

My name is Stan Garfinkel. I'm continuing to interview Mrs. Freda Schmelzer for the Holocaust Archive project. You were telling us, Mrs. Schmelzer, about the Blockalteste. And I was wondering what sort of people they were. And they sounded very, very hardened.

Very hardened. They went through a lot during the four years being in ghettos and lagers. And they knew all the tricks that the German could do with us if he is-- she is not tough. So she was.

You see, one day, Mengele comes in. And he tells us, children, if somebody is sick or has fever, report. We going to take you in a sanatorium or in the hospital. We will take care of you. And one girl, yes, she reported. Her name was Eva. And Marika says, I am responsible here. And I am talking. I am the one doing the reporting. And you sit down. And Mengele turned his hand and gave her two patch.

Two slaps?

Yeah, two slaps. And after he left, she told us, no one reports for anything because that's not true. They are taking you somewhere. They are taking you in the crematorium. I am doing the talking. And it happened. One night, after she told us this, she says-- we woke up. We didn't even sleep because the rain fall on us.

We-- between the bunker beds were that height, you couldn't see it, you couldn't-- if you couldn't sleep because we were sleeping five here and five here, with the understanding that one try to turn, the other try to turn, everybody was turning. And we had once a girl who had pneumonia.

In the morning, she had to-- we had doctors between us, woman doctors, Hungarian doctors. And we didn't have medicine. But she told her, she has pneumonia. But she had to go and stand out for the Zahlappell. And also, you see, she can't hide anything. She had to report when the SS comes in. And she has to be responsible for everything.

This is the Blockalteste?

The Blockalteste.

What about Olga? You were mentioning something about her.

Olga was taken away. And Olga was-- well, we were crying. We knew she was taken. Then she was brought back. The sick who didn't feel good, there was a big oven in the middle of the barracks, made from bricks. It was tall and fancy. And the people who were sick was put there already to taken away. And Olga was already there. We were crying. And she knows she will be taken away. And she came back by miracle. I don't know what happened. But she came back.

And one night, after the Blockalteste were talking, we hear a noise, barking, shooting, crying, and everything. And before, we heard Levinele, or a girlfriend of ours from Terebes in the block 10. And we thought we going to visit her tomorrow morning, tomorrow morning. So that night was that noise-- barking, and shooting. And we went to see Levinele and 100-- 1,200 girls were taken away and killed, young girls. There was no living there anymore.

And that night, next night, after the noise, and we were so scared that the Blockalteste told us not to make noise. Take ever it comes. But you shouldn't panic. I don't have-- I don't want to hear it because they could come here too and take you away. So next day-- night, it was in the night, we went to sleep. Who could sleep? Every day had a different surprises for us.

So three SS came in-- it was raining-- with long, black raincoats, black hat, black gloves, and three dogs. And it was so quiet. It was so quiet, I says to my sister, this is it. We going to go now. And we going to go. They were looking around, turning their heads. Went down. It was very quiet. And they left. They left.

And it meant, again, a day pass by. But we were never sure one minute to another we're going to survive. There's so many things you saw happening there. So when I hear that Marika told us, I went out of-- the coming Friday evening,

you have the window here. This is a window to me, I don't know, a window. And the window was open, no glass in it.

And I went out because I had to go to the toilet. And we couldn't go outside at night. We had to do it in that particular outside. And the window was open. And the first time I saw, I saw the crematorium burning, big flame. When you put-- you make barbecues, put lot of fuel, and that kind of fume and thing, you saw, and flame, and the smell, and everything. That-- day and night, we saw that day and night.

And that was a morgue not far. We had to pass by every day by that morgue. They collected the dead every morning. There was a death Kommando, came with a wagon. It had only two wheels. And they throw the dead and pushed that wagon further.

And that place, the morgue, didn't have a top, or roof, or anything, just throw it up, like a piece of garbage, not even human being. You couldn't do with a chicken what they did. And tomorrow morning, they came with a covered truck, with a black something, black cover, and they took those people away-- healthy people, maybe a glass of milk could save.

And you see, the men lager was next, only the wire separated us from the next. I lived in that lager two months. And then one day, we had a selection. And my sister, Irene, was selected. His-- her ankle was swollen a little bit. And she was going already.

And there was two blonde girls. One was crying for her sister. She was taken. And she says to me, is your sister going? Let me go instead. I go with your-- instead your sister. We didn't say her to go instead of my sister. But she did. She pulled her out.

And she was standing to the five. We went always in five. And my sister was with us. And the group was selected one group to go to work. And one group was selected to go to die, who has some kind of trouble. And we remain. We ran away. We ran away. But we didn't have place anywhere-- nowhere, no block could take us because we were in plus.

You were an extra group.

Extra, extra four-- five-- our fifth widow stayed with us. So we had to go every night in a different place, a different barrack. It didn't matter. We stand Zahlappell here or there.

And how did you manage to the counting?

The counting? Every day, people died.

So it was really-- they weren't really counting, truly.

Yeah. So they were. They were. Maybe we were lucky. You don't know. They were counting from one person. It didn't matter if they-- he was or she was dead. But the number had to be that day. The register had to fit. But maybe, somehow. So what happened? We went. We didn't have one cover. We didn't have-- nobody wanted to-- when I wanted to go up to sleep somewhere, I didn't have place.

So the last block let us sleep on the cement one night. And I was very sick, very sick. And that would be a long story. I don't want to go into it. So we were waiting for two days. And there was another selection. And my sister had-- we had somebody working in the-- a relative in that warehouse where they collected the clothing.

And she got a-- that girl gave her a pair of shoes, which covered her ankle. And we went. When they wanted to select for the work, we were there. And we passed in the next lager, the Tsche-lager, that Tsche-lager that day had to be emptied. That's a family-- that was a family lager.

And you should see the selection we saw in July. It was in July, this month. The older people were taken away. And the younger was reaching after the trucks like this, embracing the air. They know where are they going. And then the

working youngsters went away. The children, gorgeous children, remained alone. In particular night in the Tsche-lager--

What do you mean Tsche-lager?

The Czech people-- there were a group of Czech people, working Czech people.

Czech?

They were-- Czech. They were working.

Jewish?

Jewish, Jewish-- Czech Jews. And they were singing and playing the guitar every night, about two months they were. Then we needed the lager. And our lager had to be given to newcomers. The French, the Belgian Jews came in. And the Holland Jews came in. And always that's what they did. So they made place for us. So we were selected.

We were taken to that Tsche-lager because the children were killed for next morning. They were taken away. And the lager was empty. So we went to that lager. We stayed there for two and a half months. And there was a selection again. And second day Rosh Hashanah, I don't want to talk about it. Just the-- just what you are interested how it was a selection.

Those German couldn't make a selection for a group of people. They needed 300 girls to take us somewhere. They couldn't count us because they start counting from here. Those people run away in the back and so on always. So somebody told us, no matter what, you can't run away. Let them count the 300 girls. So they did.

And that particular Rosh Hashanah, we left Auschwitz. In June, they gave us the number. And we were condemned to leave. They don't tell you anything. You don't have to be prepared. They just gave a piece of bread at the gate, the daily, that little nothing. And the wagon was there already. And they took us. We left Auschwitz.

This is in September of 1944?

For second day Rosh Hashanah. And we went in Gorlitz. It was a beautiful city. We never saw the real city. So we traveled. And we saw Jewish cemetery in that particular city why--

You were in a train?

Train. And that was different already because we could sit. The door was open. It was closed with wire. It's a wire there some kind. But we could see outside. And the same day we arrived, we were selected already to go to work. 36 of us that day was chosen. They chose girls to work for the LagerfÃ¼hrer in the kitchen. Mostly, they chose blonde they needed to work for them.

Repeat that.

Blonde girls.

Why?

That was their mania, the blonde. So they chose the-- I don't know how many very nice girls working the kitchen for the SS. And some of them were chosen to work in the factories. And 36 of us, including me, we got overalls. And they gave us a nice trim on the hair. And we were marching.

And every morning, I was working in a Koche. The train came in. The train came in the factory. I was reading about, it's Goring something. We made-- they burned the iron, the raw iron and the other thing and made grenades and bombs.

But I did first, I painted the outside of the-- and inside of the grenade, it has a switch for the bombs. It was long like this and heavy. And that's what we did, four of us, and four Hungarian Jewish girls and one Polish, who was an artist, a painter, artist-- Max. He was painting the Lagerführer with his family.

And the foreman in that big factory was sitting for him to make a portrait. But he says, he was not satisfied because I couldn't make his nose smaller. He had a big nose. He was a comic also. And he was also doing that same work I did. That was a machine after.

And I don't know. Then they put me in to work in the control with two German girls to push-- put a stamp on that, a K, a number K. Those two girls never spoke to us. But same place, we had French and Italian boys working. And the next factory also, all Italian and French boys, it was.

Did they speak to you?

Yes. Prisoners-- they were prisoners. And I had a chance to steal potatoes. My oldest sister was weak. All 36 of us had a chance to boil potatoes. We had that underground storage, which was covered only with dirt and straw. We went outside. We had the bathroom. And I could reach for there-- in Gorlitz, this is in Gorlitz already-- potatoes. And I made a place for myself in that cover.

Where were the potatoes?

I told you, for the SS. And they stored that inside in our lager. And that was different already. We had a washroom. We had an ambulance. Nobody wanted to go in the ambulance to sit. If I had something, I wouldn't report I am sick. And every day, we were up at 4 o'clock, stand Zahlappell, have that lunch or coffee, and up marching in the factory.

And I made place in my lining, between my lining in my coat for that thing. And I could boil a couple of potatoes because the boy there, in the Koche, just took out a piece of iron, raw iron. It was hot. It was all fire, put it in that pail, I throw the potatoes. And he cooked it for me. And it was in my inner lining in my coat.

So anyhow, that all of us, we did. See, we were not soldiers. We shouldn't do it. I think the SS could shoot us, all of us. He didn't. Because while he was standing in that reflector, the lagers were so lighted up, you could pick up a needle from far-- in Auschwitz too, all corners, the reflectors were scary, very scary. And here too.

And he saw us. It was a shadow between the latrines, the WC, and the potatoes what we steal. And one day, it was a control. I make it short-- a control. And I was working at night. They find the potatoes in my bed. The girls came in in the morning. There was a report what's going on. And they find mine because I-- somebody had to be the victim, somebody.

The Blockälteste we had, it was a girl, a crazy girl from Pozsony, from Bratislava. She wanted very much to prove for the SS she is honest. She wanted to keep her job. So they find mine. If she would be good, she wouldn't let that happen. It's-- we don't have. But the SS outside had to report because one day, the thing would be open, empty. Sooner or later, they had to be discovered.

And all of us, not only me and those 36, we ate potatoes even raw, lot of people would eat if we would have. So they find it. And they came in and told me what happened. And I was standing. I was put to wash the washroom of the SS with the strong soda caustic.

And they put me outside. I couldn't sleep with my sisters in the barrack. They locked me outside in cold November without my coat and my no food, nothing. But somebody brought my coat, my sister. And they brought me my food, my portion. The SS woman asked me who gave my coat. I says, I didn't see who was. Somebody pushed it in. But I didn't see her face. And who gave me food? I didn't see. So they decided to give 25 on me. 25--

Lashes?

--lashes. And with condition, if I tell who were the orders, who stole the potatoes, I was thinking, what shall I do? If I die-- maybe they will kill me. Why shall they kill 36 of us? And I didn't tell. A Sunday morning in November, the last days of November, the bell was ringing. And there was a Zahlappell. Those 700 men, 300 women were stand up. And I was sit, seated on a stool or chair.

And a man in behind me, a Polish Jew-- I didn't know he had a revolver. He has-- I didn't care anymore. And gave me the question. The SS told him to tell me who were the others. I says, as you find mine, I was hungry. But I don't know who were the others. They start shaving my head off.

And the first, I could prove it with two friends I have here, Regina Adler and Hanni Smal. They were with me. Everybody was crying. I kissed my hair. The second time, I was bald. And the-- I wind up-- just cutting my hair, I was happy. But those girls who were working for the SS LagerfÃ¼hrer and-- they ask him not to punish me that hard. So they cut my hair again bald.

That night, I got a letter from somebody who says, I like you bald better than with your hair. And I got from him a green turban. And I should wear it. It was cold. I was a tall girl and marching up early, it was snowing and freezing. And I wear that, even in the factory.

And I was-- there was a Gestapo who was working who was with us always. He was wearing just a coat, and overall, and his outfit. And he says to me, he says to my Aufseherin, the German girl who are marching with us in the factory, says, he should tell me, I shouldn't-- I am not allowed to wear that thing, that turban, that shawl.

And then he start with me. He says to me, the Lageralteste told me-- no, no, the Aufseherin, the SS woman, she says, he says, you were punished. And you are not allowed to wear anything on your head. He says-- she says to me, Agnes, she says to me, if I'm marching with you and he's not there, I allow it, you should have the turban.

This was a German girl?

German. And that's what I did with my hair for four weeks. I had curls all over. And that's what happened. I escaped. And that was-- we were in Gorlitz. It was very hot already. In December, they start already. The Allies were winning the war and coming closer. And it was in February already. The air raids were very often.

One night, I remember, we were left alone. We escaping. You telling me about how we should escape. We couldn't. We were surrounded. The Americans came. And we were left in that thing, in the factory, big factory. So they run away. And the earlier-- the girls went out. They find a place where to stay. And they hollered for us. And we went there.

And one hole fell in, so we wanted to-- we didn't want to stay inside. With no escort, we went and reached a civilian bunker full of Germans. What shall we do?

Our coats had a patch in behind. And here, we were always-- we had our number. The man had a stripe on his-- their hair. So we were-- we looked like hafingers. We looked like prisoners. There were a lot of prisoners. And so when we came in, we saw so much Germans. We were happy to see them hiding. They were afraid. So we come out.

And did you go into the bunker with them?

Yes, we did.

And what did they say?

Nothing. One old woman comes to me and starts speaking to me in German. She says too, she is alone. And she wants to come out. And it's dark outside. They didn't have light-- and if I am willing to take her. I didn't answer her. She was holding my hands.

When I stepped out from that place, I gave her a push with my elbow like this, Fraulein, bitte, Fraulein. I left her there.

You are going to be tough when you think, maybe, she has a son, an SS or who knows, some relatives killing my people. I am going to escort her? She fell on the floor.

And we were there February. It was like this-- running and making, working, beautiful work. They said, never in that history in that factory's history, women's work on that machines we were working. We did a beautiful job. They put the plan, the drawing. And we were cutting the screws and everything like they told us to.

But we were sabotaging, all of us-- the French, the Italian. And the engineer complained that is-- everybody is working. The machine is running. But the material, the ready work is not coming in. It's supposed to. That's fine.

My sister was working, was very weak. And I said, go and wait here. And I stop. And I took my-- what she made, I had to do something with it to put in my machine. And I gave her ready work. When I took mine in the control, coming back, I brought her a couple, maybe 20-25 pieces what was controlled already. So that's why. And a lot of people did that, French, they gave me a look like this when he broke that-- how it's call, a drill?

Drill.

Expensive drills, I broke three. And one comes to me. He says to me, don't do it. I fix this one to you. I says, Robert, I am in trouble. He says, Freda, I cut it down. Don't report it to your foreman because you broke two already. That cost 60 French one. And one girl--

What do you mean it cost 60 French one?

60 marks.

60 marks.

Marks. I had so many money already.

How did-- where were you when the war ended?

In Gorlitz. So they took us away from Gorlitz. This is very interesting. I'm going to close very soon. I want to mention this. In February, the frontier was very close already. And they marched us up. It was very urgent, we should march up. We were walking for 26 kilometer. How many miles is that? I don't know, very far.

And they marched up by foot, raining. It was snowing and raining, and no food, and no nothing, no warm clothes, the water run in in our shoes and came out. And we arrived in a place. It's a mystery, still a mystery to me why did they took us there, 1,000 of us. It was in a field, open field. There was a horse barn, a horse barn.

And the first time during 14 months, we had sort. We find in that place where the horses were hiding, those were race horses, or SS horses, who knows? And they put us in that place. We were there for two weeks. It's a mystery behind that. We didn't see anything, any people or human beings.

Where did you get food?

Food. What food? Food was easy to get. But we didn't have nothing-- nothing, almost nothing. But we had the kitchen with us. They gave an excuse. They didn't have-- the supply didn't come in. So that day, we didn't eat.

And it-- we were happy. We were under a cover. And we were laying on this manure of the cows. All of us put a little straw. We had one blanket. And the patrol was rolling up and down in front of the barn. And nobody could come in or go out. We were locked in like a bunch of sheeps, or pigs, or anything. I don't know what.

And how did you-- what happened when the war ended?

So we went back. Nobody knows why we went there marching. War ended in 9 of May. In that month-- in April already-- April, they went to pick up food for us. And they couldn't. The British were very close. And everything was very hectic. When we walked to the factories, those factories, all of us-- French, Jews, different, it was-- I would be happy to work, I says, when I go home, in a beautiful place like this and doing intelligent work.

But we didn't have one-- nothing-- paid nothing, anything, not even-- they could afford to give you-- give us food. In April and May-- and when we went already in last weeks of April to work, we didn't walk already in the middle of the street like we used to. We went with a side street, like not on the side, always on the side of the street and a different direction.

We could hear the boom, boom every day. And one day, a Friday, for end of the weekend, we start-- we didn't know what's going on. A French boy goes past by us. Because we picked up that he was working here, for he was working 100-- pick the orders.

On your way back into the-- from the barrack?

Yes. And we were standing in very much order they asked us to do. And we used to do. And French boy passing by. And he says, [GERMAN]. That's it. I thought, I didn't hear well. I tell my sisters we were in-- and we had another girl. And everybody is looking so happy. We didn't believe it. He marched in, very interesting. This is very interesting.

We marched in in the lager. And already, we have-- we go in the blocks. We go in different direction. And they telling us, after a few minutes, we should come out. Tomorrow morning, we go again to work. But we don't stay too long. We don't stay too long.

At 10 o'clock, somebody comes in and tells us, we should go out because the Lagerführer and the Oberleiter, and the whole, they want to talk to us. All of a sudden, somebody talks to us. When they never say hello to us, we have to stay-- stand out three-- how it call it?

Three yards.

Three yards and stay in Achtung. And [NON-ENGLISH] that thing. And all of a sudden, so we go out. The Lagerführer stand up in Zahlappell. The Lagerführer tells us-- first, Janko-- we had a new Blockälteste there-- tells us what the Lagerführer has in mind. We should get ready. The front is very near. And they want us to go with them. So we had a doctor, Klari, a doctor, a Hungarian doctor, Dr. Klari.

Who was among your group, who was a Jew?

Yes, Jewish girl and a Polish man, a doctor. And he was a very funny man. He was working in the same factory with me. He was a very interesting man. And he says, when we come go out, and they gave us the word, the frontier is very near here. And the British, and the Russian, and the Allies, they very near.

And if they will occupy Gorkitz, then it's very frightening, especially for women, because they don't care somebody's 60 year old or I don't know how many year old. So if we don't go with them also, they will take all the food what we have here in the-- they didn't have. Even they didn't have what to eat already. And they take all the food with them. And we going to be left with anything.

So when we go back, and we go back, and the doctor comes in, and the two doctors, he says, look, I'm going to tell you, you move on and pack and go. But you pack. Because they have to go away. It's very urgent. But you pack. You have to-- you make yourself busy packing. Do something.

In other words, don't really go with them, but pretend that you're getting ready to do it.

Yes. You getting ready. Always, they came in and hollered, we should go, we should go. And we were not ready. Finally, one came in and says, look, if you are not going-- they could force us, the doctor, the Polish, he said-- a couple,

we must. I am going with you. And the last village--

I don't understand that.

Don't wait for them, they could come in. They should shot-- they could shot us. They could get revenge.

You mean the Germans?

Germans. And just somebody has to go, already that many is ready. So everybody who was one person-- not sister, just only her, 14 of them left, 14 girls. And I don't know how many-- we were separate from the men-- how many from the men. And 14, they left. There was--

14 went with the Germans?

Yes. They went. They did go until the nearest city, 12 miles. And the term was so big, Erna, who was-- she was a witch, that Erna was a monster. I want to make short. I don't want to talk too much any more, finish it up. And you should see the girl. So the girls went in hiding. Erna, the soldier woman, went in to get down, to change from the uniform.

And until she went away, they all 14, they went someplace and hide in-- on an attic or someplace. And they waited until they left. They went in someplace, the SS too. And they run. They came back to us.

They had to come back in the lager because it was very dangerous. Even if the Russian occupies the place, I almost-- I was caught, for an example. You don't have any identification to prove who you are. Then they could take you, the Russian too. So I showed this one. So we went back. They went away.

And we went out with another girl, we and my sister, to look for some food. We find two Hungarian-- two German women coming and bringing potatoes in a net-like something. And she says to me, that order, you know what we're going to do? We ask her and ask for the potatoes. She's not giving it to us, we going to take it anyhow. That's what we did. We didn't take.

When they heard us talking Hungarian, she says, she is from Miskolc or somewhere in Hungary and they speak the language. And they invited us to their house. And we went. It was a [NON-ENGLISH]-- how it's called, a air raid, a big one. He says, we should come in and stay.

And the first time for 15 months, we saw a table. We saw ourselves in a mirror, like somebody-- you could-- you people really could go crazy in misery. Imagine that, sitting again on a chair, sitting by a decent table, and having a teaspoon, not just when we were working in Gorlitz already, we had a spoon. And we had a red plate, red enamel, look like a washtub.

But we went. I says to her, look, Manzie, it's a mirror. Then we saw how we look, really look. And they made coffee for us. They could kill us.

But they knew you were prisoners? They knew you were Jews?

Sure, they know. They didn't want to know. You imagine, we are walking there, coming and going. Sometimes, we see, they were not allowed to look through the windows. And somebody pulled the curtain. And the last time, last-- in April, I think, we find apples on the floor. But we were not allowed to reach for it. No.

And then who came in, who-- what soldiers, English? And then the SS ran away. And that night, until 4 o'clock, all day, they were bombarded the city. It was a very, very big city, a bigger city, all make ammunition, all kind. And at 4 o'clock, they put out the flag, the white sheets and all that. And that say-- the Russian, they say, maybe they were-- so they stop bombing. Until 4 o'clock, still, they were bombing.

So we decided, all of us. And when the SS went away-- no light in the barracks should be seen from outside because the



running Germans could come in and harm us. So we couldn't even go out. Some-- we sneaked out and found on the dump parsley and baked it on the stove. We were very hungry.

Even that, the lager kapo, Jewish boys, Jewish boys were from the other lager kapo-- kapos were from ours too who were taking us to work and over watching us about our behaviors. They were lager kapo from girls and also for the men, 700 men. And that night, we decided, Jacobs, a Polish Jew came in. And he says too, we are free. Don't show any like you are happy--

Emotion?

--emotion. You make yourself you don't know anything at all. We are free. And then he says, nobody goes outside, very quiet. Light, god forbid, maybe those Germans were running, running away.

Fleeing.

Yes, fleeing. One group maybe could stop in here. If there is no light, they won't know there is a lager here. Or maybe there is no one here. So we watching you. So there were those boys, Rensburg and Jacobs. And they were just the lager kapo, the kapo I told you about I met in France. They had arms already.

And they were watching us. They told us, we should go down. There was not far from there, it was a bunker. So we spent the night there. And one girl went out at 1 o'clock at night. And she comes back. She says, I hear motoryzacja. She was a Polish girl. The motoryzacja is here, the army-- by motoryzacja. I don't know. I understand for myself.

The trucks and--

And all that. They coming-- and the tanks. And we were there until 5 o'clock in the morning. 5 o'clock, some of them they came and test the road not to have a grenade or some mines.

Mines.

So we went out from the bunker in the lager. And the Russian was over already there, the Russian. When the Russian-- he was a colonel, a Jewish boy. It's done? OK.

No, continue.

The Jewish boy was a high-m ranking officer with the Russian Army, says, Shema Israel, there are Jews in Europe yet.

I think that's--

That's it? So this is the freedom.

Well, this is the freedom.

Good.

I want to--

I made it short. I told you, I could. I have nine tapes, very interesting, nine tapes I have.

I want to thank Mrs. Freda Schmelzer for her courage and commitment in telling so much of her story about her experiences during the Holocaust. This is Stan Garfinkel speaking for the Holocaust Archive Project sponsored by the Cleveland chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women.