We were talking about your experiences working in the crematorium, folding the clothes. And what then happened with those clothes? What did you exactly do? Can you be a little more specific?

We tried to match sizes and make bundles, attach them, and put them in a truck. The truck was going to a train. We put them on the train. And then they went to Germany.

So these were clothes from the Hungarian victims.

Yeah.

And where-- did you work in a warehouse or--

It was a big room. It was built specially for that. They had five crematoriums. And they built five big rooms. We weren't-- it was pretty far, one from the other. But that's what happened. They built the big rooms. And it was a lot of clothes coming in, piles and piles of clothes from-- because people brought some with them. Bring the best thing you have, the jewelry, and this, so that's what we did.

So you sorted out women's clothes, and men's clothes, and sizes.

Right. But then after a little while-- it was too close for the people to see what they were doing. So they put on the [INAUDIBLE]. They put blankets so we shouldn't look at it, we shouldn't see. But the smell, and the screaming, and yelling--

Oh, they put blankets up so you wouldn't see the crematorium. Is that what you're saying?

Yeah. Because people who are revolting them self

Were you standing all day doing this?

Yeah.

Standing at tables?

Yeah. They had a shift night and then daylight.

How many hours a day did you have to work?

10 or 12 hours.

Did you work during the day or at night?

Only-- you switched. One, two weeks, you worked at night. And two weeks, you did the daytime.

And then what were your sleeping conditions like?

Well, in Brzezinka, the sleeping conditions were wonderful. We slept one person to a bed. Before, we slept by 12 to a piece of wood.

So you had your own bed.

Yes, and sheets, too.

What were you wearing?

The uniform, a simple uniform.

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Did you wear the same uniform the whole time you were in camp? The same--

Oh, sometimes. And when some body dying You have the same size, and they were cleaned enough, you were-- or they had no lice because people died very quickly sometimes. When they arrived, in two or three days, they were dead. So people used to change around. Otherwise, you wore the same uniform.

For years.

For years.

What did you wear under your uniform?

Nothing. It was nothing to wear. We had lost so much weight, everything was hanging down. And you didn't need anything. And they wouldn't give it to you anyway.

What were the sanitary facilities like when you were working in the crematorium?

Oh, in the crematorium, it was nice. They had showers-- given by men, but I didn't care. It came to that point, and I didn't care. And--

What do you mean given by men?

Yeah, the showers.

Yeah.

They would turn on the water by men. And they were-- we had clean sheets on the bed. And we could change uniform if we wanted to, at that time, at that period of time. So for four months, it was-- well, they didn't want to we should revolt, you know? That's a way of pacifying the people. That's what we were doing.

Now, did you have any contact with any of the women that you were with in the beginning once you started this new work?

I had a toothache, and I asked to go into Birkenau. And I saw Toni there and Matilde-- no, not Matilde But Danielle Casanova was a dentist. And she was the Communist non-Jewish. She pulled the tooth on me.

How did she pull it? Did she have any--

No, with the pliers. I don't have much teeth in my mouth.

So the --

You couldn't wash them. You couldn't have toothpaste, or no brush, or no nothing.

So they had permitted you to go back and get your tooth removed.

Yes. And they brought me back.

What was the state of mind with the women when you went back?

They wouldn't believe it. They wouldn't believe it.

What? You mean they wouldn't believe what you were doing?

Yes.

They wouldn't believe it was happening.

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To them.

Because a certain Hungarian got into camp. Cause they were liberated very early, which is-- so they said some-- they're coming into camp, so it can't be that bad.

These are the Hungarian saying this?

No, the people who] were, there already for a while.

Were saying things, it couldn't be as bad?

It couldn't be as bad because some Hungarians are coming into camp.

Right.

They're coming into Birkenau.

Right. So then you had to go back.

Yeah, and then I have to go back to Brzezinka At that time already, Mara and her boyfriend escaped. Because apparently, they had papers which say that they're going to destroy the whole camp. They're going to bomb the whole camp so there would be no--

Who is they?

The Germans.

Will bomb the camp.

Yeah. So it would be no testimonial or anything. Two weeks later, they find them when they were home, both of them. So they brought me in again. They brought in the whole camp to watch them hang. And that's what they used to do all time.

What did you feel like when you would see something like that?

I couldn't watch it. Because I liked it very much, she helped a lot of people. And now-- she was a wonderful person. So I keep my eyes down. I just didn't look. And then they brought us back again to Brzezinka.

And you continued to do this from April- till--

To January.

Of '45.

Of '45.

And then?

Then all the Russians were coming in too fast. So they did not want to-- the SS did not want to be liberated by the Russians. So they start to walk us. We walked for three nights and three days. I don't know, but it was a hard walk in the snow, in the cold, and no food, and nothing.

We arrived in [? Loslo, ?] which is pretty far from Brzezinka. And they put us in trains, open trains.

Cattle trains. How many people are we talking about?

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Well, I--

Is this more than the people that worked with you in the crematorium?

Oh, yeah, because Auschwitz was evacuated.

So it was-- oh, you're talking about everybody marching.

Everybody, yeah.

OK. This was just not your particular group.

No. No, it's not my particular group.

So the camp was evacuated.

Yeah, the camp was evacuated.

What was the talk among the people at that time, among the prisoners?

Well, to an extent, we were quite scared. Because every camp we stopped, they didn't warn us. They have their own people. So we were traveling from one camp to another one. In the meantime, people were dying on the train. We had to sleep on top of them. We had to-- we couldn't do anything. And--

You walked for three days and three nights and then got to the train.

Yeah. And then we ask for water. They didn't want to give us water. We arrived in Ravensbrück, another great gem of a camp. And they accepted us. And here, we stayed January, February, March. No, into February.

And February, I was very happy to get out of there. Because they were doing experimental on women. And what we saw was so horrible that we wanted to get out as fast as possible. And they did send us to a little camp. Prchin-Malkov, it was called.

Let's talk a little bit about the conditions of Ravensbrück.

Oh, god.

If you're able to.

It was-- unbelievable. People cannot believe what was [? done ?] in Ravensbrück.

What happened when you first got there? You were on the train. You would stop there.

Yes, and we got off. And they put us in the room. And people were laying all over. And they were dead. They were completely dead, cold as ice.

These are men and women?

No, just women. Ravensbrück was a woman camp.

Yeah, but the people on the train with you--

We were just women.

Oh, you were just women on the train, oh, OK.

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Yes, because Birkenau was only woman. The other camp was men. We were not together.

The women get separated.

But when you were working at the crematoria, that was mixed men and women.

Yes. It was mixed there. But they went to the men's camp--

When it was time to leave.

Yeah.

I see. OK.

Yeah. And we stayed. We slept on the dead people. We-- eating, we didn't eat, I don't think. But most of the time, we were walking around because we couldn't take the smell. We couldn't take the idea of being with the dead people.

It was a horror. Ravensbrück was the worst thing I ever saw in my life. And then they send us a little bit outside of Ravensbrück. And there, they were doing experimental on women.

Why did they send you there?

Because they had room. There was a big room there where they can put us up. That's the only way I can--

How did you know they were doing experiments?

Oh, we saw them. We saw the women.

Can you describe any thing.

Oh, god. There was no description of that. They were-- no hands, no feet, to have a stomach out, have one eye out, one eye in. It was a horror. It was horrible. It was just unbelievable. It was just--

Were these people still alive?

[GASPS] I don't think so.

So these were all dead.

I don't know. They never came back to the country. I think they were put in a sanatorium and being taken care of there. Because they couldn't take care of themselves.

So some of these people were still alive.

Oh, they were alive, yeah. When we saw them--

Oh, they were alive.

They were alive, yes. But I don't think they ever went back home.

I see. Were you able to talk to any of them?

Yes, a lot of French people. On the ground, Maquis people fought.

So you were there for how long at Ravensbrück?

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We were there for about--

[Two months?

Not too long, about three weeks.

Yeah.

And then they said--

Did people trying to help these--

Yes, we tried to help. We had very little--

I was going to say, what could you do?

Well, there was nothing much we could do. Some people couldn't eat. They had-- they cut out their tongues. They cut out-- it was just-- it was just unbelievable and cruel.

St. Joseph's College-- I don't know if you know it, in Philadelphia, it's a Catholic college-- asked me one time to come to talk with them. And then they took me-- we were talking about-- it's in the clinical psychology department. And I said never that I read, in the history of the world, this happened. And they disagreed with me. They said it was always a Holocaust.

Yes, it was Holocaust. I agree with them. But not organized like that, not-- they were fighting wars, or revolutions, or things, even now to this day. But nothing, nothing like this, nothing like this.

In many thing, I don't know what happened in Auschwitz. Many things that I saw, documentary on the Claude Lanzmann I don't know. They had families in one camp and children. There would raised them to see how they were doing and then kill them.

I didn't know that, that that was happening in Auschwitz.

You were 19, 20 when--

When I was liberated.

Well, when you were in Ravensbrück and you saw these indescribable scenes. Again, how do you think you kept going?

I was crying all the time. I was crying all the time. And I said-- people-- it came to a point that we were saying, nobody will believe it. There's no sense of talking. For years, I've never talked because nobody would believe it. It's like a fairy tale. It's worse than a fairy tale.

So then after you left Ravensbrück--

We went to Prchin-Malkov, which had no [? work. ?]

What was that?

It was a little camp near [PLACE NAME] in Germany. And there was no crematorium, no. I am sure it must have been--

A labor camp.

A labor camp, or a prisoner camp, or something like that. And we arrived in February. Again, February is the good month for me. And May 6-- May 1, 1945, we started to walk again.

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What did you do there between February and May?

Nothing, nothing-- starve.

This is, again, a group of women.

You're still with women.

Yeah. We didn't do anything.

They gave you enough to subsist on?

I [? ran-- ?] I was so furious because they were keeping the bread for the soldiers which were passing by. They were running out. They're running away.

These are German soldiers running away.

Yeah, the SS. They were running away. And I was really furious. So somebody pushed me up to where the bread in. And I threw out all the bread to the people. But nobody gave me a piece to me.

But I did-- my mother used to say, everybody is going to hold up, but Maria has to eat. It's not true. I could stay without eating for days. So that's-- and then we started to walk. And, yeah--

This is May.

May 1. May 6, I was with a friend, Maria. And it was raining. And she said, the Americans are here. I said, oh my God, she's losing her mind. What am I going to do with her?

Were you still with a whole group of people?

Yes, with the camp.

With the camp

But we were-- one was here. The one was there. The one was--

But there were German guards with you.

Yes, they were German. They want to be liberated. But the Americans, they did not --

What was their treatment of you when you were walking?

I sat down, and I said, I don't walk anymore. He said, you're almost free. Come on and walk. Because the Americans are not far from here. So they wanted to be liberated by the Americans. They were right because the Russians were not very nice to them.

And I -- she said, the Americans are here. I said, oh my God, she's crazy. I don't know if-- and I saw the Americans. took the junction. The Russians took over that part. So we weren't in the Russian--

What was your feeling when you first saw the Americans?

I think I was numb, mostly. What happened was I was walking. And in front of me, who walks in front of me, Tobaya that bastard of the Nazi who did all the selection for the gas chamber-- him, and Mengele and Eichmann.

And he turns around-- he was in civilian. He turns around, and he said shh. [SLAPPING NOISE] So I went

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over to the Americans. And I said, this is an SS who killed million of people. They arrested him.

And then I had to be here and witness in Nuremberg.

Oh, we'll talk about that. So they arrested him there. And you continued walking?

And we continued walking. And the Russians took over. They put us in a camp, a military camp with the soldiers who were [? presented. ?] They brought-- the Americans did not know how to-- unfortunately, they were young kids. And they-- immediately, it was butter, and milk, and chocolate. And people were dying. They used to get diarrhea, and that's it.

The Russians knew better. They bought us potatoes, and rice, and they locked us in. They say, you don't walk out because of the Mongolians. They were raping every child, every woman, everybody they could find. So we didn't walk out.

What was your physical state at that point? Do you know--

Oh

--how much you weighed?

Oh, I had pleurisy I couldn't breathe. I couldn't eat. I was in a bad shape, a very bad shape. At that time, already, I was not good at all. Because I came back to Paris in 19 of May. And the 20th, I was in the sanatorium.

OK. So how long did you stay--

In the zone

No, in the Russian zone that you were in.

We stayed about three weeks. And then they wanted to take us to Odessa, to the Black Sea, and go back to Marseilles. That was a little too far. We were very close to Belgium in Holland. It was closer to be repatriated that way.

So we asked them, and they say, fine. So we went back home.

On your own, you left and went--

No, no, no. It was a train, a military train. The French, who came from England with De Gaulle they took over a train. And of course, they had to go-- it was so destroyed, Germany was so destroyed that we had to go to Holland, and from Holland to Belgium, and from Belgium to France.

So you got back to Paris.

Yeah.

And who were you with when you got back to Paris?

I had nobody.

OK. What did you do when you got back there?

Well, they had a hotel. And they put us in a hotel. And I said, I'm not going to go back to another camp. To me, a hotel was another camp. I just didn't want to do that. So I went to Toni and I stayed with her.

She had come back earlier. She spoke Polish, so it was easier to come back for very early and she find her

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husband and her child. So I stayed with her.

Did you really believe you were free at that point after all those years?

No, it was very hard to believe that I was free. I was always looking in the back if some-- if a German was not following me.

This is even after liberation, you're saying.

Yeah. And even in concentration-- in the sanatorium, when I saw a blonde with blue eyes, I said, he's going to kill me. He's a German doctor. It was-- actually, psychiatry, was -- in France, it didn't exist yet.

So you went back to your friend Toni And how long did you stay with her?

I stayed not long because when I went through a medical examination, they sent me to the sanatorium for 18 months immediately.

Where was the sanatorium?

In the [INAUDIBLE] at [PLACE NAME] It's not far from Grenoble I don't know if you know that

And you stayed there for 18 months.

18 months.

Were there other survivors there with you?

Yes. But a lot of them were Maquis people for the underground. And then I find a letter from one of my uncles, who lives in America, one of-- brother of my mother, if I wanted to come here.

And my friend said, oh, you may never have the occasion to go to America. Try. If you don't like it, I'll send you the money to come back. But you don't write send me the money, I want to come back. They were very not nice, my family.

I'm a little confused. You got this letter from your uncle in America to come.

Yeah.

And did you go then?

Yeah.

Oh. And you arrived here in the United States. How did you come? Did you leave from-- how did you come over?

I came on the quota. And that--

You sailed from where?

From Cherbourg. But it was destroyed. So we had to take a little boat, the Queen Elizabeth was parked right in the middle of the ocean because they couldn't dock. Because it was bombed.

So you took a boat out to the ship.

Ship, yeah.

And you took the Queen Elizabeth?

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Uh-huh.

And where did you dock?

In New York.

New York. And then where did you go?

Well, to Philadelphia.

Your relatives were in Philadelphia?

Mm-hmm.

And you did this by yourself.

Yeah. And what happened when you arrived in Philadelphia?

Oh, my uncles were not very nice. I was a kid. I didn't even know I had uncles. And they blamed my mother. The blamed my father. Why didn't they come here? Why did they-- you know. They just--

Did you know any English at this point? Yeah-- well, some, what I learned in school. But it didn't take me long to learn.

And you were 20 years old now?

I'm 21, 20-- well, four years later.

Oh no, you were 20, right.

So I was 25 years old.

Oh, you came-- when did you arrive in the United States?

1949. What day was that?

In May.

May of '49.

Yeah.

Oh, OK. So you were 24 years old. And you went to Philadelphia. And how long did you stay there?

With my uncle?

Yeah.

A year. I had met my husband and friends. That's a long story. I don't know if you want to hear. [LAUGHS] It was no-- civilian male, only military male. And my friend, Toni's husband, saw my husband in the street.

And he said, I have a girl who got an English letter. And she doesn't know the address of her uncle. Would you-- where do you come from? He said, well, I have a sister living in Philadelphia. And she looked up all the Singers. And she find them. And that's the way the correspondence started, in between him, and he used to bring it to me. And that's it.

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When I came over, he was living with his-- he was going to school. He finished college because he was very young when he got into the army. And he didn't like to live with his mother and sister. And I didn't like to live with my uncle. He was-- they were nasty people.

So he said, well, I have solution. Let's get married. So we got married.

And you've lived in Philadelphia ever since.

Since, yeah. 44 years.

Wow. Yeah, I have two children. I have a boy and a girl.

Can we talk a little bit about them? When they were growing up, did you ever share any of your experiences with them?

That was one mistake. But I felt I didn't want to make them feel guilty. I wanted to raise them with no-- normal way, not they should feel sorry for me, or pity, or something like that. I'm paying it now.

My daughter has said to me the other day-- she told my husband, she didn't tell me-- that after 50 years, she should forget it already. I'm sick and tired of it. I'll never forget that.

My son is different. He's much more sensitive. He talks about it. He reads about it. And my daughter-- well, I think her husband has a lot to do with it, too. They don't want their children to know anything.

They don't want to make them feel-- the older grandson, he asks me, grandma, why don't you tell me the story of your number? And immediately, my daughter said, some other times, not now. He's going to be 13 years old. He should know.

But that's it. That's-- we made our will. And I'm going to leave some money to the Holocaust Museum for a lot of education for the young people. Whatever we can, we're going to leave. And it's very important to me, I think. I can have my [? game ?] very easily, and in America.

Having gone through what you did, what is your feeling about being Jewish?

Oh, I'm not ashamed. If you want to-- when I lived in Paris, we had Jewish friends and non-Jewish friends. And somebody told me one time, if you have Jewish friends, don't go out with them.

Apparently, we didn't -- in France, they don't tell you what religion you are when they meet you or -- It's very-- it's not like in America where you immediately-- you ask, well, how much you make, and how much this and how much -- Over there, it's not like that.

And I was a little bit ashamed of saying I was Jewish. I should have told them at that time. I should have slapped him. Now, I would do it because I feel that they deserve it. But I can't hate, either. I can't-- I don't like the Germans. And I don't like the people who are antisemitic or racial. So I don't like them.

But I don't want to destroy myself either. Hatred is very difficult. It should be taken out the dictionary. Look what happened to the Germans. They hated, and they destroyed themselves. And that's the way I felt. I never went back to Germany. I will never go back to Germany. That's one thing I promised myself, that--

Why not?

To a certain extent, I'm scared that they're going to keep me there. It's a very normal reaction. And just the language, to hear about the language [? gives ?] me-- I'm scared. I get scared.

[speaking in background)

I think it's a normal feeling.

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Do you receive reparations?

Yes, not much. Because I didn't--

How do you feel about getting that, getting --

What?

Jeffrey Jay, J-A-Y. (unrelated speaker in background)

To say I deserve it-- yes, I guess I do. But if I would have stayed in France, I would have gotten three times as much. Doing it from here, it's very little. The worst part is to go to the German Council every year. And they tell me, sign your name with one N. Like I don't know how my name is spelled, you know?

What do they mean by that?

Well, two Ns is German.

Is there anything else that you wanted to share? Any thoughts, any feelings?

No.

Did anything get left out?

I'm sure that when I go home, I'll remember many other things. And certain things, I don't want to remember. I really don't want to. And I don't want to even talk about it. It's too hard. It's so difficult.

Yeah, I feel that I don't want to live if I have to live with that constantly and talk about it. It's just too hard. I live with my family. It's terrible. Maybe I should forget. Maybe I shouldn't remember so much. But we were a very close family. And I just can't forget it. It's very difficult. It's very difficult.

Especially-- I couldn't talk to anyone. My husband didn't want to hear about it. You have a different country, you have a different life, forget it. So I learned to just keep it in myself and having a lot of ulcers. And I never talked about it. It's very difficult. The only time I used to talk is when I used to go back to Paris and all my friends were living. And they've all died already.

These are friends from childhood?

No, from camp.

Oh.

Yeah, from childhood, I have-- they're not Jewish, but they're very, very nice. I live with them. They [INAUDIBLE] me. They-- it was very-- and when we talk about they -- They knew all my family. And when we talk about it, she cries like I do.

But most of the-- my family-- my father's family, like I said-- they said to me-- and French policeman, I didn't have any money to have a winter coat. And I didn't have a winter coat. I came back. And he got the material. It was a French policeman. And a cousin of my father made a coat.

This is when you returned after the war.

Yes. And he asked me for money. Then his sister said, well, I can give you a cup of tea, but I don't have room for you. But a Gentile took me in. So you know, I don't know what to think about it. I don't. Some good ones, some bad ones. And you can't put everybody in the same bag. And that's all.

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Any message to your grandchildren?

Well, I hope they grow up to be sensitive young men and to learn what went on, not to be blinded by their parents. I feel it's very important for the young kids to do that. It's very hard.

Before we finish, I just wanted to know what your feelings were when you received your number on your arm.

Oh, I felt like I was cattle, you know? Stamped. And I ran out. That was February, and it was muddy. And I took the mud and tried to erase it. Off. But it didn't come off. And I felt very bad. I felt-- well, maybe someday, if I come out of life of here, of the camp, I'll have it taken off.

And then when I ask my doctor to do that, he didn't want to do it. He said, this should be the diamonds for your grandchildren. And that's true. That's when he told me, Dr. [? Rosemont. ?]

So I kept it on. Many people took it off. But I kept it on. I don't care anymore. It's part of me, and it's part of what I went through. And it doesn't bother me if people make bad comment or laugh about it. It's just-- I take it with a grain of salt, and that's it. I accept it.

It's not easy sometimes. It's easier in the wintertime when you have the long sleeves. But before, when I first came over there, they made big numbers. Now they had-- later on, they put the numbers right here with the name in the front, which is-- it doesn't show so much. This shows Wow. I was the 35,000th person in camp. From six million, that's an early-- that's very early.

And this is Jewish. The Gentile did not have that, just the number. Yeah. But I rubbed it very hard with the mud. It didn't come off.

That's it. Thank you very much--

Oh, you're welcome.

--for doing the interview.

This has been an interview of Marie Schwartzman. It was conducted on August 12, 1994 by Gail Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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