

This is the 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 two, side A.

And you were talking about your arrival in Sweden.

Yeah, we arrived. And the Swedish government was expecting us. We were 100 women. The youngest 17, 20, 20-something. The oldest, I would say, were my mother's age-- like 28, 29.

They didn't let us in the country 'til we went to a special hospital. And that was the first time I was separated from my mother, because they took her to one hospital of women. They took me to another hospital for children. I remember the name. It was called [NON-ENGLISH]. I think that means in Swedish hospital for children. I'm not sure.

And my mother got really hysterical. That's what she tells me. They took us in because we had a lot of diseases. And the king was very afraid that our diseases should spread in his land.

So there were a lot of other children your age?

I was the only one with one hundred women in a castle in Goteborg. But that was later, after the hospital. And they took us to the hospital.

But when you say us, you mean children? So there were other children?

No. No, no, no, no, no. I mean, us, this woman and me. I mean, all these women and me. I'm a young girl. They put me on one ward of the hospital with all the women. The youngest is 16, 17, 18.

And I was the only small child that looked like a child, you know. Everybody else looked like big grown-up woman, even though they were 18 and 20. And they put my mother, like, in the other wing of the hospital. Maybe it was the same hospital. Maybe it was another wing. Maybe it was another building. We had to be started to cure and disinfect all the contagious--

Diseases?

Diseases. I'm sorry. All the contagious diseases that we had. And I had two very big ones. Very frightening for them. My mother was not that sick-- not as I was. So they put her in one, and they put me in another one. And here I am in a white bed, all alone. And suddenly I have a bed and a mattress and sheet. And everything is white. And every nurse is smiling at me.

And they tried to give me food, and I cannot eat. Everything goes out through my nose. So that's when they realized that I needed a special operation in Stockholm. Because I had a [NON-ENGLISH]. That's how they call it.

So they started to feed me with a tube that should go down. They started to cure me first my problem of tuberculosis. And it was in a very, very bad unhappy [INAUDIBLE]. Then they started to try to feed me. And I wouldn't accept food. I don't know. Somehow I couldn't eat. I couldn't accept food.

Then they said I have a problem of my heart. Today I don't know what was that problem of the heart. They called the heart specialist. Then they said I had a starting of typhus, but it was not real typhus yet.

So they put me in that ward. Those were like two, three months that I lived alone. And nobody to speaking, even though the nurses come and smile, took pictures--

Could your mother come and visit you?

She didn't find me. That's what she told me. For her, it was terrible-- I think much worse than for me. That's what I was

supposed to do. And I was doing what I was supposed to do. And I was very obedient of what I had to do.

But since she knew that I was alive and I was separated by her. So one night, she told the other woman in the long room with beds-- she had no clothing to wear, just the clinic robe. So she took a curtain and somehow she found a--

Needle?

A needle, yes, and a thread. And she found one shoe from one color and one shoe besides from another color. And she made from those heavy curtains a dress. She put those shoes. And somebody found her some stockings.

And she went, running, to look for me where I was. She ran and ran, and somehow she got to the hospital where I was. So she begged and begged to let her stay with me. So they let her stay with me. Gave her a bed near me.

And she had to work cleaning the bathrooms of the hospital. To do a job so they could allow her to stay like a worker in the hospital. That's what she said-- that was nothing compared to what she did. To just wash nice, beautiful, white bathrooms.

And probably I was happier seeing her. Probably I ate a little bit more. But many months passed 'til I was allowed to go out from the hospital. The TB didn't want to go away. The beginning of the typhoid was already there.

The heart disease. I don't know what kind of heart disease because thanks to Hashem, till today, I think I have nothing in my heart, only high blood pressure, but that's normal. And for us, by the end of 1946, I think, like a year after, I was, before a year, six, seven months, I was given permission to go to this palace and get them for all those girls that were there [INAUDIBLE]. We were there 100 women inmates, one child.

You were with your mother.

Yes. There the king gave us where to live and food that they used to make in that kitchen for us. That's all. No money, no clothing, nothing. I think they gave my mother a dress and me a dress, a pair of shoes. Maybe they gave us two so we could change or wash or something.

We came to that place, and my experience in that place was, I would say it was terrible. I was not being happy and my mother was also not being happy. Every night somebody else begged her I could go and sleep in their room. They lost their children, so I have to spend every night in somebody else's room. My mother couldn't say no. I don't know.

Maybe they started to be hysterical and cry so she had no [NON-ENGLISH], like we say. She had to give me I should go and sleep one hour here and one hour there. It was very difficult for her and very difficult for me.

My mother, besides being a brilliant piano player, she used to know how to write a few languages. But very, very nice. I will send you one letter that she sent to the Jewish in Bern, in Switzerland, the Jewish Congress. How was it called? Jewish Appeal. That's where they put all the names of the survivors and that's where the survivors try to look if there was another survivor somewhere in the world.

So my mother wrote a letter of five, six pages. I have it. It's in Polish and it's in Yiddish, and it's a brave letter. It's so impressive, you know. She asked for a few cents to be able to buy a few stamps and try to send some letters to some families that she thinks, some cousins, that are in America. They went to Cuba, but she remembers that the last letter we got in 1939 was from Managua, Nicaragua.

That letter she writes who she is, from whom she descends, how she survived with one little child, that she has never begged for money in her life but she would like some money to buy some stamps and some money to go in a train to Stockholm, where I need an operation to be done. And she knows that the operation will be free but that's the only place where they told her there was a possibility that we should close this up.

And she tells the history of her family and how she survived, and she wants to be a Jew again. She doesn't talk bad

about God or why did He punish her or why did He take all her family away. She doesn't complain. She says she was born a Jew, she wants to go on being a Jew. She was between a lot of Christian people.

In that place, I would say that not the 100 women were all Jewish. They were like these three girls Czechoslovakia. And probably there were let's say like 20 Jews and 80 non-Jews. So she wanted to go to a Jewish place.

She wanted to try to get me this operation, and then she wanted a few pennies to buy some stamps to try to locate somebody in America, not in Poland, that were survivors. Her family that went out from Europe before the war.

We got a beautiful letter of response. And of course some Swedish money. My mother bought herself a watch because she says she couldn't live without knowing the time. She just won't stand it any more. At that time she already remembered that she was a pianist and she could make some money in Sweden giving concerts. Everybody said she was absolutely crazy. How would she attempt to play piano after these five terrible years with what she did with her hands? And she probably wouldn't remember anything.

And today I remember that she used to play the piano. Everybody told her that she lost her memory. She grew even in more concerts. She gave just one in Mexico with big, big palace in Mexico. Because her memory failed her, she started with one, with Rachmaninoff concert number two, and five minutes after she was already in Chopin, where she was already in Beethoven. Her mind with her skill and technique was absolutely unbelievable. People just couldn't believe how her hands looked. So when she got that money she bought a watch, she bought me a dress, she bought herself a dress and a coat.

And we went to Sweden. We said goodbye to these hundreds of residents. We went to Sweden.

You went to Stockholm?

We went to Sweden. We went to Stockholm, that's right. And there I was put in a special hospital. That was a hospital where I saw that there were all the children. Other small people. Never talk to nobody of them. What impressed me was that those children had people to come every day and visit them and I had nobody to come and see me. My mother wanted to do something to earn some money. They let her stay in the hospital and gave her a bed to sleep. I don't know if near the hospital, in the hospital. And she worked there. She worked there again like cleaning bathrooms or cleaning dishes, things like that.

Then she remembered what she was. She remembered she was a pianist. So they offered her to give some concerts and they said they will pay her for the concert. And one night, I think it was the first week that I was in the hospital, I wasn't in that operation yet because they had to first feed me and everything so I should be able to stand the operation. And they put you in a tongue, so you shouldn't touch your operation with your tongue. And I remember that very well.

They put you like a tongue, and you have like feeling off a plastic thing and suddenly the food does not go through your nose anymore. Suddenly you eat it and everything goes down. It was like also the taste of food they never had the taste of food. So I couldn't have it even if I was given food before already another hospital, I had no taste of food.

My mother went to give this concert. She was so happy because they paid her and she was coming at night in Stockholm. She was walking to the other hospital. It was the same city, not far away the place where she gave a concert. I think she was very successful in the concert and she remembered to play without music, without notes, without nothing. Maybe she know already notes.

She was walking to the hospital, so happy that she had earned a few dollars worth of Swedish money. And a car went by, and she had a car accident. It rolled over her. She didn't see how to cross the street. She was not used to cars.

Those were the first cars in Sweden. Probably people weren't used to driving. So when she crosses like crazy person. So she was taken to one hospital to be put in casts at both legs.

So two, three months, two months I imagine I couldn't see her. And I remember very well there were children in the

other beds quite far away from me. And I remember that used to have visitors that brought them toys, chocolates, things I've never seen. Came in smiling. So the nurses there used to tell the people, go and say hello because I had nobody to visit. So people used to come and say some words that I didn't understand at all. And sometimes would maybe bring me a flower and candy. I don't know if a toy. I don't remember seeing a toy. Never a doll.

Then after a few months, my mother, a few weeks probably, maybe two months, my mother came back. And in the meantime at that time she wrote letters and letters trying to find my uncles. And they would try to find survivors from the family through the Jewish agency in Switzerland. National Jewish Congress it was I think at that time.

And my mother wrote a letter that I would say somebody was taking care of us I would say again that I believe that the Hashem just guides us, and so it made us survive and find our family. Because that time she wrote a letter with the only advice she could remember, Managua, Nicaragua. Sholem [? Gesundheit ?] was one of the five brothers. And that's it. America.

That's when I came to Nicaragua. All my uncles left Nicaragua because they were single. They were not married. So a few years, let's say, like during the war time, in the '40s, in the beginning of the '40s, they moved one to New York, one to Miami, one to Salvador, one to Mexico-- two to Mexico, to get married, to find Jewish girls.

So that letter arrived in Nicaragua, Managua. And the person who received that letter knew the Gesundheits. And knew that they left for America and for Mexico. So believe it or not, they sent to Mexico and to New York those letters. And that's how my uncles new we had survived.

Right away they sent us money. They sent us tickets for the ship to America. They sent my mother money. She bought a dress for herself and a dress for me. And then she wanted a watch that really should work. And still today, I have her [INAUDIBLE] that she wore, that she bought in Sweden. And they called. And she said that when I'll be cured, she was going to take this ship to go to America.

She found some Jewish people in Sweden. Very difficult, but she found them. Because in the letter that she wrote to the Jewish Congress, she said, I survived to be a Jew and I want to be a Jew again. I don't want to live between non-Jews. I have suffered a lot. And if I survive, I want to go on being Jewish somewhere.

We found some Jews, very little in Sweden. One of the ladies was very, very nice to me. And she used to come and see me later on. I had to be in the hospital for a few months more because this palate that they put me had to be taken off and see if the operation was good enough.

Because they said to my mother, the first time we're making this operation. We don't know, maybe it will open up. And in a few years, you need another one. But this can be solved. And she'll be able to speak perfectly normal. And she'll learn how to speak. And I'm sure that when she gets big-- what happened is that during the war, having this, and not being able to speak, even if she wants to, that's what made here not. It's not that she cannot speak.

The truth is that after they took that palate still in hospital, they made me say a few words in Swedish. And I said them. And my mother started to speak to me in Russian. And I answered her in Russian. Sometimes she'd speak to me in Yiddish, and I started to answer her in Yiddish. [INAUDIBLE] in Polish, because at that time she already spoke three languages with me.

She was, as I told you before, she came out very sick from [? her head ?]. So she would change from language to language. She would change from one mood to another, like this. She thought sometimes she was in some place else. She had a tic, a nervous tic, that never stopped, to the left or right side of her head. And she used to put up her shoulder and touch her head with the shoulder.

But she tried to live again as best as she could. She tried to be a good mother, even though I will never remember her doing a meal for me, not in Mexico. I will never remember that she would come and say, can I do-- can I help you with your homework? Shall I go and buy you a pair of shoes?

When she saw that my shoes finished, she would go and buy me a pair of shoes. When she saw that my uniform was almost used, then she would go and buy me another uniform. But after the war, she gave no importance for whatever she used to have before. She didn't care about clothing. She didn't care about food. She didn't care about-- she was very pretty, but she didn't care about looking pretty. She gave the family, the first day in Mexico--

How long did you stay in Sweden?

I would say like a year and a half.

And then you left Sweden when?

In the beginning the 1947.

And you went directly to--

New York. And that's the biggest impression that I remember all the days of my life. Coming to New York and seeing cars. My uncle went to receive us at the ship. The ship was so-so. I remember the whole time, my mother and I were throwing up. Maybe we were not used to a ship. And it was many weeks it took us to come to New York. I can't remember.

It was a very good ship, a first-class ship. We didn't went to a very, poor-class ship. No, no, no, no, my uncle sent us money we should go on a first-class ship. But somehow, it didn't-- it didn't work for us very good, that trip.

And then he would come. And my uncle comes and embraced us. And here we go in New York, in Manhattan. And I get so scared, and started to cry, and tried to hide. These cars were like animals. And so many people, people, people, people, people. And then suddenly, I see children.

That's when I asked my mother, for the first time, look, I said, other children. Somehow, in the hospital, I didn't realize that there were children. I saw the big beds. It was a real shock to see that other children existed. And when my uncle took me to a store, probably Macy's, Gimbel's, I don't remember, and bought me a doll, I'm just elated, in heaven. Milkshake or a chocolate milk for the first time in my life.

And I ate an egg, a scrambled or fried egg, and the white bread. I thought this was another-- a complete other world. I thought that New York was one kind of the world, and the world I came was not on the same Earth, not in the same space. It wasn't occupying the same space.

And till today, I've never asked, God, why was I born there? Why were other people born here? Why was my fate to be there? And why other people [? didn't ?]? But I will be always thankful for my family to bring me over to America. Like my mother used to say, to walk in the park in Mexico, and breathe the fresh air, and see the flowers grow, she doesn't need anything more.

She gave thanks for everything that people take for granted. That people take for granted to go and work, Chapultepec park, and write beautiful poems. I have one-- I'll send you a copy-- in Jewish that she made for them.

There was a book of music made out of it, not only of the partisans. It was made in the Warsaw ghetto. She brought it to Mexico. She got it in Sweden, I think. Or it was passed to have from the ghettos. I really don't know how it was sent to her.

But she has the letter from those famous songs that, "Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn vet." And she has the notes and the letter of all those songs. And she used to play them later in Mexico. And she wrote a poem. I think they published it in Mexico in a review. And I'll send it to you.

When did you get to Mexico?

We got to Mexico-- we stayed in New York for a week. And then we took a train. We traveled by train. And my other two uncles were waiting for us in Mexico City. We had to stop in the border in Laredo. We went through Texas, to Laredo, Texas.

And it was a very funny thing happened to us, which was we had no passport. We were [NON-ENGLISH]. How do you say? With no passport. Still today, I don't have a birth certificate. My mother also lost her birth certificate.

So we came with a Swedish passport that said that we had no country that we belonged to. Because going into Sweden-- in Bergen-Belson, we had to say what nationality. We said we were born in Vilna, but we had no nationality. We didn't want the passport.

So we went to Sweden with no passport. We came to New York. And my uncle gave a-- paid a fee for us, a few thousand dollars. But we were not staying in the United States. We could have tried if we wanted to. But they thought that Mexico, the climate was better.

And my uncle, who married in Mexico, had a very nice house, white house. He was just married and had one baby. And they thought that the climate, and the weather, and everything would be better in Mexico than New York or Miami for us.

So we crossed the border in Laredo. We came into Mexico. And the typical Mexicans, they don't understand not our first name, not our last name. They don't understand nothing. We don't know one word of Spanish. My uncle didn't-- they didn't let him cross to the immigration to tell them our names.

My mother could explain to them my name, and her name, and our last name. It took, like, I'd say, four or five hours. And 15 different guys, they came over. She wrote them down on a paper, our names.

So we crossed the border. And we met our uncle there. We had one stop in Monterrey, because one of them was living in Monterrey, on the border near Texas. And the other one was living in Mexico City. We were going to go to Mexico City to live.

And there, the first day, when we came into that beautiful house of my uncle, my mother got such a big surprise. A big piano, I would say, pianola, the big one. It's called a pianola. There was a beautiful Steinway piano, but a beautiful one waiting for her.

Our first day in Mexico, I don't know how to tell you, I was very frightened. I wanted to sleep under the bed and not on top of the bed. My mother thought that tomorrow she won't have food. So my aunt told her, look, here's the refrigerator. And here is the fruit and vegetables. And you can come as many times as you want and open and eat anything.

Every morning, my aunt had to go to her bedroom. It was a special, beautiful bedroom. My mother had under her cushion one mango, two bananas, a cup of milk. Every morning. And my aunt said to her-- the avocados, because she had never tasted avocados.

So everything was squashed. She had to do it for months and months. And then she starts to do something that would last till the end of her days. And that was she couldn't sleep. She couldn't sleep. She used to sleep from 8 o'clock in the morning, let's say, till around 12, at lunch. And that was her sleeping-- 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, at night.

I went to school. I had a terrible experience with a teacher in school, a terrible experience. Maybe that's why after I went to the university in Mexico I decided to take-- went into a special school to be a teacher. That's what I had been a [HEBREW], a Hebrew teacher, the Bible, in Hebrew, for 26 years.

But first I went to a university. I wanted it to be something else. When I went that first day and second day to the Jewish school in Mexico, in the first grade-- I was seven years old, in the first grade-- we had a Yiddish teacher. We had a Hebrew teacher, a Spanish teacher, and a Yiddish teacher. He was our Yiddish teacher. We took three languages in that school.

The girls used to pass-- at that time it was on style to collect the wrappers of the chocolate, that came in silver paper. And the used to collect them and change them, interchange them. So here I come from a concentration camp. I have been beaten. I have been starved. I have been through so many terrible things.

And this teacher is supposed to be a teacher and know how to comport himself to behave with children or to educate children. The girl from the right passes the little paper to the girl to the left of my seat. I'm in the middle. When she passes one to the other, in the middle, in my bench, the silver paper stops there in my bench.

What the teacher sees is that I have here on my bench this little silver paper. He takes me from one ear out of the class, hanging on my one ear. And I start to bleed. And no human being could make me go back the next day to school, but I didn't want to say why. Since the bleeding stopped in school, I didn't want to say why. Because I was used to-- well, that's the way people behave and I have to shut up.

So my aunt comes under the bed the next morning-- Dolly, you can't be here. Please tell me, why don't you want to go to school? Please, please, tell me. And my mother got annoyed. And she says, What do you mean? You were so happy the first few days. And what do you mean you don't want to go to school? You are lazy. You are bad.

I couldn't-- I couldn't get the nerve to say what happened to me. I just couldn't say it. So my aunt, after a week that I don't want to go, and I'm under the bed. No, she cannot take me out. So she buys me another new dress. And she takes me to school. She puts me in my beautiful starched uniform and she takes me.

So I go with her hand to the class. And I see this teacher. And I start hysterical to cry. Never cried before. They could do me anything, I never-- I start to cry. So she understood that something happened in that classroom. And then one of the children probably told her what happened.

So they changed me to another school. There I was happy till I finished high school. And that school was also a Jewish religious school. And I would say that was much better for my education than the first school, that was a Jewish school, but a Zionist school and this was a religious school. My mother did want to give me a religious education.

This is tape two, side B. Before we go on about your life in Mexico, you had said previously that you were beaten when you were in-- during the war. When did that happen? And what happened? What were the conditions of that?

I was terribly beaten one day in Bergen-Belsen. I don't know why. I really can't remember why, but it was not a German officer. It was one of those kapo women, those women that were in charge of the other women. Probably, I did something what-- I will never remember, but terrible terrible beating.

My mother thought that I would die. But I didn't. Maybe that's why it happened, that's when it happened that this opened up. Because in Sweden, they never understood how did it happen, if I had a bone or something in my mouth that was stronger than my palate.

So your mother had told you that you were beaten?

Yes.

OK, let's go back to Mexico. So you changed schools.

I did.

Did you continue to live with your aunt and uncle?

I continued to live with my aunt and uncle for like a year. And then my mother married. She remarried to a man, to a Mexican man who had lost his wife from cancer. And my mother died afterwards, a few years afterwards, from the same disease, from cancer.

He had two married children and one 16-year-old girl that married two years after my mother got married. And he was a nice person, but my uncle knew about him. And my uncle got very sad. And I will say that the rest of my mother's life, he was quite mad at my mother. Since she thought that she-- everything was good, you see.

And whatever she got, she thought it was a prize to her. And he told her, this man that you're marrying, it's not a very good person. He won't give you a good life. Why do you want to remarry him. Look for somebody else if you want company or look a little bit more. You have everything with us.

And the truth is, what we had with my uncle, we never had in that house. We later had a little bit more because my mother started to receive money from the Germans. That's how I got later dresses and [? that treat ?] when she invited her husband to a trip to Israel, to Canada, to the United States.

He was a very stingy person, not a bad person. He never adopted me, never liked me like a daughter, never treated me like a daughter. I was like some type of furniture there. She couldn't realize it because she was so sick mentally.

What year did your mother die?

'58-- '57. '57.

So you were 19.

18, 17-18.

And so you continued to go to school, to high school.

I went to-- yes I went to junior high and to high school. And then I went to work. And he said-- had this sweater company. So in the morning I used to work in his store. And from 4 till 9 I went to the university to study. Then I met my husband.

He was born in Berlin and had also a terrible life. But they were the lucky ones who went out early, in 1936. They went to Belgium. And from Belgium to Paris. And from Paris to Portugal. And from Portugal to Spain, then back to Paris. And then to Cuba in one of those boats in 1942 that did receive Jews. And from Cuba to Mexico. And that's another story. But I was very lucky to find him.

And when did you get married?

I got married in 1960. I was 19 years old. No?

20-21. And then what happened?

Then I suffered in my youth with my mother still living. Something that I would say is terrible because we should have been so attached to one another. We were, but we were not. Because every day, I had exams the next day, in junior high and high school.

2 o'clock, 1 o'clock in the morning-- I had to be up at 7:00, because at 8:00 I went to school-- 7:30 I went to school-- my mother started to give a concert. And she would play. I would wake up 1 o'clock in the morning with a [? pathetic ?] [SINGING]. [INAUDIBLE] Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, for hours, from 1 o'clock in the morning, till 7 o'clock, she wouldn't stop playing. One piece of this, and one piece of that, then one piece of that, and one piece of--

She never went into the kitchen to make a meal for me. She worked with this man in his factory. And she used to teach. She used to teach music lessons. She gave one big concert in Mexico and wouldn't go on because her memory wasn't OK. She really never took care of me, never.



It's like very small things, like girls should be told that she's going to get her period. I was like almost 16. Very, very small and very tiny. And I thought that I was not normal because my girlfriends from the same class had already had their period since three-four years, at least. She never stopped to tell me that maybe because of what I went through. Maybe the doctor told me. Maybe that's why I got late.

Because I went one day, when I was 16 to sleep, one size. And it's unbelievable. I tried to put on my skirt, and my jumper, and my blouse. And everything is short, like 40-50 centimeters, I grew in a week, what four years I didn't. And suddenly, I get my period. And I really get scared.

But we were not living in the same world. She used to say the name of my father, of her friends, of her cousins, of the dead people. Used to play music. She never used to go to the kitchen. To do something-- I went to the refrigerator, and there was some food, because in Mexico, we're used to have maids. So she was lucky, she had a very good maid that served many years with us.

So she used to-- my mother just bought the kosher meat and had it-- and she told her, this is for her to have things of challah, of milk, and this is for [NON-ENGLISH], for food, for meat. And so if the maid made a meal, I had a meal when I came from school.

OK, you're now a young married woman and going to university. And then you said you felt you had the need to go to some kind of counseling.

Yes, at 22, or 23, I had a need to go to counseling. I needed to make some [? roshes ?]. And at that time, suddenly I'm speaking about something absolutely different. And I see the barracks and the concentration camp. And everything comes like alive again.

Why did you feel you had the need to go to counseling?

I was very depressed. I was a few years married and I had no children. And everybody-- every doctor said that I was nervous. And for me, it was very important. I had no mother, no father, no sister, no uncles. My uncle passed away also, very young, from a heart attack. I wanted to have a family. I really needed-- I have to have a family. They wouldn't [? won ?] this battle with me.

And every doctor said that I was nervous. They made me test. Every test came fine, every test. I went to Houston, I went here, I went there. And I found the Margaret Sanger research in New York in 1967, and that's where they found out that I had TB again.

They couldn't believe in Mexico, they were so [INAUDIBLE] doctors. Why didn't nobody took me an X-ray on my whole body. They found the TB all over my body. I would have died in another year or two without knowing of what.

This was in New York City, you said?

In 1967, I decided-- one thing was that I went to a psychiatrist, yes-- psychologist. And I was very depressed that I couldn't get pregnant. And that's how I became aware of all my past and remembered--

How did that happen?

Sitting and speaking, like I'm speaking with you. I saw everything, like I was seeing a film. Everything, everything-- the bodies in the-- in the concentration camps, and the walking in the storms, in the rain, in the cold. And the barracks, everything.

And this these memories were not memories that you had up to that point?

Up to that point. Up to that point, my mother told me everything. And that's what I had in my mind, what she told me. But suddenly I see, like if I'm seeing-- watching a movie.

And what was your earliest memory?

Sweden, in the hospital, before that.

And then once you have this counseling, what was your earliest memory?

A very, very small, young child in the concentration camps, in both concentration camps. That's all not before that. [INAUDIBLE]. That I know because of my mother telling me that and because I [? lived ?].

So do you have any memories of your father?

Not at all. If I wouldn't have gotten those pictures from my uncle in Israel, I would have never known who my father is.

And then when you got this kind of counseling and you started to remember, what did that do for you?

After six months, the psychologist asked me and begged me not to come anymore. Because what happened was that I didn't know it, but I was trying to kill myself. I didn't know it until he told me.

I had to go every Thursday, yes, every Thursday afternoon, after teaching in the morning. I finished already the university. And in the afternoons-- in the morning, I was teaching in the high school. And in the afternoon, I was taking a course, a masters, of how to be a Hebrew teacher.

This was a psychologist?

A psychologist.

Not a psychiatrist?

No, no, a psychologist. A Jewish psychologist. And one Thursday, I know I have to be at my appointment, so I eat. I go down the steps from my apartment. I fall down one little step and I break my leg, the right leg. So I called her up, from the hospital, from the English hospital. That's where we go in Mexico. It's called the English Hospital. It's all with Jewish doctors.

And I'm so sorry, I broke my leg. I cannot come today. But next week, I'll go with my crutches. So I went like, let's say, two or three weeks, with the crutches. I take off the crutches, I'm fine again. I go another month. I go up to the supermarket to buy something. I go down two steps, I break the other leg.

So here, I call her up-- I'm so sorry. I fell an hour ago. I'm at the hospital. I broke my other leg. OK, Mrs. Bestandig. So when will I see you? I said, well, next Thursday. They'll put me some cast. And I'll be in to see you next Thursday.

So I go with my cast for six weeks this time. They take off the cast. And two Thursdays after they take off the cast, here I go again. I fell from all the steps. I don't take the elevator from the fifth floor. I decided to run because it's getting late for my appointment, [? it's 4 almost 5 ?].

So I decided to run the steps and not wait for the elevator in my building, to take my car. And guess what, I fell again. This time I broke one hand. And this time, it was very hard, because I fell from 22 steps. I had to go to the hospital.

They put me a cast on the arm. I was getting used to it. My husband says, I don't understand you, Dolly? What is it? You [INAUDIBLE]? Everybody was making fun of me. It was like a joke around my friends-- she's falling for the steps every day.

So when they took off this cast, I still went [? like a man ?]. And then, one day, she says, look, Dolly, I understand it's very hard for you to remember. Because I used to go in those two hours there, crying and crying. Not like now, baruch

Hashem now, like unspeakable.

I was ashamed many years to speak about it. Because I felt that I had no right to live, to be alive. I was ashamed to be alive. And then a lot of people made fun of me. And the teaching university in front of 100 students, made me pass to the front of them, which was my fault. In the beginning, it was my fault.

We were in the class of Spanish literature, in Latin literature. And he said if there was somebody in the class who wanted to read this classical poem, and I-- stupid of me, I decided to raise my hand and go forward and read it. I loved that poem.

And I thought my Spanish was good Spanish. So I read the poem in front of a hundred people. And then this Spanish-speaking teacher of Latin tells me, thank you, Miss Hirsch, please go and take your seat. And then he turns to all the class and he says, what you have heard now is the worst destroying person of our language I have ever heard. He says, no intonation, no language.

He forgot or he didn't know, I was-- I was speaking something that I learned for six years. How could I explain to him that of course my voice is not a beautiful voice? But since that day on, I've never been able to speak. I worked in the WIZO the Women's International Zionist organization-- as a president for many years, to help Israel. And I had to give speeches. I wrote them down, but I never could speak them.

When you went to the psychologist and all these memories kept coming back, how many-- did you go for session after session?

Until one day, she told me, I'm telling the story-- Dolly, please don't come back any more. Why? Have I done something wrong? No, you haven't done nothing wrong. I am afraid that next time is going to be your head or something worse and you won't come out from it so easy, like maybe just today.

Says, you are doing this yourself. Because probably, you are blaming, and you will blame all your life, because you are alive, and not your father, and now, not your mother. And you are ashamed because you--

And that's true. I have been ashamed that I was there. I don't know why, till today, I'm ashamed that I was there. Maybe because my Jewish friends in Mexico had such a beautiful time to remember.

Maybe because they didn't understand me. Maybe because they never believed me. But I have a book from the Vilna ghetto that was sent to my mother, the only one that I think-- I think there are two or three in the world. If I can, I'll make you a copy, where you can see all the atrocities, the terrible, terrible-- in some of the pictures that you have here in the museum, the same ones.

So I have always been ashamed that why did I survive? Why am I alive? But then when I ask myself why Hitler-- not only did he punish me at that time, he not only took away my family, and my ancestors, and my roots, he destroyed, they wanted also to destroy my future.

So that's when I went to the Margaret Research. And I felt the hand of God again on me. Because everybody in Mexico said and everyone-- oh, you, you are nervous. But believe you me, I went today. And I'm a nervous wreck, but that time, I was never nervous.

So I asked my husband, I said, I know I went to too many doctors, too many clinics for this last seven, eight years, but give me a chance to go to one clinic. And he said, I don't want you to suffer [INAUDIBLE].

And the test that they made me, they put you some kind of a liquid that goes up to the shoulders, from the uterus to the shoulders. And the pain in the shoulders was very hard. And he didn't want me to suffer anymore.

His parents didn't want me-- they still believed [INAUDIBLE].

In other words, you were trying to have children, and these were tests to have children.

Exactly.

So then you said you went to the Margaret Sanger Clinic?

Somebody recommended me here in New York. They said I had to stay there seven weeks. So we took an apartment. My husband went back and forth, because he was-- he's a chemical engineer. And he had to do his work. But something had to be done with it. So he came back and forth. We were six and a half weeks.

That was how many years after the concentration camp? I went out in 1945. And this was '68. And everything was OK. And then at the last moment, the doctor said, before your husband comes back to here again to speak with us, you know what, Mrs. Bestandig, you have never done an X-ray of all your body, have you? No, I said, because I have been a healthy person. So now I came to Mexico, nobody told me to go and make an X-ray and checkup for my body.

He says, So go upstairs to this and this floor and ask the girl she should make you a-- a whole X-ray of my whole body. So I go there. And I'm lying there on that table, with no clothing. And the doctor comes in the middle to tell me I can already put on my clothing. And he sees this film. And I hear how he shouts to that poor nurse. Why are these pictures all white?

[INAUDIBLE] but big white-- white thing all over the uterus, everything, the stomach, almost in the lungs, the whole body. He says, I put clean sheets. And please, would you take them again? Because something is wrong here. This couldn't be-- this is not possible it should be like this. So he asked me, please, forgive us, we have to take all the shots again.

This time, when he came in and he saw the same thing, he said, you can get dressed, please Bestandig. And come tomorrow with your husband. We have to talk to you. And I saw their faces. There were six doctors there. And I saw their faces. And I said to my husband, I'm having a cancer and if I die, I'm leaving this world-

[INAUDIBLE] you think, it's a cancer what you have. At least in '68, that's what everybody thought. You know what they said? I think it's a miracle that you decided to come here. And I cannot forgive all the doctors in Mexico. I know the names of your doctors. They're very famous, like Dr. [PERSONAL NAME]. Not making you one X-ray.

You are full of TB. It became alive. It's probably three, to four, to five years that it's alive. You have been lucky that it didn't come through your lung. You would have lasted, let's say, one year more. And you would have passed away. And nobody would have known from what.

Because I had no symptoms, no coughing, no blood. I wasn't feeling-- I was very thin. But all my life, I'm thin-- today. I was very, very thin. Now, because I eat all these sweet, or my age. So he says, what we have to worry now is to get you cured. It will take you one or two years. But thank God, we have a new medicine.

[SPANISH] how it's called. And you're going to take 22, 24 pills a day for about two years. And that's going to be cured. But Mrs. Bestandig, after this tuberculosis is going to be cured, you're going to be, all of your body, full of-- [SPANISH], as we say in Spanish. I don't know how you call them-- like the TB becomes like a flesh, like this.

And so you cannot have never children, because it's going to be full of this cured TB. But it's going to be in your body forever. And you'll have every 10 years to make a checkup. Yes, a few years ago, I had it bad again. And I went to Atlanta, Georgia, to the best clinic. After I went to them they cured me again. But this time, I already knew.

So then that's when you decided to adopt children.

Si, because I decided that my family would go. And thank God, I have two beautiful children. I'm going to show you their wedding. This is my daughter and my son. I have a son called Ari, for the name of my father.

And I have a daughter called [PERSONAL NAME], like my mother, because I think her life was very sad. She's called [? Amana ?] like my grandmother. And their wonderful children. And we have been, let's say, a very happy family. And I have the idea that that's why I'm alive, just that we Jews should go on. We want it more than Hitler wanted.

When your children were very tiny, were very small, and were the ages that you were during the war, did that bring back even more memories of what you went through when you were their age?

Well, it brought me sometimes sad. And my husband says that there were some nights when I my children were-- they brought me a lot of happiness, I would say. When they were very young, after taking care of them the whole day, and running, and this, I would cry in my sleep very much.

And he would wake me up. Because he said, you were crying terrible. But I didn't remember. That happened for me for a few years, I had that. And I'd say, when my children were very young-- they are four years apart, between one and the other.

But my question was when they were two, three, four, and five years old, which was the age that was such a difficult time for you, did you think of yourself at that time?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. And I tried, like every Jewish parents do, to give them everything I didn't have. If it was OK on not, I will never know. At least I tried to give them as much love as possible.

Did you did you tell them about your experiences when they were growing up.

Yes, I did. They know everything. Both of them have-- one of them, the other one couldn't make it. He was in Jerusalem, he couldn't make it. One of them, my daughter, went to the famous trip of the March of the Living.

My daughter went there. She was very impressed. She worked in a Jewish organization. Then she go married. My son too. And I was invited last year to go. Let's see, this year, I had-- my children don't let me go. They invited me as a professor to go, to go there, with the March of the Living.

So you are still teaching?

Yes.

Where do you teach?

I teach in the Yeshiva. It's a religious institution in Mexico City, called Emunah. And I work as a sub-director of Hebrew.

Are there any sounds, or sights, or smells today the trigger memories of what you have gone through as a young child? Anything today that [INAUDIBLE].

Yes, I went now to the bathroom. And I had a terrible smell. I'm sure that the bathroom has nothing. I'm absolutely sure that that bathroom is clean and has nothing. Yes. Also, I cannot go into a small elevator alone.

And [NON-ENGLISH] that the lights should go off in the elevator in my house. Because I get hysterical. I do think I must have some kind of claustrophobia, some kind. Maybe very light, but somehow I have something like that.

Was there any remembrances, any memories, that you had once you opened up, you said at the age of 23 or 24, when you went for counseling, that was not the same that your mother had told you? Or did everything fit in?

No, no. No, it didn't fit in. I would say that she spoke her point of view, like a grown up, and I saw another point of view. That's what this psychiatrist-- psychologist-- excuse me-- was very impressed, because she said, But that your mother didn't told you. I said, yes.

Can you give an example?

She used to tell me that the barracks were where we used to sleep. She slept with me. That's all, that she slept with me. And that's not so. I see that we were eight people. And I remember the legs of the one that came almost to my face of the person, maybe a man. I remember eight people and all being squashed. But are being squished, but I remember those legs perfectly.

There are things that didn't tell me. Like the garbage can, she didn't talk a lot about that. And I remember-- I can't remember seeing bones. I remember the darkness. I remember the light when she used to open it up. I remember sounds when nobody was supposed to be there. I remember Germans speaking words. [INAUDIBLE].

Did she ever tell you about the garbage can?

Yes. Yes, she did. But she told me like this. She was being more gentle about it. She told me, you were there in that thing for one day. I don't know. I think that when I was like 10 or 11 years, I asked her, was that a garbage can, mommy? Says, yes, that was like a garbage can.

But at that time, I didn't remember. I just was curious what it was. Or maybe because I wanted to know and I couldn't remember. My early years, I just couldn't remember things. I thought that my life started, let's say, the last time in Sweden, the last few months in Sweden.

Do you remember the name of the psychologist? Was she affiliated with the university?

Yes, I can't remember. That's terrible. That's absolutely terrible. I'll have to write you.

That's OK.

Was she affiliated with the university?

Yes, she was a Jewish girl-- a woman. She was already married. Very, very nice lady. I was recommended at the beginning to go to a non-Jewish psychologist because they said she was very good and she would help me, and to get out, not to be nervous, and be able to have a child, and get pregnant.

And the truth is, I had a feeling that a non-Jew won't understand me. Maybe I'm wrong. Today, I never know. But I had a feeling that a non-Jew won't understand me. Because look, dear, I was Friday in the museum. Some people were walking behind me, yes?

And that part where there is then the maqueta. How you say the maqueta?

The model.

The model. Where there is the model of the gas chambers and all that. And there were Spanish-speaking people. They didn't know that I spoke Spanish. So the children were asking their father, why did they do this to the Jews? What had the Jews done?

So their father answered, the Jews were very wealthy in Germany. You see? They controlled all the banks and all the enterprises. So the Germans got mad because they had all the money. And they put them in these terrible places to punish them.

And, my dear, I turned around. Maybe somebody else would have passed and not say anything. But I, I cannot be like that. My husband sometimes, he says I'm crazy. You start speaking to people you don't know. You smile, you comment in the middle. Like now, on our trip.

Well, what did you say to the people?

I said, I'm sorry, but I am a survivor of these places. You see? My parents were-- my in-laws were Germans, [? the whole family ?]. We were there because they were crazy beasts that wanted to punish the whole humanity. They would have come to America. They would have taken all the Indians from Peru, from Mexico, from Canada.

They would have taken all the Negroes and all the Japanese. And they would have invaded those lands. And they would have killed them just because he was a murderer of humankind.

The man, he said nothing. But how can we go through our life if people think like that? And a child asking a question, and look what he answers. That's why I think it's so important that I took the decision to come in here.

And I took another decision a few years ago, two years ago. They had a visit of Simon Wiesenthal down in Mexico. And I had an interview with him. And I made him a promise. And I promised my children too. That I was start to write a book. I didn't know where I get the [NON-ENGLISH], the strength. But I will try to write something.

Because I do think it's important. In two or three generations, they will say it was a lie. It never happened. It's an invention of the Jews. The Neo-Nazis already say it. And I have read it. It's not that somebody told me. But here we. Are alive. And I do thank you very much for the interview. You've been very kind.

Is there anything else you wanted to add before we finish?

That we Jews have to think that we are survivors of many wars and many terrible things. We have to know that we are a unique people. We have to be proud to be Jews. We have to be proud of being a unique people.

And I do hope that all the generations to come will know of our suffering, but will live free, free [INAUDIBLE], Free in America. I do thank very, very much.