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This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview of Jadwiga Dziekonski conducted by Gail Schwartz on August 24, 1997 in Silver Spring, Maryland. This is tape number two, side A. And we had gotten up to the end of the war.

And I had asked you, at the time that the war was over in Poland, what your thoughts were. Did you feel free at that time? And I'm talking still just at the end of the war.

Yes, I did. I did, because no matter what kind of government we had, thanks to nice allies and thanks to Yalta Agreement, then there was still hope. And we were very happy to be free.

So your daughter was about two years old then.

In 1945? Yes, mm-hmm. Right.

Bringing up a child in 1943, '44, and '45 in wartime Poland-- how was that for you?

Oh, it was wonderful. We managed. My husband worked. And I didn't. And we managed and love it. And I don't know what actually we had to eat, but it didn't matter. So the little baby is easy to bring up.

Were you always optimistic during wartime?

Yes, I was. I was.

What do you attribute your optimism to?

I am a very religious woman, number one. And number two, this is the disposition. My sister was religious, but she was a pessimist. So this is what I would say.

I have a very strong faith. And that's a gift. I don't figure it out. It's a gift. I have this disposition. Obviously, I don't do it. It's mine.

You said you have a very strong religious faith. Do you feel that your mother did, too, and this was one of the reasons she was willing to put her life in danger to protect others? Was it out of religious conviction?

I'm not sure. She was religious. But I don't think that this was the reason that she was so open and so helpful to people. I just think that this is what she thought she would like to do, more than for the religious reasons.

All right, it's now the end of the war. Did you then start to see-- after survivors would come back into town, did you see any of them?

I didn't see many. I saw brothers of my mother, my uncles.

Where had they been?

Oh, they were around different parts of Poland. Also, some of them tried to join the army. And they couldn't, because the army was almost gone.

And they were in the underground. So they just came back to Warsaw where they lived. That was about all-- and friends, but very few friends.

What do you say to friends after living through wartime?

They hadn't gone through Warsaw Uprising. But they had gone through so many things, which were difficult, that they

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would rather say-- we would ask what they lived through, rather than expecting them to lament over our faith. Well, of course, being without husbands, it was sad for them. But they were hoping that we will get together.

Oh, by the way-- I'm sorry-- my brother-in-law came back, because there was some of the prisoners of war who were let go, very few of them. And they would hide in the forests around Warsaw. And then he would come back. That was unbelievable.

They were just going through some process, the Germans were. And the people who were not fighting, but they were just also alongside Germans, then they would just let them go. That was my brother-in-law. So she would see him. And I wouldn't see my husband.

What was your brother-in-law's name?

[? Jarosiewicz ?].

His first name?

[? Zygmund. ?]

When did you first start hearing about the death camps, the concentration camps and death camps?

Right after the end of the war, and even before, when people were in these camps. Then, of course, the news was absolutely clear.

Let's talk about a place such as Auschwitz, and when you heard what went on, what happened there.

And do you want to know what I felt? Oh, I felt I would like to die with them. Just incredible, it was just incredible. This was something that-- we felt this for our whole life. And the incident happened when we were in Israel.

And we were invited with my daughter and son-in-law to some friends. She was an artist. She painted. Her husband was very sweet. And they had some friends from California, a couple. And of course, inevitably, the subject was war.

And then my husband said what he felt about the Germans, about the Jewish people being executed, and so forth. And then we left the place. And he took me by my elbow. I said, so chummy after one evening. What is it?

He said, if your husband is going to tell more lies about what happened to people then, during the war, he's going to have a very difficult life in the United States. I was so taken aback. I didn't even know what he was talking about.

Who was he? I don't know still. And my daughter doesn't know, neither my son-in-law. But the lies, the lies about executions, the lies about Auschwitz?

I didn't understand who he was. He was-- excuse me. He was a man from California. So what? I knew his name them, but it didn't matter.

And so he was saying these things did not happen.

No, they did not. They are lies, he said. Well, it is very unusual. But when my husband learned what he told me-- because he was away, not in the elevator-- he just couldn't believe it.

One feels so deeply about it. We were in Israel 18 years ago. But it was still very fresh in our memory. That's what it always was and will be.

What would always be fresh in your memory?

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The fate of the Jews, all that happened to Jewish people. I think that, for instance, when we were in-- was it in Jaroslaw? Yes, I think in Jaroslaw. This was a very good, very interesting moment when we went to the museum. And the museum was very well thought of.

And there were lots of terrible pictures from Auschwitz and other places. And three young Israeli soldiers were next to us. And they talked to each other. They said, is it possible?

So it was very informative for young people. They were in the army, but they didn't know. So this is idiocy.

When you say the Jewish people, do you feel a particular connection, or its just because it happened particularly to the Jewish people at that time?

No, I am thinking of Jewish people at that time, because we suffered, millions of executed and tortured people. But we know what happened to the Jews.

So after the war was over, you decided you did not want to stay in Poland. Obviously, your husband was not there. And so what measures did you take?

We were trying to get me and my daughter over the border illegally. But I didn't want to go over by sea, because she was too little to give her a sleeping pill-- or to explain, and too big to give her a sleeping pill. So the only way that was left was through Sweden.

It was, of course, paid for. We were supposed to be-- I escaped with three more people. And we were all five supposed to be friends of the sailors, the people who were trying to-- the guards, I mean. The guards of the borders didn't pay attention. And we went there.

We paid. So we expected to be on the deck. But now we were sitting on the bottom of the boat, because it was a cargo boat. And we were on coal, because it proved that the first mechanic didn't know, and the captain didn't know. Only people did it-- you know, the sailors did it on their own. So of course, we couldn't expect any better way.

And I was sitting on the coal half way in water. And I held my daughter on my abdomen. And she was very sweet and said, when I come home, could you cook this bean soup I like so much? And I said, yes, I promise. And she was very brave. And it was only 36 hours.

So we thought that we will be put in this coal business-- I mean, in the places where they keep coal underneath the deck, because of the controlling guard, which goes around the port. So we were fully expecting that, after it was over, then we will go up at all. And then there was another inspection. That was already the Swedish borders, but we didn't care.

And we got out in Stockholm. And that was the real, true liberation. And the Swedish people were anxious to know if we just like their toilet paper nicer, and the food, or do we have political reasons? So we explained.

But when the explanation went on, then Christine got her window full of toys. People were looking from outside to see who was arrested with toys. And then they let us go. And they're saying, you were-- the friends were in the underground. So it was obvious that they don't want to have the change of way of living, but just they want to escape from Poland.

So we were given two weeks in some kind of a welcome cabin, which they do with every person who comes from abroad in Sweden. Meanwhile, my husband collected my father's friend, who was the counterpart of my father in the Swedish bank. So they were so nice that they took us out. And we stayed there after we got the visa in their beautiful place not far from Stockholm.

And there were children bathing naked, naturally, because of-- all the girls. They were all girls. And Christine learned some Swedish. And then, at the hour, we went to London.

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And when he met us, she said, oh, I remember your picture. You had such bangs of nice hair, and now you're bald. He never had bangs. She imagined something.

And for two months, she didn't want to talk to him. She was very, very strange, very cold to him. And after that, we couldn't be separated.

What port did you leave from in Poland?

Sopot. It's a port very near Gdynia, between Gydnia and Gdansk.

Now when did you say you left Poland?

In 1947.

What month was that?

It was August.

And then you went directly to Sweden. And then when did you come to London?

I think about two or three weeks after.

Oh, so you were only a few weeks in Stockholm.

Yes.

And then you stayed in-- well, what was it like for you to see your husband?

[LAUGHS] Fantastic. I always knew that I will see him. But it was great. And he was very happy.

And then you stayed in London for how long?

Actually, we stayed in Epsom where my father was. And he asked us to stay with him until we get someplace to live. It didn't take us long. Epsom was fine, beautiful. I think it was beautiful.

And your mother was back in Poland.

Yes. I was very anxious for her to come with me, because she was-- not as I am now. She could go, but she didn't want to leave her mother. So I am so sad. I never saw her after I left. I never went back to Poland. I couldn't, because they wouldn't let me go out again.

You stayed in London for how long?

Four years. And then friends said that we should come to America, because this is the land of opportunity. And it is, but not from a humanistic persuasion, because he was a doctor of chemistry, as they call it there, a chemical engineer. So he lived in Detroit and was pirated from one place to another.

But it was difficult for us to get a job. And we struggled. He did everything he could. And I started working in a bookshop immediately.

So you left London when?

May, '47 and-- '51.

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Came to what city here?

To Detroit. What a change after London. But our friends lived there. And then they offered us--

These were friends from back from Poland.

These were friends from Poland, from London, from everywhere. From Poland, right, mm-hmm. But in London, we were very close friends.

And how long did you stay in Detroit?

If we subtract from 40 years that I am here from 1951, if we subtract 18 and 20, let's say-- 1941, 1951. We moved to Washington in 1970.

What brought you to Washington?

There was some-- oh, I should say, my husband-- was asked to be a stringer to Voice of America. Then he got to be a stringer for Radio Free Europe. And then they offered him a job in Voice of America. So we went. We came to Washington. And then he worked in Voice of America.

Working as a journalist, or as a--

Working as a-- Voice of America had all kinds of possibilities. And he was working, doing some secretarial work. And then he was the [NON-ENGLISH] of the-- director of the Polish desk of Voice of America, vice director, whatever it is. And that was until he retired.

Have you been back to Poland?

I have been back to Poland. With him, it was difficult, because he would have gone with either this president or another for Voice of America as a correspondent. But it would cost extra if I would go. So when, later, we decided that I'll go, it was 1988. And my family was no longer alive.

And the only family that I've got was his family, which adopted me. And I am now a great grandmother because of the difference of age. And they live in Kielce and Starachowice. In Starachowice, it is a factory town.

And after my husband's mother-- not his mother, his aunt. How did it go? No, his aunt and his sister-- well, I mean cousin. Oh, cousin is good.

And the other little boy-- they were a little boy a little girl. And the aunt was young. And they were all sent to Siberia. So there, they lived in a hall, not in a cottage or anything like that, in a hall.

And the girl and the little boy tried to work in a garden of a Russian. And she would give them a piece of bread for the mother. She was too weak to work. So after that, they were repatriated. And they would have been given a ticket.

Then she thought, if they would go to a place where there's a factory, she could work in the factory, because she didn't have any qualifications. So that's where Starachowice came to her mind. She worked there for 25 years on the rock-- not rock, stone, on a stone floor in a storage room.

And the children grew. The boy got married. And he has children in turn. So that was their story. And I correspond all the time with my husband's niece. I just got a letter from her. I don't write many letters, but this, I have to.

How did it feel to go back to Poland?

Wonderful. Wonderful. I didn't pay attention to what was going on in politics. But I was just enjoying. These were my

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husband's family and friends who were in Warsaw-- and the landscape and everything.

Do you still feel very Polish?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I do. This is my adopted country. And I feel very American, too. But my roots are in Poland.

And for instance, if I see the floods, I am so upset, because they went through so much. And it's very close to me. But of course, we had floods in Colorado, too.

Do you think that you would be a different person today if you hadn't gone through the wartime experience that you had? I don't mean living in the United States. I just mean the type of person that you are. Did that affect the kind of person you are today?

No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I was always an optimist. And I am an optimist now.

Have you--

Maybe I misunderstood your question.

So you're the same person you are, whether or not you hadn't gone through wartime?

Mm-hmm. Yes, I would say.

Have you been to Germany?

Passing only, because one of the flights to Poland stops in Berlin. And we were allowed to go out of the plane. That was all.

Would you like to visit Germany?

Not particularly. Bavaria is very close to my heart. They are all Catholics. It's not that I judge people by religion. Oh, heavens, no.

I have here many Jewish friends. I think I mentioned to you today, 75% of people who are here are Jewish. And I have a lovely friend who stays with me and eats with me at the same table. And I have many friends.

I have a friend who is called Mrs. Cantor, who is a very famous people in the Jewish organizations. I didn't know that. And she is very sweet. I really have lots of friends.

I'm friends, maybe, with Anna Cantor, maybe with Sylvia. So far, after five months, I have acquaintances. But friends is a big word.

Do you think about the war a lot?

In a way, I do, because I am of this generation, which loses people who are in the war. One friend died, who was at Monte Cassino. And I didn't know him then. But I knew him later.

The other friend, who was-- and one who died last night, yesterday afternoon. She was in a Polish home army, very young. Her husband was the youngest.

And then I think of so many things that she went through, and bombed. And then this comes back. So that's how I think about it-- because of people who are leaving me. Why don't I go?

How did Warsaw look to you? Had it been completely destroyed during the war? And now you go back. You went

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back. What did it look like to you?

First of all, I was the first one to go, after Warsaw was destroyed, with my brother-in-law. I went through those horrible, horrible ruins. And we just wanted to go and see. Maybe there is somebody who is left there. We couldn't believe it, but who knows.

And I said, yes, I'll go with you. And my sister stayed with the children. And we went. So that was a terrible experience. But we didn't find anybody. We just went and looked around.

But when I saw it redone, or rebuilt, some of the things are very well done. Some of the things are horribly unattractive. But I found that I react to it, OK, well, this is some architect whom I don't like. But it is good that it was rebuilt.

And things, which were-- like the castle, which was rebuilt very well. Then it was great-- and the old town, too. So some things were rebuilt very well. And then I feel very pleased with it, because Warsaw is ugly now. But it's Warsaw. I like it.

And so, as you said, you still feel that Poland is your home.

Yes. Yes, I do. But I don't want to go there now. I don't want this post-communist government. I can't stand it.

Everything is wrong. So until sometime-- probably, my lifetime will not be enough. That's the way.

Is there anything else you wanted to talk about, any message to your grandchildren, anything that you feel you wanted to say?

Well, my message to my grandchildren-- one is in [? Langford. ?] One is in Belgium-- not Holland, but Belgium. And my daughter is in Tunisia. So it will be difficult.

But what I would like to say is that I rejoice in having my friend back, whose brother was Jewish, I mentioned, and who is now in Warsaw. And when she comes here, she stays with me-- well, not in this situation, but in other apartment house. And she thinks that, when we see each other, it's just like-- what, '78-- 60 years ago.

She knows Russian very well, because it was her extra language. And she could recite Pushkin and other poets. So I like that. But she also thinks that we will never grow old if we see each other. So I have to write to her to hurry up.

So that's what I wanted to add-- that even after 60 years, the friendship didn't die. And she is so wonderful. And that's something that came from her family, definitely so.

How do you explain the warm feelings that you have? And yet how would you explain the German mentality during the war?

About warm feelings? Oh, warm feelings.

The warm feelings that you have to Jewish people. How would you explain the German mentality during the war and their feelings?

The German mentality is very foreign to me, as I say, because I feel so very deeply about Jewish people. And Jewish mentality is very close to me. Then, I am not trying.

When I meet German people, I am not jumping up and trying to injure them. But I don't make any effort to know them. So this has left a mark, which I don't know where and when it will go away, because they are the same people.

But still, their German mentality is very-- well, there was somebody, I don't know if he was right or not, who said that no other nation would let any devil as Hitler to do what he did. They would-- there will be a revolution. But they just did

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what they were told. This is their mentality. And they thought it was good.

You've been to Israel.

Yes, twice.

Twice. What prompted you to go?

Because my son-in-law's position was there. And Christine was with him, and the children. And then, since they had it prolonged-- they stayed four years. And they was asked, would they like to stay four more years? And they said, yes. So we visited them another time.

And your son-in-law's work is what?

He's in Belgian diplomacy. He's a Belgian ambassador now. So they liked the Israeli people. They had very nice neighbors, a couple of architects we made friends with. And then we liked the American Ambassador Lewis, who was-- do you know him?

I only know who he is.

Yes. He was nice. And his wife was nice. And then we met other people whom we liked. And of course, the family was great. To me, it was.

And the housing was nice. So we really enjoyed it very much. And it's a beautiful country, so beautiful. And they were-- I don't know if it could be called courage.

But when there was this attack of Palestinian army, they stopped exactly at [PLACE NAME], where they were. Our family saw. My husband and I called them and said-- and they already retraced their steps. They didn't stay long. I mean the Palestinians.

So we asked, were you afraid? Why? We were not afraid. I said, goodness. Is it silliness or courage?

Were you ever afraid during the war in Poland?

No. I have the atrophy of feeling of fear. Now I fear something. Sometimes I fear people.

It sounds like your daughter inherited your optimistic temperament.

I don't know. I don't know.

Anything else that you wanted to say before we close?

Actually, what I would like to add will be about the place I am staying, because I am very open about my sympathy with the Jewish people. And the girl who sits next to me, I talk to her more than with the other two, and so forth. And the only thing that I can say is that nobody made them come to this place, the other non-Jewish.

So I don't believe that many people are anti-Semitic here. But they could be different. And they're just exactly the same. And I think that this is the greatness of this country. That's all I want to say.

When you were growing up in Poland, did you sense anti-Semitism?

Only with one stupid man, who is no longer alive, who was some kind of a leader of a group, very much-- this was called Nationalistic Group. And they were anti-Semitic. But that was the only time.

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That was at school in the school of journalism. And they started some kind of action towards my friends, I mean other colleagues who were Jewish. And they were immediately dispersed and reprimanded. That was the only time.

Other than that, I don't have any experience. My people-- and I knew many people, especially when I met my husband. He knew everybody. And I don't have any experiences of people being anti-Semitic.

Speaking of your husband, is there any other information about his work in the resistance that you didn't talk about that you could now?

No, because he was fighting when the fight was necessary. But actually, he was teaching and writing. So that's all.

Well, we appreciate you taking the time to do this interview. Thank you so very much.

I thank you very much.

This concludes the interview of Jadwiga Dziekonski.

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