

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Tania Rozmaryn, conducted by Gail Schwartz on February 23, 1997 in Silver Spring, Maryland. This is tape number two, side A. And we were talking about your journey in their train car, end of December, 1941, early January 1942. And I was asking about who else was in the car, and what the atmosphere was like.

Yeah, they were-- the rest of the people were from my hometown. I knew most of them. And the atmosphere was very glum. Although we didn't know about crematoriums or concentration camps or a final solution, but we know we are going to work, and maybe that will save us until the end of the war.

We came to a town in Lithuania called Žiežmariai. And they opened the cars, and we all stepped out, and there were trucks waiting for us. We got into the trucks, and they started moving through the streets. As we move through the streets, we knew that before the war it must have been an 80% Jewish town. Because wherever we passed the houses, we saw there-- we saw the remnants. We saw the area where a mezuzahs used to be, and it was ripped off.

So of course we surmised that those houses belonged to the Jewish people. After 15, 20 minutes, we got to the shul. It was the synagogue of the town. It was surrounded with barbed wire. And they took us in, into the synagogue. And already it was totally emptied from whatever it was before. And they had constructed three tier bunk beds.

But not individual ones. It's like the one that I saw at the Holocaust Museum, where like 20, 30 people were next to each other like sardines. And they were three tiers. And there since I was very young as is my cousin, we went on the third tier of the bunk bed, and that's where we slept.

And there was another house in the yard, also constructed inside with bunk beds for men. They gave us some food. And the next morning, they told us to line up. We lined up in the courtyard. And then the head of the camp came over, told us we are here in Žiežmariai, and we are going to build a road from Žiežmariai, which is going to run from Kovno to Vilna.

And they are starting on both sides. We'll meet someplace in the middle. And then he said very nonchalantly, if anybody feels that they are too weak to work, or they want to go back home, by all MEANS we have more than enough people.

So like 25 people stepped forward, and the rest went back to the shul or to the other building that was there. And they took them away. And then we found out the next day that they just took them like three miles away, and they killed them all and buried them there. And then we started going to work every morning.

What was the age range of these 300 people?

Oh, the age range, I would say, I must have been the youngest there, but they were from 16, 17, I would say, through 28, 30. Definitely not older.

So you're 13 and 1/2 at this point.

Yeah.

And you said, were you very small physically?

Right. I was very small physically. And I really think I was the only one, that I was small. Because later on, as I will mention to you, that because I was so tiny and small, I caught the eye of the head of the construction. And he was going to do me a special favor, but I will get to this later.

Were you staying close by your cousin?

Oh, we slept together, and we worked together. At night, we would cuddle up like sardines to stay warm.

But still we did not feel that our life was threatened.

Were you wearing that special coat that your mother gave you and the boots?

Yes, I was wearing the red boots and that shearling, gray shearling coat. Yes. And I was very comfortable and very, very warm. And of course, my mother gave us some food in the beginning. I don't know even where she got it, some chicken and other things that we had to add to whatever we got there.

What else did you bring with you?

Nothing, really. Just what I wore, and maybe one more dress. That's it. Nothing else.

You were wearing a dress?

A dress and gloves. Yes, no-- nobody wore pants at that time. No women. No woman wore pants in those days. So the next day, they sent us to work. And he took us with the trucks again to an area where the highway was being built. And we got out, and there was like a Choo Choo train. And then we would get on that little train to get to the workplace as we progressed.

And then they divided the jobs for what should be done. Now, there was one group where they were bringing-- of course, after it was all prepared and measured, they would put sand on their whole area of the highway. And it wasn't like with a highway that we know now. It must have been like a two-lane highway at most.

And then rounded stones were brought in, and they were placed, one next to the other with the tips up. And we would have little shovels, put the stones in, and then fasten it in place. And this was-- the younger ones were doing that.

And then the older people, the men were sitting on the roadside. And they would hammer-- special hammers, they were chopping up stones to make them into smaller ones, like not gravel but smaller stones. And then they would take those smaller stones with wheelbarrows, and they go on the freshly put stones, and sort of throw them off the wheelbarrow to fill in the holes in between the stones.

After that was done, and of course let's say after 50 yards or 100 yards, then the next step was they were boiling tar. And they would cover it with tar, and then they had their steam roller. And that was the last-- that was the last thing that they did.

And every day, we used to go to work and go on to proceed further and further. And we were being watched, but not by SS, but by soldiers from the construction kommandos. But of course, we couldn't run away or go anywhere. We didn't even speak Lithuanian, so we were stuck there.

What did they give you to eat in the morning before you left?

In the morning, it was a bowl, sort of like black coffee, sort of imitation, with a slice of bread. It was like a small bread that was to be divided into four. And I remember we used to take-- and one person was in charge, so we would take a straw to measure that tiny bread. It was this size. How many inches? I don't know. 6, 7 inches.

And we would measure with the straw, and to divide it equally. And that was the bread for the whole day. And then when we came back, there was some kind-- some kind of soup. What they did was, we used to take the peel from the potatoes from the German kitchens, and some grass that they would pick that wasn't poisonous to eat, and cook it together, and add some flour to it to thicken it. And that was the dinner when we came from work.

Did they give you anything during the day?

No, nothing. We had to save from the bread that they gave us in the morning for the day.

Did they count you before you left?

Naturally, they counted. But there was one other thing, what they did. And because really they were not-- the Nazi commanders, the head of the-- a few weeks after we were there, the head of the construction, we didn't even know his name, but he was hoarse. So we called him the [INAUDIBLE] chef.

And he told us that on and off he would take a truck, and take the head of the camp, which was a Jewish man. His name was [? Ring. ?] And he would take him and two other people, and he said, we'll go back to the ghetto, and ask your relative to send food for you. And we'll bring you the food, and you can write letters to them.

So we did. Somebody who had a piece of paper or a pencil, they would share. And that's what he did, like once a month. He would take a truck and go there to the relatives, and bring food for us from the relatives.

At that time, my mother wasn't any more in Smorgonie ghetto. At that time, they liquidated the Smorgonie ghetto, and they transferred my mother, my brother, my grandfather, and my sister. My oldest sister was-- my oldest sister was in meantime, a few months after I came, he went back and he brought more people.

But my sister wasn't staying with us. My sister was working in the office with 10 or 15 other girls near the workplace. And they had the special barrack there. So I really never saw my sister, but I knew she was there.

Was that a help to you?

No. No, not at all. Because she was in the labor camp just as I was, except that she had a better job. She was working in the office.

Were you still wearing your yellow star?

No, we didn't have to wear the yellow star there. We were just wearing what we did, but no yellow star. And then-- but they transferred all from Smorgonie and a few other ghettos into Oshmyany, which was a larger ghetto. So my father, my mother, my grandfather, his wife, and his daughter, and my brother, they all went to Oshmyany.

Something interesting happened that my mother told me. When they came to the ghetto of Oshmyany, before they took them into the ghetto, they made a selection to get rid of the old people and the children. And it was someplace near where there was a synagogue.

So they made a selection, and whoever was old, feeble, or children, they would send into the synagogue. And from the synagogue, they would take them immediately to the forest and kill them. So my mother, my brother, somehow I don't know why, and my grandfather's wife and his daughter, they let them go to the Oshmyany ghetto.

They grabbed my grandfather and said, you're an old man. We have no use for you, and they put him into the synagogue. As he was in the synagogue, they were pushing people in, invalids and the sick people, and old people. And my grandfather was a healthy man. So he went to the door, because they would throw them in, and then everybody would step over the sick and the invalids.

So he was standing by the door and picking up the invalids and the sick to put them in the corner, that nobody should trample them. The Nazis there at the door noticed it, and they said hey, you're still strong. We need you. And they took him out and sent him back to where my mother was and his wife. And they all went to the Oshmyany ghetto.

Now, going back to Žiežmariai, every day we would go to work, and then from-- we were already farther away, we would get on those choo choo trains until we got to where the trucks were to get back to camp. One day I was on that choo choo train, wearing my red boots and my shearling, and the chef, the

[INAUDIBLE] chef, he came over to me, sat down next to me, and he said, I know who are little girl. I met your mother on the way here. She walked to the train with you, right? I said yes.

He said, you know-- and it was very cold. It must have been February, beginning of March. He said to me, next week, we'll be going with the truck to Oshmyany, to ghetto. And I know your mother is there. For food-- Because all the people from Smorgonie were in Oshmyany.

And if you want, he said, you can come with me to see your mother. And apparently, he saw that I was frightened. And he said to me, don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you. Because the head of the camp is coming, and he was there with me before. And a few other people are coming. So I assure you that we are not going to kill you. You can come. I said OK.

The morning, you know, the truck came. I got in the truck. I was so cold. It was freezing, and it took several hours. In the evening, we came to the Oshmyany ghetto. And we came in straight to the police station, to the Jewish police station. And he came in, and he told the policeman to go look for my mother and tell her to come, that I am here.

My mother came, and of course we started kissing and hugging. And then she took me to the room where she had at that time a room. My mother, my grandfather, his wife, his daughter, and my brother, they had a room in somebody's house.

And you hadn't seen her for about two months.

I hadn't seen her, right, for two months. And I came. I came in, and we were there for two days. And then the following day, I got up. I was always suffering from probably strep throat a million times, because every time I had a sore throat, it was absolutely horrendous. I couldn't swallow. I couldn't speak.

And I got up, and I had a high fever, and I was very sick. So my mother said-- she said, I don't know what to do. How can I let you go? So she went to meet that chef, the head of the construction. And she told him that I'm very sick and I can't go back. And he said, but I cannot go back. I have to have the same amount of people.

And then somebody said to my mother, you know, there is a girl, an orphan girl here in ghetto, from Smorgonie. And she has a sister that is in Ziežmariai, and she is starving here. You could do her a favor and yourself. Let her go instead of your daughter. And give her food, and give her whatever you can.

And my mother, of course, was in seventh heaven. She went to meet the girl, and she gave her food. She gave her a few of my dresses. And she said, go and my first cousin will take care of her. And my mother said whenever they'll come for food, she'll send food for her, and maybe even my sister could help out. And the girl went. And I was there. And I got well, and I made some friends. And in the spring--

What was that ghetto like?

In the ghetto, really, there was no starvation. People looked well-fed, because somehow they would sneak out of the ghetto and barter things. And there was a soup kitchen always there. And it was a rather pleasant atmosphere. People weren't killed. People weren't dying. There was enough food. But it was a ghetto, and people were hoping that maybe we'll survive. The war will soon be over, and we'll manage to survive.

Was it a walled-in ghetto?

It was a walled-in ghetto, barbed wire. And I was in the ghetto. My mother, I don't think she worked. And I was in the ghetto. It was springtime already, like April, May. And I met some girls my age, and we were walking the streets. And it was rather-- we were teaching each other, and we were reading books together.

And then one day, I was walking with my friends in the street near the entrance of the ghetto. And I saw the chef, the [INAUDIBLE] chef is there in a car. And he came over to me. And he says, "Kleine." Means in German "little girl." He said, who are you with? Where's your mother? I said, my mother is here. My

grandfather, his wife, my brother.

He says, listen closely what I'm telling you. Tell your mother-- go home, tell your mother to pack everything up. Tomorrow morning, I'm taking you all to where-- to Ziežmariai, to where you were. He said, don't ask questions. Just do as I say.

I went home to my mother. I said, mama, I saw the [INAUDIBLE] chef, and that's what he told me. He told me to tell you to pack up and come to the entrance of the ghetto in the morning. There will be horses with wagons, and he's taking us to Ziežmariai.

My mother said, well, so far he was nice to us. We're going to do it. The next morning, my mother all packed up, and there were maybe another 20, 30 families. And in the entrance of the ghetto, there were farmers with horses and those large wagons that the farmers had. And they put the things on the wagons, and they said there is a train, which I saw is town here in--

I forgot. I forgot the name of the little town. We go to that little town, and there is a train. And you will put all your stuff, your things into the freight cars. And you'll go to sleep over in the ghetto. And the next following morning, you'll come to the cars, and we will go to Ziežmariai.

And we put-- my mother put everything. She had so many things in the wagon. And we got on top of it. My grandfather, his wife, her daughter, and my mother and I, my brother, we're all sitting and we're going. And on the way-- maybe it was 15 miles. On the way, we passed by a village. Župrany. In Župrany, we saw the farmer let everybody go, all the wagon trains, and he pulled up to a side street.

And all of a sudden, he pulled us up to his farm. And there it was his family came out with pitchforks and with neighbors, his neighbors. And they were ready to kill us and take everything we had. As I said, my mother, God bless her-- maybe that's why she lives a long life. Next March the 5th, she'll be 95.

She jumped off the wagon. She ran to the street, and she saw two German officers. And with the Germans, if they had an order to kill, they didn't hesitate. But if they didn't have an order to kill, they behaved like civilized people.

And they didn't like the white Russians much more because they were primitive in the eyes of the Germans. So my mother walked over to the Germans, and she said that we are about to go into a labor camp from Oshmyany to the other town. And the farmer, they took us, pulled us off to his farm, and he is about to kill us and take everything we had.

They asked my mother where is it. And she takes them there, was in the next street. And they come in, and they saw what was happening. They took out their guns, and they told the farmers, you'd better get back into the house. And the person that the wagon belongs to, you get on the wagon, and take them to where they have to go, or we're going to kill you all right now.

They all disappeared. He got back on his wagon, and he took us to the train station. We got to the train station, and we put everything in the freight cars. And he told us from there, it was not far to walk to the ghetto. And my father had relatives in that little town, so we figured they will probably be in the ghetto.

What were you doing when the farmers started approaching with pitchforks?

Well, we were sitting and crying, and then knew that that was the end of us, but there was nothing we can do about it. We couldn't fight back, and we couldn't do anything.

What did you think when your mother walked away from you?

I know that she was going to get help and to save us. That I knew. I knew my mother wasn't running from us.

How did you know?

No way. Not my mother. When she risked her life in the Smorgonie ghetto, in the Oshmyany ghetto to barter things and to bring food for us, and she wouldn't eat before everybody ate. I knew my mother wasn't going to run away from us.

And in the later years, of course, even when she was 75, it was still her concern to take care of her children and her grandchildren. All her life, it was her concern. So we came to the ghetto, and we asked where the relatives lived, if they were there. And we were told yes, and they were quite wealthy people. And they were in the ghetto. Their house was in the ghetto, so they were essentially in their own home.

What is the name of this town you're talking--

If you will stop for a minute, I'll look up on the map if you want me to. It slipped my mind. Anyway, we found our relatives, my father's relatives. And they told us, well, come in. In the room we'll give you two beds. They said we have another room, but we can't give you the other room, because the chef is coming to sleep over. This was the nicest house in the ghetto. And he came to sleep over in that room.

So I remember we were like four people on a bed, and we rested. And then I walked out into the hall. And I saw the chef. Again, he called me. He said, "Kleine, come with me." Takes me into his room, and he said, listen what I'll tell you. And tell it to your mother. He said, I found out that within two weeks, they are going to liquidate all the small ghettos and take them into Ponary and kill them.

So I decided to save as many people as I can. So I went to the Gebietskommissar, and I told him that I need more workers to speed up the highway, and he should give me permission to go to the Oshmyany ghetto and bring more people. He said when I came to the Oshmyany ghetto, he said I felt that the first people that I need to save should be the relatives of those that are in Ziežmariai. And that's why, he said, I told your mother not to hesitate and not to ask questions and to come.

And he said-- he opened his wallet, and he showed me a gold coin. And he said, some of the people there were trying to bribe me, that I should take other families. But he said, well, I took this one gold coin, because I'm taking people out of the ghetto, but my priority was their relatives from the people in Ziežmariai.

And then he looked at me and said, if you have somebody here in ghetto that you want he should come with us, bring that person. Because in two weeks, that's what he showed me, that they were all going to be slaughtered.

And in that ghetto, it so happened that I found the daughter-- if you recall, when we first ran to Lebedev, to my Aunt Golda, that he was a shoemaker, and they had three children. So the daughter was there. Somehow she had a boyfriend, and they wind up in that ghetto.

When she came, she told me that she's-- I asked, what happened to your relatives, to your parents, to your brothers? She told me that a few months after we left, they gathered all the Jews into a barn, and they sprinkled the barn with gasoline, and they burned them all alive.

And she was someplace at work, and she survived. And then she found a boyfriend, and that's why she was in that ghetto. Her name was Rivka. And I said, Rivka, come with us. Come with us, because we know for a fact that this ghetto will be liquidated.

She said, no way. She says, I'm not going with you. I have a boyfriend here. I don't believe what you're saying. She didn't come. The next morning, we got up. We all went to the cars. And we got in. They closed the freight train, and they took us straight to Ziežmariai.

And we came to Žiežmariai. And of course, all the relatives then found each other, and my sister was there, too. And we were also in seventh heaven, that we found each other.

Why do you think this chief singled you out and talked to you and helped you?

I think that first of all my mother had bribed him well on the way to the train, because he did it to us, especially, as you will hear later how he saved us again. And maybe by nature he was-- he wasn't a young man. He was sort of in his 50s. Maybe he was a good person, and he wanted to do something decent for people.

Did you feel singled out?

Yes, because when he came and he asked me-- and I was the only one. He asked me if I want to go back to Oshmyany to see my mother, I knew he singled me out from everybody else. Because nobody else went except the head of the camp.

Did you feel especially lucky?

I felt lucky. I thought that because I looked clean and neat and my boots and my shearling, and I always had my hair, I felt that that made a difference, that that's why-- I didn't let myself go and shumpy and all this. I felt that made a difference.

Here he brought us back to Žiežmariai, and he had the places prepared for my mother, and my grandfather, and his wife, and the little girl, and my brother. He all gave us, and he took my mother to work in the bakery, so we were sure that we would have bread enough to eat. And the rest of us went again to work. And we worked there until the spring of '43.

What was your state of mind? You said you always were a very optimistic person. You are now 14, 15?

My state of mind at that time was, it was one day at a time. I was composing songs and singing with my friends. We were talking about the events, but I remember something distinctly. On a Sunday, when we didn't work, and I was on top of that bunk bed, and I looked out the window, and I saw Christians all dressed up, with their children, the children wearing patent leather shoes, and white socks, and nice dresses, and hats going to church.

And I looked out the window. And I would sit there all day and cry, why? Why is this happening to me? And I poured everything out in the songs that I had composed, all the misery and all the suffering. And then we would sit at night and sing the songs.

There was one other thing that kept us occupied. We would sit in groups, and we would make believe it's Friday in our home. And we come home from school, and all the delicious aromas of fish, and challah, and chicken soup, and chicken is there in the kitchen. And the mother is there, and the white table cloth, and the candles, and we would sort of-- everybody would add how their home looked on a Friday night, on a Shabbat. But of course, we woke up to reality, and it was very, very, very bad.

Would you sing one of the songs that you wrote?

[SIGHS]

In Yiddish?

Mm-hmm.

I don't know if I--

For just a little bit. Maybe a line.

OK.

[SINGING IN YIDDISH]

I forgot. But the end is that I hope that this storm will stop, and just like the river is flowing peacefully by, maybe my life will start peacefully flowing again.

Thank you for doing that. Thank you. This is a song that you composed?

Yes.

Thank you.

Yes.

Thank you.

Then spring came, 1943. And there were rumors that the Russians are pushing back the Germans from the Ukraine, and there were heavy, heavy battles going on. And we were hoping maybe, maybe it will happen to us. But all that happened one day, we saw trucks come in. And people come out of the trucks, setting up stations, and called everybody to come out and to sign up.

We didn't know what to do. We're standing there. And all of a sudden, the chef came to my mother. He said, go back. These people, this camp is going to be liquidated, because the war is getting-- the front is getting nearby.

And this people came. I made arrangements, instead of you being sent to Ponary all to be killed. I found places near the Russian border, where they need to dig trenches and obstacles for tanks. So they took my advice, and they came to sign up the people to go there to [? Pleskow ?] was the name. But he said, don't go because there is something else coming. Let other people sign up. Go into the room, and stay back, and wait until I'll tell you when.

So my mother took me, and my sister. We all went back, the whole family. We didn't sign up. They signed up most of the people, put them in trucks, and they went away. The next day, another group of trucks, a caravan came in, and they opened the trucks. And we saw men with armbands, blue and white on their arms. We walked out to look. We asked, who are you? Where do you come from? They said, we are Jewish policemen from the Kovno ghetto.

And we came out, and then the chef came running to my mother. And he says, now I want you to sign up and go. So we signed up. We were all put on trucks, but not my sister. Because my sister was working in the office. And he said, don't worry. There are like 15 girls working in the office. One day I know where you are, I'll bring her to the Kovno ghetto.

We got on the trucks, and he brought us to the Kovno ghetto. And with us, of course, was my Uncle [? Meyer, ?] that was in the Judenrat, that his daughter, my cousin, was with me. He and his wife, and the other two children, they were already-- they came with us from Oshmyany and to Žiežmariai and then to the Kovno ghetto.

This is tape two, side B. And you were talking about going to the Kovno ghetto.

We came to the Kovno ghetto, and the Jews in the covenant ghetto looked very well dressed, very well-fed. And they were very nice to us. They divided us into two groups.

This is June '43, we're talking. And so you are now 16-years-old. Did you ever have any marking of your birthdays up to this time, once the war started?

None whatsoever. And I was just still as small as when I was 11 or 12-years-old. They divided us into two groups. One group they took into a synagogue, which they converted for lodging. And this is where they put us. We walked into the synagogue. There were mattresses wall-to-wall in the men's synagogue. And in the ladies section up there, there were also mattresses, and they put people there. And every family, we got one mattress. My mother, my brother, and myself. My sister still didn't come.



And the rest of them they took to another building nearby, which used to be a movie house. And they had the same arrangements. They had mattresses there. And that's where my uncle, and my aunt, and their family went to that movie house.

And when we had nothing to do there, we would go out of the synagogue and look around. And one day, two girls came over to me, one whose name was [? Sisa ?] Trotsky, and the other one was Batsheva. And they came over to me. And they looked much older, and they were dressed beautifully. And they asked me my name. And then they said to me, we lived all our life in Kovno. Now we're in the ghetto. And why don't you come with us and come visit our families?

And I went with them, and they really lived in a beautiful house. One of them that I became very friendly, [? Sisa ?] a Trotsky, she lives now in New York. She's the one that I mentioned before. She would know much more about the Kovno ghetto. And they would give us food. And then they introduced us to other--

[PHONE RINGING]

What happened? I took the phone off--

So they introduced me to many more boys than girls. And these boys and girls, they were much older than I am. And they had already an organization. They had an organization. They were in contact with partisans, and they knew exactly what was going on outside. And we used to have meetings and discuss even talk about Zionism. And it was really-- the evenings we would spend there together with these young people from the Kovno ghetto.

Did this group have a special name?

No. No, they didn't have a-- not that I know of, but we would all meet. And it was-- for me, it was for the first time in my life that I belonged to a group, because I was already a teenager, and to a group of teenagers. But it was only intellectual. Of course, people had sympathy, this boy likes that girl. You know how it is under normal circumstances. But there were no dating or anything. We are all concerned about the political situation and about Israel and Zionism.

Was this the first time that you had heard about any form of resistance?

Yes. This was actually the first time that we heard that there are partisans, they are resisting, and they are in the forests. But of course, it was so far away from us that we wouldn't even contemplate to run away or to look for them. It was an abstract thing that was happening at a time. And all of a sudden, I was aware of it.

But in the other places that you had been up to that point, you had not heard of talk of resistance?

Not at all. And we lived in small towns with forests all over, but there were no partisans in our area. In the Ukraine there were, but not in our area. And so we were in shul. And then my sister came. This [INAUDIBLE] chef brought my sister. And of course when we saw her, it was like she came from the other world.

My mother had gotten a job, also in a soup kitchen. And of course, so we always had some soup with potatoes or whatever. Now somebody found out. Somebody came back from Žiežmariai after they found out that the chef took the girls to the Kovno together. They came to look for the girls. They wanted them back, somebody else. And we were afraid that they would come and immediately find my sister, they would take her back.

One of the friends that we made, interesting, she was-- she was-- all my other friends were very educated and sophisticated. Like this [? Sisa's ?] mother was a nurse. Her father was a doctor, and her uncles were all in medicine. Before the WAR they would travel to Paris, and Amsterdam, and to London. So they were all worldly people.

But there was one girl that she came from a very plain family. Her brothers even I think they were like-- they were like truckers or something. But once in a while, we would go to spend a few hours with her. And then I told the girls, I said, look what's happening. They want to grab my sister, maybe me, and take us back.

So this girl of all people, she said, I have three strong brothers. And don't you worry. You come to us, we'll hide you. And they won't find you. And my sister and I stayed with them for several weeks until we knew that they probably had left. And then we went back to the synagogue to be with my mother.

One day, as we were sitting in the synagogue-- this is one of the miracles that I can't explain. We were sitting on that mattress, and everybody was sitting there on the mattresses. And to the west, there was still-- the Holy Ark was there. There were no scrolls, but the Ark was there. And we were sitting there. And outside whoever had some potatoes or flour would make a little fire and cook something.

And then they started-- we didn't go to work yet. All of a sudden, a Jewish policeman comes into the synagogue, and he has a certain piece of paper in his hand. And he says, is there a family Marcus and Jablanovič here?

My mother gets up. She says, yes, I'm Cyla Marcus. He says, and Jablanovič There were two sisters, and they got up. They said, we're Jablanovic. He said, come with me. I have a room for you in the ghetto, instead of being here.

We were shocked. We didn't apply. We weren't pushy. We're just sitting wherever we were sent. We didn't go out of our way, because we didn't know what to do to save ourselves or what's bad or what's worse.

Did you believe him?

Yeah, a Jewish policeman? Certainly. He says come. And I said, but how did you know? We didn't apply for a room? How did you pick us out? He says, come with me. I have a room for you. There is an old lady with a son, and she has two rooms in the ghetto. And one room will be for you and the Jablanovičes.

He took us there to that room, to that lady. We met her-- I can still see her face-- with her son. And the second room, he gave to us and the two sisters Jablanovic. And we stayed there. And then they started sending us all to Ziežmariai. We had to go to work.

First, it was very, very hard work. We had to go where they had the airport. But what they did was, in order to save-- to protect the plains, they had built bunkers around it, like a double wall around the planes-- around the hangars. And in between was filled with sand.

So we had to stand there. They brought-- sand was brought. And then we had to-- and then there was like a platform. And we would have to throw the sand on the platform. Then another group would take the sand from the platform and put it into the hollow in between the two walls to fill up as a protection for the hanger.

Sand is heavy. How did you have the strength to do this?

You had to do it. You took as much as you could, and you did.

You said you were small, and obviously you weren't eating that.

Right, right. So we did the utmost. But I don't remember anybody being hit or anybody being punished. So we did what we could.

Did you do any work previous to that in the Kovno ghetto?

No, no. This was really a short time after I we came, maybe three weeks or so. And then-- and we-- really, we worked very hard there. Then all of a sudden-- and we had to line up at the entrance of the ghetto every

morning. One day, they looked at us, the Jewish policemen, those that were assigning the work. And they said, oh, don't go there. We're sending you to a new place, a new job. My mother, my sister, myself, and my brother was at home always. If we had any food, he would prepare it for us.

So we got in the truck, and they brought us to a place where they made galoshes and rubber boots. And it was warm, and it was clean, and it was nice. And we sat at a conveyor belt. And I remember my job, the galoshes would come on the wooden form. And I all I had to do is-- and I had a whole tray with soles. And all I had to do is put the sole over the galoshes and go over with the roller and put it back, and then it went another few operations, and then it went to a vulcanizing oven, where it was hardened. And that was beautiful sitting.

And what they did, the people from the Kovno ghetto made arrangements for us that every day lunchtime, they made-- they prepared a meal for us there at work. I don't know whether everybody had it. I think just for us, for the people who came from Ziežmariai. And we worked there, and it was really-- it was just wonderful.

And this is how-- so we went every day to work, my brother--

Is this men and women?

Men, yes. Men and women.

Did you notice at this point any difference between men and women, or boys and girls in responding to what was happening?

Really not. I think people kept to themselves, unless it was like a group of friends or relatives that came. Otherwise, people were so absorbed with survival and to have some food for today or for tomorrow, that nobody really discussed anything else. When you are hungry and your life hangs on a thread, you don't discuss philosophies, or histories, or any other topic that normal human beings would discuss.

It was all "today I survive, and let's see what will be tomorrow." But I must say, the people in the Kovno ghetto were wonderful. I remember when we used to come to the gate, there were two Jewish policemen that they were in charge of the gate, the entrance gate. And people knew already. You know, people used to sew pockets into their coats, in the lining. And at work, Gentiles would come, and they would barter potatoes and carrots or bread or whatever, and they would stuff it in.

When we came back to the ghetto in the gate, there was this-- [? Lora ?] [? Aronofsky ?] was his name. And then there was the Lithuanian policemen. And they would start to frisk people. If they would find something, they would take everything away. Somehow this policeman-- and there was Yankel [? Leveblovski. ?] This Yankel [? Leveblovski ?] was even more than [? Lora ?] Aronofsky. Yankel [? Leveblovski ?] somehow had probably bribed the Lithuanians.

So when the gate was opened, he would walk over to one side of the gate, sort of facing the Lithuanian with his back to us, and speaking to him, and with his hand, he would motion [HEBREW]. Which means in Hebrew like, "go, go, go, move on, move on." And this is how people would bring in food into the ghetto and survived. And this is how we went to work and we managed to survive.

Did non-family members come to the aid of other people? Obviously, family members helped each other, but did you notice help between two different families?

The people, the Jews in the Kovno ghetto were tremendous. They also had in the Kovno ghetto, they called it Werkstätten. It was like workshops that they produced shoes and clothing, all kinds of-- I really don't know exactly, and many were employed there. And they managed to get food. It was really-- when I read about what happened in Lodz and in Warsaw, incredible. In the Kovno ghetto--

And one other thing, the head of the ghetto, his name was Dr. Elkes. He was a very dedicated Jew. I remember him. He had a horse and a driver and a chariot. He would sit on his chariot and be driven all

around the ghetto, and everything was under his control. He must have had some connections that made life in the ghetto easier for all the Jews. He was a tremendous man, respected by everybody.

Were you thinking at all about your father all along, or at this time?

All the time. All the time I was thinking, if my father was alive, he would have found a way to save us. He knew so many farmers. He knew so many peasants. If he was alive, he would have taken care of us, because we had so much trust in my father's ability to provide and to take care of us.

Did your mother talk about your father?

No, she did not. Did not talk. No, no. It was sort of a wound that didn't heal in everybody's hearts. One day, one morning we got up, and the ghetto was surrounded. And we heard rumors in the street that they came-- the Nazis came to take 6,000 people from the ghetto to labor camps. And again, they did not-- they did not-- in the Kovno ghetto, they did not give out lists.

So the first thing they did, they went to the synagogue, and they cleaned out all the Žiežmariai. they went to the movie house and take out all the Žiežmariai. Took them to the trains, took away all my younger cousins immediately to the concentration camp. Later we found out they took them to a labor camp in Riga.

But before that, they took away the old people and the children. And then they spread out all through the streets of the Kovno ghetto to grab as many as they needed. And my mother prepared for us already a bag, a sack to take along. But the woman in the house says to us, she says, you know, we have a cellar here, and we can hide.

And I'll describe to you that place. I'm sure you saw Schindler's List. Do you remember that the little girl with her family, they opened a door into a cellar, and they got into the cellar, closed the door and covered it with a rug. That's exactly what we did. We all got into the cellar, and there was a rug attached to the door. And once we got into the cellar, this lady pulled down the door, and she locked it.

And as soon as you pulled down the door, it looked like a rug on top of it. And we were there in the basement, in the cellar sitting quietly and then we heard the Germans coming into the room, looking for us. Where are the people? They saw bags, packed bags but no people. Where are the people? They looked around, but they didn't find us, and they left.

A few hours later, when everything-- we were told the coast was clear, so we came out of hiding, and then we found out that they took away all the people from Žiežmariai. The only two families that survived were us, the Marcuses, and the Jablanovičes that were in this house. Nobody else. Nobody else remained in the Kovno ghetto.

How does a 15 and 1/2 year old young girl handle that kind of knowledge that you just said?

Interesting. I-- I was sad. I was-- I was terrified. But I don't know. On one hand, I was resolved. Whatever will happen to me, will happen. My father was gone. All the relatives are dead. So dying? So we have to die, I'll die.

On the other hand, I was very optimistic, like I said. And I always believed in dreams, even now. That if I have to make a certain decision, I know I will dream about it, and I will get an answer what to do, always. Sometimes my dreams frighten me, because once when I was already in the United States, I had a dream that a relative came, to an aunt from Israel.

And it was maybe two months before Yom Kippur. And I dreamed that night that it was after the fast, and her brother came to our door and he knocked at the door. And I asked him, Moshe, what do you want? He said, you know, my sister doesn't cook much. I know you have a lot of food. Could you spare some food for us to break the fast? And I said, of course. I called him in.

It was a few months before Yom Kippur. On the month of Yom Kippur, somebody knocks at the door. And I

walk over, and I see this man is there. And he asks me, do you have enough food? I was petrified. For something, you know, to-- but I always-- I always believe in dreams, and my dreams give me messages. I know how to interpret them.

When I went to school, I have a master's in counsel of education. I have a master's in marriage and family counseling, which I practice. So when I went to college for my master's in marriage and family counseling, there was many courses, of course, in psychology. And were discussed dreams and interpretation of dreams. And we always discussed my dreams. It was-- I am afraid, you know, to interpret the dream, because I always want it to be good.

Let's go back to when you're in hiding in the cellar.

In a minute. I just want to finish why I mentioned the dreams. That night, one night, I had a dream that I was on a lake, and it was a very stormy lake, and it was dark, and the water was black. And I was there with my mother, with my sister, and myself. My brother wasn't there. And I felt that I saw we are drowning. And we were drowning, and crying, and screaming.

And then all of a sudden, I saw-- I saw a log on the water. And I grabbed that log. And I made my mother hold onto it, my sister, and we swam to the shore. And I got up in the morning and I said, mama, we'll survive the war. I know it, we will. Because my dream told me that we will. You had asked me?

Yeah, what did you do when you were in hiding in the cellar with the top covered over by the rug? Were you able to talk? Did your mother console you? What did you do?

Just sitting. Everybody was petrified, shivering, and listening, and hoping that that door will never be pried open. We didn't talk, because of out of fear that we might be discovered. No, not at all. It was total silence there. Yes.

So here we are, they took away all the people from Žiežmariai, and we continued. And we went on with life, and if we had enough food. Nobody-- I didn't see any dead people in the ghetto. Nobody died of starvation. And then it was in March 1944. The ghetto was surrounded. We got up in the morning, and we saw the Mercedeses and the top echelon Nazis with those leather coats, German shepherds, dobermans. And the ghetto was surrounded.

And we got up, and we were told we should go to the entrance of the ghetto. And we have to go to work. Those that are going to work have to go to work. I had a terrible dream that night before we got up. I had a dream that we were in a big kitchen, and there were big pots of water boiling on the stove. And somebody grabbed my brother and threw him into a boiling pot.

I got up, and I didn't-- I didn't even want to-- I didn't want to think about it. We went to work as usual, but we knew that something was going to happen. And we went there. We started working on the galoshes. And around midday, somebody came and told us that there was an Aktion, that the Germans went into the ghetto, and they took out the old people and the children.

They took them to the Fortress #9, and they were all killed. We came in to our room. My brother wasn't there. We started crying and screaming and tearing our clothes. And the neighbors, they told us how he was begging for his life. And they took him away.

The next day, we didn't go to work. At that time, we did not live anymore in that house with the woman. We lived-- they had two-story buildings there, brick buildings. We lived in a room with other two families in the Kovno ghetto. But this is-- at that time, I don't remember when we switched, but this is where we lived.

And the next day, they told us not to go to work. We all gathered in one of the rooms that had the window to the front. My mother, my sister, and many of the neighbors that survived.

What was your mother like after that?

Oh, my mother was-- my mother was very strong. We all cried. We all tore our clothes. But she knew that she has to be strong for us, for my sister and myself. And we sat there, and my mother immediately, she stuffed up, up my breasts. She took-- she found some red paper and made my lips red and my cheeks, and puffed up my hair, that I should look mature. And we sat there. And they were going from house to house to check, to double check if any children were left.

In the next two doors down, they went in, and some children were hidden there in a bunker. And probably somebody-- the children cried. And they opened up, and they found several children there. And the children were screaming, and the mothers were following them. They grabbed the children by their legs, and they dragged them downstairs with their brains spilling all over the staircase.

And they came down, and we looked out. There were trucks. And they were standing there with their bayonets and sticking into the babies and throwing them inside the truck, like you do with a fork with a piece of meat. And the mothers that cried and objected, they immediately shot them and threw them into the truck with them.

And we sat there. We looked out the window, and we saw it all. The next day, they ordered us to go back to work. And we went back to work as usual. And we did the same work. We came home, and we continued until it was the month of July.

In July, the ghetto was surrounded again. And they told us that the ghetto is going to be liquidated. And everybody should line up, and everybody should take whatever they want, and out of the ghetto. We walked out of the ghetto. And we walked to the river, to the Nemen. This is the river that crossed the city of Kovno.

We came to the Nemen. There were barges, like coal barges or freight barges. And they pushed us all into the barges, again like sardines. And--

After seeing what you just described, how did you have the will to go on after?

Somehow I think it's the instinct in us, the instinct of survival. That as long as you live, you push on to survive. Because as we have noticed, especially later on, people that were in the same situation that we were, but they gave up and they said what's the point? As a matter of fact, one sister of the Jablanovič sisters said, what's the point? We are going to be killed. And she gave up. And she wouldn't eat, and she wouldn't wash, and then she died.

So the instinct of survival as we all know in a human being is very strong of self-preservation, as long-- and in any animal-- of survival of self preservation. And this is how we functioned from day to day, on animal instinct of self-preservation, without thinking or discussing the current situation that we were in. None whatsoever. Only the animal instinct prevailed.

If I can get some food, if we will survive. Well, we weren't even afraid of death. Just like animals. This is what they did. This is what they turned us into. Became like animals without any human reaction to what surrounded us, or what was, or what happened to our loved ones. We were absolutely stunned or petrified into like a four-legged animal, nothing else.

And then it was in July they put us into the barges, on the river Nemen. And the barges were going West. For a few days, the sun was boiling, and our lips were parched, and we didn't have water. And then as I looked out of the barge, the water was so beautiful on both sides and both banks. And there were flowers, and grass, and trees, and everything was so beautiful. And here we where, being decimated in those barges under those conditions.

A few days later, we came to a town which was called Elbing, a German town. They took us out of the barges, and they put us in a train. And we went into the train wherever it would take us.

Did they give you anything to eat on the barge?

They gave us some-- they gave us some water, I remember. And no food, but we did have some food with

us. We tried to stretch it out for as long as possible.

Now you're with your mother and your sister?

My mother and my sister, yes.

How was your health at this point?

Oh, my health was-- I was strong. I was healthy. It so happened that obviously we have healthy genes. And we did not suffer hunger. Because until we came to Stutthof, to the concentration camp, we still had gold coins, jewelry. I remember the last thing my mother sold in the Kovno ghetto was a pocketwatch of my father, a 24-karat pocketwatch, diamond-studded. And she kept it. She held on to it, held on to it. And that was the last thing that she sold in the Kovno ghetto.

Where did she keep all of these valuables?

We would always sew it into a coat, in the pads, shoulder pads, or wherever it was possible. All sewn in. Nothing was anywhere loose. And one by one, you know, she would take it out and sell it for food.

We came to a place which we didn't know where. They opened the freight cars, yelling "Alle aussteigen!" "Get out, line up into five." We walked out, and we saw barracks, lots of barracks, and a tall chimney, and smoke coming out of the chimney. And the whole place smelled like sometimes if you forget you cook meat, and you forget to take it off the stove, and it burns down to the bottom of the pot. This is how the place smelled.

We still didn't know where we were. They took us to a very, very, very large room. And I remember we all had double dresses and double underwear on us, just because we saw that they were taking everything away from us.

This is men? These are men and women?

Men and women. And then the selected. Men separate, women separate. They did not give us tattooed numbers on the arms, but they did right down on the hand a number. And then they wrote it on a piece of cloth. And there was somebody sewing it on the jacket or whatever we had.

And we saw that they were selecting men separate, separating families, women separate, children separate. And people realized already. And they said that they were going to send us to an Entlausung, that we should leave everything behind, because they are going to send us to a place, because they assumed that we had lice, that they are going to send us to a place to get rid of the lice. But people already realized what was happening.

Did you know about concentration camps then?

Not at all. But when we walked in, we saw the chimneys. Some people said to us, well, this is the concentration camp. But we still didn't know. I was in the gas chamber, and I didn't know I was there.

I walked in there, in that next-- in that large place where all the people gathered, there was a latrine. And it was a big, deep hole. And then there was like a board stretched over maybe 20 feet. And whoever needed to take care of their personal needs went in there.

And when I walked in, I went in there, and we saw people were dumping all kinds of jewelry and money and dumping. And then somebody said that several people had jumped in to die there, because they saw what was happening. They were desperate.

As we were there, and they started selecting, selecting-- and there were thousands of people-- selecting, all of a sudden, it came our turn. My mother, my sister, and myself, came our turn. And they told us to go in. There was a door, to go into that door.

Well, it was a small room. It was maybe like-- first it was like 3, 4, 5 people in a queue. And there-- I never saw it in my life. And I was so embarrassed. Because in those days, mothers, especially Jewish mothers, didn't discuss with daughters the period. I know my sister, when she started wearing a bra, my mother sewed her a bra, and nobody could see it. Or talk, discuss the period, it was unheard of.

We walked into that room. There were two chairs, gynecological chairs. And they made the women-- didn't touch me. He made the women get there, put their-- spread their feet, legs, and disperse, and they would check their insides. And I was really surprised, because at that time I didn't know what was happening.

And they would pull out little bundles, probably with jewelry or diamonds or what, and throw it in the corner, which was a big pile. And then, group by group, they sent us in.

Who did this examining, men or women?

Men. Men were there. The SS. SS. And then they sent us into a room that was a square room as big as this area. Maybe I would say 400 square feet. And I saw the walls. And they told us to strip before we got in there, to leave all the clothes behind before we went into that room, where they checked the women.

What were the Germans saying when they were doing this exam?

Oh, to them, they were just-- "up, on, checked. Out, on, out." That's it.

What did the women say?

The women were petrified. They were hiding. They were holding. They were-- some of them were massaging their uterus. I guess they were hoping maybe it would go inside deeper and they wouldn't find it. This is now that I know what was happening.

Then we got into that room. It was maybe 400 square feet. And of course, we were already all naked. And I looked around, and they said they are sending guys to the shower, to the Entlausung, to get rid of the lice. And I looked around, and I saw the walls were all covered with metal, sheets of metal, studded, and the roof. And then from the roof, there were several shower heads coming down.