

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, December 27, 1984, we are in the third segment of our interview with Hilda Prooth, a Holocaust survivor from Prague in Czechoslovakia. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Hilda, after the year returned to Prague in 1945, tell us about life under the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and what made you determined to leave.

It was very hard because you couldn't talk anywhere. You couldn't talk to people in the street. I mean, you could, but very limited because you never know who the people are or who the people-- how the people think. And everybody tried to be nice to the Russian, just the same way they nice to the Nazis. So they were nice to the Russian, and think they save themselves, or something. This were in thing.

And the food was not very much. You couldn't-- but this wouldn't bother us because I could something to get from the country or somewhere. But and altogether, I couldn't make-- and my Mike was nervous about this because since he was born in Russia and he was not very keen about this, so he was always afraid they would take him away somewhere. So I said, he could have gone to Germany.

Can I help you?

No, no, please, sit down.

He could have gone to Germany. But I said, no, I don't go to Germany. I don't go to a railroad. I don't go anything. I cannot have it. But then I saw, he says so sick, he gets sick by days and depressed. So I said, no, write this and this guy for papers. We can go to America. No-- write, but the guy to America is-- he didn't send very good papers.

What guy was this?

Huh?

Who was this?

A friend from Hemmingstedt, in where he was a pupil once in Germany. And they lived somewhere in Jamaica, somewhere there near New York or somewhere. So he wrote and he had the address. So anyhow-- and he prepared them to go to America and tell them always. But they went. And of course, so it was not a very good papers. So we didn't have enough. So we couldn't go.

So then a friend of ours, she had from her former husband-- the husband was dead in Poland. So she said to me, she-- my husband wrote her the letters to America, said, she will come to America. And she could go because she had a German quota. And this was very fast.

She could go. So then she said, you have to go illegally to Germany. And she prepared. She was a wonderful person. She could everything could go. So she prepared our things to go to Germany.

But we had to go in the evening night to a train and go to Cheb, this is a border on the-- city on the border still in Czechoslovakia. And so I-- we left the luggage on the train. And they asked where I go-- this, and this, and this address. They said, yeah, go in this one. So suddenly, this was dark and nobody on the street, of course, nobody.

So suddenly, I heard gap, gap, boots, heavy boots to walk. I turned around, oh, my gosh, police with a bayonet again. And oh, I got sick again. So I said, don't turn around, I said, but there are-- the police is behind us.

So the police came. They said, where do we want to go? I said-- I gave them the address. I said, we should go there and there. Oh, he said, yes. You see, we didn't know, the Jews, they were from Israel-- the Jews, the Israelis Jews, they were in Prague. And they should help us to go over the border.

And they were so tired, they fell asleep and didn't wake up. They should have been on the train and pick us up. But the

soldiers were young soldiers. They were friends with this one. They didn't know. They said, no, no, we will bring you there. I said, my gosh, the prison comes again on a prison.

So they saw it. But they brought us in a house. And there were several Jews awaiting there. So they went in this room and said, listen, wake up, wake up. We picked up for you these people here. So then I knew already we were amongst the Jews.

So next day, we went across the border. And we had to say-- we didn't say we were from Prague. We had to say we come from a border, from Poland and German, where they speak German because we couldn't speak Polish. I mean, I could make that understood, but this is not the right thing. We couldn't speak English because we shouldn't be. We should be immigrants from there.

So we went. There were a couple of people with us there. And they went to-- they went there in this-- through immigration thing again. And they brought all kind of a food with me. And they took it away, of course. So then we went like a no land-- nowhere land.

Stateless?

Yeah. We went through there. And then we went finally to Selb in Germany. It's on the border. And there were people, they went-- there were this-- was a headquarter for the Jewish there. So we went in there.

And I had a kidney trouble. I was lying on the floor. I couldn't sit anymore. And so he said-- this guy came, was from the Jewish congregation from there. He said, who is this what on the floor? I said-- my husband says, my wife. She had kidney trouble. And she cannot sit up anymore.

So he invited us in his house, where a new build house, beautiful. And we got again a bath and all right. We were really nicely done and in a nice, clean bed and so.

But next day, we had to go to Munich. And the Munich, we couldn't go in the street before 7 o'clock in the morning because we didn't have any papers. If they would have found out us, we would have to go in a prison again. So we had to stay the whole night on this railroad station. And I had to lie on this little wheels, where they bring the luggage on. On this, I lie down. I couldn't sit anymore. I couldn't make it anymore.

So finally, the day grew out. And they-- we were 7 o'clock. So they could go out. And we asked where we go in this Jewish congregation. It was Saturday. Saturday, the congregation is not open. Now, what do we do now? Now, they told us where we go with a bus. We have to go with a streetcar. But the streetcar doesn't ride all the time. They have no codes or no electricity for this. But we had to go in this and this kaserne again further out.

I want to go back a minute. You're in Munich in late 19-- it's 1947 now, correct?

Mm-hmm.

And in Munich was a Jewish congregation after all the pogroms from Hitler?

There was a congregation. But this was not-- this were for the Jews what is-- this was not-- the congregation was only a city hall or something, where the Jews are.

Community center.

Yeah, a community center, something.

Not a religious congregation?

This not, but there was a religious congregation there.

Also?

In the city, yeah. So then we went there. And we couldn't-- so we went then in this camp there. Oh, terrible. So they brought them. I said, I come from Prague. So they brought a guy, a Czech, talk with her, whether she speaks Czech. All right, I talked with him. And he said, yes, she is Czech. You can leave her here. There were Polish people there. Oh, there were all kind of people there. And we were there in this place. What a terrible place.

So you had smuggled yourself across the Czech border into Germany--

Yeah.

--awaiting entry into the United States.

We had to wait there.

You had to wait there. Now, tell us, please, before you left Prague, you were telling me something about a printing house.

Yeah, I had to work there.

Tell us about that.

Oh, they were fun. It was no fun. I mean, I had to-- there was a note on the door, we accept-- we look for young girls. They don't need any-- don't need to know anything. We will train them and all, right.

What kind of a printing house was this?

Printing. These were books, and books, and--

Old, established firm?

Oh, yes, a old one. They made prayer books already in 1850 or some, the oldest prayer books what they had.

Jewish prayer books?

Jewish prayer books.

Hebrew?

Yeah. These were Hebrew and all, were old established. Of course, this-- the one manager was a Gentile and were a democrat. And the other one were a communist.

Right, so now, it's Prague 1945--

'46.

'46. And Israel established a Jewish printing press in Prague.

It still was there. Yeah. Now, it's not anymore.

No, but then.

Then it was. And I went in. And I said, I'm not a young girl anymore. But I need a job. And you can train me. I mean,

I'm not so stupid. You can train me. You can show me what to do. All right, they took me. Then I had to go to the labor exchange from the communists to ask the permission to work in this one. All such a ignorant things.

All right, anyhow, I get it. I got it. And then so I worked there for a half a year. It was also Christmastime. You couldn't make-- if you want to have a Christmas day, you have to work this hours in during the other days. You cannot day off this Christmas Day. And my husband had a operation. So I had to go out to the hospital.

So when I went to the hospital, these hours, I had to make up. So it was 8 o'clock in the evening sometimes, 9 o'clock before I went home. It was good enough. I lived only around the corner. And so I went to my husband on every second day in thing, went in sanatorium.

And by far out, I had to go by bus again or by streetcar. And so then, finally, he came home and was all right so far. He was, again, teaching. And he had private teachers and all from Masaryk. You know who is Masaryk was?

Yes.

He had also from the ministry for Masaryk were his pupils in English. They came all in the house and did that. And so it wouldn't be so bad, only we had to go away. We had to go away from Prague.

Because of the political situation?

Because political situation. So we went there. And when we came to Munich, and we came in this kaserne again, this Funkkaserne was the name, so then we-- then my husband-- there was a guy. And he said-- he was from Romania.

And he said to me, to my Mike, if somebody speaks like you English, and my friend is Mr. Retter, he's a manager from this-- not congregation, from this Jewish thing here. He will get you a job immediately. They will need such a thing.

And all right, my Mike went there. And he got him like a foreign minister. He was a liaison officer between the Jews and the American. And then to this, we got in a hotel room. So we could live in the hotel. When they were-- in Europe, you didn't have a closet for clothes. You had wardrobes.

Yes.

So right there were the three wardrobes. And I sat there. The chambermaid came. And there were no keys. I said, where are they? There's no keys to this. And she started off in German to say, yeah, there they were living some Jews. And they were-- I said to my husband, listen to this. Start all over again. So my Mike went over. And he was talking. He learned German in Eastern Germany, you knew this were a German when he talked like a--

Prussian.

--Prussian, yeah. So he said, Fraulein, we are Jews too. We don't want to hear it at all what you have to say. So she was quiet. And she never-- she was the best person what I ever had there of course, then after this. But immediately, they started, oh, we are the Jews. They left all the-- they weren't very tidy. And they-- I said to him, listen to this again. Starts already. So he shut her up immediately. And then it was all right.

So in Munich, did you get any help from the Jewish organizations, the international ones?

Really, I didn't.

The Joint Distribution Committee, from America?

We didn't need it.

Didn't need it.

First of all, I brought-- we brought money from Prague, all the marks what I could get. There were no value in these things. Of course, they were not too long value because there were money reform again. I went through-- I went only through three money reforms because Hitler printed money galore, like our beloved.

And so he-- so in France, we had to give the money away, whatever we had. And we got 350 francs to live a life, start a life over again. So then I came to Prague. In Prague, our custodian had money for me because we couldn't have more than 3,000 crowns in the hand, in the thing. And I sold some jewelry. And I gave this guy to keep my money. He were-- they were very honest people.

And so we had this money. And you couldn't buy much. So and it comes again a money reform in Prague. We got 500 crowns. And there's other one in the bank. And goodbye again.

So right now, we came to Germany. In '38, money reform. Again, this money give away. And we got, I think, 50 marks in the hand. And then my husband was very sick in nerves. They had to give him in a sanatorium. And he had to get shock treatments and all.

This is '48.

This was in '48. And then I brought him out. And he said-- and I had to bring him in a home. Yeah, then I couldn't get him anymore in the hotel. We couldn't pay it in the hotel. I had to look for an apartment. You couldn't get any apartment. You could only get a room with somewhere.

All right, Hilda, let's move from Munich onto getting into the United States. You went from Munich to where, Hamburg? Bremen?

Yeah, Bremen and Hamburg. What a terrible camp there.

What kind of camp, displaced persons camp?

Displaced persons camp. And then there was Polish Nazis there. And they came with a bayonet. They ran around. And when the children-- there were people with children. And he was-- they were terrible. This was horrible.

Now, these were all interred people waiting waiting--

Waiting for--

--or displaced persons, rather--

Yeah, they ran--

--stateless and such.

--waiting for a transport to go to America. So we went on the boat.

Who operated the camps?

Polish people.

And what government?

German. Horrible.

East German, West German?

No, in east-- West German, was under English, I don't remember what it was. Didn't ask them much. But this was a horrible thing. And besides this, when we came back to Prague, there were no children in my life because they were all killed. There were no children there. You can imagine a city--

Jewish children?

--without Jewish children, nobody. Came to the effect that I hated people with children. I hated them, really. In Germany, it was terrible when I saw the German children. Oh, I could kill them. I was really ready. They really frustrated me so much. So when we came from Germany in the train to-- yeah, then on the boat to New York, and from New York, we were only three days in New York.

How was it you got to the United States? There was a new law for displaced persons?

Yeah. Yeah. Truman had to sign. We were waiting for President Truman, he should sign the displaced person pact. And then we could go. We had to go again, undergo all kind of a treatment and all kind of a thing. Oh, this was terrible-- hours to walk in high snow and all.

Now, you went on the ship from Bremen to New York.

Yeah, was a ship. Was a good ship for us.

Were there--

And only displaced persons. This were only a ship for displaced person. Of course, there were also-- there were only 135 Jewish people on. And the others were all Lithuanian and all kind of a people.

What were they like?

They didn't bother us. One couple were there. And there were young Jewish guys from Poland. And they were always in bundles. And they were shh-shh. When this couple come by--

Who came by?

A couple from Lithuania and a couple with kids, dressed up to a T.

A kapo is a camp guard.

No, this was a camp guard, yeah.

From the Nazis?

Yeah. And they were in the same camp where this guy was a cap. So they were always whispering. My Mike said to them, what are you doing? Why whispering? So they said, oh, we don't want to tell you. We are afraid. And I said, what-- he said, what you are afraid of here? So then they told him. And my Mike had the audience by the captain. And they told him what's going on. This guy were a cap in Lithuania.

This is a secret Nazi. And there, they called up the immigration officers when they came to New York. We were in line. And this couple with the kids, they were like they already owned the boat.

So these two, this guy from the immigration office-- this was such a big guys-- and they came. And they said, are you Mr. Wojek [PERSONAL NAME]? Yes. Oh, yes. All right. Then when they came down, they were railed away. And they were separated already. And my Mike had to interpret into them, had to stay with them. And I had to stay in front of my luggage to get the P, under the P. And he was there.

So there were people from the press in-- from New York. And they wanted to talk to us both, Mike and me. So I said, yeah, my Mike-- my husband is there. So then finally, they were already taking care of these people. They came to Ellis Island. They came back again to Lithuania. And they didn't come into country.

Your husband saw to it that they were not admitted--

They were not permitted.

--because of the Nazi background.

No.

So all right. Now, how did you come to Cleveland?

No, they were-- we went to Cleveland.

Why?

Because in Munich, they asked my Mike, where-- you have a preference which city to go?

And he said, no, New York will be too big. So Chicago, they had too many racketeers. We don't go there. He knew already from Al Capone and so only he didn't want to go there. Then he said, no, San Francisco. But it's overcrowded already. We cannot send you there. But we send you to Cleveland.

No, right, wherever. What can you say? Well, you have a preference then? So we went to Cleveland. So I said to my Mike, how is the climate in Cleveland? Very good, the good air comes from Canada over the Lake Erie. Later on, I cried. I said, you said this is the-- when it was muggy and all.

What work did your husband do here in Cleveland?

Immediately, he was a bookkeeper.

He had an accounting degree in Europe?

Oh, yeah, in England. But he was here a bookkeeper. He was by a company, Heimans. We are still friends and they live now in Florida. When they come, they come always here and visiting me. And then they were by a firm, a paper company, Glennville Paper. And they were wonderful to my Mike. They were really wonderful to us. Whenever-- when he was two months in the hospital, they brought us the check in the house or in the hospital with the overtime what he made. They were wonderful, these people.

Fine. Now, Hilda, your own work in Cleveland was in the garment trades?

Yeah. Yeah, from the making.

You'd been a dressmaker in Prague before you went off to Theresienstadt.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

And in the camps, you made German uniforms, the labor camps.

You didn't need a degree for this.

Yeah. You didn't volunteer. And then you come to Cleveland and you're in the needle trades. Now, tell us a little bit

about your work and your activities, now, in the union movement.

Oh, I was in the-- I worked in [PLACE NAME]. This was the finest coats, and the ladies' coats, and ladies suits factory on 24th and Payne. Now, it's the board of election in there.

In the needle trades. I would like to explain that next to New York City, Cleveland was the--

Was the biggest.

--was the biggest in the needle trades in the United States.

So and now, is nothing there anymore. So and then I went-- and they closed up [PLACE NAME]. Then I had a operation, two operations, and so on. So I was sick. And then my husband said, you know what? You don't have to. Then I said, I make it home alteration. I stay home. And I make alterations at home. I sewing at home. And this finished. But then, of course, then he got sick. And I was glad I was home. And then he died.

What year?

In '60, in March.

And you never had children?

No. I had a miscarriage. And you were active in the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. always.

Always.

I was a chairlady. I was.

Now, tell us now what you do in the 1980s with the union.

Oh, I'm always involved. First of all, I'm the president from the retirees in the Union for the Ladies' Garment Workers. Then I'm a member from the Federation of Retired Workers. This is also only workers out there. And we work. We try to do something for the senior citizen good.

What are your projects?

Project is always now-- is just-- I had just now, we have to-- our Social Security, we have to tax. And we should have gone already a long time to Washington to try them after.

Now, do you go to Columbus, and Washington--

Yes, oh, yes.

--and Cleveland City Council.

In Columbus and Washington.

And you appear before the committees and lobby?

Yes.

Good. And you're 80 years old?



Yes. And we went twice already to-- three times to Washington. I belong also National Council of Senior Citizen. This is a outfit in Washington. So I have-- and then the CLUW. The CLUW. is a coalition of labor women. I was in Chicago in the convention. And I was in-- we had from the federation, we had a convention in Philadelphia this year. And I go any time when something is.

All right, Hilda, please tell us how the Holocaust experiences affect you now.

It affects me. I tell you the truth, I don't want to talk too much about this because then I get sick. I can't sleep the whole night. This affects me in this way. So when is in the afternoon, I still can talk. A little later, I cannot talk anymore because I get so distraught. And I cannot sleep.

Well, what made you decide to share your experiences with us?

Because everybody said, you should have gone there. You should have done this. Why didn't you go there? No, I thought, all right, once, why? Then I saw the mayor was talking and said, the people should call up this and this number.

On television, the mayor of Cleveland?

Yeah. So I thought, I'd do him a favor. And I call up. And this was this.

For this Holocaust survivors project?

Yes. Yeah. No, I was in the civic auditorium when it was opened. And I was there. And I brought--

And they had an exhibit from Prague and TerezÃn.

Yeah. And I brought my book along. Oh, the girls, they were out. I went there in the evening, the first evening when nobody was there, not yet. This girl didn't want to let me in. I said, don't talk so much. I said, I was there. I want to see it all alone. I don't want to have any audience with me. And I don't want to have a distraction at all. I said, I was there. And I wanted to see it. So all right.

Then I went again once and took my book along, and took the things along, and I showed it. There were these volunteer girls there. And they were very nice. They told me, I should call this and this rabbi. But I didn't say anything.

Then I have two neighbors. They said, you call this and this rabbi up. But of course, this rabbi never, never called me. So I didn't bother. So this was the reason what I said, I thought I'd do him a favor, said, I call it up. So and there was the-- what's her name-- this Inge Kootz was on the telephone. She said-- her mother is my friend.

Good. Hilda, do you think that survivors have a message that others need to understand?

Nobody understands. Nobody wants to understand. When something would come here in America, they wouldn't do a thing because they don't believe you. See, I worked in Majestic. Majestic was an outfit for all the ladies-- were only a shipping plant. It was in Lampard Building. This were a Jewish Jewish outfit.

We had there a girl, a Italian girl. And there were also girls from Poland. And they were in the bunker there. They didn't even know whether-- or were frightened. They were in Palestine, in Israel, came back here, frightened girls.

And this Italian girl said to this one, I said-- you know what she said? Hitler didn't do a good job with you. But now, I have a boyfriend. And he is a German. And he said, he will finish up what Hitler didn't do. So these girls were so frightened. They came to me and said, Hilda, what's the matter with this? I said, all right.

And so this one girl heard that all the Jewish girl-- she said, this one vice president passed. And he said, this is a free country. Can say what-- she can say what she likes. I was not satisfied. So I went to the president on a Saturday, when

we worked.

I said, Harold, can I talk to you? Yeah, come on in the office. Come on. So I told him about this incident. I said, these girls, they suffered so much. They were in the war. They were in the bunker in Poland. They didn't even know the war was over. They were afraid to get out. I said, these girls, they heard it from this Maria.

Here in Cleveland?

Yeah. And what I intend to do? He said, nothing. I said, you wouldn't want her? After all, you are Jewish. This is a Jewish outfit. Your uncle is a Jew, who belong-- who is the owner. No, it wouldn't do any good. I said, you wouldn't do anything? I said, you should be ashamed of yourself.

So I said, if I have to go down-- because we had the boxes on the escalators. You had to take it down. They come around the boxes for packing. So he said-- I said, should I go next to her and I hear one peep out of her, so the big box comes on her head. That's all. So he said, Hilda, you wouldn't. I said, try me.

I said, and since you are also Jewish and I went through this all, I would greatly suffer with you again. And you should suffer. See? Therefore, nobody would fear a finger. This I tell you. And I hope only the government will never come such a thing. But nobody would move a finger. And I can tell you, I know it.

This is Sidney Elsner. And our Holocaust survivor today has been Hilda Prooth. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. We thank you very much, Hilda.

You're welcome. Get--