

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Dolly Bestandig, conducted by Gail Schwartz on July 27, 1997 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This is tape number one side A.

What is your full name? It's Dolly Hirsch Bestandig.

And what is the name that you were born with?

Dolly Hirsch.

Did you have a Hebrew name?

Yes, it's Devorah.

And where were you born?

I was born in Vilna, Lithuania, 24 of July of 1939.

Let's talk a little bit about your family, about your parents or grandparents. Do you know and about some of the generations that went before you?

Yes, I know I was 11th generation born in Vilna since the times of the 17th century, from the times of the [INAUDIBLE] of Vilna. My great, great grandparents were the suffering-- the people who wrote the books and the whole mission for the [INAUDIBLE] Vilna. Our last name was [PERSONAL NAME] or [PERSONAL NAME]. I don't know how to spell it correctly.

And from my grandfather's side-- from my grandmother's side, she was a Gesundheit, and she came from Warsaw. And she married this gentleman growing up when she was 22 and he was 70. She was his fourth wife, I used to have uncles all over Europe, because his first children went to Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, and some of them, like my mothers, they lived in Vilna.

What were your parents' names?

My mother was Rachel-- Rachel [PERSONAL NAME]-- and my father was [PERSONAL NAME] Hirsch. He descended from Germany to Lithuania, also a few generations back.

What kind of work did your father do?

My father was a physics mathematic engineer-- learned in Vilna and in Russia. Received a degree there, even though in those times it was very difficult to enter university. He did receive a degree there as a physic mathematic engineer.

Did he have any brothers or sisters?

Yes, he had a twin sister that I didn't know because [INAUDIBLE].

And what about your mother's family-- excuse me, your mother. Did she do work? Did she do anything?

Yes. My mother was one of the best concert players in Europe. She was a classic piano player. She won the Warsaw prize of Chopin, and she started also in the Conservatory of Paris some years before. They were in-- then she met my father in Vilna when she came back from the conservatory. And they married in 1938, and I was born in the middle of 1939.

How did your parents meet? Do you know that?

Yes I do. I think my mother was in-- she used to tell me she was in like a reunion place for Jewish groups. And my father went there with some friends, some engineers, from the university that finished. And there they met. And he fell in love with-- like she used to say [SPEAKING HEBREW]. She used to say that he fell in love first with her music, and then with her. That's what I know-- that they met like I would say a year before they got married, 1937. They were both very young-- the same age.

How old were they?

Around 22.

Were they very religious? My father was from a line of persons who were not very religious. My mother and my grandmother were very, very religious, direct descendants from [INAUDIBLE] and the [INAUDIBLE] suffering. So they were very, very religious. And until the day my mother died, she remained. After the war, after all that happened, she remained like a wonderful [NON-ENGLISH]. How do you say [NON-ENGLISH] in English?

Faith.

Faith, faith in God, yes.

Now you say you were born in July of 1939, so why don't we first talk about what your mother told you happened at that time, because obviously you were an infant and were young when the war was over. Can you just begin as much as you can in chronological order the story that your mother told you?

She told me that when I was born. I was born in a place called [PLACE NAME] on the [INAUDIBLE]. It's a name given in Russian, in Lithuania for [INAUDIBLE]. But that was the name of the hospital that still existed. And still received Jews at that time. So I was born in this hospital.

And since she was a concert player all the day of her life, and she was not allowed to change the baby's diapers and to cook and things like that, my grandmother went to live with them. They had a beautiful apartment, she says, in Vilna, with Persian rugs and a beautiful Steinway piano for her. And the one who did the diaper, you know, the changing of the diapers, she used to say everything was my father, because she had to practice the piano around 8 to 9 hours a day.

And she said that my father was very, very much in love with me, and loved me very, very much. And then the war started, and 1940, 41, when the Vilna Ghetto opened, we were closed in the Vilna Ghetto. They were taken out.

Did she say anything anymore about what happened, how the war started, where they were-- any these stories about that? September 1939.

Yes, yes. She said that they were living in their house still at that time when they Vilna Ghetto was closing. So they had to move with like five or seven people more in one apartment, and they were very, very crowded. They went on the very old part of the town, the Vilna Ghetto. There she became acquainted with a partisan group-- a very famous partisan group that used to work and all the time that were in the Vilna Ghetto.

And she says that they were all very, very afraid, but not until one year after that, she heard that all the engineers, and they were taking 100 physics and mathematics engineers to a famous camp that the Germans made for to produce radio communications, and that's where they took my father. But my father said that they were going to send me to a-- I say me and my mother and my grandmother-- to any kind of transport. And people never came back. There he would go to that place to work.

So let's say that thanks to him, we survived. We survived those 4 years until we got into the concentration camp. So this was a camp made for--

Did your mother talk about what it was like to be a young woman with a new baby and the war starting in September 1939? You were 2 months old.

Yes.

- Did she ever discuss with you what it was like for her?

She used to tell me it was very hard to be born, you know, like rich and wealthy and have the liberty to go to Paris and visit her uncles and study at the conservatory. And she finished the gymnasium. The gymnasium is like college, I think, today. So she finished the gymnasium. She used to love to write. She used to write very, very nicely, even in Spanish. She wrote the few years that she lived in Mexico.

And she said that it was very difficult and my father used to work as an engineer, and she used to give concert, and they used to go to beautiful concert. And to live like any young couple, really nice. Maybe because of that and the work in those five terrible years, is that my mother suffered a change that a lot of people that were in a poor, let's say in a poor environment, had a strength that she didn't have to support. Because she left the concentration camp very sick mentally-- very, very sick mentally.

And she suffered very, very much and I think that even though my father would think that he would have maybe had survived if he would have been a stronger person, worker of the land or worker of a factory or a person who had starvation or poor. But since they were from another side, let's say the privileged people, they couldn't [INAUDIBLE]. Now I'm going to start speaking Spanish. They couldn't support, you know? They received the lacking of everything a human being should have. So maybe that's why I think for her, my father it was very difficult to survive because of the environment being so, so terrible after being-- after living so nicely.

How was she able to feed you when the war started and when you moved into the ghetto? Did she talk about the availability of food? Yes, the food availability was terrible. My mother was shot twice. Twice she was shot by a German who was walking on a horse. Because once in the Vilna Ghetto, and once in the ghetto where they put the engineers near Minsk.

She saw the wires, but she could, you know, like jump the wires. And there was a field of potatoes, and once there was a field of beets. So she decided that she needed to steal something to make me something to eat. So twice she was shot. She just fell down. She touched herself and she came back.

The food was terrible-- the lacking of the food. There was no milk for me. Until I was seven years old, I never touch any glass of milk, sugar. Just hard bread. That's what she said she used to fill me, and a little bit of soup that she made with water and potatoes and some other vegetable that's used to soak the bread. And that's what I was fed until I was-- well, until after the concentration camps and everything. Very difficult the lacking of the food. And she risked, I would say, very, very much of her life, so I should be able to survive.

My father did too, because he was even offered something that my mother used to tell me many, many times that he was offered by one of the German guards in the prison that they made for these hundred engineers. They made a prison camp near Minsk. And one of the guards took a liking on him, and he offered him to let him a door open and go to Vienna or to Siberia. That's not very far from there, if you wanted to run out.

And he said I can't leave my daughter. I cannot leave my mother nor-- my grandmother was killed after Warsaw. And I can't leave my wife, and I won't do it. So let's say that he did have a chance to escape, but just couldn't do it. Maybe he could have also escaped with the partisans, you know. In Vilna, there was a very big group of partisans from what I've read about them. And he was young, he was strong. But he decided that family was first, and I have to be grateful for that.

You were talking about the partisans in Vilna. Did your parents work with any of them, and if so, what kind of work did they do?

My mother worked with a partisan group giving out pamphlets and going to the bunkers that they made, yes? And giving them things that they needed so that people who were known and who were looked for. Like they'd say one day a

little bit of water, one day a piece of hard bread.

Something-- underground they had bunkers underground, and since she wanted to be helpful, she did that. She went to see what they needed, and she tried to bring them something.

There were the partisans who were in hiding that she brought supplies to.

In hiding, yes, exactly. These were the partisans who were in hiding, yes.

And your father, did he do any work for the partisans?

No, he didn't. He was taken right away by the Germans to work for them. They knew that he was a physics mathematics engineer of radio communication.

My father was the first inventor in Vilna of somehow-- of a movie camera. It was like not a movie camera. Was like the first movement of television that went around Poland and Russia, with a few others [INAUDIBLE], because my mother remembered that before she got married, he was talking to her that they had invented somehow something that you could be vision the person-- you could see them.

Like a movie camera-- not a still camera like a photograph, but a camera that had some kind of movement. Of course, it was the very beginning and probably wasn't developed until much later, but it was the beginning, and that was his dream to do something more for the engineering and the movement of films or something like that.

Was the grandmother that was with you your mother's mother or your father's mother?

No, my mother's mother. But my father's mother and father died in Vilna a few years before they get married. Only his sister was alive.

Now who else was in the ghetto with you besides your parents and your grandmother? Did you have aunts and uncles and cousins with you in the ghetto?

Yes, as many as my mother remember, there were 90 people from the family from my mother's side. Very, very much. The Gesundheits, the Horowitz, and the [INAUDIBLE]. And one sister-- not really sister. My grandmother was very rich, very wealthy. When my mother was three years old, my grandfather died, because he married her when he was 17 and she was 22. So he passed away right away, and he left her a business of many centuries, where they used to make [INAUDIBLE] and books. And [SPANISH] we say in Spanish. How do you call it in English-- where you print books? Printer shop?

Publish?

A publisher. That's right, a publisher. And so she had a lot of-- have children from her husband's children and grandsons, and daughters and sons from her husband that were older than she was. They were all around Europe, and they didn't need the money, so they left her. So she was a very good hearted person. She had a lot of cousins and children from her sisters and brothers who were not rich. So she head up to the [INAUDIBLE], and they grew up the sisters of my mother.

One of them especially-- that was Golda-- just like she, Rachel Gesundheit, she married to a very special man. They were killed during the war, and also their boy, who should be my age. He was a very famous astroman, no. How do you say somebody who studies the stars?

Astrophysicist or astronomer?

Astronomer. Yeah, he was a very famous astronomer. His name was Shia Gesundheit, and he discovered a historical [INAUDIBLE], and it's still in the papers. And all of them were killed.

But she adopted her as a baby, and she grew up with my mother like a sister. She married her off, my grandmother. My grandmother did everything. So she used to help her family, because she came from a very big family, not wealthy at all. One of the brothers, five brothers of this girl, Rachel, who grew up with my mother like a sister and I have pictures that I'm going to send you-- both of them.

These uncles went to Cuba in the year 1920-something, in 1930. And those were the people who found me in Sweden and brought me to America.

We'll get to that in a moment. I just want to clarify something with you. When you and your family went into the ghetto, your father was able to stay with you for how long?

Until 1994.

1944.

1944, I'm sorry. So you do lived together.

In 3 different ghettos. We lived in the ghetto in Vilna, we lived in the ghetto in Minsk, and we lived in the ghetto that they made especially for the engineers.

How long did you stay in the Vilna Ghetto? I would say 1932, the end of 1933.

1942. 1942. I'm sorry.

And then you went to-- your family went to Minsk?

To the ghetto in Minsk, and from there they made the special ghetto-- no, from the ghetto in Vilna to this ghetto made for the engineers.

And where was the second ghetto located?

It must have been very near of Minsk, because we stayed there until the Germans started to lose the war with the Russians from the end of 1944. Then they sent this to Minsk, and from the ghetto in Minsk we were sent to the concentration camp.

So the second ghetto was near Minsk. And was that your whole extended family-- all those people that were in the Vilna Ghetto? Or who went with you to that second ghetto?

No, my father, my mother, and me. That's all. Because he said he was he wouldn't come with us. So they took the families of these 100 engineers. It's very strange, but there used to live there-- a few years ago he passed away-- one of the engineers that survived with my family-- that used to go, one of the 100 engineers. Must have had a name and a place. Must be written someplace, because a lot of people knew about this coming for the engineers, where they were working for the Germans to make radio communications.

What was it like for your mother to have to leave her relatives and just go with you and your father?

It was very, very hard. I think that was like the beginning of falling down for her, you know? When she used to speak about it, she used to cry so much. To remember her youth so much in Zakopane and Paris and [PLACE NAME] and my father, and how he loved her, and her beautiful cousins and their beautiful aunts and the big [NON-ENGLISH] from Vilna from so many generations. She was third generation born in Vilna, 11 generation born from a very, very big family.

And she was like falling apart in pieces. And the truth is that the one who helped her to survive the whole time was my

father. They say he was the strong one, and she was the very weak one. It should have been maybe on the contrary, because she was a very well brought up girl, with a very nice [NON-ENGLISH] with a lot of money. And all that in Europe was so strange at that time.

But she was starting to fall down and fall down, until she got to the degrees of the washing of the bathrooms and the making of things in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen that she told me. There with was like a degradation that she never could surpass, even though she survived. I would say that a person who survived was never, never the person left at their house. Not only had [INAUDIBLE] and the things that she had to do with her works-- the dirty work and the bathrooms and the factories and the slave factories.

It's just that she just said that there was a lot of times that she told me, and I felt when I was a young girl very bad-- was that somehow she blamed me, because I was alive. That she wanted to go on, because it came to a point when we went out from Bergen-Belsen not from Auschwitz, from Bergen-Belsen that somebody told her that my father was taken to the gas chambers the day before the liberation.

And she said, well, I don't want to live anymore, and she was going to do something to herself when somebody stopped and said but your daughter. She's the only child here alive. We all lost our children. So let's say that in the later years, I felt like if I may have been, but not because she wanted to [INAUDIBLE]. Because, you know, I was there, so she had to go on living.

So you then went to the ghetto in Minsk.

Yes. That was the third ghetto. That was the third ghetto.

And how long did you and your family stay in Minsk, and what did your father do at the time?

In Minsk there was somehow like it's a [? slave ?] ghetto also. But there he had to do what everybody else did, you know? Work the trains-- they used to make, you know, lines, train lines?

Railroad tracks.

The railroad tracks. And what else did he-- she told me that he did there in Minsk. The railroad tracks, and I have no idea. Since they dismantled this engineering ghetto-- the Germans-- so they put everybody there in the Minsk ghetto. During 1944, they were losing their war, so they didn't give him a special task, you know? Just imagine the task that everybody had to do there, you know? if They work hard, they would survive. They would go in the next transport.

And your mother was able to stay with you, or did she have to work in the Minsk ghetto?

No she had to work, and I stayed there in that room with a very old lady that they found there. She had to go and work.

What kind of work did she do?

I can't remember, because I think that the clothing and the brushes and things like that she made in the concentration camp. And in Minsk, I have no idea what kind of work she did. I can't remember that.

And then what happened?

By the end of 1944-- by the end of let's say winter of 1944, we were put in some wagons to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. I still remember today being so young. I was what, 5 years old? I remember that packed train. It's absolutely unbelievable.

Friday I was here, crossing the [INAUDIBLE], and my daughter and my son-in-law and my husband went ahead of me. Somehow we got lost. And there were some [INAUDIBLE] young kids. And I had to ask somebody to hold my hand, because it was like living it in again, because we were stuffed. We couldn't breathe. We were stuffed. There was no

water for days and days and days. People were dying down me. My mother put me on top of one, on top of another person, and she was trying to somehow save-- the whole time was like her task was not that she should survive, that I should survive.

And somehow-- I am a very fervent believer in [SPEAKING HEBREW]. I have the faith that there is a special God above us. And I'm a living miracle, you know? That we really [INAUDIBLE]. How could the Jews survive the passing and the crossing of the Red Sea?

I don't have to read that story, because I feel that I do believe in miracles. I don't have to ask myself where was God. I know that He was with me through this thing. Because I feel that I'm a living miracle. How could I survive? How could I?

Your father was with you in the [INAUDIBLE]?

Yes. Yes. In Auschwitz, yes. And then we were separated. The second travel that we had from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, there we were only women.

OK, so you're in the railroad car, and you then arrive at Auschwitz.

We arrived in Auschwitz around November or December of 1944, October maybe of 1944. We went there only 2 months. That entrance to Auschwitz, it's unbelievable. Until today, I don't remember if it was at Bergen-Belsen or Auschwitz. But I do remember that my grandmother gave my mother and advice in the Vilna Ghetto. Since she was a very wealthy woman, and I would say a very wise woman, I survived thanks to her jewelry. I had like a sponge with what do you take a shower-- a [INAUDIBLE] sponge.

And she opened it up, because she said to my mother if the Germans want to know if we have jewelry, they're going to take us out there. And if you think you can swallow it and then go to the bathroom and things like that, don't do it. Put a [INAUDIBLE]-- [INAUDIBLE] they used to tell me at that time. In her bath sponge, put a few diamonds and a few emeralds. And leave them inside, and there will come a time when you can probably open it and change it for something.

And my mother did that, and until we came to Bergen-Belsen, I still had it. Because when they undressed us, that I remember very well, and they shaved my-- we were standing in those famous lines, you know-- right to live, and left to die, and since they used to change them, you never knew which one was to live and which one was to die.

So my mother looked-- she looked like strong, you know? She was very pretty, but besides that, she looked strong. She made her cheeks more stronger. She put on me like that like older people, younger glowing. I don't know what she did.

But she somehow knew which was the line for to live, and she saw where they took the women with a small, small children that they had been carrying. She never carried me. She made me walk.

So she made me walk, and somehow they put her on the line of the living, where there were no children, only women. And they let her through with me in the hem. So that's how I came to survive.

Then they took us to a shower. They took her, too.

We're talking about Auschwitz.

Yes.

Then they took my mother to a place where they shaved their heads. And then they gave her a uniform, and she took one for me-- a long, long jacket. It was like a long dress for me, with a jacket only. Not the pants, because I'm growing.

And then they tattooed her hands, and somehow-- I don't know what she did, but they didn't tattoo mine. It's very, very

funny that they did hers. And I saw that young girls doing it, but mine didn't. Maybe they thought that I wasn't going to live. Maybe they thought they were going to send me to the gas chambers right away. I don't know. They just passed me through.

And when they took her to the showers for the living, not for the dead, for the gas chambers. I had that sponge, and somehow they didn't take it away from me. They took everything. My mother was so worried about her degree-- her piano degree-- and some documents that the whole time she held the documents. But there she had to leave them a little while. In the meantime, we took the bath and the disinfection. I think baths were for disinfection. They said they were going to give it back your things on the way out, and that's when they didn't give you anything.

They give you a little plate. I will remember that, earthenware, metal plate. Somehow my mother get a spoon, because I remember that's where my mother used to feed me the garbage can. I was many months in the garbage can.

Each time she saw an SS man, she taught me a word in Jewish that's says SS [NON-ENGLISH]. And I knew it was time to go into that garbage can. She went to work for many hours in a concentration camp. When she came back, she took me out of that garbage can just at night.

Those were the first few months in Auschwitz. Then too many people came to Auschwitz. Somehow there was no room.

Where was your father? Did you see him at all?

No, not at all. But my mother knew that he was transferred to Bergen-Belsen. When we leave, how, I don't know. She says that one day being in Auschwitz, she went to the wire when they divided the men from the woman, and she found one of those engineers. And he said yes, he's with us, and we are being moved. We're being moved next week or next month to Bergen-Belsen, and maybe you would-- and that's what happened.

Because the last time that my mother changed in Bergen-Belsen with one of the capos was for a package of cigarettes from my father. And she gave it to one of the friends through the wire. And she changed it once a month for me to have a piece of dark bread.

So in Auschwitz, your mother did any work? What did she do?

She worked in a shop-- that they had a slave shop for to make uniforms for the war-- on a sewing machine, and sewing by hand. She worked on something very hard, I don't know. Moving stones-- something that had to do with the railroads also, since it seems she was a strong physical person. So they made her work very hard. But that's also one of the things that helped me to survive, because if she wouldn't have come one day, let's say it would have been a week or something, nobody would have taken me out of that garbage can. At that time already, there were no children-- no children at all.

So you were the only child that you saw?

In that barrack, yes. Until I came to New York, not to Sweden-- I don't know why in Sweden I don't remember children, even though I was in a hospital for children in Sweden. I don't remember-- I never thought that another child existed. And I also thought until very, very-- my late 20s-- that I thought that that was the way one should live, and that I was somehow small.

This is tape 1, side B, and you were talking about what you thought and what it's like to be a child.

And you see I grew up with fear and I grew up in darkness, so I thought life was to live in a dark place, in a humid place. Everything was gray, and everything was black. There were no colors. In the beginning of those times during my years, I thought life was like that. Life was gray, life was black. Life was to be one small one with only grown ups.

At night, I only heard crying and crying, and people dying. Nobody was ever born. I never knew that people had to be born. I was very, very afraid the whole time. I never spoke for one more until I came to Sweden. My mother thought that maybe I had a disease, and I wasn't going to speak. The truth is that they did they didn't know yet in Sweden that I



had a terrible fall in [PLACE NAME] or in Auschwitz or in Bergen-Belsen, or probably I fell in-- the they got those tremendously big garbage cans, so they threw something on top of me.

Because I had a fall and it opened up here on part of my inside lip-- inside mouth. And that's why I didn't eat too much food, because anyway, if I drank that soup, it went halfway through the nose and half on the inside. And I couldn't speak well because of that.

So I was speaking at all. I wasn't crying. I don't remember myself. I remember hearing their cries day and night, and I remember everything is gray, and everything is back, and now I understand everything was suffering. I was afraid of the dark. I was put in that garbage can for months and months. I was afraid of the wetness that I had around me, the terrible cold, the terrible-- at night, the crying of people, crying of people, you know. The shouts of the Germans, the terrible shouts of the Germans. All those dogs-- I remember those terrible dogs.

But I thought life was like that. Maybe that also helped me to survive, because I didn't know any other life. I didn't know children existed. I didn't know the sun existed. For me, it was always dark, always night.

But I do know that there was something about us. Yes, I do believe with all my heart [INAUDIBLE] that there is a God who looks for us, and if somehow I survived and all my family and my wonderful father, wonderful mother-- all of them passed away, the beautiful [INAUDIBLE] of 90 people passed away-- is because there is hand that helped me to survive for something. I don't know if I'm doing in this world good or bad, if I'm intelligent or not-- probably I'm not.

But somehow it was agreed that I should survive, because I would always think this would be the last day of my life. Because my suffering didn't end yet with the war. It's my duty as an adopted because [INAUDIBLE] never had a family. But I decided that not Hitler and not the Germans would win the war. We won it. We are alive, yes.

And I'm sad we will be forever, and they are gone. I'm so sorry. But they are gone, and we are alive.

When you were in Auschwitz, you said your mother-- would she put you in this garbage can every day in the morning?

Every day. So they couldn't find me when they came to look for children and send them to the gas chamber. By that time she already knew about the gas chambers. She knew about the ovens. She had seen them from far away, and she had seen the clothing that they take away. She had seen the [INAUDIBLE] parts of teeth and things like that. She has seen the hair, where they put the hair together to send it to other parts of Germany.

She was also working. I remember one time she told me she was working with something about shoes, feeling [INAUDIBLE] or manufacturing shoes.

So you stayed in the garbage can--

The whole day.

The whole day, and then she would come--

12 to 13 hours.

And where was the garbage can in relation to your barracks?

In the door of the barracks-- in the inside of the door of the barracks. I don't know what kind of garbage they used to put in there. I have no idea. I remember one time seeing bones, but maybe they were not bones. Maybe it was something else. I just can't remember.

And you were wearing this jacket.

That's all.

And then when you would sleep, you would sleep with your mother?

Yes, she would take me up in the barrack, where we slept like 8 grown ups and me. One with her legs to here, one with the legs that way, north to south, and 4 in one barrack and 4-- it's like a 8 people in one barrack. But at least we were not so cold.

And I had my sponge the whole time. I just couldn't believe it. Nobody even cared to take it away from me, and somehow that's how I survived. That's how my mother fed me. I don't know how, but even--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

How did she feed you?

She took out one diamond at a time, and she changed it for a whole loaf of bread instead of one piece that they gave everybody. Because the food was only enough to survive. I don't remember how many calories, but it was like 60 calories. I can't remember exactly. But it was just enough for a grown up to survive. That's all.

So even though you weren't speaking, you could understand--

Yiddish very well.

Yiddish, and you could understand what other people were saying.

Yiddish and Russian. My mother spoke to me in Yiddish and Russian, and then she changed for Polish. And in Mexico, she went back to Yiddish. Because today I speak 7 languages. Not very well, but I do speak 7 languages.

So this is what happened during the day in Auschwitz for how long?

Until the beginning of 1945, around January of 1945, the last four months we spent in Bergen-Belsen. Somehow there was no room, so the people that they thought that were stronger, they moved them to Bergen-Belsen to do a special job. I can't remember the job. I can't remember my mother speaking about a job. I think it was the same thing-- a factory manufacturing clothing and shoes and something that has to do with that.

How did you get from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen?

In another train, a cattle train. All the same trains. Very crowded. Again, you know, my mother thought, well, maybe now we're moving to a better place. She thought we were just moving to another concentration camp into Germany. Maybe also we were moved because Bergen-Belsen was more in Germany-- on the German side. So maybe the Germans in the war-- were losing the war already at that time, so maybe that's why they moved a lot of people from Auschwitz [INAUDIBLE]. Or maybe to fill in Auschwitz more quickly, I don't know. That history can tell you, but I really don't know.

But then that train was absolutely terrible-- the shouts and the agony and the people dying-- the thirst of the people. In the darkness again. I want used to already the darkness. I thought life was dark and black. But the shouting and those people one on top of the other. Excuse me, the people making their necessities there in front of everybody. The terrible smell, terrible, terrible smell.

Yesterday my children told me that they got a good lesson in life. They have to be clean, and their bathroom has to be clean. And my daughter says that her house has to be clean and fixed, and her clothing has to be. Because after the war, until today when I go to work, if I'm in the middle of the work, let's say and I drink coffee at school, yes? If one drop falls on my clothing, coffee or something. I have to do something to change that blouse. I have to do it.

When Pesach coming, and Rosh Hashanah, since I have no family at all, I am always inviting-- I have a lot of friends. I

will have 20 to 30 people and cooking like crazy. Like my daughter says, so it could be 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. I have to clean up the kitchen and clean up the dishes. I can't stand the dirt. I just can't stand it. It's impossible to live with it. A psychologist would say it's a complex somehow. But those dark smells and the dirt and the dirt on top of the dirt.

When you were in that garbage can, what did you think of? You were five years old. Did you think of songs? Did you think of music?

I didn't know it existed. I knew it existed, music. I never knew that it there was a toy. I never knew that was another child alive. I thought that's how life should be-- in dark, humid space with people outside crying and shouting and their bodies all around. One day they took us out, and that was already in Bergen-Belsen.

One of the girls, I don't know what they did. So they put them naked and hanging and everybody should stay like four or five hours in the cold with nothing on, you know-- to see how they were punished. And so I thought that's life. Life is to cry. Life is never to grow up, or just be born maybe. I thought that people were born like me small, and some people were born big. I had a mother, but no nobody else had a mother.

Your mother was very musical. Did she ever sing or hum some melodies to you when you were in Auschwitz?

No, never. Never, never, never. She just used to, I remember, to embrace me, tell me that she loved me, and my father loved me. And she also had a lot of faith that we would survive-- the three of us. Until the last days, she always thought we would survive. And maybe from that she got like a little strength to do the work, because they asked terrible works that she did. Because not everything she told me, I'm sure, but she did terrible works with bodies also. She had to do something. I don't really know what.

She never mentioned her piano, her love for her music. That she mentioned after.

Did you go in the same railroad car with your father to Bergen-Belsen?

No. But somehow they took them, too, because he passed away there, not in Auschwitz.

So now you've arrived at Bergen-Belsen, and where did they place you?

I was 6 years old already. More, no? More than 6? No?

You were 5 1/2. And you arrived in Bergen-Belsen, and did you go through any kind of selection process again?

Again. Again, the same selection process. And my mother, again she passed it. I think she moved from the line once or twice there in Bergen-Belsen. Why? I don't know. Maybe she had a special intuition. I don't know. Maybe they were in a hurry, so they didn't look at why some people were changing from line to line. Maybe that's what it was.

The food when terrible in Bergen-Belsen. I remember my mother being so, so skinny. Terrible-- and everybody being so, so skinny. Like I saw bones in the garbage cans, and bones walking around. And everybody was shaved, and everybody had those terrible numbers my mother had. And those weird stones, gray stones where we walked. And there was a time I had no shoes, and my mother made me something out of I don't know what-- to wear as shoes, because it was January, February of 1945.

And then there was a very famous rabbi that survived from Bergen-Belsen. And so how we came to Mexico, too. His name was [PERSONAL NAME] from a very famous line of rabbis that made rabbi-- in Mexico that was taken [INAUDIBLE] Jews.

And I remember that he used to send messages to the people that we were going to survive, and we're going to survive, and we were going to survive. And somehow those messages came to the woman side, and gave people at the last few months courage. Because there was the moment that my mother told me later that they said that the food in Bergen-Belsen was going to be poisoned, because the Germans didn't want the English army to know what happened. Because

we were liberated the 15th of April 1945 by the English, not the Americans. And somehow the rabbi send an order, try not to eat the soup the last few days. Try to eat only the piece of bread that they give you, at not the water, I think.

And a lot of people did that. They were completely starving. A lot of people I remember died afterwards, my mother told me, because of the chocolates that the English gave them, and tried to eat much more than what they could.

What did you do during the day in Bergen-Belsen?

She put me again in that famous garbage can. Maybe it was not a garbage can. She used to say it was a garbage can. It was not full of water, so it was not for water. But like for dry things. But it was probably garbage, because it was a lot of paper there, and a lot of tools that somehow they worked with in camp.

And somehow I had a feeling of bumps there, of something cold there. I used to be in that dark place again the whole day. My mother used to work 12 and 13 hours a day, since they called up at 4:00 in the morning.

Then at 6:00 in the morning, like one or two hours I had to stand in line. I stood in line with her. And then when they said to start to march, she would put me in that can, and close it with something, I don't know. And said I shouldn't move until she comes to pick me up. And I wouldn't move.

How are you able the age of five to stand quiet for hours in a pail? I will never understand. I will never, as long as I live, understand how could a child not move in a sitting position or in probably like a feral position for hours and hours with that little piece of bread that she left? Maybe I slept many hours. Maybe I was-- I remember being afraid, being afraid because it was a closed place and a dark place, and nobody would come for hours to pick me up.

No, I meant-- you said you would have to stand in line on her lapel.

No nothing, just holding my mother instead. Maybe because many hours I have to be there sitting on the floor in some position of that terrible garbage can that was made out of wood. What I remember was those terrible places with holes that you had to go in the morning around 4:00. So if you had typhus or diarrhea, they would inspect you. So my mother didn't put me in that place where they used to go, like a bathroom. But she put me on the floor on the side in that stall. And then they used to wash with, I don't know what they called it-- the water with something.

Was she able to wash you every day in Auschwitz and in Bergen-Belsen? I don't know. Maybe with a little bit of small something. I don't know. I don't think so. Because the remembrance of dirt and the garbage and the smell, it in my memory too strong today. So I don't really know.

So you were in Bergen-Belsen from the end of January until April.

April 15.

And what was April 15th like for you?

I would say it was a different morning from all the mornings in my life, because the night before I heard my mother and everybody there shouting the English arrived, the English arrived, the English arrived. The Germans are running. The Germans are running. Most of the camp guards and the dogs and SS men and everybody left. I think Bergen-Belsen was found with very few of the guards, very, very few. They got afraid of the English.

And I remember the night before stinking like a pile of fire, because they were burning papers. And everybody had a feeling that we're being freed. We are going to be freed. It's really happening, because my mother didn't put me back in that garbage can. And I stayed with her in the morning, and nobody came for the call at 4:00 in the morning.

And suddenly we had not like shouting. And other people coming in with other uniforms, were not the uniforms we were used to seeing. There was another SS man that they thought they should be careful that she could see me. It was other people, and people shouting and embracing.

And I do remember my mother embracing somebody and falling to the floor to thank him, and kissing his hands. Probably it was a soldier, I don't know who it was. Not a soldier. Later she told me it was the chaplain, and his name was Greenbaum. He was like the rabbi that came with the English. He was called the chaplain, I don't know what you call him. He was a religious person from England that came with the army.

And she was embracing him, kissing and kissing their hands, and I didn't know why she was kissing the hands, something I'd never seen in those few years. Sort of kissing and kissing and crying very, very, very hard, like crying in a different way, you know/ and then all the people started running and embracing. And the shoutings and the soldiers and the trucks, like a chaos went, you know?

I said, what's happening? Like I was used to one kind of world, you know? That same everything was and the lying in the dark and the dirt. And suddenly everybody started running crazy, crazy. And there was some women that didn't look like they were women, the kapos, you know. They looked like six different people, different kinds of humanity.

And then what I remember most is that my mother was smiling. And then there was the wires, and there was the closed, the wires. They opened them up. And the men were running to the women, and the women to the men, in that wire.

And my mother saw some friends of my father, and she started to ask about him, because she knew that two days before, she sent the package of cigars. That was the only thing that they wanted to give her for her last time. And so her friend came and said he was taken yesterday the gas chambers, and then he died. She shouldn't wait for him.

And I would say that that's when my mother completely changed. That's when she broke down, and she didn't want to live anymore. And she said she wasn't going to live, she had what for to live. She just couldn't support anymore. And all her family were gone, and she was all alone, and she didn't want to survive. She didn't want to see Vilna again.

So that's when like a real miracle happened, when another person, another human being, came and told her that I was there, standing there. See that garbage can? That's more or less precisely where I was.

And I was standing there, and that's where the people were. I was like, you know, in the side, very afraid to be able to walk. The light was out. She said but what are you talking about? She said, you have a daughter. Who else do you see with a child? Absolutely no children. But absolutely, I never saw another child.

So she said no, no, I don't want to live. And I think she tried-- before she passed away in [INAUDIBLE], she tried to explain to me many times why she didn't want to live anymore. She just didn't want to. Because she saw me, and she said, OK, she would survive. She would go on. [INAUDIBLE]

But at the last moment, they mentioned that somehow-- somehow they made her understand that she had to. She had to survive. She had to go with me. She forgot who she was, but she was like-- she was in this state of, I don't know, between being absolutely crazy and wanting to run away from reality and have to face the reality that was me.

It took about a day or two to pick me up there. I stood standing there. The police officers came and the nurses came and they fed me. They gave me a little coat. I don't know where they took a little coat from children. And they put me some shoes, and they gave me-- I don't know if it was a chocolate bar or something. It was something sweet that I never used to taste.

They realized I wasn't speaking at all. I wasn't crying at all. I wasn't saying one word. And like 24 or 48 hours happened, and I still wasn't saying anything. I was almost not moving. They went out to find who was my mother, you know?

And so they brought her back. Excuse me one second. I need a Kleenex. Let's see if I find one here. Could I go out one second?

So that was the liberation day, and like two days passed before my mother realized that I was alive and I was there, and she had something to go on living for. And then this strange thing happened. She said, I'm not going back to Vilna. I'm

not going back to Poland. I'm not going back to that, to those places I used to live. Not anymore.

And there were in Bergen-Belsen some Czechoslovakian girls, three sisters. One was like 20, one was 22, and one was like 18-- between 18 and 25. These three sisters, they were like political prisoners in Bergen-Belsen. They were Catholic, and they had no mother and father. They were taken and killed.

And they needed-- they heard that the King of Sweden took all the children, the youngsters, in Sweden, to cure them, to feed them. And then if they wanted to stay and live in Sweden, he offered the castle in Gothenburg to the survivors of Bergen-Belsen. I don't know if true survivors of the concentration camp, but I can't remember. Maybe some were from all the concentration camps. I can't remember exactly.

What I do remember is that these three girls came to my mother, and they said, you see, to go to Sweden we need their mother. We need one grown up to say she would go with us. Could you say that you have four children for the others? Give your name, we'll give you our name.

Besides, I was very, very sick. I had the beginning of typhus. I had tuberculosis. I had this open palate. I had a problem in my heart that is permanent, so I really needed a very good hospital. And my mother thought that was the best place, since the king was going to help us. So we went--

Before we go on, you said these three young women came to you. I just wanted to ask you a little bit more before we leave and go into Sweden, before we get to Sweden-- the role of other women-- you said that when your mother wanted to give up after liberation, one of the women said you have this child. What was your experience with the other women in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen? Did they talk to you? Were they a help to you?

They were a help. They used to touch me every day, because every one of them had lost a little child. So at one point it was terrible, because they used to come and touch me, and they used to say you are really living, and you are a child, and you are a child, and you are living. And they used to cry, maybe remembering their children that didn't survive. But they used to-- all the women wanted to help me. All the woman wanted to have me. So somehow they wanted to take me from my mother, too, because it happened later in Sweden in the castle where we lived. My mother had a terrible problem. Every night I had to go and sleep with somebody else.

But I would say that all the women were very much in love with me, very surprised that I was alive, and wanted to have me to go on living. Because I would say that there were times when I was more dead than alive. I didn't eat. I didn't move, I didn't talk. I think I went, let's say, to the bathroom. I just was like somehow afraid of somebody being there.

Were you attached to any other women, or was it just your mother that you felt close to? Did you have a relationship in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen with anybody else?

No. No. She used to embrace me and hold me very close, and talked very nice to me, and told me about beautiful times and beautiful weather, and then about Zakopane when she used to go with her cousins there to skate, to sporting, or when she went to Paris. She used to speak to me like she was living still in another world.

But other women-- did you feel especially close to any other woman besides your mother?

No. Never.

On a more basic level, how did you go to the bathroom when you were in the garbage can?

Probably there. Probably that's why I felt so wet at time. I couldn't go out. It was very big. I was-- when I came out from Auschwitz, they told me that I was the size-- the weight of a child of probably a year, a few kilos, that's all. And the size of the tall-- no more than a two or three year child. No more.

Did you ever try to climb out of the garbage can?

Yes, I did.

Were you successful?

Never. No, never. I think I gave up on that a few days or weeks after the beginning.

All right, now we're back at that these 3 young women come to your mother and ask if she would pose as their mother, too.

Yeah, that's how we entered Sweden. Because you had to go to a place where they told you who you are. And you said your name and my mother did it. And she said our name and where we came from and everything. And they asked her do you want to go back to Poland, to Lithuania, to Vilna? She says no.

So she told them I have have 3 more daughters here. This and this are their names. And I have one very sick one, a very young child, very sick one. And the king of Sweden said that he would receive every sick person and every sick young girl.

Your mother now was what 28, 29?

How old was she? Yeah, around 28 I would say. Yes, 28, 29. Yes. And so they took us to Sweden, and there in Sweden-

How did you get to Sweden?

On a special train. How did we get to Sweden? How did we get to Sweden? I can remember that train and all. I remember the hospital in Sweden.

When we went to Sweden, I remember with these three-- yes. Yes, I think it was in the train-- a train of people, where you sit like in the bus. Train-- regular train.

And the army of Sweden came to pick us up, but we were not allowed to go out by your own, you see. We were taken in the border straight to the hospital. There I was separated from my mother for the first time in all my life. Because the train was only women, no men. Only women and young girls, and me as a child.