

--with each other a little bit.

Good morning, Hannah.

Good morning, Peggy.

It's so nice that you are here this morning. I am Peggy Nathan. And we are talking this morning with Hannah Rath Trabit--

Right--

--survivor. We want to thank you very much for participating in this fantastic project really. You are contributing to an oral history of the Holocaust. And important thing is that it will be a permanent history for future generations.

Let's start at the beginning. First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself-- again, your name and your age and so on.

I'm now 61. And--

What was your maiden name?

My name was Hannah Leschetzky, which is a Polish origin name, but I was born in Germany.

I see.

My parents came from-- my mother too was born in Germany, my father. But the grandparents came from Lithuania.

I see. Where do you live now?

I live in Cleveland, Ohio. And I have two daughters.

Are you working?

And I'm working for 17 years as a dental assistant and secretary in a dental office, like I said, 17 years at the same job.

Oh, well, you must be very good.

Well.

Are you married, Hannah?

I am married the second time. I lost my first husband and got married again seven years ago.

And do you have children?

I have two daughters. Both are married. One lives in Washington and works for the Jewish Federation. Her husband working for the enterprise system, American Enterprise Institute. And my other daughter lives in Cleveland. And I have a little grandchild, granddaughter.

How lovely. All right, now, we'll talk-- we're going to get back, go back in your history a little bit, and talk somewhat-- we'd like a picture of what your life was like before the war. Let's begin with say 1939 or so. And you did live in Germany, right?

Well, I--

What was life like before Hitler came into power?

Well, I was a little girl, lived in a small town in Germany, Halberstadt, which is now in the Russian zone. And from there--

What city was that near?

Germany is so small that it really--

Was it near a big city?

It was, let's say, four hours from Berlin. For Germany, I was quite a distance. But it really wasn't far.

About four hours.

It's centrally-- it's now the Eastern zone. But when I was 11 years old-- that it was 1933-- we moved to Hanover to bigger city because my mother was widowed very young. And it wasn't so easy already then in a smaller town. So we moved to Hanover, which I think everybody knows is a much larger town.

Do you know what the population of that town was at that time?

About a half a million.

Oh, it was a big city.

It was a big city, yeah.

Were there many Jews there?

I don't really know, but it's quite a bit-- well, there was quite a few Jews.

Hanover you said?

Hanover, yeah. And there were-- I really don't know how many, but I would say a couple thousand at the time.

OK.

And so I moved to Hanover. And we lived with my grandfather because my grandmother had died. And my mother being the only daughter with four brothers took care of my grandfather.

This was in the late '30s.

That was in the '33--

Oh, early '30s. I see.

--when I moved to the bigger city. So I was a little girl then we moved to Hanover. And we lived with my grandfather. My grandfather was then like my father because my father had died. I was orphaned very young. My mother had never remarried. So it was just my mother and me and my brother. I have a brother.

I see. Is your brother older than you?

My brother is three years older than me.

I see. OK.

No, two years, I'm sorry. [LAUGHS] So we lived in Hanover. And I was enrolled in school.

You were about how old at that time?

I was-- '22-- 11.

11 years old, OK.

And I was enrolled in school and lived a very nice life. My mother took care of my grandfather. And my grandfather was very religious.

You didn't have a grandmother living at that time.

My grandmother died. This is why my mother took care of my grandfather.

I see.

So we lived in Hanover. And it was a nice life. I mean I was-- we didn't have too much money.

How did your family make a living?

Well, my mother sewed. She was a seamstress. And my grandfather taught Hebrew. And he was very Orthodox, very religious. He did all kinds of teachings. And he had students come to the house. He was a Cantor. He was a teacher.

And my mother did all kinds of-- she took in boarders. And she cooked for people, you know, like catering. So she really worked hard, very hard all her life.

Did you have to help? Did you help your mother? I mean--

I helped a lot--

Were you expected to?

Well, but I was young. But, you see, it was '33, and already times were getting worse for us.

Already there. In what way?

It was-- well, not right away. But already then Hitler came into--

We'll skip a few years then--

Yeah.

OK.

Because I don't really recall, but '33 there wasn't really-- we weren't worried even though some people started leaving already for--

They heard-- felt the rumblings.

Israel, which was Palestine then.

Right.

America, some, the very-- usually people that had money.

Sure. Sure.

Because it had-- you had to have money.

Right.

And as it always boils down to it, if you had money you had a way to buy yourself out in those days, even with Israel, which was Palestine then.

All right, then, let's move on a few more years.

Well, when I was 14, already there was 19-- this is '31, '35-- I know I had to I had to leave school. I only went to school--

Was this your choice?

This already-- this-- no.

Was this the Nuremberg laws?

In Germany, you only go to school, I think, till you're, what, 16. You don't go till 18. You have four years of elementary and four years of high-- actually eight years is mandatory.

OK.

But I know I went-- they enrolled me in-- we skip a few years. And then he then enrolled me in middle school. It's called middle school. You learn languages. It's not like the real lowest. But it's very nice. And I was-- two Jewish-- there were two Jewish girls in my class. That's all.

Only two?

Yeah. Only two. And already then there was antisemitism.

I see. In what way did you feel that?

I remember then they used to pull up the flag, and we-- the kids went out already then sang, you know--

The German flag.

--the German flag, and, you know-- and we just-- when I was younger, I used to go and do it too because I didn't want to look different, you know.

Well, you were German.

I was German. But it was already the Jews weren't supposed to do it. But we didn't want anybody to know we Jewish. I mean you really hid it.

I see.

You really tried to hide it. But I did have to leave school in '36 because no Jewish children could go to school anymore. And they started a Jewish school, just for Jewish children. But by that time, I was 14 years old. And they didn't have any high school classes. So it was only for the younger ones.

So they were thinking what can they do with me. So I was sent to a-- it's called a household school to learn ironing and--

Your mother made this decision--

--washing-- yeah-- in Hamburg. So these things--

How far was Hamburg from--

That's three hours from Hanover with a train.

And then you lived there?

No, I lived there for one year. Yeah.

With a family or was it--

No, it was an orphanage, a Jewish orphanage. And part of it was accredited as a school.

I see.

And the orphanage, we took care of the orphans. And there was like 20 students. And in the afternoon, we learned English. We learned German. You know, we had actual classes. But you learned household at the same time.

Did you have to pay to go to this school? Did your mother have to pay your tuition?

you had to pay, right.

OK.

But in Germany, everybody wants you to learn the household--

Should they need maids--

It's very important.

Oh, you mean--

No.

The Germans were very clean people.

Yeah. But this was really from your parents. Every girl has to learn these things, to cook, to iron.

It was called a balaboosta.

Yeah, balaboosta, yeah. So I learned really my basic skills. Well, my mother taught me really, the basic skills.

So you were away from home for a year?

A year. I came home for vacation, just like kids go to college, but I was very young.

Yes.

You know.

Yeah. Well, that was very fancy, like a boarding school.

Yeah. But I was plenty homesick then.

All right, then, all right, this is then you're age 14. We're up to 1936. You were there for a year.

Right.

Then you came back to Hanover?

I came back. And then what now? Because you just couldn't already as a Jew do many things.

Right.

So I was sent to another orphanage. This was a going thing at this time.

As an employee?

For just a few months, yeah. But that wasn't really that important. But I remember after that, I was working-- already then I was making money-- in some kind of a resort outside Hamburg.

Oh, OK.

It was a vacation resort and a camp for children. And this is when Kristallnacht came, you know?

Yes, of course.

And we were-- it's out in the woods, like here in the Catskills, for instance, you know. And out there, they didn't do anything. But we heard what was going on all over the country.

Was it in the newspapers?

It was in the papers. It was on the radio. And anyhow, it was very upsetting to everybody. But somehow, they didn't get-

It was mainly in the city.

--to these little, yeah, outlying areas. So I went home.

You were frightened?

Yeah. We were frightened. They closed up--

The resort.

And I went home, yeah.

Was the resort a--

Jewish--

--a Jewish resort?

At that time you had to be-- I mean you couldn't go to a non-Jewish resort. I know I wouldn't know really.

Yeah, right, OK.

I was very young. And I came home, and all the synagogues were burned at that Kristallnacht, you know. And my grandfather was very religious, and he couldn't go to temple anymore. And this was his whole life was teaching and going to services. I mean he was a man in the 70s. This was his life. So that was heartbreaking.

This was devastating to him.

And a lot of people-- this is-- of course, the first time-- not the first time. This is a time that took all the men and put them into the camps, a lot of men. It was in '37, you see.

Did they take-- well, your grandfather was older--

He was older. They didn't take him.

I see.

But we were very afraid for my brother. No, I think my brother left actually that year, but before Kristallnacht. My brother left in August. And Kristallnacht came in September-- in November was Kristallnacht.

Again, you did tell me, but I forgotten. Your brother was older than you?

My brother was older.

By two years you said.

He learned to be a glazier.

A glazier.

You had to find a trade to teach your children because times were bad. Jews couldn't go to school. Jews couldn't go to college or do like whatever you wanted to do, even though he was a very intelligent. And he sure missed out in life.

But he went-- my mother sent him to America by himself. He--

At what age?

17 years old.

She had money to do this?

Well, that--

She got it together.

We weren't that poor. I mean we had some money. And my mother had four brothers that were well-to-do. One was a banker. So they all helped her.

But he came alone, absolutely alone.

My brother came completely alone to this country.

Knowing English?

Well, a little bit. We all learned English in school. And he came to Utica, New York and stayed with an old uncle. That's my grandfather's brother, which is not really an uncle. It's what a grand uncle? Grandfather's brother.

Or great uncle we call them.

You just send your children somewhere. So we send him-- he sent him an affidavit, which is that he will take care of if he can't work.

What they call a sponsor.

A sponsor. And he stayed with him. And I don't think they were happy years for my brother. He was a 17 years young boy. And this old uncle which it was--

This old uncle had emigrated many years earlier.

Oh, he was here since a young boy. And he was an old man. Yeah.

Yes.

Yes. But my brother survived this way, you see. He was here and started to work as an auto mechanic or machinist and did all kinds of work and later on was in the army. And, well, later on, I'll tell you what happens when I was liberated.

OK, but all right. Now, let's talk about you personally. How do you remember yourself as a 14 or a 16-year-old when you were in Hanover and when you went to work in this orphanage and so on? Were you a pretty little girl? What did you look like?

I'll tell you I was always happy go lucky. And I still-- and today, I am again. And people always say I'm a survivor. And I'll survive anything, which--

Were you were you light haired and--

Blonde.

I mean really very Aryan looking.

Very-- yeah, I was very athletic.

You were a healthy child?

Healthy, athletic, and a fun person I really think I was because I always had a lot of friends.

Tell me, what schools did you attend? You said you attended only until age 14.

14. Right. I went to-- well, first in Halberstadt when I was young, I went to a Jewish school, like it would be the Jewish Academy because it was a very small town in it was--

A Jewish day school.



Yeah. And in Hanover, I went to-- it's called middle school. And I learned French. And I had all the subjects that you have. But at age 14, no more Jewish children could go to any school.

Did you have any non-Jewish friends at that time?

As a little girl. As a little girl. But not anymore.

Not when you were finished with school, not at age 14 or 16?

No, it was all Jewish friends.

And what did you enjoy doing as a young girl, even when you left school? I mean--

I love sports. I think that was really one of my main thing. I loved sports. We had a Jewish-- I belonged to a Jewish sports, you know like Bar Kochba. Or they had these Jewish sports because the Jewish community tried to do things for their own people. At that time, we could still go to our own Sportsverein, you know, which is like a group of just Jewish people. So we went on Sundays.

And I bicycled a lot. I mean, we just bicycled. And we had our boyfriends and went out in the country and in the woods and swimming. I mean a lot of really of healthy activities.

Right. Right. At that time, did you have plans for the future? Most children think a little bit--

I really didn't. It's really-- I mean, I think back--

You were sheltered maybe?

Yeah. When I think back, even though I was sent away at age 14, when I think about that I could send my daughter at age 14, I send her at 18 to college and I was crying. But at age 14, I was sent away. It's really very young to leave home, you know.

What do you remember about antisemitism from those days?

I remember as a little girl--

Even as a little girl--

--in Halberstadt that when we went to school and we went through the streets-- my brother, we talk about that today. My brother says, remember, they used to call Jude, Jude, Jude. There were streets we used to go through. And they used to throw stones at us as a real little girl already. More in a small town though.

But that was before the Nazi era really?

Ah, yeah.

And now what do you remember about antisemitism say in 1937 or something, 1938 when you were sent already to the orphanage to learn these things?

In '37--

Were they all Jewish people where you were sent?

All Jewish people.

I see. OK.

But already, you didn't tell anybody I'm Jewish. You just didn't because already antisemitism was spread quite-- but I mean there were always some nice people. But the Jews just didn't-- I mean, it spread the minute Hitler came to power it got worse and worse and worse in Germany for the Jewish people.

Were you aware of any antisemitic attitudes toward you yourself or toward your family? Of course because of your grandfather--

Well, my grandfather was-- it was, let's say, you walk with your grandfather and saw as a Jew, there's always people that made snide remarks.

On the street?

On the street.

Were there any--

Not a lot, but there were always some.

Were there any other manifestations other than that?

Not before '37 or '38.

After '37 or so, then what happened?

Well, then my grandfather-- after the synagogues were destroyed, my mother sent my grandfather to his son in Holland because he was--

Your mother's brother.

My mother's brother. And he was well to do. And we thought it was safe in Holland for him. And he could go to his synagogue and, you know, do his--

He was already in his 70s at that time?

Yes. And I stayed with my mother.

And you stayed with your mother in Hanover?

Right.

I see. I see.

So we stayed. And I worked. You couldn't find employment so I worked as a maid. Yeah.

For a Jewish family?

For a Jewish family. You could only work for a Jewish family.

I see.

And I learned sewing on the side. I did already learn-- in that orphanage, I learned some sewing. And I sewed. And I worked as a maid really.

Yeah. Did any non-Jews at that time offer any friendship to you?

I had some non-Jewish friends, yeah.

At that time?

Yeah. I got a job in 1939 at a non-Jewish company. It was a knitting store.

But that was illegal really--

No, she could hire us. I don't exactly recall. But I know later on we had to wear a star. But that was before. She hired us. There was certain work-- I think if there was no men, I don't exactly recall. A girlfriend and me, we both worked at this knitting store. They had machine knit items. And they made them over into-- you know, they cut them and made them over. We knew how to sew. So we were sewers, you know.

I see.

And it so happened the lady that was the boss was married to a Jew who was in a concentration camp because-- so she had really feelings for the Jewish people.

I see. So she was your friend really--

Yeah.

--even away from work.

Right.

You used to see her as a friend.

Right. And there I met another non-Jewish woman that helped me till I was liberated.

In what way did they help you? I don't mean-- I mean--

Just being nice and not--

Know that they're human beings--

Not talking about this constant, you know, Germany--

Did they give you anything? I mean did they help you with money? You didn't need it?

We didn't need that.

You were paid at the job.

I was paid. And we weren't really destitute. We were doing nicely, fine. yeah.

You stayed-- you lived in the same place where you had lived with your grandfather-- right--

--when your grandfather was sent away? An apartment. And just and your mother?

My mother and I. My brother was he was already in America.

Was there a communication from America? Did mail get through or anything?

Oh, yeah, my brother wrote. And we wrote. And it was--

Was it--

--constant communication.

Was the mail censored at that time?

I don't think so.

You don't remember.

I don't think so. No.

OK, now, let's go on to when the war actually began--

There's one other thing, maybe you're interested.

Certainly.

I had an uncle. And my mother-- one of my mother's brothers lived in Hanover too. And he went to Israel at that time, which was then Palestine. So we were left-- my mother and I were left alone because they too had money. And first, they sent their children. They had three daughters. They sent first one daughter and then the next daughter and then the couple, my uncle and aunt went.

So they weren't terribly concerned about you and your mother?

Well, my brother was in America. So we figured we'll follow--

Eventually you'll get there.

Which we wanted. And it just was too late.

Right. Right. Right.

So that happened.

OK, now, we're going to go on to what you remember about the beginning of the war. When were you first aware that there was a war?

Well, everybody heard it. I mean you felt it was coming. I mean you just read the paper. You hear the radio, you know. And what, the war broke out in September of '39--

Were there servicemen in your community?

It was just a big excitement and everything that Hitler invaded Poland. That's how it started.

Right. Right. Right.

And I was at that time, which was '39, I was, what, 16, 17?

17 years old, right.

But, you know, it's somehow, I don't know, I was certainly mature enough, but it didn't-- I don't know. It didn't make such an--

Impression?

No, that I would be really excited about it or say we've got to get out.

Or that it would affect you. You didn't think it would affect you personally.

Right. So there was a war, you know.

Yeah, right. Right.

But it didn't affect us. We read the papers. And you look how fast Hitler is going through Poland and so on. But we didn't get really-- I didn't get scared at that time.

At that time, were there any more open acts of antisemitism as the war continued?

Well, after Kristallnacht, you know, they put a lot of men in the concentration camps. And they had to prove that they can go to any foreign country. And people started leaving. I mean they were leaving in '37, '38, '39.

Yes.

And, of course, my mother was a widow.

Sure.

It was difficult. There was nobody to help her. And my brother was in America trying to get an affidavit. And nobody wanted to give us an affidavit. People here weren't-- my uncle was afraid we would be a burden. And we wanted to leave, but we just--

There just was no way for you.

We just couldn't leave. That's all.

Once the war started, did your life change?

Well, I worked in that knitting store. We had to-- I don't know what year it started, we had to wear a star. There was, I think, a little later. It changed. You couldn't do certain things.

Of course, at night you had to go in the cellar because it started with the bombs falling. And sometimes we wished we wouldn't even be there because it was horrible. I mean anybody that ever wished for a war or whatever, if you would be in a city where the bombs fall, and you have to get up two or three times at night and go in the cellar and they fly and you hear them, it's not good to remember.

Did you did you have discussions with your mother, with your friends, about what was happening?

Well, people were leaving.

People were leaving.

People were leaving. The Jewish people were leaving. But--

And you wanted to leave, but didn't have the means--

Well, my brother tried to get us an affidavit. There he was, a 17-year-old boy.

Yeah, he was very young.

My uncle in his 70s, an old, not educated man, afraid that we would be a burden.

Yeah. Yeah.

But this writing that went back and forth, writing to America, and we did finally get the affidavit. But the war had broken out. So no more boats. You know, there was a time, '39-- I don't know, the last ship-- when did the last boat leave? I'm not sure of the date. All I know is by the time we finally got the paper there was no more way of getting out.

The affidavit that would come from--

America.

--America that--

We could come.

You could come, that you would not be a charity case or something. Somebody would sponsor.

Right. You had to have a sponsor. Without a sponsor, you had no way of leaving. And so it happened that my mother and I-- some people went to Shanghai at the end. I mean you smell the danger, you know. Some people went to Cuba. I mean they went all over--

Wherever they could go. OK.

But my mother and I had to stay.

Right. All right. And then the Nazis finally entered your town, right, in Hanover?

Yeah. Well, the Nazis were there.

They were there.

It's a big town.

I see. And they were there. And there were the swastikas on the buildings and the flags and that sort of thing. Right, everything.

All right, looking back, what changes occurred in your family life when the Nazis were there?

Well, we still lived in the apartment. And a lot of things you weren't supposed to do, but me being young, me and my friends did a lot of things that were dangerous.

Well, you were young, full of pep--

You weren't supposed to go to the movies. You weren't supposed to do this. You weren't supposed to do a lot of things. But many things we did. And we--

You got away with it.

Got away with it. But it was dangerous.

Sure.

It was dangerous.

But you didn't recognize-- young people don't recognize the danger--

No. They are 17 years old--

You weren't afraid.

No.

Well, we'll do it. I want to see--

We laughed. And my mother, of course, was beside herself when she found out.

Were there any changes in how you and your mother made a living?

No.

At that time?

I worked at the knitting store. And my mother-- I think that her brothers helped her, support her too. She had a pension. So I know that we never had a lot. But we lived comfortably.

Yeah. Right.

Because her four brothers, four brothers, they were all well-to-do. And my mother being the only daughter and being--

Were they--

--widowed, so she--

Were they in the same community?

No.

One went to--

The one went to Israel. One was in Holland. One was in England by that time.

But there was communication?

Oh, yes, we all communicated.

Mail could get through.

There were two in Israel.

I see.

Two in Israel. So that's the four.

One from Frankfurt. See, one lived in Frankfurt. And one in Hanover. They went to Israel. One went to London. See, they all left. My mother is the only one that stayed.

I see.

Even though the one in Holland got killed at the end too, you know, because Hitler went into Holland, you know.

But then as the war continued--

Yeah, the real danger started then in-- we knew there were things going on, you know. And--

People were being taken, is that what you mean by things going on?

Well, that didn't-- in Hanover, for instance, I don't think in Germany was like pogroms like it was in Poland. It was they took them all at one time.

I see.

They took-- in August of '41, they assembled all the Jews. I mean, you just went. You got a letter in which house you're supposed to go. They put us in houses, let's for instance say, in an old-- not a funeral, a cemetery, a house by the cemetery, they put about 100 maybe. I was put on some kind of a farm with so many Jews, 200 or so.

You got a letter in the mail telling you where to report--

Where to go because we're going to be resettled.

Oh, I see. At this point then, they told you you're going to be resettled.

Within one night--

Did you have any idea what that meant to be resettled?

No, but the war was raving and the bombs were falling.

And you want to get out anyway.

And we thought we were lucky maybe because we were going to be resettled. And this night, getting up every night, and those bombs flying, it was just horrible. So we really-- I did not know what is ahead. I really did not know.

Were you sent to the same-- was your mother-- your mother and you were sent to the same area?

My mother and I, we were sent to one of those-- it's called Zammellager, you know, where you assemble. It's like--

I see.

And they had about five places.

And you said how many people were in this one house?

Well, we were all together a thousand. So there might have been five houses, five different stations where-- and they put four or five people in one room. It wasn't that you got an apartment.



What, this was just a meeting place? Or did you live there for how long?

You lived there. We lived there. From August till December, till we were sent away finally.

From August till December, so that's several months. So there was communal cooking? Where did you get food?

My mother, you know, I forgot, my mother cooked. It was primitive. She slept in a room with a couple. Imagine that.

And you?

I slept with young women.

I see.

So they had--

Did you make those arrangements or did the Nazis tell you you'd be in this room and you'll be--

I don't remember that. I just know that we all--

Yeah, you were--

There. And all my mother took is a bed.

A bed, she was able to take?

I'm trying to think about how we-- no, our furniture-- no, our furniture stayed where they were. We had to leave everything. The only thing I took my bicycle. I remember that. I left at the end. Yeah. No. There were some furniture, but it was very primitive.

But I went to work from there. I still went to work.

You continued to work.

And I wore the Jewish star, you know, the yellow star.

I suppose you were told you could take a suitcase of clothing or something.

Right. We took our personal belongings. At that time, we took still I think pots and pans and what you could carry, not a moving van, just what you could carry.

I see.

And we went into this home. And that was already bad because it was very crowded.

Sure. Probably one bathroom for 25 people or more, right.

It was crowded.

And one kitchen?

One kitchen.

Was it-- were you able to buy food? Where was the source of your food?

Yeah, this was-- I don't recall exactly how it was. But I know that we did not eat together. We ate separately.

Oh, you ate-- so you were maintained a family.

But we didn't have our own kitchen. I think the women went in the kitchen and cooked.

Yeah, this one cooked. So one ate eggs and one ate potatoes, or whatever. OK.

And I know that you had to wear the Jewish star. And many times we used to wear purse and hold a purse over it.

So that people wouldn't see.

Because it was just-- you couldn't go-- I think you had to stand, you know. You couldn't go on the buses, streetcars. Or you had to stand in the back. I mean it was--

And still, I was happy go lucky. I really never cried at that time or that I would say what's happened-- maybe it didn't really sink in what's happening, you know.

OK, now how long did you stay in this-- live in this house? You said from August to December?

Yeah. In December-- in December-- oh, during that time-- this is really-- during that time, then the SS came at night.

Every night?

Beat up the young men. Not every night. But many of my friends got beat up something terrible.

Just out of maliciousness?

Malicious. They came at night. And they broke a chair. They took a chair and broke it and took the leg of a chair and beat up some of my young fellow.

For no reason really other than they were Jewish.

Yeah.

OK.

And you know as women what they did to us?

No.

They made us get undressed and parade in front of them.

That's terrible for a young girl. For anybody, of course.

My mother was going crazy. I know. They didn't touch us. But they just found their pleasure in watching us, you know.

Watching you be degraded.

Yeah, degraded. I remember they came, and they did that to us. But I know that they kept hitting-- in some of the houses, they came and beat up the young just something terrible. The men were working in a street-- what do you call-- that's the only work they could do.

Street repair, street cleaning? Digging?

Digging stuff, yeah that's all that men could do.

Laborers.

It was a bad time. Labor, yeah. It was a bad time.

OK, then in December, what happened? You said you were there until December.

In December, we were all put into a train.

This is December of what year?

'41.

OK.

In December '41, we were all-- I don't remember exactly, you know. It's many years ago.

Sure.

We were put on a train. But I think the buses came--

With your mother?

With my mother. We could each take a suitcase.

Everyone who lived in that house was--

In this house and the others. There was-- they were all over the city.

Those 1,000 people.

Yeah. And our transport was 1,003. I think. It was just 1,000 people.

Let me interrupt you for just one minute. What if somebody got ill when you were living there?

They all went.

No, I don't mean to be taken away. But in those several months that you lived in that house, could you get medical attention? Did you have to get a Jewish doctor?

A Jewish doctor, for sure. There was no--

Nobody else would treat.

Whatever you did, whether there was social or physical, it had to be a Jewish.

I see.

I mean it was completely--

A non-Jewish person was not allowed to--

Oh, no. Even look at us.

Come near you, right. OK.

It had to be-- it was all done by our own people.

But there was medical care available?

There probably was.

But you don't-- you didn't--

I was young. I didn't need it. But--

I'm sorry to interrupt.

That's all right. And so we were put on a train.

What kind of a train?

We were on a-- not on a-- what do you call it, cattle cars. We were in a regular train.

A regular train.

We were in a regular train. And--

Did you know where you were going?

No.

OK.

They told us east somewhere, relocation--

Did you know what that meant--

--to do some kind of work.

Again, relocation, you didn't know--

We thought it was some kind of work away from the war zones.

Away from the zones, but maybe to do something for the war effort.

Right. So we really in that did not know because like they tell from Poland or the Eastern Europe, they knew they had pogroms and they had-- they knew what was going on. We did not know.

I see.

I did not know.

So you went out on the train with your suitcase.

We went on the train like little dummies, you know.

Right. Well, you had no choice.

We went. I mean people asked, now, why didn't you run?

Where would you run?

Where would you run? Everybody was registered. German is-- the Germans are very-- everything is registered. Everybody's registered. They knew exactly where everybody was.

OK, so you go in on the train. Was it a very crowded train? Or were you just sitting as it was as one would--

We were sitting on the German trains with the benches, you know. You were sitting. But we weren't supposed to open the windows and talk to anybody. And--

You could just talk amongst yourselves, but nobody outside, right.

And--

And how long were you--

I had some young friends. You know, I was young. And we had some young girls. But it was--

This was sad. Again, from 1941--

It was in '41.

Well, already you're 19 years old.

Now, the war with America broke out in December. And that's when we were sent out. So we never knew. Did you-- would you-- can you understand that we never knew? We didn't have a newspaper.

Of course, you weren't informed. How could you know.

No papers, so we had no idea what's going on. We just went on the train. And we were on a train, I don't know, two nights. It took quite a long time because the train stopped. And we were sent to Riga.

Riga is in--

Latvia.

Right.

And it was December. And we got--

It is north and cold, right. That's on the sea, isn't it? The North Sea, the Baltic Sea, something--

Cold.

And you had this one suitcase of clothing?

One suitcase each. Yeah. That's when the trouble really started.

OK, now you arrived in Riga. And what happened?

We arrived in Riga. And the SS was standing by the train with the dogs, and out, everybody, out, and leave the suitcases here. And they'll be brought to you, you know.

Sure. Well, the porters will bring them.

Or maybe some people carry them. They throw them away later. But I think everybody left them there. And that was the last we saw of our own possessions, you know. And marching.

Now, where did you march to?

Into a ghetto.

Into a ghetto.

Which was a Latvian ghetto. I don't know if you heard about it.

Now, tell me, when you say a ghetto, is this-- did you go in-- were there gates? And were there walls around it?

Well, the Latvian Jews, when the Germans had marched into Latvia, had been put into a ghetto. Three, four days before we came, they shot all the Latvian Jews, but 4,000. Those were the survivors, only men and very hardly any women--

Were left, you mean?

Furriers, leather work, you know, they needed certain-- because there were a lot of fur, it's very cold there-- professional people like-- I know there were furriers. There were auto mechanics needed for the war effort.

Those that had special skills that they could use, they--

And young ones. They were all young--

To work.

And all their wives and children, they killed in the woods near Riga. This has been proven and there are pictures of it. They were all shot. So when we marched into the camp-- they put those 4,000 survivors in one side of the camp. And the other side of the camp, we were brought.

You were 1,000 people?

We were 1,000 people at that time, yes.

Yeah.

So we were brought into this camp and put into groups. Like I was from Hanover, they were from Berlin, you know each city in a kind of a-- it's called bezirk, you know. So they had everything registered, you know, houses, houses. But it was a ghetto because there was--

A fence.

Fence around it. So you couldn't get out. I mean it was-- and then we saw these men on the other side. There was a street in between. And--

They separated the men and the women--

No, those were the Latvian men, the Jewish men. And they all had lost their wives. And all of a sudden, they see all these people marching with children and women. They thought their wives are coming back. In the meantime, they shot all the-- 36,000 they killed, shot. In those days, they didn't have yet the crematorium. You know, they shot him there--

This was not Babi Yar?

No, this was called-- they were killed in the Bikewald. That's the history of the Latvian Jews.

All right.

So we were put in the ghetto. There was-- all in, you know, like 10, 12, 15 people in one room, very-- but we found the food on the table.

I mean a room-- a small room. And it was a room to sit?

Yeah, it was room to sit.

On the floor?

On the floor. And there were furniture. You see, those were the rooms those women and children had lived before they shot them.

Oh, they had to make room for you so they shot the other ones.

Yes. And the food was on the table. There was potatoes and food and everything there.

You mean, they had been--

We took over--

--disturbed in the middle of a meal even.

We didn't know who left this food here.

Right. Right.

And you know what?

Cooked food? You mean--

It was frozen at that time because it was so cold.

Oh.

And the closets were full of clothes.

Oh, so they figured you don't need your things there.

So we found-- well, the SS already had taken the jewelry. But we found later on. You know, you find things things.

Things maybe in hems of clothing.

This is how we lived those first years from those clothes. Well, we were put to work--

Doing what--

In kommandos-- different, you know-- marching out of the ghetto and working, especially young people. But my mother was-- she worked in an airport.

Well, your mother was young at that time.

Yeah, she was in her 40s.

Yeah.

And I worked with-- she worked for the army doing uniforms, cleaning, sewing on buttons. I mean there was-- they found all kinds of work.

Right. Right. Right.

Mostly some of it useless. Like, for instance, we worked on a river carrying-- you know there's a lot of industry, lumber in Riga because, I don't know, lumber industry is big. So we carried boards from one side of the river to the other side of the river for no reason at all.

Just to keep you busy.

Very cold. And a lot of snow shoveling. That's what they got, cheap labor, you know.

Did anyone help you?

There were some-- those were not-- those were Latvian. And the guards weren't all German. Some were German. Some were Baltic, you know, the--

They were non-Jews.

Non-Jews.

But some of them-- a few of them were helpful to you?

A little. Some of them. You know, we--

They were pleasant maybe.

--took the clothes. They were pleasant some of them. And some of them tried to change the clothes for bread. We lived really--

From hand to mouth it's called.

Yeah, no. There's-- is it bartering? Bartering?

Right.

That's what we lived like.

I see.



We took whatever we could find.

And you mean some of the guards would take this--

When we marched out of the camp. And then we were hiding it. But if they caught you, they shot you. They were already going-- shooting was going on already left and right.

And we were told if you barter and you bring home when we catch you, we shoot you or we hang you. And it did happen to one of my friends that hung right in front of us, hanged. And we had to march by the gallows and watch it.

But we still did it for survival. We did it for survival because the food, there was just not enough to eat. And we were hungry.

Were you able to help anyone?

Well, I had my mother. And I had some friends. And I'm still friends with some of the same people. I mean we went through all this together. And the ones that survived-- I have a girlfriend now that's with me. She lives in Indianapolis. And we were actually sent out together, liberated together.

You met her in Riga?

I met her in Hanover just before we were sent out. So we became very, very good friends.

Now, so this was--

That was in December '41.

That was December '41. So you were in the ghetto in Riga. And you--

The ghetto was self-contained.

I see. So you worked in the ghetto.

I worked outside of the ghetto. We marched out. We came home at night.

And was the ghetto closed at night?

The ghetto was closed at night. And, you know, the Jewish spirit, there was things going on. People made little-- you know, we made the best of it to the point.

You knew-- had a calendar. You knew when there were holidays.

Right. But there was no newspaper. Only what we heard outside. But already then there were--

People there spoke German?

Yes.

Or did you speak their language?

Well, there were all Germans from different parts of--

No, but I mean the guards.

German, they were spoke.

The ones that were helpful I meant.

They were all-- some are-- Riga is a city they all know German. There was-- at one time I think it was--

What is the language of Latvia actually? Do you know?

Latvian.

Oh, I see. OK.

It's a very strange language.

But they spoke German so that they were--

But already then they had-- my girlfriend, for instance, while she was out to work and she came home, her parents and her little brother were taken away and never saw them again. So they had already-- it's called Aktion-- while we were gone. So already then they kept loading up trucks and taking people away.

I see. And so that actually then you met refugees from other cities in your ghetto too?

Yes, they were from--

Other countries too?

The first two weeks-- no, not other countries. But the first two weeks every day a transport arrived till they filled the ghetto up. I don't really know how many we had. But we were 1,000. They were from-- they were all from Germany, different cities, relocated from different cities in Germany.

I see. So you and your mother worked. And how would you describe the Jewish council? Was there a Jewish council?

There was a Jewish council.

The Judenrat, is that correct?

Yeah, Judenrat, we had that in the ghetto. And he was-- well, we had not much to-- but it was self-contained that they took care of-- I mean sanitation wasn't too good. And it was-- it was a sad situation. I mean you had no freedom.

Were there any classes of any kind? Did they try to have a school?

They taught, the little children, I think they taught-- there was some little children yet at the beginning. And there books have been reading. I think-- I belong to a society of survivors of Riga ghetto, which is in New York. We have a newspaper. And we are very close group because there are so few survivors.

Are there any others in Cleveland? You have this friend in Indianapolis you said.

Yeah. No. In Cleveland, not from Riga, I have survivors here, but not from there.

That's what I meant.

Most are in New York. And we're very close. I mean I still go see them.

Now, how long were you there?

I was in the ghetto till '43.

At that time, you said no newspaper, no radio.

Nothing. No. Nothing.

So you really didn't know what was going on in the outside world at all.

Many people lost their parents then already because, you see, the young ones went out to work. The older ones, they got sick or they didn't feel good. There was always a danger that they would be picked up during the day. And many disappeared. Many disappeared at the time.

And on top of it, there was some kind of plot against-- I don't know exactly. I know many were hanged. We had to watch it. It was horrible.

And once, one day, we came home, they had shot all the young, elite policemen. We had our own policemen. They mowed them down with a machine gun during the day. And we walked in it was like a morgue. There was-- we had their own police. And they were all shot while we were gone.

I mean there were things going on. It was a very, very sad dangerous situation. But we didn't know what's going on much really in the outside world, America and the war and Russia. I mean how it progressed, you know, we were dying for news. And some people did get some news, you know.

How did they get news?

You went out to work.

Oh, so maybe--

Some women were cleaning for the Nazis, for some kind of SS headquarters.

Sure.

And those were the elite jobs if you were inside. I was shoveling snow, and I was just awfully cold. And you didn't really have the clothes for it.

Did you have gloves? Did you have overshoes?

In those-- overshoes, I didn't have. But I remember I still had gloves. And I still had jacket. And, you know, we still wore civilian clothes with the star. We didn't have our--

I see. I see.

--our uniform from the concentration camp yet.

OK. Were you aware of any underground in the ghetto? Was there a possible resistance? Were you aware of any resistance to the Nazis?

No. The Latvian Jews, see, there were 2,000 Latvian Jews on the other side of the fence.

Yeah.

And they were-- this was their home town. There were things going on.

And you were a little bit aware of it.

You were aware. And they helped us women. This was all dangerous, you know. But they had lost all-- had lost, imagine, they had lost their wives and children. And they had pictures, lovely wives and young men.

Of course.

A lot of these men married some of my friends. And they got married after the war because they became friendly.

Pick up the pieces a little bit and go on.

Yeah.

Were you aware of any non-Jews who perhaps smuggled food into you people?

Well--

Or any goods that helped you survive?

We-- your whole life was smuggling.

Right. Sure. Just to live today.

Just to live. It was bringing in food or smuggling . Or the Latvian Jews had more connection because this was their home ground.

Right. So that--

Even though they had lived-- they were very wealthy. The Latvian Jews were all educated and well-to-do. And there they were put into the ghetto. But they had, of course, hidden some. They all had money. And they helped us too with food.

The main thing was food really. You didn't need any money. You're not supposed to have money. Nobody had money.

I see.

Money, there was nothing to buy. You just lived and went to work. And that was your life, I guess.

All right.

And I think about it now, I don't know, without reading or doing anything how one survived. But one did survive.

Were you deported from the ghetto to a concentration camp?

Well, when the Russians-- [BACKGROUND NOISE] well, first, we-- from the ghetto, we were put in a concentration camp.

I see.

This is a whole new period.

Well, I think this might be a good place to take a break.

OK.

We'll stop for a few minutes. And we'll pick this up then, the next little phase of your life in the camp, all right?

OK, fine.

OK.