

This is tape three, side A.

And when I came home, I know that for months, a friend of mine-- the first thing he said to me is, you will feel paranoid. I said, not I. He said, you just wait. And he was absolutely right.

For months, I felt, when I heard a car, that-- because they told you, we are letting you out. But we keep our tabs, because they wanted that you sign with them that you will be their spy. And that's a very-- and some people did it.

I mean, I know somebody who did it, actually, because he told us that he signed it, that-- you know. And that was a kind of common knowledge-- that if you do not believe them, don't-- but I was scared stiff for months when I heard a car stop that that's them coming for me, because I didn't sign that. And--

Were you able to go back to school?

No, I was already out of the--

You had already finished.

No, out of-- because they threw me out of the university that I was a bourgeois originator.

Right. So you could not re-enter.

Oh, know. That, you can't. No, no. That, they take seriously.

So what did you do then?

Oh, father found me a job with another architect. I hated that, because it was drawing. And at that time, today, everything would be done on a computer. But at that time, you had to draw. It was so boring. And we went to Israel then, because that was the last country they would allow.

Now, what year are we talking about?

'49.

So you stayed in Prague until '49. And then where--

Well, the communists came in '48. And so we went in '49.

The whole family, the four of you?

Yes, because that time, the Czech-- I mean, the communists, whether the Russian, all of them believed that Israel will go into their camp. So they allowed. That was a-- because we had, at that time, visas to Canada. And they wouldn't allow us to leave for Canada, which I am very thankful today, since I saw Canada. But--

What was it like for you to leave Czechoslovakia?

Well, everybody was kind of-- my generation, leaving illegally-- in jail. It was a big upheaval. It was. And I had no idea about what-- the Czechs really were very good to Israel, so it was not that. But we knew nothing, really. And--

Did you have any affinity for Israel before you went over, any--

No.

--emotional connection?

No, not really. I mean, for any brave country which is fighting for its life, I don't think that I really-- you know.

You didn't feel any Jewish connection to Israel.

No. I don't know. I mean, that's too much to say, didn't, but kind of. If it were not for the communistic thing overall, I would feel that's very nice for them. If they need Israel, that's fine with me, but not for me. If only everything changed.

What did you--

That was a typical Herzl product.

So where did you settle in Israel, and for how long?

Well, we didn't. We came. We went again ahead. My parents went one transport back. And first of all, we staged nearly a strike, because we were able to buy tickets up to Bari.

And then we had to go on a Israeli ship. Though we went first class to Bari. And then we get on a terrible ship.

So first thing is I'm looking out of the window. And there are the Israeli sailors. So I say-- they have the Star of David, or whatever. So I say, what language? They said, German.

So I said, OK, [GERMAN] is Israel? What kind of a country is Israel? It was a sailor. The first Israeli I meet says in Yiddish, [YIDDISH]. The country is nice, but the people-- so that was my introduction, which is marvelous when you think about it.

And then they put us on a ship, which probably was not supposed to run for the last 40 years. And they were trying to put us down. And the Hungarians will go up on the deck.

And we started also Czech saying, well, why? We have here some pregnant women. I mean, it was not a nice thing to do. So it is, so the captain said. So we said, so we don't go.

So then they came and said, OK, the pregnant women can. I don't know. Probably the captain was a Hungarian. And we went to one of those transit camps near Haifa, where there were 10,000 people and two latrines.

And I don't know why-- first of all, they put us in a tent with 10 people. That was much [INAUDIBLE]. How much? We knew we were only Czechs there.

Comes the evening, so we start to put one bed over the other to reach the top to close the opening. And comes an Israeli and says, what are you doing? We said, we are closing the opening. He said, you will choke. Its June.

I said, what about if it rains? And he says, it won't rain. And he's a typical Israeli. He knows it will not rain. I mean, we knew nothing, so we choked. Next day, we took the chances, and we found out it will not rain.

And then that was Alena who found out-- she said, there must be a doctor. And where is a doctor will be a decent lavatory. So we marched every day. And years afterwards, I would meet somebody who said, I remember you from the bed only because you were the one who, while we were marching behind you, the girls know where to go. They look like they are clean.

And then of course, from there, we would try to look for jobs. That was a time when Israel-- 600,000 people took in one million refugees. And we both got a job in the airport, in the hotel. So she wouldn't forget me.

So you looked for a job, you said. But there was--

We found then-- Alena was the first one who found a job. They gave her a pushcart, which went to every plane coming and going, with Jews and whatever. And so she said to the owner that, but I have a sister. So they gave me a job.

I was probably the unskilled worker in a bookkeeping office. They didn't have a machine. I had to add the sums the whole day. But it was a job.

And how long did you stay there in Israel?

I stayed there probably for two years, whatever it was. And then I got myself a ticket to London. A friend of ours, who was head of Swiss Air-- he was a Czech, originally-- gave me a free ticket. And I went to London that I would do something.

I went to school there a little bit, and wanted to-- was trying to get a scholarship to one of the universities. So since that time, I became a western person who I said, Little Doggie [BELL NOISE]. Yes. Yes. Yes.

And so you went-- how long were you in London?

I was over a year. Three years, I think. And then I went back to Israel. And then I got a job with somebody that I came the first time to this country. Then I married the first husband. Then I married the second husband. And then I'm here.

So you've been living in the United States on and off.

On and off since 1956, because with my first husband, we lived also in London. He was an American. He was a film producer at one time. I lived everywhere in the Western world.

Can we talk before we end just a little bit about some of your thoughts after what you had gone through because you were Jewish? Has that influenced your feelings about--

About what?

--being Jewish in any way? Has it changed? Did it make you more aware? Did it--

Oh, I'm-- yes. I am very aware that I am Jewish. And I think Israel did it much more. I think I am the typical product of [INAUDIBLE]. They will come when they need. But it's a great country. And I think that Israel did much more for me than--

Even though you went through what you went through because you were Jewish.

Yeah, but that's negative. The Israeli experience is positive.

Are there any sights or smells today that remind you of some of your experiences during the war?

Yeah, there are smells. Oh, I can't tell you which and when. But there are.

Do you get reparations?

Yes, I get-- because the Czechs can get only for health. But Czechs don't get like the Germans. The Germans get-- the former Germans get big reparations. So we don't get. But we get something. I get every month something.

How do you feel about getting reparations?

I feel they owe me much more than they are paying. I don't have any kind of this hang-ups, because it's not what was negotiated. It was not blood money. It's not for life.

It's not that they will pay you-- you lost so many, and so many, we will pay you so much, and so on, because the Germans got it so-called for loss of their earning capacity, or whatever. And we get-- it's like what you have here from insurances. So I don't feel that--

Did it make a difference, going through what you did go through, having your sister there?

I'm sure. I'm sure.

Was that a source of strength for you?

I'm sure.

In what way?

I can't tell you. But I'm sure, because one of the worst things is that you are a lonely person. I'm sorry. I think he wants to go out. Come, [DOG'S NAME].

Besides being with your sister, what do you think kept you going in this terrible, terrible time?

I really don't know. But I think it's a natural human instinct that you want to survive. I think it's one of the strongest instinct.

Do you and your sister talk about your experiences?

No, not really.

And did she follow your-- in coming with you to the United States?

She was here before. Her husband had to come here for something. So she went-- no, she lives in Switzerland now.

So she never settled in the United States.

No. No. No. I'm sorry. That's the back.

Have you talked about your experiences much to others?

Not really. No. Here and there, but not really. No.

Is there anything you wanted to add that we haven't talked about?

I don't think so. No. No. No. But you transcribe it, or will they transcribe it?

Well, we can talk about that later. OK, well, I want to thank you very much for doing the interview. We appreciate very much what you did.

Thanks. Yeah. No.

This concludes the interview of Irena Kirkland. It took place on June 26, 1996 in Washington, DC. And it was conducted by Gail Schwartz on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.