

Good morning. My name is Rita Stonehill, a volunteer from the Cleveland section, National Council of Jewish Women. I'm very happy to be participating in this Holocaust Archives Project.

We're even happier that our friend here, Ita, Ita Majzner is with us this morning, and she's going to tell us about her life in Europe and what has gone on. We've had a lovely ride together down, Ita, haven't we? We're referring to this as the Ita and Rita Show.

Again, we thank you for your time and interest of telling us about your past. To begin with, we'd like to have a brief description of how things are today. Where do you live, Ita, and would you tell us your name, again, please?

My name is Ita Majzner. I live in Beachwood, Ohio.

How old are you?

I am 56 years old.

Are you doing any kind of work at the present time?

At the moment, I am not doing anything, just being a housewife.

Good.

Grandmother.

Oh, that's the best, a grandmother. I know from that, too, I'm happy to say. Your husband?

My husband is self-employed. He's got a business downtown.

I see. How many children?

I have three children, two daughters and a son.

Do they live here in Cleveland?

They all live in Cleveland.

I see.

They are married with grandchildren?

My daughters are married and have children. My son is still with me. With us, I should say.

Oh, yes. How many grandchildren?

Three.

Three grandchildren, oh, that's nice. That's what we like to know, who's following us.

We're going to go back in time, as you know, Ita. That's what this is all about. What we'd like to have you do, please, if you will, is to take your time. Take a drink of water. Tell us about what your life was before the war. How old, say in reference to the year 1939, how old were you at that time and where exactly were you living?

Well, in 1939, I was 11 years old.

11 years old.

We were living in Sosnowiec, Poland, a city not far from Germany. You could take the streetcar and go to Germany from there. A lot of people spoke German just as much as Polish in our hometown. We were in Silesia, in that area.

How long a trip was it on the streetcar, you say? Like the Interurban--

The street car went all the way to the German border.

Oh, really?

Just take one.

Isn't that-- I never would have thought. What language was spoken in your household?

We spoke Polish.

Polish.

Polish.

Did they speak German, too?

We spoke very little, Polish and then Jewish, too.

Yiddish?

Yes. Yes.

Well, your town, I've heard-- and I did find it on the map, Sosnowiec-- how large a city was it, would you say at that time.

As I recall, it was a pretty nice sized city, a large city. Because I had once an argument with my girlfriend who was from Rock Island. I told her I bet your city was bigger than hers. She says never.

We looked it up in the dictionary and found out that my city was larger than hers. It was a very industrial city, had a lot of coal mine and iron, steel.

It was a very important section--

Yes, yes.

--to the economics of that area, I'm sure, in Silesia.

Right, and Sosnowiec.

Now about how many Jews would you say were in the city? Was it a large Jewish population?

A large Jewish population, I don't know by numbers exactly.

I see.

But it was big, big Jewish population.

Did you have much of a family there?

Oh, I had a tremendous family.

Oh, really, well, can you tell us something about your family.

Well, to begin with, my mother had five sisters and four brothers.

Five sisters and 4 brothers.

In my immediate family, we were five children, three daughters and two sons.

Where in the family were you?

I was the youngest daughter.

The youngest daughter.

I have one sister that is here with me in Cleveland.

Oh, how grand. That's nice.

That's all there is. The two of us are left out of five children.

So the five of you were home?

We were home.

Together with the parents.

With the parents, yes.

What did your parents do, what kind of work, or how did they provide for the family?

My father was a meat wholesaler.

Oh.

My mother had her own business.

Really?

Yes. She had her own shop, butcher shop. She had her own business.

She was a feminist?

She was buying meat from my father.

Oh. But she was the retail outlet?

She was a retail outlet. We had a home of an apartment building a little bit away from my home town, by streetcar, like, 15 minutes. That's where she had the shop.

Oh, I see. When they bought the meat, where did it come from? Where did the cattle come from?

The cattle came from-- my father used to go out on a buying trip to Poznan, where the Baltic is, way up there.

Oh, way up north?

Way up north, yes. Then, around our hometown, there were places where he went buying for, on buying trips.

I would imagine--

Then he slaughtered them in the public slaughterhouse and sold it to her.

Was it kosher meat?

No. My father never dealt with kosher meat.

I see. I see. But being an industrial area, I wondered if there was much farmland that they'd be raising cattle. But it was an adequate--

By us, not, but not far from us there was farmland.

I see.

Lots of farms.

Well, was that a very productive occupation? Was there money?

Yes. We were middle class people, pretty good, well-to-do.

I see. Well, because there were two incomes, which--

We also had a big house of our own with 24 tenants in it, which we had to leave.

This is a large apartment.

Apartment building, yes.

Yeah, yes. Did you do any work at the family, then, or to participate?

No, no. I never worked.

You had--

I was just 11 years old.

So your business was going to school and learning?

Going to school, going to two schools-- I went in the morning to public school. In the afternoon, I went to Bais Yaakov.

Oh.

I went to a Jewish school.

I see. Were there boys and girls together?

No, not in that school. It was strictly a Jewish girls' school.

I see. So that's where you got your background somewhat--

Yes.

--in Judaica?

Right.

Well, in your large apartment building, and in the area there--

Was like in a suburb, away from the main city. We lived in it there up to 1937. But in 1937, they made a pogrom on us.

Oh. But when you say they--

The Polish people.

The Polish, the army?

Not the army.

Your neighbors?

The neighbors, yes, that we gave credit to. Then we had to move away. Overnight, we moved out of our own house, our own building.

Well, in your immediate area, were there more Jews? Or was it equally distributed between non-Jews and Jews?

When our house stood, our apartment building is mostly, I would say, 25% Jews.

I see. But you folks were the landlords?

We were the landlords, yes. One night, we just had to move out. Because they threw big stones, big bricks into our house. And the police stood outside, did nothing about it.

This was in 1937.

1937.

Where, when you left the home then, where did you go?

We rented a place in the city of Sosnowiec, right in the mainstream, in the center of the city.

Oh. Well, was the atmosphere or the climate more favorable there?

Yes, most of the Jewish people lived there. It was, like, a Jewish community.

Oh, I see. So you perhaps were more relaxed there.

Relaxed, yes.

Well, at least you were away.

Yes.

What happened with the property?

Well, it still was ours. But we rented our house, our apartment. We rented the store. My mother gave up the store then.

Oh. And things were beginning to get--

Yes. We moved in right into the mainstream of the Jewish life in the city.

Did your mother and dad, how then did they earn a living?

My father still did the same kind of work that he did before. Because he used to go to the main slaughterhouse. My mother gave up her business.

The retail business?

The retail business because the man that rented our rooms in our house had his own business he opened there. So we were comfortable, as far as income.

Yes.

My mother became a hausfrau.

Yes. Well, tell me the difference, say, in background, the Jewish background, say, as far as celebrating the holidays or belonging to a synagogue. Was there any difference when you lived out in the suburbs as to when you moved in to the city?

No.

Did you participate?

There was no difference. Because my father belonged to three synagogues, one in our hometown in Sosnowiec, and then another big rabbi there, he belonged there where he went once a year for holidays. It was a big honor to go there.

So our religious life has not changed. My father belonged to three rabbis, so he was going here instead of there in the city rather than outside of the city.

Your own personal education, then, it meant that you changed schools?

When I was living in our house in the suburbs, away from Sosnowiec, which was only about 15 minutes ride by streetcar. I went to strictly with all Polish children to school.

In the suburbs?

I was the only Jewish girl in the classroom.

Oh.

On the days that they had religion, which they did, I was excused and I just walked around, yeah.

Because the religion that they were--

It was Catholic religion.

I see.

They were teaching Catholic. They did not-- never imposed that I should do it. I just walked out of the classroom. I don't know, once or twice a week. I can't remember.

So they were aware of that?

Oh, yes. They were aware that I was a Jewish girl.

Yes.

Very much so, but then, when we moved away from our own house into the center of the city, then I went to strictly Jewish school with all Jewish children.

I see. That was an all day?

All day public school also till 1 o'clock. Then I went to Jewish school.

Oh, you mean [CROSS TALK]?

Public school.

Public school? That was run by the Polish government?

Government school, but only Jewish children went there.

I see.

Girls only.

Was the curriculum--

The same.

--similar and the same?

The same. Same, no change.

Did you continue with the same Jewish school, then?

I did till the war broke out. Till 1939, I went to that school.

Did Zionism enter into the family life at all? Were there Zionist groups?

Yes.

Did the family participate in them? Or can you tell us a little bit about--

Not my father and mother, I don't think so. But I have older sisters and they belonged to clubs. I was beginning to--

Oh, really?

--to belong to.

Do you remember the names of any of the groups?

I don't remember. But I know one was Betar, that everybody knew about. But I was a little too young for that. Then we had-- and I don't remember exactly what it was.

Did girls participate in Betar, too?

Yes, they did. Yes, they did. But there was another, "Shomer Hatzaim." I don't remember exactly the name. But we belonged to it. I belonged to it.

Your older?

My older sisters did, with you know, boys and girls. I was still there.

Were there any other political organizations that the family identified with?

No, no.

Or political parties, was father involved much in the local politics?

No. They all used to talk politics a lot at home. Everybody talked politics. But they did not belong to any particular party. It was just polit-- people sit around, talk politics.

You said, I believe earlier, that the language that you spoke really was Polish.

Polish, yes.

And Yiddish.

My first language was Polish. I mean, very, very little Yiddish I talked.

That was the language in the home as well as--

In the home, yes.

--out of the home? In the public school, was that the language of instruction?

Right, Polish.

What was the language of instruction in the Jewish school?

Jewish, how to read a Jewish newspaper, how to pray, also, the prayer book, and how to read and write Jewish.

I see.

Not Hebrew, Hebrew I took. I had a Hebrew teacher.

Oh that came to your house?

Came to the public school.

Oh.



There we had a Hebrew teacher. They used to come to public school and gave us Hebrew lessons.

Was that voluntary to take?

No, it was just a regular classroom.

I see.

They called it religion, like, religion instruction, religious instruction. But really we were learning Hebrew.

That was in place of--

And then the Bible, you know.

Did you read the Bible or study the Bible in Hebrew or--

In Polish.

In Polish.

All the stories in Polish, just like here.

Oh. Now in your home, were there particular books around that you can remember?

A lot of Jewish books, I had a very, very religious grandmother used to live with us, my daddy's mother. She had a lot of religious books. She was very, very Orthodox lady, very religious.

Did the movies mean anything to you growing up? Were there picture shows around that maybe you went to with--

Yeah. There were picture shows. I remember my very first picture show. My aunt took me.

I have an aunt who is in Montreal. She's only three years older than I am. She was like a girlfriend, my mother's sister. She's still here.

She took me to very first movie. It was Laurel and Hardy. In Europe, they were called [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

Oh, really?

But here they were Laurel and Hardy, I recognized them.

They were Polish subtitles?

Everything was in Polish, yes.

Or was the voice dubbed in?

The voice was dubbed in.

I see.

I don't think there was voice. Excuse me. I think there were titles. There was crawlers, yeah. Yeah. I don't think there was any voice. It was silent.

They were very entertaining.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I remember it very well.

Can you remember any other kind of entertainment or sports that the family might have done, the children?

The family, we used to-- in the winter time, we did a lot of skiing, skating.

Where did you go skating?

On the streets.

Oh, you mean--

We skated on the street.

You skated on the street?

Right. Then there was a place where they used to freeze the water for the winter. It was like an arena, and we would go skating there.

Oh That was--

Lovely.

--pleasant.

Yes.

But when you went skiing, was that very close by?

Skiing, I did not go. But a lot of people did go.

They did go.

Yes. They went. It was beautiful places to ski.

In the summertime, when the children were not at school, were there vacations?

Vacation in the mountains, we were three hours away from the mountains.

Mountains, which mountains?

Beautiful, in Bielsko, in Biala. I don't know.

Right in Poland?

Right, three hours away from us, bordering on the Czechoslovakia, too. We used to go there. We could see, from the mountains, Czechoslovakia.

Oh.

It was very beautiful. We stayed there all summer.

That must have been--

Not my mother and father, it was just the children they send with it.

Oh, really? Well, who took care of you?

With my older sister and a helper, a maid.

I see. In your own place there?

We had rented several rooms, two rooms from a farmer, anyone that lived in the village.

I see. Was the idea to get you out of the city--

Out of the city for the summer, yes.

Where it's hot. Where you could have a good time?

A good time, was beautiful, the swimming pool.

Were you a swimmer?

Yes. I'm a swimmer from home. There was a-- what do you call it? The falls, small falls, we used to sit under them.

Oh.

Beautiful lake, right in the middle of the city.

Very, very pretty.

Just lovely.

Well, I can certainly see where that is--

We used to go mountain climbing a lot.

When you think back, your general lifestyle and everything, did you have many illnesses during your young life up to age 11?

No, I don't recall. I was very happy.

A typical pre-teenager. Did you have any special interests or hobbies?

No, not at my age. I liked to read. I liked to read. We used to go Saturday to the show, Saturday afternoon.

Oh. Well, it sounds very much like my growing up here in middle class America.

Yes.

Because we all went to picture shows on Saturdays.

Oh, I know.

I saw Laurel and Hardy.

Right.

Are there other things that you'd care to tell us about in your younger years of growing up? We know about your schooling now. Were there plans made? If you were 11, the older children were being planned for.

Yes.

What were the ages of your sisters?

I have one sister, the older one, she is--

The difference, how many years older?

It's about eight.

She's eight years older than you?

Yes. She was married already.

Oh, oh, I see. So she was not living at home?

No, not at the time, not before the war, no. She got married in-- I think it was '38 or '39. I don't remember.

Oh, and she had left?

She had her own beautiful apartment and a business in the middle, in the center of the city. She had a hardware store.

It's difficult, probably, to think at age 11 what you were thinking of for your future, but did you think of--

I was not thinking. But I was happy.

You were enjoying your day-to-day?

I enjoyed very much. First of all, the town was divided into sections. I would call it suburbs here. It was Sosnowiec and old Sosnowiec. Sosnowiec, it was older than the center of the city. Anyway, it's called old Sosnowiec.

Then there was little in Pogon. There was my grandmother used to live there and my grandfather. We used to go there all the time. I just loved to go to my grandmother's house.

I think everybody.

I loved it.

That's a typical feeling, worldwide.

Over there, I had lots of relatives. Then we used to go to [INAUDIBLE]. My mother's brother and sister lived across from each other, my aunt and uncle. They had children. So we were always visiting, a lot of visiting.

Now you've told us, of course, about the pogrom in the suburb. Were there any other anti-Semitic events or attitudes--

Yes

--that you can remember?

They were quite-- I remember--

Would you like to--

--my sister had that store on the main street in our hometown. They were walking in front of him with placards and saying don't buy by the Jews.

Was that before--

Before the war.

Yes.

They were walking right in front of the store with those signs.

Even prior to that time--

Prior.

--when you were growing up, were things a little bit more pleasant, or was there an atmosphere of anti-Semitism?

I tell you, when I lived in Sosnowiec, in our hometown, in our own house, I had no problems with anybody. They accepted me. Once in a while, somebody called me a Jew, or this, or that. But I paid no attention to it. I was very contented.

But when we moved to the center of the city, then I saw these guys walking around with placards and saying don't buy by Jews, Jews go to Palestine, and all these things, openly, before the war. I remember that well. It bothered me a little, not too much, because there was nothing I could do about it.

Then the other Jews in Sosnowiec must have experienced the same way. Were there any of your non-Jewish neighbors at all who extended themselves, or were--

During the war?

Any non-Jewish friends, would you say? No, prior to the war, before--

Prior to the war, we had every-- my father dealt with only non-Jewish people. They were supposedly all our friends.

Yes.

Supposedly, don't forget.

I see.

But when the war broke out, we found out differently, that we had hardly any friends.

Well, that's what we're at the point now that I want to ask. When World War II did break out, you were aware there was a war?

Oh and how-- very much.

Yeah. Would you sort tell us something about the beginnings of the rumblings?

I tell you, when the war broke out, my mother was not at home and my father were not there.

What time of the year?

That was in the fall of 1939. I'll never forget it, because we just came back from the mountains, the children and the maid and my sister and all. We got settled in our house, in our apartment. Then my mother and my father used to go away for four weeks.

Oh.

Just the two of them. My mother had arthritis, so she went for baths.

Baths, oh, yes.

It runs in our family. We have bad legs. So it came to a point where when she came back, already she lost her luggage. The luggage never arrived from the place that she came home from the baths because the trains weren't running on time, nothing.

And the war had started?

The war is just about to start. We felt no war, because the Germans just walked over the border and they were here. They were received very, very, very graciously by the Polish people. There was no--

No fighting going on.

--no, not in Sosnowiec, because they just crossed the border. And here you have buddies. They were buddies immediately, but we were in trouble.

The Poles and the Germans were the buddies.

Sure, of course.

Yes.

Of course. There was no resistance. They didn't shed one drop of blood in taking our hometown, nothing. They just came in and here they were.

Yeah. And then how did it show itself up to the Jews? What was the beginning of--

That was terrible. Then I realized the terrible beginning. When they occupied our hometown, we were in the shelters in the basement. We sit-in the shelter. We had shelters in the basement.

There were air raid sirens?

Yes, we heard sirens and we went to the shelter.

Yet not a shot was really fired?

Nothing, nothing. My father was not home. He was in the slaughterhouse, a little bit far away. No one was allowed to go out on the street, not a soul.

I remember a cousin of mine that lived not far from the slaughterhouse. My father went there to their house when they occupied our home. My mother was so worried whatever could happen to Dad.

She was a reddish blonde. And she took a chance and walked all the way to our house to tell us that Daddy is OK. This cousin lives in New Jersey now.

Oh.

I love her.

I can understand.

She came and she relieved us all, because we were so worried what's going to happen to Dad. Anyone that was on the street was shot immediately. They didn't want anyone on the streets.

Well, then, she took practically such a chance, her life, to come and tell us that Dad is in her house.

When were you allowed finally out of the shelters then?

I don't remember exactly. The following day or so, we got out. There was no sense in sitting there in the basements-- in the cellars, not basements. Those were cellars.

What changes then took place in the family?

Oh, they were so fast and so drastic that it was bewildering. We happened to live in a building that was only six years old. When we moved, it was a very nice apartment.

In the city?

It was six years old. It had water, and it had bathroom facilities, everything, just like here. It was a young building. The minute the Germans saw this building-- and just before the war, our landlord lived in the same house. They added another addition in front. In front of that building, they added another addition.

The Germans did?

No, no, my landlord. So it was even newer. The front was even newer.

The building was built in such a way there was a courtyard like this. On the bottom, on the lower floor, there were little, tiny shops. We lived upstairs. There were shops.

It was called Bazar Centralny, central bazaar, a bazaar. And it was called Bazar Centralny. I remember that.

As soon as the Germans occupied the home town, and they saw this building, they wouldn't let us live there for five minutes. We had to get out, out, but fast. They opened a shop. They made a shop out of it to make a-- Schweidler, the shop owner, Schweidler.

Yeah.

They were making uniforms for the German soldiers. The whole town of people was working there now. We had to get out.

So how much time did they give you?

Not too much time, I don't remember exactly time. But I remember that one of our customers bought most of our furniture because we had nowhere to go. Then they took us a little way from the center of the town and they gave us one room on the third floor and one room on the fourth floor.

In another apartment?

In the Jewish-- we had to share.

Yes.

We got those two rooms, my family.

From the large spacious--

We had a two bedroom, dining room, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, which was very comfortable in Europe. We got one room, one bedroom on one floor and one bedroom on the other floor and kitchen privileges, to some extent. Although I remember my mother put in a little oven into the bedroom. It's the way we cooked.

We were immediately disposed of our apartment. Could not live there.

And your father's business, could he continue with that?

No, that ceased to exist. They were slaughtering for a while. My father did nothing. He was out a lot of money, because the war broke out the first, when he collected money. We were not in a very good shape at the time, because our money was in the business.

I remember my mother was very upset. The war broke out the first of the month, or close to it. Everybody owed us money, but nobody paid.

When you moved then, how many of you moved? You had the one married sister.

That's all. My other sister, myself, my two brothers, and my father and mother. I believe my youngest brother went to live with my married sister.

Oh.

Because she had a little bit more room to offer. That's all there was, beds, and we had a little stove that we could cook a little bit.

I'm sure it was such a contrast and an uncomfortable--

Unbelievable, unbelievable.

--and you certainly were concerned of what the next step.

We were happy that we got that. We were quite happy.

Were there other members of the family, your aunts and uncles?

They didn't live there, see? They lived in different areas. At least at that time, they were not being bothered. They were not bothered by anyone. But we were the only family that had to move immediately.

Well, the Jewish community there in your hometown, did they communicate, the families together? Was there a feeling of being united in this problem?

To a certain extent. Well, we had to. See, they offered the rooms. So that was through the Jewish community. It was called the gmina.



And the head of the gmina was-- Marin. Marin was his name. He was the head.

He was the head of the Jewish--

The head of the Jewish community in Sosnowiec. They made all the arrangements for us to get the rooms, you know? We didn't do it on our own, because really, people didn't want to let loose of their own rooms. All of a sudden, you get--

But he accepted the orders from the Germans?

He accepted the orders. Well, just he worked with the Germans quite close. Yeah. I don't know if it was good or bad. But that's the way it was.

As you look back, it's probably difficult to say. Were there other choices that could have been--

For us?

--done? Mhm.

Not then and there, but later on, we did have choices. We did have choices, and we didn't take opportunity.

I see.

Yes, later on, like, in 1941 maybe. This was 1939. We stayed with them.

Well, you were in these two rooms then--

Oh, yes.

--for how long, would you say? Or what was the next step, if--

The next step, we were put into the ghetto.

Oh. There was a ghetto in your hometown?

They took another part, section of the town, very near the railway, railroad, and they made a ghetto. In other words, there were people living there, you know, Polish people in Srodula.

Living in the ghetto?

Where we had the ghetto, there were people living there, Srodula. They took all the Polish people out of there and gave them rooms apparently somewhere else. I would imagine so. We all went to Srodula, to the ghetto.

I see. So you were really two years in this small--

I don't know how long exactly. As far as dates, I'm not very good at it. It's fading. But I know that from there, we went to Srodula.

Did all your other Jewish neighbors?

Oh, everybody went, all of the people. Then we were all in two ghettos, one in Srodula and one in old Sosnowiec. They made two ghettos.

Oh.

Both were near the railroad tracks, unfortunately.

What were your quarters like in the ghetto?

Oy. I forgot my grandmother was with us, too.

Oh.

You know, my grandmother-- there's a story about her, too-- was in the United States. She came to the United States in 1937 or '36. I'm telling you, I'm not so sure about dates, or maybe '35. I don't remember.

But I know she came here to live with my uncle-- my father had a brother here in Cleveland-- and my aunt and their children. She came over here to live with them because my uncle wanted her very badly. She stayed here for six months and came back to Europe. She contracted polio here, too, by the way.

Oh, my.

She was limping. But she didn't think it was kosher enough. My aunt, poor baby, she changed all her dishes. She threw everything out from the house to accommodate this lady. It was not good enough.

Because when she saw my cousins eat without a [? Kippah ?] or drive to a shul, for to her it was sacrilegious. And she could not take it. She came back to Europe.

So she went back to Poland.

That's why we had Grandma with us all the time, up to the ghetto.

Well, how many rooms did you have in the ghetto?

Two rooms, two tiny rooms, like two attics, really. You see, I'm bad on dates. By then, my other sister was married. She married her childhood sweetheart.

Because they were supposed to go away to the Russian border, to Russia, and my mother said you're going to go unless you're married. You can go if you marry. So they got married. They never did go to Russia, but they had a baby, a beautiful little girl.

Oh.

So they were with us, too.

And your brother-in-law?

My brother-in-law and my sister and her baby, then, again, the little brother was with my other, my older sister, because there was just no room for us, and my grandmother.

Well, the family, at least, was together.

At least we were together.

Yeah.

But why? Why am I jumping so far ahead?

Was there something in between that we've left out?

Oh, yes.

Please, please tell me.

The Germans, it came to a point they were trying to get us a little bit crazy, not a little bit, a lot. They tried to confuse us. So they did it very well, I must say.

Sometimes in 1941, I don't remember exactly the date, they told us to all get together on one spot. It was the place where we used to go skating, a big arena from a school.

Outdoor?

Outdoor, it was in the summertime. They said we should all go there and get together. I don't know why. I don't know the reason for it.

But I know my mother got us very well-dressed. Everybody wanted to look good. I don't know. I don't understand why.

We got together there several thousand people, many, many people. They kept pushing us together, pushing us together, pushing. I don't remember how did this happen.

Did somebody speak?

Oh, wait a minute. Pushing us together, nobody-- just the Germans were there. It started drizzling. The more they pushed us, the more the odor started, You know, BO. It was just horrendous.

Then they started to divide us on that arena. I'm trying to remember. My sister, the younger one, and the older one, the one that's between, the one that got just married, she was pregnant. They kept pushing her.

We were standing around her like this, trying to hold her, to save her. Because people were just pushing. They couldn't help it. They were pushed by somebody else.

Then they started to make selections. You go here, you go here, you go here, you go here, you go here. Those selections, this A went to Auschwitz, B went to working camp, C went where older people. You could see right away that they put they pushed the older people--

Your whole family? Your parents, too?

We were together.

The whole family?

We were together. But all of a sudden, we saw what was going on. The older people were to one side, the children to another side, the younger ones they were going in a different-- and they started selecting people.

This was before you went to the ghetto.

This was before I went to the ghetto.

Before the ghetto.

Before the ghetto. Those selections were horrendous. They took some of the people out.

Then there was three days we were standing there, for three days and three nights. There was no room to sit down. We

were clumped so close together that you could not breathe.

Then they took some of the people away. Afterwards, they took those groups of people into the houses that were left. There were houses left in the city.

So we were in somebody's apartments. They pushed us. In Europe, most apartments are like a courthouse and a courtyard, and then all around, the apartment. Well, on a different street, and we went to this side of the apartment, and somebody went this side, and there was a smaller one.

So your family was still together, though?

I was with my mother and my father and my two brothers, or my one brother. My older sister got out right away. Some people they let out right away. They let them go back home. Others they send away God knows where. Others were selected to go who knows where.

Anyway, I remember being in this house. There was nothing to eat. We found a piece of cabbage. You were in a strange house with strange furniture, strange beds, but we made myself at home, because that's where they put us.

I didn't know where my sister and my brother-in-law were, the pregnant sister. I didn't know where they were. All I knew that I was holding on to my mother and father and the brother.

Then all of a sudden they say rouse, out. Back to the courtyard we went. We went down to the courtyard.

Who do you think I see? From every courtyard came different people, my sister with her husband and his family. So we gathered together.

Then a little house, a small little apartment, my aunts were hollering and screaming. Please help us. We were out in the courtyard and they were there, ready to go already to Auschwitz.

This is the last time I saw. And they were saying please help us, help us, get us out of here. But we couldn't. We just stood there like dummies.

We just stood there. We looked at them. We couldn't do a thing with them. I remember my aunt, she was crying. Her daughter, I just see them now.

We stood there. We couldn't move, go near that house after they made, again, selections, I don't know what. They tried to drive us crazy.

My brother-in-law, very smart fellow, very, very, very smart fellow, he died recently. He was in Australia, my ex-brother-in-law, I should say, because my sister's gone. He took us in a little corner. He says, look here.

When we go back upstairs, let's stay together. He took his parents and asked my sister. We went back to the house, the same apartment building, went upstairs again.

My brother-in-law says, you know, I don't like this situation here. Something is going to happen. You are all going to go right to the railroad tracks.

Sure enough, just like he said, a few hours later, raus, raus, the Germans are coming. They want everybody out again. But he told us before, he says, look here. You see this bedroom?

He watched it. There's a bedroom in there. I'm going to bring you a pail of water. And he found a cabbage in the house. I don't know how.

He put that water on the windowsill. He says when I heard the Germans coming down there, and he didn't want a lot of

people to know that he's doing it, when I hear the Germans coming up to our floor-- they had chifforobes, big chifforobes in Europe, for clothes and linens. He put a chifforobe against the door.

He says I'm going to open the chifforobe. You all go in. I'll put that against. They won't know there's a bedroom in there.

He was blocking off that room.

He was blocking off that room. He says you all go in and be as quiet as you possibly can. Fine.

I followed him. I said, what's going to happen to you? Don't worry about me. I'll take care of myself.

So here we heard already rouse, rouse. They're coming. The Germans are coming. We could hear them.

He quickly opened the chifforobe and pushed us all in. Would you believe that my father wouldn't go in? Something came over him. He says, I'm not going.

Well, he couldn't hesitate. It was too late. He pushed everybody, the children, us in, and my mother, and my father, his parents, and my sister, and closed it, and ran. He ran like hell.

Your brother-in-law?

My brother-in-law. Whatever happened to my father, he could care less at the time. The man got stubborn. My mother's sitting there and she says, oh, my husband is not here.

So your father was out alone. My father was out. He was selected to be sent to Germany to working camp.

Oh.

Later on, we found it out. We're sitting there quietly. They put the like this over the children's mouth they shouldn't make a peep. They were young children. You can get hysterical anytime.

We hear the Germans knocking with a stick. Raus, raus, raus, never. All of a sudden, quiet. Everybody was gone. That's how we saved ourselves. Isn't that ridiculous? I can't believe it.

Thanks to your brother-in-law.

Thanks to my brother. That brother-in-law was really something.

But your father, at that point?

My father was selected to go to work to Germany because he was out.

You found about this later?

Later, we found it out. Then it was very quiet. The building all of a sudden deadly quiet, not a soul.

Frighteningly quiet.

Frighteningly. No one, no one is there. Sure enough, when it quieted down, and the city came back to its supposedly normal life because this things happen so rapidly, he came and took us out of there, my brother-in-law.

I asked him, how did you run away? He had a plan, he says. He went up on the roof and jumped from roof to roof to roof to roof and came down on the same street, down to that big doors to open the apartment buildings.

On the main floor?

It's called [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], yeah. I'm referring in Polish because that's a gate, a big gate. I have sometimes difficulty.

It's all right.

By the gate stood the superintendent from the building, a Polish guy. He says, I want to get out. He wouldn't let him get out. He would not let him get out.

The guard would not let your brother--

The superintendent from the building, the Polish super.

Would not let your brother out?

He would not. They were chasing him because he tipped a chimney over and they saw the stones coming down. But he kept running until he got to this particular building. He went down and he wanted to get out.

This guy would not let him get out. But he was a young fellow and he gave him a good zip right in his face and left him there and ran. Then he came for us.

Then where did you go?

Then we went back to our little houses, the little rooms, right back. You know what? My grandmother, because she had polio, and she was dragging, we didn't take her with us. Imagine if we would take her with us, she would never have come back.

So she was back in the house?

She was in back in the house.

Waiting.

Waiting. Then we came all back.

This was several days? This just went on.

This went on for a few days, in and out, and building and this, and from the arena. Then they gave us cards. For me, they gave a green card, for my mother, yellow card. Green was supposed to be a good card to have. You're a working person. You're young and you're working.

So people used to sell anything to get a green card, which meant nothing, really. But psychologically, they got us so messed up that my grandmother got a yellow. So yellow couldn't be good. My mother got yellow.

I had a green card. My brother-in-law, the same brother-in-law, he got a green card. They gave us cards. In other words-

You had working cards, but there was no work?

We worked. Yes, I worked.

What did you do?

I'll tell you. I want to finish this first, because this is a horrendous story. But I did work. I did work before. I worked for that Schweidler that took over the factory. I'll come to it later.

So we came home, but minus my father. My sister got out, the oldest one with my little brother. They were young. They gave them green cards. This sister, we saved with us, with the pregnant sister. Her husband was there.

We came home, no father. For money, there's such a thing-- money is such a powerful thing, and connections. And it's true today.

We got to the big deal in the gmina there and people. And they found out that Daddy is there and there.

So you heard?

We got him out. We got him out of there. We got our father out. He wasn't sent to Germany to work.

Oh.

The family was again intact, I want you to know. We were once more lucky.

You were able to make a deal?

Yes, yes, yes.

With a German person?

No, with a Jewish person.

Who was in charge--

Who was in charge, of charge, of charge, you know. We got our father out. What happened, I remember that afternoon very distinctly, because we were in this one room in the kitchen.

Oh, the people that we lived, that gave us the one, they never came back. Steinitz was their name. They went to the gathering and they never came back. So we were sitting in their kitchen now. My family was sitting in the kitchen.

This same brother-in-law comes up. He says, look here. There's absolutely no future for us here. There isn't.

I have connections. Let's sell. And forget you [INAUDIBLE] and your clothes and your silver and your furs. Forget everything. Sell everything we can. By then, we didn't have much to sell anymore. Get rid of everything. It's not important.

And buy papers. We're going to go to Hungary on Aryan papers. I have somebody who's going to give us paper. We're going to Hungary. Over there, it's less confusion.

I'll never forget my father piped up. We're going to go to Hungary for, he says. The war is not going to last more than three, six more months.

The world?

The war is not going to last much longer than six months. It lasted six years. He says, what are we going to run? What for?

Then his parents agreed with my parents and we stayed there. Would you believe that? Would you believe? Then we really had to go to the ghetto.

Later on, after that?

We were sorry we didn't listen to that boy. He was such a smart man. He was such a man. I admired him.

What was his name, your brother-in-law?

Heniek Kestenberg.

Henny.

Heniek. Isn't that something?

He loved my sister dearly. You know what?

Did she have the baby?

She did have the baby.

In the ghetto or before?

In the ghetto. I don't know. The baby, maybe, was a year old when I went away from the ghetto.

I see. Can you tell us anything more before the ghetto story to finish up this particular part, Ita?

I was going to say something and I forgot. Can you believe me?

Yes, I believe you.

I don't remember. I don't remember.

It's easy.

Oh, yes, I worked. I worked.

Yes.

You know who I worked for? Schweidler, I told you, took over our house and made a factory for uniforms and stuff for military. We used to make--

Uniforms?

--for the bullets, to put in the leather stuff we used to make, in uniform. But he had a mother, a German lady, tall, she was about 6 feet tall with black hair. Now I realize it was dyed.

She used to be called the Grandma. And she opened a Grandma. She opened a little shop within the shop with young children. Then when we were making leather flowers, flowers out of leather, and shipping them to Germany. I worked in the Grandma.

Oh, my goodness.

That's what I worked. I was making leather flowers during the war.

You got paid in?



Paid? Nothing. You just worked. You were just happy. Many times they made selections, she hide us. She tried to keep her own workers, you know, not interfering with her business.

That was right there in your neighborhood?

Right there in Sosnowiec. But then, from the ghetto, I used to work by her, too. I worked for her. We were about 60 girls there.

We made leather flowers, corsages, out of leather, dyed the leather to color. They were beautiful.

I'm sure they were.

We were sending them to Germany. This is what I wanted to tell you about.

So you worked with your hands. It wasn't exactly sewing, but it was manipulating.

Then, then later on we were sewing. We're sitting on a horse and sewing those holders for--

Yes, for the bullets.

Not for the bullets, for what they explode, grenades, you know, that the soldiers wore on it. We used to sit in a horse and sew these.

Sew them on sewing machines?

No. With an awl, we make a hole. With two needles, you were sewing them.

Oh, it was real, real leather.

It was real stuff.

We're going to take a short break now, Ita.

OK. We'll continue again in a little bit.

OK.