

This is day two, side A, with Frances Hirshfeld. I wanted to ask you how long you were in Birkenau.

Oh, I wouldn't remember the exact time, but I was there from August '43 till sometime early '44 when I was transferred to Auschwitz, because my job was the reason that they transferred me because we were working at the munition factory from then until the end.

In Lager 1?

You call it Lager 1, I only knew it as Auschwitz. Yes.

I had asked you a moment ago about what you had heard about the Warsaw Ghetto. I wanted to know, even if what you were hearing was perhaps not the whole truth, what other bits of information filtered into the camp?

Well, the people were being killed for trying to escape even through the sewers when they were caught trying to survive the final bombing, because the bombing finally ended. The ghetto was absolutely riddled with ground leveled. The Nazis came in and they were shooting people alive. They were shooting people without any mercy. They were killing them.

And a few of them-- I remember one particular person that was not a Jewish lady that was caught in the fight for survival. And she was the one that came in and told us about the atrocities, what was taking place in the ghetto. The Germans simply came in and horrified the people with the rifles. When they were trying to even shield their head from them, they would still knock them down with the rifle before they even used a bullet.

There was a story about a little boy who was trying to go out and bring some bread in for his mother. And he was cut down because he was caught while he was crawling through some closed space. There were so many stories that I can't quite remember, but it was awful.

So you knew about the Warsaw Ghetto, at least you got pieces of information. Did you know about the other death camps, or the Einsatzgruppen, or anything like that? Did you have any idea that anything else was going-- anything like this was going on?

We heard about it. We heard about it. But only when they transferred, once in a while you could hear that people came being sent from some other camp to Auschwitz, or from Auschwitz to other camp. Our news was very limited, because we were only kept there for just that long.

Were you in any other camps besides Auschwitz and Birkenau?

Yes. After January 18, 1945 when we were told that we were going out of Auschwitz, we were marching to the train station. And that's the famous death march that took place that time. We didn't know where we were going. We only knew that we were going to another camp because the Allied armies were closing in on Germany. That was in the beginning of 1945. And don't forget, the war was not over until May-- May 8.

We were loaded-- those of us who survived the death march, those of us who could survive on a little bit snow, if they caught you to take a little snow from the ground and put in your mouth, they would shoot you. And some people fell by the wayside, they could not survive. It was bitter cold. It was freezing cold. We were hungry. We were starved. We were naked.

We came to a train and loaded into an open cattle car-- an open-- and rode through the night. I don't remember exactly how long. They took us to Ravensbruck, which was a sheer hell on wheels. I'll never forget it where they put us into an area where there was-- it was surrounded with barbed wire, but the area was like a pit. It had walls that were slanted. That in case you were trying to escape, you had to climb that slanted cement wall. But it was covered with human excrement and nobody could get around it to climb up to the barbed wire to be killed.

So fortunately, we weren't there too long because they shipped us off after a few days. They shipped us to another camp called Malhoff. Malhoff was a place where we sat around and do nothing. It was not a work camp. It was just a stopover that they kept us there for maybe two or three months. And the final transport came when they took us to Leipzig. And Leipzig-- the bombing was so severe. This is already-- I'm talking about April, three months later. In Leipzig, we were being transported back to Dresden.

And we were transported during the night. While during the daytime, they hid us in farmer's places because-- different farms because we only march during the night in order for the bombs not to see us. Maybe if they would have bombed those camps, it would have been better because maybe the war would have ended sooner. But anyway, we were taken back to Dresden, and Dresden was heavily bombed. So during one of those nights, I attempted my escape.

Before we get to your escape, I have a few questions about the camps that you mentioned. You were only in Ravensbruck, you said, for a couple of days, but can you tell me what your living conditions were like there?

There was no living. I just described, we were in that pit, that's all. That's all. They kept-- for orders, they waited for orders were to send us.

What about food?

Very, very little, just bread. Just bread, no cooked food.

And in Malhoff, you said you were there--

Malhoff was the same. It was a vegetation. It was strictly a vegetation in Malhoff. Nobody worked in Malhoff. We only waited there for further transfer.

What were your living conditions? Where did you sleep?

I think it was a brick building. And my memory from those days is very vague because we didn't do anything. We just kept waiting for the piece of bread to be handed out and waited for the war to end, because we assumed that with so much bombing going on, maybe it is the end.

OK, and you had gotten as far as the bombing in Dresden and your attempt to flee.

Yes, I was between Leipzig and Dresden. In the middle of the night, we were marching under guard-- naturally-- five of us in rows. And we-- another girl whom I had never met, she was with me in the lineup. She looked at me and we decided that maybe we should attempt to escape. And we agreed on our plan, but the first night, we didn't do it.

The second night was April 14, the night for the 15th, yes. Saturday night, we decided to step out of the marching, because we only knew that we were coming from that direction. We better not go back in that direction. We stepped aside, and we stepped into the forest and huddled between one another and decided that if we survive, we're not going to admit our real names because we were so afraid if they find out.

It's bizarre when I think about it, because my clothes that I wore would spell me out. But we decided we were going to tell them that my name is Maria, her name is Johanna, and that's as far as we could think. And when we spend the night in the cold forest freezing, we decided in the morning that we'll go in the opposite direction away from the highway.

And here and there, you could see people hiding under bushes, under shrubs, who also attempted the same-- had the same idea as we did. But we walked and walked into this deep forest that Sunday morning and saw a little clearing, then saw a little forest again. We didn't know, really, where we were walking.

But when we finally noticed a church steeple, that was our guide we decided we'll walk towards. All of a sudden, we saw a truck-- an army truck. And we thought, well, we're walking into a trap. But when walking around it, we were stupid enough-- we were afraid that had we gone inside the truck, maybe we would have found some food, but we

didn't. We walked away from it because we thought we will be caught.

And when we finally walked into that village outside the church steeple that guided us, we saw some women who were coming through the field-- several women-- who were helping one another pick the potatoes in the field. And it was so cold, and we were so hungry. They looked at us suspiciously.

And we told them that we were in a working camp and it was bombed the night before, and we are so hungry, would we please ask them to give us some potatoes. And when they gave us the potatoes, they were so suspicious of us. They said if we would wait for them when they get through, they would take us to their home and give us a piece of bread.

So we sat down by the wayside and looked at those. They gave us the potatoes that were dirt from the ground. You couldn't eat that, you had to be able to peel them. So we waited and an old man came from the village. And he said in German, you girls will freeze if you don't go inside. And we told him what we were waiting for. So he says, well, that's my wife. When she comes, she'll give you some hot coffee too.

So when we were taking into that little place, we didn't believe ourselves that we are in a house where it's warm, where we're given bread with syrup and hot coffee with a little milk the first day away from camp. And some woman came in and brought some coffee cake. That's how they treat each other in the villages.

So by noontime, I asked them if they could permit us to cook those potatoes. So I remember, they gave us a pot. I swear to you, it must have been four liters. I filled it up with the potatoes, and I asked my friend if she thinks it's enough. And she says, yeah, I think so. She acknowledged that it was enough. But when we cooked those potatoes on the peasant stove, they ask us to eat with them at the table. And they put a dishpan full of potatoes and pork chops with sweet and sour cabbage.

I'll never forget that meal. That we didn't die that day, that was a miracle. And after the meal, we didn't want to go anywhere. The old man offered us to go upstairs in the attic and take a nap because we must be tired, we stayed up all night. And we went upstairs on straw. He covered us with some old blankets and coats. We went to sleep, and then we were awakened at 4:30 for coffee and cake. I'll never forget that.

I have two quick questions for you. My first question is, what happened to the friend that you had in the camp?

She remained in Belgium. I have no connections with her. I have no idea.

But she survived?

She and I survived both, yeah. She talked me in to go to Belgium.

The woman that helped you in the camp, the one-- when you had the scabies.

Oh, she survived. Yes, she's still in Germany.

And my second question was, the two of you had planned with your escape that you would use German names. Was your German good enough that you could pretend to be German?

Mine was not as good as hers, because she was born in Leipzig. She came from that area. And she took upon herself that she's going to be the spokesperson, which I was delighted, because I was helping in the kitchen, I was helping with the cooking and with the laundry. Mind you, my German wasn't bad, but you could tell that I was a foreigner.

OK, you had just finished telling me that you were awakened at 4:30 in the morning for coffee.

4:30 in the afternoon.

Excuse me, 4:30 in the afternoon.

Yeah, for coffee and cheesecake. That's unbelievable, yeah. But when we went downstairs, and then there was some commotion going on. All of a sudden, they had soldiers coming back and forth going from one assignment to another. And everybody was ordered to take in a soldier for the night. And we were scared to death, we didn't know what was ahead of us.

But he didn't pay attention to us. We had scrambled eggs for supper with fresh bread and butter. And he opened the bag with candy. He didn't pay any attention, even though he was placed in the old folks bedroom upstairs next door to our attic place. And next morning when we woke up, he was gone. He followed his instructions. But that's just a detail of-- go ahead.

I wonder, were you still wearing those prison clothes?

Yes. But during the stay in that village, we went into the burgermeister-- to the mayor's home-- and stole some clothes. We could have stolen anything else. All I stole is a change of clothes that I wouldn't-- I would be able to throw away. That's when I got rid of the prison clothes, when I got another change of clothes. I stole a towel, stole a blanket. That blanket and that towel, I think, I donated here to the museum.

But it's hard to describe the agony of living in those conditions when you had no other change of clothes. And when finally the war was over and they began-- well, three weeks after our escape, the war ended. But by the time, they made-- the Allies were exchanging people from one area to another, like people who wanted to go back to the Russian side, or to the French side, or to the American side.

That's when we decided that we're not going to stay, because while the Russians occupied that village, the mothers and grandmothers woke me up during the night to come to help them because the Russian soldiers were raping their daughters. But I could not do it, because I would put myself in jeopardy.

So my idea was to get away from it. And she was then successfully talking me in not to go back to Poland, but to go to Belgium with her. She says, well, if you can't speak French, she says, you don't have to live in Brussels. You can go to Antwerp, there's a lot of Jewish people. She didn't realize that a lot of the Jewish people were already sent away from Belgium and the Netherlands.

So she found that after she came back that her parents, who, she and her parents and her brother, they had left Germany trying to get away from Hitler, settled in Belgium. And by the time she came back from Auschwitz, they were already annihilated. She did not find them alive.

I wanted to ask you about your liberation and your first moments of freedom and what they were like for you.

Well, actually, when I find myself in the village the next morning after escaping, to me, that was the liberation. We still didn't know how long it's going to last. But for the three weeks, we were living in fear. But when it first came, it was-- we couldn't believe it. We were so thrilled that we were finally free. That's when we went to the burgermeister's house and stole some clothes.

Where did you go next?

Pardon?

Where did you go next?

To Belgium, to Brussels. And I was under the Jewish Welfare organization's care until some Jewish families who survived offered to take in people like myself, people who were homeless. And I was taken in by a very nice family who gave me their maid's quarters where I slept. And I ate with them downstairs-- very prominent people in Brussels. And I started to find my family in the United States.

I knew that my mother had two brothers in America and one sister. And when I started, that was a very difficult journey because I didn't have the exact address. I knew the name and the town. But somehow, people weren't very eager. Don't forget, those days, there were no telephones like there were now. There were no facilities whatsoever.

So it wasn't easy. But when I finally, in my search for people who would listen to me, found a man who was representing the Viennese Jews, he decided that he'll listen to my flight and he would write to his people in New York and gave them the name of my family.

And they found my uncle. It was enough to say Harry Weinman in Jacksonville, Florida, and they found him. He was out of town, so he was already located in New York at the hotel. And that's when my uncle found me. He started to support me. And I moved from these people into an independent apartment.

And he began to make the plans how to bring me to America, which at the time sounded a long time, but it was only 15 months from the time that I found my uncle that I came to Brussels. I came to Brussels in June 13 of 1945. And in October, I sailed for America of the following year-- '46, October '46.

And how did you spend your days, and what did you do during your time in Brussels? How did you rebuild your life?

I just tried to learn a little French, had to go to various doctors and dentists and meetings. Now the first thing I did was-- it turned out to be a smart thing. I used to get together with all the other refugees and, what do you do, and what do you do? And some of us decided to go to Israel. And some of us, like myself, wanted to go to America. And they said-- somebody said, if you want to go to America, you have to register in the American Embassy.

So not having even contact with the family yet, I went and registered in Antwerp. I just put my name that I would like to go to America because I have relatives. So when my uncle reached me the following October-- no-- whenever, three months later. It was June, July, August, September. When I moved-- when my uncle started supporting me, he started writing me that he was told that I should register at the American Embassy.

So I was able to tell him, I already did. And that was in my favor, because people waited a much longer time. Because you see, when you are born somewhere else, you are on a quota. To come to America, you are under the country where you were born. You belong to-- I was under the Polish quota. German people were under the German quota. And I was very fortunate. Excuse me. Anything else we left out?

I wanted to ask you, you didn't go back home to Poland at all?

Not at that time.

Did you start meeting new people making a life for yourself? I wanted to know a little bit about how you started to rebuild your personal life.

My personal life was-- I was young, don't forget. I was still only, what, 24, 25. I was enjoying freedom. I was going out to eat, and I saw the young people. We enjoyed being alive. And I made contact with someone that I knew from the ghetto, who became my husband later. That's right.

But I didn't work. I was very-- I wish I wouldn't be so lucky. If I'd had worked, maybe it would have made a different person out of me. But the uncle kept sending me money and kept working towards bringing me here. He had a personal friend who was Senator Pepper. You don't know that. That was before your time. You're too young to know him from Florida-- senator. He was very, very helpful in guiding my uncle about bringing me to America.

And when I came to America, I had to speak-- I had to learn the language. That was my main objective. And now, also, I had gotten married just before I left Europe. And I had a project to bring my husband to this country. And that was not an easy task because he was not registered as I was. You see?

How did you meet your husband? Can you tell me?

In the ghetto, in the ghetto. We were neighbors. We were neighbors. Yes, and then I never knew he was going to be my husband. But it turned out that we both survived, and he came over. When I finally located him in Paris, he came over to Brussels. And that's when I learned that I was going-- that he wanted to marry me.

Can you tell me a little bit about-- your husband is not alive anymore now.

15 and a 1/2 years. He died in '81-- 1981-- in North Carolina.

You mentioned that he was also a survivor.

Yes.

Can you tell me briefly how he came to be in Paris and how you came to find him?

My husband was educated in University of France when he was in college. He had a degree from universities in Mulhouse, in Strasburg. He has his doctor's degree from Strasburg. But when the war ended, he was in Buchenwald, and he was very sick with high fever. He was really thin. He thought that he was dying. He was in the latrine throwing up, running a high temperature. And somebody ran through and saw him lying down, and somebody almost kicked him. He says, don't move, the war is almost over.

And he stayed there until it was over, until the Americans liberated Buchenwald. And because he was mumbling in French-- he spoke eight languages. He mumbled in French because that was his beloved language from his student days. They thought he was French, and they sent him to Paris.

And there, he, too, found out that his family was gone. He lost a wife, he lost a mother, he lost his daughter. He lost everybody-- a sister. He lost everybody. So he remained in Paris because some friends of his family gave him a job so he could sustain there. And that was '45. The war was over. In '46, he came over to Brussels.

I'm going to stop you now because I have to flip the tape.

OK.

This is tape two, side B. We're interviewing Frances Hirshfeld, and you were telling me about getting married after the war and trying to make your way to the United States. And you said, you had registered and your husband had not registered at that same time that you had. So what difficulties ensued because of that?

He was registered in 1946, which was already six months after my arrival to America. And I was, like I mentioned before, I was very fortunate that I registered by coincidence right after arrival in Belgium. But because I was registered early because my uncle pursued all the necessary steps to bring me, I was able to come while my husband was waiting for his turn. Since he registered so much later, he had to wait. And he was registering in Paris, France, where there were maybe more survivors. I'm not sure.

So we had to decide, if we're going to get married, that I better go to America. And I thought if I say thank you to Senator Pepper and Congressman Blum, they'll bring my husband too, but didn't work that way. He had to wait his turn, and it was three years.

Did you see him at all during those three years?

Yes. I went back after living in Florida for a year. My uncle saw how unhappy I was-- and I was. He offered me a trip. If I go to see my husband, but I promised my uncle that I would come back. So I went to Paris. I couldn't get a French visa because I was still a Polish subject. I was only in America as a newcomer on my first papers.

So I took a French transit visa and I was going to Poland, because I was able to get the permit to arrive in Poland with

my Polish passport-- postwar passport. And when I arrived in France, my husband arranged that I could postpone my departure. So I stayed there as long as I could to be back in America before six months was over, otherwise I couldn't re-enter. I went on reentry permit.

The reason why I went to Poland is because I wanted to put a tombstone on my aunt's grave. My aunt who raised me died just before the war, and I knew she had no tombstone. So that was my aim.

Having accomplished that, I came back to Paris. And we had made the decision when I came from America that if I get pregnant, I'll go back to American, because for any price, I wanted my child to be born in America. If I don't, I would remain there.

And I did get pregnant with my daughter, and I did come back to America hoping that my husband would be following me. But it didn't work that way, he still had to wait, and she was about a year old. Yeah, it was three years after my arrival. I came in '46 in October '46, and he came in July '49. But I had been with him for six months in between.

And my uncle, again, tried his darnedest to bring him over, but it was a sheer coincidence. He had a tailor, a Jewish tailor, who always asked about me when I lived in Jacksonville. And he says to my uncle, what about your niece? How about your nephew? So my uncle says, that's the only problem we have. He can't come. He's waiting for his turn under the Polish quota. So he said, I have a niece who is married to a reporter for The Saturday Evening Post, and they're stationed in Paris. Maybe your nephew should meet my nephew and niece.

And that's how it came about. My husband met the gentleman and the lady and told him his flight. And sure enough, the man wrote an article for The Saturday Evening Post. He was so touched by our flight because I was here, he was there, and the baby was born, and he couldn't come, he had to wait his turn, that he wrote a quite powerful article under the name "Uncle Sam Breaks Up a Home."

And this did not do anything, except that the man could pick up the phone and call his friend who was the ambassador from America in Paris. And only a telephone call to Washington got my husband's visa, just because who do you know, not what you know. It's who you know.

So it helped. But this man who wrote the article was helpful in bringing my husband to America. And then when he came, the baby was almost a year old. We decided that we're going to start a new life. And he was a professional, he was a textile scientist. And all I said to my aunt and uncle, when he comes, will he make \$50 a week? I was just so anxious to get him over, but we had a very, very happy life. I had my son in North Carolina.

And then we moved around a bit because he was always bribed by the industry. They always gave him more money from one place to another. And we lived in the South all the time. And our final nine years together were also in North Carolina because an old friend brought him from Alabama, where he retired from Monsanto Company. And unfortunately, I lost him. He was only 74, but he died because of asthma.

I want you to tell me a little bit about that trip to Poland. You gave a very heavy sigh when you talked about going back to Poland to put up the stone. What happened to you? What did you find in Poland when you went back?

At the time when I went back in '47, I found the grave. I put up a tombstone. And the reason why I sighed is because the following trip, which was only three years ago, I found nothing. You could not even find the grave. The cemetery is so pathetically neglected. There's no one to take care of it. And that broke my heart because I went with my son. And I wanted in particular to find my aunt's grave, but I couldn't. It was impossible.

When you went back to Poland the first time in the 40s, was there-- were you treated badly, or were you in any way mistreated by the Poles?

No, but I was afraid because I was already speaking English. After a year living in America, I spoke English and I was looked down. I was afraid because the Jews in Poland after the war were not treated very kindly. They would say, for instance, somebody who knew you before the war would say, how come that you survived? How come they didn't kill

you?

You heard, probably, of the Kielce pogrom. And when you knew of that, you sort of felt like the whole Polish country was anti-Semitic. And you sort of-- you're afraid. You're afraid for your life because you survived so much. You survived such hell. Why being killed after the war by Polish people?

I have one or two last questions for you. When you look back on your years in the ghetto and in the camp, is there any person that sticks out in your mind, or any event that sticks out in your mind that you have not mentioned yet?

My sister who came to Auschwitz after I did having lost her baby. I didn't tell you what she told me. That her baby was an infant. What they did with infants, they put them in potato sacks and tied the knot and threw the bag of those babies on the truck straight to Auschwitz, straight to the killing.

And my sister and I were sitting and killing lice in Birkenau, looking through the clothing that they gave her and talking, reminiscing about-- she was heartbroken-- so was I-- that the baby was killed in that manner. And we never could forgive them, because how can anybody believe that people could do such a thing to other people?

How could-- even now, what worries me is that there are still people who are trying to deny it. And that bothers me very much, because after our generation is gone, it's going to be up to you, the children of the survivors. But you did not go through it. You can help educate the world.

But there are, unfortunately, too many people who try to deny it. And that is a worry, because not only did it happen, we are the proof. I think the museum is doing a great job. But when I went back the second time to Poland and saw those cemeteries that are no more cemeteries, that broke my heart too.

I want to thank you for doing the interview with me today. I appreciate all the time that you put into this.

I do appreciate your work. You are incredible. And I do thank you. I hope you interview many more survivors because our days are limited.

This concludes the interview with Francis Hirshfeld.