

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Christine Cohen, conducted by Margaret Garrett on January 5th, 1997, in Bethesda, Maryland, tape 1, side A. Mrs. Cohen, what was your name at birth?

It was Rita Grabina.

And what was the date of your birth?

April 27, 1940.

And where were you born?

I was born in Warsaw, Poland.

Could you talk about the circumstances surrounding your birth?

Well, I was born in the Warsaw ghetto with my family who, before the war, lived all over Warsaw, being brought into the ghetto, into a small confined area, the whole family, my grandparents, my parents, my aunt, my uncle, their spouses, and children, four cousins I had. We all lived in one little apartment, from what I understand. They were all brought from different parts of Warsaw.

And I was born in the Warsaw ghetto in a Jewish hospital and I was in the ghetto until 1942. I was two years old when my mother escaped from the ghetto with me, leaving the family behind.

Now, when you were born, had the ghetto been sealed?

Yes it had.

It had been sealed. And so you lived in the ghetto with your family until you were two years old.

Two years old.

And how was your mother able to escape from the ghetto?

Well, it's kind of a long story. My father had-- all his business assets were signed over-- before they were put in the ghetto, were signed over to one of his partner and very, very close friend, because the Jews were not allowed to own anything. And my father was taken, every day, by the Germans out of the ghetto, along with other men for hard labor. And he was able to make contact with people in the outside world and get some forged papers for us, stating that, of course, we are Christian and not Jewish for myself and my mother.

And it was supposed to be paid for with, basically, his money that the friend had. And my mother didn't want to leave the ghetto, because the whole family was there. And even though they knew they were taking people away, no one really knew the extent of what was happening, unless you were there yourself. No one, I guess, wanted to believe that this was happening. So they felt, as long as they were together, somehow, they will survive.

My grandfather was a jeweler. And they were able to stash some, I imagine, diamonds, whatever precious jewelry, for which they were able to, at least, for diamonds, you could buy a loaf of bread. You could make it to the hospital. That's why I was born in a hospital. So they were able to get by with whatever he had in the way of jewelry to bribe everybody. And they felt that they would survive.

And my father kind of knew what was happening. And he wanted-- my mother was only 22 years old. But he knew, if anybody was capable, she was capable of doing something. So he wanted for her to take me. And basically, to save me, he made her-- the way he made her escape is she didn't want to. And he said that if not, if she doesn't try it, he will give me to the Germans, which a lot of people did.

Very few children were actually saved and sent to Germany or wherever, very, very few. The majority were killed as soon as they were given to the Germans for a sum of money.

Did your mother and father know that?

Yeah, they both knew it. And my father only said it to make my mother do something. Everybody knew it, after a while, in the ghetto. In '42, everybody knew it. At the beginning, people were hoping against hope that someone will save their children. But by then, they already knew. They would, as a matter of fact, people saw it where they would take the baby, that's what I hear from my mother, of course, I couldn't possibly remember that.

They would take a baby. They would take the money. And then grab the baby by the legs and just hit the head against the wall.

In front of the parents.

In front of the parents, so after a while, of course, they didn't try it. So anyway, so my mother, a doctor in the ghetto gave me a tranquilizer, because I was only two years old. And of course, I could not be discovered during the escape. My mother dressed like a peasant woman from a village, put a big scarf around her and put me inside the scarf. So I wouldn't be seen, mainly, because I know it sounds strange, but because not everybody in Poland is blue eyed and blond.

But that's one way they were judging people. My mother was a blue-eyed blonde. And I was dark. And for a child, I did - not necessarily did I look Jewish, but I had dark, curly hair and dark eyes. And that was enough to identify me as being Jewish. So she didn't want me to be seen. And of course, they wanted me to sleep. So they gave me a tranquilizer.

And she dressed in this big, big shawl. And she had a maid before the war who was called on to testify in court. And there was-- right outside of the ghetto walls, there was a courthouse. Now, the Germans didn't know how to read Polish. Plus, the date was actually 1938. Had they paid attention to it, they would have discovered that there was something wrong with the summons.

She took that summons and walked straight to one of the guards at the wall, at the gate, or entrance, I don't know what it was at the wall and took him off guard, because they were used to people running away from them, not walking towards them. Everybody was afraid of them. And she told them, I think in German, my mother spoke German. I know she spoke German later, but I assume.

She told him that, in Polish, and he understood a little. She told him that she is from some village. And she looked the part. And that she got summoned to the court. And she got lost. She came in here. And she doesn't know where she is. How does she get out?

He was so surprised by her walking up to him, talking to him, that he pointed to the gate. And she, with real bravado, she said, I'm afraid I'll get lost again. Would you please walk me out? And he did. He walked her right outside of the wall.

Then, she realized that she forgot. She still had the Star of David on her arm under that big shawl. So she went to the first bathroom and flushed it down, of course. And then, she wasn't out of danger, because if you were without papers, you assumed to be Jewish and shot.

She had to get to this man who basically had all our assets. And he had money. I don't know what it was then. It was a lot of money for then, but say, it was \$10,000 before the war. He was supposed to have it ready for her. So she could pay the forger, meet the forger, and get the papers.

Before she went to his place, and of course, the danger was everywhere, because first of all, I could wake up and cry. Secondly, she had no papers. And people were stopped constantly. She made it to his place. And the men lived, and this

is kind of significant, because he lived in a 12 story building, which was a high rise then. And he lived on top.

And she went there and he opened the door. And she tells him she's here for the money. And of course, he knew very well what it was all set up with my father. And he said, what money? She said the money that is their money to begin with. And he said, I don't know you.

This is a person who was a very close friend before the war, who went with them to dinner, and was invited to every party, and always said, if anything happens, you can always count on me. My father trusted him with all that. He said, I don't know you. She says, how can you say you don't know me after all the dinners you've had at my house? He says, well, what are you going to do about it?

He had a fortune from my father. But he didn't want to spare the money just to save our life, just a little bit of whatever he had. My father was very wealthy. So my mother, the reason I said it's significant that there were 12 stories, my mother went to the window, and stood on the window, and said, if you don't give me the money, I will jump, with me, she said-- they always called me Christine, anyway, because-- even before I got the papers, because they always loved that name.

I will jump with Christine from the window. He gave her the money not because he was worried about her jumping. He didn't care. But had she jumped from his window, he would have been shot too, because that would have been harboring a Jew. They would never believe him that she just came in-- they would kill him too. So he had to give her the money.

And when I was older, my mother told me the story. I asked her, I said, had he said no, would you really have jumped? And she said, yes. She said, because I wouldn't have gone back to the ghetto. And I was as good as dead. And she really meant it. My mother was an incredible woman.

Now, all of this happening, she's 22 or 23 years old. And someone who never had to lift a finger to do anything, from a loving family, everybody always took care of her, and all of a sudden, she fights for her life and mine every day.

Then, she met with the forger. Again, until she had the papers, there was always the danger. She met with the forger, paid him. Got the papers. And then, of course, I don't know the details, how we got wherever we got. But we went to some small village. Do you remember the name of the village?

Yes, I-- starts with a G. I'll think of it in a minute, Goroshkov, I think. And I mean, I don't remember, remember. I just remember from when my mother said. And she picked a place, there were farmers there. It was right by the forest. Because she felt if she ever needed to hide, that was a good place. The partisans were there. Although they were not helpful to Jews at all. But they were hiding there. It was a good place to hide.

There was a woman and I don't exactly know whether there were three children, however many children, and I assume there were around 10, 8, 12, give or take a couple of years, and this couple of farmers. My mother had to pay them to live there.

Oh, her story was that because people, Polish people didn't just leave Warsaw. Her cover story was that her husband was in the Polish army and was taken prisoner of war. And that's why she left Warsaw. The reason she left Warsaw, the main reason, is because between my grandfather and my father, they were very well known. And she could have been recognized by someone non-Jewish and they were only too happy to report you, most people. I'm not saying everybody. So that's why she took off.

So her cover was that her husband is a prisoner of war. And she didn't want to stay there. Everybody believed her. And she had to work to support us. She never worked a day in her life.

She would sell cigarettes and liquor on trains, which was illegal. You could get shot for that. But she made money. She would work in the fields, all kinds of odd jobs. The problem was she would have to leave in the morning and come back in the evening. And she paid these people to take care of me. And the man, I don't remember that part of it, because I guess I blocked it out. I don't want to remember. But somewhere in my subconscious, I know I was abused by all of

them.

Abused how?

Physically, children, and the woman, not the husband.

By hitting or sexual abuse?

Oh, no, no, no hitting, hitting, hitting. They would-- the thing is I have pictures of German soldiers on a horse with me. I was very talkative. Well, I was more intelligent than the children in the village. And all the soldiers just loved me. They used to come bring me presents. And the kids were jealous, so they used to hit me.

The mother was jealous. So she used to hit me. When the father was home, no one hit me, because he was a good man. But the mother and the kids used to, I mean, really abused me.

You don't remember that did you say?

Vaguely, vaguely.

What is your memory?

My memory is that I was afraid of them. And I was the youngest to begin with. I don't know how those kids were. To me, they were giants. But they probably were 8 and 10 years old. But I was the youngest. And like I said, the kids hit me. And the woman didn't care. Or she probably hit me too. I don't remember.

And how old were you?

Well, I was two when we got there. And we stayed until I was four.

So between two and four, these vague memories of being afraid of them?

Yes, unless the father was home.

So it would be the mother and the older children?

Actually, all the children. All the children.

That would be boys and girls?

Yeah, I think, I don't know if there was one boy, two girls, whatever. But I don't remember. That it's funny that I remember the second family, because they were wonderful to me, but not this one. But I do remember the father, because he was a good man.

Anyway, the other thing, the other big thing was my mother, they thought-- they didn't know for sure that I was Jewish, because had they known, my mother wouldn't have found me when she came home. But they were fishing. They were on a fishing expedition. They even went as far as churches, checking stuff. And we had baptism certificates. It was all forged, but we had it. So they didn't do anything.

But they used to tell my mother-- even the people in the village, even the woman we lived with, used to ask her how much money did you take to hide the Jewish bastard? Because they were convinced she was Polish. But I was Jewish. And of course, my mother had to act very brave and all that. And then they would say, well, you go on to work. When you get back, she won't be here. We're going to take her to the Gestapo.

My mother had no choice. She had to. So this affected my whole life, because my mother, she never knew, when she

came home, whether I would be there, whether they were just bluffing, or they would really take me, they would dig up something. So it was a horrible way to live, because my mother escaped only for me. Otherwise, she would have stayed with the family.

And this affected me till the day she died. She worried-- mothers worry about children. But it was to the point, when I was younger, that it drove me crazy. She couldn't go to sleep unless I was in bed at night.

Because she was so worried?

So worried. I was 22 years old when I got married. Before I got married, I had a curfew, not because she didn't trust me, but because she could not sleep, unless I was safely in bed.

How old were you when she told you what had happened?

Over the years, many times.

Was it something that you remember knowing from--

Probably from the time I was 7, 8, 9, actually, somewhere around that age, because I didn't know I was Jewish, which I'll get into.

Before you were seven, you think, she had not told you.

No, no, no, no, no.

One day, she just sat you down and told you?

No, a lot of it came out gradually. But she had to tell me I was Jewish. And I was already nine years old. It was a few years after the war, which is another story again.

So anyway, should I get back to the village? So we were there. And there was a German soldier there. An older man, at that time, he was, probably, he had a granddaughter my age. And there was-- my mother was a very beautiful woman. But there was nothing going on there. He loved me. He used to bring me whatever he could. He missed his granddaughter. He was just a simple soldier, not SS or anything, they send him there to fight.

And he always seemed to warn my mother, because what the Germans did is, if they had a suspicion about something, mostly, they were looking for partisans, they would come in the middle of the night, take the rifle and hit the door of the house, and ask for vodka. They would bring the vodka. As a matter of fact, there's an interesting story about that with my mother. And have them drink with them, and search the house.

One night, they came over there and did that in the middle of the night. And my mother never, maybe, she had a glass of champagne or wine before the war, but not straight vodka. They poured these big glasses of vodka. And they tell her to drink. And she can't, she's choking.

So the woman that we're staying with said, she didn't mean anything bad, because had she known, we would be dead. Says, you know what, you drink like a Jew. Supposedly, Jews couldn't drink. That's all she had to say. My mother swallowed the vodka. And the man, she told me, the husband, was so nice that he kept pouring water in it for her. So it would look like she was drinking all that vodka.

But that's what the Germans did. If you didn't drink with them, you were shot. Then they searched the house, then they searched someone escape, whatever was going on. Then this older German soldier kept warning my mother. He knew when they were coming to search for somebody. And he would say, why don't you take Christine and go visit somebody at some neighborhood village.

And she says, why should I go? He says, well, your husband is a prisoner of war. You don't want to be here when they come searching. So she would do that. He did it several times.

Then, he was transferred to the Russian front. And there was a woman in the village who worked with the underground. Like I said, the underground was not sympathetic to the Jews. As a rule, they did not help. They didn't care. They were fighting the Germans. But they didn't care about the Jews. They were probably just as likely to report Jews to somebody, but certainly not help them.

This woman, she was a titled woman, aristocracy. They still had, what do you call it? Can't think of it. But anyway, she was she had a castle in the village. Nobility, she had a castle in the village. But she was helping the resistance.

And this German man knew her. And he trusted her. And he went and talked to her about my mother. My mother didn't know that until after the war. And he told her-- this German soldier knew my mother was Jewish. I don't know how he found out. The reason he didn't want to tell my mother that he knew is because he thought, he was such a wonderful man, he thought that if she finds out that he knows, she will run. She'll be scared. And he felt he could protect her.

So he trusted that woman with the information. He said, don't ever let her know that she's Jewish, but help her. And that woman helped us several times out of a situation where they were coming. And she told my mother the same thing he said. And she didn't tell her until after the war. And of course, my mother searched for him everywhere. He probably died on the Russian front. She never could find him. But he saved our life many times. And through him, the woman.

But that's basically it. I don't know if, in my tape, I mentioned, because that I found out, I think, after I did the tape.

This is the tape that you loaned to me that was done 10 years ago. Yeah, I didn't, because I didn't know about it. My mother just wrote the article afterwards, about my mother, when she was going on these trains to sell liquor and cigarettes. They would stop the train if they suspected someone not Jewish and search for papers. And if someone didn't have papers, they were shot.

So my mother, in fact, I have article my mother wrote, they stopped the train one time. That I didn't know until three, four years ago. And they got everybody off the train. And there was a young 18-year-old girl, no papers, she was Jewish. And the Germans said, they'll make an example of her and bury her alive. And they made everybody dig her grave, including her.

And my mother wrote in it that she had a little red coat and a red purse. And even the Polish people were begging them to shoot her first, not to bury her alive. But they said, no, they had to show what they do with Jews. And they buried her alive. And they put the little red coat on the grave. My mother said she will never, ever forget it, and the little red purse.

And so she witnessed that, along with other people. And even the, like I said, the Poles, as a rule, didn't care what happened to the Jews, everybody on the train wanted her killed first. I mean, they didn't want her dead, but that it was so cruel. So this is just some of the things that my mother witnessed.

One time, the Germans caught her. And she was supposed to cook for the big police dogs, the dogs that were supposed to smell a Jew. And of course, the first time she was afraid, you hear about it, they can tell who's Jewish who's not. She was scared to death, but she had to. The dogs loved it. They didn't know who was Jewish, who was not. She fed them.

All kinds of strange, digging potatoes in the fields, I mean, any kind of odd job to keep us alive. Then, I do not know why we ended up in another village towards the end of the war. That I don't know. And I guess I'll never know. I didn't ask my mother.

But we ended up in another village with a couple of poor, poor farmers. They had two daughters, who were, I assume, they were teenagers. At that time, they looked grown up to me. They were teenagers. And they were wonderful, wonderful family. The parents, I called them grandma and grandpa. I didn't have anybody-- I never had grandparents that I remembered.

So they were my grandparents. And they were good to me. And the girls were wonderful. I was like their little sister. They were, like I said, they were very, very poor.

Do you remember them?

That I remember. That's when I started remembering.

So you don't remember very much from the--

Before, I think I don't want to. But from that time on, I remember everything.

Like what?

Well, I remember going with the girls, we were going to get bread. And like I said, they were very poor farmers. And they gave the girls money-- the girls were maybe 14, 16, to go buy bread. And there was a carnival. And they took me to it. And I wanted a doll. I wanted a doll so badly. The girls took the bread money and bought me the doll.

You wanted that doll? Did you not have any dolls?

Probably not, because today, have I have a collection of stuffed animals. I'm a grown person. And I have a collection, incredible collection, of stuffed animals. It's something I always wonder why does it appeal to me so much? I mean, I'm not playing with them like a child. I just want to have them.

I probably didn't. We were at this bizarre carnival. And I wanted, maybe, that particular doll or a doll, I don't know. But they took the bread money. And they brought me the doll. And when we got back, the parents were not upset with them at all, because they all loved me.

So this was the beginning, for me, of having some semblance of a family. So when my mother went to work, I didn't-- first of all, my mother was a stranger to me. I knew it was this lady that loved me and hugged me every night and every morning. But she was never with me. So I really didn't miss her. It was a way of life for me.

She didn't have a day off that she could spend with you?

You can't have a day off in a situation like that. You scratch and claw wherever you can. I mean, you can have a day off, but you need the money. So she never spent any time with me. She was there at night, I knew, but that's it.

Do you remember whether you slept with her?

Probably. I'm sure I did, because--

You don't remember that. But you think must have.

I must have. The places were very, very small. And then, with the other people, again, my mother was someone who came and went. But they were my family. Because I would wait for the girls to come home from school, and the other people, I mean, they were my grandparents.

Like I said, they were very poor. And when they did, they were so good, that when they didn't have money, something happened, my mother worked. And we all lived off of what my mother made. When my mother got sick, there was a time where, and it was all related to the war and everything, she, all of a sudden, lost her vision.

I'm not saying it was psychosomatic, but it had to do-- there was no physical reason for it. She lost her vision. She couldn't see. So the poor farmer went to work and supported us. And vice versa, then she had some other-- then all of a sudden, she started seeing again.

When she could not see and could not work, was she then home with you? Do you remember that?

Not really, because it wasn't such a long time. I remember more all the times that she wasn't. Anyway, at the end of the war, what it was, whoever could worked and we were like family.

When the war ended, my mother wanted to go find, see, if there's anybody left. So she wanted to go to Warsaw. And because they were like my family, she left me with them. Was no place for me to go.

Do you remember that? Do you remember her leaving?

Yeah, I wasn't upset or anything, because I loved them. Warsaw was in ruins. And she didn't want to take me. So she took-- she went. I don't remember for how long, whatever, she didn't find anybody. Then she found somebody in a small town that wasn't a relative, the relatives of her sister's husband.

That's the closest to the relatives, her sister who died with the twins, that's-- I'm sure you've got that, with the twins, was married to a man who had family, some of them survive, his sisters, her brother-in-law's family. And they lived in the little town close to the German border in the south. And she figured it better than no family at all.

And she just-- I think that's where we ended up. That's where we ended up. Well, she found a job. And she decided to stay there. Or maybe she did it in Warsaw. No, no, no, she went to Warsaw first. She found a job and decided to stay there. She went back for me. And I didn't want to go.

Do you remember that?

Yeah, I didn't want to go with her, because I had my grandpa, and grandma, and my sisters. And I didn't want to go. These people were good to me. They were always with me. They took care of me. I didn't want to leave them.

And you were about five?

I was five, depending on when-- officially, my birthday is April '45. So I don't even know, officially, when the war ended. But I was five. And I didn't want to go. And so they talked, and she left me for a couple of months. She came to visit. But she went. She worked.

She got an apartment. No, at that time, she went to that little town where that family was. She got an apartment. She got help. She had a maid. Someone to take care of me, and then she came and got me, whether I wanted to or not. She came and got me and she had to work. But she had someone taking care of me.

Do you remember leaving the farm?

Not really. I know I left. But I don't remember, because again, it was probably something I didn't want to do. So I didn't want to remember. I really didn't want to go. Well, here's so-called family, so again, there was one older lady who was a grandmother to the other children. So she became my grandmother too. So that made it a little better.

After a while, I had some sort of a family, even though we weren't really related, except through marriage. But it was the closest. There were three sisters. They all had children my age. And their mother was alive. So they call her grandma, I called her grandma. Needless to say, the people from the village came to visit us. And we went to see them. And we kept in touch.

These were the farmers that you'd been living with?

Yeah, and my mother, later on, helped them. Anyway, my mother had a maid, who was-- this is a story in itself--

Maybe we should turn the tape over.



Yeah and I need to go to--

Christine Cohen, tape 1, side B.

Anyway, my mother had this maid who was basically Polish, but of German descent, because of Poland being the way it was. At times, parts of Poland belonged to Germany. At times, they were Poland. There were a lot of, in that particular town, in that part of Poland, there were a lot of people that were German. But they were there for generations. And it was Poland now.

She had this maid her name was, I still remember, Irene, and she's lived in Poland all her life. But she had a sister who was married and lived in Germany. And the maid's brother-in-law was in the German army. They had a child, a little boy named Willy, who was exactly my age. And the parents got killed, or taken prisoners after the war, or whatever.

And this Irene was left with her nephew. She was single. She was left with her nephew. So she lived with us. She was a live-in. But the child lived with us too. And she told him he was exactly the same age as I was. She told him, people are going to-- again, shoe was sort of on the other foot. Not exactly, but they were hiding the fact that they were German.

So she told this little boy, if anybody asks you, tell them you're not German. Don't tell anybody you're German, because of the repercussion after the war from the Poles, as a matter of fact. There weren't enough Jews left to do anything. But Germans were hated. And the little boy could have been really hurt.

So he understood that. Children grow up very quickly, just like myself, when I was two years old and we went to the village. I had aunts, and uncles, and cousins, and grandparents, and all of a sudden, the next day, I don't have anybody. And I'm two years old, and my mother tells me, people will ask you questions. They'll ask you where is your grandma, where's your grandpa? You say to everything, I don't know.

And I guess children grow up very fast under those circumstances, because from the age of two, whenever anybody asked me-- I don't remember that, but my mother told me, about anybody in the family, my standard answer was I don't know. So you can tell children, when it comes to danger. Anyway this little Willy lived with us. And he was my companion.

I used to-- we used to play board games and things like that. We were inseparable. One day, well, my mother was at work. And this Irene was talking to another maid in the building or something and left us. We were five years old. We were playing a board game. I don't even remember what.

But I remember, I can see it in my mind, we're sitting at a table playing a board game. And I said, Willy, are you German? And he said no, ma'am. I'm not. I'm not. He was scared. So I said, well, do you understand such and such, and I made up a word that I thought was German.

And he, being a child, said, forgot himself, that's not German at all, because he spoke German. And I said, aha, if you know that's not German, that means you speak German. And I was only five years old, right after the war. And if you speak German, then you are German. And the Germans killed my daddy. And now, I'm going to kill you.

That's what I told the kid. And I went to the kitchen, and I remember that. I got a kitchen knife, that big. And we had a big dining room, I remember. I was chasing him around the dining room table with this big knife. And the maid was somewhere next door. I mean, she left us for a couple of minutes.

I never give any indication of being violent towards him. He was my companion. We played together. We ate together. We did everything together. And I'm chasing him, I remember that, around the dining room table. And he's screaming that I'm going to kill him.

And my mother happened to come home for something. She walked in and saw what was happening. Well, immediately, she let the woman go, because she knew what was happening with me.

And you remember that?

I remember that.

Do you have any idea why it was then that you brought up--

No, because we were completely-- I mean, here he was, I don't know how long they were there, but for some time. We always played together. I do remember I was very bossy with him. He did what I wanted, always, because, I have to admit, that after the war, because I felt I was so mistreated, I went completely the other way. I was very selfish. And I wanted all the attention. My mother used to undress me when I was seven years old and put me to bed.

You felt you were mistreated?

And I wanted--

Mistreated how?

Physically, and I didn't have attention of my mother. And I wanted all of her attention. And so I always-- I never did anything to the boy. I never, I just-- always, he knew that he had to defer to me. And I don't know if this was because his aunt worked for my mother, or because he was afraid of me.

But I never did anything to him. We were friends, as long as he did what I told him. And then all of a sudden, out of the clear blue, we're sitting playing a board game. I don't know why.

But you had been bossy with him.

Yes, that I remember.

Was he younger or smaller than you.

No, I was very small. So he couldn't have been small. I was tiny. No, he wasn't. We were exactly the same age. He was wasn't smaller. He was probably bigger than I was.

But you said that you did want a lot of attention from your mother?

And I got a lot of attention from. And the more I got, the more I wanted.

So she usually gave in to you?

Yes, with everything. Everything, and until the day she died, my mother couldn't say no to me. And I have a brother. And she was a wonderful mother to him too, brother that was born after the war. But with me, it was just different.

My mother, I guess, felt, not that she should have felt guilty, but in a sense, that I didn't have what I should have had. So she tried to make up for it all her life. And I took, until I-- I was a selfish, bratty teenager, too, until I understood later on what really went on. That changed me. My mother remarried after the war. I don't know if we're ready for that part.

Let's go back to that so you and your mother were living in the apartment.

Yes and then, like I said, after that boy episode, she got someone else who was Polish.

Were you going to-- you weren't going to school at that point?

No, I was five years old.

And did you then start school?

I started school around the age of six, I guess.

No, it wasn't village. We were in a city.

It was a city.

City, it was after the war. But it wasn't Warsaw. We have not gone back to Warsaw yet, because eventually, we went back. And what was the name of the city? It was called Walbrzych I would have to spell it. W--

Do you want to get that?

Housekeeper.

Stop for a minute. You were spelling the city,

W-A-L-B-R-Z-Y-C-H.

So you started school there. Do you remember that at all?

Vaguely, I do.

What do you remember?

Well, what I remember the most, but that's sort of after the fact, because I didn't realize it until after it happened, that I didn't know I was Jewish. And throughout the war, I remember children telling me, I know I'm going back now, but just to give you a background how I felt about Jewish people. I disliked them as much as the children in the village did.

Disliked them is not the word. We didn't think of them as human, because that's what I was taught. In the village, the kids used to say, you know what a Jew is? And I would say, what? I would say pig with a tail. So my early, formative years, I grew up believing that Jews were subhuman.

So these were the little kids in the village where you were until you were five. But you didn't know any Jews that you knew of, the kids just talked about Jews.

Talked about them, there weren't any to know. If they were to know, they would be dead. Not only that, my mother-- we were not too far from one of the camps. I forget, which one, whether it was Treblinka or Majdanek, one of the two, where her family went, as it turned out.

And the woman, the first village we were in, used to say, to my mother, and my mother's heart was breaking every day she looked at it, but she had to be very blasé about it, because they were. See that smoke over there, and my mother said, yes. That's Jews burning. And how do you say that?

Oh, they deserve to be burning. And my mother said, why would you say that? She couldn't protest too much, obviously. She says, oh, because they're sinners. They didn't go to church on Sunday. That was, I mean, that was the mentality there. They're different. They're something to fear, so let them burn.

But that's how Jews, so little bits, I mean, I do remember the part about the Jews being a pig with the tail. But there were other things that were said that I knew, growing up I knew that a Jew was subhuman. And I mean, I didn't know anybody that was Jewish. And I certainly didn't know I was Jewish.

So when you started school, the kids were still talking this way about Jews.

Not as bad, but I'm sure, because the anti-Semitism is strong in Poland. With the communists, don't forget, I was growing up during communism, it was against the law to express anything against Jews. It really was, you could go to jail for it. But the kids, among themselves, talked. But I was one of them. I was Jewish, according to me.

And my mother had a hard time telling me. So she waited for the right moment. First she waited she was married, I would be more settled. I would have two parents.

Did she marry a Jew?

Yes, she married-- that's an interesting story, too, she married-- well, my father, the only father I know, in '46.

So you were six.

I was six. He was from Krakow. His whole family died, also, in a concentration camp, except for him and one sister. They ended up in Russia. He worked in a coal mine. They put him to work, the Russians. In fact, he lost half of his pinky in the coal mines.

He was an electrical engineer, brilliant man, absolutely brilliant. As a matter of fact, we lived in Israel for a time. And he was in charge of the Negev irrigation of the whole Negev desert. Brilliant man, spoke seven languages, most wonderful man that you could possibly ask to meet, kind, gentle, sweet, just wonderful.

And my mother, what my mother did was, before she married him, my mother married him, I hate to say it, I'm sure after many, many years, they lived together 30 years. They loved each other. But she married him to have a father for me. And I realize that now.

How did you feel when you knew they were getting married?

Oh, I loved him.

I loved him, because--

You didn't mind sharing your mother. No, because he was so wonderful, because then I had two people to spoil me. He spoiled me just as bad. I mean, there was nothing my father wouldn't do for me. So my mother-- I had two people to just jump up and down and do whatever I wanted. So I thought that was great, until my brother came. That's another story.

My mother left me with my dad, whose name was Leon, for a week, went out of town on business. She arranged it on purpose, because she wanted to see how he could handle me. And she was going to ask me. And she knew that I would tell her. Anybody that look at me the wrong way, I would tell her.

Because like I told you, I went completely the other way. I wanted everything I wanted. I wanted attention. I wanted everything. Even then, without realizing it, I guess, I felt like the world had to make up to me for what I lost, even though I probably couldn't form that thought.

So she left me with him. We had a great time. He bought me this. He bought me that. He took me skating. We fell through the ice. And of course, he saved me. But my mother almost didn't marry him, because he let me fall through the ice. Well, I remember. He fell through the ice too.

Were you scared?

No, because I was with him. And I knew he would save me.

Was it deep?

Yeah, it was deep. We went on a lake skating. He wanted to teach me how to skate. And we went on the lake. And the

ice broke in the middle of the lake. But he got very sick after that. But of course, I wasn't scared at all. I thought it was a great adventure.

My dad was very-- he used to ski. He used to rescue people when they-- he was very, very athletic. And he tried to teach me everything, skiing, skating, swimming. My mother wouldn't let him, because she was afraid something would happen to me. So I remember when he taught me swimming, I was seven years old. And he threw me in the pool. But he was right there. And my mother, who doesn't swim, ran around the pool and scream. And she was going to save me.

And how did you feel when he threw you in the pool?

I didn't mind he could do anything, because I knew he would never let anything happen to me.

So you really trusted him.

I trusted him. And I loved him. And my mother was very smart for leaving me with him, because when she came back, I told her in detail everything that happened. Of course, I told her we fell in the-- but I loved the man. And I loved him till the day he died. And I could never ask for a better father.

In fact, all my life, my brother was his natural son, all my life, my dad, as long as he lived, I was very special to him. He loved little girls. And I was very, very special. He had patience for me. He studied with me. He would stay up all night for a test, if I needed to. It was incredible.

And then my mother would holler that he was keeping me awake. Actually, he had to go to work the next day. And he was awake. I was keeping him awake. But that's my mother. He was just the most wonderful man. He wanted to adopt me legally, but my mother didn't want to change my name. So in every other sense, he was my father. But she wouldn't let him change my name.

Did you know about that at the time?

About what?

That he wanted to adopt you and change your name?

No, not really.

It was later that you found out.

Later, I found out. And later, it didn't matter. He was my dad. I was his daughter. When he introduced me to someone, he was just beaming. This is my daughter. This is my--

So you still didn't know you were Jewish.

No, I didn't know I was Jewish. What had happened, all of a sudden, during the war, we had to go to church every Sunday. So I was basically brought up Catholic, knew all the rituals and everything. After the war, without an explanation, we weren't going to church anymore.

So I knew, I don't know how I knew, but I knew it was something we didn't talk about for some reason. But I missed it. It was something I grew up with. So I started going myself, without telling my mother, when I was old enough to leave the apartment and go.

Which would have been about how old?

Probably eight, I mean, walk out, because it was safe--

So that would have been three years since you went to Catholic church.

At least.

And you still missed it.

I still missed it. And well, it gave me a sense of security, a sense of belonging somewhere. Because here, I was here, I was there, I was moved here. Everybody disappeared in my life. To me, that was a constant. So that's why I missed it. I didn't necessarily miss the rituals, but something familiar.

And one day, I was-- maybe I was older than that when I went by myself, and the church was across the street. So it was not-- I was 10 years old, I think, when I went to church one day and the kids told me, you don't belong here. I said, why not? Because you're Jewish.

Well, I didn't believe them, of course. I went home. And I was just crushed. How could I be subhuman, less than a person? That's how I grew up knowing that's what Jews were. And then my mother had to tell me as much of the story as she felt I could understand. I did not accept it.

What did she tell you?

That I was Jewish. And she tried to explain. And I didn't want to be Jewish. I didn't want to be a piglet. Of course, at the age of 10, I knew that's not a pig with a tail, but it's someone less than human. And my mother tried to explain, in terms of child could understand, how the world, how the Germans, Poles, how the world felt about Jews, what happened without frightening me. I don't remember what she said, because I didn't want to hear it.

And for the next few years, I hid the fact that I was Jewish. I wouldn't admit it to anyone. In fact, I probably did not admit it to anyone until I was 17 and we moved to Israel.

So your parents were not observant.

No one in Poland after the war-- my mother didn't come from a very religious family, neither did my father. After the war, there was not a synagogue left in Warsaw, because we eventually moved back to Warsaw. Not a synagogue left in Warsaw. And they just weren't observant. So no one-- I mean, I remember-- oh, I forgot to say that until I found out I was Jewish, I had a Christmas tree every year and presents. So I guess my parents, instead of telling me right away, felt that, I don't know, they wanted to make me happy. They wanted to do anything.

Were you expecting a Christmas tree and presents?

Sure, during the war, I didn't get presents. But after the war, I expected presents, because they knew other kids got presents. So I wanted presents too. And I got it.

Like I said, I was-- they were both trying to make up to me and, as a child, I was very demanding. I wanted this. And I wanted that. And until I got married and actually had my own children, I didn't understand. I didn't understand. I resented my mother for making me come home early enough so she can go to sleep without worrying about me. And all these things, I thought she didn't respect my privacy. I know she would listen in on a phone conversation. Or open my letter, or whatever, all these things, as a teenager, used to drive me wild.

But now I understand why. To her, there was a threat hanging over me, even in peacetime. And she had to protect me above all, at all costs, even if it meant making me mad, because she picked up the phone I was talking to somebody, that sort of thing. And I could always play them. I mean, if I got sick, all I had to do was sneeze. My parents were ready to give me the world, because my mother thought I was dying.

Was your mother overprotective with--

My brother? Yes, but not to the extent. Yes, my mother was always overprotective. I don't know if she would have been without the war, because she was with my brother, too. But not the same as with me. My brother went away to college. They didn't worry about him. Me, I couldn't leave for one night without them worrying about me.

They never left me alone. They always-- and it wasn't a matter of trust, never. It was just a matter of she was so scared that I could go during the day somewhere. I am sure she never told me that she was uneasy until I came home and she saw me safe, till the day she died.

She died a year and a half ago. She was in-- her last year of life, she was in a nursing home in San Antonio where I live. And she had no short-term memory. She had the long-term memory at that point. And of course, she was reliving the war. And no matter what I said, I realized that I'm not going to convince her that it's where we're at, that it's the '90s and whatever. So after a while, I started, because I knew I was upsetting her, I would come and visit her.

And she would tell me, take off your glasses, put on your contacts, put this. I said, why? So they won't recognize you, and take a different route home, and that sort of thing. Here she was, she had congestive heart failure, which is what she died of, and beginning of Alzheimer, but still, even with that still, to the day she died, she worried about me.

That must have been upsetting for you?

It was. That's why I said, everything had changed for me. My mother lived in New York after I got married. And as much as I love my parents, it's a good thing, too, because I'd be completely helpless if she lived where I did, because my mother always did things for me, and I let her, because it was easier.

Few years ago, my mother came to visit. My children are already grown. I've been married, now, 34 years. I'm cutting something in the kitchen. She came behind me, took the kitchen knife out of my hand, and she says, let me do it. You'll hurt yourself.

So in a way, it was good that I wasn't near them, because that was the easy to let my mother do everything for me, decide for me. I couldn't make a decision. I'm amazed I made the decision to get married. And I had to be away to become independent.

Did you decide to be away?

Oh, no, no, no, no it was a complete coincidence. I have-- my natural father died on the way to Treblinka, I guess-- we know for a fact, what happened to everybody in the family, because those same cousins, I mean, the family of my mother's sister that we lived near after the war, one of the sisters was in that transport with the whole family. So she knows what happened to everybody. Anyway, I forgot what I was going to say.

What was I going to say? We're talking about something. I get off the subject and then I forget. I'm trying to think. We're talking about, oh, so anyway, my natural father's family, two aunts, and a couple of cousins, of course, some of the cousins weren't born till after the war, survived the war.

One aunt and her family lived in Mexico from before the war. So they were there. But there was another aunt who was with her daughter in a concentration camp. They went, the daughter was 13, she had three boys, also. She had a older daughter who was in Mexico. But she had three boys. So the husband and the three little boys died, because they were younger than 10, I think.

And she and her mother survived. And somehow, my mother found them. We lived in Paris for a while, my mother found out about them, found them. And they started writing. So when my parents moved to New York from Paris, my aunt wanted to meet me. And I wanted to meet my family. And they lived in San Antonio. And I went for a two week visit. And I met my husband. I wasn't planning on being there.

So that's how I ended up in San Antonio. I didn't do it consciously, certainly not, trying to get away from her. But there were many times when I wanted to. Until, like I said, I started understanding, took me time. And I understood. Even

though I knew all of that, but I still-- I was very resentful of the being so protective, being-- I felt like I was suffocating when I was growing up.

Did your mother talk, as you were growing up, about the experiences during the war during the Holocaust?

Only if I asked her.

Only if you asked her. And when did you start asking her do you think?

Probably in my teens-- actually, I don't know. I probably started asking after I got married. Until I got married, I probably didn't want to hear it. Because what I know is certainly more recent. And it had to be after I got married. When I got away from this situation, I wanted to know. Before that, all I knew, my parents were different, they suffocating me.

But she didn't say what she had gone through for you.

Oh never, never, never ever did my mother say look what I did for you. She use to play the guilt, but not with that. Never, but I know. She didn't have to tell me. I know that she did it for me. If I wasn't there, my mother wouldn't have gone. She would have stayed with the rest of the family. They were very family oriented.

As a matter of fact, that's why what happened happened, because before the war, people were already kind of aware of-- well, they never realized what would really happen. But they knew things weren't safe for the Jews. And my mother, and her brother, and his wife, and the sisters, and everybody, they wanted to leave Poland. But my grandfather didn't want to, because he didn't want to-- the problem was the people that had something to lose didn't want to leave. They didn't want to leave their wealth.

And my grandfather said, we'll survive. We'll have enough diamonds. We'll survive. He was convinced that if you have enough money, you'll survive. And the children didn't want to leave the parents, my grandparents. So no one left.

And then finally, before the-- in '39, I guess the war was on already, was September '39, so maybe it was shortly after that, my mother was pregnant with me. So it had to be '39, early '40. And they decided to finally leave, my mother's parents. The other children didn't want to, because my father, again, insisted, because my mother was pregnant. They were going to have a baby.

They paid off some Russians to get them into Russia. They crossed the border. The Russians took whatever it is that they paid them, whether it was diamond, money, or whatever, and turned them over to the Gestapo. And they beat them, put them in some-- that I know from my mother. They put them in some stalls for horses, or whatever, barn, and just beat them and send them back to Warsaw.

So when they tried, it was too late. But at first, they didn't want to, because none of the kids wanted to leave the parents. And the parents didn't want to go. They didn't believe--

You asked your mother about these things after you were married. Why do you think it was at that point that you started asking her?

Because as I got older, and even now, I guess, when I was a teenager, family wasn't-- or at least I didn't realize it was, extended family, wasn't as important to me as it is now. Each year I get older, it's all important to me. I feel like I lost out a lot. Lost out, I never knew my aunts, my uncles. Until my mother died, I didn't know what my grandparents looked like, because my mother was not allowed to take any pictures.

Well, she couldn't take any pictures from the ghetto, because that could identify her. And she had gotten, probably a few years ago, from the family in Israel, a few pictures. And I had to, by process of elimination, figure out who was who. Even my mother's wedding picture to my natural father, I do have a picture of my natural father, because my cousin in San Antonio had it. And she had it made for me. But other than that, I never saw pictures of anybody else.



When my mother died, I guess, she just got them. And then she got sick, she forgot-- she didn't forget, she didn't tell me. When my brother brought her things, because she lived in Seattle before she went to the nursing home, we got her out of New York, because she was alone in New York. And he brought a bunch of boxes with papers. And I found some pictures. And to me, it was a treasure.

And by process of elimination, I figured out who was who. And now I'm having them made for my brother, too, and restored, and all that. And there are about six pictures. But they're incredible. And I didn't find it until after my mother died. And so to me, at least, there's some link to the past, because-- And I guess I want to know more and more now, because and I know I won't to know anymore. I'm sorry I didn't ask more questions, because my mother was the last link to the past, so to speak. And no one else knows.

What are some of the questions that you would like to know?

I don't know, just what the people were really like, about her sisters. Not that she was wonderful and beautiful, I know she was wonderful and beautiful, but some details. That I always thought I had time to ask.

Let's stop here and turn over the tape.