

This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Ruth Cohen, conducted by Gail Schwartz on October 4, 2011, in Potomac, Maryland.

[? North Bethesda ?]

What is your full name?

It's Ruth R Cohen.

And the R stands for?

Renee.

And what name were you born with?

Well, Renee Ruth Cohen.

Cohen is your maiden name?

No, Friedman-- sorry.

The name you're born with was Friedman.

Friedman, right.

And where were you born and when were you born?

I was born on April 26, 1930, in Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia.

You have been interviewed before.

Yes.

So just to put this post-Holocaust interview in a framework, I'm going to summarize a little bit of where you were during the war. And then after that, we will focus on your post-Holocaust--

OK.

--experience. You stayed in Mukachevo until May or June of 1944, when your whole family, your parents, your sister, your brother, and the rest of your family, and the whole city was taken to Auschwitz.

Right.

And then, in October 1944, you went to Nuremberg.

Right.

With any members of your family?

My sister.

Your sister. And her name?

Terry.

Terry.

And you went to work in a factory in Nuremberg?

Right.

And then, in February 1945, you went to Holysov to work in another factory?

Right.

And you were liberated in Holysov.

Right.

OK. So I just want to ask you a few questions before we do the post-Holocaust part of the interview. How aware, as a teenager, were you before you went away, before you were taken away--

I was 14.

--in '44? But before that, how aware, as a young girl, were you of what was happening?

We were quite aware.

Did your parents talk about it with you?

We talked about it. We lived it. We mourned it. We lived it, quite.

And so you had heard about this man from Hitler, from--

We heard about Hitler in 1938.

'38 was when you first heard about him. What language did you speak at home?

We spoke Hungarian, German, and Hebrew, and some Yiddish.

And was your family religious?

Yes, they were.

So they were quite observant?

Yes.

What kind of work did you do in Auschwitz?

I was a messenger girl.

Taking messages where?

Taking messages from the gate, from the SS guys to anyone who needed to receive the message. It could be the Blockalteste. It could be another officer. It could be anybody.

And you were staying with your mother and your grandmother and your sister all together--

No.

--in the barracks in Auschwitz?

My mother, only my sister, and I.

Because--

My mother and brother, and we had some other children with us-- Olga was killed the same day we got there.

The same day you arrived, OK. When you got to Holysov, what kind of work did you do in the factory?

It was some spool winding for airplanes.

This was a Siemens factory?

Yeah. They were both Siemens, both in Nuremberg and in Holysov.

Both Siemens. So you did the same kind of work in both.

Yeah.

And what was your health like at that time, before liberation?

It was bad.

What?

I got sick in about January, mid-January 1945.

But did you continue to work?

I continued to work for a while in Nuremberg. And we all had to stop working in Nuremberg, because our camps were being bombed constantly. There was no time to work. And then, when we left to Holysov, I started to work for a few weeks. And then I had to stop.

Had to stop because?

Because I couldn't sit. I couldn't--

You were too sick?

Yes.

Do you know what you had at that time?

Well, now I do. I had tuberculosis on the spine.

Oh, my. Yeah. And then you were liberated?

Then I was liberated.

Liberated. Let's take the story from then on. Can you tell me about what you remember about liberation?

Well, a very interesting story is that-- it was two days before the end of the war. We were in the barracks, because we weren't working anymore. I suppose the Germans knew that the war was coming to an end. So they were all hiding. We didn't see any Germans around.

And somebody got up on the cots and happened to notice from a window men running down from the mountain. And so we watched for a while. And then somebody realized that the men were carrying guns, and they were running. So the-- the point was that they came. They unlocked the camp.

They being?

They being-- well, we found out later, White Russian partisans. And well, they found the Germans in their barracks and their rooms, wherever they lived, and took them prisoners. They shot one of them, because he didn't want to be a prisoner, and told us that we're now free, but we have to stay here, because it's not the end of the war yet, although it'll be finished very soon, within a few days. And the Americans will probably come and open the gates for us, because they had to lock us in, so that we're not in danger, which is what happened.

Then just before they left, they said, whoever wants to come with us, can come with us. We'll go back to our camp, and they can stay there. At any rate, about 120 women of the 500 of-- we were 500 of us. About 120 women went with them.

Was this a factory only of women?

Yes. The camp consisted of 250 Jewish women and 250 political prisoners. They were Polish, German-- mostly Polish, then German. So as I said, 120 women left with them. About three hours later, 90 came back. They weren't Jews. And they were told that Jews are not wanted in their camp. This was in the White Russian partisans camp.

So they came back. And I don't know how they got in, because the doors were locked. But they did get in. And they told us the story of what happened, which is that-- this was on a Saturday. Friday night, some of the Wehrmacht women went to a bar in Pilsen, which is about 30 kilometers away from Holysov, and told the bartenders, or bartender, that the camp is circled with cans of--

Explosives?

Explosives, so petroleum, or whatever, and that at 12:30 tomorrow morning, they're going to blow us up. So I guess word got to these partisans. And this was around 11:30, when they ran down and opened the gates. And I guess they got rid of the explosives, whatever they were. And so this is my liberation. Two days later, the Americans did come in.

Where does go when you left-- went out of the gate?

We didn't.

Oh, they just opened the gate and took away the explosives?

Right.

And you stayed--

We stayed, right.

--until the Americans came.

Right.

You are 15 at that point.

I was 15, yes.

What were your feelings then? Do you remember? Did you know what was happening?

Well, we knew that we were liberated.

What did that mean to you as a 15-year-old, a sick 15-year-old?

What can I say? We were all dancing on the deck.

You were dancing?

Yeah.

Were you, yeah.

Yeah, not realizing any-- we probably didn't even think than that moment at that moment.

What was the difference in age? What is the difference in age?

My sister is seven years older.

Oh, seven years older. So she was already 22.

Yeah.

Yeah.

She was [? in it ?] almost.

So you stayed. Then did you see the American soldiers?

Of course we did. They came in. They opened the gates. They let us stay there. Of course, they took all the information necessary, I suppose for Red Cross or for themselves. I'm not sure.

And did you know what had happened to the rest of your family at that time?

I knew right away. It just so happens that I knew right away-- not my father. My father survived. And I even saw him in Auschwitz. But we knew right away that my mother was-- my mother and my brother-- and we also had adopted two little cousins to save them. Though we didn't.

Where was your brother in the order of children?

He was a year and a half younger than I.

Oh, so he was the youngest.

Yeah. He was 12 and 1/2. And these children were about 11 and 9. They went with my mother.

They all went with your mother.

Yeah. So I knew right away.

Is that something you talked over with your sister while you were in the camp, about your family?

Well, we talked about it. But we really didn't believe it. We didn't want to believe it, absolutely not. And my father was also in Auschwitz. He sent us a message to meet him once. So we did. So we knew he was fine. And then we met an uncle. But--

But.

Yes.

Yeah. So now the Americans have come.

Right.

And what did you do? After they took the information.

They took the information. They treated us well.

What did you--

They fed us.

--know about America at that point?

A lot. I have family here.

You already had family?

Yeah, we have family here from late 1920s, early '30s.

OK.

So yes.

What did America mean to you as a 15-year-old?

Well, not that I'll be here. But my family meant a lot. I mean--

OK.

--we knew about them, about America. We know about Israel.

Did you know any English at that point?

My sister did. I knew a few words, because we started English in third grade, but not much else.

So then, after the Americans took the information from you--

They took the information. They fed us. They stayed there, and they fed us. And they were very careful, because they have had bad experiences with other camps, where they overfed people, and people died. Nobody died. Nobody got sick with us.

How did you communicate with them?

I don't ever remember talking to them. But my sister probably did. Yeah, but there were many people. We had Dutch girls who spoke English quite well. Well, many people spoke English.

Were there many other children your age?

Not there. There, I was the only one, in Holysov. In Auschwitz, we were, I think, 10 or 12 of messengers. We took turns.

That were approximately you age?

There was one who was 13 years old. Everybody was my age or a year older. And in Holysov, some women left the camp and went looting. And problems did arise.

Looting in the town, you mean?

Mm-hm. But then the soldiers, the American soldiers, warned everybody of the dangers. And it mostly stopped. But we only stayed there for a month after that. We went back to my hometown.

But you stayed in the barracks that you had been in?

Yeah, there was nobody.

There was no place else to stay.

Right. We stayed there. We were there. I don't really have memories of what happened there while we were there. But I know we were there. I know we gave information. I suppose that's how my family here found us.

Oh.

I suppose so.

So then after the month was over?

Again, I don't remember exactly. But we boarded a train. I don't know where. I suppose in Pilsen. And I don't know how we got there, or Prague. [LAUGHS] I have no, no real memory of it. And it took us about a week to get back to Mukachevo.

You went back to Mukachevo.

Oh yeah. And on the way home, we found out that my father is alive, and he's back in Mukachevo. Don't ask me how. I have no idea. And so we went home and did find my father living in my grandfather's-- one of the apartments in the house.

So did you saw non-Jewish residents of Mukachevo when you returned? And if so, what did they say to you?

I didn't see any, no.

You didn't.

I didn't speak to any, I should say. There was nobody living in our house my father had tried to get into. I don't know whether he did or not. But when my sister tried, they didn't let her in. They didn't even open the door.

The people that were living there?

In our house.

Yeah.

My grandfather's house was different than ours. It had a main floor, and then it had a main apartment on the main floor, where my grandparents used to live. And upstairs where three apartments. Now, the main floor was occupied by Russian soldiers, because Russia liberated Mukachevo. So Russian soldiers lived in that big apartment.

And upstairs, my father took one of the apartments. I don't remember who lived in the other two apartments. Well, yes, I do. One of my old friends and his mother lived in one of the apartments. I don't remember who lived in the third apartment.

And so you moved in there--

We moved in--

--you and your sister?

--with my father, yes.

And you father.

Who was already living there.

Right, when you got there. And how was your health at the time?

Well, my health was that I was in terrible pain. That's how I knew that something--

That's how it manifested itself.

Exactly. But I wasn't feeling sick. I just was in horrible pain constantly. So as it happens, psychologically, the pain stops when it has to. And it did. It stopped when we were bombed in Nuremberg, until I got to Holysov and started to work. I had no pain for about probably 10 days or so. And then it got progressively worse.

I don't remember being in pain on the train coming home, where we had to stand for a week. We slept standing. Whatever we ate, I don't know. Or whatever was done, was being done, was being done standing. It was so hard.

Was this in one of these cattle cars type of thing?

No. No, it wasn't.

It was a regular railway car?

Right, right, right.

But still you stood--

But it was completely mobbed, because everybody was going place, mostly home.

Did you get any medical attention after the war?

After the war, of course.



Not Immediately after.

I even got medical attention in the camps. I mean, I was in a--

Infirmary?

An infirmary. And I got probably something like aspirin, which didn't help much. But it helped somewhat. At home, I got home. And I was kind of. OK for almost a month. And then I started being in terrible pain.

So I went to Budapest, to the Children's Hospital in Budapest, spent the month there, with being X-rayed two or three times a day, every single day. But I'm still here.

[LAUGHTER]

And they couldn't find what was wrong. They said, Oh, it's something, whatever. Something-- they couldn't find it. And naturally, from lying in bed for a month, I felt better. And I went home. I went home for the holidays. So it was the end of August. I came home. I spent the holidays with my father and sister.

And then it started again. So somehow, my father arranged with my aunt, who survived in Slovakia, near Bratislava. My mother's best friend had been a doctor in the Jewish hospital in Bratislava. And my aunt was instrumental in somehow arranging with them, that as soon as there was an empty bed, they would take me.

So I went from Mukachevo to Rohovce, if you want to write it down, where my aunt lived, and waited for a bed. This was around November--

Of '45?

Of '45. And they didn't have a bed for me until March, so I stayed at my aunt's house.

Getting medical attention?

No. But I was in bed. Then I mean, I was lying down. I don't remember going anywhere. But that's what had to happen. Because in the meantime, the border in Mukachevo was closed, shut. If you wanted to leave, you had to leave by December 31st. If you didn't leave by then, then you couldn't leave.

So my father and sister decided to leave. So they weren't there. It was a good thing that I was here. And so I waited until March.

Did they come to you?

I'm sure they came to see me. But they didn't stay there. They ended up near Prague.

They went to Prague.

Right.

OK. And you stayed--OK.

And I stayed there, because we had this arrangement.

Yeah.

I got into the hospital, I think, on March 16, '46, and left March 16, '47.

So you were in the hospital for a year.

A whole year, exactly a year.

And was your father and your sister able to come?

Yeah.

Were they able to come visit?

Either one or the other came to see me at least once a month.

I mean, you were only 16.

Right.

16, 17-- your frame of mind-- do you consider yourself strong? Well, I mean, were you a strong young woman at that time? You were still just a teenager.

Strong. Strong.

Strong mentally-- no, not physically. I know you were in pain.

Yes. Yes.

To be able to go through what you did at such a young age--

Yeah.

--and not with family. I mean, you were--

Well, there was nothing that we could do. I mean, my aunt also--

Your aunt-- yeah.

--came to see me frequently, because she was-- I don't know. I can't tell exactly-- about 20, 30 kilometers away from Bratislava. She did come to see me frequently. And of course, there were many other survivors in the hospital.

So we sort of formed the family. There were lots of lovely young people in Bratislava, Jewish people, who visited and brought books and little gifts and their company constantly.

Did you talk to the other young people about what you all went through at that time?

I don't think so. I don't remember, so I don't think so. I brought a diary, and not once did I mention what I went through.

The diary you wrote at the time?

In the hospital.

In the hospital?

Right. And not once did I mention--

It was just what you were doing at that time.

Right. Right.

It was like a journal.

Exactly.

Did you think about what you had gone through in the previous couple of years?

I don't even think about it now.

[LAUGHS] So you got good care in the hospital?

Well, it took them--

A year?

Almost three months to find what was wrong with me.

What was the matter?

I had tuberculosis on the spine. And it took them a long time to actually find out and then get to find the cure for it.

Which was medicine?

They were to-- no. It was bed rest, absolute bed rest.

Just bed rest.

But absolute bed rest. After the three months, I was in a cast in bed for about 8 and 1/2 months.

Whoa.

Yeah. And nutritious food-- that was the important thing-- food and I suppose-- I'm sure they gave me vitamins and very good nutrition, which was first thing the doctor said when he discovered what was really wrong. So that's-- and I did get better from that.

And then the year is up. An then?

I went to a sanatorium for three months.

Where was that?

In the Tatry, Tatry Mountains.

OK.

And so that was the end of the summer, I suppose. I think I went home. After the hospital, I went home. I went home to my--

To your father.

--to my father. And then from there, I went to the Tatry Mountains for three months, then came back to Zatec, which

was near Prague, which is where they lived. And I didn't work. My sister worked. My father was-- I don't know what we lived on.

And around the end of January of '48, my aunt, either she picked me up, or I must have gone there by myself to her house. And we traveled around central Europe for a month. She took me to many places.

Now, your schooling had stopped at 14.

Completely.

By age 14.

Right, right. There was no such thing as tutoring or anything in the hospital. I read a lot. And I taught myself how to speak Russian. And I read a lot. That was the main occupation, but no schooling. That was-- yeah.

Were you at school, to go back to the wartime, up to the time you were taken away to Auschwitz? Had you-- to the age of--

About a month before that--

--at school?

Right. We went to school until March--

'44.

'44.

OK.

Right.

OK, so you were 14.

Right. Never got a diploma, I mean, because it was the eighth grade, which was the end of that school session-- not session. But it's like in middle school. But we did get diplomas there. But we never did. Because we didn't finish.

Because you didn't finish.

Right.

So now you're traveling with your aunt. And you said you--

Yeah, so let's say traveled all of February or all of March. I'm not sure. All of February. And after we came back-- she did come back with me. We came back. We got ready to come here. We left in April '48.

April '48. OK, how did your father arrange that? Do you know?

My family here arranged it, actually.

They sponsored you?

They sponsored us. They sent us tickets. My sister arranged the visa in Prague. I guess she got the passport, the visa, whatever.

How did you feel about leaving Europe?

No, no problem. Not at all. I didn't miss it as a homeland, not at all.

And were you fearful of going to America, or eager?

Well, we all were very excited about seeing my aunt, my uncle, my whole family. We had family.

So it was more a matter of seeing family rather than going to America?

Right. And we knew that we were going to live here. We had choices before. We could have gone to Israel, too. But we chose to come here. We have family in Israel also. And we could have gone there also. But I guess my father and sister decided that we were coming here.

Did he keep up his religious observance immediately after the war?

Not to the same extent. But yes, but not to the same extent.

So you came to the United States. How did you get here?

By boat.

From?

From Le Havre.

Do you remember the name of the boat?

I do. But they can't find it on the computer. I'll have to fight it. Because yesterday, I found a piece of paper that--

You say the name of the boat, you don't--

It's the SS Washington.

Oh, the SS Washington-- OK, very appropriate.

Yes.

And you landed--

In New York.

In New York.

Right.

Any special feelings when you landed?

Yeah, it was quite special. We arrived around 5 o'clock. They told us that very soon, we were going to pass the Statue of Liberty. So of course, everybody was up on decks. And that was most-- most-- yeah, I guess I cried.

Right. The Statue of Liberty meant something to you at that age.

No only at that age. And to everybody.

Yeah, yeah.

I suppose that that's how we expressed our joy--

Joy and relief--

--and relief.

--and everything, yeah.

Yeah, yeah. And even now, when I see the Statue of Liberty, I still have the same feeling.

I'm sure.

It doesn't go away.

I'm sure. I'm sure.

And it was Pesach. We arrived on the first day of Pesach. We had the first Seder on the ship.

Oh, really.

And there was a Seder on the ship.

What was that like?

It was very nice. We're very, very proper. Everybody was Jewish. Everybody knew what to do.

So it was all refugees on the boat?

Of course. And the only difference was, from what I was used to what was there, is that-- I don't know how familiar you are. But we had celery for karpas--

Karpas, yeah.

--rather than--

Parsley.

--parsley. And that was a big difference. Anyway, my family here, whoever is left, is still ultra-orthodox.

Oh, OK.

So two of my cousins walked from Brooklyn to meet us.

Oh, my.

And another cousin from the Bronx came by train, or however. I mean, they were not religious. But these cousins were the son and son-in-law of my aunt and uncle.

Is this on your mother's side or father's side?

My mother's side. My father's side-- my aunt in the Bronx was not-- she may have been religious, but the children were not.

So you had--

Family.

--relatives from both sides, from your mother and your father?

Right.

Wasn't that nice? Yeah.

Yeah. And of course, we'd walk back with my cousins to Brooklyn. All our luggage had to stay on the ship. And I don't know if it was Shabbat. But they let me carry my pocketbook, which is interesting. Anyway, I did carry my pocketbook. And we walked back from 21st Street.

Is that where you landed?

I think. Or Pier 21. Pier 21, I don't think it's on 21st Street. I think it's further up. I can't remember. I think it's--

From the after the war was over till the time you landed here, did your father talk about your mother or about your brother? Or did he just kind of--

We didn't.

--close up?

Yeah. Yeah, he did. We all did.

You did talk among yourselves?

No, no, no.

You did not?

No. We all closed up.

You closed up.

Like I think everybody else did.

Yeah, right.

Yeah. I'm sure that my mother and my brother were mentioned. But we didn't talk about what happened to them or my grandmother or the rest of the family. I mean, my father was of eight children. One was here. All the others were there. So there were six other people who did not survive--

Survive.

--with their families. Altogether, there were 58 people, my mother and father.

That you lost.

Yeah. I'm sure we mentioned everybody. But we never talked about what happened. I can't even remember telling my father about what happened in Auschwitz. I don't remember. It doesn't mean that I didn't. I just don't remember.

Yeah. So now you walked to your relatives' apartment.

We walked to their house, and it was the first day of Pesach.

Right.

And we had the second Seder.

Second Seder.

And of course, I can't even imagine-- if that's bothering you, just move it.

That's OK.

I can't even imagine how amazing. I felt. I don't know how my father felt-- I'm sure equally so. And at the Seder, I remember it was an ultra orthodox Seder. I loved every minute of it. But I sat there crying all along.

Of course.

Yeah, also it was my birthday.

Oh!

So it was a very, very, very emotional day.

A real day of liberation--

Yeah.

--of being rescued.

Yeah. And then we stayed living at my aunt and uncle's house for-- this was April, until almost-- almost or until July. I don't remember when. Somehow, because apartments were unbelievably hard to get at that time-- you had to either know somebody or had to have money to pay, as they said, under the table, to get an apartment, even if there was an empty one.

So what happened was we shared an apartment with an old Russian couple who lived in a private house, lived upstairs. It wasn't their house, but they occupied the apartment. And we shared it with them. We had the room, a bedroom. I guess we had two bedrooms. And we had the use of the bathroom and the use of the kitchen.

We lived there for a little while. I can't remember how long. And I started to work. Where did I work? In a t-shirt factory. I don't know how I got the job. But again, everything was arranged with a Jewish owner, who was willing to hire people.

My father got a job also with a man from Mukachevo, who was also-- he had been here for many years and established the factory. My father became a tie presser, a necktie presser, which was a terrible come-down for him. But he did it. I mean, I just know that he was not happy about it. But we all survived.

Did your sister get a job?

My sister wasn't here yet. She didn't get here for six months, six months later. And that was a little story. She went to get



our visa, and she left one piece of paper at home. So she had to go back to Zatec and back again immediately. And the line was 1,000 different numbers. She was 1,000 numbers behind us. So she got there by Sukkot. And yeah, she got a job also.

Did you think about going to school? Or you just thought about your--

I went. I immediately went to school to learn English immediately.

Oh, OK.

Of course, nobody would speak to me in any other language but English. They insisted. And they made me read English, even before I went to school, which was the easier part.

So where did you go to school? Was it Americanization?

To Erasmus. Erasmus Hall.

Oh, you went to a regular public high school.

High school, right. So I did that. And then they had the English as a second language also.

So language, yeah.

And that was about my only formal education here, that I finished high school.

yeah?

After I finished high school, I went to some private thing, where I learned how to do typing and steno, which I never used. It's not me.

[LAUGHTER]

And so I have this job working in the t-shirt, men's t-shirt factory. And I met a lifelong friend there. We're still friends. But after a short while, they were laying people off. And they fired me.

So I had to find something else. And I worked for a place called Barton's, a candy store. Again, I got the job because either my aunt, uncle, somebody, knew the clients who owned the place. So I got a job there. I worked there for, I don't know, six, seven months.

And then I couldn't stand it. So I again, through a friend, I got a job at an insurance office. No, I got a job with my cousin in his office, a real estate office, where I learned some skills, office skills, how to deal with people, whatever. And when I left that, I got this job in the insurance office doing bookkeeping. They actually taught me how to do it.

And when I realized that they were really taking advantage of me, because they would make me stay a while later. And then I would have to go to their house, and they would send me home at 3:00 in the morning. Because they were teaching me. it was a lot unfairness.

I quit that, and I got a job at the Educational Alliance, which was a social work agency. I was a cashier and doing some kind of bookkeeping. And when I left that-- because they were also letting people go. And there was a man who had six children, and he needed the job. I had seniority, but one of the bookkeepers said, why don't I leave? I'm more than happy to do it. So I left and then found a job at the New School for Social Research, where I stayed until '56.

And you were all still living in that apartment with your father?

Oh, I'm sorry. No.

Oh, you had moved out.

You mean in the shared department?

Yeah.

No. I'm sorry. I forgot. We shared-- we stayed there for, oh, less than a year. And then the Kleins, the Barton people-- [SNEEZE] that's my husband. He has a cold-- left their apartment. They were moving from their apartment. And they offered us their apartment.

So we moved there. We only stayed with that couple for maybe nine months, maybe a year, or less than that. At any rate, we moved to a few blocks away. And then I got married.

Oh.

How did you meet your husband?

At the Educational Alliance.

He was working there also?

No. No, he was still in school. He was graduating, as a matter of fact, when I met him. And then he was inducted in the army.

OK. And his name?

Ben Cohen.

Ben Cohen. And when did you get married?

In December 1952. He went in the army.

He went in the army. And you stayed where you were.

I stayed here. I stayed wherever I was living. And my father died in '53. And because he died, my husband got a compassionate transfer. He was transferred to Governors Island, in--

Oh.

--Manhattan. So he lived at home.

And you continued to work?

And I continued to work until I had my first baby, in '56.

In '56. And then from then on, do you have other children?

I have three.

Three children.

Right.

OK.

In the meantime, I'd work at the new school, and I attended many, many, many classes. I never got a diploma, but that was basically my education.

And so you stayed in New York--

Yeah, until--

--from then on?

--until four years ago.

And what kind of work did your husband do in New York when he got out of the army?

He had his bachelor's. And then, when he was in the army, he got his master's.

In?

In business.

Oh, OK.

And he was an accountant. He had his own firm, And then, when my kids grew up, I went back to work.

Doing what?

I started doing bookkeeping. And I ended up being asked to do-- I was the controller of the company in the garment center, of all places. And I stayed there until I retired.

And then you moved to the Washington area--

In 20--

2007?

Seven, right.

Well, let's talk a little--

That's my story.

That's your story. And I just have a few questions. When your children were growing up, did they ask you or did you talk about what you went through and the fact that there weren't that many relatives, and who you lost?

Yeah, of course we did.

You did?

I did.

You did tell them?

My husband is an American-born. So it was I. And my friend, my closest friend, who I met in hospital in Bratislava, and her friend. It was the three of us.

Did she come to the United--

Survivors, yes.

They both came to the United States?

yeah.

And their names are?

Well, there were two Susies. One was black Susie, and one was red Susie.

[LAUGHS]

And we stayed friends until the end of their lives. So our children grew up with them and grew up with their children and matter of fact, my daughter's best friend is red Susie's oldest child. They're still good friends.

So you did speak to your children, when they were relatively young--

Yeah.

--about what you had gone through?

Well, I believe that whatever they asked, I answered, which is what I really do with most people. I don't know.

Are you more comfortable being with other people who went through similar wartime experiences?

No, I'm not. I must say, I am not.

Would you prefer to be with?

No. I'm not more comfortable or less comfortable. But somehow, when you meet someone who had your experience, you have this immediate camaraderie. But it doesn't mean that one is more-- that I am more comfortable with them. But there is an immediate--

Connection.

--connection. But most of my friends are not survivors--

Are not.

--of the war, except for my--

Those two women.

Well, three women, but two of them, because they lived in Jersey. We lived in New York. My third friend lives in Boston, [? she-- ?]

Oh.

So it wasn't the same thing. I mean, she and I and her husband were great friends. But the children were not involved

with their children.

How is your health now?

I'm fine.

The tuberculosis of the spine got cured?

Well, that got cured. It actually never gets cured, but it's totally arrested.

It's in control.

No. It's arrested. It's not in control.

It doesn't get worse.

It's nonexistent unless it would reignite itself, which it hasn't done. Ben, this is Gail Schwartz. This is her.

Are there any sights and/or sounds that remind you--

Not anymore, but there were.

Like what?

Like an airplane going by. But not anymore.

How long did that go on for?

I can't tell exactly, but a bunch of years.

Even when coming to the United States?

Oh, sure. Of course.

And what would you do when that happened?

Nothing. You'd think. You'd feel. You'd think. But that's it. I didn't duck.

You didn't duck.

No.

Any smells that evoked what happened to you?

No. No. But that was real for a long time.

Tell me about becoming a citizen.

It was exciting.

What was that like?

One of my uncles here-- well, it was different than it is now. We didn't have to study for it. It's what you know and what you knew from living here. I can't remember.

Was it five years after you--

Five years almost exactly.

--when you left?

My uncle was my witness. And I think my husband was my witness.

Uh-huh.

But it wasn't a big deal like it is now. Now, I understand, it's really a big deal. You have to pass tests. We were asked a few questions.

What does it feel like to be a citizen?

Great. An accomplishment.

Well, on that note, then, do you feel European? Do you feel Czech? What do you--

I don't feel European, and I don't feel Czech. I have some sort of joy in Czech people's accomplishments, such as tennis players, musicians. But at this point, that's about it.

You don't feel--

Not any more.

--yourself.

Not any more.

Did you miss the country at all when you first got here?

No, there was no one to miss. Honestly--

There was no person--

--there was no one to miss. My aunt from there went to Israel. And there was no one there.

What language do you think in?

I think in English, but when I speak the other languages, I think in those languages.

So you're still fluent in other?

Fluent? No.

[LAUGHS]

I didn't speak Hebrew for about 30 years before I started to speak Hebrew again.

Because you had learned it as a child?

yeah. And my education was in Hebrew, complete Hebrew.

Oh, you didn't go to a public school. You went to a Jewish school?

I went to a Hebrew school.

A Hebrew school.

It was not Jewish. It was a Hebrew Gymnasium.

Oh, I see.

That's what it was called.

Yeah, OK.

So my whole education--

All your classes--

All, everything-- math, history. English was English. But everything else was in Hebrew. So I was really, really fluent. I was also really fluent in German. I did most of my reading in German, but not after. Not--

Well, on that note, what do you think about Germany? What are your thoughts--

Now?

--about Germany? Yes. Have you been there?

No. I won't be there.

Why not?

I can't. I don't want to. I can't. Ben, we've been all over Europe. But I couldn't get near Germany. When I did, I was-- we didn't. We made plans to go. At one point, we were driving from France till Italy. And we were going to go take a route through Austria. And we had to change plans, because I just wouldn't.

So you haven't been to Austria either?

No.

So Austria and Germany, you will not go to?

Right. Right. No. Now, the people in Germany, well, I have a different feeling about them. I mean, I know what the oldsters did. And I don't have 1,000% faith in-- or I shouldn't say faith, but trust in the younger ones. But I met many younger German people, many.

And if they were real, then they were wonderful. I just can't trust in my head that they were absolutely real in their-- or honest in their behavior, in what they said. But all the young German people I met were great people, good people. I met many before, and I met several at the Holocaust Museum. And every one of them was more than great. But these are the youngsters, 30-year-old, 40-year-olds.

How does it feel to speak German?

I don't.

You purposely don't.

I purposely don't. I have friends in New York, Austrian friends, who would speak to me in German. And I would answer them in English. I knew they understood-- not Jewish. They understood. They can speak to me. But I wouldn't speak. And here, too. I won't do any translation in German.

So if you met a German tourist at the Holocaust Museum, you would speak in English.

They speak English.

Yeah, yeah, I'm saying you would--

Yeah, let them speak my language. I definitely-- I still feel very much the same way about that.

So you have traveled a lot in Europe, you said?

Oh, yeah.

Yeah.

But we never went--

To Austria or Germany?

Right. That's because of me, not because of the rest of my family.

Right. Right.

And I don't understand how many of my friends have gone to, you know, Germany. But if you can do it, fine, more power to you. I can't.

Have you been to Israel?

Yeah, many, many, many, many times.

What does that mean to you?

Oh, kind of--

Yes.

Of course. Yeah, many times.

And do you speak Hebrew there when you're--

When I'm there, I would like to speak Hebrew. But my friends want to speak English. So it goes back and forth. But I speak more Hebrew here than I speak--

[LAUGHTER]

Do you think you would have been a different person if you had not gone through what--

Well--



--you had to?

--I'm sure I would have.

In what sense?

First of all, I would have had my education, first of all. I would have had a profession, which I don't. Of course, I would have been. And I wouldn't have had-- I would have had my parents for a long time.

But I meant psychologically, do you think it had--

Well, that is--

--affected you, that you would have been a different person today? Did it make you stronger?

I was brought up to be strong. My family was strong. My mother was strong. My father was strong. My family was.

How did your parents grow you that way?

I don't know. I really don't know, but they did. They really did.

Did that help you in good stead when you went through terrible, terrible times?

Probably, including my sister, who was as intelligent as could be-- she's not as emotionally healthy as I am. She's a very strong person, too. She had her problems, but aside from those problems, very strong, very capable, probably much more so than I am, or was.

Were you an independent child? Did you do things before the war started? An Independent.

Independent in what sense?

Do things on your own, or were you more dependent on your parents?

I was 14.

As a young-- I'm trying--

I was 14.

But during-- up to that time, is what I meant.

Dependent in what sense? I mean, they had to support me. They did support me. That was no--

No, I meant but in doing things--

In doing things?

You know, on your own.

I was a good student. I didn't need help with--

So they didn't hover--

--studies.

--over you, or anything like that?

No, no, neither my mother nor my father. There were not the kind.

So you felt you could handle. And you certainly did.

yeah.

Well, my sister helped, I must say. Because she was there. Whether she helped or not--

The fact that she was there.

--she was there. Right.

Did you or do you feel you lost part of your childhood?

Of course, I did-- not part, all of it, from eight on.

Right, from 1938, yeah.

Yeah. Because life changed completely after that. So that's too bad. So of course, I would have been different. Well, that would have been very different.

When your children were your age, let's say 8 through 15, starting at 8 until 15, did it bring back memories for you--

No, I don't.

--of what you had to go through--

No.

--from the ages of 8 to 15, of what they were going through--

No, no.

--from their ages?

It's interesting. I never thought about it. It never occurred to me--

It didn't trigger--

--until I heard-- no, until I heard that some people did feel that way. No, never.

So you never compared--

No.

--this is where I was?

No. it's really interesting. When it hit me that I didn't, I found it very interesting.

Did your children feel they were different than their friends who had grandparents, both sets of grandparents?

I can't speak for my sons, but I can speak for my daughter, who-- yeah, she-- she and my friend's daughter became sort of sisters. And my daughter feels that her, Renee's mother Susie, was family. I mean, that's what it was.

Of course, becomes family.

Yeah. Because they, too, didn't have grandparents. My sons never-- my sons are a different world. But yeah, my daughter definitely felt the loss. They had grandparents. They had my husband's mother and father.

Right, fortunately they had--

Right. Not for terribly long, but they did. But yeah, they did feel different because of that. They were so far different, because I raised them differently. I have different values than most of their friends' parents did.

In what sense?

Oh, well, I was more strict. They couldn't watch all the television they wanted. They couldn't be out at night all they wanted. And yeah, they didn't like that. But life is life.

What kind of work do your children do?

My oldest one is a vascular surgeon. My daughter here is a researcher. And the youngest one is doing acupuncture. But he has a degree in the neurosciences, which he chose not to do.

And did they have children? Do you have grandchildren?

Yes. Yeah, eight of them.

Ooh, now, do they know? What's the age range? Are they little?

26 to 10.

OK. And they're totally aware of what you--

Of course.

--lived through?

Of course.

Did they question you? Or did they question you when they were younger?

Mostly my grandchildren here, my daughter's children. My youngest one is most sensitive. The oldest one, he's 19. They go to JDS. So that he went to Auschwitz and--

On the march, yeah.

--on the-- no.

Not the March of the Living.

No.

But the other trip. They go senior year.

Right. And he was totally, totally distraught when he went to--

Auschwitz?

Auschwitz was their third stop. The first one was Majdanek.

Majdanek.

No, the second one was Majdanek. The first one was one of the other. Just give me some names.

Theresienstadt?

No, no, no. He-- that was the last one he did. Between Majdanek, and Auschwitz. Oh, I can't remember. But he was totally, totally destroyed.

You don't mean Auschwitz II, Birkenau?

No, no, no.

A totally different--

Another one of the camps near Majdanek.

Yeah.

Majdanek was where my family--

In Lublin. Lublin in Poland.

Yeah, but my family, part of my family was--

We went there.

--in '41 or so. But the other one--

Treblinka?

Treblinka, thank you. He was beside himself. But he doesn't talk about it. He wrote to me when he was there.

Did he?

He has a-- he wrote me an amazing email, actually. And then, when he went to Auschwitz, he described that, and I'll talk to you about it when I see you. Of course, I saw him, and he never mentioned it.

Really?

I just asked him this summer when he was home. He never said anything. Now, OK, we will.

Yeah, yeah.

Never will, probably.

It's too painful.

And I dread my youngest granddaughter, when she will be going there. I don't even know that I want her to go there. But my oldest granddaughter, who is now 13, she'll do fine. She'll be fine. But they know all about it. And they go to JDS, so they study it there. They have gone to the Holocaust Museum. They're part of the family.

And the others, I don't know how much they care or not. But they know. And they come here, of course. They went to the Holocaust Museum. They know all about it. They know a lot about it.