My name is Lissa Keller. Today we are interviewing Rose Gelbart, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women.

We took a brief pause, and we are back, and I would like to continue where we left off. And you had said you want to start-- please do-- wherever you feel most comfortable in continuing the story, Rose. I think we had stopped-- I'd like to know where you went after Warsaw.

OK. After Warsaw, there were so many places where my mother would find people who would harbor me. And--

How did she go about finding the people who would-- after all, at possible risk of their lives?

Well, she would sort of have connections and find out about those people who were willing to do that. And this one place that I was at, there was sort of a ironical happening there. I was not in hiding there. I was there as a Polish girl, living with them.

And at that point, my mother was getting ready to have me baptized or become Catholic-- communion. She wanted--

She was going to go through the ritual of--

Ritual of having me having communion. I don't know how you call this in--

Being-- yes, becoming a Catholic.

A Catholic, and she was postponing it, but she thought that might be a reason, one good reason, for safety. And she was getting ready to buy me the dress, the white dress. And I was really looking forward to it. I knew I was going to get a white dress, and--

This was important.

--and I thought this was going to be, for me, that it now would be safe. I wouldn't have to worry anymore. So I was looking forward to it. But somehow, I guess, my mother must have had second thoughts on that, and it never came to pass. But I do remember going into church and crossing myself and having the Commandments-- playing with that, when I was with the Polish people.

But in this particular house, I was right on the other side of the Warsaw Ghetto. And even though my mother lived in Warsaw, it was not close to the Warsaw Ghetto, where the people that I stayed with lived right adjoining the wall-- the Warsaw Ghetto. And I remember seeing flames and hearing screams. And I even remember vaguely a baby, you know, being thrown from a window.

But I didn't know why. I mean, I didn't know that this pertained to me being Jewish or anything like that.

You didn't know this was part of you, part of your life.

I didn't know. I didn't know why I was persecuted. I had no idea.

You knew you were Jewish.

I knew I was-- I didn't know what "Jewish" meant. I knew we were people who were persecuted.

And I remember my mother--

But the reasons for that, you didn't know.

No. I know my mother taught me a prayer, and it wasn't Jewish. And that prayer stuck with me throughout all my years. And I knew, if I didn't pray that night, something would happen. So every night, but it-- every night that I went to sleep, I said that prayer.

And it said, in Jewish, that I'm laying myself down and going to sleep with all my limbs and all my family, and I hope I'll wake up tomorrow again. And this is how-- it rhymes. And I remember my mother taught me that.

And every night, until even when I was a married woman, when I worried about something, I would say that prayer. And I knew it was going to be all right when I wake up.

So you held on to that prayer. That was an important thing. That was a security--

And it was in-- I never spoke Jewish, and I grew up in a Polish environment, but yet that prayer, I always said in Jewish. But-- excuse me-- being on the other side of the Warsaw Ghetto, in that household, they had a store, and I would go in the store-- stationery. And I would help them in the store.

And one day, they received a threatening letter, that they're harboring a Jew. And at the same time, they came to pick up her husband, because he was dark-haired and had a big nose. When they said that they're harboring a Jew--

They assumed--

--they assumed it was him. And of course, they released him. Well, after that, they had to send me out again. So--

How long did you stay there?

Oh, just briefly.

Was it brief, in most every place that you stayed?

Very brief.

How many places--

Weeks. Weeks-- a few months.

And when you stayed at these places, was your mother near?

She would come to visit periodically, yes. Now, that one place that she gave me to some Polish, well, I remember the building. And that's very vivid in my mind. They had a little boy, and both of them went to work.

And my mother told me that, when she comes to visit, I should never refer to her as my mother. And I didn't question. I didn't ask why. I just knew I was going to call her "Mrs."

By her name.

Right. And when she came to visit, this is what I, throughout the war, used to call her.

There must have been a tremendous bond between you and your mother.

Well, I didn't feel that much. I mean, I didn't remember my feelings when I was three years old. I don't remember-- or four years old. I just--

It was just your way of life.

It was just a way of life.

And you accepted it as such.

I knew, when I went to her apartment where she was the housekeeper, that I had a closet over there-- what they called a "wardrobe." And there was a pillow. And whenever the doorbell rang, I was to hide over there.

And this wardrobe was in a bedroom. And so there would be a little opening just for air for me. And sometimes, when the company would stay there for hours and hours, I would stay in that closet for hours and hours. And I knew, as a child, that I cannot go out of there. And I never questioned it.

You just accepted it.

Just accepted it.

You were going to say something-- after the Warsaw-- after the stationery store where the man was let go--

Right.

--thought to be a Jew--

And from there, of course, my mother had to find another place. And I remember, I had a favorite purse from the ghetto that was red and had beautiful, hand-painted flowers on it. And my mother found this man who was going to take me from one place to the other. And it was a blizzard of a storm, and we were going through fields.

And he must have taken the bag away from me, because I had that bag, and I asked him, could I have my bag? He says, I don't have the bag. And I was so heartbroken about this purse, because that was all that I had.

It was yours.

But yet I know that he took it. And there was nothing-- as a child, I just remember that I had that purse and that he took it. And so it was-- this was a man that my mother paid and that knew I was Jewish and all that, yet he had no feelings, no heart, when it came to material things.

He wanted the purse, and so he took it. And he didn't really care how you felt.

Although he delivered me safely to the other place--

It doesn't quite make sense, does it? How many places do you think you were?

Oh, god, there must have been-- someday I hope to go back to Poland and go over this, with this daughter of this Mr. Zak, who was with me in most of the places. And she remembers the names and the cities and everything vividly. I will--

You will then relive your steps.

Yes. That's what my dream is-- to go back. Because we write to each other, and she pleads with me to either bring her here or come there. And I would rather, right now, go there so that I could go over with those-- and with a camera and take those-- the places. Because there were so many different places that I was-- I mean, wherever they would get a hint that there is a Jewish girl there, that you're harboring a Jew, I would have to leave. And my mother would have to start anew searching for a place.

Now, there was another place--

Now, all of this time, your mother was working at different places.

No, she was mainly a housekeeper for this man. But she would go try to earn some money by working for another friend of theirs who was making coffee or something. And there were a lot of coffee beans around. And I know my mother telling me that she was chewing on coffee beans all night.

I was going to ask you--

That was an addiction, almost, to her.

--what about food?

Well, the only places where I would be hungry would be, like, in farms, where she would give me to those people. Now, this was another incident-- that I was in one of those-- at the farmers'-- it were a little, tiny town. And they had a-- they had a son who was in the underground-- a very handsome guy. And they had a farm where peaches would grow, and we would go out and, the peaches that were falling, we would be able to eat and all that.

So I wasn't really hungry-hungry there. But certain things that I remember-- they had a cat, and the cat would go into the bowls. And I couldn't eat, from that, so it sort of turned me off. A lot of the food that they were serving me, I couldn't eat.

And also, in this point, I would have a lot of lice in my head. And I would develop great, big crusts in my hair. And my head had to be really-- because nobody was there to wash my hair. And [LAUGHS] that was a big problem. I remember, when my mother found out, she came and they tried to put medicine and medication on it.

Your health generally was OK?

But my health was all right.

Your health was OK.

But in this place, one night, I was sleeping with this girl, this Zak's daughter, as my sister. And we had that little-- I mean, everybody, all the whole family, was sleeping-- there was one room-- their son and the mother and father and me and my so-called sister. And there was a big knock on the door. And we all thought that the-- the SS came in with great big Hakenkreuz, and everybody was sure that they came for me.

And I just huddled under the blankets, trying to hide, as if-- you know--

As if you could.

--that would save me. Right. But instead, they took out their son, because he was in the underground. And they sent him to Auschwitz, I think.

And that farm, I was free to come and go.

They did not question anyone else.

No, no. They just came to pick him up.

And you stayed huddled under the blanket.

Just they came in Warsaw to pick up that other guy instead of me. But they would send me out in the morning, early in the morning, in the biggest frost, to stand in line for milk. And I remember, you know--

There was a milk ration.

==freezing-- yeah-- and doing chores for them. And sometimes, when we were hungry, there were stores and bakeries and I would beg for bread. And they would give me a loaf of bread. And I remember sitting down with her in one of the fields and just breaking up the bread and eating that. So that helped.

But there were children there that used to run after me and call me "Jew." And--

Now, these were children who knew you were Jewish?

Polish children. They sort of--

Surmised it?

--surmised it. Either they heard it from their parents, that there might be-- you know, she might be a Jew.

And once I went swimming. They had a lake, and I went swimming. And this Polish woman that was saving me, she didn't know I was Jewish. She knew that I was-- my mother's husband was fighting in England.

In other words, she knew the story that was made up.

Right. So she didn't know. And she said to my mother, you know, if I knew that you're not Polish, I would swear your daughter is Jewish, because she's afraid to go into the water. You know, that kind of stories.

But over there, somehow, there was suspicion. And the children would run after me. And I knew that, if I'm going to run--

And I remember carrying this big pumpkin for them. They sent me to buy a pumpkin. And I knew that, if I was going to run, that I would give myself away. So this thing was in me, you know, this pretension was in me, trying to pretend that I don't know who they're calling. And I would just walk just as slowly as I could-- even though they were chasing me. I would walk just very slowly and not turn around or anything, thinking that, if I turn around, they'll know they're calling me-- this way, I didn't know who they're called.

And at the same place I remember passing an SS man with a great big Hakenkreuz on the street.

Passing a what-- an SS man?

Right. And I knew that I have to look him right in the eye, because, if I turn my head down, he might suspect that I was Jewish. So I looked him right in the eye.

It was the same bravery that your mother had.

It was just something--

A survival.

--survival. Right.

It's a choice that you had to make.

Yeah. But why--

--of whether to look suspicious--

--exactly.

--or whether to--

If I would go like this, I knew I was going to give myself away. And yet I was just barely a baby.

You mentioned something, before, when you were in the apartment and everyone had evacuated the apartment. And the three of you were in the apartment. I'd like you to tell me about that. It's retracing our story--

Well, everyone was gone. The whole apartment was completely-- either the people that were left alive-- I mean, they were allowed to stay in the building-- were at work, or they were gone already. And when they came to check--

Why were the three of you there, by the way?

I don't know. I don't remember why, but I remember that the three of us were there. And they came to check-- the SS man, with the police, came to check whether everybody wasn't-- you know, people weren't hiding. And when they came with those guns--

And we were sitting, like, overlooking the courtyard. And when we saw them, we froze, like. And they saw us from downstairs. And when they came up--

You were sitting outside?

--yeah, like-- you know.

In a veranda?

They had like balconies all the way around the courtyard.

Like a balcony.

Yeah. And they came to check-- they came upstairs. They saw us. They came upstairs, with their guns pointing at us, and we thought they were going to shoot us.

And then they asked, what are you doing here? And my father said, well, I'm working here and here, and today was my day off-- or something like that. Or I couldn't go in. I was sick. I don't remember the words that he said. But all I know is that they left us alone.

They accepted it.

They accepted it, yes. But going back to that farm--

Yes.

--one day they received a letter, that unless they send me out of the town, they would notify the Germans. So again my mother was notified to pick me up. But they didn't give me away. They just sent an anonymous letter, that that's what they were going to do.

So even though the Polish people didn't know that I was Jewish, by that time there was no question that they were afraid, already after their son was picked up. And again my mother had to pick me up.

And she managed to do that each time.

Each time. And I remember, this was one of those towns, farms, where I stayed, where I remember the children used to-

- there was a family with very poor-- very poor family. And they used to go to the cemetery and dig up the teeth from the dead. And I remember, I was so scared. And those children--

And I remember this little boy. They were just completely very low, common people. And the whole family was a bunch of thieves. Those were the kids that were running after me and calling me--

Calling you names.

--names. Yeah. And stripping-- you know, this little boy would just strip in front of me and things like that. I mean, they were just-- so I suspect that maybe it was one of them that sent that letter.

What did they do with the teeth?

They were just-- they were just--

This was for profit or--

For profit, yeah.

They would sell the teeth.

They would-- yeah, they would dig up the bodies and sell the teeth. [LAUGHS] Well, from then on, it was another one place after the other that my mother was trying to hide me. And each time was a big, new trauma for her to raise money, because the money that she'd gave away already was gone.

Your father. We haven't talked very much about him. And of course, your memories of him are somewhat limited. But tell me what he was doing, all the time that this was going on with you and with your mother.

Well, he was a very quiet man. They put him to work with the shoes, fixing shoes or whatever. And that's what he did. He was not trying to run away, or he left all this up to Mother. He knew that he couldn't save himself, because he said to Mother, you are the one that looks not Jewish; I do. So there's no point of me, he says, to run away.

So she was the active one-- Yeah.

--in the family.

Yeah.

You have some pictures that I want to cover. And I know we're jumping around, but you've brought some pictures-- your husband was interviewed earlier today. I'd like to see a picture of your family.

Now? The family, now?

Yes, this is fine.

If you can point.

This is my husband. He was interviewed here earlier. And this is one of my sons-- the younger one. This is the older one. And this is my stepfather, who my mother remarried in Germany after the war. And that's his wife, who also went through the Holocaust, that he married in Israel. That's my--

That was your stepfather.

You may call my stepmother.

I see.

Yeah. After my mother passed away, my father moved to Israel. And my stepfather moved to Israel, and he remarried there. So he lives right now in Israel.

In Israel. And you are right next to your husband.

And I am right here, yes.

You brought some pictures along-- though they are not your story, they're certainly as close as you can get-- that are of your husband. There's one picture of him in the army that I'd like to take a look at. Which is who? This is Camp Wood, New Jersey.

I don't know if you can see this.

I see it. Yes. And I see you're pointing--

He is right here.

--right here. And this is October 13, 1948--

Right. --Camp Wood, New Jersey.

As soon as he came to this country, he joined the army.

He joined the army.

Mhm.

There's another picture that you brought that I would like to see.

And that is also him. And I think this is--

Also in the army. This is at the same--

Also in the army. Yes.

--same base.

Mhm. And this is the way he came out, when he-- after the liberation.

And this was taken-- this was where? He was liberated from where?

This was in 1945, in Buchenwald.

In Buchenwald.

Yes. And he was--

This is was there when the American soldiers liberated the camp, and they took a picture of him. He was about 16.

And that was the--

At that point, he didn't even know that his sisters or anybody was alive. It was just him.

That was the uniform that he wore at Buchenwald?

Right.

Thank you. I want to touch more on the very strong feelings that are very, very obvious, within you, about your mother. From what you have said, she was a very, very brave woman, and you owe her everything. And I know that it's very normal not to express those feelings at the times you should be expressing them, but nobody does. I'd like you to tell me what kind of feelings you have about her-- about the kind of life that you had at that time, about how she enriched your life, what kind of impact the entire life that you had at that time made upon you today.

How far would you like me to go back?

I'd like you to tell me what you feel about your mother. And you had some very strong feelings about that. I think I'd like that first.

I guess, when I was growing up, my mother and I-- from what happened during the war, we were sort of not very close, as mother and daughter would be, because we were not together. The best part of my years was

Spent on--

--spent--

--different places that she arranged.

--different places, and I wasn't allowed to call her "Mother." And after the war, again, she was left alone with me, and she again had to provide for me, so that I was not together with her. She would again be trading and going from one city to the other, trying to make a living for us, so that I was not together and I missed-- I missed--

The growing-up years--

--the growing up.

--and the togetherness.

--and I missed togetherness, and I missed-- right after the war, when we were together and we came back to our city and to our own apartment, that we took back from the Polish people, in Kalisz, I remember clinging to her at night, so that, when she wanted to go out on a date or something, she would have to wait until I fell asleep and sneak out, because I wouldn't want to let her go. But all during the years-- during the war, I never thought about that.

There was not the mother-daughter relationship, because there was not the time spent together.

Right. And later, I was afraid that she'll go away again, so I was always holding on to her. And then, when we came to Munich, again she had again to-- we were separated. I was in one of the refugee camps, living with another family.

Now we're talking about after the war.

Right. And so we have-- till the age of maybe 15, until we came to this country, I was really not much with my mother, because she was constantly in business and trying to provide. And then, even though after she got married, they were still in business with my stepfather. And I was in school by then, and I had my own life. But we did not grow together anymore, afterwards.

Our closeness became a little bit closer, I think, after I married and had my own children. But I remember always,

whenever she used to meet or had a listening ear, she would constantly talk about her past. And I would always say, oh, not again, Mother. How many times are you going to repeat it? I was tired, and I didn't want to hear it.

And now I-- she passed away rather suddenly. And now I wish I would have wrote down and listened to all of it. But I just-- the excerpts that I remember that she was talking over and over again, that I--

It was a need for her, to--

It was a need for her to release that, yes, because she was--

--what was inside her. --very-- she had, like, a nervous breakdown right after the war.

I want to know what happened after the war, when you finished-- where you went and--

Yeah. Just another-- going back to during the war, when the Warsaw Uprising happened, she was in Warsaw. And then she tried, like all the other Polish people-- ran away from Warsaw, because they were all running away during the uprising-- not the Warsaw Ghetto but the Warsaw Uprising. And so everyone--

So there were caravans of people running away. And we were hiding in this one farm, the three of us, this so-called other sister of mine and my mother. And at night, the Germans came into--

We were all huddling together in one room, a whole bunch of women. And they knocked on the door, and they wanted some pretty women to dance with them or something, you know?

Some fun.

Yeah. And my mother went-- arranged with one of them that she wanted to go to another town, a little further away, and her husband was-- she was a widow or something, and that she needed transportation. And I remember, very vividly, that one of the generals, the German generals, went--

There was a caravan of the soldiers on a horse and the generals in a covered--

Vehicle.

--vehicle. And-- a horse and-- I mean, the horse vehicle-- wasn't a car. And I remember them-- we were traveling at night-- that they gave my mother and me and this--

Sister.

--sister-- gave us-- he gave us the inside of this vehicle and went on a horse himself, until we reached the next town--

That's amazing.

--not knowing that we were Jewish.

That you were Jewish.

And going back to your question that you asked me before, pertaining to-- but I lost the question--

Well, I wanted to know how you felt about your mother. I wanted to know what kind of--

Oh, what happened after the war.

What happened after the war.

Yes. I'm sorry. After the war, we came back to Warsaw. At that time, the whole city was demolished. And my mother and I, the first place we went to was where there was a committee established by the Jews-- the survivors. And there was a sign of all the survivors-- everyone would sign their name, who was looking for whom. And my mother was looking through the list, to see if there's anybody that's looking for us, or you know, putting her name to it.

And there immediately was established, like, a [NON-ENGLISH]. And from there, she searched the lists over and over again but didn't hear from anyone. So she decided to go back to our hometown, hoping that whoever is alive will come back to this town-- I mean, to our apartment. And it must've been very difficult for--

I didn't remember the apartment anymore, but I remember my mother coming in there and getting it back from the Poles and even getting some of the furniture back that was dispersed between the Poles. I remember the beautiful bedroom set. It was the most modern bedroom set. And my own bedroom set that my mother ordered before the war was custom-made-- was all white and blue. And she got that back.

She managed to get it back.

She managed to get it back.

So Poles had been living in your apartment and had done with the furniture.

They dispersed it. But she found out who had what--

And got it back.

--and got it back.

And then you lived in the apartment?

We lived in there for a while. And one day--

Was there a problem, getting it back? And what was the attitude of the Poles that had to leave your apartment when she returned?

I am not sure about that. But evidently it wasn't hard, because we did-- you know, they had to give it back, at the time. And my mother had buried some things in the apartment. My uncle was very handy, and they buried some things above a door. And they were still there when we came in.

What kind of--

Her bracelet and her wedding ring.

And they were still there.

They were still there, yeah. Imagine how well it was hidden.

And this is for all those years, that it was there.

Yeah.

And that had not been found.

And the Germans living there and every-- you know.

Did you find other people who had survived?

Well, what happened-- one day, my mother and I were in the apartment, and my mother took in a friend of hers, a woman who was living with us. And she comes running up the stairs, and she says, someone is looking for you, with a knapsack on his back. And my mother was sure that it was her husband, you know.

And she ran down the stairs, and there was my mother's brother. And he was the only one that survived, from my father's side and from my mother's side.

Where had he spent his years?

He spent his years-- now, he was in Rzeszow until the very end. He was there with my father. He and my father were left.

He, at one point, ran to the Polish people-- when everyone was gone, and he was working on the other side of the ghetto, he ran to one of the Polish people that managed to give us papers-- not this Polish man that I told you, but the ones that we stayed with later on-- and managed to get us over to the Warsaw, to this man who my mother worked for. He went over there when he was on the Polish side. And he kneeled to her, and he begged that she should save her sister and myself, because he was very close to my mother.

And he was with my father to the very end of the ghetto. And one day-- there were very few left. There were only left those that were cleaning up the streets-- that were carrying away the dead. And it was just almost like a ghost ghetto--

Ghost town.

--by then. And they were segregating, again, to the left and to the right. And they took my uncle to one side and my father to the other side. And nobody knew which side was the surviving side-- which side was better.

And so they separated them. And my uncle was sent to a death camp, which was near Rzeszow. It was a-- nobody came out of there.

But one of the Gestapo recognized him, where he used to do the locks for him, and he asked him, what are you doing here? And he says, that's where they put me. He says, out from there. And he took him out of there. And they sent him back to Rzeszow, where he would make again the locks.

The locks.

But by that time my father was gone, and he was sent to the extermination.

Where was your father sent?

Nobody knows. He was either shot there-- because they separated them-- those that stayed alive and those that-- you know--

That didn't.

--that didn't. Right. So that was the last time he saw him. But by that time, the ghetto was almost done with--

Empty.

--empty. They completely liquidated the ghetto

I have a thought--

This is-- excuse me-- I'm sorry for interrupting, but this is a place where they had Germans by the name of Lehman and Dunenberg--

L-E-H-M-A-N?

Yes.

And Dunenberg is--

--and Dunenberg and Potenstein, who was a Staatskommissar. And he would make it a sport-- all of those-- but the other ones, the names, he couldn't remember-- but they would make it a sport where they would chat with a woman and then would tell her to go forward and shoot her in the back. Or they would play around with a pregnant woman, and where-- my mother was a witness to that and my uncle. And they would, well, shoot like dice-- they would shoot at her, like arrows.

They would make a sport of this.

Sport of this.

And these names, you remember.

Yes. You had said you have a thought of going back to Poland. And I'm curious about that, because it would seem to me the memories are so poignant, so strong-- how would you want to go back? One part of me thinks that you would like to remember the things because it's important to remember. It was part of your life. The other would say that you never wanted to see it again.

Well, the reason I would like to remember is to have it so that my children would have something to remember or to know really, you know, where I come from. I would like to go back to the town where I come from and see where I-- show-- you know--

Your roots--

--for them to be able to know-- yes.

How do they feel about it? What do they respond, when you speak to them? How do they respond?

They always said, yes, we would like to go back to Poland and see. And Michael, the social worker, is very involved now in Chicago with the second-generation Holocaust. He never wanted-- neither one of them really wanted to hear about it, when my husband and I were talking about it-- or my mother.

But Michael was all shook up when he went to Israel for the first time and to the university there. And he went to the Holocaust-- the Yad Vashem. And then he was just-- when he walked out, he said, he thought this was the pits of civilization. And he was just very shook up by that. And then he started digging and getting interested into--

Some of the things--

--writing papers about the Holocaust and about the German view of it and why it happened and different things.

I would like to know, of all the experiences-- and I know this is painful, and I appreciate it very much. Of all the experiences that you had, all the trauma that you went through, all the heartbreak, what was the most painful to you?

I think, besides the being scared, besides all the living with that fear all those years, I think the most painful was that I was walking down the streets, after the war, trying to visualize that I'll see my father coming across to me. And even though I was in Germany later, you know, like really my teenagers years, teenage years, I always thought that my father

was going to come. I always thought that I'll meet him on a street.

[CRYING]

And I always remember, as a child, when I came to Germany-- now, even though I survived, you know, in the war and came to Poland, and I wasn't afraid in Poland anymore-- my mother tried to send me to school. And, of course, I missed so much school, so she tried to give me private tutoring-- piano lessons, right away. And I was already nine years old then. And she was trying to make me catch up in my school years.

And so I had skipped-- with tutoring, I skipped from first grade to third grade right away, so I should be with the children of the same age. And she also gave me piano lessons, private. And then, one day, she decided that Poland wasn't the place for us to stay and there was no future for us.

So she and her brother and I went to a town-- there was a German-- sort of on the Russian-German border between Poland-- at that time, it belonged to Germany and Poland.

It changed, all the the time.

Right. And there was a border between the Russian and the Polish-- the American zone. And so my mother set up an apartment for me and my uncle there and for this young lady that was with me.

That's the sister.

Because even after the war, she was still with us in Warsaw. She went back to Warsaw. And she was afraid that this man was going to kill her, if she was going to run away, because he at that time didn't want my mother to leave.

This is the person she had been working for--

Right-- as their housekeeper.

--all these years.

Mhm.

And he did not want her to leave.

No. And so I was still with his daughter together in Kalisz, and he was in Warsaw. He worked in a bank. He was an intelligent man. He worked in a bank, during the war and after the war.

And one day, he bought a gun And she was afraid that he was going to kill her. So she decided we have to run away to the American zone.

And so she sneaked me away, with his daughter, to a border town, bordering the American zone. And at that time, she decided that she doesn't want to-- and my mother went back to Poland, trying to, again, make some money for us. And this girl--

Meanwhile, she had located you. She had relocated you.

--right. And we were there for a little bit-- for maybe a half a year or so. And she kept coming back and forth.

And then this daughter of his decided that she wants to stay in Poland. She doesn't want to go with us, because she had a boyfriend and she wanted to stay in Poland, going back to Kalisz. So my mother left her the whole apartment, with everything there. And she says, well, now set up your life there-- with this young man that she was in love with. And she was by that time about 17 or so.

And we ran away. We smuggled ourselves through to the American zone, with the trains from there to Munich. And then my mother again gave me away to some friends of hers in the refugee camp-- Freimann.

You have a picture, as a matter of fact, of you doing some performing.

Yes. That was later, in Munich. Mhm. And there was a Hebrew school, so I started my Hebrew education in this refugee camp. That was close to Munich, but it was not Munich. But later, when my mother established her residence in Munich--

But I remember the first time I came to Munich, and we were given a room by some Germans. And my mother and I huddled in fear, because, even though the war was over, we still had that fear of the Germans. And we couldn't sleep all night, afraid that something will happen to us. Even when I was already 12 years old, we went to skiing at the resort in Garmisch. And we went to sleep--

The nights were the worst. And we knew we were at a resort place. Yet at night we couldn't sleep. My mother and I couldn't sleep, we were so scared that somebody was going to do some harm to us. But later on, as I grew older-- and the Jewish community was very large in Munich--

How long did you stay after the war?

Five years. I was in Munich for five years. And then the Jewish committee confiscated some rooms from the Germans, so that they were-- we had one room, my mother and I. And my stepfather, matter of fact, had in the same building a room right beneath us. And this is how my mother and my stepfather met. And she thought he would make a good father to me, so she married-- because, like I said, before she didn't want to marry anyone that she didn't think would be an appropriate father for me.

And the Germans, even after the war, I mean, that place where we lived where we had that one room that was given to us, they hated us-- just as much.

There was no sorrow? There was no guilt felling?

Not those people. This was the aristocracy. They had their beautiful apartment. Their son played-- all day, and all night he played Chopin and music.

But we were, like, the underdog. We were the-- although they couldn't do anything about it, they hated us. They looked down on us. Even their maid-- they never said hello. And it was like we were the intruders.

You were the scum of the earth.

Scum of the earth. Yeah.

Did any other Germans, besides the aristocracy that you mentioned just now, and their feelings-- what did other Germans feel? What was your experience, when you went to do your grocery shopping and walk down the street? What was their attitude toward you?

I didn't feel, really, any-- you know, nobody ever called me names or anything, throughout the five years. Nobody did. Because, by that time, they were really afraid. They were afraid to do or say anything.

Was there ever anything said?

My mother was trading with them. At that time, chocolate was scarce and butter was scarce. That was after the war. And she would manage to buy it and sell it to them and things like that. So--

Was there ever a feeling, on the Germans' part, of, I have great sorrow that this has happened to you?

Oh, some of them did, yes. Yeah. Although I never remember ever discussing it with them. There were a few, yes, that were very nice to me-- took me to a garden or something like that. But otherwise, there was just never talk about that.

It was something that happened and wasn't discussed.

Right. Right. But like I said, so I-- when my mother established as resident in Munich, she signed me up to this Hebrew school that was established for all the children--

Surviving children.

--of the Holocaust survivors.

How many children were in this school?

God, there were a lot-- a lot, because they came from all over. They came from Russia. They came to Munich. I mean, this was like the melting pot. Everyone came, from all over. Although there was Feldafing, a camp of immigrants, and Freimann, and there were different camps, Munich was the--

Main one.

--main, the center. And this school had some terrific teachers. And I used to play the piano. We had a choir, and we used to go on all kinds of different--

Do you have the picture of you in the choir?

Yes.

I'll talk to you while you're getting that. What kind of--

This was in a house on the [GERMAN].

That's in Munich.

This was where the Jewish committee was-- [NON-ENGLISH]. This was where all the Jewish organizations were and where the school was.

This was a hub of activity.

Right. And this was the school that was taken over for this purpose of the school. And there I spent about five years, about four years, in the school, until everyone emigrated and there was nobody left anymore and the teachers emigrated. And--

Everyone, then, was biding their time?

Right. This was all by--

There are some Jews still in Germany, but there aren't very many. And none of these people that you're mentioning here stayed.

No.

They all emigrated.

No. Everyone that I know, or my friends, emigrated. And we had also Israelis coming there and teaching us the songs and the-- playing the-- I remember that I knew enough-- imagine-- I knew enough of how to play the piano that I played the Hungarian Rhapsody Number 2, then. And that was standing room only, in this whole place. And I was entertaining them, so I must have been the best pianist around, that time, when I was only about 13 or 14 years old.

Now, you learned this--

I learned this from my piano lessons. I had a German tutor in Munich and a Polish one when I started. I remember when I came to our apartment in Kalisz and there was a piano. So I sat down at the piano, and I started playing some, so my mother thought that I had possibilities.

Possibilities.

And she started me on it.

And you did, indeed--

Well--

--if you had standing room only. Did you think you would survive?

I never thought about that. I just-- like I said, I prayed every night, and I lived from day to day. And I just couldn't understand-- I didn't even know why.

You didn't understand the reasons for your life being as it was.

If my mother didn't survive the war and I would have remained alive, I probably would have thought I was Polish. I just didn't know. I didn't know why. I knew "Jew" was a name-- "Jew"-- but I didn't know what that was.

You said your prayer every night, and that was the important thing that you held on to.

I knew, if I prayed, that I'd be alive the next day.

My questionnaire says "What gave you strength and hope?" And you had an unusual answer, and it was your prayer. Did you ever think about God?

No. No, I knew that I was praying to God, because, in my prayer--

It mentioned Him?

--it mentioned Him, yes.

Were there any fellow victims who helped you? Did you run across, in your many travels, in your many places where you stayed, other children who were hustled about from place to place? Did you ever meet anyone like yourself? Did you ever talk to anyone who said, we had a child here who was about your age? Was your experience--

During the war, you mean?

--during the war-- did you ever meet anyone who had similar experience? After the war--

No, I remember-- no. No, not pertaining to that. But I remember, one place, talking about being in hiding, when my mother told me, when I come to visit you there you cannot-- that was in Warsaw-- you cannot call me "Mother." Call me "Mrs."

And so the people that were hiding me went to work, and they had a little boy and I always stayed with him-- the two of us did. He was even about the same age as I did. And I never questioned why they told me not to look out the window. Because if somebody will see me--

The other children will see me, down below. And the windows were facing the courtyard. And if the other children will see me, down below, that I am not coming out to play, they will know that I'm a Jew. So I would open up the curtain just a little bit and just peek out, to see other children play. Yet I knew that I have to be invisible. But where I--

I really, till today, ask myself that question-- how-- what-- it was just by instinct. It's like you train a dog or a puppy. I guess--

You were trained.

--I was-- yeah, I was trained. I trained myself.

And you didn't question.

This was the way it had to be.

Right. And why? Of course, I never questioned. I was too young to question that.

I was going to ask you if there were any past memories that you clung to, at moments that might have seemed impossible. But you were so young. Was there anything that you remember that-- when things seemed at the lowest, and when you were most desperate, and your mother was not around to comfort you, was there anything that you dug around in your mind that helped you?

I don't remember that. I always knew that my mother was going to come. Somehow, somebody is going to--

So you clung to--

--take care of me.

--the thought of-- yeah.

Yeah.

So you really-- OK. So it was your mother-- thought of her coming back and providing you someplace to go to--

Although, at time, there was months that I didn't see her. It was very rarely that she would come to visit-- only to take a glimpse at me-- you know, never spend more than maybe a day or just [CROSS TALK].

It was somebody who always showed up--

Yeah.

--sometime. But they asked me a question, before, about how close I was with my mother. So I guess, all those years that I was growing up, we were more--

Companions?

--not even companions, because I didn't have a-- I couldn't talk to my mother about any of my feelings, growing up, about getting my menstrual period or about my-- there was never any-- I was always bashful and shy. I was always withdrawn. I never-- I was too shy to talk to my mother about it, because I didn't have that--

Closeness.

--closeness. Right. So I was growing up, guessing-- like, guessing things-- about men, about boys. When I was 15, my mother thought it was a good idea to send me to Switzerland, to a Hebrew school-- to, like, a private school. And I didn't want to go. By that time, I already had some notions of having a boyfriend. I was in love with a teacher. You know how it is. I didn't want to leave.

But she talked me into it. It was a beautiful private school. And I left, and I came there. It was a beautiful school in Switzerland, in the mountains. And it was an Orthodox Hebrew school. And there were children from all over the world-- like, a banker's children.

And somehow my mother managed to send me again-- like I said, she always provided-- to that school, even though she was not a millionairess-- far from it. And she worked very hard, but she sent me to get that better education. And I was going to be there for two years. And about three months later, I received a wire that we have papers to emigrate to the United States. And that took care of that, so I had to come back.

What year are we talking about now?

In 1951.

1951. So you emigrated in 1951, with your mother.

It was, like, a few months before, and all the school was already liquidated. There was no school. I even tried to go to German school. My girlfriend and I decided, we don't want a Hebrew school. We'll go to a German school. And we sat in, one time, in one class, and we decided, no, that's not for us.

But we had-- The best years of my life, I may say, of my childhood, were spent, the last few years, in Munich with my friends. Because then they were-- I had some very close friends.

Anything else that you want to share? Any thoughts that come to your mind, about those years?

Well, yes. After the war, when my mother-- like I said, my mother saw that nobody survived. And one day, she just completely collapsed and had a nervous breakdown. And she pulled herself out of it, and she was all right. She was never hospitalized or anything like that. But I guess it just caught up with her.

And after a few weeks, she started again being herself. And I guess somehow it just never left her, because she didn't care about herself anymore. She sort of-- as long as she was in business in Munich, things were still all right with her. She was busy.

But when we came here to the United States, and she didn't do anything--

She did not work in the United States.

No. No. My stepfather worked in a factory. And he was afraid of losing his job, and he never traveled. He actually wanted-- his dream was to go to Australia, because that's where his brother emigrated. But being that he was hit, by a German, in the eye, and he lost his eye, they wouldn't pass the inspection. So he couldn't go to the United States-- I mean, to Australia-- so we came to-- otherwise, we would have wound up in Australia.

In Australia.

So he worked here in a factory. And it was always temporarily hoping that we'll go back to Australia. And my mother was going down, down, sort of--

You mean, healthwise.

--downhill-- healthwise, yes. She had angina, and she had palpitations, and the doctors not knowing, that time, how to treat her symptoms, just kept on giving her a lot of medication and pills for depression. And she was getting worse from it. And by the time she passed away, it was her heart. But she was very depressed from it. She did not enjoy, anymore.

Life?

Life, yes. And I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand why this was happening to her. I just couldn't understand why she didn't want to fight like she used to-- why she couldn't dress the way she used to--

She was changed.

--and be beautiful the way she-- yeah. She just resigned herself. And that was a very sad part, because she didn't enjoy her grandchildren that much anymore.

But your memories of her are wonderful. She was someone that was very special to you. You had a very special person.

I just wish that I would have listened a little bit more and showed more interest when she was repeating those stories over and over again.

It was a need that she had, but I have a feeling that she understood perfectly well.

I wish something like that would have happened to her.

This is Lissa Keller. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Rose Gelbart. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, the Cleveland Section.