

I'm Sue Danford. Today, we are interviewing Rena Rubinow, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. All right, when we left the last tape, you were at your third concentration camp. Would you like to pick up there?

Yeah. OK. It was just starvation, hard work, and starvation. There was 300 women only. Some of them were Slovak girls. We didn't get along with them. But everybody was starving. There was just no food at all.

One-- for dinner or lunch, we came home from work, and they gave us every day the same soup with worms, the very old boxes of noodles get wormy. So that's what we ate. At the beginning, I couldn't, by no means. So we picked up sometimes a raw potato, someplace, something. But after, we had to eat it.

And when we went back, my stomach was starving. I said, God-- I was praying for God. When we heard sometimes it was a siren, so we ran out just to get killed. We wanted to get killed. We couldn't stand it anymore. It was just unbelievable. The hunger was so terrible, my sister's gums were bleeding. All the women were swelled up.

And there was a staff doctor. One of the prisoners was a doctor. So she said that if another three months, we will die from starvation. Only once-- this was, I think, in March-- there was-- in Sudetenland is a lot of snow. So a horse-- they brought a dead horse in the camp.

And we had to-- they had to wait for the Befehl, for the permit to cut him up and to give him to us. So the horse was there a whole month laying from February till March. And after, we ate it. And it wasn't taste bad. They put it in soup, the meat from the horse. So this was the only one what kept us alive.

Because even it came some food to the camp, but there was the two Aufseherin-- the women who were watching us, taking us to work-- and the old guards. They were taking out all the food. So for us was-- for seven people, one loaf of bread for three days, a round loaf of bread. It was like a slice of bread like here.

Anyhow, we were there five month. Five month-- after they found-- when the Russian came, they found a paper that they were supposed to kill us, all of us, two days before. If they knew that the war comes to an end or they are going to run away, the SS men, whatever it is, they should destroy the camp with all the people.

But the guy, the-- how you call it-- the leader of the city, like Voinovich, what is he-- the mayor from the city didn't allow. He was a old man. And he didn't allow to destroy us. He was afraid because it was-- the Russians were approaching.

He did-- they didn't have, maybe, the time. Because next morning, we got up, everybody is gone. The camp was empty from the guards. And the Russian were there. And we were afraid of the Russian too. So till they came--

This March, April '45?

This was in May, May 5 in '45.

'45?

Yeah, I was there till May 5, '45. And my sister-- we walked out from the camp, started walking, a group of us, toward north. Because you see, Kraków was much north from there. So we were going. Took us about three weeks to walk.

Meantime, my sister got sick. She got a very bad diarrhea because she started to eat. We went to a police station someplace to stay overnight there. And they gave us food. So she probably ate too fast or something. She got a terrible dysentery or diarrhea, a very bad one.

So I remember, I was-- I heard about this. I had some apples. And I was grinding it for her, to give her the

apples. And it stopped. So many of them died from dysentery, or diarrhea, or whatever.

Did they take you, the Russians take you from the camp to the police station?

No, they didn't take us, no.

We were afraid of them because there were young soldiers. And they were raping there, most of them. Even a woman 70 wasn't-- was being raped. But they were-- no. They had an order not to approach the people from concentration camps. Because there was another concentration camp in a different city, next village. This was like a village, small city or a village, where the camp was-- Lichtenberg there.

What did they do when they came in?

Who, the Russian?

The Russians.

They came in and they went farther. The war was still on. They were there about a day or two, drinking vodka and eating whatever they-- they didn't--

Didn't bother you and they didn't help you?

No, no, they didn't help us. We didn't need-- after the war, when the war was over, you could go to any house and take some food. But the people, the people were Czechs, not German. But they were German living in Czechoslovakia. This was Czechoslovakia.

But they had an order-- if they will help a prisoner like we are-- we were then prisoners-- they will get executed. So they didn't help us. They could help with a slice of bread or something.

They would save-- nobody-- from our camp, I think maybe one or two died, most-- very, very few. Everybody survived because they were young women, strong. They picked only young and strong. And we all survived and started toward Kraków. Took three weeks to walk.

And what happened when you got to Kraków? Where did you go?

When I went? I remember, when we left the train, the train was-- we were riding over-- on the roof of the train. There was no room. So I was sitting on the top of the train on the roof. When we came to Kraków, I remember, it was a hot day. It was probably June. It was very hot. And I was thirsty. And I needed a nickel, \$0.05 to buy a soda.

We didn't have the \$0.05. This was the time we didn't pay for the train but to come in. So where I lived, there was a Jewish center. And we went in. It was my town. Somehow, I found maybe somebody. I really don't know. But we had food. My sister-- I sent my sister-- I had some money. I don't know.

Oh, in concentration camp, in Lichtenberg, then, my sister got a coat, a very long coat, too big for her. When they gave-- before we left in Auschwitz, they gave her a coat. She looked so funny. So I said, let me-- I learned in camp to sew. I didn't know how to sew before. So I said, let me fix you the coat, make it a little smaller.

And while I was fixing the coat, there was a shoulder pad. And I was going through it after. And I said, let me look. It looks funny, the shoulder pad. And I found there a ring in it, in the shoulder pad. So I think I sold the ring. And I had some money after. I started to-- I learned in camp to make-- in concentration camp there, from a girl, to make brassieres.

So I was-- so then I learned to make by my own some flowers for the brassieres, trimming, what we were doing for the girls, for the German Lagerführer-- the how you call it-- Aufseher. Aufseher means she was watching us.

They were very cruel. They were very-- the woman were-- the German woman was cruel. They were cruel. They were beating terrible. I wasn't-- maybe once I was maybe whipped there in that camp, the last camp. But most of the women were whipped there.

Did you think you'd survive?

No. I never believed. I never-- only one time, I said to my sister, I said to her-- because we had-- we get-- I told you, once, about every three days, a slice of bread with a piece of margarine. So I said to my sister, I said, Rose, if we survive, I'm going buy a whole loaf of bread and a whole pound of margarine, eat it up at once. That's what I told her. So I don't know. It sounds maybe better than it was. My struggle started later. It was very hard.

What was the most--

It was.

--do you remember what the most painful thing that you went through was?

Everything was painful. Everything was painful. I don't know. I don't know. We were hungry. We were lonely. We were alone. We didn't find anybody. I mean, came back to nowhere-- not a living soul. I had, at least in Kraków, 100 people, relatives-- uncles. My grandmother and my mother died, but I had cousins, uncles, sisters.

My three sisters were killed, my brother was killed, and my young father. I mean, nobody, nobody. It was just to come, to an emptiness. It was just unbelievable. I can't even know how I could take it.

Then what did you-- how did you support yourself? And what did you decide to do, you and your sister?

I learned to sew in camp. So I was making brassieres and selling them to those women on the market. And they gave me some food. After, it was-- I think she started to work-- she took typing. She took typing. Meantime, I got married. I got married.

In Kraków, you got married?

In Kraków, yeah.

This was--

We went to Sweden.

--'46 by now?

'46-- '46, I got married. Yeah. I don't remember even what month.

Was it someone you knew from your childhood?

No, unfortunately, no. Nobody survived what I knew. No, nobody. I married a guy who was very, very handsome. But he was sick. He was sick.

Did you have a family with him?

Yeah, I had--

Your boys.

I had the boys. I had a daughter what I lost very tragically.

Did you stay in Kraków?

We were staying in Kraków till-- he had brothers in Canton, Ohio. And he wanted always to go there. But the brothers didn't have means to bring us over. So we went to Sweden. And in Sweden, was-- there after the war was terrible. It was no people. Even the Swedes were living in the depots because they didn't build. And we were there.

Why did you pick Sweden? And you didn't--

Because this was the only escape. He didn't want to go to Germany.

And he didn't want to go to Palestine?

He didn't want go to Germany. He said, he don't want-- he was-- he never was in concentration camp. He didn't look Jewish. He was-- he had blue eyes, blond, tall. And he was in the underground.

But the people in underground went through even more because as a Jew, he was chased every day, afraid that somebody is going point him out. So he was-- maybe this was his illness. But he was-- I didn't realize that I married a very, very sick man.

And you didn't try to go to Palestine?

I didn't try what?

Palestine?

No, I didn't, no. No, I wanted to-- always, my dream was always to go to America. Since I was a little girl, I was dreaming about America. And I didn't-- no. I wanted to go-- especially he had two brothers in United States. This is the reason I chose him.

I had many opportunities. I had so many guys who wanted me there, who came from Russia, who came-- it was very few women survived, but a lot of men. So I had so many opportunities. But bad luck.

Your children were born in Sweden or in Kraków?

One boy was born in Kraków, one boy after-- from Sweden, we went to Montreal, Canada. I was there a month and a half because we didn't have the permit to go to United States. So we went to Montreal. I was there an year and a half. And I didn't know even that I am pregnant.

It was just-- so I went after to Montreal. And he couldn't find a job. He was sick. He was he was confused. It was bad. And the brothers, two bachelors, they wanted him to come to Canton.

So we went to Canton, which was very bad. He couldn't find a job. He was making \$20 a month-- a week, a week-- \$20, \$25. I didn't like Canton.

When did you get there, what year?

In 1950, in April. I came very sick to Canton. I came sick with a-- not nothing, but I had a gangrene. I had-- how you call it-- some throat-- very, very bad throat-- no, just a sore throat infection. I had maybe 105 temperature.

Strep?

Strep throat, yeah, strep throat. Yeah, OK. So this was a sickness. But after, I was OK. OK, it was struggle. It was struggle. We didn't have any help. We-- I worked.

Your brother-in-laws did not help you in Canton?

They didn't have. They did not have enough, no. They were bachelors who-- they didn't believe in. I mean, they couldn't. They didn't have the means. So it was a mistake that we came from Montreal to-- and Montreal was a big city.

This is the reason I didn't want to stay in Canton. I wanted to go to a bigger city because I am from a large city. And here, when I came here to Cleveland, I was working sometimes 20 hours a day-- 20 hours a day--

You came here.

After the store-- I had a store, a little grocery store.

When did you move to Cleveland?

To Cleveland? In '58.

With three children?

Yeah, with nobody to help.

Oh, you were widowed by this time?

No, I had a husband. And he was happy in the store. He was happy. And when he had everything, everything, to think, he killed himself.

And you were running a small grocery store with these three children?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Did you have any help in Cleveland from any agencies?

I never ask for help. I never ask for anything. Nobody-- I-- no, never, never. I didn't have. No.

Where did you live in Cleveland in the beginning?

At the beginning, I had some insurance case. So I got then \$10,000-- \$9,000 for an injury, personal injury. And I bought a two-family house then. There was 4% mortgage, I think, then. And my husband didn't want to buy. But I said, with three children, I have to have a house. And the one side was paying for the other.

And somehow, I worked myself out with very hard work. God, it's unbelievable that a human can work so hard. I mean, I would never believe it. When I was in Canton, I had this little house. I had boarders-- one, two boarders, always-- I mean, unbelievable that I could do it. But I did it.

Yeah, you're a strong person.

I did. I am very strong, yeah, very strong, very strong. I was ambitious too.

Did you put your boys through college?

Oh, yeah, of course. Both have master's degrees-- yeah, bright children. And my poor daughter was in college. She was in Boston College. I don't know. It's 10 years. Didn't have peace in this time.

How long have you--

The guilt.

--how long have you been married to your present husband?

Almost 19 years?

You met him after you moved to Cleveland then?

When I was a widow, yeah. Yeah.

Do you think very much of the Holocaust today? Do you ever think about?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I have dreams.

Do you?

Every night-- chase and run, I chase, running.

Do you have a strong belief in God that you survived?

Yeah. Yeah.

Do you think that's what pulled you through?

No.

No?

No. No. But when I was in Auschwitz-- I forgot to tell you this story. When I was in front of the crematorium, staying there for three days, the second day came a man in a stripe outfit. They were wearing those stripe suits-- whatever, uniforms?

And he used to be-- he said to me-- there was 300 women or 500 people waiting. He said to me, I know you. I said, how do you know me? So he said, I was a friend to your brother.

My brother was younger, maybe three years than I am. And I-- he was an Orthodox boy. I didn't know his friends. And we had very little. So he said, he told me, you are this and this. And I was your brother's friend.

So I ask him, listen, do we have any hope from here? So he said, no, this is the end. So I said to him, in Yiddish, in Jewish, I said [YIDDISH]. The one who is above us-- it's everything possible. I believe that I am going live.

So he said to me, we don't have a God. We don't have. We don't have the one who is above us. We have something like this, in Jewish, is saying, we don't have the [YIDDISH], we have [YIDDISH]. And he yelled at me, we don't have him.

So I said, I still believe that I am going live. That's what I told him. And in two days, they destroyed the crematorium. And they burned all the workers. He was-- he said, you see my hands? Those two hands were helping to kill, to burn-- I mean, those who were burning were already poisoned.

But he helped in the crematorium to burn the people. He said, thousands of people went through my hands to the oven, even they were not alive. But I was helping them. I couldn't help myself.

So two days later-- and he helped me then. When I was there in Auschwitz, he gave me some soup. He gave me a piece of chocolate. Because they had-- from the Germans, they had the means. And two days later, they destroyed the crematorium because the Russians were approaching.

And he was burned to death. All the people who were helping were killed. They put them all in the crematorium before they burned. So I believed always. Yeah, I did believe.

Do you think that survivors are different from other Jews?

Maybe they are stronger. Maybe. I think they have to be stronger.

What happened to your sister?

My little sister is in Israel. She's now-- she has a little problem. She gets depressed. She gets depressed. And she-- some-- lately, my son was there. I paid my son. My son was the first time to visit my family. And I helped him. I wanted him to see it-- as long as I'm here, I want him to meet my-- and he was very impressed.

They married well, even they don't have maybe too much money. But they live decent. And they are, all of them, educated. They are educated. I have one sister who is there since '37. She was a Zionist leader. She lives there.

So he was impressed with my family. They educated the children. They are-- they speak languages from my sisters. So it's-- they live OK. They are doing fine. I didn't go on to go there. I cannot. I cannot cry. I'm afraid I'm going cry in front of them because my life became so cruel.

Have you seen your sister since the war?

If I saw her?

Have you seen--

I was there three times.

Oh, you have been.

I didn't go the last 11-- 12 years. I was planning to go there, and the last minute, I changed my mind. I don't know. I'm just too weak to. And I'm helping them. I'm sending from time to time.

Your older sister got out of Europe--

She's younger a year than I am.

Oh, but she left before the war?

Yeah, she was a young-- yeah. She got a permit from the British government to go to Israel. And she's there. She has a daughter who is a lawyer. And they're making a living. They living different than we do. But they are satisfied, I think. Of course, worry-- worry because it's no peace. And they have children, grandchildren, or whatever they have.

Well, you've done quite a bit with your life. You're very strong. You've brought up your children alone. You were successful in the real estate business.

Yeah, if my daughter would be alive. Yes, I did. I did everything. I did. I tried. And I still play a little golf. I was a tennis player for years and years. I mean, I didn't do it for many years while the children were small and while I was in Canton, there and there. But since I married my husband, this one, we play golf together sometimes and tennis-- not in Cleveland. In Cleveland too, here on the-- but I do a little something.

Are you active in the Jewish community at all?

No. No. No. I am a member all over. I support. I am a life member of Council of Jewish Women. You know maybe Coppolino? You don't know her? She is there a big-- she is a friend of mine. She made me a life member. And I support the organizations.

But I-- no, no, I am not a mixer, except-- no, I'm not a mixer. And it's hard. I am-- then my accent is always what bothers me, regardless. I'm very upset sometimes when I hear my voice over the recorder. It bothers me. It bothers me because I took English in school. And I write and read perfect. But my accent is hard, very, very so.

Do you have any personal message that you would like to share with us regarding the Holocaust?

Yeah. Yeah. It's the reason-- message is we should teach our children that there was one. And they should be probably aware of the terrible sacrifice what many of them didn't have to go. We had we had a writer, Korsak, he didn't have-- he had Polish friends. And he didn't have to go through that with them. But he went.

So we had many dedicated great Jews in Poland, great people-- had great people. We had poets. We had-- I didn't even know some of them. They had-- their names were changed maybe to Polish. We didn't know that we had some great poets, writers, educators who were Jewish.

And they decided to go with the people to the camps. And they were killed with them together. I mean, I didn't have the connection with them because I am a different class. But they were high class people. They didn't believe. They were not believers. But they knew they are Jews, Jews in heart. So I know one of them.

Is there any other message you'd like to leave us with or any other thoughts?

No, I don't have. I don't have messages. What is my message? I talk to my son and I ask him if I should go. I said, I want to forget. I don't want-- I was trying-- I didn't get money from Germany because I didn't want tell the doctor my life. I didn't want it. And I could have every month a pension. I didn't want get it.

But I talked to my son. I said, the woman from the Council-- this was before you called me-- wanted me to go, or one organization or the other. And I don't-- I can't talk. You see, now, I opened up a little. But I didn't tell my children my life. They didn't know even maybe that I had a child before. I don't know if I talk to them about. I didn't want talk. I couldn't talk. I could not talk.

But I-- when my son was here last month, I told him-- he said, Mother, go. You should go. And you should tell what you went through. Maybe somebody else went through more, probably, or can remember more. I tried not to remember. I tried not to remember because it was it was unbelievable.

We didn't feel like human. We felt worse than a worm-- unbelievable. They wanted to take away-- systematically take away more and more the humanity from us, make us like animals.

But if I talk to you five days, I wouldn't tell everything if it comes back to me. I was thinking at night what to talk and what to tell you. And I didn't sleep. It was-- so OK, now, I'm old.

Well, your story was a hard one to tell. And you certainly went through many, many bad experiences and--

Terrible, terrible, after too, after-- god. Canton was bad to me, a sick husband, very sick husband. I didn't realize how sick he was.

Well, today you have two gentleman sons who are successful. And you have that to be proud of.

Successful? They make a living. What is the success? If they would be married--

They're healthy.

They are healthy. And I am healthy.

And they're a joy to you. And they bring you happiness. And look what you went through and what you survived. And we thank you very much for sharing your story with us. And it certainly was a--

Oh, you're welcome.

--a wonderful one to hear and-- a horrible one to hear.

Horrible.

This is Sue Danford. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Rena Rubinow. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.