

The following is an interview of Irena Kirkland. It is taking place on June 26, 1996, in Washington DC. It is being conducted by Gail Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Could you please give us your whole name?

Irena Kirkland.

And the name you were born with?

Neumann.

Where were you born?

I was born in Prague. I would have behind my name "ova." It would be "Neumannova" in Czech.

And when were you born?

On the 22nd, August '25.

Who were the members of your immediate family?

My father, my mother, my sister, and I.

Your father's name?

Emil Neumann.

And where was he from?

He was from a place which is like 40 miles out of Prague, called [PLACE NAME].

And your mother's name?

Was Ludmila [? Steinlově. ?] And she is from a place which is like also 40, 50 miles out of Prague called Benesov.

And your sister?

Her name is [? Alena. ?] Alena Neumannová.

And how old is she?

She is the same age as I am. She's my twin.

Twin sister. What kind of work did your father do?

He was an architect-- engineer architect.

Did your mother work?

No, no.

And did you live right in--

We lived right in Prague.

In Prague. What kind of neighborhood was it? Was it a mixed neighborhood of Jews and non-Jews?

I don't think-- I don't know. But I don't think it existed. The Jews were very assimilated in Prague. They were not-- there was no ghetto or anything. We lived in the neighborhood where for the first-- I think our five years of my life-- were today the residence of the American ambassador is. That's the neighborhood it was. A very nice, near big park. And then we moved to the other side of Prague, also near a park or whatever. But I don't think it existed, that Jews would be living in one place and non-Jews in another.

OK, so this, as you say, was a mixed neighborhood of Jews and non-Jews, then.

Well, it was mixed. But I am not conscious that ever there were only Jewish neighborhoods.

And you said your father was an architect. What did he particularly design?

Houses.

Private houses?

Yeah, I think private and office buildings. I mean, he was working for a firm. And he was what in Europe you would call engineer-architect, because he was allowed to build also.

He designed and built.

And then he opened his own office. Unfortunately, only like a year or two before the war. So that went down the chutes then.

How religious was your family?

They were not. My father came from the kind of generation of which I think in the Central or perhaps Western Europe was at that time very prevalent, that they were not atheists. They were agnostics. So we didn't go to any church or any nothing.

And so did you observe any holidays or?

No, no.

Nothing. No religious education?

No. Because we did-- only the Catholics had the religion in school. I mean, during-- then also the non-Catholics had the hour off, which we loved. So it was not a hardship for us. I mean, whether they were Jews or whether they were of no religion or Protestant or whatever, they had an hour off. And I think it was once a week or twice. I can't-- I can't remember. I mean, how often the religion, the Catholic religion was being taught in schools.

What about your mother's family? Your mother, was she religious at all?

Well, my mother, She died when we were like eight months old. And my father remarried whom I would call then mother, and I didn't know that she was not our mother till I think we were like 14 years old, and it came out of an aunt. Because when they were going by transport, a ship by the Germans, and she let it out.

So I don't think they-- the family-- I cannot tell you about the families of my parents, whether they were religious or not. My mother's father, that would be my grandfather, who was a big landowner and he was a member of the Austrian parliament for the Czech party, and so that--

But I have no idea whether he observed something or didn't observe, because he was dead by the time we were-- and on both sides, there was a lot of intermarriage in the family. So that again, I don't know whether it was looked at well or not well, that they married, so to say, out of faith.

Some of my father's sisters, his-- 1, 2, 3, I think, siblings married non-Jews. And so I don't know, I mean, what was happening.

When you were a young girl and growing up, did you consider yourself Jewish? Did you know you were?

I don't know, really. I don't think I thought about it too much. I do remember that when Hitler marched to Prague, which was on the 15th of March '38-- '39. Sorry, '39, that mother called us to her bedroom before we went to school, and told us that we are Jewish, and that it will not be so good and so and so forth.

And I remember that I came back from school, and we had for lunch something which I loved. And I couldn't understand then, when the whole world is going to pieces, and my world, I mean, you don't know, we will be dead tomorrow. And we have what I love.

But I don't know, really, whether I-- how much I was thinking about it. I never thought about it, because it was such an important part since '39. But what happened before, everything seems like marvelous times and no worries.

Do you remember what was it like when your mother told you, you were Jewish? Did it come as a complete surprise?

Well, it was just before we went-- no, I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean, it was-- no, I'm sure that I knew that. No, I'm sure that I knew that. But that was not something which I can put my finger on. I think we knew that. It's only that we didn't go to religious school. I mean, some-- and we did not-- my parents didn't go on the high holidays or--

Did you celebrate Christmas? Did you--

Yes, we did. But then everybody did. I mean, that's not-- it was not really-- because the religious people went to church. The non-religious had a marvelous dinner, and children got beautiful presents, and we had a tree, yes.

Let's talk about your schooling now. What kind of school did you go to as a young girl?

Well, I think it was a law, you had to go to the school which was nearest to you, the first five years of your schooling.

So this was a local public school?

Yes, we didn't have-- I don't know whether they now will have it, but I don't think so except England, the Europeans didn't have too much of private schooling. Usually if a child couldn't make it in a public school, you sent him to private school, and it meant that the schooling is bad. Not the public, the private was. For money, you buy him some degree, but you don't buy him good schooling.

And then there were religious Catholic schools. I don't know whether they were Protestant as well, but Catholic. And again, they were basically for kids who couldn't make it. So that it probably was that like everywhere else that the schools were the bourgeoisie or the better class people will be better than very, very poor people live. But we had the kids from very poor families and so on, I think.

And then you continued on to another school?

And then after that, at that time after the first five classes, you go either to a high school, which leads to university, which would be 8 years. Or you go to four years, where you then cannot go to university. So you have to take an exam. And that was-- I don't think that it was a completely private school.

They were only that they were public, but you had to pay if your father made so much and so much, so that we paid. I

mean, but we went to the one which leads to the university, which had Latin and things like that.

When you were in school, were there any unpleasant incidents because you were Jewish? Did you sense any of that? I'm talking about early on.

No.

No problems? And what about in your neighborhood. I mean, did you play with the other neighborhood children?

Yeah.

But there were no difficulties, no problems?

No, no.

What other interests did you have? Were you interested in music?

Well, we had to have piano lessons. I mean, not that I wanted to, but we had to go to piano lessons. We had firstly after the-- we were very small. We had a Czech nanny. Then we had a German one. And then we had somebody who was mademoiselle-- I mean that we should learn French. It did not take too well, because we were two and she was one. But--

What language did you speak at home?

Czech.

You spoke Czech at home?

Yeah. Yeah.

So you were very close to your sister, being a twin growing up? Did you have a good--

We fought a lot. And I mean, we were like one person. So that it's you are fighting with yourself, but we fought a lot. And she had at that time very often bronchitis. So she was weaker.

Are you identical twins?

Yeah, yeah. And so that-- but otherwise, we were. We couldn't do anything else, because we went to the same school. We were living in the the same house. And we looked exactly the same. And people would say much later that when-- I mean friends, that somebody would say, what are you doing today in the afternoon? And I or she would say, well, I'm doing such and such. And what is the other one doing? Well, of course the same. I mean, we didn't even consider probably that we are two.

Were you interested in sports?

We had to go to certain-- we had it in school. We did-- kind of-- I don't think so, no. No, we went skiing in the winter, and I broke my-- I remember my wrist skating, and I hated skating. So that was a great burden that I broke the wrist.

And we went, of course in summer. My parents always took us for two months somewhere in the country, so with the other family members and so-- and so we went swimming. You know, the normal kind. I think when we were 13, started tennis or whatever.

Any youth group membership?

They sent us one year to a camp, which was done a la American camps. You know, youth camp. And I can't-- and there was the two of us and a cousin as well. And I don't think either of us really enjoyed that very much. We didn't suffer there, but it was not something which-- I think we were probably quite spoiled.

Were your parents interested in Zionism at all? Or was that not a part of their--

No, no. It wasn't. No, no, no.

Now, of course you were obviously very young in 1933, but when were you first aware of Hitler? Do you remember when that first--

But there were refugees coming from Germany. And my grandmother had-- I think it was her sister or grandfather's sister, I don't know, who lived in Vienna. She was a typical-- a typical kind of spinster old lady. And she came suddenly to Prague. Yeah. And I mean, I'm sure that the grown-ups talk about it quite a lot. And we were aware. I mean, the Czechs never liked very much Germany, and so that it was not difficult than you would be aware there's something bad happening next door.

And plus the part of Bohemia, that Sudetenland where the Germans started, and we used to-- that's where everybody used to go to ski. And plus my mother had a cousin there, who had a factory and they lived there. And so that I can't tell you when I was, but we certainly were conscious very much of Hitler.

Were you particularly frightened at that point?

I don't think that we ever thought that they could occupy. Czechoslovakia had a very good army, very militarily strong. And it was a rich country with great industry. I think they were number two in steel and every third car in Europe was Czech or whatever. So that it was kind of inbred, nothing very much can happen to us. I mean, we would fight.

And I remember that in 1939, before Munich, they kept the mobilization. That was before the Czech president gave the Sudetenland. So they mobilized. And at that time, they asked everybody who has the possibility that women and children should be evacuated out of Prague. So we went with my parents' friends. And we had the nanny with us. And we went out of Prague to a place.

And my father then with the other men returned to Prague in case they would be called up or whatever. And you saw the roads lined up by people, asking for a lift to go to their battalion or whatever. I mean, they were called up and everything. And there was no-- everybody very-- I still remember that, I mean, in a very up mood.

And that night, in that place outside of Prague, when German Fraulein came to our room and made us kneel and swear on the Bible that we will never say that she's born in Sudeten Germany, that she's German, that we will always say that she's Czech, and that she's very-- she loves Jews or Whatever

And of course when Hitler marched in, she was the first one who marched to our house and said to my mother, I know exactly which jewelry you have, and don't you dare to hide it and blah, blah, blah. But at that time, I mean, she was absolutely on our side.

And then after a few days when the Munich pact was signed, and so we were going back to Prague, you so grew up man standing on the road crying. Because I don't think that anybody imagined-- and that was not Jews or non-Jews-- I mean, that they will give up without firing a shot.

And so then it started to be much-- I mean, you know everybody knew that that the Czech countries are vulnerable. I mean--

Were you able to talk this over with your parents, the change? Because you said this was the change.

No, no, no.

You went back home to Prague?

Yes, and I'm sure that that was when my father tried and started to get us visa to some country, and to get us out, which was by that time nearly impossible. I mean--

And did he talk things over with you about what he thought would happen?

No, no, no.

Did you and your sister talk between yourselves about this terrible change?

I don't think so. I don't think so.

Because you were young. You were young.

And I think that also everybody was trying to pretend-- I don't know-- that nothing will happen or whatever. I mean, it was-- that was the end of the good times.

Did you have a lot of extended family?

Yes. Yeah.

Cousins and aunts?

Yeah.

Was it a close--

Yes, yes, yes.

You would get together?

Yeah, yeah. Everybody talked to everybody. They would-- but most of them did not come back after the war, though.

All right, so now you're back in Prague.

Yeah.

And what was the next change?

I kind of don't remember too much what was happening between that Munich and March of the Germans marching into Prague.

Marching into Poland, you mean? Or marching?

No, they marched first-- they marched on 15th of March '39, they marched to Prague.

To Prague, yeah.

They marched in '38 to Vienna. '37 or '38, yeah?

Right.

And then '39 to Prague.

Did your family know or were you aware of Kristallnacht?

I'm sure that-- I do know that they knew, because then everybody knew Kristallnacht. Because I kind of have memories of the radio talking about it or whatever. But the Germans came in '39, and--

What was it like for you as a young girl to see the Germans coming in?

I don't know, really. I really don't. I mean, that's--

Seeing uniforms, was that frightening?

I don't think it was as frightening as it should be. Because they came kind of-- unfortunately, there was no television. So what do you didn't go to see, you didn't see.

Right, saw what was nearby.

And they went downtown in the Wenzel Square. And so--

So then life in a sense continued on for a bit, once they invaded?

Yeah, yeah.

You continued in school.

Yes.

And your daily routine continued.

Yes. And I wouldn't know how fast which law came, because they were kind of putting the laws against Jews and this. I don't know which, because there was a point when they wouldn't allow Jews to go to school. Then they wouldn't also allow to have more in the apartments. You were allowed to have-- Jews were allowed only to have so much and so much place, so that you had to take other families in.

And then there was one that-- one of the first was that Jews have to give all their jewelry to the fatherland. Then they were not allowed to have pets. So we had the dog and a canary. So I remember that my parents sent the dog to some friends outside Prague, and bought something which they gave him, because you know that he would be destroyed. It was a kind of a sadism of the uttermost. Because what can they do with the dogs or whatever?

What was it like for a young teenager to be told she couldn't go to school?

You know, there were so many worries that I cannot tell you how it was, because they of course-- they wanted to make out of Jews a race which that-- I don't know which came first, between a race which was, but also that they wouldn't know how to read and write and whatever.

And so even though it was actually against a German law so that my parents took somebody who would teach us privately. So we were not off the hook. Then we were not allowed, of course, to go to movies or whatever but to park. So that's when we used to go to the old Jewish cemetery to play around there.

And then-- it was one after-- and I don't know which came when. I mean, and I remember when the first transports started, which was I think in '41. And then everybody had to be registered. And unfortunately, Czechoslovakia was a very Western country. So they had everybody registered. You know, even if you didn't register, the registry where you were born or whatever would send it to them, because it was German-occupied. So it didn't help what you did. I mean,

everything was on paper nicely.

So you had your own identification papers? Did you?

I don't know when it started, whether they start to wear the star. I think that was like '41.

To actually wear a star on your clothing?

Yeah, yeah. So that everybody sees immediately that you are a Jew.

How did that feel for you to do that?

Well, it scares the hell out of you. Because that's not a-- you couldn't go-- I think in the shopping, then you could go only from 5:00 to 7:00. I mean, I don't remember what there was. There was one thing after another what you couldn't do and what you could do.

What about your non-Jewish friends? Did they change in their attitude towards you?

Well, they would be-- funnily enough, I remember only one who did. And that was the one who was in our class, and her mother was washerwoman. I mean, it was-- and so-- and my sister and I liked her very much, because she used four-letter language.

And she would always say, you know, your mother never uses four-letter word, and we would swear she does, and she didn't. I mean, it was-- and when we had private lessons, my parents paid for her as well. And so she was the first one which dropped us. And no, that makes actually sense. People don't like to say thank you. I mean, I'm sure that her mother said you will be nice to them. I don't know, but perhaps she was a horrible person.

But perhaps it was just normal that [? she thinks ?] thank God I don't need to try to eat like a human being when I go to their house for lunch or whatever. Plus, I don't need to learn anymore English or French or whatever.

But otherwise, I think they used to come at the beginning, and tell us what they are learning in school. I don't have a memory that somehow we were dropped. I mean--

Before you couldn't go to school, were the teachers still pleasant to you?

Yes. Yeah, yeah.

So there was no problem there either?

I don't think so. I don't have a memory. Perhaps I was dumb, but I have no memory of that.

[LAUGHTER]

Very good customer.

This is tape one, side B. And we were talking about your childhood. Are you and your sister similar in personality?

Yes, I think she's the stronger of the two of us. But yes, I would say. That's why I wanted that-- and she perhaps is coming at the end of August. So if you could-- because I wanted originally that we do it together. So Because it would be a little bit like Rashomon, you only have one thing. Is there more coffee?

So how would you describe your personalities at that time? Were you outgoing or quiet?

No, I don't think we were quiet.



More outgoing, friendly type children?

I think so.

OK, so now you're at home, and you're wearing the star. And again, did you share your thoughts with your sister then about what it's like to wear the star?

I don't even know. No, no, no. I don't remember one single incident talking about it.

And the restrictions increased?

Yeah.

And then what was the next change?

Well, the transports started, which is a frightening kind of thing.

How did you know about them?

Well, first of all, one of my uncle went with one of the first one, where they-- I think it was basically all lawyers went somewhere to-- it was sent somewhere to Poland. And it was, I think, Litzmanns-- Lodz. And I don't think anybody survived. I mean, not a single person survived.

And then there was again a little bit of respite. And then they started to send it, and I remember we had to go and work then at the Jewish community. Why it was, I don't know anymore, but I don't even know what I was doing there. I think I was standing at a machine there.

What kind of machine?

I think it was what do you call the copy machine? [INAUDIBLE] But I don't know why I would-- and they were not good times. And then in '43, we got our-- and we were shipped.

All right, if we can talk a little bit about that, how did your family find out what they had to do? How were they notified?

Well, it came by-- I think it came by paper, by a letter or whatever.

To report to a certain place?

Yes, yes. It was a place. I'm sure it still exists in Prague, where they had the big fairs. Kind of--

Big grounds?

Yeah, and they put there whatever, 5,000 people. That I know, like sardines, one next to another.

What did you take with you?

They allowed you, I think, 20 kilos.

Did you take anything special with you?

We didn't--

As a teenager?

By that-- no, I would say that we probably-- everybody did the same, to take warm clothing. You know, nobody knew, I mean-- and--

Did you know where you would be going, or they just told you to report?

Yeah, I don't know whether we knew that we are going to Theresienstadt or whether that we didn't, but that's where we went.

So the four of you, your mother, father, and your sister, and you reported together?

Right, right. And then after I think three, four days, I don't know how long we were there. Those are things--

In this collection area.

Yeah. They put us on trains. And--

The four of you are still together?

Yes.

Did you have other relatives with you at that time?

No, I don't think that they were-- I think my grandparents just went before. And some other relatives went like before. I mean, we were one of the last of our family. I mean, not of all the [? trains. ?] We were one of the last. And we went to Theresienstadt.

OK, which is about 40 miles from Prague. But that journey--

Is it 40 miles? No, it must be more. I think it took like three or five hours. I don't know, but--

I think it's about approximately 40 miles.

What? By train 40 miles would be--

It went slowly.

No, because I said that--

Or maybe it wasn't direct. Maybe. Maybe they didn't go in a direct line. I don't know. Whatever.

I couldn't imagine. I think it must be more. From the simple point of view I said that I go by kilometers--

Oh, right. So kilometers would be 60, 70?

Yeah, no. But that's because I said that the place where my father is from or my mother is 40 miles. But then it's next door. It's five miles.

You went by train?

Yeah.

OK. And what was that train ride like?

I don't remember. I don't remember. I remember the train going to Auschwitz. I don't remember this one.

What was your first impressions of Theresienstadt when you arrived?

You know, it was a barrack city from Maria Teresa, from the 18th century. The Czechs used that. And next door was what they called the Fortress Theresienstadt, which was one of the worst Germans under the Nazis, where were a lot of political prisoners. But this was a--

And they were barracks. I mean, old kind of, where I don't know. I can't-- I know that we were in one of the barracks. How many thousand people lived in one room, I don't know anymore. I knew-- but--

Were the men and women still together? Were you still with your father.

I think, yes. Yes. And--

Would you characterize your parents as being very strong people? Was your father--

I'm sure my father--

--able to keep his composure?

Yes, that he did. But we met there with some people we knew. So that-- I mean, so that at least I remember that I had a feeling that it was-- because it was that certain familiarity, because you saw some people. And--

Where did you eat?

You went for-- you had a kind-- like a-- you know, for camping they use it. And you went to a communal kitchen, which they put some--

On your tray?

Tray. Trays!

I meant a small dish tray or whatever.

Yeah, yeah. And I think that's what-- that's how I remember that.

What was the food they gave you? What kind of food?

Terrible, but I don't remember that-- I mean, the hunger which we had then in the German camps, that I do remember much more so. I think it was-- it was not plentiful. It was not even enough, but it was not something that you only think about food, that it was probably still, let's say, a potato here and potato there, and something.

And you are 18 years old at this point.

Yeah, yeah.

Did you feel very old by that time, considering what you had just gone through?

No, why would I feel old?

Well, I mean, leaving your home and going to this transit center.

Yeah, but it had nothing to do with age.

I just know whether it made you feel older than a typical 18-year-old young woman.

Oh, no. That I thought about only after the war, that I never was 18. I mean, that we had not the luxury to think about.

What was a typical day like there?

We had to work there. No, I think that the first-- I don't know how long. We worked in so-called the agriculture, which was very bad for people like me, who know nothing about agriculture, don't care for it. And you know, because you are bending around in the sun. You were-- I don't know what it was anymore, what we were doing.

You were working out in the field.

Yeah, right. So you could pick up here a strawberry or something to eat, perhaps. But it was so-- and then I worked in a factory there, which was making-- I think constructing beds for those barracks. You know, from wood. I mean with a ma-- and that I kind of liked better, I remember.

What month in 1943 did you go to Theresienstadt?

I don't know whether it was May or June, but it was somewhere there that it was. And then came-- I think it was October in '43, which was the fateful transport to Auschwitz, which we both were, Alena and I. And my father somehow managed to get-- he thought both of us, but only Alena got the piece of paper that she is out, that she doesn't need to go.

Because that she has-- so it was that she got scarlet fever. And there were-- and then I got the exclusion. I still have this piece of paper, because that was the transport which went-- the whole 5,000 went to gas. I mean, there is not one survivor.

So that was-- I should actually give it to the Holocaust Museum. If I give it to you--

We could work something out.

Yeah. Yeah, because that I don't know whether they have things like that that.

Now, why were you excluded?

I can't-- I don't know. I think that-- well, I am sure that my father tried, whatever. And I was. Whether it was-- who know?

When these transports would leave--

Yeah.

--would you know where--

No, they didn't. My father maintained that he knew. Because he never told us when we then were going, that it goes to Auschwitz, and that Auschwitz gas. So it is. They thought that they know where they are going, but the gas question wasn't there.

OK.

And--

When the Red Cross came to visit and the camp was spruced up, were you a part of that.

I think we still were there, but it was a big failure.

Right, this big hoax, right.

No, the failure was of the Red Cross. They got intimidated by the German. We were not there anymore. But I was told because my parents were there behind, that the Swedes came later, and they didn't take any nonsense from the Germans. When they said you have to stay outside and you can't talk to the prisoner or whatever, they said, nothing doing. We don't talk to warring parties. We don't talk to you. We go in and we talk to them.

And they distributed cigarettes or whatever it was. But it was a great morale booster. Whereas the Red Cross shut up and went home. I mean, [INAUDIBLE]

So you worked first in the fields, then in the factory.

Yeah.

Any other jobs?

I don't think that I had any other job.

What were the sanitary conditions like for you?

You know, that I don't remember. But I don't remember at all how did we stay clean or what. Not at all. I have also no-- I know that we had a certain social life, which was a unique sense. And I don't think many people kind of understand it. But there was a decision by the Terezin-- Terezin population. Now, they were there only the Czech Jews, some German Jews, Dutch, the one-- and the Danish who did not-- were able to escape to Sweden.

So then it was the crop of the crop, so to say, of intellectuals. There were not really workers in between those Jews. Everybody was Herr Doktor. And so they decided that you combat hunger by culture. So they had readings, and they had-- they smuggled in one piano to have an opera. And they were putting together-- that was I think Verdi's Requiem.

Well, anyhow, they performed the day when that-- they didn't know. That was the horror of it. When the 5,000 people went to gas in Auschwitz. But they had a [? Requiem. ?] And they really were kind of-- they had fiddlers going where the really old people, you know, who were starving.

Because you were getting food also according to your job. If you were younger. you get more, because you worked on a more strenuous job. Whereas the old people who couldn't work, got the--

And so that they were going, fiddlers around playing Viennese schmaltz music. But it was something which I don't think anybody can imagine that-- well, it's like in any ghetto, if the people say, no, you will not kill us. We will really survive by culture. We have it, and that will save us. And it did. And--

What did you take part in?

No, I went to all these.

You went to all these concerts and readings?

Yeah, yeah. But there was a social life kind of. Not that you had food and not that you had--

What did it consist of, your social life?

Well, you saw people, or you-- I can't tell you that, but it's-- there was a certain kind of-- which the other camp, of

course, didn't have.

What about contact with other young men your age?

Yes, we saw them and there was--

Any romances? Any--

Yes, there were romances. And of course, most of them didn't come back. And then we-- both of them--

Were you able to spend time with other young men out of crowds? Any privacy?

Well, that's what I cannot remember, really, too much. Because I know that you had to be-- you couldn't be in the evening out. And you worked eight or whatever hours. So I can't-- somehow I know that we were together, but how--

Were there any days that you didn't have to work?

I think Sundays.

Sunday was the day off?

Perhaps, but I'm not sure. I really am not sure. And because also I entered working without knowing what it means, really. I mean, it was not like a person who finishes school and gets a job, I mean, so that you will have some-- but--

How did you feel about the lack of privacy in your living conditions?

I think that you are so scared that you don't think about certain things. It's the human nature can look, how did people survive seven years in a Vietnamese prison? I mean, something happens to the brain or whatever it is.

Did your sister do the same kind of work you did?

Was she working alongside of you?

Yes. Or I alongside her.

And what about your parents? Were they working?

Yes.

What kind of work did they do?

Well, that's what I don't know anymore, what my father and mother were doing.

And their health was OK in Theresien?

Yeah, yeah. Kind of, yeah.

And your health?

Yes, we got both of us encephalitis. Because that was a sudden--

An epidemic?

Epidemic. And of course they had no medicine, but they-- but I think that was one time when the Germans allowed a

little bit more food or something, because these things don't know borders. So that-- because they had infections there. They had the scarlet fever. Then they had the encephalitis. Kind of epidemics.

What was it like for you to be with people from other countries? The other refugees who came to the camp? Did you mix with them?

No, we were kind of the-- first of all, the Danes had a bit-- they were under the protection of the chief rabbi plus the archbishop or whatever of Sweden. So they got parcels. They got much better treatment. And they were accounted for. I mean, you know, the Swedes really-- I think the Swedes did-- I don't know what everything they gave to the German-- they gave them also-- entrance to Norway, but they also, I mean, took care of them.

And the Dutch, they also somehow didn't go to transport from Theresien. There was also some kind of a protection for them. Not all. Sorry. Not all. So perhaps the Dutch didn't have it so well.

But with the Germans and Austrian, I don't know.

But you spoke fluent German at that point?

No, I spoke German.

You spoke German.

We didn't like it, because it was the language of Hitler. You know, I mean, it's not-- something we're kind of resisted. And I remember I once cried to my grandmother, why do we have to learn German? And she said, look at the map. You know, and of course, if we learned Russian, it would have been better, but--

Were there any particularly physically difficult experiences for you there? I know you were working hard and the food was scarce, but did you have any situations where it was a particularly difficult?

Because of the time after we left to go to Auschwitz and then to Germany was so bad that I probably automatically blocked anything bad about the Theresienstadt, because that was the good times. The good times were not Prague, because I couldn't remember. You know, that was--

It's all relative, you mean. Yeah.

Yeah.

So then you stayed there working.

Yeah.

Until when?

We went in '44. It was, I think, November '44.

Oh, so you were there for--

A year and something, yeah.

15, 16 months.

Perhaps it was October.

And all that time you lived with your family.

Yeah, we moved somehow around there.

In the compound?

I think we did, yeah. Yes, yeah, yeah. I think so. You know my sister would-- I don't know I never kind of concentrated on

That and then how did you know-- again how did you know?

Oh, you got your pieces of paper. The Germans were very good about everybody's accounted for, and everybody gets those.

And you're still wearing your clothes from home?

We didn't have uniforms. That I know. So then probably.

So you got your notice that you would be leaving.

Yeah. And that was bad. We had a very good friend who we'd met there in Theresienstadt. Her name was Eva, Iva. And Neumann, like ours.

From Czechoslovakia?

She was, yeah, Czech. She was not from Prague. She came from some city. She was only half-Jewish. And absolutely this non-Jewish, this Czech kind with this-- and she was much more kind of a person the same age as we were, and much tougher, because she came from tougher background, which probably both of us liked very much. I mean, not to us, but she took life much better than--

And she was in the same transport. So that we were the three of us, kind of. And the transport always went late at night. It was probably not so late, but it was dark. And as far as I can remember, they were not normal wagons. But they were kind of-- I don't know whether we sat on ours. We had what we were taking with us. And it took a long time to get there.

We got to Auschwitz. And it was dark, and there was a German with the dogs, and they were immediately dividing you, this way, which still didn't know what that meant. When somebody asked what happened to the other-- because they marched, I think, somewhere. What happened to the others? That was already a Jewish kapo or whatever who said, "you see the smoke from there? That's from your people."

And they marched us to that place, where they look at you and strip and shave you, [INAUDIBLE]. And I think that went through the whole night. I don't know. And they put us then in the barracks. And it was terribly cold to stand that Zahlappell, but they had the dogs there. And they started to take down only then your-- by that time, you had no documents, no nothing. Until that time in Theresien, you always had a piece of document. You existed as such.

And because they took everything away and put us in the prison or in uniforms or whatever, so that we had nothing of ours. And there came a kapo to take down our particulars. You know, name, born, where. And when it came to either Alena or me, we were together, those three. We started to give-- the name was really the same. But we started to give the same date of birth. And this kapo must have had two seconds humanity in, and she said-- barked, give a year different. So we did.

Because we would have ended in that-- which-- and I still don't know how long we stayed in Auschwitz. Because they were by that time sending people who were able to the slave labor camps. It was--

And I think it was two, three weeks. I only remember the cold. It was full of mud, standing in that without-- somehow



they didn't have proper uniforms. So we had like summer dresses. It was cold, and we were standing in the morning, and we were standing in the evening.

And then we went through more of those kind of exclusive kind of-- they were trying-- well, the exclusions, whom they sent to gas and things here. And then one day, there was a big, fat German sitting with dresses and shoes, because we had no shoes. We had only kind of this wooden shoe.

A clog.

Yeah.