

Close the door. OK.

Speaking. You want to give your name, so that--

This is Elaine Grunwald.

OK.

[INAUDIBLE] light out, Jim?

That's good. That's usable.

OK?

No. [BACKGROUND NOISES].

And it is 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Hello, I am Leatrice Rabinsky. Today, we are interviewing Elaine Grunwald, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Elaine, I know that you may have a favorite name, by which you were known, since your childhood. Would you like to share that with us?

Yeah, Lenka.

Lenka?

May I call you Lenka during the interview?

Sure, you may.

Elaine, we're interested in knowing a bit about your present life. Could you please tell us something about your family, your husband's name, his occupation, and your children?

OK, I have two children. My son is 35 and lives in Canton, Ohio. And he has a little sandwich shop there. And he lives there with his son.

And my daughter is married and lives in Corpus Christi. At the time, she's a librarian. And her husband works for the government, for the Coast Guard.

I see. And your husband? And what does he do?

My husband is retired. But he used to work for Name Brand. He was a manager at Name Brand, a warehouse manager. Right now he's retired.

Right. And Lenka, would you please tell us what some of your interests are, in homemaking or activities, what organizations you're interested in?

I love to sew, which I do. And I love to bake and cook and clean. And I love to listen to music, to read. And I belong to the Suburban Mothers Club. It's a small organization. And I belong to the-- what do you call it-- children's group home.

Yes. The group home of the Jewish Children's Bureau.

Jewish Children's Bureau, yeah.

So you are active in the community.

In those two, yeah. Yeah, those two. I go--

Has your husband participated in any communal activities, also, with you?

Not really. No. No. Well, while he was working, he never had the time. And now that he's retired, he's not feeling up to. He's not very healthy, so not really.

So you're enjoying your retirement together?

Yeah. Yeah.

Perhaps you can, now, take us back to your own childhood? Could you please tell us where you were born?

Well, I was born in Czechoslovakia, in a small little town. And then we moved to the town where I used to live till before we were deported.

What was the name of it?

Poprad.

Poprad, Czechoslovakia.

Yeah, Czechoslovakia.

Lenka, could you tell us something about your family, about your parents, and how many brothers and sisters you had?

Well, we were six children. One girl died before the war. And my father had three sisters and three brothers. And my mother had three sisters. Right, there were three sisters and three brothers. In fact, one was here in United States. And they all perished during the war. I'm the only survivor.

What about your own immediate family?

We were two girls and four boys.

And where were you?

And I was the oldest. I was the oldest. Yeah. And also, nobody came home.

What did your father do?

My father worked for a railroad.

Could you share some of your memories about his work or his life in the community?

Well, as much as I remember, I remember that we always were able to travel free. He was on the train, what they call, the conductor, coming and going. And we were always able to travel free.

Do you remember some of the places where you went as a family?

Oh, yeah, we used to go visiting mine aunt, my mother's sister, to Presov. When I was 11, my parents put me on-- my mother put me on a train. And I went, by myself, every year. We had-- and in little bitty village, where we went every

year to visit the family. And we went up to the mountains, Tatra Mountains. And I remember, we went once to Vienna, the family.

Those were vacation times?

Yeah, those were vacation times, yeah. Yeah.

So they were very happy memories.

Yeah, they were real good memories.

Could you, perhaps, tell us about one specific vacation that you remember?

It was maybe four or five miles from the town where I used to live. And I remember, we went. The whole family, we went there for a few days just vacationing. My father, when he was in his younger days, he used to work, as a-- what was it? When they have big farms, and he was in charge?

Manager?

Yeah.

So he took us there, where he used to work. It was before he worked for the railroad. He took us there. And it was a big, big ranch and really beautiful. And this I remember, we were running and the horses and so on. So this, I remember, was a nice place to go.

Could you tell us something about your mother? What do you remember about her?

Well, my mother was very young when we lost her. She was 40 years old when I went to concentration camp. And, well, she was just a homemaker, because she had six children. But she was a very good housekeeper. She was a nice lady.

Could you describe some of the childhood memories from home? What was your home like during holiday celebrations?

Well, I remember my grandmother used to live in town-- one grandmother. And her daughters and sons, we always used to get together in grandma's house.

And I remember one thing about grandma. I used to love to go to grandma because she always had-- she had a table in the kitchen. And under the table was-- I mean the table, and there was like a board. And she used to keep her challah there. And I used to love to go there, take the dry challah out from there.

Right, that was the Sabbath bread.

Yeah.

Did she bake her own all the time?

Oh sure, everybody baked. Everybody baked his own.

Your mother did, also.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I learned a lot from my mother. I was one of those who liked to learn. And I remember, we used to have holidays together. Because all her kids but one used to live in the same town. So we always had holidays together.

My mother's mother lived with another daughter in a small town. But she used to come to our house every summer. She was a very neat lady. She used to wear a sheitel.

Could you explain what that is?

It's a wig.

That's for religious reasons, to cover her hair?

Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. My mother was not religious. But my grandparents were, yeah. And I remember, she was always so neat, always used to have patent leather shoes, a very neat lady. And she used to wear her money, always, in a little bag, a little and put it in, yeah.

Those things I remember for her. And they both came to concentration camp. And I both saw them there. Yeah.

You remember seeing them?

Yeah, I both saw them there, yeah.

What else do you recall from your own childhood, with your brothers and sisters at home?

We used to fight a lot.

How did you get along, really, and entertain each other?

Well, we got along very well, because the difference in age was just two years old. But I remember one thing my brother, which was four years younger than I was, because I was the oldest, then my sister and he. So actually, he was four years younger than I was. And well, he used to pick on us.

So when I ran away from home, just to my aunt, and my parents were very upset with me. They didn't know where I am. We didn't have telephones to call up, you know? Then, when they found out where I was, so I was punished. But it never happened again. But we got along very well, all of them. We helped a lot each other.

Did you have specific responsibilities in the house?

Oh, sure.

And the other children?

Oh, yeah I could never--

Could you describe what each one had to do?

Well, every time, when we came from school, you know, like, we used to eat our lunch-- dinner, lunchtime. And one of us, one of the two girls, one had to wash the dishes, one had to dry the dishes. When it was my turn, there was no problems. I washed my dishes without problems.

My sister's turn, which was two years younger, she never liked to do those things. So we always used to fight about it. But we had to do.

We had to wash the floor. I remember, I could never go to a movie unless I washed the floor on Thursday. Thursday evening. Everything was prepared. I had to wash the floor. And then I could go to the movies. My friends were waiting, already, outside, but I had to finish. That was--

Your regular responsibility?

Yeah, we had to help. Everyone had to help. But we went to school. And I remember, my mother was very neat, but I was even more than her. Like my mother would make-- we used to have like a frame over the bed. And then you put your bedspread. And I was never satisfied the way it was done because I had to be straight, the way I-- and I'm the same way today.

Today?

Yeah, I'm the same way today.

What was your house set up like? Was it a large house?

No. We had three bedrooms and call it a living room. People used to sleep in the same room, they used to stay in the same room. And we had a dining room and a kitchen. But we had our bathroom out.

You didn't have indoor plumbing?

No, there was no-- oh, yeah, we had water inside, but the bathroom was out. That was in one house. But then, before Hitler already came, we had to move. You see, everybody, all the Jews, who had a window facing the main street, had to move out and go in the back. So we had to move away.

And then the next house, we had a bathroom inside. It was a very nice house the first one. But that's the way how it was. In Europe, not everybody had a bathroom inside.

You mentioned the preparations Thursday night. Is that particularly significant because of the Sabbath observance?

Yeah.

Would you like to describe what that was like in your family and in your neighborhood, perhaps?

Well, everybody was cleaning. I do that even today, Thursday is my day when I clean or Friday is my day when I cook. I don't know if everybody does it, but I do it like that. And I remember at home, too, my mother used to prepare and clean everything for Thursday. And Friday she used to cook.

For the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday night.

Yeah. Yeah.

How did your family observe the Sabbath? And perhaps tell about your--

We were not--

--grandparents.

My grandparents were religious, yeah, but not my parents. We belonged to a Conservative temple, but the kids went to Hebrew school. And when my father was home, on a Saturday, he went to temple. And we went with him to temple.

And we didn't travel on Saturday. We kept kosher. But I wouldn't say that was-- no, kept kosher, yes. But not-- I wouldn't say we were considered Orthodox.

But did you have a special family meal for the Sabbath?

Oh, yes. Oh, sure.

Would you like to recall what that was like?

I remember we had soup, chicken soup and probably chicken and farfel and things. I think the same way like you do it even here, yeah.

Traditional.

Traditional, yeah.

Were those happy times for you?

Yes, very much so. Very happy times, because the family was together. They were-- here was an aunt in every corner. You had an aunt, a uncle, and so it was nice. And we were a very close family.

See, my mother's family didn't live in town. But my father's family lived in town. So we were very happy family.

We were not rich. But we had what we needed. We didn't get a dress every day. But for every holiday, we got new clothes. And then my uncles and aunts, they were nice to us, especially to me, because I'm the first one. And then-- you know. But they all were very nice to us kids. So it was a nice family.

Can you share with us some of your recollections about your school life? What kind of school did you go to? Was it a government school or religious school?

No, first I went to a government school. And I went to a German school. I think I went four years to German school. And then they transferred us to a Jewish school, just like, let's say, the Hebrew Academy, but it wasn't as religious as the Hebrew Academy. And we learned our language, Slovak. And then we had Hebrew history. And that was public school. And then I just went to high school.

But all we went was four grades, high school, and then they threw us out. And in '40, they threw us out. And in fact, we couldn't even finish school. It was just before school was over. We never got our report cards. And that was the end of it.

What grade were you in when that happened, do you recall?

Well, I went four years. I didn't finish the fourth, because they threw us out-- three years and then the fourth. Actually, I started to go to gymnasium, to a different city, but I couldn't go, because it was already bad there.

On the train-- I had to go by train. And they were doing us too much trouble. They knew we were Jewish students. So we just had to drop out and just went, in town, to high school, a regular high school.

Could you tell us a little bit about what the preparation in school was like? Was it a classic education? Were you prepared to go on to university? Did you learn vocational trades that you remember?

No, not vocational. Well, yeah, in a sense, you do. But you just learn basic things, like arithmetic and history. We learned a lot of history and a lot of-- I can't think of the word now--

Geography?

--geography. And we had to know everything by heart. Everything, we had to know by heart, and reading and writing and spelling.

How many languages did you learn?

Well, like I say, I went to German school. And we spoke German. So I spoke German. And we didn't take languages. But somehow, everybody spoke more than one language. Like I remember then I spoke two languages, Slovak and German. And as time went on--

You learned others.

-- I learned others, yeah.

Did you go to school with non-Jewish children, as well?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Most of them, we were just four. I remember we were four Jewish girls. I think we are-- how many live? Wait a minute. One, three? Three survived from those four. And we were always good students.

But once, we had arithmetic, and the teacher says, when a Jew is smart he's smart, but when he's dumb he's very dumb. So we were just four girls in our class. And then we had one or twice, we had-- they called it Biblical history. So we had like history, Jewish history we took.

In the place of the?

No, that was after school.

I see.

After school, we had--

Those were special subjects given to you?

Yeah, that was after school just for the Jewish students. Like here you go to Hebrew school. So we had it, right there, in school. But we had teachers, special, come in. And we got along very well with our student friends. But I wouldn't remember one of them who went with me.

You don't?

Not one I can remember the name.

Do you remember some of your non-Jewish neighbors?

Yeah, I do.

How did your family get along with them?

Very good. We got along very well. Yeah, we had no problems. They were very nice. In fact, I was there about 10 or 11 years ago, and I forgot to go in to see if they're still there.

Some of your neighbors?

Yeah, they were very nice. Yeah. See, we lived like in a court. That was before, when we were still living that the window was facing front. But then we moved. Then we had to move away from there. So we moved in a different place.

And there, we had just one neighbor. And she wasn't the nicest one. She took away everything from my parents. She never would give it back to me. I found out, you know?

When I came back, I found out that she had my mother's candlestick. She had my mother's coat. She had some dishes. But she wouldn't give it back to me. She said, just get lost. Go away from me. And I didn't want to start. I figured, it's

not worth it.

So basically in your childhood you do remember very congenial and pleasant relationships with the non-Jewish community.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Are there any memories, perhaps, of any antisemitic incidents that you can recall before the war started?

Well, probably in school, yes. In school, yeah, there was a lot in school going on.

Do you remember anything specific?

Well, calling you names. I don't remember fighting or so. But calling names, yeah, this I remember.

Were your parents involved in any kind of political movements in the community?

No. No.

Did you talk about Palestine at the time? Do you remember that being a subject?

Well, I was very active. I was very active in Maccabi Hatzair.

Which is the Young Maccabis.

Yeah, Maccabi is like Hashomer Hatzair Maccabi Hatzair. I was very active. And I wanted to-- and I went to overnight camp. And I wanted to go when I was 15, 16. I wanted to go to Israel.

The Shlichim used to come and so on. And my parents wouldn't let me go. I wish they would.

What were they afraid of?

Well, I was just 15 years old. They're afraid to let me go.

Were there any other of your friends who did go to Palestine then?

Yeah. Yes. They did.

They left their families?

Yeah. Yeah. But they went. I was just 15. They used to come to our door. They used to talk to my father, to my mother. They couldn't persuade him to let me go. But I wanted to go. I was very Zionistic-inclined, yeah.

Lenka, in thinking back about those years, how do you remember yourself in those days? What did you think about your life in the future? This is before the war or before the troubles started.

What were some of your dreams for yourself, do you recall? Do you recall what kind of person you were? Were you happy-go-lucky?

Yeah. Very happy-go-lucky. I like to organize things. I was always the one who organized, especially when I was active in Maccabi Hatzair. I was always the one who started something and went about whatever I wanted to do.

And I remember, one summer, I went away to visit a cousin of mine. And I spent the summer there. And I used to get letters, "come home, everything is quiet, we need you here."

So yeah, I was very-- I think I was very, how should I say-- very organized. Whatever I did, I liked to organize. And I like everything should be just the way it should be. I was always a perfectionist, that's what they say.

Is there any specific activity or program or outing that you remember that was especially joyful to you from those years?

Yes. Yes, I know one.

Could you tell us about it?

Well, I remember we used to have every Sunday, we used to go on outing, [NON-ENGLISH], how they used to call at that time. And it was not so far. It was about maybe 6 kilometers from us. And we used to go and sing and walk together and have a [NON-ENGLISH], if you know what it means.

Like a meeting?

Yeah. Yeah, meetings. And those were the nice days. We get together in the park. We sing. We dance. And we had a moadon. My life, really, I say, it was very much involved with the moadon and with the organize--

Which is like the club headquarters?

Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Yeah. And we always have something to go. And like Saturday afternoons, we used to get together. And we used to talk about all kind of subjects.

And I remember, once, we had one who came out about sex. And that time, it was-- and everything was so secret. Everything was a secret.

And I remember, I had a girlfriend. They used to have a big textile store. And we took out a book from the library. Or I don't even remember where we got the book. But we read it, quietly, all together. And then we had to hide the book, so we hid it between the materials.

In the store?

Yeah. But we were all good, decent girls. We had no bad intention. But we were just anxious to see--

You want to understand the ways of the world.

Yeah, understand what it was. Because there was nobody to explain it to you. But things like that, we used to. But it was a good youth, I guess.

When did you first begin to sense, in your family or among your friends or in the neighborhood, that things were not good? When you began to hear about the war?

'38. '38.

How did you find out about it?

Well, first of all, my father was mobilized.

Can you tell us about that? Where was he called up and how?

Well, I remember it was in-- '38 was the first one. It was in-- I guess it was in November. Now, I'm not 100%, but I remember that, you see, in Europe, they used to make sauerkraut in barrels, home. You put it away for the winter. Because everything was prepared for the winter. So I remember, we were supposed to do that.

And they called up my father. So I remember it was fall or something like that. So my father was mobilized. And he had to go away. And we were left alone. It was in '38.

And in '39, he was mobilized again. And then--

Where did they take him?

To the army.

And what was his service? Did he have to train? Or do you recall what he told you?

No. All I know, that he was mobilized. We were left alone. And the second time was in '39, when they took him. And that time, they took-- he had to go to the army. And they concentrated. They took people away from home who wasn't Czechoslovakian citizen and they took them someplace to Hungary.

And when my father came back, when he heard what's going on, and his mother and his sister was gone, he was very upset. So he went to the city hall, and he made a big thing. He says, you are taking me in the army, and you're taking my mother my sister? And they were citizens, because we had a lot of citizens who were not Czechoslovakian-- Polish or from different places.

So they gave him a taxi. And he went to see where his mother was/ someplace in Hungary, in a forest, they were concentrated there. And he brought her home. And that's how it started. And then the Germans came in, in '39. And they came with horses. Some of them came with horses.

And in the back of our house, there was like a farm. And they had stables there. So the horses were there. And the Germans were there, too.

And I remember one incident. There was a non-Jewish girl. And she thought she's going to play. She was Hungarian. And she thought, she's going to play a joke on them. So they brought out some chairs. It was like a--

Upholstered?

--upholstered chair. And she put. She didn't like them. And she put pins-- full of pins. It was like a dining room chair. And she put full of pins, so, when they sit down, the pins will go. But they almost killed her. So this, I remember. And oh, they were so mad.

So from then on, we stayed away. We didn't realize. We were young. We didn't realize that who they are. We know they the Germans, but we didn't know.

And I remember how they were going through the city and singing. And it was very scary. It was very scary. And so that's how it started.

Right. Did you talk about this within your house, with your mother, with aunts or uncles?

Of course. Of course.

Were you concerned about-- did you have any fears about what might happen to the Jews?

We didn't know that. No. We didn't know that. We didn't know.

What did you think was going to happen?

It's going to be a war. We knew it was going to be war. But we didn't know that they will take the Jews. That was in '39.

And then, till '41, they took away the stores from the Jews. You couldn't live in the-- you couldn't face a window, in the city, to the main street. You couldn't go to school and a lot of things. You had to give up your jewelry. You had to give up your furs.

Did they come to the individual houses to take these things?

Yeah. Yeah. Or you had to take it to the bank, yourself. And well, they came to the houses. This started, already, in '40.

And then they took away all your businesses. You lost your jobs. My father lost his job and things like that.

Did your father or perhaps your uncles or any members of your family think about trying to run away? Did they make any kind of plans?

Not then. Not then. Not in '40. No. Not in '39 and '40.

Did they discuss, with the children, what was happening? Do you recall?

You know what? I don't recall any of those things. Because when you are 60 and you still don't think-- you know?

About what might happen.

You don't think like that, yeah, what might happen, so I really don't remember. But all my aunts were married and they had their own businesses. And they took away their business, so they were unemployed.

How did they survive and your father, your own family?

Yeah, well, we struggled then. We struggled, like everybody else.

What did you do for food?

I know we had food. But--

What did you do about schooling?

No, we couldn't go to school. My mother wanted me to go take sewing lessons, which I didn't like. But there was nothing to do. You know how in Europe it was? You went to somebody's house.

Let's say somebody was working at home. Mostly people were working at home. And so I had to go to that woman's home. And I had to pay for it, too.

I started already in '41. And I went to learn how to sew from '41 till '42-- not even till '42. And so I learned how to sew. Thanks God to my mother, I know how to sew, today.

And what did the other children in your family do every day? Was there any attempt, by members of the Jewish community, to organize a new school?

Yeah, that's right, there was a Jewish. Like I say, I went to a Jewish school, public school. But then I went to high school. But the younger kids, they all went to the Jewish school. So they still went to school.

My youngest brother was seven months old when I left. And the last one was 11. So it was, we were 17, 15, 13, 11, and the one, and seven months.

During this period of time, when Jewish businesses were taken away, how did your Gentile neighbors react with you?

Some were very nice. Some were nice. And there were some. And then there was a curfew. You couldn't go out. Like in '41, we had to wear the yellow stars.

And you couldn't go out after 9 o'clock. In the wintertime, after 7 o'clock, you couldn't go out. And you couldn't go every place in town. You were not free to move around all over.

Different cities, they had different rules. Our city was more German. A lot of Germans, our city had. And so we couldn't move around anyway. So like certain stores you couldn't go.

Like during the day, if you wanted to go to meet somebody, we could go during the day but not in the evening. Not in the evening. Like I say, in the summer till 9 o'clock, in wintertime 7 o'clock.

Can you tell us about the stars? How did you first find out you had to wear that star? And then tell us who made them and what you did about that?

I was in a different town. Like I said, I used to go on vacation to one of my cousins. They had a store. She just happened to have a baby, so I went over there to stay with her.

And I came back in September. There, they didn't wear stars, still. But I came back, in September, and I found out that you have to wear a star, and there is a curfew.

I don't know if we had to put on, if we had to supply the stars or they gave them to us. I can't recall this. But everybody had to wear a star on their sleeve. And that's it. You lived with it.

Did that bother you when you had to do it?

Probably, yes. Yeah. Sure. Everybody can see who you are, especially when you live in a small town. It was a town, maybe, like Canton by the size. So you know most of the people. So probably bothered us.

Lenka, did you know what was happening in Poland at the time, from '39 on?

No. We didn't.

Nothing was printed in the newspapers?

No, we didn't. No. No. We didn't know anything.

Did you hear the word "ghetto?"

I didn't. Maybe the grown-up knew more than we. But we kids didn't know about it. I never heard about it till about '42. In '42, yes, then we did.

Did you have a ghetto in your town?

No. It wasn't a ghetto. But it was like a certain part of town where there were more Jewish people. But we had a nice community. We had a rabbi. We had a shochet. We had all those.

And you were still permitted to carry on your tradition?

Yeah. Yeah.

You were able to have kosher slaughtered meat?

Yeah, we did. Yeah. We did have.

And synagogues had services?

Yes, we did. We did, yeah. Yeah. But you had to have the star on your arm. Maybe, they had some problems, which I cannot recall.

Do you remember talking with your friends about the situation?

You mean before the war? Yeah.

The war-- just during the war?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

What did you think?

Well, we were all scared. We were really scared. But we had no idea what's waiting for us. We were scared that our parents or fathers or brothers will have to go to the army or our friends or so. But we had no idea what's in store for us till '42. Then we heard about Warsaw, about the ghetto.

In '40 and '41, you hadn't.

Maybe in '41, yes. That's why I say, '41, '42, but not in '40. I don't remember.

You had mentioned that your father was taken for conscription the second time in '39. How and when did he come back after that to join your family?

He was there for about two months. Yeah, he was there for about four months. And then, again, they let him go home. Not just he, but my uncles, too, his brothers, they all were there. And then they let them come home about two or three months, something like that.

How did the situation change, then, in '41? What happened? Can you tell us about the regulations on the Jewish community, the food situation, what you did?

Well, like I said, we couldn't go in every store. You couldn't go in every store. And started to be a shortage, too. When the Germans came in, started to be a shortage of food. And I guess everybody did the best. We baked at home, bread. You baked home bread.

Where did you get the flour?

You bought it in the store. And in the fall, you prepared potatoes. You store potatoes. And you store apples and sauerkraut. And you worked around that and also bought some meat. And I guess that's how we survived.

Come to think, I really don't remember too much about how it was with food. Most I remember, in '40, '41, end of '41 and '42, when we started to, with the stars when it started.

What happened at the end of '41-- can you recall, personally-- to you and to your family?

Oh, yes, we were very much afraid to go out in the street-- very much so. You just went when you had to go. And you always thought that somebody is going after you and calling you "dirty Jew" or so.

But I must say, the Slovaks were not as bad. They were not as bad as others, like Poles and so on. They were still a little bit holding back.

Did you have any special Slovak friends, who talked to you during this period or who may have been helpful?

They were afraid. They were afraid. That's what I mean. They were afraid to even seen with a Jew. That's what happened, you know?

Like I said, we had friends, sure. But they were afraid to talk to you. Somebody should see it, so they stayed away from you. It start in '41, already, especially when we wore the stars. They were afraid.

What happened when the Nazis started to clamp down? What are your first recollections of that, at either the end of '41 or the beginning of '42?

It was very scary. It was very scary. It was like-- really, we didn't know what's going to happen. But we still didn't know that they're going to take us. We were living just like from day to day. We didn't know what's going to happen.

When were you first aware that there was a change taking place?

Of course, we were aware, already, when the Nazis came the first time.

Yes.

We were aware of it.

When did they begin to ask members of the family to leave? Do you recall that?

Yeah. Well, I was the first one, from the family, from my uncles or my aunts, from my cousins. I was the youngest in the family. I mean, from there, to be taken. Was it?

Was that--

March the 21st, I went to visit a girlfriend, who was living not far away from me.

This was 1942.

'42, March '42 on a Saturday, and I went to visit. And while I was there-- oh, you know, I remember something. No, I remember, it was already when-- I think it was on a Friday, already, they brought some people in from Slovakia, from where Bertha came, from that part, from the east of Slovakia. They brought in, already, some people.

Into your hometown?

Into my hometown. And they concentrated them in the military barracks.

This was in the city of?

Poprad.

Poprad.

Where I lived. But we didn't know where they go. But we know they're going to take girls 16 and up.

How did you know?

How did I know? I had a friend. They were very, very wealthy people in town. And I happened to be there, in the house, when a policeman came to tell them they are going to take-- they were influential people, so they had connections. So a

policeman came to tell them that they're going to take the girls. They started out with the girls, this and this day. And to give them enough time, if somebody wants to run away or hide, to do it.

So she told me about it. And I told it to my parents. But we didn't do nothing about it.

Did your parents believe it?

That was already maybe a week before. But we didn't see anybody to be taken. That Saturday, they started, the 21st of March. So I knew about it. They were talking about it. But they didn't take anybody. So we didn't do nothing.

Did your friend run away, the one from the influential family? Do you recall?

No. He was in concentration camp, too. He was hiding, but they found him. He was hiding. Yeah, he's alive. And so I went. Then I went.

On a Saturday, I went to visit my girlfriend. Her name was Lenka, too. And I'm there. And they came to pick her up. And they ask her if they know me. My name, my maiden name was Zuckermann.

And when I heard that, I ran home instead to pick myself up and run someplace. But where was there to run? If they wouldn't have found me now, they would have find me a day later. Or they would have taken my sister.

So she didn't say anything. But I just picked myself up and I ran. So what did I do? I packed my knapsack. They told you what to take.

What do you recall taking?

Well, clothes, take clothes with you, take warm clothes with you, take food with you. And I remember, my mother gave me chocolate. And she said, save it. In case you don't have what to eat, take a piece of chocolate, because this is a lot of energy. And I remember that like today.

So I packed my knapsack. And I waited until they came, picked me up. They didn't say where we going. They say, we're going to work. That's what they told us. And so I went.

What was the scene like in your house? Do you recall that?

Terrible. Terrible.

Tell us about it.

Everybody. Yeah, everybody was crying.

Who was there?

My mother, my father. Wait a minute, come to think, was he home? Yeah, he was home. Everybody was crying. But the kids were very young, so they didn't know. My sister was 15, so she understood. She was worried they're going to take her, too. So we packed, and they came to pick me up, and I went.

How did you go? Were you walking to the place?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It wasn't far, with my knapsack.

Do you recall what any members of the family said to you?

Everybody came. They wished me good luck and write to us and so on and so on. And I never see them again.

That was the last time?

It was the last time I saw them. But I saw my father coming when he came three weeks later. He came, and I was there already in Auschwitz. And I was working in potato kitchen, peeling potatoes. And I saw him through the window, coming. And that's it.

Where do they take you then? From your house, where did you go?

From my house, they took me, like I said, in those barracks, where they concentrated all the people. And we were the first one from our hometown. They took about 1,000 girls that time.

Did you recognize relatives or friends there?

Well, from my hometown, sure.

Do you recall what it was like? Did you talk to each other?

Oh, sure, we were crying. We were crying. Everybody was crying. And they didn't give us food, right away. And we slept on the floor it was terrible.

You stayed in the military barracks overnight.

Yeah. Yeah. We stayed there for one week.

A week?

Until they concentrated all the people from around, from surrounding cities.

Describe what took place every day during that week? Do you remember? Were you able to go out of those barracks?

No. No. No. We just stayed there. And we sat around and talked around, looked out if we see somebody parents. And they just came around to see if they come.

Were they able to come to you?

No. No. No. No. That's it, we never saw them again.

But you knew where you were in Poprad.

Well, actually, when they took us from my house, we went first to city hall. There they registered everybody. There, I remember like today, we were standing in a line until they registered us. It was a cold day.

And from there, they transported us to their barracks, which was not far away. I would say like from our house to Green Road. So it wasn't far. So we walked. We walked.

Cedar?

Yeah. Yeah. We walked there. But first, they took us to city hall to register. Each one was registered. And then we went to.

Did they answer any questions, that you may have had, at that time?

Nothing. We never knew where we going. All they said, we are going to work. That's all they said. But where?

Did they ask you what you were capable of doing?

No. Nothing. No. Not that I remember. Maybe there was some things they asked us. But I really don't remember. It's such a shock to leave your parents and leave your brothers and sisters and the whole family. And I was always that.

They used to call me always, green, because I always so skinny. I was always skinny. And I was a bad eater. And they thought I will never survive. But I was the one who survived, and they all went. And each one went through my hands.

Lenka, what did you think about that whole week? Do you recall what went through your mind?

You mean then?

Then, can you recall that?

Well, natural, will I ever see my parents and my brothers, my sisters, my family? And then we started to be hungry. Then you thought of food.

They didn't give you anything?

Not enough. Not enough. But we still had a little bit, what we had with us, what we took with our parents. So we still had a little bit, you know? So that kept us going. Were a lot of talking.

Could you please explain to us-- you were referring to "they." Were they only Nazi officers--

No.

--or were they members of the Slovak military?

That was members of the Slovak military.

Did you ever see any Nazi officials, at all, with the swastika, at that time?

Over there?

Right.

Oh, yes. Sure.

Who were the ones who came to your house? They were the Slovak?

Slovak.

Slovak?

Slovaks, yeah. They used to call him Hlinkova Garda. They were special appointed for this kind of a job. It was a special force of police, but they used to call them Hlinkova Garda.

And those who registered you were also from this--

Yeah.

--group?

Yeah. Yeah.

And while you were all being gathered there, the Slovak girls, were there any German officials, Nazi officials who came by?

Oh, yeah.

Did they ever speak with you?

No. No. No. No. We really didn't know what's going on. We had no idea what's going on. All we knew, we were there. And where we will go and when we will go, what will happen, we had no idea. That's all we knew.

How did they begin to organize you for the deportation?

Well, they put us in--

Do you recall that day, what they told you?

Yeah. It was March the 28th, I remember. We went to Auschwitz. They put us in the trains, in the open wagon. No, I think those were closed wagons if I recall-- the train, you know?

Were they freight cars?

Freight cars, yeah.

Empty freight cars?

Empty freight cars, and they just put us in like sardines.

Was that railroad depot far away?

From us, no.

No?

No. No. It wasn't far away. In fact, it was in the same area where the--

Military?

--the military was. Yeah. And my grandmother lived across the street from the military, from the barrack.

So she knew about this group of girls, that were this tremendous group, that was there?

Well, she knew some people, maybe not everybody. But she knew those.

That that was happening?

Yeah. Yeah. She knew. Yeah. But she went then, too. But she went a little bit. She came later than I came. But I was between the first from the family, and then--

Could you describe how you were taken on those trains? Could you tell us just a little bit?

Very difficult. Very difficult. There was no standing place. There were no toilets. There was no water, no food. It was very hard. We didn't know where we going.

They didn't tell you anything.

Those carts were closed. And people were screaming and crying and just like animals.

Do you have any idea of how many people were pushed or packed into one of those cars with you?

I think at least 200, 300 if not more. There was no place to move. And we had those knapsacks. And we took them with us, you know? So that took place, too. Was a lot of people in one of those wagons, of those trains.

Do you have any idea how long you were traveling?

I remember we arrived during the day. Because, I remember, that we saw working people in the fields, men. And they wore the striped uniforms-- I mean the jackets and the pants.

And they were showing. When they saw us, they were showing food, food. But we didn't know what they saying.

We thought they're crazy people. That's what we thought. But we found out, very fast, that those were the people from Poland, some of them from Prague. There were a lot of non-Jewish people, too, already in Auschwitz when we came, especially men.

Lenka, we're going to stop for a moment.

OK.

And we will be returning so that you can continue to tell us your experiences at Auschwitz.

OK.