

I'm Minda Jaffe. I'm a representative of the Holocaust Archive Project. Today is August 16, 1984. And I'm here to interview Ann Cyncynatus, who is going to be our narrator for this afternoon. I'm going to start with an overview of several questions, Ann. I've asked you-- mentioned your name already, but would you like to tell us your name?

Yes. I'm Ann Cyncynatus. My maiden name is Gelbart.

And how old are you?

I'm 59 years old.

And where do you live, Ann?

I live in Shaker Heights.

And do you work?

No. I'm a housewife.

That's work too.

Yes. I suppose.

And do you have children?

Yes. I have three children-- two daughters and a son, two grandchildren, and my husband Paul.

And what kind of work does Paul do?

He is a painting contractor.

I see. Under the name of--

Of Cyncynatus Decorating.

OK. And where do your children live, Ann?

My married daughter lives in Sharon, Pennsylvania. My middle daughter lives in Cleveland, temporarily. And my son lives also in Cleveland with his wife.

Which one's made you the grandmother?

My oldest daughter.

Your oldest daughter.

Yes.

And what are the children? Boys? Girls?

A boy and a girl, in that order.

Ann, I'm going to want to ask you some questions. I'm going to ask you for an overview of your family lifestyle, your living conditions, the members of your family, both your immediate family and your extended family, what your

relationships were with them and your community before the war. We're going to begin with 1939. If you'll tell us first how old you were, where you lived.

You mean at the outbreak of the war.

At the outbreak of the war.

I was 14 years old. I lived in a small town named Klobuck. It was near Czestochowa, which is quite a well-known town because the Black Madonna is there. I was the oldest of four children. My father was a butcher. My mother helped in the business.

I had just, that summer, completed seven grades, which is the grade school in Poland, with intentions of going on to further education. Unfortunately, the war broke out. And that morning, when the war broke out-- excuse me-- a farmer that my father dealt with, he was a Jewish man, came to town. And my father sent me with them, with him, to his farm. It was about 10, 15 kilometers away. And on the way, we encountered bombs and got separated.

My father and mother and my two sisters--

You got separated from the man?

From the man. My father and mother and my two sisters and a brother were left behind. And as we encountered the bombing and devastation, I don't know, someone grabbed me and kept me with them, some people that I did not know.

Ann, before you tell me about the people who you were with, go back just a little bit for me and tell me something about the population of the town, how many people, about how many Jews there were, a little bit more about the individual members of your family.

The population of the town was probably around 10,000 together. There were about 450 Jewish families, very close-knit families. It was hard to make a living because, at the time when I remember, antisemitism was very, very prominent, and Jews were oppressed. So therefore, it was hard to make a living, and the people struggled. There were a few well-to-do families.

There was one synagogue. The majority of people were Orthodox. I'm talking about the Jewish people were Orthodox. And I come from a very loving family.

My father is of-- was one of nine children, and there's only one brother left.

Did his brothers and sisters live in the same city?

Yes. Everybody lived in the same city, was very close-knit family. My mother had three brothers, and one survived. He lives in Sweden now. I had-- my grandmother from my father's side had 36 grandchildren. And there are only seven left.

You lived with your parents then.

I lived with my parents, my brothers and my sisters, and my--

Anybody else live in the home with you?

No. No. But my grandmother and grandfather from my mother's side lived in the same structure, but not in the same house. My other grandmother lived not too far away. My grandfather on my father's side had passed away a natural death in 1930.

And what did your father's siblings or your mother's siblings-- what kind of work did they do?

My father's brothers were in the same-- it was all a family business.

Oh, it was a family business?

Yes. And his sisters were married, as far as I can remember. Just the youngest was not. She was a beautiful, gorgeous woman. She was not married. She was engaged. Now that is before we lost her.

My mother's brothers were all married. Two lived in Łódź, and one lived in the same city. And they each had families. And we attended school. I was one of two Jewish children in my class because there was no Jewish school. And I took my Jewish education in a separate school, school for girls.

I was going to ask you that, to kind of give me a typical example of a typical day, both school and what your brothers and sisters were doing, and the kind of the hours your father got started at his place of business.

OK. My father got started very early, so did my mother. When we woke up in the morning, we had all-- all four pairs of shoes were sitting there waiting for us, all polished and ready. Breakfast was ready. It was early. It would have been around 6 o'clock or so because in Poland, there were two sessions of school. You did not attend the whole day of school.

The higher grades went in the morning, and the lower grades went in the afternoon. So that school started pretty early. And my father started much earlier in the morning, probably, I'm sure, before dawn. It was a long day. Things weren't modernized in any business as they are now.

And we went to school. I came home about noon and had lunch waiting for me with a very loving mother. And after lunch, we sat down and did our homework. My education was very important to my mother. And after that, I helped in the house because my mother helped out in the business.

How old were your brothers and sisters in 1939? You were 14.

I was 14. My sister Esther next to me was 12. My brother Arthur was 10. And my sister Frances was eight years old.

OK. Your day, you're telling me you did your homework after lunch.

I did my homework, and then I had to help with the house chores. We all did. We had our work divided. My younger sister was too young, and I helped with cleaning, with cooking. And then I was allowed to play.

With neighbors' children?

With neighbors' children. Yeah, I had wonderful friends. And as a matter of fact, luckily, they survived too, and we are friends still today.

And dinner time was with the whole family together?

Dinner time was always with the whole family together. Yes. It was a blessing before dinner. My father was Orthodox and-- modern Orthodox. And the blessing was very important. And we proceeded with our dinner. And we did not stay up too late in the evening because the day was long.

And there was no television.

And there was no television. No. As a matter of fact, there weren't even-- well, in 1939, there were already in our town electric lights. And we were one of the first ones to have them. But prior to that, there weren't any. We had to have a lamp.

Do you remember when you had lamps?

Of course. We had a lamp lit by, I guess it was kerosene.

You must have been very young. But you remember that.

I remember. Yes. I remember pretty far back. Yes.

How about times of the holidays, the Jewish holidays? How were they spent with your family?

They were very joyous times. They were mostly spent together.

When you say together, you mean with--

I mean with grandparents, with other members of my father's family or my mother's family, as many as they could get together. Homes weren't as big. Living quarters were much smaller and cramped. But we made do. We loved every moment of it. And they were very important times.

Did you go to synagogue together?

Yes.

The children went as well?

Yes. Children went as well. Yes.

Was there ever any discussion in your home about politics or Zionism? Now I'm talking about prior to 1939 and the outbreak of the war.

I really don't remember that much. A relationship as far as discussing things between children and adults were a little different than they are now. Now you discuss with children practically everything at any age, as soon as they can grasp it. To my recollection, we were taught values and everything that was important. But a lot of times discussions like this were just mainly between adults.

I was aware that there is Zionist organization. But there wasn't that much discussion about it.

Were your parents members of any Zionist or socialist organizations?

No. No, they were not.

Do you think that there were some in the city that you lived though?

Oh, yes. They were. Yes. Yes. My husband was a member of the Betar, which is a Zionist organization. He was-- he's a little bit older than I am. And he was involved in Betar, quite active.

What was the language spoken in your home?

Predominantly Yiddish and Polish.

And at school it was Polish.

At school, yes, it was Polish. And the school where I attended for Jewish studies, it was Yiddish. It was Jewish.

Attended a school after school?

After school, yes.

What time of the day that?

That was mostly about 4 o'clock, until 6:00. And then we would come home and have dinner.

That was for girls and boys.

That was for girls and-- but I attended-- there were for girls and for boys, but I attended a girls school.

Your elementary school was boys and girls?

For boys and girls, yes. But that was Polish. And the school where I studied Jewish and learned how to pray and a little bit of translation of the Hebrew language, that was just for girls.

Were there other schools for boys and girls?

Not really. There were mostly like a rabbi or a teacher that you would go to his home. And that's where boys would go.

I was going to ask you, how about your brother?

My brother went to one of those rabbis, to his home, that needed-- did this for a living. And he learned to read, to pray, and the meaning of Judaism to become a bar mitzvah. He never, unfortunately, never got to it because he was too young.

This was after school also. He went to a regular elementary school.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Just trying to identify the different type of schools because I'm sure every different community had a different type.

It was a small-- it was a small town. And in larger towns, they did have schools, Jewish schools, for boys and girls that was taught the Polish and the Jewish or Hebrew together. But in our town, that's what was available.

What was the closest largest town to you?

Czestochowa. I mentioned this at the outset.

Oh, Czestochowa. OK. And how far away was that?

17 kilometers.

That was were your -- 17 kilometers.

Yes.

How about the theater or a library-- not a library per se, but books and reading. Do you remember any kind of books that were in your home, some cultural things?

Library was available in school, in Polish schools. And I, by the way, was an ardent reader and still am-- love to read. At home there weren't too many books. There wasn't that much money to spare for books. But we were able to rent them out. And as I said, my mother was a great believer in education. She encouraged to read a lot. And she instilled in us the importance of acquiring as much education and knowledge as you possibly can.

She says, hopefully, you never have to use it. But if you do, you should have it. She was very wise.

Who would you say made most of the decisions in the house, your mother or your father?

My father did. My father did. But they were very-- there was a very close relationship between my mother and father. He wasn't the bossy type. It was just this is the way it was. So my father was the man of the house. He made the decisions.

How about for entertainment? What did the family do for entertainment? Because you had so much family.

Yes. There was no theater. The schools would put on plays. The Polish schools and the schools of Jewish Studies would put on plays once in a while. And I don't know. We had an awful lot of fun between the cousins and the family. There was always something to do.

And there was no radio, there was no television. So therefore, we either read, or in the spare time we would get together and go on a picnic or go swimming and little things like this. And we were quite--

Where did you swim?

There were no pools. There was either a-- what do you call a-- a hole, or there was a very small stream going through the city. And we would swim there. Of course, we had to watch for the antisemitic children, mainly for the boys, not to try to drown us. Be sure that they're away at the time when we would go into the water.

Your parents warned you to watch, or you were aware yourself?

No. This was by instinct. You learn this by instinct. Yes.

Now you didn't tell us before, but I remember when we spoke over the phone-- maybe you were too modest now-- that you told me you were a very studious person. You did very well in school.

Yes, I did.

And you explained to me, and perhaps you should explain now about the scholarship.

Yes. I was very studious and exceptionally good in arithmetic and math. And for a Jewish student to get into what would be equivalent to high school here was very difficult. There was quotas. But the principal of the school where I went to was a very wonderful man. And he was working very hard to get a scholarship for me to get into-- to-- for further education. But unfortunately, it never developed because the war broke out that fall.

What other things do you see yourself as having been then-- you personally-- in those days, some of the aspirations that-- well, of course, you were 14, but some of the things that you kind of dreamed about for yourself or hoped for yourself.

Well, mainly, like every girl I suppose, I looked forward to studying, really. It was very important to me. I wanted to become a bookkeeper.

Did you think you wanted to stay in the same city?

I was hoping not to. And my mother was always instilling in us that this is not a town. The town is too small for young people. That it's better to go on to a larger city. And as a matter of fact, had I gone to school, to high school, it would have been to Czestochowa because it was not available in our city. So then I probably would have lived with some relatives and attended school there. And that was a very important goal.

And I was-- I had a very wonderful, happy childhood, a very loving family. And very concerned about my father. He was always worried. Is he going to be able to make a living to support the family. And because, as I said before, antisemitism was spreading more and more. And it was very-- it was being made very difficult for Jews to earn a living.

I recall shortly-- I'm wandering away from the question you asked me. But I recall one incident shortly before the war. My father would go with a horse and wagon-- that was the transportation then-- to farmers to buy cattle for slaughter. And he was particularly late coming home that day. And my mother started to worry. And she said to me, why don't you go out. I knew from the way that he is coming, due to come from.

And all of a sudden, I see my father coming. And I thought at the time, he's wearing a red bandanna on his around his Head and I holler, Mom. Mom. I see Daddy, but he has a red bandanna on his-- around his head. And as he came closer, we realized that he was struck with stones by some antisemites. And he was bleeding.

And I remember it very vividly. Things like this you never forget. And so there was always the worry for my father's well-being. And beyond that, as the war years grew closer, we were aware that nothing good is going to become because if the war should come, we knew, not to the extent to what happened, but we knew it's going to be very bad. He knew. And we also knew that the Poles are going to help the Germans in every way they could.

Ann, you began before, and I asked you to go backwards a little bit, with what you remember about the very beginning of the war. When were you first aware of it? How were you first aware of it? And about that day that you told me-- why don't you begin to tell me again?

From where I got separated from these people.

Right. How did the war had broken out.

Well, we heard it. I guess there were a couple of radios in the town. A couple of well-to-do people had some radios. But there were not the kind of radios that you have now. They were radios with the earphones. And it doesn't take long to spread the news at a small town. And we also heard shooting because we lived not too far away from the German border.

And that's how we found out that the war is on. And as I said, when this man came early, very early in the morning, it was a Friday morning I believe, September 1, 1939.

That's the date you told me.

Yes. My father sent me with this man. And as I got separated, and I don't know who these people were that sort of took me in as the bombs were starting to fall and things were collapsing. And then when it had quiet down--

Did you know these people? I'm sorry.

No. I did not.

You didn't know who came to get you.

No. But I was a child wandering around. And these people grabbed me and sheltered me.

You and your parents?

No, I was-- my father--

Oh, I'm sorry. You're talking-- yes, right.

Yes. They had sent me away. My parents were left behind. It was such a confusion that they didn't know. They just felt that at least they'll-- I was the oldest, and maybe mature enough. And he trusted this man immensely. So he said he felt it's on a farm, away from everything. Maybe I'll be safe there.

What he intended to do with the other children at the time, I don't think my father knew himself. It was just a lot of confusion. And then when the bombing subsided, we started towards home.

What day was that? The same?

That was-- I think that was probably the second day. I remember sleeping in a shed with a lot of people, on straw. And there was a shortage of food and a shortage of water. And everybody crying. A lot of people, of course, got killed from the bombing. It was total confusion.

And I kept on wandering with the throng of people towards home. And then at one point, we came to a stream of water. And there were people. We were all thirsty and hungry. And people started drinking the water from the stream. And they became ill.

One person had slit his wrists right there at the stream. And do you know that the rest, from this point on, from being at this stream until I came home, it's a total blackout. I never was able to recall how I came home.

But when I came home, my father and mother and my two sisters and brother were there. And there was a terrible tragedy. One of my mother's brothers was shot to death. My grandfather was shot. They were just-- as the Germans came in, there was just-- they were just shooting into the homes. And my grandfather's arm was shot. But he was OK. He was treated, and he was OK.

It was great devastation. Half of the city was burned. And it turned out that my parents never left. They stayed. And luckily, they escaped any of these injuries.

Never left what? Never left the house, you mean?

They never left the house. Then the following morning, when the Germans were in, they were-- the occupation was there. The following morning, they were going around with cars, with I would say, what you would call horns, and telling all the people to come out-- Poles and Jews to come out to the marketplace. And that's where they started to instill the fear in us.

They would tell us to stay in rows. And they would tell all the men to bend their heads. And they would start reading off a list of rules of what not to do. Now of course, there was a curfew instilled. You're not allowed to go to pray and a whole list of things which you're not allowed to do.

It was mainly then they started-- and they said, and then tomorrow morning, you are to come again to this place. And there was still an awful lot of confusion. And it was beatings.

Wow. In the marketplace?

Oh, yes. There were beatings and confusions and pushings and with the rifle butts. And that was all, as we learned later on, designed to instill fear in people.

About how many people were gathered there?

The whole town.

And how many soldiers were around?

I really don't remember.

Did it seem like a lot?

It seemed a lot. Yes, it seemed a lot. And the following day we came out again. And my father was a very proud man,

and he refused to bend his head. And a German went over to him. He spotted it, and he went over to him and pushed him, pushed his head down. And when we came home again, my father said, I refuse to bend my head. And from then on, my mother pleaded with him. You know, the result is going to be very bad. And he said, no. I am not going to bend my head.

And finally after-- I remember, after a lot of discussion in the family, with his sisters-- with his sisters and brothers, my grandmothers, it was decided that we were going to hide my father every day. He is not going out to that gathering place. And we had to hide him and pray that he isn't caught.

Where did you hide him?

You know, I don't remember.

But you know he was hidden.

Probably in an attic or in a basement, someplace. Yes. But he never attended. He never went out there again.

And then--

And then--

How long do you think you were going there? For how many days?

Oh, I would say about a week or maybe 10 days. And then-- and then most of the--

Were the men going to work then?

Yes. Then they started for the men. And then they started to concentrate on mainly on the Jews, the Germans did. And they had a lot of help from the Poles.

The Germans?

The Germans did. Yes. And imposing all kinds of restrictions. Then they started to-- not long after that, they started taking men to labor, to forced labor, to do all kinds of things just to keep these men under their watch.

My grandfather, who, as I said, was shot in the arm, he was an older man. And as his arm was healing, he went to work too. And he tried to outdo a younger man for fear not to be able-- for fear that he shouldn't be either shot or they were starting to gather older people and send them away. And we didn't know where. We were still very naive and did not-- did not know. They had no idea what is actually brewing.

Where were they taking the men to work, when you said they were going?

They were taking them to clear out the bombed houses. There was a lot of devastation. And dig ditches, all kinds, all kinds of work. And they were taking women and girls to work too. Now, this already I'm talking about when in like-- this would be the following summer.

The summer of 1940.

Which would have been in 1940. And rumors were starting to come around that they are doing all kinds of things, that it's better to have a job. They were starting to bring in what they called in German Volksdeutsche. And they would bring them in from the Sudet. Those were actually Poles from German descent. And they would throw out either a farmer, if the man was a farmer, they would throw out a Polish farmer and give him the farm and the house. They would also do the same thing with businesses.

And where was this Polish farmer going? Did anybody have any idea?

They just--

They threw him out.

They just threw him out, and he had to find lodgings someplace else, either with his relatives or-- and--

What did you mean, Ann-- excuse me for interrupting you-- when you said it was better to have a job?

OK. It was better to have a job with a Volksdeutsche, what they call them like this-- than not to be occupied. Because if you weren't occupied, they would come at any time either during the day or the night and just drag you out and either send you away for work or made you do some kind of work around the city, which was not too bad. But they would send you away.

Also at the very outset-- I'm going to wander back a little bit. We had some friends. They were actually friends of my parents, also people, a very large family that lived a few kilometers away. They were very well-to-do. It was a Jewish family. In that town, they had some kind of a business. I don't remember.

There were seven brothers and two sisters. And the Germans, when they occupied that small town-- it was actually not a small town. It was a village. When they occupied that village, they took those seven sons, those seven brothers, and they sent them away. We did not know where. But after a few days, they sent seven boxes of ashes. And we still did not know what it's all about. We were still so naive, did not know what it's all about.

Now where was I at the end? I don't remember anymore.

OK. You were explaining to me, when I asked you that it was better to have a job.

Right.

And we were in around the summer. Your family was all still at home. And your father was working for them?

Yes.

Your grandfather was working for them, trying to work very hard, you were telling me.

Right. Now, I was able to obtain a job by one of those Volksdeutschen, by one of these German-- actually, they were Polish from a German [INAUDIBLE]. And I was able to obtain a job. He had a farm, and he also had a hothouse, where he was growing things in a hothouse. They weren't hot houses like here. They were different.

And I was able to obtain a job there with him to weed, to do all kinds of things on that farm, also help the lady in the house with her household chores. They were a childless couple. And they got to like me very much. And I liked them. They were a very wonderful couple. And I suppose they treated me like I would be their child. Like I said, they were a childless couple.

And several times, when the Germans would come at night-- and these people knew ahead of time. They would come at night, and when it was unexpected, and take out girls and young men, take them out and send them away to work someplace, to Germany. And on three separate occasions, this couple knew about it. And they told me, and I and my younger sister, the one that's two years younger than I am, were able to spend the night there with these people.

My brother was too small, and my younger sister was too small to be taken. And we were spared that way. But many were taken. Some of them were heard from. Some of them were never heard from.

So they knew beforehand.

They knew before him because he was German. They knew beforehand. Yes. And I suppose they had friends, maybe, with the authorities there or whatever. But they knew, and they were nice enough. I must say, I have more good memories about some of the German people that I have worked with than about the Polish people that I was raised with, unfortunately.

But that's the truth. The people, the people, the German people weren't all bad. It was the regime, the dictatorship that was bad. And this is why I have this feeling. It always remained with me.

So they were looking out for you, and you were working for them. And this was in 1940.

That was in 1940.

This is about the summer.

And then a little bit after that, my father was taken away. He was taken to prison.

Excuse me one moment. You were living the rest of the time at home. You were sleeping at home.

Yes.

Besides those times [CROSS TALK]

Yes. I was living at home with my mother. And then my father was taken away from us. He was taken away and sent away. And we never saw him or heard from him again. My father was, at the time, 42 years old. I never saw him again. And it's not that long that I have finally gotten over the feeling that one day he's going to ring the bell and walk in. That's because there was no finality to his death because nobody ever saw him again.

And it's just-- excuse me-- maybe in the last 10 years that I have given up. Always in the back of my mind was this feeling, this thought that someday he's going to ring the bell, and-- and I'm going to say, my God, Father, you're alive. It was probably an illusion or in my subconscious mind. I always thought that he couldn't be dead. That gorgeous, wonderful man couldn't be dead-- strong.

And you were at home with your mother and your brother and your sisters.

Yes. Shortly after that, they took all the Jewish families.

Shortly? About what period of time?

I would say within a few months.

So it was fall or the beginning of winter.

It was fall. It was fall. They decided, the Germans decided that they were going to take all the Jewish families, and they will put them in one concentrated place. And they--

Did you know beforehand about this?

Yes. Yes.

They made announcements.

They made announcements. And they said that these few streets or this section of the town is going to be for the Jews. And we are to-- we are to-- not every family live separate, but we are to-- the expression escapes me-- to get together

several families and move into one or two rooms.

Of a house, of a flat.

Of room-- of a room or two, not a house.

Right.

By then, by then, most of my uncles, my father's brothers, were gone. They were all taken already to labor camps. And just the women and the children and the grandmothers were left. So we moved together. My mother, my sisters, and my brother, and my grandfather, and grandmother moved into one room. And my other grandmother and two of her daughters, one daughter-in-law, and some of the grandchildren moved to another room. And we lived not far from one another.

And I remember my grandparents were very religious. And they slept in separate beds. As a matter of fact, not even-- the beds weren't even together. They were along one wall. And because we had one room only, that's where we slept, and that's where we cooked, and that's where we did everything, my grandmother and my grandfather were forced to sleep in one bed. And it was a tragedy to them. They were so embarrassed. It was a terrible tragedy to them.

And these are-- they're probably little things, but they stick out in my mind because I can see my grandfather's face. It was a degrading thing to him. And what we did was-- my mother was very handy-- we put a curtain up, and we divided their beds so at least to give them a little bit of dignity. And we stayed there what was till 1942.

What were you doing during the day?

Working with this--

The same family?

With the same family. And I remember, while I was working there-- and then my sister joined too, my sister Esther.

The next one.

Yeah, next, joined too. And while I was working with this couple, the Hitlerjugend came to being. Now, are you familiar with what Hitlerjugend is?

You can explain it to me because I would like to hear it from you.

They were taking the young boys and girls, the German boys and girls, and they were starting to indoctrinate them into the SS, to instill in them all the things that-- all the Hitler's program about--

This was in Germany.

In Germany. But then what they did is they were sending-- as they-- after they went through a course of indoctrination, they sent these children to various places to work. And one girl was sent to this family. And she was a young girl, younger than I was. I was, by then, 16 years old, and quite enough experience from the hardship you-- it's a wonderful, wonderful teacher, the best teacher.

And I remember this girl couldn't do anything in the house. And I remember the German lady telling me to teach her. She said to her-- by then I spoke quite a bit of German. She says, now you watch the Chana. She called me that, Chana. And she will teach you what to do. And so this girl was there too. And I became quite friendly with her. I guess she was away from the atmosphere of being indoctrinated and here with this nice family, so she was quite nice to me too.

Then in-- we stayed there until the beginning of June of 1942. This is when they decided they're going to clear out all

the Jews. Now, you must understand that all this was done extremely systematically. There was a tremendous plan that the Germans had to do this very systematically. We still were not aware that there were gas chambers and all the atrocities that they already began. We were certainly not aware.

Had you heard?

I don't know what we would have done.

Had you heard anything from your father's brothers, from the labor camps, nothing?

No. Nothing. So then they decided that it was time, that it was time to clear the city of Jews. But I will have to go back to one other thing, where they brought in some young people to our town. And they started a labor camp. And that's how a lot of the young people were saved.

All right, Ann. We're going to begin again. I've jotted down that we're going to talk about labor camp in 1942 for the next beginning.

All right.