

The following is an interview of Marie Schwartzman. The interview is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on August 12th, 1994, on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Please tell us your full name.

Marie Zosnika Schwartzman.

And where were you born?

In Paris on August 21st, 1925.

Let's talk about your family. What was your father's name?

Abraham.

And what did he do?

He was of clothes designer.

And where did he come from? What city in Poland?

Cieszyn Don't ask me to spell it.

OK.

Well, I think it's in the thing.

And what was your mother's name?

Torba

And her maiden name? Do you know that?

[PERSONAL NAME]

And where was she from originally?

The same town-- Cieszyn

And was your family a very religious family?

Well, I don't think so. Not my father anyway. He was not religious. I think my mother was a little bit more religious, but we were not raised religiously. Just we kept to tradition and that's it.

Now you said you were born in Paris. When did your family come to Paris?

In 1922.

What brought them there?

My father came much earlier, and my mother joined with my older sister to Paris.

What brought your father to Paris?

I think the army to a certain extent, and a job-- a good job.

How large was your family?

Well, I had four sisters, two brothers, and my mother and father. I had a lot of family in Poland-- my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins.

But you were born in Paris. Did you go back to Poland to visit?

Yes, my grandfather-- we went to visit.

And you stayed with large extended family there?

Yes, my grandfather didn't let my mother go back.

He wanted her to stay?

Yes.

Yeah. And so where were you in the order of children?

Were you the second?

Second.

You were the second child.

And what kind of neighborhood did you live in, in Paris?

We lived in a mixed neighborhood--

Non-Jews and--

Non-Jews and Jews.

Mhm? And did you have non-Jewish friends?

Yes. Actually, when I came back from camp, I lived with my friend who I went to school when we were six and a half years old. And she was Catholic. My Jewish family didn't have room for me.

Mhm? Let's talk a little bit about your schooling. When did you begin school? How old were you?

We begin school early in France. We go to the maternelle, which was-- I was about three years old. And--

Was this a public school?

Yes.

So there were Jews and non-Jews in your class.

Yes, Jews and non-Jews. But mostly they were non-Jews in my school. And then, first grade, we start-- I think I was six, six and a half.

And when I was arrested, I was in lycA©e and didn't finish my education, of course.

Yeah.

My sixth year.

Yeah. We'll get to that in a few minutes. So you went to a regular public school, as well--

Mhm.

--what we call "elementary School.

Yes.

Was there any problems, there? You said it was mixed--

Yeah. No problem.

No problems. You were accepted?

Yes. No problem. On the contrary, our teachers liked us very much. We were five girls in the same school, because we had girls' schools and boys' schools. It was not mixed schools.

And my principal, when we were arrested, came every single day to see if there were news from us. So, it was no problem at all.

Mhm? What kind of neighborhood did you live in? Was it an upper-class or a middle-class neighborhood?

Probably middle-class, i would say.

Mhm? Did you live in a house or an apartment?

A house.

And was it in the center of the city or on the outskirts?

Was not in the outskirts, but it was in the onzieme arrondissement, which was in Paris.

What else did you do, besides go to school, when you were a young child, and elementary-school child? Did you do any other activities?

Well, we didn't have much time. We went to school at 8:30, came back for lunch, and went to school until 6 o'clock in the evening. So, by the time we did homework-- and I did help my father a little bit in this--

In the business?

--in the business, yeah.

Mhm? Did you have any hobbies?

Yes-- music.

Did you play an instrument?

Mhm-- Piano. And my art teacher thought I had talent in art, so we worked on that a little bit.

Mhm? And you said your family was not religious. Did you observe any holidays or any ceremonies?

My mother used to observe. We did not observe, but we had our traditional dinners-- that's--

You mean, Sabbath dinners?

Yeah.

Did you ever go to a synagogue, as a child?

There are very few synagogues in Paris. No, I did not go. The first synagogues I went to was the [INAUDIBLE]. Because an American took me, over there.

So you had no religious training--

No.

--then, as a child. OK. And now you're in high school-- in the lycÃ©e.

Yeah.

Any experiences that you remember, from those years?

Not really.

OK. when do you first have a memory of things changing-- of conditions changing? What was the first experience?

The first experience was when the German came into France.

What do you remember about that, personally?

Oh, personally, I -- all Paris was blocked, and they marched in.

Where were you, at the time?

Home. My father was in the army. My father enlisted--

In the French army.

--in the French army. He was a big Francophile. And yeah, so we were alone, my mother and her seven children. And then he came back. And, about a year later, he was arrested.

When was he arrested?

In 1941-- August 1941. And, at that time, he was arrested by a SS and a French gendarme. In 1942, when we were arrested, it was only a French gendarme who came. I think we were denounced, I'm sure.

Because my art teacher had a home outside of Paris, and she said, go and stay as long as you want. But it became dangerous to stay there, too, so we came home. And my mother said, we can't stay there all the time. We have to do something-- go to work or find-- and that same day, we came back on a Sunday. And on Monday, they came to arrest my older sister, me, and my younger sister.

At night, they came to take the whole family, because the other ones were in school. My other sisters and brothers were all still in school. My little brother was too small. He was home. He was two and a half years old.

When the Germans first came in, how did your life change?

Oh, we had curfews. We couldn't get out after certain times. We had to stay in line for food.

It was not easy. It was very difficult, especially eight people to-- or nine people to feed. It's --

Could you go to school?

No. My older sister and I and my other sister could not go to school.

School was closed immediately.

Yeah.

So what did you do with your time? You were a young--

Working.

--girl--

I worked. I did everything I could find as work.

You worked with your father?

My father was arrested already, at that time, in 1941. And they came in 1940. It didn't take them long to arrest him.

What happened to your father's business?

Oh, they took over. And they never wanted to give it back, especially to me.

Do you remember your parents talking? Did they share their knowledge with you? You were 15 years old, then.

Mhm?

Do you remember them speaking to you?

Yes! My father told me, now, you're the head of the family. You have to provide for them. And my mother said, but she's a young child. But we did it. I managed.

My oldest sister was in medical school. And she was very [INAUDIBLE]. Her professor was very nice, and he sneaked her in as much as he could. So there were some good ones and some very bad ones-- French people. Not that I like them very much.

And what was the food situation like?

Well, we went hungry, lots of time. Our friends who were not Jewish brought some food to us. We stayed in line for milk and eggs for the little ones. And we saved a lot of stamps and things, to keep and send it to my father, because my father was already at Drancy, at that time.

Were you home when your father was taken away?

Yeah.

What was that like-- can you describe?

It was a horror. It was horrible. He was walking out of the house, going to work, and the SS and the French gendarme asked him, are you Mr. Zosnika And he said yes. And he said, take a blanket. And they took him away.

In the meantime, he said to me, you have to go here and there. They owe me money you'd think -- but people-- you know, everybody works for themselves. And that's what happened.

I [INAUDIBLE]. I loved my father very much. And my mother used to say, the world turned over if my father was taken away. I was-- I became a different person, a very sad person.

Mhm. Mhm? So you stayed at home with your mother. You were--

Oh, yes.

--second in line--

Yeah.

--and your sister was away. And then, for the next few months--

I worked.

What kind of work did you do?

Oh, anything I could find! Pressing heavy men's clothing, come back to things like that. My art teacher gave me some work to do. I did that-- some commercial art-- anything I could do-- and keeping a child-- you know, taking care of children. And--

What was your mother's state of mind, at that point?

Well, my mother was completely gone, at that point. She adored her husband. And, after seven children, she didn't have any strength of her own. Most of the time, I remember her, at that period of time, she was in bed.

Mhm? So the responsibility was really on your shoulders.

On my shoulder-- and my little sister, Bruna we both really worked very hard to bring in food-- a rabbit, if we could find. We didn't care what-- as long as they weren't hungry.

How was your health, at that time?

It was fine. I was young. I was--

Mhm? And then, what was the next change?

The next change-- somebody came over and said, go away, because tomorrow is going to be a raffle. They're going to pick up the children and the women. And that was the famous raffle-- July 4. So we went away to that house to one of my teachers, and we stayed three months. And by the time we came back--

Your whole-- your mother and the children?

Yes-- And the children. And by the time we came back, on a Sunday, the Monday they came to pick us up. I remember,

I picked up my sister at the hospital. And then we stopped at a library, to buy books.

And we were reading upstairs. And my mother said to them [NON ENGLISH WORD] "They are here." That means the gendarmes were here to pick us up-- the three of us. But we had time to--

You know, in France you don't have closet, but you have armoires. So we pulled one armoire, and we put my little sister in the back. So they just took the two of us-- my older sister and me. But at night, they came to pick everybody up.

But they picked you, the two of you, up first?

First.

And what happened to you? What--

They took us to a police station and put us in the toilets-- for the whole night.

The two of you, together.

Yeah.

Were there other people with you?

No. And then, you spent the night--

Then, in the morning, they said, come on, and you're going to join the rest of the family. And they took us in a truck, and they put us in Drancy.

The next day, they picked up the rest of your family. And you were all together, then?

Yeah. In Drancy, yes, we were all together. We stayed three months there. And February --

Let's talk a little bit about the conditions there. What was it like, during those three months? How did you sleep? What were the sleeping conditions like?

Well, everybody was sleeping in one room. It used to be a caserne for soldiers, so there was bathrooms and there was showers and-- you know, they had beds, one after the other.

Food? It wasn't that much, but we managed, I guess. We were hungry, but the hunger goes away. And, three months later--

How much belong-- how many belongings were you able to bring from home? What was your mother able to bring?

Just the precious thing they told us to take-- the jewelry, the clothes the fur coats, the-- all what they could use it and they could sell it or give it away or-- that's what they told us. blanket-- and a blanket-- which was taken away in the train, anyway.

Were there friends of yours and neighbors there, also, that you recognized?

Well, they were all looking outside, and they were smiling.

This is when you were taken away.

Mhm.

Your non-Jewish neighbors--

Yeah.

--were smiling, as you were being taken away?

Yeah.

How did you feel, as a young woman, when you saw that?

Not good. Not good. Maybe I'm wrong, but I never have hatred for anybody. Because I felt that, if I hate too much, it'll destroy me. And I didn't want to be destroyed. I wanted to fight.

So, I did not look at them. And, whatever they did, I did not care.

When you were in Drancy, now, your Jewish friends or your Jewish neighbors, were they with you also? Did you know any other people, when you were there--

Yes--

--from before?

Yes, I think so-- very few, not many, because-- we had a problem. We were seven children. And to run away with seven children was impossible. Nobody would take us.

So the people who only had one child or two children, they were able to cross the border or go on the other side of France, the ligne de la marcation-- go to Switzerland, go to Spain-- Spain accepted them. And, from Spain, they used to go to Portugal and, from Portugal, to America or Canada or Mexico.

But with seven children and one two and a half years old, forget it. Nobody wanted to take us. So we end up-- April--

You were there for three months.

Mhm?

And what did you do during the day--

Nothing.

--just sit around?

Mhm.

And everybody just--

Nobody was doing nothing-- just sit around waiting.

And then the next thing that happened?

Next thing that happened, that the train-- we knew already that we're going to be deported.

How did you know that?

Because the trains were coming in, one after the other.

Did you know where they were going?

No. We did not know where-- they were saying that we were going to work in a commune, and we'll be very happy. This was the worst tragedy happened to me, is being eight people-- we had to be five by five-- I was holding my little brother's [? milk ?] and separated from my mother and my sisters and my brothers. And three-- we were three together, in a different wagon, in a different

Car?

--car.

Yeah. Oh, in other words, they lined you up and--

Five by five.

--to get on the trains-- yeah. But, when it came to them, they--

They split up. --they split up. They closed the door, and we went into that one. And that was a horror for me, because I adored my little brother. And he didn't have his mother.

Oh. Mhm?

And so I took care of my two little sisters. And it took-- the train stopped. People were trying to run away. They were shooting. It was-- it was not pleasant. You were always scared.

Three nights and two days. And when we got to Auschwitz, it was another horror-- the screaming, the dogs, the-- and all of a sudden, I find myself all alone! The whole family went on a truck, and they pulled me out! So-- or I had long hair-- young, and--

I climbed on the truck. And one SS saw me, and he pulled me by the hair, and he threw me down. By that time--

You climbed on the truck that your family was--

Yeah.

--on.

And then the truck went away.

So, when you got off of the car, you saw your family.

Yeah. I saw-- I find my family, yeah.

You found them.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I find them.

Let's go back a little bit, in the-- when you were going to the camp. You said it took three days and three nights. What were people doing, in the car? Were they helping each other? Were they being of comfort? Do you remember?

It was very sad. First of all, it was--

Was it all women?

--thirst-- no, mixed.

It was mixed.

Yeah. They were doing holes in the bottom, to try to escape. There was no water. Everybody was thirsty. It was no toilet, so it was a mess. And--

Was there any light in the car?

No, there was no lights. It was cars that they used for pigs and-- you know, bestial--

Did they let you out at all?

No. No.

And what were your little sisters doing?

Oh, they were-- we were half in a different world. You know, we just didn't talk. We didn't know what to do. We were lost. We were completely lost.

And I was very naive-- being raised in a big family, you can become very-- and my parents were very strict, too. We couldn't get out at night, we couldn't do this, we couldn't-- it was schooling and practice, and do this, and helping my mother a lot, too. It just was--

So I was a naive little, young girl, for that age. I saw my daughter at 16. She was [LAUGH] not like me, not at all.

So you arrived at Auschwitz, and you said you tried to get on the truck that your family was on. And they--

Mhm.

--took you off. And they took me off. I didn't know what's the reason they took me off. But they usually took 10% out of each transport that came.

Usually they took women in the 30s, because they have much more to offer. They had a past and they have a future to fight for. But I didn't have a past, and I didn't have a future. So fighting, for me, was nothing. I was just crying all the time.

But, in camp--

Then they took you where, in the beginning? They took you off the truck-- uh-huh?

And then they marched into Birkenau.

This was-- you were with a group of women?

Yeah.

Mhm? And when you got to Birkenau?

Birkenau, they put us in a big room. And I'm having my period, and I went over to the SS, to ask her for something.

Oh, this is a woman guard?

Yeah. And I went bouncing on the other side of the room. About that time, my period stopped and I never had them since I came back.

She threw you to the other side of the room--

Yeah.

--when you asked her.

And they did this-- they put the tattoo. [INAUDIBLE].

This was when you first arrived?

Yeah. First arrived. And then they brought in-- now I am a little older-- well, first of all, I was ashamed. I never had a man looking at me nude. I was-- But they were such monsters to-- now that I think of it. It's just a horror.

Because they brought in French men, undressed us, and shaved us-- from all over-- not only the hair but--

On the body--

--private part and everything. And I was crying. I was ashamed. And they said, don't be ashamed. We don't even notice.

And they put us in how -- spritz and then they gave us a cold shower and uniforms. And that's it! And they put us in-- the next morning, we went to work.

So you did not have any belongings from before.

No,

They took everything that you--

They took everything, yeah.

Were there many young women like you in your group?

No. Mostly, they were in their 30s. And I was very lucky, because I find camp mothers, like I called them-- two French women who really took care of me. They knew that I wouldn't survive if they wouldn't taken care of me. They're both dead, now.

So they-- and where did you go-- where did you sleep, that first night?

Oh, they had barracks, you know? So-- where you slept, three tiers. I don't know if you went to Birkenau.

And they gave you a blanket and a pot-- to eat, but it served for everything, because there was no bathroom. But you couldn't sleep, because people were stealing from you. You didn't ever took off your shoes, because people were stealing them. It was very hard. It was-- to this day, I don't sleep.

Mhm? Mhm.

The first few weeks was really hard, because we didn't have water. And water is the main thing for survival. And I saw

people urinate, and it was cold, you know, so it froze. And they sucked it. I did the same thing, to survive.

Then we were quarantined, because everybody got dysentery. And, after that, I wanted to kill myself, and I went to the-- to the your electric field--

Fence?

--fence. But a German saw me and he shoot-- but he shoot at my foot-- it got infected. [LAUGH] [? lying ?] [? down. ?]

And then, one day, they took me to the Block 25, which is-- I don't know if you knew about it. But 25 is, they selected the people--

[AUDIO OUT]

--your experiences in Auschwitz. And you had arrived in February of 1942. And you said you were taken to Block 25 after the guard shot you in the foot because you had--

I couldn't stand up. I was--

Was this more in the beginning of your stay?

Yes, it was more in the beginning of the stay. And over there I find Toni, which was my-- she became my camp mother.

She was in Block 25.

Yeah. She was a [NON-ENGLISH]-- the ones who take care of the other people, you know, just-- well, she came in 1941, so she had all-- she knew what to do.

Was she another French woman?

Yes, but she was born in Poland. And they took the Polish people first-- the farmers. And she fought very hard for me not to go to the crematorium. But he didn't want to listen to her.

He took me there. And I went-- while he was driving, I was in the back of it, and I told him that I'm not going to die, he's not going to put me in the gas chamber, I have all my family living, and that did it. They wanted to know how many Jews are still free.

And, while I was walking into the gas chamber, he said you [SPEAKING GERMAN]-- "You dirty pig Jew, come." And he brought me back to camp. That was luck, [LAUGH] because he wasn't that nice, after that.

So you went back to--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And I worked there. I worked at Block 25.

Oh, you worked at Block 25.

Yeah.

And where was your barracks?

25.

Oh, I see. You lived--

Yeah.

--uh-huh?

Block 25.

And what did you do?

The people who came in there, they were half-dead. So we undressed them, put them in the truck, and they went to the gas chamber and then to the crematorium.

So did you also sleep there?

Yeah.

You didn't go back to your original barrack.

No.

Yeah. And how was your foot, at that time?

Oh, very swollen, very infected. So it was a Dr. Rose-- I don't know if you ever heard of her. She was really something. She doesn't show her head no place.

She wanted my rations, so she could heal my foot.

She was another prisoner.

Yeah-- French woman. And we did. We gave her the ration. And she opened the wound and--

Drained it?

--drained it. It was no medication. And it's just plain luck that it healed. And then, they closed up that block. And we went on the road, working.

How long were you in Block 25?

Maybe a few months-- not long ago.

When you said you had to give up your rations, what were you getting for food?

Well, a piece of bread and a piece of cheese. [INAUDIBLE] in the morning, coffee-- "coffee." I don't even remember what it was. And, lunchtime, soup-- if you didn't go to work. If you went to work, you didn't get anything. You only ate when you came back to camp.

Did they ever take you out for counting, for--

Oh, yes, we stayed every morning at 4 o'clock in the morning. And they counted us.

What was that like?

Well, it was very difficult, because we stayed straight for about three hours.

Just standing there.

Just standing there. And then they opened up a Jewish hospital-- the "hospital." You brought in half-dead people, and then you took them out. But the only thing they wanted is to take their number. They were very organized, you know-- terribly organized.

In the morning, when we came out, there was nothing left but bones. The rats had eaten everything up. I went back, recently, and it still-- I saw rats, big like that. They're still there.

Are we still talking about Block 25?

Oh, no, that's-- they have closed up-- this is a hospital they opened up.

Near Block 25?

Near Block 25--

I see. I see.

--yeah. And that didn't last very long-- about a couple of months. And they closed that up, too.

So, after you stayed in Block 25 for several months, then what happened?

I went to that hospital--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

The hospital, right. And you were there for a few months, helping--

Yeah-- not even a few months-- a month or so. They didn't even wait for the people to die. They took them directly on the truck, and put them in the gas chamber, and then the oven.

At that point, did you know what had happened to your family?

Yes, I-- because you couldn't help it but smell-- smell the grease of the person, of the-- it was a horror, a horrible smell, of-- and people told me, you know-- I-- in the beginning, it was very hard for me to believe it. I always wonder how my little brother reacted to that.

Mmm. Mhm. Mhm.

And then I worked on Kommandos. Oh, no-- I did go in-- they picked me to go work for the Gentile hospital. For three months I worked there.

When you say you worked, what did that mean? What did you do?

It was no medication. It was nothing to do than to make them a little bit more comfortable.

These are Gentile prisoners?

Yeah-- communists, underground-- a lot of Polish people, a lot of French people, a lot of--

Did you also speak Polish, besides French?

No.

You only knew French.

French, but I learned very quickly Polish and German. And it was very fast, because you had to. You had to learn very quickly.

Mhm. And where were you sleeping, at that time?

In the hospital there, with the sick people. And then they closed that up, too.

Again, were you one of the younger women?

Yeah.

You still were one of the younger women.

Yeah.

And were you with your friend Toni?

Toni and Matilda-- Matilda-- who was from Palestine-- Jewish. And they both took care. If one wasn't around, the other one tried to be around me.

How old were these women?

They must have been about 25, 30 years older than I was.

Older than you?

Mhm. They must have been close to 40.

And they were alone? Did they have any children?

Yes, they had children, but their children escaped. They were not in camp. Well, they wouldn't have come into camp, anyway. But apparently they were-- they were saved.

They came back, and they find the son alive-- both of them. So they were very lucky.

What was the youngest age that you saw, there in the camp?

The youngest-- in the women? Maybe 15 or 14. And that's all. They were not-- and the men, maybe a little bit more, but I did not know them. They were separated from us.

You said you then worked in the Gentile hospital, and then they closed that.

Yeah. They closed that.

And then where did you go?

The Kommandos-- potato Kommandos and that Kommando, and they find work for you to do.

Can you describe a typical day? Well, you left at 8 o'clock in the morning, by staying up three hours. And the worst Kommando was the potato Kommando.

What did you have to do?

We worked on the ground and then pick out the good potatoes for the soldiers, for the SS, and the bad potatoes for the camp.

Were these potato fields within the camp grounds?

They're in the camp grounds, on the ground. And it was cold. It was damp. I think I suffered the most [? during that. ?]

Now, what time of year are we talking about, now?

Well, I think it was starting fall-- not fall, but almost to the spring.

Fall, winter, and spring-- '42, '43.

Yeah. But in '44, in April, [NON-ENGLISH]-- I don't know if you heard of [NON-ENGLISH]--

Well, before we get to '44, let's talk about a little bit more in '42 and '43. So you worked in the potato fields.

Yeah.

What else?

On the road, like everybody else, you know.

What were you doing on the road?

Making roads.

How?

The water did not absorb. You know, it was like clay. So, when the snow melted, the water's stagnant on top. And it was very dangerous, because mosquitoes come out and all those things. So we used to put big stones on top of-- making roads.

On top of the water.

On top of the water.

And what did you have to do?

We did that.

You carried the stones?

Yeah. We carried a stone.

And what were you wearing?

Well, I didn't have shoes, because I lost my shoes in the clay. Because, by the time-- if your foot got into it, you had to twist your foot to pull it out. and your shoe stayed with it.

So you were barefoot.

Barefoot. Yeah.

And your striped outfit?

I had a stripe outfit. I usually-- the minute my hair used to grow back, I used to go and cut them, because of the lice! Oh, I had body lice, which gave me typhus. I had twice typhus. And that was not funny. That was really bad.

When you were sick with typhus, did you have to work?

Yes. Mhm. There was no hospital. There was no medicine.

I'll be right back.

And so you were working on the road and carrying heavy rocks.

Yeah.

Yeah. And what was the treatment by the guards, when you were doing this?

Well, you had the dogs, and you had the-- if you didn't do fast enough, you had the dogs on top of you. Still plenty of marks on my backside. And--

From the dogs, or from the whips, or--

From both.

You were beaten, while you were--

Mhm. Oh, yeah! Everybody was. I don't think-- very few people were not beaten, but I don't know.

How did you keep going, at this time, with such--

Well--

--terrible conditions?

--first of all, I had those two ladies, who really took care of me.

Did they work alongside of you, when you were doing the rock work?

Yes. they worked alongside of me. They usually had better jobs. But they always bring me food, which I wasn't good of - I was-- it was degrading me, to go and steal or beg for food. I was too young! I was--

So they used to bring me food and take care of me or find a scarf for my head or find a pair of shoes-- it was too big, but at least it helped.

When you said you cut your hair off, as it got too long, how did you do that?

I went to the barber! They have a lot of barbers-- well, prisoners, you know? Man prisoners. And they had-- well, first of all, it was very dangerous, to have hair.

Why was it dangerous?

The lice-- one thing. And, if you had -- you usually have curly hair, they liked that. They liked when you were pretty. And you couldn't be pretty, in camp, you know? They took you out, cleaned you up, and send you to a home! So you had to be very careful with that.

You were talking about working with the roads--

Yeah.

--and getting beaten--

Yeah, but that wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was, [NON-ENGLISH] was a Belgian girl who spoke a lot of languages. She was a [NON-ENGLISH]-- that means, an interpreter-- for the Germans. And they loved her.

Was she a prisoner?

Yeah! And she worked with a Polish underground prisoner, too. She escaped. But, before she escaped, she-- I was walking in-- because, when she walked in from a Kommando, you had to sing.

This is when you were marching back--

Yeah.

--to your barracks? What did you have to sing?

German song.

All the women were singing.

Yeah. And if you didn't sing, he went the whip. And she says-- she told me, Marie, meet me [SPEAKING FRENCH], someplace. You know. So I said, why?

She says, I have -- I may not save your life, but you'll have maybe four months-- good months. So I went, and I met her at that time. And that's when-- it was about April, or March, of 1944.

Oh, now we're in 1944.

Yeah.

OK. So, all of 1943, you were working--

In Kommandos--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--different Kommandos.

Anything else besides the potatoes and the road work? Did you do anything else-- that you can remember? Well, I don't remember, yeah. But, you know, you did so many things. They caught you when you did anything. Yeah.

OK, so now it's spring of '44.

And she says, you're going to go to [PLACE NAME]. And I said, what is [PLACE NAME] She said, it's a crematorium and a gas chamber. They have a-- a half a million Hungarian Jews are coming in. That's when the time [INAUDIBLE]. And they need people to select--

We did not select the people to-- who die or not. The women fold the clothes and look for jewelry and make packages to send it to Germany.

This is the belongings of the Hungarian Jews.

Right. The women did that job. The men did the other, the worst job. Well, that really almost drive me crazy. I couldn't take it.

My bed was [? giving ?] right on the oven. So-- you know, the old-fashioned bread-- wooden thing? They used to put the gassed people on top of that-- and some of them were still moving-- and shoved into the-- and I was thinking about my family, you know-- were they alive? Were they dead when this happened?

A half a million, they didn't have enough room for that. So they made trenches-- put the kids in, put some gasoline, and light them. The screaming and the yelling-- I still dream about it.

It was a horror. I never talked to anybody about that [CRYING] because I was ashamed!

"Ashamed"? What were you ashamed of?

Of [CRYING] being-- I had to do-- see-- and-- and sending the clothes to Germany and-- anyway, that's-- and, after this would be finished, we knew that we're going to die, because they didn't want to have any witnesses for that. But, lucky enough, the Russian were coming too fast.

OK, we'll talk about that in a minute. So, when you were working there-- this was beginning and April of '44-- you were also staying, but you were sleeping there at night?

Yeah! Oh, we had clean sheets! We had showers! We had the food, as much as you want. They fed you, so you should-- you shouldn't-- you should be happy! You should not revolt yourself or-- you know--

Who were the other people that you were working with?

People picked-- some men and some women. A friend of mine was working with me-- Maria Toni and Mathilde, they worked in factories already, at the time. They worked for-- they're making cars, now-- Mercedes.

Did you have any contact with Toni or--

No. Well, they were away. They were in the middle of Germany. We were still in Poland-- in Krak³w-- in Krak³w. The factories were in the middle of Germany, where they were making [INAUDIBLE] anything but cars. [LAUGH]

So you stayed-- you lived, every day--

Yeah.

--near the crematorium.

Oh, yeah, it was from here to here.

Just a few feet.

It was very close-- very, very close.

Yeah. And was every day the same?

The same thing-- the screaming of the children, the yelling-- every day was coming another transport. You know, in six months, a half a million-- that's a whole lot! That's an awful lot. It took them four years for 6 million.

And what were-- do you remember what you were saying to your fellow prisoners? Was there any kind of exchange of thoughts?

Well, we all felt the same thing. We've gone to die. They're going to kill us. They don't want any people who saw all that horror. And Eichmann was-- monsters!

They were looking in the gas chamber and laughing, like it was-- you know, a play. It was, like-- it was a horror. It was terrible. And it was just awful.

And one part of the men revolted themselves. Of course they were killed. And they took another-- a group of men who did the gassing and the burning. But that lasted from April to January.

You did this from April to January.

Mhm.

And again, what was your health like, then? You said you were eating all right, at that point?

Yes. My health was OK, but my mental attitude was terrible. I was crying, day and night. And I was--

Were you able to share your feelings with anybody--

Oh, yes, with other people. We all felt the same thing. We all felt the horror of the whole situation.

And again, were you one of the youngest to be doing this?

Yeah. I was the youngest.

Mhm? Mhm?

Well, they had something to live for-- seeing their husband-- wife, maybe, or their children, still alive. I knew my family was gone. About three months I was in camp, I saw a friend of the family. And I said, where is my father? And he said, he just died two weeks ago.

So I knew everybody was dead. I had nobody left.

Mhm? How do you think you kept going, during that terrible, terrible time?

When I came back, you mean?

No, no, no, when you were doing this terrible work. What kept you going?

The idea of seeing them lose the war, and having maybe one hour freedom, or eating one orange, or seeing a tree. You-- you imagine. You want to see them being beaten by the-- and our -- my dream is to take the subway for an hour. And then, after that, I didn't care what would happen to me. And that's what made you live, I guess, or fight.

And luck has a lot to do with it. I think my time wasn't there to die yet. I believe very much in that.

But that's the way you fight, you know? You fight every day-- maybe today, it's going to be the end of the war. Maybe today, they're going to lose it. And maybe today, they're going to--

And then, when it came, I couldn't do what some people did when they lost the war. They used to beat the SS. They used to spit in their face. I couldn't do that.