, but we stayed in. And that morning in May, we started to hear that the Russians are getting close. And they bombarded. So we were happy. I mean, we heard the bombarding. We thought to ourselves, my goodness, maybe something is going to happen.

And in the morning, we went out. And we saw that a lot of the Germans were already running away. And they didn't-- we stayed there.

And I remember one fellow came running into the camp. And he said, you'll never believe what happening. I saw American tanks.

We were liberated by the Americans. And we couldn't believe it. We said, how could that happen? Still some Germans are here. Not everybody ran away. We were still in the camp. But as the day progressed, the American tanks came in. And we got liberated.

Do you have any memory of any individual Americans?

No. No. No. No. Just the soldiers and the tanks. And they gave us food right away. A lot of people died a few days after they got liberated because they couldn't-- from the food. Everybody ran and ate a lot. And that's what killed them because they couldn't-- a lot of people were sick.

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My father's brother survived. And he was in that same camp. After the Americans came in, I was running and looking for him. And then I found out that he is in a hospital. He was very sick. Another day or two, and he would never survive.

So the Americans came. And--

You remember the date?

May, May the 2nd, could it be? I think May the 2nd, '45. And then-- this I remember. I was with a girlfriend of mine, but we befriended very good after we got sent out from Stutthof, like we were two sisters.

We shared our little piece of bread. What we got, we shared it. I saved it for her. She saved it to me. She is now in Argentina. She's survived.

So the few girls who got to be there, we sat down. And we thought to ourselves, what now? After the liberation, what now? Where do we turn? Where do we go? Is anybody alive? What now?

We were for a few days just like numb without any emotions, without any-- we couldn't be happy. We couldn't be sad. We were happy that-- but we didn't believe it. But we thought to ourselves, where do we go on from here? What do we do now?

How did you sort that out?

Well, it took us a few days to be like emotional. I mean not-- without any emotions I mean. It was like dead a few days. And then people start to kind of get out and look for family and look maybe this one survived, maybe this one survived.

After MÃ¼hldorf, where I got liberated, a few people talk together. And we took our horse and carriage. And we went to Feldafing. Feldafing was already a DP camp with a lot of survivors where the Americans put them up.

And I thought, we'll travel there. Maybe, I'll find somebody there. So we went. It took us a few days to go by horse and buggy. We didn't go by train.

And when we came there, I started to ask around. A lot people from Vilna were there who survived from this camp or from this. So when I came there, I was already almost on a bus to take me to the railroad to go back to Vilna. I said, there I couldn't find nobody. I was asking around.

I said, well, before we left Vilna, before we left from that place, our family said to each other, if somebody survived, we're going to meet back here because we knew it-- so I thought to myself, I remember that. And I said, if anybody survived, they'll be back in Vilna.

So I was already on that bus. And all of a sudden, there came some people who knew my parents, who knew my sister, from Vilna. And they were with them together in Stutthof.

And they said to me, Sylvia-- well, then I wasn't called Sylvia-- but where are you going? I said, what do you mean where I am going? I'm going back to Vilna because my mother and sister are going to be there. I was--

And they said, well, I'm sorry to tell you, honey, you can't go back because nobody is left. We were with your mother and sister in Stutthof. And they never got out of there. They were there.

They told me my mother got sick, typhus. And that automatically she died there. And then my sister was by herself. She didn't leave my mother's side.

Then she could have gone out because she was still young. But by then she was already sick too. And they didn't choose

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her. No place to go. When she was with my mother, they told me she got chosen a few times, but she kind of wiggled back in because she didn't want to leave my mother alone. But by that time, they said she was sick, and they both died in Stutthof.

So you didn't--

So I didn't go back.

Didn't go back.

I went-- from that bus I went, and somebody from the men told me about my father that he was sent from Stutthof with all the men from Vilna on a boat someplace. And they ground-- the whole boat was ground. And everybody--

They drowned everybody.

They drowned. Everybody drowned. And one survivor was from the whole boat by miracle. I don't know how he survived. But I heard afterwards--

Was the boat deliberately sunk or was it it attacked?

No, no. They didn't have where to send the men already.

So they put them on a boat and sunk the boat.

They put them on the boat. And they told everybody-- see, the thing is that nobody knew that they are going to their death because they told the men they are going to send them to work. Like I was sent, my mother didn't know if I was sent to death or to work.

Correct.

So they told us to work. They told the men they are going to send them to work. And they're going to work. And they're going to be all right.

And when they went on the ship, on the boat, they drowned--

In the Baltic?

With the whole-- with the whole people. So after that I thought to myself, if nobody is back home, why should I-- why should I go and because our home wasn't there anymore?

Well, if you did not go home, then where did you go after the war?

We stayed in Feldafing. It was a DP camp. And I went to ORT school. They organized--

ORT is--

Yeah.

--a Jewish organization.

Right. Right. Right.

What does the O-R-T stand for?

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Right.

What does it stand for?

Oh--

Organization, Rehabilitation and Training.

Right. Right. Right. I went-- they had there like a chapter. And I went. And I took sewing lessons. And I was by myself with my girlfriend, with some friends of mine what we after the war.

And in '46, I met my husband--

At--

At Feldafing.

--the camp?

Yes.

What was his name?

Izidor, Israel, Israel, Israel.

He is also a survivor?

He was a survivor from other camps. I didn't know them before.

What was his original home? Przytyk, Radom.

Near Poland?

Near Poland-- in Poland.

I mean in Poland.

That was Poland. So we met in '46. And we got married in August of '46.

And when did you arrive in Cleveland?

We arrived in Cleveland in '49, end of June. The Jewish Federation transferred us to Cleveland. I think, yeah. The Jewish Family Service I think, the Jewish Family Service.

So we came to Cleveland by boat, which it was another chapter, the ride. 10 days we traveled. We came right away to Cleveland. That's where we were assigned. We didn't have no family here. But the Jewish Family Service sponsored us. And when we came, they helped us.

And what year did you come here?

'49.

In '49.

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Yeah, till '49 we were in Feldafing. My husband worked a little bit there. And my older daughter was born in Feldafing in '48. She was a year old when we came.

Sylvia, we're going to pause now. And we'll be back to conclude.

OK.

Thank you.

[AUDIO OUT]

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