

This is Sidney Elsner. Today, December 27, 1984, we are interviewing Hilda Prooth, a Holocaust survivor from Prague, Czechoslovakia. This is under the sponsorship of the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Before we begin the questions, I want to explain that Mrs. Prooth was a resident of Prague who was sent to Theresienstadt, the so-called good concentration camp in Czechoslovakia.

But she was not sent there until 1943, in contrast with many, many thousands of Jews from elsewhere in Czechoslovakia, who went there immediately after the German occupation. This is because Mrs. Prooth was under the protection of the Swedish government, as on the books, a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Russia. Her husband had been born in what was Russia, but taken when he was six months old by his parents and the family to England. And he was brought up thinking he was born an Englishman. It was not until during the war, when he was teaching in Germany, that he realized he had Russian birth.

And consequently, the family had to leave Germany as Jewish and go to Prague, which was then free. At that-- after some time, when the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia, this Russian citizenship by birth came in very handy because Russian citizens were regarded as interned. Czechoslovakian Jews were deported to death camps. Accordingly, Mrs. Prooth had this document in which the Swedish consulate changed her place of birth, which was erroneously listed here as Czechoslovak--

Then I was stateless--

Stateless, she was stateless--

--because my husband was stateless.

--then changed to USSR. And this is what kept her out of the death camps in that period and sent her to Theresienstadt, instead, in 1943. Mrs. Prooth, tell us, please, about your early life, what it was like in Germany-- what your life was like in Germany before.

It never was in Germany. This was Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. We never was in Germany. This was only the first-- after the First World War, we had the option to be a Czech or a Sudeten district. My father made the option we were Czechs. So we lived in Karlsbad. We were born in Karlsbad, I and the family. And I moved into Prague because Prague, I wanted to widen my horizon. So I went to Prague. And I lived in Prague.

When I say Germany, I was referring, I think, to your husband's--

No, he was--

--teaching. You said that--

--he was alone. He was there alone. He was in Stettin in-- alone as a teacher. He came from England. I didn't-- I was not yet married to him.

Right. But tell us--

And I couldn't get married because he was stateless. And I was sick. So I would have lost my--

Wait, back up just a minute.

Yeah.

When did you meet the man who became your husband?

He became to me a husband, I think, in '40.

OK. When did you meet him and under what circumstances?

In '39.

Where?

In--

In Prague?

In Prague, in congregation, all the truth-- all the refugees came to the congregation because first of all, they had to be registered there. And second of all, they had to get some-- some of them, they got some support from them. So and since I was very much involved with the people, with the thing, so I-- Saturday, when somebody, Friday, came from Germany as a refugee, so when a woman was, they sent them to me because the congregation was closed for religion Friday evening and Saturday.

So they opened again on Sunday. There was also a Russian girl with. So she knew him because they came together there. And my husband, he translated. And I sent letters for the people who couldn't speak English and wanted to emigrate to America or Australia, like this particular girl. So he made all the things. So I came involved with this all.

How did the Swedish consulate come to know of you?

Because I went there.

Tell us what happened.

I went there. And I said, I married one of your subject now. And I wanted to tie him. And he said for me that I was there. So he said-- he tried to help me whenever, however it would be possible for him to help me. But he doesn't know not yet how he will deal with the Nazis.

The Swedish were watching out for the Russian interests--

Yes.

--in Czechoslovakia--

In Czechoslovakia.

--just as the Swiss do for the American interests--

The Swiss, yes, quite right.

--in Cuba at the moment--

Quite right, yes.

--1984.

Yeah.

Correct.

And so he-- when-- once I came home, and I had a cleaner woman at home-- my husband was gone already in Germany

in the camp. And I was arrested-- not arrested, but some people, because I didn't have any star, so these two guys or three guys, these Nazis, took me along and want to go into Gestapo. But of course, they had to release me again, accordingly about this paper.

OK.

But then I said--

We'll come to this paper in a minute. How is it that you did not wear the yellow star that everybody else--

Because the consulate made-- wrote a letter to the police, said, Russian Jews is not necessary to wear the star.

You have that letter here?

Yes.

Read it to us.

It's over there.

Where is this?

No, it's on your--

Is this here?

Yeah.

No, it's not here.

Yeah, yeah.

You have it there, no.

We're on television, so.

I'm sorry. Oh, here it is. But this is in German, of course.

Read it in English, translate it to English.

Yes. We take the answer according to your question whether the-- and the [INAUDIBLE] Swedish consulate in his-- being he has the Russian interest in mind for the protectorate and permanent man. This was in our state. And so he writes, he was the Soviet Russian state people, stating they are not necessary to wear the Jewish star, the David.

And this is signed by the Swedish?

Signed by the Swedish General Consul.

And what date?

This was on the 20-- 1920-- '42, December 1942.

Fine.

Yeah.

Tell us about your life in-- before Hitler came to Prague and after Hitler came to Prague, the differences.

Now, right, I-- when I was working.

As what?

I was, like I say, a governess. But I was at home. And I was teaching the Czech children German. So I was tutoring, really. And of course, then, when the Nazis came, it was not necessary. The Czechs they had no-- they were so without the head, they didn't know anything. So I didn't do much. I was sewing. My really thing is a seamstress.

And so read-- then I was my husband. I didn't know, when the Nazis came, we were not allowed to go in the evening. Of course, out after 8 o'clock, you were not permitted to go in the street. And in the morning, at 5:00-- 6 o'clock was again the curfew from 8 o'clock in the evening till in the morning 6 o'clock, they had a curfew. You couldn't go out. If you would go out. And even if you looked for the window out, you would be shot.

What year was this?

This was in 1939, when they came. And the Jews were not allowed to go shopping, only from 3:00 till 4:00 in the afternoon. The Jews couldn't have any eggs, no onions, no meat, no nothing. They couldn't eat. They couldn't get. So they had the card, the ration cards. They were stamped everywhere-- Jude, Jude, Jude. This means Jew. And you could only go-- no shopkeeper would sell you something. Even if you would go in, he would be arrested for giving us the food.

OK. And what was your life like socially?

There were no much socially life anymore. You could only have it amongst something because after 8 o'clock, you couldn't go anymore in the street.

We-- and when-- you married-- this was 1939. And you became married in 1940?

Yeah. Yeah, about, yeah.

What was the Jewish wedding like under occupation?

They couldn't marry anymore in the city. We had to go in a suburb. My husband was already in the camp. And I had to get the permission to get him out.

What type of camp?

In Prague, interned camp, already from the Russian. Was the Russian, what were there together.

Correct.

And so I had to get a permission to get him out to go in the suburb. There came a policeman with him. And I ask him-- I gave this policeman some cigarettes. I said, listen, I have a dinner prepared. Could you go with him-- bring him at least home? So he said, yes, I have permission to. He have permission till 4 o'clock to be out. But at 2 o'clock will be an exchange of the guards.

So in my house, there were the-- was funny enough. And there was a guard. This one came in. And the other one went out. So then we went-- I went with him to get in this camp. It was an hour away from Prague. And so right in this ended our marriage.

And then they told me, maybe he comes away in 10-- in a week or so, they come away from here. They don't stay in Prague. So right, and this one guy, this German, this Nazi-- well, I don't know the rank what he had, but he was fairly decent to me. And he said to me, he will come away.

And once I heard the first transports went to Poland from the Jews in Prague, so I was so excited. And I went to him in the office of the Gestapo. And I said, listen, the people come away now. What happened now when I think-- I said. He said, no, your husband comes away too. I said, would you promise me that I will know when he is coming away or something? He said, I promise you, when he is coming away, I let you know.

And sure enough, a week later, I came home, there was a note under the door. Your-- the men are coming away next day. It didn't say, go visiting or something, only that's what he let me know. Was very nice-- I found this was decent of this guy. He had a beautiful-- either a high rank of the Nazis. But he was very nice. I mean, I was grateful to him.

So then later on, I ask him where the men are going. He said, I cannot tell you. I said, you know what? Is Christmas coming. And maybe I could send him some cookies, my imagination what I had. So he said, you don't send any cookies. Now, maybe I have to wash him his clothes. He needs-- he will be dirty. So I said, maybe, you do this one. He said, he doesn't need you either.

Now, I pestered him so much, so long that he gave me the address. And he said, write on this address. So I wrote him on this address. And I got, after a time, this address, a letter back. And there was written in shorthand, he is well, and don't write anymore. So this what is.

Was the address in Poland or where?

No, no, this were in Germany. This were between Munich--

In Germany.

--and Nuremberg or somewhere there in the camp. So this what is. This is all what I knew from him.

Your husband survived the war and came with you to Cleveland?

He was sooner there as I was.

Yeah.

Because I was in France.

No. But he came to Cleveland? Yeah.

He survived. He came to Cleveland and looked for me.

OK. We'll come back to that. But we want to make sure that everybody knows that he did survive the war.

Yes, sure, he survived. Yeah.

And he died when?

He died in 1960 in America.

Right. And how did your-- before you were married, how did your family make a living? How many brothers and sisters did you have? What did your father do?

My father was a painter-- but of course, no painting anymore. And you lived somehow. I don't know anymore.

Sometimes, I think, how did we live? I did odd jobs. I went some-- when somebody was sick, and I helped them something. But I got paid for this-- not very much. But I don't really-- I don't know how we lived.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

We were four. We were really six, but one died already on cancer many years ago. And then I had a brother. And he was a communist. So of course, he was Jewish and communist, was a very bad mixture. So I had to get him out to England. He came to England. And I had another brother, a younger brother, and a younger sister.

And the older sister, she was in Vienna. I never knew what happened to her. Of course, she was much more older as I was. She was seven years old as I was. So I-- she was very old already. And she-- I don't know what happened to her. She just got lost. And I never heard again anything. And I wouldn't know where to find her-- find something about her.

Did any of your brothers and sisters survive?

No. No, just my brother from England. He survived in England.

In England. But--

But my younger brother, he was beaten to death because somebody told him, he should take such a money out. And he had to work the trenches outside the ghetto. And they found on him this one. Then they beat him up. And this time, I was very psychic. I dreamed in the night, my brother-- his name was Freddie.

And he called for me. He said, Hilda, help me. Help me, help me. Please, come and help me. And I woke up. And I said, something happened to Freddie. He called me. And sure enough, it didn't take maybe 10 days, 12 days long after this, I came to Theresienstadt.

So of course, I looked in the matric where this is, in the thing, in the files. They said, go look there by the dead ones there. So of course, he was by the dead ones. And he was in a transport. And he was gone. So I had a sister. She was married and had four children. They were all there.

But you see, in Theresienstadt, the women, they got something in their food, mostly in the soup that you lose your menstruation. So the women, sometimes, when they have a husband and so, they didn't know, when you have no menstruation that you cannot be pregnant.

And they made always lectures that women shouldn't think about this. They can't be pregnant, even if they have no menstruation because this was artificially subtract. So right-- and she also got.

But what I heard from her, how she died, I heard when I came back to Prague in a synagogue. I heard-- when the mothers-- there was a transport in Auschwitz. And the Nazis said, the children, they come in the gas, and the mothers are spared. So the mothers all, they sent-- they said, we go voluntarily with the children in the gas. And I heard this one. And every year, in March, is a service in New York for this particular group of women.

Amazing.

Yeah.

You told us, of course, that the Swedish consulate saw to it that you didn't have to wear a yellow star.

Yes.

Tell us about the period leading up to the time when you went to Theresienstadt. Others from Prague were being shipped off regularly.

Oh, yes, they were.

But you yourself were under Swedish protection. What-- just describe what life was like when the others were going and you were under Swedish protection.

I didn't know right there were so many thousands and thousands in transport. I had always the people I was in a help-- like here, volunteer always, were help the people. There were old people, 80 years or 90 years. They came in a transport. They didn't know what hit them. They said, no, right, we are here. We are Prague. We are here from citizen. What do you say? They didn't know it. They couldn't comprehend what this was. So of course, the--

These people coming from elsewhere in Czechoslovakia--

Yes.

--were brought into Prague, funneled into Prague--

Yes.

--and then out again?

They went there. And so then we had a-- they went on the transport. And I, because I was home free-- so far you can say free-- and I went. I had-- yeah, they called me then for a transport in the congregation. So I went to the congregation and said, listen, I have not to go in the transport. So they said, we cannot say anything. Go to this office. This is where the Gestapo.

So I went in the Gestapo. And they said, you come in here. Stay here. Nothing. So next day, of course, they-- I had to take my keys away from my apartment. What did you have in your apartment-- and this and this, what you can think what you have just when you out there and the things. So I half didn't mention it at all, or mention yes, or so.

But also some-- my custodian in where I lived, they were very nice. They went in. And they took something out, but they knew what I could use later on. So they took all kind of a thing-- a big lockwood for my husband, what he got in Germany for the university-- all kind of little things, previous things. So then I was away.

I was there in this place where they collecting the Jews. And there were some other-- two women were there and the two men. The one was-- I think they were Hungarian. And the other one were other something-- a daughter with a mother, and a son with her husband, a father, and me. So we came two days later on a trolley, on a lorry, to go to Theresienstadt, not with a transport.

We were extra. There's also everywhere written, this is an extra special transport. So we came not in this place where the transport, where thousands come in. We came through the gendarmerie therein. And so we came in just there five. And so we came in this-- there's a Judenalteste, to this Edelstein. And so he had--

You have to explain who Edelstein is.

Well, the, Judenalteste he's like a father for the camp.

The head of the Judenrat?

Head of the Judenrat, yes. There was him. And there was-- he was from Czechoslovakia. And there was one from Vienna, from Austria because there were also from Austria, they came also there. And from Germany, they were also there because they thought, in Germany, this is a wonderful-- you go now, pack up your things, and you go in a summer resort.

So these people in Germany, they took nice things along. They didn't know this were a concentration camp or

something. So they left. And they went there. And they didn't know what hit them. They came there in this camp. They took everything away what they had. And this was this.

OK. Now, at what month and year were you taken to Theresienstadt?

In February?

And year?

In '43, 1943.

So up until-- between the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939 and February of '43, you were able to live under Swedish protection?

Yes. Now, right, protection was so far that--

Yeah. And while everybody else was being shipped out. Now, we're in Theresienstadt in '43. What was it like when you arrived?

Oh, my gosh. I came there. They were this Hamburger-- I had to go-- they were in the-- go in the Hamburger Kaserne. We have now nobody is here.

That's a barrack.

This-- in a barrack. There were soldiers once living. And the soldiers, they were maybe for 500, for 300 and some people. And we then 5,000 were in this Hamburg Kaserne. Now, you can see how were the toilet things here, the facilities, the washing things. This was very limited because it was only for so few people prepared. And we have 5,000 there.

We should explain to the people that the town of Theresienstadt was a city of about 7,000 population.

Yeah, maybe 10,000 maybe even.

Yeah. And they put in, what, altogether, at one time, 50,000 Jews.

Yes on the two thirds.

In two thirds of the city, and one third was--

Yes.

--they threw out the Czechs from two thirds.

Yes. They had to--

They moved them out.

They had to come to Prague to-- immigrant to Prague. And then they were shipped, again, in a transport. I met one girl from Dr. Heller. He was a doctor in Theresienstadt before the war in normal time. And his daughter was a friend of mine. So we were working together. Now, see, I came in this room. And suddenly-- and I had a big hat off and elegant-- I came in with kid gloves and all, with a handbag under the arm.

So I came there. I didn't have a toothbrush or nothing, nothing with me. So I was in there. And then this-- Lily Heller was her name. When she saw me, she said, for goodness' sake, Hilda, where do you come from? I said, no, I came now

from Prague. Now, there were no transport. I said, no, right, we were five people. And so the soldiers, they gave you a kick in the behind if you didn't act fast, go down from this lorry or some. So I said, no, this is-- so I was sitting there.

And the woman let me sleep on her straw sack, on straw. And in the night, I couldn't sleep, of course. And the people, they had to go to work. They were also-- there were bunks three story high to the people. Maybe 70 women were in one such a room.

Now, you can imagine that the people couldn't sleep very well because the one snoring, the one crying, and the one this one. And so they came sitting onto the bench there. And they said, couldn't you sleep? I said, no, I hear mice or what is here? Is there such a noise here?

Yeah, next door is the bread--

Bakery?

Not a bakery, where they have it put there for the whole thing. So I said, no, right now, I'm here. What should I do? I cannot-- I'm so afraid when all this would cross. But after all, whom am I to cry? So next day, my friend, this Lily, she said, Hilda, here, you have to eat everything because she knew I was-- at home, I helped myself always a little with the black market or something.

So she said, here, you have to eat everything. It's not like the home. It's different now-- and right next day. And I had there friends also, and pupils from my husband. And I went into her-- now, I went already in this-- I ask already where the husband is. These were a lawyer from Prague. And I said, where is Dr. Hostovsky? No, he's here in this kaserne-- Grosser city hall.

So I went there and I asked whether a Dr. Hostovsky there. No, but I said, tell her Mrs. Prooth is here. Oh, they were-- next day, they came already looking for me. And of course, he brought me a toothbrush. And he brought me this one, what utmost necessity.

And so her mother was also very old lady. But she survived. And she came back to Prague. And she came to New York, where we visited her. And then so I was there. And next day, finally, they gave me this Hamburg kaserne up in the second floor, also in the room. And there was the bunks, the bunks on both sides. And in the way there, there were other beds-- here one, there. And they said, here, you can sleep.

Hilda, you said you came in there with kid gloves and a handbag.

Yeah.

And you were able to carry this handbag with you?

Yeah. Yeah.

And you went onward?

I was with his handbag. I wouldn't let this handbag go.

You're probably the only prisoner who went through 10 concentration camps and work camps carrying a handbag.

Always a handbag with me.

It's a wonder. Why did they not take it away from you?

Right asked. There were always no rhyme and reason. Then I had a big hat on, beautiful, of course. Then when I went and visited Mrs. Hostovsky, she was in the office there too. And the people said to the-- oh, Mrs. Hostovsky, this lady

with a hat is out there. Now, who were wearing a hat in Theresienstadt?

I said, don't you have a babushka or something on my head? I cannot go around with a hat all the time. No. Then she gave me a babushka so I could give this hat away. Because these were ridiculous. They thought, the Nazis, they came only the women in with the hat.

Now, Hilda, we have this photograph of that you brought that was taken in 1945.

Yeah.

And I want you to hold that up.

Yeah, maybe '48, yeah.

All right, '48. It's as close as we've got. This that you're going to look at is Hilda in a photograph taken in 1948, which should give you an indication of the young lady she was just a few years before when she first entered Theresienstadt. Now, it is 1984. And if you don't mind saying your age now.

I'm 80 years old.

And at that-- and in 1943, when you went to Theresienstadt, how old were you?

I was maybe 36 or something.

Fine. Thank you. So this happened to a very knowledgeable woman at that point. Tell us-- we've heard so much about Theresienstadt as a good place to be, full of culture, and teaching, and learning. And the Germans, of course, wanted you to believe it. But what was its real purpose?

Right. The purpose was this, the world should know that how good the Germans were to us-- the world. Because there were so many, really, very big artists, there were lawyers, there were doctors there, and all. They came from everywhere else. And they wanted to show off. So there were musicians there. They made-- had to make concerts there. Whether their hearts were bleeding or not, they had to do it.

But just-- that didn't save them from going to Auschwitz to be gassed.

No, oh, no. They were gassed then. When the purpose were fulfilled, then they had to-- they didn't come back.

So Theresienstadt instead was just a transient stop on the way to the death camps?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Now, you mentioned the concerts. Tell us, please, Hilda, what you know from what you saw or what others told you in Theresienstadt about the so-called cultural life. Start with concerts.

Yeah, they made very nice concerts. They made philharmonic concerts there because we had the best musician there. I don't know anymore many names because I forgot. I forget here the names. So I wouldn't know so many anymore. But I knew very many very well-known. Because Prague was a cultured city.

And they came there, were from Vienna were people there. Were the best thing what they have, and they made-- the Nazis made them do a philharmonic. And they all came, the Nazis, and were listening. And of course, the Jews, they had to come too. This had to be filled out. Because then they made pictures and said, look how what we do.

Now, how about coffeehouses?

A coffeehouse was there too. There is a coffeehouse. And there were a very-- I mean, musically or so on. They had-- even an opera, somebody wrote from the ghetto girl.

Did you go to a coffeehouse?

No, no, no.

Why not?

Because I couldn't stand it.

Explain.

It hurt me. A friend of mine, she said to me, which I was very close in Prague-- we went out dancing and we had always good times. And she said, you know, Hilda, my brother said I should call you. You should come with us because we had always a good time. And you should again make a little fool of yourself. So I said, no, here, I don't make a fool anymore of myself. I'm here. And I don't want to know anything. I only try to survive. That's all what I want to do.

What were you surviving at? What work did they have you do?

I was working in the uniform for a military-- for German military. And this was a firm from Munich. We had to make the uniforms for the soldiers.

Did they pay you?

No. Oh, no, no, no pay. These were all forced labor.

What about this Theresienstadt money we've heard about?

This money?

Tell us, first, what was--

The money was done also-- again, like in Russia. I don't know whether you heard it once in Russia, but the Potemkin villages, what they build up when the-- after the First World War, when they started to have the communist country there. Then they build up a village, beautiful.

And when somebody came to visit, they showed them this job. And look what we do here. This is a progress already and all. These were only Potemkin villages because this were only on the outside. And so it is with this money. They printed money, they said, we can buy something. There are stores. And we can do everything with this money. They made even a bank there-- all Potemkins, they're all outside.

You have some of this occupation money with you?

Yes, I have. Where did I put it?

I think it's there.

Here is this.

Hold up, please, to the camera.

What do you want, this \$100?

Yeah, kroner.

\$50?

Yeah, hold both up.

\$20. Don't know where the \$100 are.

It's all right, just any of them, anything. Put it up, Hilda.

This one?

That's good. Yeah. Yeah.

Now, the camera will show you what that-- that was with the tablets of Moses.

Yes. And they were printed in Prague. And this was only for the ghetto. Was not by-- by punishment, high punishment, if you brought it out outside somewhere.

It says on there, Theresienstadt money.

Yes.

And how did you earn that money?

No, you got it.

They just issued it?

They issued it, yeah.

You didn't have to work?

No. With this work, we didn't get anything. This is only-- you could buy some for the people who died or people who came to the transport and they couldn't take anything. They left it there. We had to leave it there. So then they made stores out of this. And then you could go, for this money, to buy this one. But you had to have also a permission to go there and buy this.

Do you have one of those documents that allowed you to buy something?

Yes, somewhere is this here. Where was this, here, somewhere? Here, yeah.

Good. Show us what you could buy with that.

You could buy a pair of pants.

I think it's upside down.

Yeah.

Hold it up here.

Yeah. You see, you could buy-- I got the permission to buy a pair of pants because I had to--

Have the camera come in right here.

Yeah.

Hold that up.

Because I had to work-- beside my work, I had to also do chop wood and make a fire in the morning for our workshop. So I needed a pair of pants. And then-- and so this were the reason why I had this permission. And this would have cost \$50-- ridiculous for an old pair of pants.

Yeah. OK. You can put that down.

But I never came to it.

Now, you said, your brother had been beaten to death for carrying money like this outside?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And how did I know about this? Once came a man where I worked in the uniform barrack. So came a man, a younger man. And they heard, when they called me.

So says, he said, are you this Hilda Prooth? Yeah. He goes, did you have a brother Freddie? I said, yes. I helped him. I had to beat him up. I was with him in the cell. And I had to beat him up. And he called for you. Therefore, I knew this were authentic, what he told me.

This is the same as your dream?

It was the same what I dreamed. And when he wouldn't-- he said, if I wouldn't have beaten him very much, they were standing there, then they would beat me up.

Did he use the same words as you heard in your dream?

The same words what this was. And he said, Hilda, Hilda, please, oh, help-- in German, of course. [GERMAN]. And I woke up then. I said, something happens to Freddie.

Same day?

Yeah.

Same day, same night.

Yeah.

Amazing.

Therefore, I know what happened to him.

What was your family name, Hilda?

Schierl.

Can you spell that?

S-C-H-I-E-R-L, Schierl.

You described the coffeehouse and the theater-- the cafe and the coffeehouse.

I cannot explain it because I never went in.

Yeah.

But they told me that they had chairs there. And like in a coffeehouse, you go there. And there are waitresses were there. And I think for this money, you could also buy some coffee.

Artificial coffee?

Maybe for a-- for this-- I don't know which one it was. The coffee was never good anyhow. So we got tea. I washed my face with his tea because was-- you couldn't-- it's just hot water. And I rather had nothing. And so it was this.

What other social amenities-- we've heard much about the artists of Theresienstadt.

Yeah, there were big artists. I told you, they made a theater. They made a-- they made VariÃ©tÃ©. You know what you call a VariÃ©tÃ©, a musical, or something? They made even a musical. And they saw it should be very good. And they were singing this. There were-- one had composed this one. And one was a musical star there. And they-- of course, they got a little more bread and butter, maybe, from the ghetto.

Tell us about the artists while I'm looking for something here. You tell us about the artists who drew pictures in Theresienstadt. Did you know any of them?

I don't know-- I didn't know any of them before because I was working. I had to get up in the morning, 5 o'clock.

OK. Hilda, I want you to hold this up so the camera can get it. This is a scene by-- at the theater in Theresienstadt by the artist Otto Ungar.

Yeah. Yeah.

Now, we want the camera to focus on the picture, down just a little bit. There, very good. Thank you. Now, although you didn't know-- did you know any of the people who knew any of the artists? Did they say anything about their work?

Yeah, they told me. They told me. They have a kind of a-- I met-- not that I met them. Once we had-- oh, yes, on the 9th of November-- because there, they burned all the synagogues in Europe-- not in Prague, but everywhere else. In Karlsbad, our synagogue was burned down. And so I-- they had-- we had to go all out to be counted on the 9th of November.

In what year?

There were 40-- this was in '43.

Yeah.

There was 40,000 people in the camp. And 8,000 were not able to go. They were in the bed. But 32,000 people had to march out in this-- you call it like the military, this exercise place there. So we had to march there, all young kids or some. Everybody had to go out for-- to being counted. How can you count 32,000 people?

Then they came some Nazis with a little cane of them. And we had to stand there. And they counted, one, two, three. How can you say 32,000 people and counting. Of course, it took them-- and up there were a hill. There were-- every 10 yards were a gendarme with a bayonet. So we thought, right, what would now be-- maybe we cannot come back anymore. Maybe we are killed here. Maybe they bring a gas down here. Something has to be.

But anyhow, it became dark. And they came back. And we were there in limbo. So we didn't know where to go. So we

went around there and had called out. Maybe there is a husband from this Hilda, Hilda Polak from Pilsen. So you called out, Karl Polak is here somewhere, Karl Polak. Maybe we find somebody.

The mother from this Hilda Polak as well in the room, her mother was old already. And Hilda Polak was nearly blind. So I had to carry her. Then we had the old thing. So we went finally in a summer hut what there. It was dark. And I said, we cannot stay here. Now, we have to look-- go back somewhere.

So we climbed over the-- on a board there, where they have this bike in there. So all right, I said, come on. We climb through. And we go somewhere we have to go. So finally, we came at-- was 11 o'clock back in our ubication again. And it was really-- without food. We were standing there and had nothing. We couldn't go away, had no toilet.

From before dawn?

Yeah. Yeah, this was the 9th of November. I'm sure nobody forgets it, what was it. Maybe this is here? Yeah, here you have it.

Hold that up.

Here you have it, November the 17th, the count-out. See? I knew this was here somewhere. And here, you have the gendarme of them.

Hold up the picture while you're telling this.

See?

Thank you.

See here, the gendarme on top there?

Yeah.

So this was the count out for 32,000 people.

Did you ever know of a swimming pool for the Kommandant and his children on the other side of the wall in Theresienstadt?

No, no, no.

I saw that when I was in Theresienstadt a year ago, last summer.

They made it then somehow. They never were there and wouldn't have-- I wouldn't want to be extra out that the people notice me. Because when I was fairly good-looking still, and I was young, and they said always, I look 10 years younger. So I didn't want to be noticed by the SS or somebody because they would get-- they would do all kinds of a thing with me.

So I never went somewhere, where they see. I went to work. And I went home again, and so fast, nobody could see it. Because these were the reason I didn't go anywhere. Because there were terrible thing what they had, what they did to girls and to women. And so far, I said, I wanted to survive somehow.

Even in Theresienstadt.

Even in Theresienstadt and everywhere else. In prison-- we were in prison, and through 10 prison we went. There were this one. I want to show you, there is a picture from the ubication, from inside. And this looks like-- I said, always, this looks like me. I cannot find. I made a note.

Keep looking while we're talking.

So you see, I never I never wanted to be amongst these people. They said once-- the SS, they will look for some people to sew or something. I don't go. I said, I don't want to have anything. I'm here. And this is all what I have to do. And I don't do--

Working on the uniforms for the German Army?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And here, you have again-- here the execution. Here is the execution. See?

Hold it up a little more. There. All right. Were you witness at any of those executions?

No, this was outside of the ghetto.

This was at the little camp?

By the small fortress, they call it the small fortress. See?

I know, I've seen it.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So this is this.

Now, when you were in Theresienstadt, were the people aware of the death camps to the east?

Sure. Sure, we knew it.

Right. We've heard that Dr. Leo Baeck, who was the head of the Berlin Jewish community, and was interned in Theresienstadt, he had information about them. But he never told the people of Theresienstadt.

This was this--

Would you know anything about that, why he didn't--

I knew it.

--why he didn't tell it?

I was in Prague already. And we knew it in Prague.

Yeah?

Yeah. Yeah.

What was he keeping such a matter secret for?

No, I didn't know the people. There were many old people. It's enough when they lived in this-- how they lived. This was disgraceful. So what do you tell them other things more? I wouldn't have told them, either. It's not-- no use for this, just the same when something else comes up somewhere. It's no use to talk to them.

Just the same here-- if somebody, you tell them this and this is so sick. What for? When my husband was in hospital, a friend of him died. A girlfriend called me up. I didn't tell him. He says, why didn't you? And the doctor told him, well, he died now.

What do you have to show us there, Hilda?

This is here--

Hold it there.

--when the cemetery-- when they go to the cemetery, how this goes here. And Leo Baeck was walking behind them because he makes the service there. See? And this list, they were only thrown in a trench. They didn't-- they brought this back again empty, these boxes here.

Yeah. Now, the picture on the other side, right there--

This is the--

Hold it up.

--the gates where the men, they go through when they are dead. See?

Yeah. That's a photograph of Theresienstadt city.

Yeah. See? Yeah.

Thank you. Now, would you show us the title of the book, the front of it? Hold up-- hold up the front--

TerezÃn.

--so anybody who wants to--

TerezÃn. This is just TerezÃn.

--and you got that in Prague.

They sent it to me here.

Sent from Prague.

Yeah. It's the only one what exists. Nothing else exists anymore from this one. And this is a picture how this was. See how the streets are?

Hold it up. I'm not sure if we can see that so clearly. OK. I understand. Now, we're going to end this tape in a minute. So I want you to conclude your impressions of Prague without the book, Hilda.

Yeah, I want to see only one thing I found.

Without the book.

Yeah.

Conclude your impressions of Theresienstadt. What-- when did you leave? How did you leave?

How I left? This was, again, I suppose, through this Swedish consul because they came. It took a year, maybe, before the thing once I was summoned to the office-- the Jewish office, not to the Germans. And they said, well, from Berlin, they had a notice for what kind of a papers you have, that you are a Russian citizen. So I showed him my-- this one there from the police.

And other two women, they were real Russian. They had the passport sent to Ankara to have the renewed. Of course, they had the paper for this all. And then other was too-- they were also from Austria. And their husbands were dead already. And they were also Russian citizen for this. So right away, showed them all, and they wrote down everything, and I went home again.

Now, maybe so three months later, they called-- two guys came in the evening. And they said, you come on down. I was prepared to go to sleep because I had to get at 5 o'clock up in the morning. So he said, come on down. I have something for you. I said, I'm very tired. I have to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning. And you better come down.

So he wrote-- gave me this little paper. I had it somewhere. I should prepare it in the morning, warm dressed, with something the food, and at 8 o'clock in the German Kommandant-- to the German headquarter. So all right, what has to be, has to be.

So I was so skinny. And in the meantime, I had made me already two dresses more because I had sewed myself things. I got remnants somewhere and made it. And I took maybe-- I could wear. You can imagine how skinny I was, I had maybe four pairs of pants on, three slips on, three dresses on, and a sweater under coat.

And where did they take you?

To Prague in a prison.

OK. We'll come back in the next session.

Yeah.