

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with Helen Luksenburg, conducted by Esther Finder on May 26, 1998 in Silver Spring. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are volunteers with the museum. This is tape one, side A. I want to thank you for doing an interview with us today. Let me ask you, what was your name at birth?

Hinda Chilewicz.

Could you spell that for me?

Hinda, or just the last name?

Whatever.

Hinda is H-I-N-D-A. Chilewicz-- C-H-I-L-E-W-I-C-Z.

I know you gave testimony already for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. And this is going to be an interview about your liberation experience and your post-Holocaust experience. I wanted to ask you, what can you tell me about the day that you realized that you were free?

That's really-- I had a lot of guts. I didn't realize we were marching again. They were sending us out from one camp to the other. And we were four of us. And all of us were from the same hometown. I was the youngest of the four.

We were walking and walking, and we realized the guards were already-- the old guards, Hungarian. They didn't because the young ones were already on the last front, fighting. And they didn't care. We stopped on a farm, and we rested. And we told them, we'll catch up with you. And they let us.

So we're walking by ourself. And we realized that we are walking on the road with civilians-- Germans. So it must be the end of the war, and we were not afraid anymore. And we stopped at the roadside and rested. And a young German came by.

And I remember stories from my mother's stories when she was telling us that a child could disarm a soldier after the First World War-- that they didn't have any guns, they didn't have any belts anymore. And he actually stopped. I guess we still looked halfway decent because he stopped and started to flirt with us.

He was a handsome guy-- blue eyes, in uniform, but he didn't have any arms, and he didn't have the belt on. So I realize, and I said to him, do you know who we are? [GERMAN] We are Jewish girls. I don't exaggerate when I said-- say that his eyes popped out. He was so brainwashed that he thought that we are not human-- that we really have horns on our heads.

Can you tell me where you had been and where you were at this point when you encounter this German?

This was-- the location was-- I really don't know exactly because they were shipping us from one place to the other. Originally, it was Ravensbruck. From Ravensbruck, they send us someplace else. And the rest, we were walking.

So that was some place in the complete North of Germany, like Reichshof, I think it was, by the lakes. It was on the border, almost on the Baltic, very north of-- the north of-- all these-- because it was a lot of fishing there, the lakes were there. I forgot what they named the lake. It's Mecklenburg, I think, the area, what we call-- they called. Can I go back to the German?

Yeah, just I would like to ask you, since you gave me the opportunity, who was with you? Can you give me the names of the other ones?

The name of the other women-- Tola Cukier, [? Gutra ?] [? Siegler, ?] and Etta Rotfeld. We are still in touch with each

other. We keep like sisters. One, that [? Gutra, ?] I never seen her again because she lived someplace-- she moved-- she went to Brazil or someplace. I never seen her. But the two others, one lives in Kansas, and one lives now-- she used to live in New York, and now she lives in Nevada in Las Vegas. And we keep in touch constantly.

Coming back to the German, and I said to him-- I wasn't afraid anymore. I realized I'm liberated. And I said to him, we are Jewish girls, and [GERMAN] I wasn't afraid anymore. And I told him that. He just walked away and didn't say anything.

Can you translate what you said to him?

Yes. You damn pig-- German pig, I told him. Really, I realize now that I had some-- what a nerve I had to say that to him. And because we didn't know what was going on. We're just seeing the civilians are running, too. We realize that this-- it's the end, and we are free.

Do you know when that was?

I think it was around beginning of May because the capitulation was May the 8th. This was maybe May the 2nd, something, approximately-- May the 3rd. Shall I continue? So we're walking and walking again. And we came to a small town.

And we rested on a bench. Two men-- three men approached us because we were speaking Polish. And they started to bless us and kiss us-- that now they know where-- they thought that we are Poles. And they-- know they know where the good Polish girls were in concentration camps, because some of the Poles, Polish girls, were working on the farms in Germany.

And they didn't want to have anything to do with the Poles. They could get out much more from the German soldiers. So they were so appreciative. And they took us immediately to the farm, gave up their room for us. They slept in the barn.

And the German woman invited us for supper. And I will never forget the supper. It was a typical German meal. Was mashed potatoes, a pitcher of melted lard, pig lard, the fat, and a pitcher of milk. And after-- how starved we were, but I couldn't seeing that combination, I immediately threw up. And I realize-- they rush me to the hospital, and I had typhoid. The rest--

I would like to ask you, can you describe for me what you looked like that you were able to make a German think that you might be German? And you made the Poles think that you might be Polish. Can you describe what you looked like when you were liberated?

I guess I had light hair. And I never looked typical, if you can call it, "Jewish." And the rest of them, they were all pretty girls. We had very short hair, and we were not dressed-- I don't recall if I still was-- I guess I was still wearing the uniform, the stripes, because I didn't have anything else to wear.

And I guess we looked halfway decent yet because he wanted to flirt with us. That's all. I never was a Muselmann like just skin and bones. I never got to that point, because I remember my father always told me-- this makes me cry each time-- that I would be the one who survived. I never was a big eater. I was satisfied with anything. He always said, somebody has to survive, and you will be the one, because you are smart, you are pretty, and you will be the one who survive. I always remember that.

Here, pause for a moment and let you collect yourself.

[INAUDIBLE]

You were telling me that your father had thought that you would be the one that would survive.

Because also when they-- in 1943, when they gathered us-- twice they gathered us at the stadium. 1942? No, that was 1942. They gathered us in this stadium, and they separated us. Finally, we stayed there for a whole day.

Then my father said, maybe they will be-- get tired and send us all home. Tables were set up alphabetically. I remember we approached the table about 10 o'clock at night. And immediately, they separate my brother and me, said raus to go home. And they retain my parents.

And I started to cry. I said I didn't want to go. So my father said, somebody has to survive. Gave me the key to the apartment, and he said, "Go home." Fortunately enough, we had connections. My mother's brother was working in the Central Committee.

And through somebody, they detained them in buildings. And I remember it was raining, pouring rain, like God was crying with us. So I came home. And I think we had different covers. For the summer, it was like lacy on the bed. And for the winter, we had velour, green velour covers.

So I took these two covers and gave it to a militiaman to give it to my parents that they could cover themselves at least from the rain. He never delivered it. But fortunate enough, through the connections, they got out.

They were digging out a hole in the basement, and they got through that day. So they lasted another year. They were home. But I remember his words when he said to me, go, Hinda-- they called me Hinda. Go, because somebody has to survive.

When did you realize that the war was in fact over?

At the moment when I was walking still, and nobody-- we were not-- nobody watched us anymore. We just walked away from the column. And these old guards didn't care anymore. They seen what is going on. They wanted to save their own skin.

And so I wind up in the hospital with typhoid. I don't remember what happened from that time on. But we were liberated a few days later. The Russians were liberate. I was liberated by the Russians. And my friends-- two of us had typhoid.

And two of us-- the two others were all right. Well, immediately, they took over an apartment. We were not afraid anymore of the Germans. The Germans were afraid of us. And we didn't have any power at all, but they were afraid of us.

And I remember a neighbor came in and said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] Was a big deal to have real tea because they all have ersatz during the war. And they wanted to help us. And one woman-- I didn't have a pair of shoes. I didn't have anything. We walked into her apartment, and we took some clothes. I remember a robe.

And a woman gave me shoes because I didn't have any shoes to wear. And they tried to be nice to us. We had our own apartment, but it was very difficult to leave, because the Russians were telling us [RUSSIAN] Polish girls, you have to go back home. And they wanted to send us home with a-- they were-- what to say? Demolishing everything in Germany and sending machinery and everything back on trucks to Russia.

So they were telling us to go with cattle. They were sending the cattle from Germany to Russia-- that we should go with the cattle to Poland. I said I never was near a cow or something. We refused.

But I have to get back to the hospital. I don't know how long I was in the hospital. I don't have the slightest idea. But later, they gave us a whole villa. And [? Gutra ?] and I were in the villa to recuperate.

I want you to stay with the hospital for just another moment and tell me how you were treated in the hospital. And who else was in the hospital? Who were the other patients?

I don't remember because I had a high fever. I don't know what was going on in that hospital. I remember just that I have a lot of-- I was hallucinating because I remember now [INAUDIBLE] I think that he came to visit me. I really don't remember. I had high fever, and I don't remember anything what was going on in the hospital.

When the Russians came, can you tell me, how did they treat the other survivors that you might have seen?

I really don't know because I didn't see the liberation, actual liberation, because I was in the hospital. So I didn't actually see how the Russian behave with us. But in that one experience I had, that I was in that villa, and we felt better already.

And we put on the door-- we were afraid that the Russians will rape us. So we put on the door "quarantine"-- that they would be afraid to come in. Was right across from the hospital, a villa.

Why were you worried about the Russians raping you?

Because they were soldiers, and they were hungry. They didn't see a woman maybe-- who knows how many months they were fighting on the front? So one afternoon, two soldiers go by. And we went in-- I was in the window, looking out.

And they stopped and started to talk to us. And one looked-- was a captain. And one looked very Jewish to me. He was short and had-- I hate to say it, but he had a typical Jewish nose. So I said very quietly to him, [RUSSIAN] That's the Russian. Are you a Jew? In Russian.

He didn't answer me, and they walked away. Middle of the night is a knock at the door-- on the window. And he tells me, yes, I am a Jew. And what can I do for you? I didn't want to admit in front of my other comrade. I said, please, help us to get out from here. We don't have any communication how to get out. And the Russians want us to leave.

So he arranged for us that-- they were dismantling everything-- that another Jewish general was going with trucks to Szczecin. Szczecin is now in Poland already. That used to be Germany. That he will arrange for us to go and to take us to Poland, all four of us.

So we left the hospital. We went back to the apartment, where [? Gutra ?] and Tola was. And, no, it was Etta and Tola. [? Gutra ?] was with me sick. We were in the quarantine. And we felt better. We left that villa and went to be with them. And we told them. I don't know.

We gathered some stuff that we had, some junk, to take with us. And we were supposed to meet him at the Hungarian girl's apartment, place, and he will come there and pick us up. What happened? He never showed up. And we left Tola with this stuff there because-- and we went back to the apartment.

And next morning, we came back. We had some kind of a-- we gathered some clothes or something that the Germans gave us. So we had a suitcase. Was too heavy to walk so far with it, so we left Tola there to be in that Hungarian girl's apartment. And by the time we came back the next day, she was hysterical.

He arrived middle of the night, and he was drunk. And he wanted to really rape her. And she was-- he was so drunk-- she doesn't remember that, even. He was so drunk that she started-- she had a beautiful voice, and she started to sing him a lullaby. And he fell asleep.

She was engaged, she said, and maybe her fiance is alive. And she wants to be for him. And he fell asleep. By the time we came in the morning, he was up. He took-- we went on the truck. He didn't remember anything what happened. At least this is the version of what she told us. I wasn't there.

And he took us to Poland. When we arrived in Poland in Szczecin, we had to get on a train to go to Sosnowiec. You can't imagine. People were hanging from the doorways and from the roof and everything, going back. I don't know how we got on the train.

We arrived in Sosnowiec. And the girl, who lives now in Toronto-- her name is Hanka [? Pesa-- ?] was. I don't remember now the married name. And she was waiting. She's the only one who escaped from our camp. And she was at the station.

And right away, she said to me, you have where to go. Your cousins are here already. That I had a home where to go in. My friend, Etta, her uncle survived. He was hidden. He was one of the richest men in our city, Mr. [? Ostrick. ?] He was hidden during the war.

And right away, he took over his buildings and thing, and she had a home where to go. The two others went to Katowice. They didn't have where to stay. So I really lost contact with them. I was in Poland. It was very painful.

Everything reminded you of something. I went back to our apartment. Nothing-- I couldn't even recognize. So old and dilapidated, and I didn't recognize even the street, because it was all changed. But I stayed with my cousins.

They all went to work. And I was the one who had to cook and clean. And I felt like Cinderella. But after two months, my cousin who was here once. You met her. She was engaged, and her fiance said, we are not staying here. We are all going back to Germany.

Before I let you go back to Germany, I wanted to ask you what attempts you made-- when you came back to your hometown, what attempts did you make to find loved ones-- people that you knew before the war happened?

The purpose of coming back home was that if anybody survived, that will be the meeting place. I didn't have any hopes for my parents, because in Ravensbruck, somebody who knew my parents had seen them went back on the transport to Auschwitz with the liquidation of the ghetto.

She told me when I saw her in Ravensbruck that she saw my parents going to the gas chamber. She knew my father. So I didn't have any hope for them. But I was hoping that maybe my brother, who was just one year younger than I-- maybe he survived because he was in a camp. So can I go back to how we were-- how they took us? No.

What did you find out about your brother?

My brother, when I came back, somebody who worked in the kitchen told me that two weeks before liberation, they sent him out as a [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] as a underage, to another camp. And he died there just two weeks before liberation. He died from starvation.

When you went back to your home, how were you treated by your former neighbors and other people in town?

How we were treated by our neighbors? You're still alive? You survived? There were not too happy to see us. It was very-- as I said before, very painful. Everything reminded me of something-- go walking on the street. But the first thing, I guess-- every city did it-- that they form a Jewish committee.

And everybody signed their name because that's how people found each other-- registering who still was alive. So I put my name down. But I didn't see my brother's name at all. He never came back. And after being there for two months, we visited each other, Etta and I and my cousins.

Every time-- like my cousin's friend, who was a partner in a factory with my uncle, he had a big apartment in one of the newest buildings. And he survived because he was hidden during the war. So when my cousin, who's-- she is now his wife. He passed away five years ago. She married him.

And because she was working as a secretary in the office of the factory. And we all worked during the war in the factory because we had to have affidavits that are employed from the time you were 14 years old. So he's a great man, had a big apartment. And everybody who came went to [? Izak ?] [? Gleitman. ?] So later, my cousin [? Heniek ?] came back, survived. [? Izak's ?] sister [? Sala ?] survived. We had a lot of people, and I had to cook for everyone and go shopping.

Did any of your family's possessions survive?

Nothing, because everything what we had valuable, my mother, living through the First World War, was very nervous because we lived most on the border, on German border. It was just maybe 20 kilometers from the border, maybe more. I'm not-- at the time, I wasn't so-- didn't know much. I was too young still. So she got very nervous.

And when the World War broke out, my father-- I remember seeing on September the 1st the Polish army retreating, walking back beaten already. So we stood outside on a Friday night and were giving them coffee. And my mother was very nervous. And my father came home on Sunday.

He said, it's a train going to DziaÅ,oszyce. My mother was born in a small town. And over there, my grandfather had a building. And her older sister lived there. So he put us on a train to go to DziaÅ,oszyce.

And he was supposed to follow us because it was right after the 1st, and to collect money, and so on. So we never went too far. We get to Wolbrom. No, we didn't even get to Wolbrom. The train was going through a woods, forest. And all of a sudden, we see fire from both sides of the forest-- the Poles and the Germans fighting.

We had to get off. We didn't even take anything with us because it was a short trip. No sandwiches, nothing. I remember my mother took a couple bottles of wine. And we had this hard sugar, and no food, actually. And my brother fainted.

I was the oldest of three. I had my younger brother and a sister, Blinka, who was four years younger than I. He couldn't take it, and he fainted. So my mother asked a woman across the compartment, was eating bread, a sandwich. She asked if she would give him a piece of bread. She cut away the crust from her sandwich and gave it to him-- not even a piece of bread, just the crust.

And we had to get off, and we're walking. And my mother remembered that a neighbor's parents lived in Wolbrom. I guess it wasn't too far to walk. So we knocked at the door. And they recognized my mother, and they let us in. They were two old people.

Next morning, the Germans knocked at the door. And I remember asking, [GERMAN] Are here men? My mother spoke good German. And she said to them that we have just an old man and a young child, who is 11 years old. I guess he was 11 or 12 at the time, my brother Mumek. So they left us, but we had to leave that house and go to the marketplace.

And we saw something. Everybody from all sides, they took, they gathered the people to get to the marketplace as a gathering place. I didn't know what they will do to us at the time. But somebody came over and told that one of my uncles had a car over there. That was a big deal, to have a car before the war.

And they found the car, and there was blood in it. So my mother got hysterical that they killed her brother. But it wasn't-- he survived. Not survived the war, but at the time, he was alive still. We met a lot of people. And finally, by horse and buggy, we came to DziaÅ,oszyce. And we all stayed in that house.

And it was a madhouse. All my cousins were there. All my aunts were there. And they're screaming, and they're eating. And the little boys-- I remember I had a lot of younger cousins. I remember how they were-- they never wanted to eat, and how they had to push to eat the bananas and things because bananas was a big deal in Poland.

And I remember what they used to make. I used to go to visit my aunt. She used to make like a banana mash, an orange squeeze, and a piece of chocolate. And that's what they liked. And they give. Here, the war was on two, three days, and what was going on how starved they were. We didn't have bread, nothing.

Somebody had to get up, a few people, 3 o'clock in the morning and stay in line to get bread what was made like from sawdust. And how these children-- we were all hungry, but I was the least composed, and I wasn't carrying on. I was older than they were. I was 13 at the time. But they were five years old, four years old, six years old. We stayed there. We stayed there for a couple of months [INAUDIBLE]

Actually, I have to pause to change tapes, so let's take a break right now. This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Helen Luksenburg. This is tape one, side B. And you were telling me about your family's possessions. What happened to them?

The possessions-- as I said before, that we went to DziaÅ,oszyce. And everything we took with us because the possessions-- the jewelry, silverware, fabrics. Because my father was in textile, we had a lot of fabrics. And then we all took it and hid it in the basement, because in 1935, I think, it was a flat in DziaÅ,oszyce.

And the basement and from the building was filled with dirt. So the whole family brought all the possessions, and they hid it in the dirt in the basement. So we were left with nothing, even not able to sell something for bread.

You didn't tell me what happened to your sister.

My sister was the youngest one. And she was born in 1930. So she was just nine years old. Yeah, she was nine years. But she went straight-- she was too young to be sent to work. And she went with the liquidation with my parents to Auschwitz.

I also wanted to ask you if you had witnessed any acts of retaliation or retribution against Germans or German collaborators?

I personally didn't witness anything, because when I came to Poland-- right after I was liberated, we went back to Poland. And I was in Poland for a couple months. So by the time I came back to Germany, life was being normalized already.

So I didn't have-- maybe the anger was still there. But I didn't have any-- I didn't come across anybody to do it. And I wasn't capable of hurting anybody.

You mentioned that when you came back to your hometown, other people started to come back. Can you tell me about some of the reunions and what you talked about when you met again?

Every day, we walked. And we were walking on the street. We met somebody. I even found out about my future husband-- that he is alive-- when I came back to Poland. I was walking on Mojaevska. I noticed-- I forgot his name. And I knew him, that he was in our camp. He lives in Richmond now. Hendle-- Hendleman-- [? Hendler-- ?] David [? Hendler ?] was his name. Now I remember.

And I came, I asked him, I said during your travels, did you come across to see Welek Luksenburg? He said, yes, the last time I saw him was in Flossenburg. And so just common sense and logic, I told, Flossenburg? That was in April 1945. I said the chances are that maybe he survived.

I had just a hint of it, but I wasn't sure. And he said, he told me that he was-- they were being shipped out from Flossenburg. And he ran out from the line because he remembered that to go on the trip again without water, that he saw some empty bottle in the wash barrack. And he ran back to fill that bottle with water.

By the time he came back-- this is already-- David didn't know that. But my husband told me that that bottle of water saved his life, because by the time he came back, the transport left already. And he wanted to get out from Flossenburg for any price. It was just torture there. He found out after the war that they put all the transport in a barn, poured gasoline, and burned them all alive. So if you know what that means, [NON-ENGLISH]

Translate for me, please.

[NON-ENGLISH] means, what is your fate?

But you had told me a few minutes ago that some of your family and friends from your hometown came back. Your reunions with them-- what were they like?

Slowly, everybody-- my mother came from a family of 11 brothers and sisters. We were a very large family and very close. My personal-- I never had really very-- my cousins were my friends. From all of this family, who were maybe 250 people or 300 people in the close family, only six of us survived.

And we all wait-- two sisters-- Henia came back, and I came back, so there were four of us. We were very happy to see each other. And the fifth was someplace in a camp. We found her later in Germany. And the sixth, the oldest, whose-- his name is Harry [? Brogress. ?] He's about 85 years old today. I just spoke to him a few days ago. He lives in Brooklyn. He was in Russia during the war.

But after the war, we all met. Even we went [INAUDIBLE] to find each other, to find out who survived, was a big thing to-- and I remember even we-- there were right away weddings after the war. I remember going to a wedding right after the war. And everybody was very happy to see each other-- that at least some of us survived.

When did you begin to realize the full extent of the genocide?

When I realized, I remember my parents looking at newspaper. We knew about Hitler because from newspapers before the war. I always was interested what was going on, even being very young. I remember caricatures in the paper-- Jews with long noses. We used to get The Moment, a Jewish newspaper.

And I remember because I was born so close to the German border when the German people-- the Jews were shipped to Poland. Mostly the ones who were born in Poland-- they put them on the border, and we had to open shared apartments with them. And that was in 1938. I remember the Anschluss, what a German had with Vienna and with Austria and how the Viennese-- the Austrian people were.

So I can remember the history from the late '30s. I was 10 years old, 11 years old, but I was always interested, and always was politics talked in our house. So I knew what was going on. But my mother never believed that such a cultural country like the Germans could do anything.

One thing she was very happy-- the outcome of the-- even during the war-- that they was [GERMAN]. That they wouldn't touch me, that they wouldn't rape the Jewish girls. Being a mother, that's how-- that was very important to her. Because she said-- I have to explain what was [GERMAN].

[GERMAN] mean that we were not a pure race. We were the "shameful race." That's what they consider us. Maybe there was something going on, not officially. But officially, no German touch a Jewish woman or girl. Otherwise, his life would be shortened, too.

But the extent of the genocide-- when did you realize how many Jews were killed?

You see, was everything so systematic. It didn't come at one time. It started with that we had martial law applied. And we couldn't walk on-- go on certain streets. They put the armbands on us with the blue star, David's-- Mogen David.

They started to ration us. We had to give up electrical appliances. Women had to give up the fur coats. We had to give up jewelry-- everything systematic. And what they did, the Germans-- they didn't want to dirty their hands.

So immediately-- I wasn't there, but my father was telling me, because we were going on the train-- he was telling me that they gathered in the-- when they marched into the Sosnowiec, they gathered. It was a-- in Polish I know how to say. [POLISH]

Tell me--

[NON-ENGLISH]

I had asked you about a word. If you could please translate that into English? If you can't, I'll take the Polish. We'll



worry about it later.

I know. The Germans gave out orders that all the men had to register immediately. And they gathered them in a big hall. They pointed right away the head of the committee of the Judenrat-- of the Jewish community. And he was a past president of the Jewish community, so he became the head. So he gave out-- they gave him orders, and he applied the orders to us.

So all the men had to register immediately. And my father was telling me that he was walking every day to the city hall. And he-- and turn around for a whole month. Finally, he came one day. And they called it off. When I arrive, I missed my father tremendously. And I didn't have any communications to get from DziaÅ,oszyce. So somebody gave me a ride on a horse and buggy, and I arrived at home.

I didn't recognize my father. He looked like Gandhi. He was bald. As long as I knew him, he was always bald. Shrunken-- lost a lot of weight. And I couldn't believe this is my father. And he was so scared of his own shadow even, because when the German marched into Sosnowiec, he was having a beer with a friend.

And on their motorcycles, they marched in. They said, halt. So he ran into a building where they knew him, and they opened the door for him. You know, they were the big doors. The other man was shot on the spot. He never recovered. My father never recovered from that.

So he was really afraid of his own shadow. We took over, my mother and I, for everything. And I came in. We had credenzas-- credenza in the kitchen. We didn't have cabinet built in like we have it here. So I opened the cabinet. It was so much bread. So much bread.

I said, why-- for whom did you save this? Penicillin what was going on it. Was everything mildew. He said, for you children. I was saving it for when you come home. He used to get up every morning, 3 o'clock in the morning, stay in line to get some bread for-- and to remain there for her children and for his. But we could never use that bread because it was all mildew. That was the beginning [INAUDIBLE] of my father.

You mentioned that you had heard that the man who was to become your husband survived. Can you tell me-- let's go back a little bit and tell me how you met this man.

That's a long story. He worked in my hometown. He was from nearby city of Dabrowa Gornicza. During the war, he worked in our city. His friend-- his cousin was my friend. And he looked like a typical Aryan-- blonde.

And I wanted to meet him, so she never introduced me. I was a teenager. And one day, somebody who worked in our factory brought him in. He was supposed to bring him in and introduce him to me, but he just-- I remember that he brought him to the machine where I was sitting, working.

And across from me was my cousin Hadasa. And we started to giggle because we knew why he was there. He doesn't remember. He doesn't remember two young girls giggling. He never introduced him. But fate is again interfering.

I was sent to the camp. And through the fence, there was a men's camp and a woman's camp. We worked-- the men were building the factories, and we worked in the factory. There were about 1,000 men and 600 women. I see him, that he is through the fence. I see him there. He's in the same camp.

And how did we meet? I didn't have the nerve to-- wasn't even personal thing to do that you could touch or talk to somebody. Was a fence between us. But one day, we ran out of water. Something was wrong with our wash barrack. So we had to use the back door of the men's wash barrack. I come into the wash barrack, and he is there, washing his clothes.

And a friend of his was there, Henig [? Meinheimer. ?] He introduced us. And from that time on, he used to come to the fence to talk to me. Not every day, but whenever it was safe, we'd talk to each other. And I remember once they opened the gates, and they let us mingle with each other.

And the Germans were all around us-- the Gestapo, watching us. And he said to me, you see? We'll survive, and I will marry you. And I touched his forehead. I thought that he is not sane. He has a high temperature. He doesn't know what he's talking.

But he survived. Tell me about your reunion with him.

After leaving Poland, we came-- I went with my-- my cousin's fiance took a group of people. And we were leaving Poland. It was too painful. And on top of that, they wanted that I had to register because I was born in 1926 to go to the Polish Army. I said that's what I need? The Polish army, to serve?

So he gathered-- he took his sister, his brother, a cousin, two cousins, and me. And we took-- we didn't have any money. We didn't have any visas. We didn't have any passports, no tickets. We got on the train, and they arrested us on the border of Slovakia.

And I remember they took us off. I have even a notebook still, what I have the addresses and everything on it-- the names. And they arrested us. They didn't put us in a jail. They put us in like a school. And I think I was in Brno and Bratislava. In Bratislava, I met somebody who us-- took us out to a kosher restaurant right away. And he left.

Menahem left. He said, I am going to Prague to make arrangement. He came back. He said, let's get on the train, and we'll go to Prague. Prague-- we had-- at 6 o'clock, every one of us had a bottle of vodka under the arm to bribe the guards on the border, because there were Russians there on the border-- Czechoslovakia to Germany.

And as I'm getting on the streetcar, somebody recognized me in Prague. My name during the war was Hilda, Germanized. And she said, Hilda, Hilda, do you know that Welek is alive? I wanted to jump off the-- she was my overseer. She was a Czech girl from Prague.

I said, I don't believe it. Really? So where can I find out? She said, in the Joint Distribution. So I started to cry. And I said, I thought he is working there. And I started to cry and said to Menahem, I don't want to go. He said, we have an appointment at 6 o'clock on the border, and you better go. I promise you I will come back and look for him.

He really did. A couple of days later, he came back, but nobody knew about him in the joint distribution. He went there to find-- to visit a friend. But he used to-- I found it out later. A few days, maybe a few weeks later, I was in Germany.

In one room, we were seven people sleeping on the floor. Everybody was-- the doors were always open. Every survivor-- nobody slept on the street homeless. Everybody shared. And the same was in the camps. The comradeship was great.

We needed each other. We didn't have any family. We knew what our-- well, what our life will be. I went out once-- didn't have what to wear at all. These shoes what the German woman-- so the first rain, I lost them. They didn't fit right.

But my cousin Hadasa had clothes still from home. I even ask her. I said, how come you have-- you made the same dress? Was a knit dress. She said, no, this is my clothes. Where she was in camp, they didn't take away the clothes.

Where I was, we went out there, and they-- my camp became-- in the beginning was labor camp. And after, it became a concentration camp. We were incorporated into Auschwitz. We were a branch of Auschwitz because the assessment in camp tattooed us. And they took away all our civilian clothes. We were wearing just the stripes.

So she shared with me the clothes. Once I went out in Weiden-- that was Weiden Oberpfalz, in Germany. I went out, and I recognized so many people who knew me. And I was ashamed to go out. I didn't have what to wear at all. So I am in the apartment by myself-- apartment-- one room.

And somebody-- oh, they came. People were traveling. I have to back it up really. People with traveling after the war because was no communication. Most places had registries of people who survived. And they were looking at list.

Three girls came who were from Bendin to that cousin's, I think. And we started to talk. And they were telling about some shoemaker for two packs of cigarettes, because we used to get from Onnera food and some clothing-- what there was for big people. People paid here a lot of money, and they gave us anything they send to Europe what was not wearable, even-- big shoes and things.

Yes, one thing I had from the Onnera I was wearing is white nurse's shoes for my wedding. Those were my wedding shoes. And we received cigarettes also.

So the Germans were so hungry for good coffee, for thing-- and you're bartering. Was bartering because we gave them this, and they gave us-- like we used to get that white bread. We didn't like the white bread. The Germans loved the white bread. So we exchanged for regular rye bread, or.

So he-- what was I saying about actually clothes? Yes, the three girls come in and start to talk about that for a pack of cigarettes, so they say had shoes made, whole dresses made. And she mentioned two names-- Ada [? Comuniska ?] and [? Braja ?] [? Comuniska. ?]

I said, who are they? And Bayreuth. They live in Bayreuth. He said, oh, are they with their-- had Ada found a husband? And an uncle is there and a cousin. Who is the cousin? Welek Luksenburg.

How did I remember the names? Because being in Ravensbruck, a friend of mine mentioned-- introduced me, because she knew that I know Willy. We were in the same camp. And she knew his cousins from Bendin. So we all were together with the transport.

We were on the same transports on the trains going to Ravensbruck and the people from Auschwitz. So she introduced me in Ravensbruck that they are his cousins. So having a good memory, I remember the names. So I wrote a little note.

And I said, if he wants to get in touch with me, that's where I am and the address I don't-- [? Milkstrasser ?] something, Weiden and so on. He said-- and again, they said to me, he is right now in Prague. All the girls were after him. So they knew all his moves.

So he said, he's right now in Prague, but he should be back by Wednesday or Thursday. So I wrote that note. And they gave him the note. Thursday, Friday, Saturday-- we didn't have any phone. I don't hear from him. I guess he forgot me. I didn't know how he feels.

So come Sunday, and I'm by myself in that little room. And a cousin said, throw down the key. And I said, I will get-- but she couldn't hold on anymore. She said, guess who's here? He received that note, and he took a train and was coming to see me.

So I got very nervous, couldn't find the key. Had to knock at the neighbor to get the key. And I was sitting on the-- it was dark. That was on the third floor, I think. I was sitting on the edge of the window sill. I almost fell off.

And he comes in. He was dressed, I remember, in a brown suit, long jacket. Looked very good. The hair was starting to grow in here. You see? Here's a picture.

And he said right away-- he gave me a watch, a men's watch. And he said, want to get married? So we didn't have anything. But he had to wait. He lived with an uncle, and he was like the chauffeur for the uncle. And the uncle didn't want him to get married because he needed him.

So we had to wait till 1946 to-- the uncle went to America. He had a sister in America-- the first transport what was legally going to America, with the survive-- with the DP, Displaced Persons. And left him an old Ford. So we sold the Ford. It took about seven, eight months by the time we organized everything.

We sold the Ford and made the wedding. The wedding was about 50 people. My friend's father had two rooms, so it was more room than we-- I cooked for my own wedding. I almost fainted before the wedding because I was fasting,

according to Jewish tradition as a bride.

And we got married. We didn't have nothing but each other. Was very important. A lot of marriages were going on right after because everybody wanted to have a home to start building a life.

When you were reunited with your husband and other-- when you got together with survivors, other survivors in general, what kinds of things did you talk about in those first days?

Mostly we were talking about our past, our experiences. It's still going on. When survivors meet now, sooner or later, we wind up talking about it. It never fails. I know that they are going to make now a film about DP camps.

I didn't have the experience of DP camp, because I promised myself that I will never be with so many people together. I couldn't wait to be separated, not to be with 30 women together. It was just-- I promised myself, I will never live with so many women again together.

And I never considered even going to a DP camp. I was lucky when I came to Poland. I had cousins. And when I came to Germany, the Jewish community gave us a room in a hotel.

So I was there with my cousin Hadasa, who shared a room. Later she got married. I got married. And life started to be, but we always talked about our experiences. It never failed. It never stop.

You said there were a lot of marriages after the war. Were there different standards after the war-- religious standards or moral standards or just traditions after the war?

See, a lot of marriages were not good matches. There were a lot of older men and younger girls. But we didn't have anything-- a lot of sacrifices. I don't know how these-- maybe there were divorces or unhappy marriages.

Some people made money already. They were doing business, and they wanted to impress with the [GERMAN] they used to call the Swiss watches, men's watches, and the boots, leather boots, they were wearing and giving. And some girls went for it. And they were not some people were more educated or more intelligent, and the others weren't. I could never see that.

I had to some-- the most important thing was to some to have something in common with the next person-- to be compatible and be able to talk, to discuss. And we had a lot of-- I was always involved. They form right away after the war organizations.

And I was very involved in the Zionist Movement. And my plans were to go to Is-- to Palestine. I myself received papers to go to America in my maiden name from a cousin of my father. But I was already-- I wouldn't want to leave Willy behind, so I just tore them up. And I didn't know the man good enough to bother him to send me other papers.

Besides getting married, what other steps did you take to rebuild your life? Did you try to get more education?

First of all, I went to art school. I was involved with Zionism. We always had a cousin, like a second cousin, who was much older than me and was-- he always was involved in politics and things. And I used to have discussions with him. And I went to art, too, because I always remember during the war, my mother sent me to take a course in sewing.

We had the machine at home, but I didn't know how to use it. Because she always said to me, you should never need it, but you should know. You never know what life can bring. So here, I had plans to go. Didn't have any-- to wind up someplace, in Palestine or in-- America wasn't on my mind at all at the time.

And here, I had to have some kind of a-- to make-- to be able to work. So I took that course, the arts course, to know how to sew. My first job in America, I was doing alterations. It helped me. But [? Isrek, ?] my cousin, came one day and said, we are going to Palestine. That was that time the War of Independence going on.

And I said-- are you packed? I said, no, not yet. I will wait. Because I realize we just got out from one hell-- the war. He was 23 years old, and he would be drafted right away. I don't know today if he would be alive. He would be-- have to be in four wars. Because we, the survivors, were fighting for the independence of Israel. We contributed to it a lot.

And so I said, I wait one day. So he was doing a little bit business. I didn't let him do anything. We had some money-- because unfortunately, it sounds awful, but the black market was going on. You had to survive. And that was the only thing going on in Germany.

So somebody, a friend, used to give him-- he used to go to Munich and bring stockings. And the man knew his father, so he gave him credit. Even after-- we came back once in 1962. We went the first trip we could afford to go to Israel.

And we visited Mr. [? Weitzman. ?] And he told him, what a fool you were. You knew you were going to Israel-- to America. And you came and paid me? He said, how could-- to pay what he owed him. He said, you didn't have to come. I would never maybe see you in your life. He said, but I couldn't face you today if I wanted to see you again if I wouldn't be honest and pay you for the merchandise what you gave me on credit.

So he did a little bit business. And after, I said to him, that's enough. I was afraid if he would be arrested or something-- would be blacklisted, and we wouldn't be able to leave Germany.

He also had offered a big-- people always trusted him and his ability, his honesty. Somebody gave him a whole yard with bombed planes and a villa. And he could be a multimillionaire in Germany. But I said, I will not live on that forsaken land. I wanted-- I was ready to divorce him if he wants to remain in Germany. I will not bear children on that forsaken land. So we left.

He was once in Munich and was-- we didn't have any papers to go. But the war was going on, and I was afraid that he would be drafted in the army. So we waited out. Once he's in Munich, and he sees a line-- as you stood in line, you didn't ask what the line is for till later. And they said, registering to America. So he registered.

Two months later, they called us. And they said, they send [INAUDIBLE] to Hamburg. That was like going through all the tests and everything. They took X-rays. And he is listed-- the X-ray is-- people whose X-ray wasn't clear, they put it out. And he went back.

And I thought that we'll not be able to leave because he had bronchitis and a touch of on the lung something. But they made a bigger X-ray and showed that it was nothing, just calcification on the bronchial tubes. So we arrived in Washington. Our papers were to Washington, DC. And--

When did you come to Washington?

We left we arrived here on Labor Day Weekend, 1949, September the 2nd.

Pause now. We're going to pause now, so I can change the tape.