

I'm Leatrice Rabinsky. Today, we are interviewing Elaine Grunwald, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.

Lenka, which is your name from your childhood, you were telling us about your arrival in Auschwitz concentration camp. Do you want to take us back to that day. Do you remember what day it was, what year?

I remember the year. I remember the day. But I don't remember. I don't remember the day. But I remember the--
Month?

The month and the date. It was March 28--

19--

'42. I remember we arrived there. And like I started to say, we saw in the fields, working, those people. And they were showing us, with their hands, something. We didn't know what it means. But then we found out it was food. We thought they were crazy people. But they were not. They were just working in the fields. And so then they-- that was a experience.

And we had to go down from those trains, you know, the Germans, there, and with the dogs. And rushing us and pushing us and it was just a confusing thing. And then, from there, some people they put-- some people, they put in one side, on the right, and some went on the left.

Were you aware of what that was?

No. No. Not. And the one who went to the right went to the gas chamber.

But you didn't know it at that time.

No, we didn't know. No. And some of them-- but at that time, mostly, they didn't put. Between the first one, they were young people, mostly. So they went. Most of them went to the blocks.

They took us to Auschwitz in the camp.

Did you walk there?

Yes. We walked, yeah. And it was very, very cold. And they took us in a place. First, we were standing in a line. And they said to us, everybody leaves the stuff where we are. They took everything away from us. And I remember I had a piece of chocolate. And I was holding on to it. And we had to leave all this stuff we had with us.

Including that little bit of?

Well, no, that little chocolate, I kept in my hand. It was a tiny, little piece what I still have. And we left our stuff there. And then we had to walk in a place where they took all our clothes off. And we had to cut our hair. And we they gave us those striped uniforms. And they gave us some wooden shoes. And whoever was finished had to wait outside. And it was very cold. We had no hair. No. Just barefoot with the wooden shoes, those slip-on shoes, the wooden. And we had to wait a whole night outside.

Standing?

Yeah, standing outside until everybody was done. And then they took us to the barracks. Actually, they were not barracks. They were-- what you call? They were? It was a building, regular buildings. And that's where there they took us. And they divided us in rooms. And I remember, I was on block 10.

This was in the main camp of Auschwitz.

Yeah, that was when we arrived. Yeah, that was in Auschwitz not in Birkenau. And I was in block 10. And there, we were all the girls and waiting what's going to be next. And then we had-- there were a lot of fleas. And they were eating us up alive.

They were in that clothing?

No, they were not in the clothing. They were in those-- not mattresses, they were straw, straw mattresses. And I guess they were the Russian soldiers, who were living there before us. And they left all those fleas, there. So one of the girls, she went to talk to the German, to the SS woman. And she said, we brought them with us.

The SS woman said that.

She said we brought them with us.

Well, that was the beginning. And we stayed in those barracks for a few days. And always, more and more people were coming. And I remember, I was looking out the window. And I heard somebody's voice. And the girl was whistling, you know? But the voice? And I look out. And I remember her. I was in camp. Few days back, I was in camp, with her, overnight camp.

Yeah, summer camp.

Yeah, in summer camp. Yeah, that was during the good times. And I recognized her voice, because her name was Lucy. But we called her Peter, because she was like a man. She had a voice, deep voice. And she used to wear her hair always like a boy. And she wore always short. I just, I looked out. And I said-- she wasn't from the same town. She was from a different town. So they accumulated all the people together. And then, little by little--

And every morning, we had to stay Zahlappell. And it was from early morning, for hours and hours, until they took care of everything.

Do you want to describe what that was?

Well, Zahlappell was everybody had to go out of their barracks. And we were standing in line, four or five, like--

Rows?

--rows, yeah. And they were counting us. And let's say, if somebody was missing, because something happened, that somebody hid under the bed or something, until they didn't find the person, we had to stay Zahlappell, the counting. And the German, the SS came and was counting us. And if everybody, everything was OK, all the people were there, then they let us go back. And there was nothing for a few days. There was nothing to do for us, just laying around and waiting until we gotted that watery soup. And they gave us those one dish. We had one dish for washing ourselves and for eating and, excuse me, for doing something else, too.

That same dish?

Yeah.

What was it?

It was a round. It was round dish.

A tin dish.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And then we got--

What kind of food did you have there?

Well, I just wanted to say, for morning, we got black coffee, watery coffee. And in the evening, they gave us-- it was a loaf. And they divided. It was a small loaf. And they divided it in four. That was for the rest of the day. Sometimes, we got a piece of margarine. Sometimes we didn't. And for lunch, we got a soup, from horse meat or what they feeding the cows. Was some kind of a yellow? I don't know what it was.

Turnip?

Turnip, something, yeah. It was just water-- nothing in. And they put brom in the food, in the soup.

And what was that?

The girls shouldn't get their period. We didn't have our periods there.

From the entire?

From the brom, yeah.

Really? That was a medication, a sedative?

Brom, it's something. It wasn't sedative. I think-- I don't know what it was. But I know they called it brom, I remember, like today. Not just that we didn't get our period, But we were more calm. You know, you just couldn't? It must have been--

In the bread or in the soup.

In the soup. In the soup.

They told you that.

Well, the girls, probably, who worked in the kitchen, they probably saw it. So, because they were working in the kitchen. So that's what we got. And that's all. And if you saved a little bit bread for morning, you were lucky. Some people could, some people could not. And we got a little piece of margarine. That's all. That was our food.

I remember, I couldn't eat from the beginning. I couldn't eat for weeks. I couldn't eat that food.

Well, how did you exist?

You know what my luck was? I think, even today, I think, because I was-- some people live to eat. And some people can live with less.

Right.

And I think I was the one who food wasn't as important to me as to some other people. Some people were able to steal and to kill and do everything for food. I could never do that.

Did you share your food with somebody else, then? Do you recall?

No, I ate it. But I mean, I did not-- I couldn't eat the soup.

Yes.

So I lived on that piece of bread, what I had, for the whole day. That's all what's to it. It was very little. It was just a little piece, like that. Wasn't good either. But I was able to save a little bit. I was able to.

Where did you save it or how?

Oh, you save it on your own--

Body?

--body, yeah. You couldn't put it down under your head, because, if you put it down under your head, they stole it-- or next to you on your bunk. They stole everything. Like I say, the people were like animals.

Were any of these people girls whom you knew from the deportation from home?

Sure. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

What did you talk about with them in those first few days?

Food. Food.

That's it.

Food. Food and family. Food and family.

What were you hoping for?

Hoping to go home again. That's all what we hoped. We always had the same wish.

Did you have any idea of what was going to happen?

No.

Were there any other prisoners, older prisoners, who had any contact with you?

Well, when we arrived in-- when we arrived, I was between the first 1,000. I was between the first 1,000 who came to Auschwitz. And when we arrived, just about two hours before us, some German came in but not SS, but just German prisoners, women, all women. They came from Ravensbrück.

And they, also, when we were standing in the line, waiting, you know, before they took away our stuff. So it was like in a basement room. And they were showing through the windows. They were showing us the same thing, food, food, food. Again, we thought that they are crazy, until we found out.

They wanted you to give them food?

Yeah, they want us to give them the food. But we couldn't. So those were the only people we saw before we came. But they just came in two hours before we came. And then, I have to think. Well, yeah, then they put us in the barrack. Like I said, we were-- cut our hair, completely.

Did you have any number tattooed?

Well, then they gave us our tattoo numbers, yeah. And I remember, I fainted. Because when they gave it to me, they couldn't find the right place. So it went in one of my veins. So I fainted.

The needle went into your vein?

Yeah. Yeah. And they had to make it over, because it wasn't. Like it wasn't--

And you still have the number.

Of course, I'm not going to do anything about it.

What is your number?

1735. So after this, they sent us, again, back on the blocks. And then, little by little, they started to send us out to work. And we worked in the fields. I remember I worked in the fields out.

Was that around Auschwitz?

Yeah.

Did you have to go for any distance to walk there?

Yeah, yeah, we had to walk. Yeah, we had to walk through the gates and go out. And we were working.

Did you see any of the villagers or people who lived nearby?

No. No. No. We were not allowed even to pick up our heads, because the dogs were from each side, you know?

Did you ever see dogs becoming ferocious or wild?

Oh, I remember he left. I remember when I was working on that Aussenkommando, when he-- I probably was too small, too slow. Because I remember, we were-- we made like a chain and blocks. We had to hand blocks, you know like with a chain. You know, like each person, and then we were throwing those blocks. And probably, I was too slow. So he let the dog jump on me.

And what did the dog? Did the dog bite you?

No, he didn't bite me. He just scared me, good, because he pushed him away from me. So I worked there, for a while, outside. That was terrible, go every day, walking. And they made us sing when we walk.

What did you sing?

I don't even remember the songs.

They gave you words to sing?

Yeah, yeah. I don't even remember what we sing, what kind of song.

Who supervised you in the field?

Germans.

They were the--

Oh, yeah, the SS.

The SS officers?

Sure, SS officers.

Did they ever speak with you?

No.

Any other prisoners?

No. No.

Did you ever see any of the higher officials of the Nazi SS?

Oh, yeah, I saw Mengele. I saw Kramer.

You saw Mengele? Where? Sure, he used to come. When you stand Zahlappell, he used to come. He used to pick out people who went to the crematorium. If he see somebody is very weak or something, so he picked them out. Every day you went on Zahlappell, you didn't know if you were going to go back to your barrack, if he's not going to pick you out.

I saw there was a Drechsler. She was a woman. She was a bad, bad woman. There was Kramer.

What did they do?

Well, they were the-- they had Eichmann.

You saw Eichmann?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Did he come frequently?

Yeah, they came. They came. Mengele was always. Mengele came quite often there, yeah. Sure.

Were you aware of what his position was? You didn't know at the time?

No. No, we didn't know. We knew that he was the one who picked out the people. This we knew. Yeah. And we were scared of him. I mean, that happened only after a while. But from the first week, we didn't know what's going on. But then, later on, we found out who he was.

After those first few days, who were those who were directly in charge of you? Were there any elder girls, other prisoners?

Well, not exactly older, but they were girls who were prisoners as we were.

What were they called?

Blockalteste. And then they had a Stubova, how they called.

Who are they?

They were who helped the blockalteste.

The one in charge?

Yeah.

And these were all prisoners?

All prisoners, yeah.

How did they act toward the other girls?

Some of them were OK. And some of them were not so nice. I, personally, didn't have any problems with anybody. I didn't. But some girls did.

What were some of the problems?

Well, they were not nice to them. Let's say, some girl was naive enough to say, I want more food. She didn't have it, you know? So she said, I don't have it. So maybe she spanked her over her face or something. Some of them were pretty mean, sorry to say so. But I, personally, never had problems with them.

What were your greatest desires at that time? Do you recall talking with the other girls?

Yeah, just to take a bath.

A bath?

Take a bath, yeah.

Did you have any access to washing or sanitary facilities?

Very little. Very little. Very little. In Auschwitz, it was better than in Birkenau. In Auschwitz, it was a little bit better than in Birkenau.

How long did you remain in Auschwitz?

Six months, from March to August.

And what was your work during that whole time?

I was working outside in the Aussenkommando, they called it. We went every day, out. And we were building roads. In fact, I think we were building, already-- now, when I think about it, it was already Birkenau where we were building. Because Birkenau, they didn't have roads. And when the prisoners came, they built the roads. You were in Birkenau.

Yes.

Do they have them now?

Yes. You were building those roads?

Yeah, we were building those roads. Because, before we came, they had Russian prisoners there.

Prisoners of war?

Yeah. Yeah.

Were the barracks up already?

Yeah, the barracks were up. Yeah. The barracks were up. Yeah. I stayed on 27, but that was later. That was a little bit later. And I don't remember where I stayed in the beginning, honestly. I can't remember this. But later on, I remember.

So you had to walk, then, about three kilometers, every day, to and from?

Oh, yeah, we walked from Auschwitz to Birkenau to build those roads. Yeah.

Do you recall having any close or special friend at that time?

Oh, yeah, I had a lot of friends.

Very close?

Bertha was a very good friend of mine.

Bertha Lautman?

Yeah, Bertha Lautman. We were very close friends. I just met her in Poprad at a military barracks. And we were all-- we were together in Auschwitz. And then she went different direction. And I went different direction. And then in Bergen-Belsen, we found each other, again. So I had many good friends there, with whom I'm still in contact.

Really?

Did you help each other during these very difficult times?

Yes.

Can you recall how?

Well.

Or any specific incidents.

Well, let's say, I had a friend, who his cousin, she was a blockalteste. So she gave me a little bit of food. So when I went to work, I could see him. But I couldn't get close to him or so. So somehow, I knew he was working in the ditches. And when we passed by, and nobody saw, so I threw a little bit something in the ditch for him. And I left a little bit something for me, too. And then if somebody didn't have?

Well, actually, during the first six months, I couldn't help too much. But when I was in leichenkommando, in Birkenau, then we got double ration and so on, then I could already help for people.

Lenka, would you explain what happened, how you were transferred to Birkenau? And tell us what Birkenau was.

Everybody from Auschwitz was transferred to Birkenau, the whole, all the girls, except there were few who worked at the [GERMAN].

What was that?

Which was the main office for all the SS. And those girls stayed. But otherwise, the whole lager was--

The entire camp camp.

--camp went to Birkenau. And when we came there, well, it was tough. Like I said, Auschwitz was better than Birkenau.

What was the barrack like in Birkenau?

In Birkenau, it was like those bunks. There were really maybe about that big. One bunk was about that wide and about that long. Enough just to stretch out your legs. And on one of those, six girls had to sleep. So it wasn't fun. There was nothing. There was no-- just wood.

No blankets?

No. No. Yeah, blankets, we had some kind of a blanket. I can't even recall what it was. But it wasn't too much. And everybody put his clothes under his head. And that's how we slept, one on top of another. So it kept us warm.

There was no heat in the barracks?

Yes, they did have heat. Yeah, they had some kind of a heat. I remember something that was like in the middle, like it was built from blocks. And that was heat. So there was some kind of a heat, yeah. There was heat.

You mentioned something called leichenkommando. What was that?

Well, when I came to Birkenau, I got typhus. And I was afraid, that if I'm not going to work, I'm going to have to go to the Zahlappell, which was the counting. And if they're going to see that I'm sick, they're going to take me. They're going to take me to--

In Birkenau, they had a block. They called it 25th block. And there, they took all the people who were half dead or dead, everybody went to that block. And from there, they loaded them. The trucks came, and they put them all on a truck. And they took them to the crematorium. So I was--

So people knew what 25 was?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Some of them went. My cousin, my aunt, they went by themselves. I took them out, but they went again.

They went by themselves.

They went by themselves. That's another story. And so I was afraid, that they might-- I will have to go to Zahlappell, and they're going to take me. So my aunt, who was there, too, she said, why don't you go there, to that woman at the revier, and ask if you can work. Because she heard that they're going to need people for the leichenkommando.

The revier was the hospital.

Yeah, revier, yeah, that was the hospital. Yeah, so I went there. And she was not a-- she was a German prisoner but not Jewish. And so I came there. And she says, you look very sick, very thin and weak. I said my mother was small and thin. And she was strong, too. And I said, I am strong. Anyway, I was lucky. I don't know, maybe my aunt put a few words in. I don't know. And I got a job.

But I was really so weak, because I really had typhus. So we were carrying the dead people, like on a bar, four girls, some were really Muselmann, what they called them-- you know, nothing.

Would you explain what the Muselmann was.

Oh, Muselmann was when somebody was really so thin, already, nothing but--

Bone.

--bones. Yeah. But some of the people, especially one who came from Holland, they didn't want to fight. They didn't want to live. They went to the electric.

The barbed electric wires?

Yeah, to the wires, yeah.

You mean they committed suicide.

Yeah, they committed suicide. And those girls just came in a day or two before. And they were so-- they were still healthy. They were big women. And they were very heavy. You know, so as I walked with that dead person, I always fell down. I was almost as dead as they were. But somehow, someway, I--

Where did you take these bodies?

We had like-- we had a place, like a barrack or whatever you call it, where we put all those dead people, one on top of the other. And then at night, about 2 o'clock at night, came a truck. And we had to throw them on. We took. Two people took a dead person and just throw them up on the truck.

And where did they take the bodies?

And then they took them to the crematorium to burn them.

And these bodies were dead people.

Those were people who died in the revier. There were people who came in from work, and they shot them on the way. If you walked, and if you did something wrong, right away, they shot you. Or there were people who were shot in the camp or dropped dead in the camp. And we had to pick. We were 20 girls in that leichenkommando. And we had to pick those people.

This is what you did all day long?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And so we picked those people. And we all put them in that barrack. And then 2 o'clock at night, they came and picked them up. And we had to load them up on the truck, again. And I think that's the reason I survived. Because we had double portions. We were able to take a shower. We didn't have to stay Zahlappell.

Oh, you were spared that standing.

Yeah. So I think that's what really saved my life.

Where did you sleep, then, in the same barrack?

There was a block, yeah. There was a block at 27. They called it the 27 block. It was like a revier block, too. And there we stayed in that block till it was August, September, probably, or maybe October already, in '42. And so I worked there till that whole thing fell apart. And then I got another job.

How long were you working at this, about?

I can't even remember how long it was. But it was quite a while.

Was it several months?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Do you recall--

Till '43, something till '43.

Lenka, do you recall any of your feelings during this time?

I recall once--

Did it disturb you at all?

Do you know what? It's a funny thing. We found a dead person. We had to pick her up. And let's say she had a pair of good shoes on. We just took it off from her. You were like stone. Or you could carry a dead person, in one hand, and, with the other hand, you can eat something if you had what to eat. You just became like no feeling at all.

Did you ever talk about this with the other girls, what you were doing?

Of course. Of course, we talked about it. That was a very hard job we had, a very hard job. But like I say, we had some rewards for it. We were able to survive.

Did you ever recognize any of the dead people? Were they people who you knew?

Oh, yes, that's I wanted to say. I had my aunt, one aunt, my second aunt that was my father's sister, second father's sister. In fact, my grandmother came. And I saw my grandmother there, with her daughter. But they took her to a what-you-call-it. They told them that they're taking them to a different place. They took them, right away, to the crematorium, yeah, gas chambers, yeah. So I saw my grandmother.

Then I have a cousin, who lives here. His mother, they came later. They came in '43. And his mother and sister came. And that was already during the time I was working in leichenkommando. And one day, I went to pick up. We took over somebody to that 25th block. Who do I see? My aunt is laying there. But she was still alive. She was still alive.

So I don't know how we did it. But somehow I did it. We put it her on those-- what do you call it-- where we carry the dead people, on those bars. And I took her out from the 25th block. And I was lucky I was not caught, because, otherwise, I would have got a bullet in my head, too.

Where did you take her? I took her back to the block. And I gave her food. And I talked to her, because her daughter was still. Next time I go, they both out there, but they already dead.

What had happened?

They didn't want to fight. There were a lot of people who didn't want to fight. There were a lot of people.

They just gave up?

They just gave up. They just gave up-- a lot of them. So, you know, they were one of those, who--

So you had to take your own aunt in there.

I saw all my aunts on the trucks. I saw all my aunts on there. My cousins, everyone who came went through there. There was, one day, they just took everybody from wherever they found people and just loaded them on the truck. And I see my-- still alive. They took them to the gas chambers.

While they were still alive?

Well, they were alive, yeah. They just load them on the truck, and they took them to the gas chambers. And I saw my

aunt, a young woman, 24 years old, just married, just a few months before she went to concentration camp.

Did she recognize you?

Oh yeah, I saw her. I saw. We saw each other before. Like I say, everyone went through my hands except my grandmother, they took. But the rest of them all.

How could you speak to each other?

What did you say?

Well, we were able to speak to each other when I used to see them. We spoke to each other. We each was in a different block. But we could speak to each other. But they all went to the gas chambers. And they were healthy, beautiful, young women, 24, 26. So they all--

Did they ever give you a message or say anything? Did you know these were the last words you'd have with each other?

Well, when they were on the truck, the last aunt, when she was on the truck, she couldn't talk to me. I just saw her. I just saw her. But I didn't talk to her. But in between, we were able to walk over to each other's block. Yeah, we were able to do that and just walk over and talk to each other.

Lenka, after you had worked in leichenkommando, what was the next job you had?

After leichenkommando, I worked. I worked in a place where people came to take a shower, when they were permitted, you know, to take showers. So this was a good. This was a good job. I mean concerning, I didn't have to go out.

What did you do in that place?

Washed the floors, cleaned, things like that. They had-- I don't know. I can't recall what those seats were there. Oh, I know already, that was entlausung.

Oh, delousing.

Delousing, yeah. What do they call it?

Delousing.

Delousing, yeah, that's right. They brought in people, delousing. Now I remember what it was. And so that's where I worked. That was considered a good job, you know? And so--

Did you still have the privilege of not having to stand Zahlappell at that time?

No, then I had to stay Zahlappell, yeah. And while they cut our hair every-- I think I had 14 times cut my hair.

14 times?

Until I went to Brzezinka, then they stopped to cut our hair. And so that's what they--

What was it like? Did they shave your hair?

Yeah, shaved with a little machine, like men?

A clipper?

Yeah, like men. Yeah. But we got used to it. We had lice. So it was easier to take care of it, you know? I remember, once, in Birkenau they entlausing the whole camp. They took off all our clothes. They let us naked run around. And people were on the roofs and you name it.

They were trying to get the lice off?

Yeah. No, they took away all our clothes. And they were entlausing the barracks, too.

Like fumigating.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And so everybody had to be outside. And people were all over naked people. It was really something.

What went through your mind as-- or even now as you think back on that?

I don't know. I say to myself, I can't believe this is true. I can't believe it. When I see sometimes those

Pictures?

--pictures, I can't believe it, that it really-- that you can survive something. Because, as I'm talking to you, really, there was so much more to it that you can't even say everything in words. You can't. Like I said in the [INAUDIBLE], I never forget. I was on one of those. I was sick. I had to go to a bathroom. So we had those latrines. But they were not next door to you. You had to walk a good part of the lager. So I went to the latrine.

And I don't know how, on the way coming back, I fell in, in a hole. And that was-- I don't want to say what it was.

It was a sewer?

This was a sewer, yeah. And I don't know how I crawled out from there. And I smelled terrible. I don't know. I lost mine block. I didn't know. I was confused. I didn't know where I was. And I went to a different block. And I crawled up on the bed, on the bunk. And they throw me down from the bunk, because I smelled.

And again, I went up. And every time I crawled up, and I was so weak-- I must have diarrhea at that time. We had it a lot there. And they throw me every time. Then I was so weak, already, I didn't crawl up anymore. I just slept there on the ground.

That wasn't your barrack?

That wasn't my barrack, no. No wonder they throw me down. That was not my barrack. And I slept. And in the morning, I saw I was in the wrong barrack. But I smelled, my clothes and everything. And then, lucky, somebody took me and gave me a little bit of water to wash up, as much as I could wash up. And I got some different clothes. She brought from someplace-- one of those blockalteste or whatever she was. And I was able to go stay at Zahlappell.

Back to your own barracks?

Back to my own barracks, yeah. I never forget. That was a terrible experience. At night, you are alone there, you know? So it was-- like I said, there was so much more to it. Really, you can't explain. And you can't say everything in words, what a person went through. It's hard to believe, but it's true.

You mentioned Brzezinka. Do you want to tell us what that was?

Then I, like we called it sauna where I was working in--

The showers.

--in the showers. From there, I went to Brzezinka. That was a place where--

It was near Birkenau?

Yeah.

In Birkenau.

Yeah, that was in Birkenau. That was a place where they had a lot of barracks and people. That was already in '43, end of '43 till '44. And mostly people, at that time, came from Hungary. Because the Hungarian-- the Hungarian government didn't let them out till end of '43, '44.

In '43.

Yeah. So they started to come there. So I worked in a place, again, where they were bringing in the people, took away their clothes. And then we were-- I don't know how many girls. We were cutting their hair.

You had to cut the hair?

Yeah, I cut their hair. We cut not just their hair, we cut them all over.

How did you feel about doing that?

Terrible. Terrible. Terrible.

What did the new incoming prisoners feel toward you? Did they ever talk to you or resent?

No, they knew that I-- that wasn't our-- that we wanted to do it, you know?

Were you able to converse with them at all and talk to them?

Not really very good speaking, because I didn't speak, that time, Hungarian. And we couldn't even speak to them, because the Germans were-- the SS was there, watching us. So we couldn't speak. We had to do our job. It wasn't a pleasant job, beside.

Lenka, how did you get changed from one occupation to another?

They picked us. The SS picked. They came, and they picked so many people. And we had to go where they sent us. But all those jobs were much better what other people had to work in the outside kommando, you know, building and roads and so on. So this was, I was one of the lucky ones, that I was able to work inside, in the camp. So I was one of the lucky ones.

What else did you do in Brzezinka?

Just cut the hair. It was a lot of people came in. And we cut their hair, always. But that's the only--

Did you have access to any of the clothing or perhaps food or anything that those new prisoners brought?

We didn't have access. We didn't have access. But you always, how they called it, organized. Somebody had access. But there, they didn't cut our hair anymore. We were able to keep our hair. And always somebody had access. So if you didn't have, we used to trade. So it was always.

And I somehow was very lucky, always. I always had-- it was that rotkappchen.

Oh, the red hats?

Red hats, what they used to-- again, that was where they used to-- some girls used to work there. And in fact, I was reading that Bertha was working. I didn't know that she was working there. I just read in a book. And so they used to bring in. But they had to be lucky not to be cut, you know? So somehow I always was lucky, somehow, to get. And I was able to help other people, share with other people.

Were you able to bring anything back to the barracks, like clothing or food?

You mean when I was in Brzezinka?

Right.

Yeah. Yeah. There, it wasn't so bad there. There we had half-decent bunks, the bunk beds. And we had--

You were not in barrack 27 any more.

No, no, that was a different. That was away already from Birkenau. That wasn't so bad there. And it was much easier. We were able to take showers and change clothes. So that wasn't bad. And we had better food. Because, like I say, some people had access where. And when I was working there, I was in that big room. But nobody was in the room. Everything was cleaned up.

And in the same place, where we were cutting the hair, as the people came, they took off their clothes. There were washing machines. And they put that clothes, right away, into those wash machines. And the other girls were working there, where they were taking out the clothes.

And at that time, they gave back the clothes to the people. They were giving them back. They didn't give them, any more, the--

Striped uniform?

--yeah, striped uniform. Actually, when I came? When I came, we didn't get the striped uniform. We got the Russian uniforms, the bloody Russian uniforms. That was when we came in '42. So that wasn't so bad anymore. And then, when they liquidated that, in '44, when there were no transports coming anymore, so I had to go back to Auschwitz.

To main Auschwitz?

Yeah. No, not main, Birkenau. And that Unterscharführer, who was our Unterscharführer when I was in the leichenkommando, his name was Taube. He came to the block. And he recognized me. And he picked me. He was sent to a Camp Hindenburg. And he was the Oberscharführer in Hindenburg. So he picked me.

That's like a commanding officer?

Yeah, commanding officer. Yeah. He took. He picked me out. And he said, you come with me. So I went to Hindenburg.

Do you know where Hindenburg was Located

It was in Oberschlesien.

Silesia.

Yeah. Oberschlesien, yeah. And so that was a small camp. So in the beginning, I worked in a kitchen, again, in the

potato kitchen, peeling potatoes. And then, later on, I worked in a factory, where they were making, for the airplanes, the wheels. And I was [GERMAN]. I don't know how you call [GERMAN], you know, with a mask? When you have to mask, and they were putting those wheels together.

Soldering?

Soldering it, yeah. And that's what I was doing. And then, from there, we went to--

How long were you there at that Hindenburg factory?

It was from November till January-- not too long. That wasn't so bad either.

Were there many of the other girls, who had been with you, in all of the previous places?

Not really. Not really. They were different people. But I don't know, he picked me between.

How had you been feeling, physically? What had happened to the TB condition that you had? Were able to--

I didn't know. I didn't know I had TB.

You didn't know?

No. I didn't know till 14, 15 years ago. I didn't know I had it. Well, from there, I think what happened-- well, I come to it later. Then we went from Oberschlesien, from Hindenburg, we started to walk. That was already before the Germans, when the war started to come to end. So we walked to Mauthausen. Was it Mauthausen or Schaffhausen? Mauthausen, I guess.

Mauthausen was in Austria outside of Vienna.

I know. I know I went one of those camps, which was so beautiful. We were afraid to go. First, we went to Leipzig.

The German city?

Yeah. And then we stayed one night in Leipzig, and then we walked again. And we stopped in a few of those camps.

How did you know that things were becoming difficult for the Germans? Was there any indication?

There was an underground.

How did you know?

There were always underground.

You had news in the camps?

Yeah, we did get. Yeah. We always knew any--

What were some of the messages that came across to you?

Well, there were some Polish girls, who were very much involved in it. In fact, one lives in Israel. And they knew what was going on. I mean, what was going on as much. But they always got some kind of information. So we didn't know too much. But we knew something-- when they're going to bomb, when they this, when they-- or when they lost someplace. So we knew those things.

Did you know that the Russians were approaching?

Yeah.

Was there any attempt, among the girls, that you knew or were with during all this time or in any of the places, any attempt to revolt, to run away?

Well, there was a revolt. Well, there were a few people who tried to run away but were not. In Auschwitz, there was one girl who tried to run away. But they caught her. And she was hung. And the whole lager had to witness that.

You were among those that I watched it?

Yeah, I watched her, sure. Sure, there were people who tried but not too many-- not too many. Well, you probably heard about the revolt that they staged in one of those--

Crematorium?

--crematoriums. And I was there. That was on Brzezinka. I was really-- we had like a bathroom, that was already a civilized bathroom, but it was outside not in the block. And I happened to be in the bathroom, quite a few girls. And the crematorium was just probably as far, like from here, I would say, 30 feet, 40 feet, no more. It was just divided by a fence.

And we were in the bathroom, when the guys, I mean the prisoners, started out a revolt.

And blew it up. You heard the explosion?

Oh, yeah, we couldn't go out from there. And we heard when they were praying, [NON-ENGLISH] and Shema Yisrael.

All the prayers?

Sure. Yeah. Yeah. And they put-- they killed a few Germans. They put them in the ovens, you know.

You were aware of all of this?

Oh, yeah, sure. Like I said, we were so close there. It was scary. We thought that they were going to blow us up, too. But then the Germans came. It didn't take too long for them. What happened? There were a few German SS who were watching them. And so they overpowered them.

They were able to take several of the SS with them.

Yeah, they took several of the-- yeah.

What was the repercussion or retaliation of the German officers to this? Do you recall what happened?

Yeah, I think they killed the few people who worked in there. Well, that's why we were so afraid. Oh, we couldn't go out. There were a lot of investigation was going on. And they kept us closed up, there in Brzezinka. This was during the time I was in Brzezinka.

And we stayed in that bathroom. We stayed there for about two or three hours. We couldn't go out. Nobody was allowed to go out. And it was a terrible experience, especially when you think about it. And we were praying Shema Yisrael.

The last prayers.

It was a terrible experience. And the shooting was going on and the dogs. so you know, when we thought-- what we

thought of it? It was the end of us, too.

Now, when you were already later, in these other camps, in Hindenburg, and then when you were marching, what did you think was going to happen to you?

I thought we were going to die, because so many people died on the road, couldn't make it.

You were walking from place to place?

Yeah, sure. Sure, without food and cold. It was in January, you know? So it was cold. So we thought, you just go as long as you can. And then, if you die, you don't care. You really don't care, one way or the other way. When they were bomb-- when the bombs were falling down, we were just wishing, one should fell down on us and take an end to it. So you didn't care about those things, what's going to happen to you.

After this stopover in Leipzig, what was the next camp that you went to?

I think it was Mauthausen, where we saw-- where the men came. No. No, no, there was another one. It was Mauthausen. And there was another one. I can't think of the name. Didn't I tell you last time a name?

I think you had mentioned Mauthausen.

Mauthausen Yes, there was Mauthausen, there was Schaffhausen, too. So we stopped in both. But the Schaffhausen was in the hills. It was really nice. And we thought, oh God.

You mean, the natural scenery around?

Yeah, it was beautiful. And the room where they put us in, it was like painted, the walls. And we said, oh, God, that's the end of us. We were sure.

Why? What did you think was that?

Well, we thought it was just to fool us, you know? But it wasn't. We went on from there. And there, all those men, who like I said, a baby was born there. And the men--

From among the girls who marched with you?

Yeah, probably they came. They came in '44. And they were pregnant.

So you marched together with some of the girls from the Hungarian transport?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And so when we came there, like I said, I saw my cousin there. He was there, too. But he went in '42. But that's where he was shipped to. And the men were very nice to us. They gave us chocolate. And they didn't know what to do with us-- brought us food.

These were still prisoners, though?

Oh, yeah, they were all prisoners. Yeah. But we just couldn't believe this is true. It looked too good to us, everything, especially that room.

What kind of camp was that? Was it a labour camp?

It was a man. It was-- yeah, it was a man, yeah, men, strictly men. Didn't see for two years a woman.

And yet they were polite to you.

Very nice, yeah they were very nice to us. Yeah, but they were prisoners.

Yes. Were you told, by the Nazis or the SS, where you were going or what was going to happen to you?

We never knew where we are going until we came there. And from then on, we walked again. And then they put us, again, in those--

Trains?

--trains, yeah.

Were they open or closed wagons?

Those were open. Open, because I remember we used to take snow and eat snow.

So it was really quite cold when you were traveling.

Oh, it was very cold, very cold. A lot of people died and froze on the train. And it was a terrible experience. To go to Bergen-Belsen was really terrible because so many people died on the road. And they just were falling. And they just left them behind. And then somebody picked them up. And you were not allowed to turn your head.

You were standing up in those open wagons?

Sure. Yeah. No, I mean even when we were walking, you were never allowed to turn your head, to go.

You were that closely supervised?

Yeah. Oh, yeah, we had a lot of. In fact, when we went to Hindenburg, I remember that-- no, that was from Hindenburg already away. We lost that Hauptscharführer, that Taube. Somebody said that he died on the road. Because they were exposed to the bad things, too, the SS. That's what somebody said, that he died, too, on the road, that he got sick and he died.

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

OK.

And then we will resume and talk about your trip to Bergen-Belsen.

OK.