

I'm Sylvia Abrams. Today we are interviewing Bella Lebowicz, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Mrs. Lebowicz, why don't you tell us a little about yourself? First of all, your name and how old you are.

I'll be glad to. My name is Bella Lebowicz, and I'm 62 or 63 now. I was born in 1922. So you figure it out.

You look terrific.

Thank you.

Where do you live today?

On East Groveland in Cleveland.

That's in the suburb of Beachwood?

Beachwood, yeah.

Do you work?

I help out my husband in the store.

OK. What kind of work is that in the store?

He has a furniture store. And I'm actually just doing some paperwork, and doing some buying for him.

You do that part time or full time?

Part time.

You said your husband has a furniture store.

Yeah.

What's your husband's name?

Michael.

And do you have any children?

I have two children, a son and a daughter. And my son, Joseph, and my daughter, Annette, are both married and live in New York.

And you have some grandchildren you told me?

I have four grandchildren, four little boys.

And how old are they?

The oldest is 9 and 1/2, and the youngest is 3.

That's a very nice family.

Thank you.

Let's go back in time now to before the war. I'd like you to tell us a little bit about what your life was like.

First of all, how old were you and where were you living?

Just tell me when I should start, during the war or before the war?

Why don't you start with before 1939. Where was your hometown?

Well, my hometown was always before the war in Sirokij Lu. And that is in Czechoslovakia.

What region in Czechoslovakia?

It was called Podkarpatska Rus. And that is what it was the Slovakia and Bohemia, and Podkarpatska Rus, that made up Czechoslovakia.

What was the nearest big city?

The nearest big city was [NON-ENGLISH] it was called in Czech.

What was your own town like? What was its general appearance?

It was a very small town. There were altogether about 40 Jewish families.

How many people were there totally in the town?

Something over 2,000.

What was the main business in the town?

There was practically no big business in town. All they had is a lot of wood. And they used to transport wood from there. But also, that was at the end of the town. And people were mostly raising their own products to live on.

I see.

And also there were little stores, of course, little necessities what everybody needed.

And you said there were about 40 Jewish families?

40 Jewish families.

OK. Tell me a little bit about your own family. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

I had-- we were 12 children from two mothers. My father's first wife had seven children. And then she died in the First World War. And then my father married my mother that she had a previous husband and two children, which her husband and the two children also died in the First World War. So my mother got married to my father when he had seven children in order to heal her hurt after her two children died on typhoid in the war. That's what she told me.

And then my mother had five children.

How many were at home during the 1930s?

During the 1930s, well, my older sisters from the previous wife of my father's got married one after another. There were six girls and one son from my father's first wife. So my mother tried to make their trousseaus, and they got married one by one. And then my mother had four daughters and a son. And I was the oldest from my mother.

And during, that you asked me before the war--

So at the outbreak of the war, then how many children were at home?

At home, were just me and my four sisters and one brother. But I was not exactly home then. Like I told you, because I was away from home before that, because one of my older sisters lived in Nové Zámke, and that was in Slovakia. And I was by her.

But you were living with her, or you were still living at home normally?

Well, I was living at home normally. I just visited with her. And I got stuck there when the war broke out in '39.

I see.

Tell me a little bit more about your family's life before the war. How did your family make a living?

Well, my father had a regular general store with everything that anybody could want. A general store, then also they had tobacco and things like that. They also had a license for a bar that people came in, in the evening and drank some whiskey. And that's how they made their living.

Did your mother work there also? She couldn't have worked too much because she had small children. But she helped out, of course.

Would you describe the family as well-to-do, or comfortable, or poor?

Everybody was poor according to today's standards. But at that time we were considered pretty comfortable, because we didn't need so much as nowadays people need.

Did you have to help your family?

Of course I helped, with the chores in the house, and around the house. We had a big garden. And we had a big orchard with fruits. And we had all kinds of, for instance, I helped outside. We had horses and we had a cow. We had geese, and we had all kinds of things like that. And I helped out, although we had somebody that took care of that. But we helped. We did our part of the chores.

When you think of your family's life, who made the major decisions at home?

My father and my mother.

How did you get along with your parents and your brothers and your sisters?

Excellent, because we were taught that we were supposed to listen and we did it.

How about relationships between your family and friends and neighbors?

That was excellent. That was excellent. It was like one big family.

With the non-Jewish neighbors as well?

Sort of in a different way. Of course, there was the difference because the Jews that lived in our town were all very religious. And so we were very religious, but the non-Jewish population knew it. And they, for instance, we needed their help on Shabbat. And they came and they did whatever we needed to do. And they were the customers in the store and everywhere.

Could you describe a typical day in the family in that year?

A typical day, well, everybody got up in the morning and said their prayers. And the family sat down to

breakfast. And then everybody had chores to do. Everybody had his chores to do.

You mentioned the family was very religious.

Yeah.

What do you remember particularly about holidays and other special occasions?

We went to the temple. And we, of course, everything was kosher. And the holidays were observed to the T, because my parents were very religious. It's a matter of fact, the Jewish population, as many as there were, there were just about 40 families. And every one of them was very religious.

Did the family belong to the synagogue in the town then?

Yeah. There was just one synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue. And that's where we belonged, and that's where everything happened actually.

I see. How about the role of politics in your family? Did anybody belong to any Zionist groups?

No, not at that time.

Did anyone belong to any other kinds of political organizations?

No. We tried to really keep very much away from politics, because there were those changes first, and that was not in my time from the Austria-Hungary regime. It changed to Czech regime. And then I grew up under the Czechoslovakian regime.

But I remember my parents talking about the previous, the Hungarian regime. So the Jews were not very much involved in politics.

Were you involved in any other kind of community organizations?

As far as they were there, but there was not too many organizations there at that time.

Let's go into the background of your family. What language did you speak at home?

Yiddish.

Did you know any other languages?

Well, we knew sort of that was the Russian language, that was the most populations language. And of course, we were taught. We had a teacher to teach us German, and to teach us reading and writing in German that was not available at that time in the school. The school was at that time just a Russian, that the population spoke.

What kind of books were in your house?

Mostly religious books.

What languages were those books in?

Well, they were in Yiddish and Hebrew.

Was there a theater or anything like that in the town?

There was no theater and no movie theater.

So there were no things like that in the town?

No. If we wanted to see something like that, we had to go really far away.

So what kinds of things did the family do for entertainment then?

Mostly we were taught religion, how to behave, and how to take care of one another. And that was the predominant. And also we went to school.

Was your family ever able to afford to go on a vacation?

That was very seldom, unless we went to relatives to another town. And that mostly was the vacation.

You've given me a very general, nice picture of what the family was like. Let's talk about yourself--

A very close knit family.

Let's talk a little bit about yourself at that time. What do you remember about yourself? First, what did you look like? What did they look like. I found a picture that I told you that it was made in Budapest, and that was already in '39 or maybe '40. I don't remember exactly when. But I found it. It's very old. See, this is not-

That's you. How old were you in this picture?

I must have been 18.

How about-- how tall are you then?

Just as I am now I think.

About 5'2", 5'3"?

5'2", 5' 2 and 1/2", I was at that time.

And you had Brown hair then too?

Dark hair.

Dark hair and dark eyes.

Yeah.

You look like you were very pretty young woman.

Thank you. See, this is somebody went to the photographer in Budapest. It was my husband. And got it because he had probably the negative already from before, that we went. Because we did not-- I don't have nothing of what was left in the house or at home. We didn't get nothing, because I didn't even go back.

From the picture, you appear to have been a very healthy young woman. Were you?

Yes, I was. I was, absolutely.

What were your interests at that point in your life when you were 18?

Well, I wanted to go very badly to school. But my parents were too religious, and it was very complicated. If you went away from home, you were bound to not have kosher food, or not to observe the Shabbat. And that was a big problem for our people. And then when the war broke out, there was no possibility at all to do

any of it.

So to what grade in school did you attend before the war?

Well, I went my eight grades first. And then I went, it was sort of a gymnasium. But even before the war broke out, when it started just the complications, and it started they did not-- they couldn't set it up because there were not enough pupils to attend it.

So before 1939, then you had already left school?

Yeah.

When you did attend school, was it a public school?

A public school. Yeah.

I see.

Who were your friends at that time?

Well, all the girls in town were my friends, the ones that were my age, and we went together to school. We were friends.

Jewish and non-Jewish girls?

Jewish and non-Jewish. Yeah.

How did you get along with your friends?

Terrifically, because that was the most entertainment for us that we had.

Would you consider that you led a very sheltered life up to that point?

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely, very sheltered life.

And you said your plans for the future, you had hoped you could go to school.

Yeah.

When you realized that you couldn't, were you able to make any other plans?

I couldn't make any other plans because there were always problems coming up that were facing us at the moment. So we really couldn't plan very far ahead.

When you think of yourself at that age, would you characterize yourself as brave or sensitive, fun loving? What would you say you were like?

I would say I was very serious and very, of course I was fun loving. But there wasn't much fun.

So you would think of yourself as a serious young woman at that point in your life.

Yeah.

What do you remember about antisemitism in those days?

I remember even then in public school, we were a very small minority of the children that went to that school. And here and there, it was already obvious that something is brewing and something is cooking.

Because there were some children of the non-Jewish that attended school that called out, so and so, dirty Jew. Or dirty so and so.

Did your family ever discuss any of these anti-Semitic things that we're beginning?

Yes. Because when we came home from school and when we were complaining about it, we were told not to make a big fuss over it. Because it can make it worse. See? We should just take it and not make a big fuss over it.

Were there any discussions in your town that you ever heard about plans to try to do anything about this antisemitism?

There was very little possibility to do about these things anything, because the main population was Russians. And they were hostile towards the Jews. See? There were some that didn't show it so much. But deep down, they were hostile because their church preachings were that Jews are just no good, because they killed their God.

When the war came, when were you first aware that there was a war?

Well, like I said, we knew it long before that something is brewing and something since '33, because we did get some newspapers, and we did we were aware of what's going on. Also, I had a sister, a married sister that was living in Berlin with her husband. And in '33, they had to come home because of what happened in Berlin at that time. So we were very much aware that what's going on. And we knew it all along that it has some terrible things are in the making.

Where were you when the war actually broke out? I was in Nové Zámke by my one sister that lived there. And that was in Slovakia.

You mentioned before that you got caught there. What happened that you couldn't go back to your family?

Because the Hungarians marched in, into Nové Zámke before they marched into my town where we lived. So I couldn't go back home. So I got stuck in Budapest and was waiting until I'll be able to go home.

What year was all this?

That was in '39.

This is in '39.

In '39.

What were your feelings about being stuck in Budapest?

I was scared to death. I was scared to death. And I also didn't have any money to live on, so I went to work and did some sewing for a couple that owned a pension that rented out rooms, and cooked meals for them. So I was sewing there, whatever there was to sew.

Were you able to notify your family where you were?

Yes. Yes, by mail. But it took a long time until it got there. There was no telephone connection that I could call them or anything. But I did write to them. And we were in contact by mail. But it, of course, took quite some time too.

Did you live with your sister then?

In Budapest? No. No, in Budapest I was all by myself.

What was the distance between where your sister was and Budapest?

No, my sister was in Nové Zámke.

What was the distance between Nové Zámke and Budapest?

Well, that was just about 50 kilometers. Why did you decide not to stay in Nové Zámke and to go to Budapest?

Because they were at that time they made a razia in Nové Zámke, and whoever was not a citizen of Nové Zámke was supposed to-- they just caught them, and send them back to Poland. And we were afraid. So my sister went with her husband to another town in Hungary, in [NON-ENGLISH], and I went to Budapest because I was at that time very much aware of the Zionist organization that had organized transports to Israel.

And I was hoping that I can go to Israel instead. But it didn't happen.

So that was the reason you went to Budapest, thinking you could get on a transport for Israel, as long as you were stuck and not near your family?

That's right.

OK, I've got the picture, while you were there. Who did you live with in Budapest?

I lived, like I said, I worked for this couple that owned pension.

And you lived--

And I lived there. They gave me a room. And that's how I made my living, because they gave me food and shelter, and practically nothing else.

How long did you think you were going to stay there?

I didn't know. I was just waiting for the border to open that I should be able to go home. In the meantime, I was trying to find out if I can go to Israel. That was an illegal transportation to Israel.

So you were trying to make two different sets of plans, either go back to your family--

Yeah, either go back to my family or go to Israel.

And you really had no idea how long you would end up being in Budapest.

I didn't know because I had some hopes that I might be able to go to Israel. Although my family was not very much in favor of that. But they agreed that if I cannot come home, I should rather go to Israel than stay in Budapest.

I see.

So your family is in the little town. You have this one sister in Nové Zámke, and you're in Budapest. How long did you end up staying in Budapest?

I stayed in Budapest about eight or nine months.

Do you know what changes happened to your family during that time?

Well, during that time, not great big changes happened. Because then the Hungarians came in and they took over, and it settled down that now we don't have a Czech regime we have a Hungarian regime. So

everybody had to, of course, scrape and scrimp to do to try to make the living. And it was hard because things became scarce already, when the Hungarians came in.

So they tried to make do with whatever there was. And eventually it settled down. But then the problems started with papers again, from the Hungarian regime.

So were you able to ever return to your family?

Yes, yes. I returned home.

Yes, you did after.

After eight or nine months, I returned home. And I was home for a while.

And what did you find as the changes in the family's life under the Hungarian regime?

First of all, they took away the licenses from the store. They took away the license for the tobacco. And they started to make trouble. Jews were not allowed to have this or that or anything. They didn't care how one should live or one should make a living. They took away all the possibilities. So like I said, it was a problem because everything was scarce. And we had to make do with a lot of things less, and with something none.

And that was very hard.

Were Jews required to get special papers at this time?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, especially they started already with that, that if one was a foreigner that he didn't belong there or he wasn't born there, he had to have papers. And that's when they started with my father's, like I told you that he was born on the Romanian side. And they demanded citizenship paper, which he didn't have.

What year did they demand these papers?

In '39 already.

This is still in '39?

Yeah.

So you had been already nine months in Budapest, managed to come home. Then there's this demand for papers.

Yeah. That was already in '40 when I went back.

So in 1940, you had to go back to Budapest.

To Budapest, and try to make those papers. Then in between, I came back home. And then I went back, because those papers were not very easily obtainable.

And since you were the oldest sister at home, you were the one who went to Budapest for your father to try to get these papers.

That's right. That's right.

Each time you went to Budapest, where did you stay? With that family that I worked for. I stayed with that family. And then things changed there too. That was a Jewish family, a couple. But then they lost their license for this pension that they managed. A Christian took it over, and so I couldn't stay there.

So I met some other people that I stayed with. And I had an uncle that made me aware that I have some family there, some distant cousins. And I got in touch with them. And so I lived with them for a while.

And most of your time in Budapest was spent trying to obtain these papers for your father?

Yeah. Yeah, but I also tried to work, to make some money in the meantime, that I needed for pocket money.

What was the hope that for these papers? What did your family think would happen?

The hope for these papers were that if not, my father could be deported any minute. And of course, that would be a tragedy for everybody in the family. You would have to leave your home, because we had a home. We had a beautiful home. And that was a tragedy for us to think that we will have to leave our home and be deported to Romania.

And of course, it didn't help. The papers didn't help at the end anyway.

But you did obtain these papers?

I obtained these papers. But in the end, they didn't help because the family was deported to Auschwitz anyhow.

As the war continued, where did your family stay? Were they able to remain in their town?

They remained in their town until '44.

Until '44.

Until '44.

Were you aware of much Nazi activity among the people in the town?

You didn't see, especially Nazis, but you saw the Hungarians which were probably worse than the Nazis. Because those were called the Niloshes. And they did as much trouble as they could possibly do.

Were the family required to wear any Jewish sign at that time or not?

They were already in '44. In the beginning of '44, they had to wear the stars already. And they started in '41 yet, they deported already some of the townspeople to Poland, which they never returned. And nobody knew where they went. Because some families that didn't have the papers, they were deported already in '41.

What happened to your brothers and sisters and other family members as the war continued?

Well, my younger sisters and brother were still at home. But my older sisters that were married, each one was in a different place. Each one was in a different town. And they had their families to worry about. But my older brother that lived in another small town in that area, was deported in '41 with his wife and two children to Poland, and never came back, and we never heard of him.

During the time from '41, you never heard another thing?

We never heard from them, another thing from my oldest brother, that he had a wife and two children.

As the war continued, when did the changes happen in your family and to you personally?

Well, when I was in Budapest to do those papers, I was interned already in '43. So between '43 between '43 and '44 that my family was deported, I didn't see my family anymore.

So as of 1943, you had no knowledge of what was happening to them?

I didn't have no knowledge. I did have knowledge sometimes with a letter, but that's about all. Because I was interned already in '43, because I was caught just going to the Ministry, and they made a razia in Budapest. And whoever was in their way they just put them in jail for no reason at all, just because he was Jewish.

So when you were interned, you were put in jail?

I was put in jail.

This was the jail in Budapest?

This was the jail in Budapest. It was called the [NON-ENGLISH]. They just, whomever they caught and didn't know what to blame him for, so they put him in there until a certain time. After that, they took me from there to a working camp in Topolya. That was some place that I don't even know where it was, it was someplace--

In Hungary?

In Hungary, yeah.

Now you said, your family had no idea what had happened to you, or you were able to send a letter?

I did send a letter. I did send mail, and I got mail. But of course, it took four weeks for a letter to get there or back.

Tell us about the conditions in the jail, and in the Hungarian work camp.

Impossible. Impossible. What can I tell you? It was horrible. It was dirty. It-- it was like I don't know. It's not for people that didn't commit a crime. It was for people that committed crimes. But we didn't commit any crimes. We were just put there.

There were no trials of any of you? You were just all rounded up.

Absolutely no, just rounded up and put there, and never even bothered to ask what did you do or why are you here.

What kind of work did they have do?

Well, when I went to that camp in Topolya, they did some knitting for the military. They made all kinds of things, socks and shawls and caps, and things like that. And that's what we did.

Were there any non-Jews there too, or were these all Jews?

Yeah, there were political, non-Jews that spoke out or did something against the regime were also interned in that camp.

And the guards in this camp were all Hungarians?

Yeah. Yeah, they were Hungarians. Until '44, in May '44.

What happened in May of 1944?

In May of 1944, they rounded us up, and just the Jews were put on trains and sent to Auschwitz. And May the 8th, I was already in Auschwitz.

I know it's very painful. But can you tell me what happened in the Hungarian work camp when they rounded up the Jews and separated them from the other prisoners?

Well, they just picked out whoever was Jewish. And they went to one other camp, where they rounded up from other places they brought people also, Jews. And we were put there in some dungeon or basement or something that was impossible cold and everything, until they rounded up enough people to fill that train that went to Auschwitz.

What was your condition after having been in the labor camp?

I was still OK. Because I was young. And I could take a lot. And the food it was probably impossible. But when you're hungry, you eat whatever you can. And I think you can take a lot more when you are that young.

As long as there was bread or something also, at that time I tried not to eat non-kosher food yet. So I was very selective even of my ration. What I got in my ration, I tried not to eat the meat, or not to eat certain things. But we did always manage, the Christian interned people, managed to get packages from home, some fruit and some vegetables. So we were not terribly under nourished.

So the non-Jews who were interned there helped the Jewish people who were there?

Yeah, some of them. Some of them.

Do you remember how big was that labor camp? About how many people were interned there?

There were about 160.

And you were in that labor camp how long before you were transported to Auschwitz?

I was there about eight months.

And all that time they had doing knitting?

Yeah. Yeah, of course cleaning, and doing all kinds of things for the management, for all kinds of chores.

Did you still have your own clothes or had they issued you a uniform?

Whatever I had, I still had my own clothes, yeah.

And you just had the clothes that you had been wearing that day when you had been rounded up on the street?

That's right. But I had a package sent from home with some of my clothes, and somebody came in to visit me in Budapest. And they brought me whatever I had there, from my relatives where I stayed.

So in the Hungarian labor camp then you had some clothing and some items?

I had some clothing to change, because I had clothing there where I was. And they brought it in to me. They were allowed to come in. I was not allowed to get out.

So the Hungarians then when they entered people in here, treated them like you should treat people in a prison, if you can say that there's a way to treat people in a prison.

Yeah. Yeah.

Please describe for me what happened when the transport began to Auschwitz.

Well, when we were stuffed in, in that train, and that train was long. And a lot of people were on that transport that went to Auschwitz. Of course, I can only speak of the wagon that I was in. And it was full, stuffed like herring, like sardines. There was no room. There was practically no room to lay down, just maybe stand up or sit down. Well, no comfort whatsoever. And there was nothing to sit down, unless you sit down on the floor. So it was packed.

And when we got to Auschwitz, we were just so exhausted, and so we didn't get no food whatsoever on that road.

Who were the guards who put people in the trains?

Those were already SS. Those were already Germans, and some Hungarian guards. But most of them were Germans already.

Did anyone tell the Jewish people where they were going to be taken?

Absolutely not. They did not tell us where we are going. We tried to ask them. And we didn't even dare to ask questions. Because if somebody asked too many questions, he got beaten up with the rifles, the heavy side of the rifle.

Yes. So how long was the ride from Hungary to Auschwitz?

The ride was about 2 and 1/2 days, or 3 days. I don't remember exactly the time. Were there any stops for people to get off the train or anything?

No. There was no stops to get-- there were stops. But we were not allowed to get out. And we started. Some people were already very delirious. And there were sick people on the train and all kinds. And it didn't help nothing. We were trying to ask for some water, for this or for that. We didn't get any.

And when we got to Auschwitz, we were all very exhausted and hungry, and in a terrible state. And it was already night when we got there. And we were still selected, one right and one left, one right and one left.

So this as you got off?

As we got off the train?

Who were the people doing the selection?

Well, Dr. Mengele. And I remember him like I would see him now. He was a very tall and impressive handsome man. And he just looked you over in a blink of an eye and he decided who was going left and who was going right. And of course, people that were young still and sturdy, they were going right. And the other ones that were older and more exhausted or more shall I say sickly looking, they went left. And we never saw them again.

What about your belongings which you had been able to--

Whatever I had, when I got off the train was left on the train. And I never saw it again.

So you had only the clothes on your back.

Just on my back. And that didn't last long because then I went, and that was taken off from me also.

Tell us what happened when you were admitted to Auschwitz then? You were in the group that went to the right.

Yeah.

What happened to the people?

They took off all our clothes. They cut all our hair. They tattooed us. I'm sure you know what the number looks like. I don't know if you're interested to see it or not. I have the number.

I think that's up to you.

Well, I can show it to you. It's no-- there, I have the number. So we were standing for hours and hours, probably till the wee hours, to wait, we naked mind you. We were naked. And they were told that they are going to delouse our clothes. And we are going to take a bath. But first, they had to cut our hair. And they had to tattoo us while we were naked. But we never got a bath and we never got our clothes back.

And they gave us some rags. Some were striped. And some were not. And each one got one, a piece of rag, and we had to put that on. And by that time, a lot of people fainted, and if we complained for some reason or other, we were very uncomfortable staying naked when SS people were marching up and down and watching us.

These are all women who had been brought up very religiously?

They were all women that were brought up very religiously. And even not just if not, because there were all kinds of people on that transport. There were people that weren't that religious But they were uncomfortable too I'm sure. But I can speak only for myself. And it was horrible. And if you did or say something or even if you showed some uncomfortableness or shyness, the SS felt like hitting you over the head, he just did it, or whatever he felt like doing, he just did it.

And it was a horrible time. It was unbelievable. It was unbelievable then. It's unbelievable now.

Yeah. It seems. How long were you in Auschwitz then?

In Auschwitz, I was just one week luckily. I was after they took everything, and after they gave us those rags, they took us to a block that had a sort of like for cattle-- they were called [NON-ENGLISH], where we were supposed-- those were like bunk beds, but they were not bunk beds. They looked-- they were built like for cattle, I imagine.

They were just racks of wood.

Racks of wood. And five or six were on one rack. And that's where we were supposed to lay down. And that's where we did. And of course, whatever we got to eat was very, very minimum. And even that, in the first days even that what we get if it was a minimum, we couldn't eat it. At least I couldn't. Because we were so dehumanized that we couldn't-- I couldn't eat it.

Was there anybody there who you knew?

Mostly strange people already that we-- some of them that I met in that intern camp in Hungary. Some of them that I met there. And some of them that I met on the train. But by the time we were dehumanized, we were scattered to different blocks.

That week must have been the hardest week in your whole life.

It was the most horrible thing that anybody can ever imagine. I mean the human mind before I could have never imagined that this is possible. And sometimes now I think, I wonder if something like this is possible. But it is. And it's true.

How did you happen to be able to not stay in Auschwitz? Where were you sent that you didn't have to stay there longer?

Well, I stayed there just eight days, because all of a sudden they called it an appell in the morning that

everybody had to get out and be counted and stay. It was called an appell.

That was the morning call to work.

Yeah, call to work. So we were about 2,000 women in that block that came out for the appell And somebody, one person, an SS it was, I cannot tell you the name because I didn't know his name. He just selected some people. And from the 2,000, 60 of us were selected, and were sent with a truck to Gleiwitz. And Gleiwitz was about 50 kilometers from Auschwitz. And there was a factory where I worked there till late in '44.

I'm just going to take a few minutes on what happened there. Again, no one knew why they were being selected or where they were going to be sent.

Nobody knew, no. No, nobody knew why we were being selected. We were just picked out from the 2,000 that was such a huge row of people. It was I think, I can't remember exactly. It was four deep or five deep. And it was a huge long row. And he just picked out some people from that row. And 60 of us were loaded into a truck, and sent to that town, Gleiwitz.

What were the conditions you found in Gleiwitz when you got there?

When we came to Gleiwitz, there was already a camp and some Polish-- some people from Poland were already there working.

Polish Jews?

Polish Jews, yeah.

And this was one of the labor camps that the SS had set up around Auschwitz?

Yeah. Yeah, it was a labor camp that it was separated. On one side there were men that built some barracks and some factories. It was a men's barrack. Excuse me. And on the other side were women.

About how many people were in Gleiwitz?

In Gleiwitz, there was about 650.

Were most of them younger or older people?

Most of them younger people. But there were a few older ones too, most of them young people, working people.

How many different nationalities were there?

From French to Yugoslavians, to Polish, to Czechoslovakians. They were all mixed in there.

What kind of work did they make you do?

The women worked in a factory that produced black soot. There were burners that were burning and going through pipes. And that black soot was used for rubber making, making rubber. But we got up in the morning, and we went to work. We were cleaned sort of, and we came back and we were like the chimney sweepers, because we were all black from that soot.

Now, who trained you to do the work?

Nobody trained us. They just gave us a job and they told us to do it. And if not, we are going to be shot. So we made sure that we are doing whatever we are told to do. And there was always a few people. There was always a superior, a foreman or something, and he told us what to do. And we did it.

Who were the camp authorities here?

The SS people.

They're all German guards?

All German guards.

And who were--

Some were women. Some were men.

But they were all Germans?

They were all Germans.

Who were in charge in the factory? Were the Germans in charge in the factory?

Yeah, the Germans were in charge in the factory. As a matter of fact, they were Germans that wanted to produce and show that they can do a terrific job. And of course, we had to do it.

What were the hours of work?

From 7 o'clock in the morning till 6 o'clock at night.

You mentioned that there were barracks for men and barracks for women.

Yeah. And electric wires were separated.

Can you describe the living conditions in the barrack?

Yeah, we had to make, of course, make sure that everything is tip top clean, the beds were made. If the bed wasn't made like it was supposed to, we could have gotten because there was always an SS woman coming in to check. And before we went to work, we better make sure that it's tip top.

But it was bearable there because as we went to work and we got soap to wash the soot off in the evening. And there were showers. And the food was not completely impossible. It was not, I mean, there was never enough, of course. We were always hungry but whatever we got, it was warm and some soup, and it was winter, and it was terrible.

What kind of clothes were you issued to wear there, if it was cold?

The striped. The striped.

You were still in the Auschwitz clothes?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

They didn't issue anybody a coat of any type?

No, no, no, just those striped dresses or whatever they were.

How long were you in Gleiwitz?

I was in Gleiwitz from May till January of '45.

So you were there about seven, eight months.

Yeah.

So you were a girl 18 years old who had been 10 months injured in Hungary, had this terrible experience in Auschwitz, and then were here. What was your frame of mind when this was happening to you?

Sometimes resigned completely, not caring what happens. Sometimes some hope.

Were there any friends or anybody who supported you?

Just what you made friends right there. You didn't have time too much for friendship. But whatever time you did have, whatever friendship you found, that was it.

You had been so religious in the camp, what did people do about that? Did any religious observances continue?

Well, there was things that I could never do even though, like for instance, when they gave-- there was a kind of a sausage that was made out of blood. I could never eat that, no matter how hungry I was. And if there was something swimming around in the soup that I didn't know what it is, I couldn't eat that.

But otherwise, you adopted. You resigned yourself to whatever it was.

Did anyone try to observe the holidays?

If it was Yom Kippur, I fasted.

Did anyone try to make any social life? Did anyone have the strength for that in the circumstances?

There was no social life, actually. It's just if you were lucky enough to have a friend that you could just spend a little time with and talk, that was already a great help.

What about the local population?

Was there anyone left in the Polish town?

We were closed off with electric wires all around. We could not go out.

Were you aware? Were there Polish people in the town? Did you ever see that there was a town?

We didn't see them, but we were aware that there were. Yeah.

Did anyone ever say what about the local Polish people? Why aren't they doing anything for us?

Well, we knew that they wouldn't come to our aid or to our help or anything like that. Nobody even expected that.

How about the treatment by the German guards?

As long as you were straight and you did your job, and you God forbid did not do anything sometimes even if you didn't do and if a guard had some-- he was in a bad mood or something, he just went and he picked somebody, and let them have it. But as long as you did your job and you didn't cross any boundaries, but it was hard to keep in line, anyway. Because a person is just a person. And sometimes the work was very hard and it was very-- you felt not a human being to work in such conditions as we did.

And you were in Gleiwitz till January 1945?

Till January 1945.

When we pick up on the second tape, I want you to tell us what happened to the camp, the work camp, and to where all the people were evacuated.

OK.

And that's where we'll start the second one.

OK. I'm sorry I get mushy.