

All right, well, we'll continue our story. We're finding out so much. And we appreciate what you're doing. When we stopped, you were telling us about making the leather flowers.

Yeah.

That was when you were at the one place.

Yeah, I used to work. I worked there.

Yes.

I worked.

And how long did that continue? You were now about 13 years old?

About 12, 13.

12, 13, something like that.

Yeah, something like that.

And this was in the main city in the apartment.

In Sosnowiec.

Yes. And your family was--

The flower shop was in Sosnowiec.

And Father came back home?

And Father came back. And from then, we went to the ghetto, Srodula.

And so this was shortly after the--

Shortly after this.

How long were you involved--

I don't know, maybe--

--do you think, maybe, making the flowers?

Oh, I was working in the ghetto. I went out. I went out of the ghetto to work for the flowers.

Oh, you came back in. That was where your green car--

When they put us into the ghetto, they let the people that were working out of the ghetto to go to work. And then they used to catch them there and send them out to work somewhere into Germany. We were not sure of anything anymore.

But you were able to continue working.

But she, whenever they came to her part of the factory, she hide us, believe it or not. She was selfish enough for her own

business that she hid us. And when they came, she says, I don't have any girls here. And then we went back to the ghetto. So you were not sure in the ghetto and you were not sure at work anymore.

This was a daily thing. You'd go every day.

A daily thing. You went to work every day, every day.

Did you get food where you worked? Or how did you manage with food in the ghetto?

No, we didn't get food. No. My-- we tried-- my mother tried to get some food into the house, talking about food. And it was very difficult to feed the--

Were you the only one in your family who was working with the leather flowers?

Yes. I was the only one that was working in the-- my father, they didn't give work. My mother couldn't work. My sister was a young mother. So it was me and my-- I have a little-- a brother, younger than me. He didn't. I was the only one that-- I was already a grown, mature person at 13 or so. And the ghetto was very difficult to get food.

And my mother sort of had hoped that our Polish friends will bring us some food. A few did. I don't say that none of them did. But once, they brought us pigeons-- listen-- and a bread, whatever we could get.

And it was very tough living in the ghetto. Two tiny rooms-- I think the height of the rooms were like seven feet tall-- for small people. I don't know. Maybe poor people lived there. That's all they could afford. And it was on a hilly area, hilly area, little tiny house, huts-like, tiny houses, small houses. And from one hill, you could see to another.

And one day, I remember, my mother brought-- got pigeons, or she got some non-kosher meat, or something she got. Somebody gave her. And my grandmother, she was a very Orthodox lady, extremely.

So she said-- she was with us in the ghetto. And every day, she had a pot of her own. She would not mix with us even in the ghetto. Her religious beliefs were so strong. And there was hardly anything to eat. She got a potato every day. She cooked that potato in her pot with water. And that's what she survived on. She lived on it.

And my mother got so upset. She says, my god, how long can she survive like this? And once, when she brought the pigeons, my grandmother hit the ceiling. She brought pigeons home for us to eat.

And then for days, there was no food. And she was cooking that potato with the water. There was more water than potato. And she was getting very-- she was not a big or a tiny woman to begin with. And my mother was the daughter-in-law. Now, I realize it. When I was a child, I didn't know mother-in-law, daughter-in-law. Those things didn't bother me. So she--

You said, your mother was the daughter-in-law?

The daughter-in-law, yes.

I see.

Because my mother's parents and my other-- they were together-- not anymore, not in the ghetto. They were already-- when we got-- from the gathering, they were all taken away. When we came back from the gathering, there was two sisters of my mother's gone with her family, my grandfather, and my grandmother. They were all gone, like they did not exist.

And you never, ever heard from that part of the family.

I saw them in that house. The last time I saw him was in that house, in that courtyard, when they were screaming,

please, help us, please, help us. And we were surrounded by Germans. We couldn't even go near the house.

That was the very end?

They-- like magic, they disappeared. So they were-- the part of the family was gone from there. And then in the ghetto, my mother was so mad. She was getting angry and angry when my grandmother used to use that little pot. They had a little oven and that pot.

And so one day, we got some food. I don't remember what it was-- pigeons or whatever she got, whomever she got from. And she took that pot, my grandmother's pot. And she says, you see? You see this pot? She threw it out the window. She says, your God wants us to eat this. So you are going to eat. And you're going to eat what we're eating.

What was grandma's reaction to that?

I have no idea. But I remember these words she said. And my mother was not a non-believer. She was also a religious person. But when you have to feed a family of five, or six, or seven, or eight, and there's nothing coming in every day, and they give you rations of zero, you have. And that was-- well, I tell you what, when we got to the ghetto-- again, I'm going back to my brother-in-law. I wish he was here.

He heard there's going to be a Oblawa. Oblawa is a Polish expression, they're going to catch you unexpectedly. They got me-- you see, they ask every day. When we lived in the city, they ask-- like today, they ask for 10 kilo gold, or they ask for 20 kilo silver, or they wanted 100 fur coats. The Germans asked for that.

When they ask, did they ask you directly? Or was it--

No, to the Gmina.

The Gmina is like the Judenrat?

Right, the council.

No, the council, the Jewish council. They asked. They gave them. They first started with the gold, then the silver, then the furs, then the candlesticks, then art pieces. They took as much as they could. And then they started-- give me today 10,000 people, 5,000 people, 2,000 people to send to Germany to work. That's what they say. And that's what we gave them. And that's what we believed in.

I see.

You see, they-- and then with the cards, what-- people were selling whatever they possession to get the green card. I had a green card. And my brother-in-law-- Heniek was his name, Heniek Kestenberg-- he had a green card from our whole family. So supposedly, we OK. He comes to the ghetto. And he says to me-- my name in Polish was Jadzia.

Jadzia

Not Ita, Jadzia. He says, Jadziu, there's going to be a catching. They're going to catch tonight. They're going to be catching people tonight. So we're going to stay, watch, and see what comes out. And I told you, the ghetto was on hilly area. So you could see from one building to another the rooftops. And I'm standing.

And I had a cot. In the ghetto, there was not enough room for everybody to sleep in bed. So there was a small cot in the kitchen, the middle of the kitchen. This was my cot to sleep in.

And I was tired. I came from work. And I was tired. And I'm sitting there with Heniek. And he's watching on the rooftop. He's watching what the Germans are going through. I said, Heniek, if they will come, where are we going to go? I mean, it's a small little house. How I can? Don't worry, I'll take care of it.

So what happened? I'm waiting. And it's 10:00. It's 11:00. It's 11:30. I cannot keep my eyes open. I said, Heniek, I don't care. I don't care. I'm going to sleep. If they catch me, they catch me. If they don't, they don't. I'm not going to be standing around here anymore because my eyes are just shutting.

He says, OK, you go to sleep. And I'll wake you if I can when they come. And his plan was to go up on the roof and lay down flat on the roof. That was his great plan because what else could he go?

The houses had no cellars, only-- and sure enough, he was waiting and waiting. And all of a sudden, the Germans surrounded the house. He didn't know how, when, and where. And he didn't give me a-- have a chance to--

To let you know.

--wake me, to let me know. And he ran on the roof. Flat on the roof, he's laying there. Maybe he was wearing dark clothes or something, you couldn't see him. Anyway, they come into the house-- card, card. I got the green card. And I'm going.

And I remember distinctly, just like now, my mother gave me-- I had a attache case in Europe you go to school with. She took my books out from it and put a bread in there, a whole bread. You know what it is, what kind of a sacrifice she did? And she handed me this. And they took me to a Durchgangslager, a Durchgangs-- that means temporary quarters, which was a school, a gymnasium, like a high school.

High school.

This high school became a quarters for temporary assignment. So they took me there in the middle of the night. The Germans took me.

Were there other young people like you there?

Well, over there, I met other young people.

That you knew before?

Yeah. Some I knew, some I didn't.

Were you able to continue with your work from there? What happened then?

No, I was ready to send out to Germany. This was the place where they send you out. They got me at home, not at work. And I'm sitting there. I was so-- I said, well, I'm not going to worry. As long as Heniek is home, everything is going to be taken care of because I knew they didn't get him.

I said, as long as they got-- see, my father had very bad eyes. He had-- he saw very little on one eye and just about five feet on another eye, bad sight. I don't know how his sight got so bad, but that's what it was. So I figured, he was the only man in the family that I could figure-- he will take care of him, Heniek.

And as I'm sitting there and contemplating my future, there comes my brother-in-law. They caught him. So I started crying so bitterly. I said, now, I've lost my family. I said, if you're not around, they will not be able to take care of themselves.

I was crying so hard-- not for myself, because they caught him. Because as long as he was-- he was the strong arm. And sure enough, that's what happened. He was sent to Germany. I was sent to a working camp. He was sent to another.

How long were you in the gymnasium, then, until you were transferred?

Oh, just a few days, just a few day.

A few days.

Was just a-- they called it a Durchgangslager, like a temporary--

Temporary station.

--right, station until they got enough people and send a group here, or there, or anywhere.

Yeah. So you went by train? Or how did you go? You tell me.

No, it's unbelievable, but I don't remember.

You don't remember. Was there a big group of you?

We were 500 girls-- 500 girls in that camp. And we opened the camp. It was in Graben by Striegau in Germany, a flax work factory. We made the flax. We made from flax linen-- not linen, but we worked it until it went to the linen factory.

I see. You brought it from the fields?

We didn't bring it from the fields. It came on wagons, on trains. But how did I get there? I have no idea.

But you got there.

I got there all right. And during that time, my mother gave me a little bit clothes. They came to see me.

They could come to visit you.

Yeah, a little bit. And she gave me--

How far away would you say that was?

It was old Sosnowiec. You know what old Sosnowiec? It was like from here to downtown, to go downtown to the--

So it was close, but it was still in the German-- over the German border?

No, no, it was in Sosnowiec.

It was right in the sense.

It was like the old town and the new town. It was in the old town.

I see.

And I'm trying to explain it as best because the names-- strange names.

No, you're doing just splendidly.

And she brought me a-- I never forget. She gave me a suit, my sister's suit, which was too big on me. But she gave. That was a beautiful suit that my sister, I think, bought it when she got engaged or something. She gave me that suit and nice high-heeled shoes. I don't know why she did it.

But she thought I could exchange it for bread somewhere. I could deal and wheel if I have some. And she gave me the

covers from the-- we had a quilt-- comforters, the covers, they were embroidered, white embroidery, lace. She gave me one of those, I remember, and other things that she thought I may be able to exchange for food or anything.

And I went. I was sent away to a working camp. And my brother-in-law-- again, he wasn't the same, they had the same. He was sent away to another working camp.

So you lived and worked at the camp?

You were no longer--

They came, there were barracks. And the room that I was in was called the kindergarten because there was no one over 12 or 13 years old in that particular room. They were all youngsters.

But this was still close to your town?

That was deep in Germany. We were already in Germany.

I see. You were in Germany.

In Germany.

You aren't sure how you got there, but you got there.

I don't know how I got there.

That's all right.

I have no idea. Isn't that funny?

Yes Yes.

Isn't that funny? I don't remember how I got there. But I know, I worked there very, very hard.

And what was the name of the place then?

Graben by Striegau. It was near Gleiwitz, I believe. We were about 60 miles away from Gross-Rosen camp, a big concentration camp. And we were all petrified because they were coming for selections all over those working camps to get them to Gross-Rosen. They drove us crazy. They drove us insane.

You didn't know from day to day.

No, you didn't know what they'll come out with.

So you were the only member of your-- you were separated from your family there.

When I left my family, they were all-- OK, in the ghetto, they were in the ghetto. But they were all there. I was the first one to leave the family-- and my brother-in-law, Heniek.

And he went in some other?

He went to also. We were met in the temporary quarters. We met there.

Yeah, in the temporary quarters. But then when you went to the working camp?

I went to Graben by Striegau. He went to another camp, a men's camp. They kept them separated.

Yes, yes.

And I never did see him till after the war again.

Were there--

I was in the camp there for three years.

For three years, that's a good long time. Can you describe what your living conditions? You said you were in the kindergarten.

I was in the-- they called it the kindergarten because there were-- we were about 20 girls, all youngsters. I mean, what I mean by youngsters-- none of them were over 15 years old, 14 years old. And once in a while, they threw in an extra little bit of soup for us because they felt sorry we're such a young children.

And I worked. We had bunk beds. I don't know how many girls went around the room, maybe 20, I say 20 girls. Bunk beds in there, you had top one and a straw sack for a mattress, and that's all, and little lockers, like they have in school-- long little locker. But they were made out of wood. And they were in front of the bunk.

Because this is what was called a working camp, not a concentration camp. The difference between a concentration camp, know, is that you work. In a concentration camp, you don't do anything. You just exist.

So in front of the two bunk beds, there were two lockers, one for each girl. And we put our stuff in there. And I got a bowl, a red bowl, and a tooth-- and shoes wooden shoes-- wooden shoes, which were good. For winter, they keep warm. Wood doesn't let through so much cold. And we had all our stuff there. And we worked 12-hour shifts.

12-hour shifts.

12-hour shifts-- one week nights, one week days. So the factory worked 24 hours. It was busy.

And you were working with the linen, spinning.

We were working with the flax--

The flax.

--the flax that just came off the railroad.

And you had to spin it?

We didn't spin. We worked it to the point of spinning. They went to another factory. We opened the flax and put it on the machines. There was icicles hanging from there. And then the linen went separate. The seeds went separate from when they made oil or something. They used it because the bags were down in the basement. They were bagging. That cut it out. And then we made little-- what do they call it, [YIDDISH]. I don't remember how to say it in English.

That's all right. What did you call it first?

[YIDDISH]-- when they--

Sheaths?

No, little bundles-- bundles, we made. One came out of the machine. Then we made bundles. And then we tied them on

another machine. I was working on the tying machine.

Oh, on the tying, the tying machine.

Tying machine. I used to tie the bundles and fall asleep all night long. I was so sleepy. I was so sleepy.

Oh. How was the food situation in there?

Well, I'll tell you about that. And above this whole factory, there was a little balcony. And a man stood there, no-- just saw, and had a picture of everybody working. And we call him the Shadow. He was wearing a white uniform, white-- a German. He worked in the lab too. They used samples for labs and stuff. But he stood there-- not all the time, thank god, because we could never make it.

And he watched. He could see, like a picture, who worked and who didn't. I didn't. I got to know my machine so well that I could make it not to work. And he used to get insane. Oh, I got to work that machine-- when you put that bundle in there and they wouldn't tie. And if I could not tie, everybody else was standing there because it would pile up high. I could care less.

The assembly line broke down?

The assembly line was broken down.

And you were able to get away with that?

Yes, yes, yeah.

Without any--

Because I fix it. I told him, the machine is broken. We had two mechanics, two Belgian mechanics. As a matter of fact, well, I tell you that if I come to it. I could press the machine in such a way that it would not tie. They would not tie. It used to make a knot. But it would not knot.

And he used to stand there on the balcony, go crazy. He was insane. He was such a-- but he never hit me because he saw that the machine doesn't work. It wasn't my fault. But I knew it was. And I used to pull that every once in a while.

So the line would break, would break down there.

The line would break.

What about the other people in the camp, the other authorities, the guards, or anything? Did you have--

We did. We had a private citizen, a German girl. She was the Lageralteste, big hunk of a woman. You think I'm big, but she was three times my size-- big blonde hair, red cheeks. Well, she was the Lageralteste. And then there was a Lageralteste in the camp, I think. And then there was three sisters from my hometown-- one, two, three. One was the Judenalteste. And the sister was the big thing in the kitchen. And one sister was heating the camp.

Oh, so they had-- they were people from your hometown who had this--

They were all from her hometown, practically.

I see.

And she was the Judenalteste, the girl from my hometown.



Yeah. Were these other Jewish girls?

All Jewish girls.

I see.

And she was pretty tough. But she had it good for herself. That's another person I'd like to-- that I'd like to meet and spit right in her eye. Because she was very mean.

She became--

She became-- as she got better, she became meaner and more certain of herself. And she had a good life there, let's put it that way. And the kitchen of my camp, guess who worked there? Two teachers that I used to take my little brother to kindergarten, two kindergarten teachers worked in the kitchen.

I used to take my brother-- little brother used to go to the kindergarten. They didn't know me from Adam. The Judenalteste and the two sister, her brother was our neighbor, had a-- they had a manufacturer from ties, men's ties. And she didn't know me from Adam.

Why do you think that they took that attitude that they did?

Because they had their own favorites. But while I was in the beginning of the-- of-- when-- in the very beginning, when I was in the camp and when my parents were still in Poland, they used to give something to their parents-- money or I don't know what. Because she was very good to me. She gave me extra this and extra that. And I got a package from home.

So there were communications--

There were, yes.

--back and forth.

I wrote letters home too.

That were delivered.

They were delivered.

And you heard from them?

I wrote them in German. I wrote them in German.

But then did they write to you? Did you get their letters?

Yes, very few because that was a short time. And I got very good treatment from the Lageralteste, from the Judenalteste. I got good treatment from her.

That name that you call her--

Judenalteste-- she was the head of the camp, of all the Jewish girls. But the Lageralteste was the German lady that was above her. But she referred to her everything. And they were good friends, the good buddies. And she was very good to me for a little while. And I didn't know why. Then I got a letter from home that my parents are doing something for her parents. So she was nice to me. But as soon as we heard it-- you see, I worked there I don't know how long. And we worked very hard.

12 hours a day.

12 hours a day. And I don't need a-- when the linen came off the wagons, the train, it was open. And the big chunks of ice formed in the wintertime. And you had to handle it with your hands.

No gloves?

No, no, you had to open it to put it under the machine. And it was-- and you worked in a big barn. That was one department. And after that, you shoveled those bundles into a tube. And by air, they went to another department, where it was 140-- 130 degrees hot because we were cooking it. The flax was being cooked in big tubs, vats. So over there, you had-- practically walked around naked in order to survive.

But where you were at first--

At first, I worked where the cold is. And then I was trained for-- to the--

Did you manage to keep warm enough when it was so cold?

Oh, yes, we kept warm. You know how? We sacked the seats in sacks. They were made out of paper and linen. And we got 50-- oh, we took these apart, and we had gloves. And we knitted gloves, and sweaters, and booties.

That you could really wear and help keep yourself.

We called-- see, they made sacks. During the war, there was not all sack material. But one line was sack and one line was paper. So we took out the sack stuff, made rolls of yarn out of it, and knitted booties and sweaters. And they-- all of a sudden, they realized, they're missing a whole lot of sacks.

And they went to us, through the whole barracks, looking for it. And our room, the Kinderstube, was full of knitting material. And as they came in to look-- there was very easy to find. You couldn't hide anything from a bunk bed in the--

Hardly.

Hardly. And we took the-- a big basket. And we threw it out the window. It was right in front of our window. And they looked through the door and found nothing.

They didn't find it.

Were you able to retrieve it then?

Well, but we couldn't wear it anymore. It was too dangerous, too dangerous, too dangerous. They found out there was too many sacks missing, believe it or not. And we were dyeing them too, believe it or not. Somehow, we-- people did all kinds of crazy things.

Well, are there other-- the other interactions between your other young people that were there. How did you get along?

We got along OK.

People--

We got along.

--for the most part for the most--

For the most part, we got a-- we lived in one room all these years. We got along OK. But isn't that funny? I don't remember anybody-- I mean, names. I don't remember. Because there were just 500 of us. And by the time we got to Bergen-Belsen, I'd say 75% were gone.

But while you were there at the labor camp--

While I was there in the labor camp--

--were there--

--we had hot water to bathe. We had-- we got three meals a day. In the morning, we got coffee, and for lunch, we got soup, and for supper, we got soup.

Rather a liquid diet.

Yes, they called it-- they used kohlrabis, big yellow.

Oh, yes.

I don't ever look at them.

Want to see a kohlrabi again.

No, no, I don't. Don't. I see them in the supermarket, say, well, who would eat this stuff? Anyway. And we got--

Were there any kinds of religious observations there?

Oh, no, no.

I mean, amongst yourself, amongst the--

Yes, we fasted on Yom Kippur.

You knew when the holiday--

Oh, yes, we knew. And we fasted on Yom Kippur. And I think on Yom Kippur, they made judenrein in our hometown. Judenrein means they cleaned the town out of Jews. But juden is Jew and rein is clean. They made the judenrein. And we found out in our camp. I believe it was Yom Kippur. We all fasted and cried very hard because we knew there was no one left at home. They just shipped them all away. We knew it. We knew exactly when it was.

Were there any communications then from the others or from your--

There were communications. One-- there was a girl, Sala Abramczyk from my hometown.

So you remember that name.

Yes. She had a beautiful voice. And she used to-- at night, when we had our little stop from work for a few minutes, we used to lay around in that hay, in that flax, and she used to sing.

Oh, how nice.

And all this--

Songs from home that you knew, that they knew?

Songs-- right, whatever. And she had a beautiful voice. And she also had a husband that knew she was there. And he communicated with her. And through her, we had a lot of news from-- she was not from my-- no, her husband was from Bedzin, another town next to mine. And her husband communicated. Somehow, she got communication. He took her out from the camp. He sent somebody for her. And they released her. And then I found out it was that he sent somebody for her.

He must have had a position.

He reminded me of my brother-in-law.

Yes, I can see why you say.

And she-- we sang. We sang. We had once a show too.

That you put on yourself?

We put on a show, yes, a theater. I remember, the hallway of the barracks, you could hardly see because it's narrow.

Amongst yourself, the 500 girls, you mentioned, the one girl who was--

The Judenalteste?

Yes. But was there anybody amongst your own--

There were--

--who developed leadership among you?

There was a leader for every group that the Germans made it. They made her responsible. You have to put out, produce, or.

I see.

So she had to be the bad guy and make sure that we produce.

Oh, so you had your own self-leadership,, which was created by the Germans.

There were a girl in the Stube, in the room, that was a head, that was responsible for our room being clean. And there was a Aufsehers. Aufsehers. Aufsehers.

Overseers.

I forgot the name. Yeah. I forget the names. It's been a long time-- in the factory.

And for three years, this went on.

I went-- but I was a person that I couldn't stay in one place too long. I got bored, really. And I learned everything about the factory. I knew, I could be a mechanic.

And you did do a lot of different things.

I could do-- yeah, when the machines broke down eventually, we had to do them ourselves because the German mechanics were taken away. Eventually, it came to a point that it was just the two Belgian mechanics, and us, and an

old man. I used to call him Sclerosis because he was so old and I sclerosis on the brain. And when he was around, we fooled her. I did a lot of--

Did more people keep coming in? Or was it just your original--

Just from our original. And then next to our camp, there was a girl-- a camp with Polish girls. And next to our camp, there was a camp with the prisoner of wars from Russia.

You said the next camp. Now, I don't understand you.

Well, we were surrounded. But they had--

A neighboring camp.

Neighboring camp. You see, but they--

How did you know? Did get out and visit with them?

They could get out, and we couldn't. They would come visit you.

No, they wouldn't. But they would come to our camp and make deals and wheels.

Oh, so that there-- the other camps, they'd have--

They had more freedom than we have. We were enclosed.

--more freedom.

Once you got into the camp you were counted in, that's it. But they had freedom. They could go to the town to buy whatever was not on their-- on ration cards. And even the prisoner of wars had a little-- they used to help us. They had ovens. They worked in different places. They used to bring us food, would you believe that?

They were prisoners of war-- Germans?

Prisoners of war-- Russian, Russian prisoners of war in Germany. And they used to give us food.

What language did you speak with them?

Russian and Polish was similar, very similar.

So you could communicate.

We could-- yeah. They worked there too.

Now, how did your-- the three years, how did that terminate? How was that ended there?

Well, we worked there. And I want to tell you, I made a deal with a Polish girl so she bring me bread. And I gave her that beautiful brown suit and the brown shoes. And I never did see her again.

Oh, so you gave her the suit and the shoes--

I gave her, and she never-- well, I didn't-- I wasn't shrewd enough to say, you give me this and I'll give you that. But I trusted her, which was--

You learn from your experience--

Yeah.

--good or bad, I can understand.

Yeah. And we used to work night shift, was very rough, very rough. And the prisoners, the Russian prisoners used to work night shift too with us in a different department. We had really nothing much to do. We were-- they were just working around there.

In the middle of the night, they used to bring us a soup from the camp because we went 6 o'clock to work. So at midnight, there was a break. And they bring us a soup. So who was bringing the soup? The cooks from the kitchen. And they were hefty girls, believe me.

Oh, they were eating well.

They were eating quite well, thank you. And one night, the Russian guys were around. And this cook came with the soup for us. It was a small group. Not everybody worked there-- in this particular department. And the guy comes over, and takes the soup, and picks up-- and there was a ladle in it. And says, and she's water, water.

He stands there and says to the cook, he says, look at yourselves. Look how heavy you are. Look how heavy. You got here, and here, and everywhere. And you bring this for my girls to eat, a pail of water? Well, never again did a cook bring our soup. They got somebody else to bring it.

Oh. And it was--

They were afraid. They were afraid of them. They were good to us. Whatever they had, they shared with us a little bit.

Well, that was some.

That was all.

So basically, the 500 girls--

500 girls who we worked there.

--who all stayed together for three years.

For three years.

--they were fed and everything. Then what seemed to be the next point along the way?

The next step was that the Russians were getting closer. They were coming closer, and closer, and closer. And we could feel it in the air because the airplanes were going around. And we were looking. And the factory was not busy. There was no work. There was no mechanic-- I mean, everything-- they rented the place to farmers to dry their corn, and food.

The flax wasn't coming in?

No, no, no, flax stopped coming in. There was no work. So we knew that the Russians are getting closer, and closer, and closer, and closer. And then we saw camps. And I saw from Gross-Rosen people walking, men-- a men.

You could feel it in the air.

Something was.

So they decided to evacuate us, which was absolutely terrible. They evacuated us from that camp and pushed us in further into Germany--

Deeper.

--deeper and deeper into Germany, where the Black Forest, I don't remember the name.

Oh, that's sort of in the southern part or something.

Well, anyway, we wound up in Bergen-Belsen. But that's not it. When we were walking for three days and three nights, we were walking. And when they closed down the camp, the original camp in Graben, they opened the magazines and everything. And there was so much food in there and clothes.

Oh, I want to tell you something. I had these things from home in my locker-- everybody, every girl had a few little precious things from home. And one day, I came from work, all the lockers were opened. And all the clothes and everything was taken away. And then you went to the magazine, they gave you a piece of clothing.

So you could see, I was wearing this girl's dress. And she was wearing my dress. It was a sad state of affairs, believe me. But that's what we get. And I happened to be working at that time in the department where they boil the wax-- and the flax, where they cook it. And it's very, very hot. And I think I received a chiffon dress from somebody, from my--

Just what you needed.

That's the Judenalteste gave me, the chiffon dress. And working there, one night, the chiffon fell apart from the heat. So here I was coming. And they counted us in the morning, they counted us in the evening-- Appell. It was called Appell. You have to stand for Appell.

And I'm standing in the morning, I'm coming from a night shift. I have a bobby pin here and a safety pin here. And I was falling apart. So I go to the Judenalteste. And I say, Judenalteste-- in German, I said, look at my dress. It's falling apart. I can't-- I don't have anything to wear.

She started screaming at me. And there was a girl that was not very normal-- she was a little bit off. It's not surprising, believe me. She says, if you talk to me one more minute, you're going to look like that girl there. So I said nothing.

But you know what I did? I went to the German, to the Lageralteste, I went. And I said, this is the dress I have. And I supposed to work in this and this department. She gave me another dress.

Oh, my.

So when we were evacuating, all this magazine was there with all our clothes and the bread.

Could you take it?

And I took clothes, and I took bread, and was dragging sacks, and said-- well, we started walking. I dropped the bread. I dropped the clothes.

What time of the year was this when you left?

February.

Oh, my.

February. And you know what? The wooden shoes, the snow would stick to it. And I was walking like on stilts with

snow.

Sort of sliding too.

No. We were walking. And we were saying, pause, pause. We asked for a pause. And the Germans were driving, riding on horses. And they were going, go, go. And we were so tired from walking, we holler pause, pause. So they stop at night. They stop in a farmyard. I remember--

You were on a highway, though, on a road.

I don't know, on a road. On a road. On a road. And we stopped in a farm one night, I remember. And there were cows there in the barn. We milked the cows to the very last drop.

Yes.

And the owner didn't like it, but listen, the Gestapo was there. And they said-- and that night, some girls escaped too. They escaped to the woods. And I don't know what happened to them. But it was terrible walking. And we're walking around, scraping the snow from each other, and drinking. And that was good.

But did you have heavy clothing on?

Well, you couldn't have heavy-- you couldn't walk too well. We dropped everything. Slowly, we dropped everything. It didn't take us more than a day or two. And the people just were not the same. We were a bunch of good, healthy girls because we were in a working camp.

And then after walking I don't know for how-- two or three days, I don't remember, they loaded us into wagons on the railroad-- cattle, cattle wagon. That was the worst thing that could happen to anybody. They pushed us about 100 in each one. And the entrance had to be open because two Gestapos were sitting, two soldiers with the--

The guns.

--with the guns, with the rifles. And that spot had to be freed for them. And we were on the sides there. So first, we went to open cattle wagons, which wasn't so bad.

When you say open, you mean open on the top?

I mean, there was no roof. OK. That was bad, but wasn't so bad. You had air.

This is still February?

Yes, this is all February. And they used to stop by a lake. And we should go out and wash ourselves. And the funny thing is that when we looked at each other, we laughed at each other because we looked so crazy.

Thank goodness, you could laugh.

And didn't take a long because the little animals started to work yourself into you because dirt. But that wasn't as bad as when they took us to-- in closed wagons, completely closed. And again, they had to have the-- they didn't sit there anymore. They just closed the door. And that's-- there was no air, no-- no bathroom facilities. There was-- it just was terrible. It was the worst thing you can imagine. When you have to relieve you--

How long was this?

For days and days. No, they didn't have a specified train to push this thing. One pushed it this way, and one went this way, one went this way. There was no schedule, nothing.



No direct route.

And I saw the German people came to the railroad, give us a little bit food-- no food, there was no schedule. Everything was just was going by itself. But we were enclosed in into those things. And once in a while, they stop. Oh, by then we were less than human-- less than. They didn't take-- it was 11 days, this whole thing.

Oh, it was 11 days.

Oh, yeah. And when we got to Bergen-Belsen, I saw chimneys. And I said, I could care less if there are chimneys. Let them be. I didn't know what they-- they were only for the-- they didn't have a crematorium in Bergen-Belsen. They didn't need to. We became skeletons in no time at all there. And you know what we call a skeleton there? A Muselmann.

A Muselmann.

I never buy Musselman's applesauce.

Oh, they're nice people. And it's a good product. But I can understand why.

Yeah, every time I look at this name, it reminds me of

You already remember that, Ita, believe you.

And Bergen-Belsen was a horrendous camp, terrible, terrible, terrible.

Were you, then, with younger people still. Or what was the mix of all the people when you got there?

They were mixed. In Bergen-Belsen?

In Bergen-Belsen.

Was old, young, crippled, the lame, whatever-- whatever. It just--

Were they all Polish?

--people existed. No.

Where were they--

By the way, some Hungarian girls came to our camp, to original camp, maybe 18-20 from Hungary. It was towards the end. They weren't there very long. And that's the first time I saw Hungarian girls. They were very nice. There was a few of them. And they-- we got together all right. They couldn't speak Jewish-- or they didn't speak Polish, and they didn't speak Jewish, they spoke only Hungarian--

Only Hungarian.

--although they were Jewish girls. They spoke strictly Hungarian. But eventually, we got along with them. And when I came to Bergen-Belsen--

This is now about 1944?

'44.

1944.

No, '45. It's '45 because we got liberated in '45. I'm between.

No, I understand that. But it's toward the end of the war.

I cannot give you every detail of the trip because it is so horrendous.

Of course not, no, no.

It is so bad. When we-- all of a sudden, from normal people, who became such a skeletons, we became skeletons. We were not heavy to begin. But we were very thin and dirty. The dirt ate us up. They had no facilities, no nothing. We were sitting--

Like animals.

Animals. We were scraping off--

Had better.

--the ice and snow from each other and eating. And it was very bad. This is a non-existing situation. You cannot exist like that. So when we got to Bergen-Belsen, which I knew was a bad camp because you hear that was a death camp, I could care less. I could not. I just wanted to get out of those wagons. And you know what they did to us? They put us in a beautiful shower room. They showered-- gave us showers, from all that filth and dirt.

In Bergen-Belsen, you got there?

In Bergen-Belsen, they had the one room where they showered the people. I said, if they shower before I die or after, I don't care. I knew they were showering people before. We heard. And they gave us the shower. And I met a girl that I used to go to the grandma when I was making the flowers. She was the big thing there in the shower in Bergen-Belsen.

I just went. I go in there. And what they did, being-- we were very inexperienced with the camps. So they said, hang-- they brought hangers, like you see, pointed that-- hang everything up. It's going to be sterilized. And then we're going to come back out. And you get your own stuff. I was such a good girl, I hung up everything that I had. But I kept my wooden shoes, and my bowl, and a toothbrush.

And your toothbrush, yes.

This I kept in my hand. And I was pure-- completely naked. And I hung up all the clothes like they told me. I got good girl. I was always obedient. And I was waiting for the clothes to come out. In the meantime, I took a shower. And I couldn't get-- it was warm. It was delicious. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. It was great, the shower. Nobody wanted to leave.

There, I see this girl that I used to work at the grandma with the flowers with a hose and cold water, chasing everyone out of there. Something happened to me. I said, you pouring cold water on me. Used to work with-- I started hitting her. But it didn't do me any good. And that's how they kicked us out from the shower room.

With the cold water.

With the cold water. And our girls were doing the other stuff because she had an extra piece of bread. And when I came back from the shower to look at the hanger, there was nothing there. There was nothing of mine hanging, only a piece of gray blanket.

Well, I took the piece of gray blanket. Out, Appell. You'll be counted. It's 5 o'clock in the morning, it's February, it's bitter cold. I'm standing there with a piece of blanket like this and shivering. And they counting once. They're counting

again. And they're counting there. Took us two, three hours to stand there. And then they put us into barracks, big rooms.

Was everybody else in the blankets too?

No, they were dressed.

They had their clothes?

They had their clothes. They got. I went too late. They took two, they took three, they took four, whatever they could. Somebody-- because everybody came dressed.

And you-- oh, my.

Me-- I was a few others like me. I wasn't the only one, I'm sure. But I couldn't care about anybody else. I cared that I was cold.

Of course.

I want to tell you something. And then after three hours standing there and counting, forth and back-- this is just for fun, they did it, just to get us miserable. Because where would you run? And if somebody ran away, they come back. Doesn't matter. And they taking us to the barracks-- all 500 girls into one big room.

But I was in a-- somehow, my mind seemed to be working. I said, I'm going to go against the wall, somewhere against the wall. I can put my bowl under my head and go to sleep. Imagine, I wanted to sleep. I wanted to sleep. And so I did. I figure, I'm going to go against-- I want to lean against people. I like-- and I was on that very-- the farthest corner there.

And you know what? They had 500 people. There was no room. So we can only sit like this, back to back, and your feet halfway, like out this, like sardines. There was no way to move. Once I got into that corner, I could die in it. That's it. But at least I didn't have body to body on me. And I was sitting there.

You weren't standing in the corner, you were sitting.

I was sitting. You don't--

Sitting by yourself in the corner.

--and your legs out like this. I was sitting. In the meantime, my oldest sister, Sally, who was here in Cleveland-- my oldest sister came to Bergen-Belsen from Auschwitz. See, I left her at home. But she came.

She was the married one.

Right. She came to Auschwitz, from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen And she had already typhoid fever in Auschwitz. So she was-- well, in Bergen-Belsen the typhoid was just horrendous. Everybody got sick for typhoid. It was very-- an epidemic.

Well, all you had to do was go into the camp, and somebody touched you, and something crawled on you, and you had-- you got sick. And this-- so as I was sitting there, and she-- what should I tell you? My sister knew a doctor in our hometown, Dr. Bimko. She was, supposedly, the doctor for the camp, for the sick people.

At which camp is that now?

In Bergen-Belsen And my sister came from Auschwitz. She says, what are you doing here? I said, what am I doing? So she made a nurse. So at least she had the freedom of going around from camp to camp.

You had a reunion with your older sister.

Wait, wait. So she had a red band, a band with a Red Cross, my sister in a babushka. And she was able to go from place to place because of that Red Cross band. And she worked in the hospital. And she saw that camps are coming in, every day a different camp-- from the Sudeten, from Bergen-Belsen from here, from Gross-Rosen. People were coming into this camp.

So she stood by the-- again, by the gate, big gate-- no, she didn't stay by the gate. She saw the two teachers that were kindergarten teachers in my hometown. It's Zimmerman Nuvna-- Zimmerman was the name, Zimmerman. And my little brother used to go there to kindergarten.

She says, you are from-- and they were bad to me. They were not nice people. Anyway, she says, do you know if my sister is here? Weren't you in Graben with my sister? She says, yeah, your sister is there on the block, at the block, the room. I don't know how I was sitting there.

And she came in over there. And there's 500 people sitting, a sea of people. And I recognize my sister. I don't know how I flew over all these. I must have broken many legs and arms, I don't know. But I just flew into her. And it was such a relief that I found her, that she found me that you have no idea.

I can imagine.

Because I was really desperate. And she came for me. And she was with another cousin that I was with her niece in the same camp. So she says, where's RuÅ>ka? I said, RuÅ>ka is over there.

And RuÅ>ka was sick when we left the first camp. She was sick. And she was in the hospital there. And I said, RuÅ>ka, you have to go. And I wish I hadn't touched her. I said, they're going to kill you if they're going to leave you here in the camp alone. But you-- go now that the Russians are going to walk in two hours after we left. I said, they're going to kill you. You have to get strength and walk with me.

And I walked with RuÅ>ka and walked, and all the way to Bergen-Belsen. And she was a very sick girl. And her aunt was with my sister. No, they were together, but she was working in the kitchen. And my sister worked in the hospital. And as soon as she took me out of there, I went into the hospital. I got sick-- typhoid. And I didn't get up-- got better till after the war.

Oh. So you were in the hospital all--

I was-- and she was taking care of me.

Your sister.

Was a very, very sick girl.

Did they have drugs to treat you with?

No, none whatsoever, no drugs.

But was there food for you in the hospital?

No food, no drugs. My sister provided for me a little bit. And you know, I had abscesses on my breast when I-- for complications. And we went to this doctor. And she says, oh, she's such a young girl, I don't want to cut her up. Let's wait. Let's wait. Let's wait. And she did. And she cured me, that Dr. Bimko.

That was the doctor from your hometown?

Right. And this same lady is--

She's a lady doctor?

Yes. She's in Europe-- she's in New York. And her son is a Rosensaft. He is the-- he was born in Bergen-Belsen. And he is the head of the Kol Israel Foundation, second generation. He gave the address in Washington, the Holocaust survivors.

Oh, my.

Her son, she married a Mr. Rosensaft.

Is she a practicing physician now?

I don't believe anymore. She was a dentist, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know if-- my sister knew her better because she's a little bit older. But this is what happened in Bergen-Belsen. I saw through the window, when the room there, where I was laying in, there were people stapled past the window, dead people were stapled, like sacks, you staple, one on top of the other.

But you-- it was a matter of weeks that you were sick there, do you know?

I was-- from the day I came in till I was liberated, practically.

But how long a period of time was it?

From February to May.

From February to May.

May, we were liberated May.

I see.

And we were liberated by the English.

Oh. Well, we're going to take a break again now, Ita. Our story seems to end at the right time, as far as the length of the tapes.

Yeah, I guess they know what they're doing there.

Yes. It's sort of beshert, if you know what I mean.

Yeah. I tell you, oh, that Bergen-Belsen, what a death camp.