

OK, Miriam, we left off when you realized that you were very near to the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto and you would see the Jews being marched out.

--marched out of the ghetto, right. At that time, my association with the few Jews completely vanished. Irka returned one day into her apartment, and there was police waiting for her. They took her away.

I almost never saw my sister, but on Sunday, when the maids get some time off, I would walk to the apartment building that I thought she was at-- because sometimes I didn't even know for sure where she was at-- and I would go up into the corridor and stand there, hoping to perhaps catch a glimpse of her when she comes out with the garbage. I was very lonely and at times wished to be picked up and get it over with.

One day, I also realized when I lived with Yanchevska, that Mr. Yanchevski was doing some business with the ghetto. One day, they brought a little girl to the house, and told me that she is their cousin and she's going to live with them. Her name was Alinka. I took one look at her, and I instantly knew that she was Jewish. She had Jewish features, tight curly hair.

Yanchevska did not let Alinka out of the apartment. Alinka stood on the balcony upstairs, and Alinka didn't get to eat what they ate. Alinka wet her bed nightly and was getting spanked for it, and my heart broke.

Alinka never came down, but people saw her up on the balcony. And they knew that Yanchevska had only one son, and rumors started to circulate that Yanchevska has a Jewish child. And Yanchevska got frightened. One of her customers was a Volksdeutsche, that is, a person of German descent who had privileges, more food, and a better life. Yanchevska negotiated with that woman to take the child, and the woman took the child.

I don't know whether Alinka survived and what happened to her after the war, but at that time, I thought it was a wonderful gesture of Yanchevska to wanted to save a Jewish child.

It's interesting, her mother being so antisemitic--

Her mother was, and--

--but she must have had some compassion.

--she was not. She had she had dealings-- being in business, she had dealings with Jews, I gather, and got to know them and did not hate them just because--

--they were Jews.

--somebody said "You've got to hate the Jews." Yanchevska rented out some of-- the apartment was very large, and a couple of her rooms she rented out to tenants. And Friday night, everyone took baths. So I brought the coal and heated the water and stayed up until very early in the morning to wash the tub after each person's bath. I was then about 13.

For my work, I received no pay. I had a pair of socks and a pair of men's shoes and a sweatshirt and a skirt. My shoes Yanchevska wouldn't let me wear. I had to save them for Sunday. So I walked barefoot the streets of Warsaw.

I was infested with lice. I had black lice in my head and white lice in the seams of the shirt. I wore the shirt all day, and I slept in it. To the socks, in winter, I sewed on cloths of a different color, and then for them to cover my thighs I sewed on cloth of another color and tied them with strings. I was forever hungry. I did not eat the food they ate.

You weren't permitted to.

No, my food was rationed out to me. I usually had soup and some bread. And I would go to the pot and

take some spoonfuls of soup, but I was afraid to take too much so that she wouldn't see that the content has diminished.

I also had a problem-- well, I had many problems, but this was one of the problems. Poles were very religious people, and during the German occupation, each courtyard erected a statue of Jesus or Madonna. And every evening, all the people from the apartment would come down and sang hymns and prayed.

I didn't know what to do. If I don't go down, they will say "She's not coming. She's Jewish." And if I do come down, then they'll see me, and they'll perhaps discover me, that I am Jewish. And I had that dilemma constantly. Should I go down? Shouldn't I go down?

I stood on the balcony when the ghetto was burning, and I saw the fiery sky. And everybody was on the balcony, making comments, and again I felt that I couldn't stay there. What if I reveal my emotions and they will discover me?

I studied, praying, in the evening when they were all asleep or I took the little prayer book with me to the bathroom and looked through different prayers. Mrs. Yanchevska was not a church-going person, and so in Warsaw, I could fake going to church. I said I went to church, and I didn't.

But when I was in Otwock with Mrs. Yanchevska's old mother, she took me to church with her, and what does a Jewish child think when she has to kneel in a church in front of a religious figure? She thinks that surely heavens will open and I will be struck by God. And so I recoiled, trying to block out my surroundings, and prayed to my God.

My sister was a servant at that time at Yanchevska's friends. The woman's name was Musia, and one day, my sister had a conversation with Zosia over the phone. Now, most homes did not have phones in Poland, but Musia was a well-to-do person, and there was a phone in her home. And while she had the conversation with Zosia, Musia was listening in on the extension.

And Zosia and my sister spoke about saying something's not kosher, and Musia stormed into the kitchen, screaming obscenities at her, telling her that she's going to turn her over to the SS and throw her out. Some time later, Musia came over to Yanchevska. That's the place that I was at. Yanchevska was entertaining, and Musia was there with her husband and some other people.

Yanchevska called me into the dining room, and they looked me over. They stared at me, and I knew that what they were looking at-- why they were looking at me. When her company left, she came into the kitchen and asked me if I have papers. At that time, I had papers. I have just gotten the Kennkarte. Kennkarte was an ID issued by the Germans, and everyone absolutely had to have it.

Tell us first, what was your name during all this time? You had changed your name? My name was Maria Gorczynska, the name of someone that I knew in Poland during my very young years. I played with that girl occasionally, and I told my sister, I'll be Maria, I'll be her. And my sister's name was Stefa Gorczynska.

And up until then, we had no identification papers, and if you were caught and didn't produce your ID, you were you were instant suspect. And the time was approaching-- there was a time scheduled where everybody just had to have it. We didn't know what to do.

We went down to the office where they were issuing the Kennkarte. We got in line. We stood in line a little bit-- my sister left me there-- and went around to the back of the building to see if she could perhaps get in that way. She gave somebody at the door there a few dollars. He let her in, and she got her Kennkarte

Now, normally, you would have to present some documents which they would use to produce the Kennkarte from. We had nothing. She told the guy that she's sending in her sister. She came back and got me in line. And I went back there, and I said, my sister was just here. They let me in, and I got a Kennkarte.

The fact that she bribed someone there, smoothed it out for us-- nobody asked her any questions. Nobody asked me any questions. And we actually obtained the Kennkarte in a legal way, which was rather--

--miraculous.

--unusual and miraculous.

So you had your papers when Mrs. Yanchevska--

When Mrs. Yanchevska--

--asked you?

--asked me if I had papers, I had papers. And thinking back, I think that she realized that I was Jewish because of the incident with my sister, and she wanted to cover herself. So she was really a good woman.

What happened to your sister at that point? Did she leave Marusia?

Yeah, she threw her out, but she did not call the SS. She threw her out. And my sister told me that she went to a neighbor, and then Zosia found her another place. And so again she was at another place. The other place was in-- one station before Otwock was called Swider, and that's where she was until the end of the war was a short distance from Otwock.

So she did the same thing as the servant?

Yeah, that's what we did all through our hiding. When the Polish Uprising took place-- that is the Polish Uprising, not the Ghetto Uprising-- I was in Otwock with her old mother. And Warsaw was leveled. There was not one house standing in Warsaw. The Germans leveled it to the ground. All the people from Warsaw were evacuated.

The Russians liberated that area, and I was with the old lady. For many weeks, she has not heard from her daughter. The railroads were out of commission. You could not travel. And I knew the war was over, and here I was.

The war was over, and I don't know what to do with myself. My sister found out that there was a committee that formed in the city of Otwock, a Jewish committee. I knew where the building was, and I was afraid to go in.

Was your sister in touch with you all this time?

My sister was then in Swider, and I was in Otwock. And I knew she was in Swider. Our meetings were very precarious. She would-- the store and the room behind the store was on a corner, and when she came from Swider, that road led right in front of that store. And I would see her.

She walked by the store and kept on going. When I saw that, I came out, and I followed her at a distance. And she would walk further on past the church, and then past the church, there was a narrow path, no people. I would catch up with her, and we would exchange a few sentences. And then she would go back, and I would go back.

Our meetings were-- they knew I had a sister, but our meetings were rather covert because of this constant fright that we may slip up or I would be her giveaway, something that was very, very important to watch. At the time that-- when I did have some contact with some of the Jews in Warsaw on the Aryan side, when they would meet and my sister was there and I was there, I was never near them. I was, like, maybe 20 meters away because I knew, I just knew that I better not go near them because of my--

Appearance.

Features.

Where was Zosia during all this time? Did she escape?

Zosia survived.

Did she?

She also had some-- she had to run from one place to another on a couple of occasions. Everybody suspected everybody else, but she has survived. She lives in Israel today.

All right. The war was over, and I wouldn't go into that Jewish committee building. I was afraid to be seen. But my sister went in. And the first thing when the Jews came out of their hiding places and-- the ones that survived right away started asking about--

--family.

--people, family, people from the same hometown. So she went into that place and asked if there is somebody there from Lwów. And there was a gentleman there. His name was Hoffman, and he said, yes, there is somebody here from Lwów. And he arranged a meeting between my sister and this man, Arnold.

Arnold told my sister that he's going to go to Łódź. He was in a Polish-- in the Polish army then. There was an army formed in Russia of Poles. There were many Jews among them, and they liberated the areas together with the Russians.

He said he'll go to Łódź and he'll send for her, which he did. And then Mr. Hoffman, who originated from a place called Stryi, not far from Lwów, also went to Łódź. And he had other people there. He collected people from all over, and they all lived in that apartment. A little later, I got a postcard from my sister on which she said "regards" and an address.

You were still with Mrs. Yanchevska's mother?

Still with Mrs. Yanchevska's mother, didn't know what to do, didn't know where to go, and I was still a child. When I got the postcard with the address, I immediately knew that I was going to go. I readied myself to go. The train started running, and I inquired. And I found out when a train will depart for Łódź.

I told Mrs. Yanchevska's mother that I will be leaving. This is a funny story. I boiled some eggs, but I didn't boil them at the place that I stayed. I took them to a neighbor to boil because I was afraid for the old lady to know that I have eggs because if I had eggs, where did I get the money to buy the eggs with? So I cooked the eggs.

So where did you get the money?

Where did I-- When I was traveling between Warsaw and Otwock, bringing these produce, the sour cream, and butter-- so when I paid 80 groszys. I told Yanchevska that I paid 85 groszys, and I really had some groszys in my pocket. And for these groszys I paid the fare to Łódź and bought those eggs.

Well, I hard-boiled the eggs, and I put them between the lining and the shell of my coat. And on the way, I lost the eggs. There was a hole in that lining, and on the train I looked for the eggs, and there were no eggs. So I didn't eat. I didn't eat until I got to this Arnold's place, who turned out to be my brother-in-law later on.

How long did it take you to get from Otwock to Łódź?

It took me a whole day. And when I got to Łódź, the curfew was on, and I could not continue going to this address that I had.

Now, this was a Russian curfew? The Russians had occupied Łódź by this time, I presume.

Yes, yes. And I sat at the railroad. Well, everybody-- there was throngs of people there. And if you were stuck at a certain place, you just waited until you could travel again. So people were sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall, and spent the night at that railroad station. When it started dawning and the curfew was off, I took a streetcar, carrying my belongings, my multi-colored--

Knapsack-like.

--wrapped in newspapers. The thing broke for me on the way. I was very embarrassed. I started losing all those schmattas. And I asked for directions, and I came to Andrzejka Street. It was still very early. And I climbed the staircase, and I sat down on the steps. I didn't want to wake the lords. My brother-in-law thinks it's very funny. He reminds me of it. But I had this mentality of a servant, and I wasn't going to wake them.

When I heard noises, that's when I knocked on the door, and they let me in. My sister discovered me. She was surprised to see me because in the meantime, they sent someone out for me to Otwock, you see? But I didn't wait for the guy. The minute I had that address, I went, and, well, I was-- my sister was there, and Mr. Hoffman was there.

They made me eggs for breakfast, and they took me to a doctor. I was covered with a very itchy rash. And they smeared me up with things overnight, and I recovered. And my brother-in-law-- well, my sister and my brother-in-law-- well, my sister got married-- that was in '45-- to my brother-in-law. And my brother-in-law went to register me to school.

There was a school that taught a whole year's curriculum in six months, so you would make two classes in a half-- in a year. He registered me under the name of Maria Gorczynska because we realized that the antisemitism was very strong still.

What was your name, your original name?

My name was Miriam Gross.

Gross?

And he had to register me as a non-Jew, and again, as long as I went to that school, again, I lived a lie. There was a Jewish boy that registered into that same class. He stayed there for three days. They jeered him, made him miserable, and he couldn't stay. And the same thing would have happened to me.

I couldn't bring home people that I got closer to because my home was Jewish, and I didn't want them to discover the fact that I was Jewish. There were pogroms after the war in Poland, small ones. There was a big one in Kielce where 40-some Jews were killed.

By the Poles?

My sister met on the street her latest employer, and she told her, how can you live in such a Jew-infested city? And my brother-in-law realized that we will have to leave. And so I stayed in Łódź only to complete one grade, and we packed up again and went to Austria to a DP camp. At the camp--

Was the camp run by the Russians or the Americans?

No, no, this was in the American zone. We were fed by UNRRA. I was given shoes and some clothes. My brother-in-law hired a German teacher whom I studied with a few times a week in German various subjects, and I also started taking English lessons from a British person. I don't know why she was British in the American zone, but she was. And we just sat there. We didn't know where our fortune will carry us.

From whence cometh your help.

Right. People were registering-- a lot of people had relatives-- and working under affidavits. I had relatives in America but didn't know them. My grandma had a sister I remember people coming home from America,

and I also know that my father's sister, one of his sisters from Vienna, supposedly was able to escape Germany. But neither my sister nor I knew their last names or-- we really had no one to call upon.

I kind of nursed the idea of going to Israel, but at that time it was rather difficult. Israel was under the British mandate, and--

--immigration was illegal.

It was illegal and presented a lot of difficulties. America never entered my mind, but it did my brother-in-law's. And one day, there was a registration for children without parents, the youngsters, and my brother-in-law went and registered me and presented me with the idea that I'm going to America, didn't ask me if I want to. I probably didn't know whether I want to or I didn't want to, but I did what my brother-in-law told me to.

You were, what, about 14, 15 at this time?

I was 16 or so. 16? 17. And one day, I boarded a bus which took me to Bremen. There was another girl that came to America to family, and we kind of had each other. I was in Bremen for three months. It was during the coal strike, and we couldn't depart until the coal strike was over. And we departed in December of '46.

From the time I boarded the bus in Austria until I finished John Hay High School in Cleveland, I was being taken care of by the Jewish Children's Bureau.

Of Cleveland?

Of Cleveland-- well, I don't know whether they have--

Branches.

--branches in other cities, but--

Nationwide.

They put a pin on me when I boarded the boat, and I stayed with that pin forever. And when we got to New York, there were a lot of relatives that came to meet and pick up their European families. We had no one, this friend of mine, Frieda, and I.

And we stood there for many, many hours until things got organized, and unexpectedly, Frieda went-- a social worker showed up, and Frieda went one way, and I went another way. I went to Ellis Island.

During my extensive examinations in Germany before they let me go on the ship, they discovered that I had a spot on my lungs, and evidently, in Germany, they were satisfied that it was inactive. But when I came to America, they saw in my papers that there was something there. They sent me to Ellis Island. So I spent a week on Ellis Island, bewildered, alone.

They took a series of X-rays again, and one day, there was-- I was called to the doctor's office, and he turned out to be a very kind Jewish doctor, told me that I'm OK and told me if I need anything, I should contact him. I sent him one letter when I came to Cleveland and told him that I have arrived at my destination and was OK.

When I-- all right, again, when they dismissed me from Ellis Island, I sat and waited. It seemed like forever. But a social worker showed up, and I got on the little boat and went back into--

--New York.

--the city, to New York. And I could have gone anywhere in the United States, but I had no preference. I didn't know where I wanted to go. And so they sort of distributed us throughout the States. My friend Frieda

went to Los Angeles. She had family--

You were in contact with her again after you [CROSS TALK]?

Yeah, when I came back to Bronx, she was still there. They stayed, I think, all in all about two weeks. And there were other children, and I came to Cleveland with a group of-- I think we were 11. And we came to Bellefaire.

From that group, I was the only one that stayed in Cleveland. From here, they, again, were sort of scattered. A couple went to Texas, some to Pittsburgh, to Detroit. And I stayed in Cleveland, in Bellefaire, for a short time, and then I was placed in a foster home.

My foster father, Al Horowitz--

That's my brother.

No. Al Horowitz? Al Horowitz wanted a child-- he was a liberator.

Oh, no, different one.

Different one. He was a liberator, and he happened to liberate a concentration camp that my husband at one time was incarcerated at. And he wanted a child. He had a daughter who was five years old, and he wanted a companion for his daughter. And he also wanted to help a child from Europe.

And one day, the agency called him and said that they have a child, but the child is a little older than what he wanted. And he said, OK, and when he came to get me, he found a big girl. Nonetheless, he took me, and Al took me to have my teeth repaired. For one whole year, every Saturday, he drove me to the dentist.

And I realize now that I presented some problems to them. I would not communicate. I went to the library downtown, came home with a pile of Polish books and went upstairs and shut the door. And I sat there with the books, and I wouldn't come out.

Nonetheless, they had a lot of understanding. They worked with the agency on my behalf, and they registered me to school, to Collinwood. I was getting a series of tests by the Jewish Vocational, and I turned out to be very dumb. I scored very low. I didn't know what they were saying to me.

I was just going to say, your English probably wasn't going--

Right. When they gave me those tests three years later, I scored very high. And we lived on East Park Drive near Euclid Beach, and the closest school there was Collinwood High. And so I was registered at Collinwood High, and I was there only about one week. I was very unhappy there.

And they realized that I had no-- I couldn't talk, and it was very difficult for me to be there. But there was a class for foreigners at John Hay High, and the agency decided that I would be better off there. And so I started attending that class. It was a long way from where I lived. I took two buses and a streetcar to get to 107th and Euclid, and I was very happy in that class.

We had a teacher, Ms. Himmel, who not only taught us English, but she was like a mother to us. She taught us to sit and to shave and to use deodorant and to eat properly. And I was very, very happy in that class.

I made-- that was my social environment as well as school environment. In that class I made bonds with people that I have today, and they started-- after a little bit, they started filtering us out accordingly to how much one could undertake in a normal class, and the first subject I was introduced to was biology.

I left my class for this one period every day and studied with American children often. And when I was done, I returned to my sanctuary. And I had a biology teacher whose name was Ms. Arbuthnot, and one day, we were given a test. We had 200 questions.

And she received my paper back, and I answered 60 questions. But they were all correct. And so she seeked me out and discovered that I was a foreigner. And she had me stay after school every day, and I read to her aloud out of the biology book.

The Jewish Children's Bureau also provided me and a couple of other girls with a private tutor who lived in the Heights, and we went to her twice a week. And in the privacy of her living room, she taught us English. And gradually, I filtered out of this class entirely. I graduated in 1950 with honors. I received a gold pin for an over-90 average.

Terrific.

Over the three-year period. And I left John Hay with having had an intense course in preparation for a business--

--career.

--career. I majored in bookkeeping, and that's what I did after I came out of school. I threw out my-- the three years I did not fit well with the American children. I didn't have what to talk with them about. I came from a different world.

But I was in close contact with kids that came from Europe. We met on weekends. We organized picnics. We went to Camp Vladek. We sang Jewish and Polish and Hebrew songs. We formed a club, called ourselves United Jewish Newcomers. We made dances at JCC on 105th. We charged \$0.50 admission, and at the end, we owed the JCC money, couldn't pay for the hall. And they wrote it off as a bad debt. And in 1950, I married. I met my husband at JCC, playing ping-pong while I was doing something else there. And my new life has emerged.

Can you tell us whether there was some person or some remembrance that helped you during your difficult times?

Well, physically, it was my mother that first saved me, and then it was my sister, who conceived the idea of us leaving Lwów because I would-- if my sister hadn't come back, I certainly would have been destroyed. I wouldn't have come up with any such idea. Of course, Zosia, who helped us throughout. I think Mrs. Yanchevska, who I think knew, didn't turn me in.

Spiritually, my mother helped me. I saw my mother in my dreams. For a very, very long time.

So you think that this dreaming that you did also helped you keep your--

Yeah, I saw her image--

And that was the image--

--nightly, and I hated to wake up. I think that sustained me.

Did you speak a lot about your experiences, or did you just recently start to talk about them? Did you tell your children?

No. I have not spoken to my children about my experiences for many, many years, and my daughter tells me-- well, now we speak about it all the time. And my daughter, Marsha, tells me that when she was growing up, she was reading all these books on Holocaust. And she thought that all the things that she read happened to her parents, and she was deeply troubled by that. But she would not approach us for fear of evoking all of those bitter memories.

But when we started talking-- we started talking when the community started listening, and my children have been asking me to. Mom, I know it's so hard for you, but I would like to know.

So you made some tapes for them.

Yes, I made a tape, and my husband made a tape. And the kids listened to the tape, and I feel that now that I made the tape, I have opened that path between me and my children. That secret that separated us is no longer there, and it really was very important to say it. I feel that I have done what I should have done. I feel much better about it. I cleansed myself, and they know that there was a family.

That they had a genealogy.

Right. My daughter has made a tree, and she went to listen to this person--

Arthur Kurzweil.

--Kurzweil, who speaks on genealogy. And she's been writing to every place in his book to see if, perhaps, there will be a trace of someone who survived.

Do you think-- or let me rephrase it. To what extent do you feel that the Holocaust has affected your present health and your emotional health?

Well, it certainly has affected me and others like me. Outwardly, we do not look unusual. We have adjusted. But our scars are very deep, and they have perpetuated unto my children. They are very much aware of what happened.

But this is not necessarily bad, that they are aware of it.

No, I'm not saying that's bad. They should be aware of it. It's very painful, and if somebody tells you that we are not different-- that we are not different, it isn't so because we are.

I think you would have to be different because your experiences were much more intensive and much different than ours. Thank you very much.

Are we done?

This is--

Is there some-- may I? There's something I want to--

Yeah, do you have something that you'd like to tell before we close?

I'd like to say-- I want to say that I'm very nationalistic. I bless America, and I love her dearly. I hope that work for advancement, for human rights, and understanding tolerance and defeat of bigotry and hatred never cease.

I think that's a very good message.

This is Miriam Wexberg, who is our Holocaust survivor, and Bea Stadtler, who is the interviewer. The project has been sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Thank you, Miriam.

Thank you, Bea.