

OK, Ava, we're back. So you were telling me about what kind of an effect a knock on the door has on you.

A knock on the door and--

You were telling me the story with the boots.

The lady with the boots. Right. Those are things that affect me without me understanding. That's all I can think of right now.

And can you tell me anything more about the day that your father was taken? You said that you were in bed with your mother?

Yeah, what happened is, the three of us were in bed, and there was a knock at the door the first time. My father ran-- no, my father-- only me and my little sister, because my father apparently ran with my older sister on the roof. Because my older sister told me she was on the move with my father.

And my mother said my father was not there when the Germans came. And so they left. And she said the children were sick, so they left. So usually they didn't come back the second time the same day. So my father came down. And there again was a knock at the door. So my father hid in an armoire, in a closet. But he had left in the dining room his jacket. So they knew. They saw his jacket. And they said if he doesn't come down-- if the husband doesn't come, they're going to take the children. So my father heard that and he came out of the closet, and he went with them.

I meant to ask you before, what language were you speaking at home?

At home we spoke Yiddish, French, and Flemish-- three languages.

OK. So your father came out when he heard the Germans say--

He left with the Germans, right.

OK. And then what happened?

What happened is, the mailman came and told my mother that-- the mailman in Belgium, if they saw there was a letter addressed to the Gestapo, they steamed open the letter and they checked it. That's a very little known fact about the postmen in Belgium, that they really helped a lot of people. And they saw who was denounced. It was the concierge in my house that denounced us. So the mailman came and told my mother we had to go into hiding because we were denounced.

I don't know. I mean, they knew we were there, so I don't know. Anyway-- so it was announced that we were going to be deported. That's the thing. So we went-- my mother immediately went into hiding. She asked--

Wait, let's rewind for one minute. Specifically when your father came out--

Yeah.

And they took--

They took away my father.

Do you remember saying goodbye to him? Do you remember--

Nothing.

--them telling you where he was going? Was he able to take anything with him?

Nothing. Because we were in bed. And so it must have happened in another room. We were probably in the bedroom, in bed. So it must have happened in the other room. I didn't see him taken away. No. If I did, I don't remember.

And that was the last you saw him.

I remember nothing. That's the last I saw my father, right.

OK, so now they took away your father, and you are with your mother and your sisters.

My two sisters, right.

In the apartment. And your mother says that the postman has alerted her that you're going to be deported soon. So she decides that you have to go into hiding.

Right. And the person that later on she find out that they denounced us was the woman downstairs, the concierge. She's the one. Because after the war when my mother came back just to ask her for the pictures and some personal stuff, and she opened the door, and she said "what? You came back?" She thought we had died. But she refused to give my mother pictures. And even she saw my father's prayer shawl as a table cloth in her living room. But the woman wouldn't give us anything.

So that's why we don't have any pictures, family pictures at all. Nothing.

OK. So what happens next after your father was taken?

OK, we-- this is very vague. We went-- I remember-- the few things I remember, being in bed and hearing bombings and the noise was bothering me. I couldn't sleep. And my little sister was crying and bothering me. She was crying. That's all I remember. We went into hiding. I don't remember much exactly. I only know what my mother told us.

I do remember there was a woman who was a friend of my mother, and she took me someplace at night. And I remember holding her hand. We were walking at night in the dark. And I told her, I have to do peepee. And she said to me, [NON-ENGLISH]. Do it here. And I said, here on the street like a dog? And she said yes.

And to this day, I remember my peepee-- I didn't want to bend down like a dog. So I remember it going down my leg and my sock getting wet. And I remember that was a horrible feeling. You know? I was crying. And I don't know where she put me. She put me someplace in hiding. I don't remember that.

Where?

I only remember when I was taken to the convent.

OK, so you know that your mother's friend took you somewhere.

My mother put me someplace with a family. My little sister went someplace else. I don't know where my older sister-- I think she was in some kind of a kindergarten-- a kinder camp. What do you call that? The orphanage or something like that.

OK. And where was your mother at this time?

My mother? OK, she went into hiding. She knew a woman in Brussels who was her seamstress. And so she let my mother stay in her attic. And my mother paid her. And in the attic, the window was broken. She didn't even give my mother a blanket. My mother was freezing all the time, and that's how she feels she got bad arthritis. But she saved their life.

I mean, she my mother paid her, and my mother was hiding up there. But then that woman, Madam-- I forgot her name already. She brought me and my older sister to the convent, and she pretended she was our mother. And--

She collected you from wherever you were with your mother's friends?

Did she what?

Remember you said that you were taken somewhere by your mother's friend into hiding.

Yeah. Right.

So the woman, the seamstress who your mother was paying to rent the attic, she is the one who collected you from that place where you were and took you to the convent?

That I don't know. I assume so. As far as what I know is that she's the one that brought me and my older sister to the convent, and that we had to pretend she was our mother. And we had new names and last names. And I used to forget my last name. I always used to go and ask. There was another two sisters, also. Also Celine, as my older sister, another Celine. And I forgot her other name, the other girl, two girls. We were four girls, that for some reason, I don't know how it was, but we were together.

And I always used to ask my new name, because I had forgotten. Apparently, only the Mother Superiors know that we were Jewish. The other nuns didn't know.

Where was this convent? Do you know?

In Wezembeek.

Wezembeek, Belgium.

A lot of people went to Wezembeek, Yeah.

And do you remember anything about how it came to be that you could be hidden there? Did your mom know somebody at the convent? Did this woman, the seamstress know somebody?

The seamstress is the one that brought us to the convent. And probably-- I don't know how my mother found out about it. I guess there were a lot of underground things happening there. You know.

And where was your younger sister at this point?

My younger sister, it was terrible. My mother had-- because she was so young, they put her with somebody, a family-- I don't know if it was Antwerp or Brussels-- and they treated her horribly. They locked her up for hours and hours in the bathroom, in the toilet. There in those days, it was just the toilet and a door. There was no bathroom, you know? Just the toilet.

And they gave her the food from the dish, she told me, that they gave to the dog. That's why she was very sick after the war. For three years, she was sick. She was terribly malnourished. And then when we got smuggled into Switzerland, somehow we were-- she told me, you know, I was protecting her. But I really didn't know my little sister. I was in the convent. She was 1 and 1/2. For two years, she was hidden someplace, so I really didn't know her.

I mean, now only recently she told me that. I didn't even realize that. She's very close to me because we were hidden together. I mean, we fled to Switzerland together.

Well, let's go back to the-- we're going to come to that in a minute. Let's talk about the convent for a little bit.

The convent, I remember very little. In 1995, '96, there was a conference in Belgium. I mean, there was Yad Vashem sent me a letter saying they were honoring the nuns from the convent, and they were having a conference in Belgium, and for me to go. So I went, and the nuns didn't remember me. I didn't remember the nuns. And the two other sisters that were with me in the convent, they were there at the conference.

So one of them-- only one of them was there. So she said she was going to go to the convent the next day. So I ask her, could you please take me to go to the convent, because I don't have no memory. So we went to the convent. They were older, so they remembered the nuns. The nuns didn't remember me, and I didn't remember them.

The only thing I remember from the convent was big dining tables, huge tables, and the children were sitting on benches. And the bedroom, the windows were high up. That's all I remember. And so I asked them to show me the bedroom where the children slept. Because I wanted to see if my memory was correct. And sure enough, there were windows on top. So that I remember.

That's all I remember. And I'm like-- I come from a very Hasidic family. My mother married a Hasid. So we're a very Hasidic family. I'm not religious anymore, but I was. But I like sacred music. I mean, I love church music, sacred music. I'm crazy about it. So it must have come from the convent.

So I asked the nuns. I said, was there music during the war in the convent? And they said, never. So that was that. I just liked Bach. It's not like you need an excuse to like Bach, but coming from a Hasidic background, I didn't grow up with that kind of music. I thought maybe that had come from someplace, you know? But it didn't.

And I had no memory. Nothing came back. There was a courtyard. I remember vaguely a courtyard. But apparently we weren't allowed to go out, so I don't remember.

And how old were you now at this time?

By then it was '44. So I was already 6 and 1/2. Almost 6 and 1/2.

And how long were you in the convent for?

I think I was in the convent a year and a half or something like that. And the war ended in '45. At the end of-- no, August '44 in Belgium. So in April-- April '44, I think my mother ran out of money or whatever. So she find out that if you have children under six, you can get into Switzerland. So the Belgian underground-- my mother had three children. So some families took each one of them, pretending we were their child, so they would be able to get into Switzerland.

My mother had my older sister Celine, my older sister. On the way, they were three trucks, about 50 people, I think. That's what my mother told me. My mother got stuck in France. I mean, we had to go through France to go into Switzerland, but she got stuck because my older sister got measles. So she couldn't go with us.

So the two families, they gave us different names. So it was later on more difficult for my mother to find us, because they gave us their name. OK, we kept our first name, but there was a different last name. So when we got to the border, this is what happened. A couple went out to take a walk, and they spoke in Yiddish. And some undercover Gestapo in civilian clothes followed them, and they heard them speak Yiddish, so they followed them. And they picked up all the adults. They were all sent to concentration camp. They all died.

The children-- I was very close to the border. I was told to go under the barbed wire. The Swiss police would pick me up on the other side. But for some reason, I was told-- my older sister told me, I went and grabbed my little sister, because they were going to take her. I grabbed her, and I ran with her under the barbed wire, and the Swiss police picked both of us up on the other side.

Now, I remember-- the only thing I remember was my coat. My mother had made a little gray coat with blue navy blue collar for all three of us. And in those days, the seamstress made clothes for us. And my coat was torn on the shoulder.

And I was so worried my mother was going to be mad at me that I tore my coat. My coat, you know?

Then on the other side, they picked us up. I took care of my little sister. I held on to her to dear life. I was like a little mother to her. We were sleeping on straw. That's all I remember. The only incident, I don't remember when my mother came or anything, how she found us. I mean, I know now she found us, but because I got some papers from Belgium. And now I know how she found us.

But in that camp, to go to the bathroom, there was like a square hole on the floor.

Sorry, which camp are you talking about?

In Switzerland.

When you crossed the Swiss border, you crossed by yourself with no adults?

When I crossed the border, I was with my little sister, and the Swiss police picked us up, and they put us in a refugee camp.

OK.

And the refugee camp had straw mats. That's all I remember. We slept on straw. But in that refugee camp-- that was in Switzerland now-- they didn't have toilets. It was just like a square hole in the floor. And you looked inside, it was like a sea of excrement. And you put one leg there and one leg there, and you did. And my little sister was there. She was waiting for me. And suddenly I slipped, because it was slippery.

And I was going to-- I was going to fall in there, and I was going to die. And I started screaming and screaming, because my little sister, I was taking care of Her and two hands just lifted me. I don't know who. Strong hands. I don't know if it was a woman or was a man and put me on the side. That's all I remember.

OK.

And then the rest I don't remember much. A few weeks later, my mother was able to get into Switzerland. But she was looking for us and she couldn't find us, because those families had given us those names. Eventually, we had the real first name, but a different last name. And even the birth date was different, because they didn't know when we were born. But anyway, eventually, my mother found us. I don't know how long we stayed in that camp. I think a few months.

And your mother had brought your older sister?

My older sister. She had finished with the measles. She brought her. In Switzerland, I was with the-- my mother went into a refugee camp with my little sister in [? Mont Jean, ?] it's called the name. And I went with a family in Zurich, a very nice family that didn't have any children. They were an older couple. And my older sister went with another family that had no children.

My family, they were very nice to me. They gave me all their coupons for chocolate and for candies. They were very sweet, very nice to me. Everything coupons during the war. Everything was rationed. And my older sister, she was treated like a Cinderella. It was horrible. They made her clean floors, and they treated her horribly. So she was very unlucky. I was lucky.

This was after the refugee camp?

No, excuse me?

This is after the refugee camp?

After the refugee camp by the border. The border had refugee camps. And then I don't know why, they put us with another family, and my little sister stayed with my mother. Maybe the refugee camp didn't take children older. I don't know. Maybe little children only under two or something. I don't know.

Yeah, I remember seeing pictures, only tiny little children under two kind of. And after the war, when the war finished, I think my mother came to visit this once in a while. She was able to leave the refugee camp, but only for one day. She had to be back by the evening. So I think occasionally she came to visit us. But I remember. I think I was told. My sister told me she came to visit us.

Do you remember what part of Switzerland that family you were living with lived in?

Excuse me?

Where in Switzerland were you at this point?

I was in Zurich.

In Zurich, OK.

Right.

And in '59-- we came here in September of '53. In '59, my younger sister got married in Belgium. So I went to Belgium, and then I decided I was going to go to Switzerland, to Zurich, to go and thank those people, what they did, that they were so nice to me. I went there. I found them. They were still alive and he was sick. He was dying. I think he had cancer of the stomach.

They were very old, and it was very nice. They were very nice. And I never went back. I assume he died and she died. I did have a little girlfriend. Her name was Heidi. And I have a picture of her. And I was even thinking of going to Switzerland to see if I can find that one, although she may-- I don't know if she's still alive.

I remember the address. So maybe somebody who is still alive may know or recognize her, you know? From the picture, who she is.

She's someone you met while you were living with that family?

When I was with that family. Her name was Heidi, and she was my little girlfriend. And we-- I remember playing on the swing. On the swing-- that's why I think I have a bad memory. I'm not sure of it. We were playing on the swing, and the swing hit me on the head hard. I have a scar, a little scar here. And all I remember is blood. And that's all I remember. So I must have passed out or something. Or maybe I went to the hospital. I don't know.

But I have a very bad memory. I always had a bad memory. It would have been interesting. I started school in Switzerland. I was six. When I came back, I spoke SchwyzerdÃ¼tsch.

How long were you living with that family for?

Well, actually not very long because from '44 April, or maybe May '44, April or May '44 to maybe October '44. Maybe a good six months, if that much. Because the war ended, and my mother came to get us. We went back to Belgium. I was put in an orphanage, because my mother had to get her life together, and Alice was so young. So she had three children. She had to work and find an apartment. And so she put us in an orphanage. Tiefenbrunner, it was a very famous orphanage.

And so they put us in an orphanage, where they had children that they had no parents and children that had one parent, that put their children there temporarily until they got their life together after the war. But I think I was there for two

years. Also I have very little memory of that orphanage, also.

That was a Jewish orphanage?

A Jewish, an orthodox orphanage. As a matter of fact, when I returned to my mother, I was-- that was in Brussels. I returned in Antwerp, it must have been '47, '48. I'm not too sure. I don't remember going to school. But I knew how to read or write. They put me in third grade. So I must have gone to school in the orphanage, but I have no memory.

But I have a tendency-- I have like a mental garbage can. If something unpleasant happens to me, I just forget it. I just like literally put it in the garbage can. Maybe that's my way of surviving. Like, let's say I don't remember ever being hungry, OK?

Other people, my friends remember, boy, they were hungry. I don't remember being hungry. But I don't leave the house without food in my bag. Even now already I have a banana in my bag just in case. I know every corner I can buy a banana, right? Every corner I can buy food. But I cannot leave my house without food, because I am petrified of being hungry. So I must have been hungry during the war, I think.

Because otherwise why? Why would I do that? You know? But I don't remember being hungry. And as a matter of fact, in the winter, every time I go to a nice restaurant or something, a nice meal or whatever, I have a nice, warm coat, and I keep on thinking, oh, those poor people during the war, how they must have suffered, you know? They were hungry, and they were cold, you know? And I have like a feeling of well-being that I just had a nice meal and I have a warm coat.

So it works on my mind. For many children, during the war you were not aware what's happening. You thought after the war you go back home, everything go back to normal. But things didn't go back. And that's when most people really realized their losses. And as you get older, especially those that don't have any children or people don't have extended families. They don't have-- now I have cousins, I mean, that they have grandparents, they have parents. They have cousins. They have big extended families. Nothing. Zero. Have nobody.

Now I do volunteer work to-- an old Holocaust survivor, she lives on this block. So I visit her. Now she's in hospital. She's 96. She's unbelievable. Her memory is better than mine. But she keeps on crying, she has no picture of her mother. But she's 96, so she must have been 20. So she must have some memory of her mother, what she looked like. But she had one son, and he died in a displaced camp. And then he became a doctor here, and then he died.

And so she has grandchildren that visit her, but about the war, she doesn't have a picture of her mother. And that drives her nuts. So she's alone. I mean, she's not really alone because she has grandchildren. A lot of people don't have grandchildren. So they're really alone, alone, alone. A lot of them don't have sisters either.

So it's really, for many children, I think what happened during the war, especially Belgium, children, I think the majority were hidden with families or in convents. The reason why they didn't even consider themselves Holocaust survivors. When we had a conference in '91 about child survivors, it was the first conference, the Holocaust survivors, that was them, those that were in concentration camps.

I never considered myself a Holocaust survivor. I never thought about it. It was like almost insulting, you know? We were hidden children and we were not in camps. It's them. And then I realized everybody's a Holocaust survivor, [? you sly dog. ?] But we never-- I never thought of myself as a Holocaust survivor. It's only the last few years, suddenly it dawned on me that I am a Holocaust survivor.

Once in one of the meetings there was a woman there. She was in concentration camp three years. I couldn't imagine how you survived that. And she's always so upbeat. And one day I just had to ask. I said, listen, you're the one that had it the worst, I think. You were three years in a concentration camp. I said, how are you always in such a positive mood and you're always so upbeat?

And she said to me, the nicest day of my life was when the war was over, and I slept on a bed with a sheet. She said that

was the most beautiful day of my life. And then she said, I felt sorry for you, she said, because you and the children, you didn't know what was going to happen to you. I knew what was going to happen to me.

I mean, she happened to have survived. She knew she was going to die. She said, I knew what was going to happen to me. But you people, you didn't know. You had to be worry all the time what's going to happen to you. She thought the children had it worse then. But when I always think about it, I cannot imagine what happened, how those people in concentration must have suffered. That must have been an unbelievable nightmare. You know, hungry, and cold, and ugh-- a nightmare.

So I don't remember being not taken care of. I don't remember that. And it must have effect on me, being separated from my parents, not seeing my parents. But I don't remember that. Maybe I just-- I think I blocked out a lot. Although there was a doctor, Dr. Kestenberg, you know who she is? She lives-- she used to live on 79th Street, that big building there. She was a child psychologist. She's the one that took interviews for all hidden children.

And that was her-- I forget what her organization is called, but Dr. Kestenberg, she interviewed children, hidden children, or child survivors. And one day, she asked me when we were preparing for conference, we wanted to find child survivors. So we had to find a way to finding them. There was a film that showed on television about a woman that went back to Belgium to thank her rescuers.

And a woman that saw that film, it gave her an idea of finding child survivors here in New York, in this area, and have a conference. So we had an article in New York Magazine, so we know that the word go out to find people, OK? So-- oh, you see now, I forget why I was telling that. My memory's playing tricks on me.

The conference was to get hidden children together.

The what?

You were saying that the conference Dr. Kestenberg had organized--

Yeah, OK. Dr. Kestenberg, OK. So she lent us an apartment to prepare for the conference. So we finally organized. We found enough people, and we organized to have an international conference of child survivors, which happened in '91. I think it was November '91. That was the first international child survivor conference. And I wrote an article.

OK, I was helping. I was one of the organizers. And we were trying to advertise to see how are we going to find children in the New York area or Connecticut, New Jersey. So I went to The New York Times. And I asked them if we could have an article in the Sunday-- in the Sunday section, in the magazine section, which stays around a little longer. They said, no, they couldn't promise us.

So I wrote a letter to New York Magazine. I said, we're a group of people. We're child survivors, and each one of us have a very interesting story. Would it be possible to have an article on us? Immediately I got a response. And they had an article about us. And then later on, there was a book about us. So they helped us.

At the conference-- OK, again, why? I forget now why I was-- anyway, we did have a conference in '91. There were 1,600 people that came. There were many from all over the world. Many couldn't come in because I think we could only accommodate 1,600. It was very successful. Some people found each other. And to this day, every day there's a conference for child survivors, or Holocaust survivors, child, survivors.

And every month-- every year, the conference is in a different city or a different country. Sometimes it's in Holland, or it's in Israel, Cleveland. You know, all over. And there's a bulletin board there. And to this they, did you know, did you find, did anybody-- people are still looking for each other, for people. And people are-- occasionally somebody's still finding somebody.

Wow, that's amazing.



But it is the most-- I always go and watch that bulletin board, because I see how they read, how they-- they're still anxious trying to find somebody maybe that's still alive.

Right.

And what happened to my mother, which is my mother didn't have anybody. She moved to Israel. She lived in Jerusalem. Then she got a brain tumor. She was in a home. And she had a sister-in-law in Poland. I don't know if it was in Belgium or Poland, she loved love very much. And you know, after she died we find out that she lived a block away from my mother.

Wow. OK, let's back up a little bit. The last we talked about you were living in an orphanage in Belgium.

I was living in an orphanage.

Your mother was trying to get her life back together after the war.

After the war, right.

So tell me what's next. How long were you in the orphanage for? You said--

I think I was there two years.

OK.

I was two years in the orphanage. And then I went back to Antwerp.

Your mother took you out of the orphanage?

My mother, she had an apartment. Hmm?

Your mother took you out of the orphanage after two years?

Well, that's the funny thing. I don't remember my mother taking me out. What I remember is taking the train from Brussels and going to Antwerp and showing up at home.

OK.

That's what I remember.

And your sisters were in the same orphanage?

My older sister was still in the orphanage. She was there longer than I was. My younger sister, I didn't think she-- I didn't know. I remember she was in the orphanage. Apparently she was also for a few months. She was with my mother. Then I came to the orphanage.

You left the orphanage, what year and what year was that?

Excuse me?

What year was it when you left the orphanage?

It must have been '47 or '48. I don't remember. Then it must have been '47, at the end of '47. Something like that.

You were about 9 or 10 years old.

Yeah, I started in the third or fourth grade. So how old are you when you're in third grade? Nine?

About 9 or 10.

Well, I don't remember going to school, like I said. But I knew how to read and write, some I must have gone to school.

OK.

And they put me with my grade age. in--

In Antwerp.

In Antwerp, right. So I was never a great student. I just always just barely made it. Because I couldn't concentrate. I never had-- I always had a concentration problem. And so I made it, but I never was like a great student. And then I went to an art school after that. And then my parents decided to come over here in '53.

So your mother had remarried at this point?

Oh, OK. In '48-- in '48 or '49-- no. After the war, there was a man that came to visit my mother. He found her and he came to visit her. And he said to her, I was with your husband in a concentration camp. And I had promised your husband that if I survive and he dies, I will marry your mother. I will marry your wife. You know, she had three little children.

So he found my mother after the war, and he told her what had happened to my father. And he died of-- that's what we were told. I'm not too sure now-- of typhoid, that there was a typhoid epidemic in the camp.

Which camp was he in?

So that happened a lot. So that made sense. So my older sister once said, no, he died a more horrible death. And I said what, and she wouldn't tell me. So I don't know. I assume my mother knew better. And this man, he wanted to marry my mother but he was not a religious man. So she did not marry him. So then later on, you know, in the Orthodox, love comes after marriage, not before marriage. You know? Love will come after marriage.

So then somebody introduced my mother to Haskel Halberstam. You know, the rabbi? And they got married. I don't remember my mother telling me or asking me, but my older sister, she married a non-Jew. And that was a terrible thing for my mother. As a matter of fact, that's the reason why we came to the United States.

She was going out with a boy that was not Jewish. And my mother-- but she was 17. In those days, 16, 17 was not like 16, 17 over here. It was very innocent, and it was not the same. It's like 12 years old, maybe. But I went to a Jewish school, but she went to a non-Jewish school. It was a business school.

So my mother and my father, my stepfather went to her parents and told her, listen, this is a religious girl. She cannot marry a non-Jew. And you know what the parents of the boy said? They said, you know what? We don't want our son to marry a Yid. Two weeks later, my mother had a visa to come to the United States.

This is the reason why we came to the United States, because of my older sister. And you know what? At the end, she still married a non-Jew over here. My parents said shiva for her. It was terrible. For an Orthodox family that suffered because they were Jewish during the war so much and their child to marry outside, it's a terrible thing for them.

OK, so your mom remarried in Antwerp.

She married-- remarried a rabbi.

And all of you were together living with him, you and your sisters.

We lived together in Antwerp. And then my stepfather had a brother here, and the Bobov Ruv which is the Halberstam, it's a kind of big rabbinical family. He had family here. So he, my stepfather-- now, that's another thing. He was one of 12. And two survived the war. And him, my stepfather, he had, I think, four children, and his wife was pregnant. They all died in the war.

And he had such a sad look. I could never look at him in his eyes. It was a horrible thing. He had the saddest eyes. I couldn't look in his eyes. All the years that we were living together, I could never look in his eyes. He was-- well, he had lost-- I mean, imagine 12 children, his whole family, his parents, his wife, children, everything. He had lost everything, more than the average. And it was horrible.

And yeah, that was not a happy marriage. I mean, they lived together, but it was not a happy marriage. And what I feel the most sorry is for my mother. She had such a hard life, the war and how she-- I don't know if I could have done what she'd done. Imagine you have three children and the Gestapo, and everywhere you have to be careful you're not going to get caught? Oh, it must have been horrible for a woman with three children or two children, anybody, any woman alone with children during the war.

And then she survived the war, and then she did not have a happy marriage, and then she had a brain tumor at the end. And she suffered for seven years with a brain tumor. It was really sad.

I'm sorry.

I feel so sorry for her. She really had a horrible a life. That is a true tragedy. My mother was a true tragedy. She was so hurt by what my sister did to her. She took it personally. OK. That was really a tragedy in my family, a terrible tragedy.

So when your sister started dating a non-Jew, your mother and your stepfather decided to come to the US?

They what?

They decided to come to the United States.

Right, my mother was such a hurry for us to leave that she got a visa right away. In those days, you needed an affidavit. It's like now, you come over illegally. She got an affidavit from the family. And so me, my older sister, and my stepfather, we came first with a maid. The maid came with us. And my mother was working. My father was working. So my mother needed somebody to take care of us and to cook.

So the maid came with us. We went to Paris to Cherbourg, and then we took a boat over here. I remember my mother stayed back to sell the business and close the apartment and everything. My mother wanted us to leave immediately because of my sister. So that's why we came here. So then eventually we found an apartment on 87th Street. And that's where we lived.

So you went ahead with your stepfather.

I went ahead with my older sister and my stepfather.

And then your mother came later with your younger sister.

Months later. With my younger sister. She kept my youngest sister there, right.

And you all lived in New York together.

We all lived in New York on 87th Street. Then--

What year was that when you came to the US?

We came September '53.

What do you remember about the trip?

What I remember about the boat trip? I was sick. I remember the boat. I was used to kosher wine. Kosher wine is sweet wine. And I remember putting sugar in my wine. And the waiter said, what are you doing? What are you doing? You're killing the wine. He didn't understand, of course. I'm used to kosher wine.

I remember very little about that trip. Very little. I remember I was throwing up because it was the winter and the sea was bad. I don't remember. I don't even remember being with my sister. I don't remember where we slept. We must have slept together. I think they were bunks, I think, on the boat. I don't remember.

But then we came here with the maid. So somebody here put me in a high school. And my older sister, she went to a business school. It was my last year. But I didn't speak a word of English. I had to learn English first, right? Somebody in the family put me in Julia Richmond High School. Oh, that was a horrible high school. I didn't speak English. They made fun of me. It was a very bad experience.

Then later on I went to a private school to finish. But about schooling, I didn't have guidance from my parents. And as a matter of fact, even when I started working-- first of all, I fell into Cornell, and I studied there for three years, and I went to working at Columbia, and I was studying at Columbia.

And the only thing my mother said, "I'll pay you if you go to Stern College." But I didn't want to go to a girls school. I just didn't want to. I was a very shy and awkward to start off with, and I just didn't want to go to a girls school. I had to do it on my own. And I had a hard time. I didn't have guidance. I didn't do properly things. But still, I mean, I did well considering everything.

But my father used to say to me-- my stepfather, "why are you wasting your time going to school?" He would say to me, "why don't you get married?" He kept on saying that to me. "Why are you wasting your time studying? You're wasting your time." So I didn't get guidance coming from a religious family.

But considering, I mean, eventually I worked in a-- I studied cy-- my background was fine arts, but I studied-- I was good at a microscope. I failed at Cornell. It was just an accident. I got a part time job there, and then there was a school of cytology, C-Y. cyto-- and that's cancer diagnosis. And they asked me if I wanted to study. It was a new field. So I said OK. I had nothing to lose, I think. I was there for three years, and I finished. And I graduated--

For college.

In cytology. No, just cytology. I was going to college outside.

OK.

But that was specifically that field. Then I got a job at Columbia in the cytology lab. Eventually I became in charge of the lab. And until I retired, that was my only job.

Wow.

Because I was good at it. And I was good because when you look at the microscope, you look for cancer diagnosis, you look for abnormalities in cell, changes in the background and things like that, any changes from the normal. And I had a trained eye because I had a fine arts background. So I was very good at immediately noticing changes. I had a good eye for that. So that's why I was very good at what I'm doing.

So how long were you doing that for?

I hate to say it. 36 years.

Wow.

One job.

That's amazing. That was the only-- well, I was in charge of the lab. I couldn't go any higher unless I got a degree or PhD or something. So I couldn't go any further. I was as high as I could go with my background. And I was in charge. Where am I going to-- I was happy. And I had this apartment already.

And I was worried-- I took early retirement. I was worried that I would lose my apartment. Because by then the apartments became so expensive. But if you worked for Columbia for 20 years, you were able to keep your apartment.

Wow. That's amazing. And what was going on with your sisters at this time?

Excuse me?

What was going on with your sisters at this time?

My older sister, I lost touch with her. She got married, and she had children. I did visit her once or twice. She lived in New Jersey. She married. She had an unhappy marriage. I think an unhappy marriage. But anyway, she had three lovely children. They're really lovely children. And they live in Salonika. I went to visit them a few times. They moved from New York to Salonika. They lived there for about 30 years. About-- I don't know-- 10 years ago, maybe no more than that.

Over 20 years, actually. They came-- the children went to Boston University. They came to the United States to go to school. Then they got married. I'm in touch with them, but I'm not close to them. As a matter of fact, when Alice was here, we went to visit them. It was the first time I saw them in 20 years. And they have children and grown children now.

And this is something that my mother instilled in me, and I cannot forgive her, what she did to my mother. I really can't. But you know, I feel very sorry for her. She is guilt-ridden. She is sick. She had three times cancer. Anything that can go wrong with something have gone wrong with her. She has metal in her back. She can barely walk. She's in pain all the time.

But I think a lot of that-- a lot of it she brought up on herself with guilt feelings, I think. She ate herself literally up with regret of what she did. And when my mother lived in Israel, she was in a home, and she didn't tell the people that she had three daughters. She only told them she had two daughters. And she told them, later on when my older sister did come and visit after my stepfather died, because while he was alive, he didn't want to see her, she told her that she was a niece, that she was a child of one of her sisters that died in the war.

But the first time she came to Israel, my older sister wanted to see my mother. So we took my mother from the home. We took her to the King David Hotel. There was a nice coffee shop there. And my older sister was in the living room, in the-- what do you call that in a hotel?

Lobby?

The lobby. She was sitting over there in the corner, just so she could see my mother, and then she went back to Greece.

Wow.

So it was really very sad.

What about your younger sister?

My younger sister? I was very close to her. She really helped my mother a lot. I mean, when my mother was sick, she went there regular. I went there twice a year, but I was working, and I didn't-- it was difficult for me. I couldn't lose my job. And Alice, she went there every six weeks to visit my mother.

To Israel?

To Belgium. And she went to visit my mother. She helped my mother and my stepfather. There was another thing. Luckily, we had a woman later on that took care of my mother. And then when my stepfather died, she stayed with my mother for 24 hours. She lived with my mother, took care of her.

We were thinking of bringing her here, but when I went to visit some of these old age homes, and even in Israel, she stayed in the home where she was, and the woman took care of her 24 hours. In Israel, some of those old age homes, they were like snake pits. It was horrible. I was shocked.

They were in a room like this size. There were maybe 20, 30 people one next to the other. They turned them around just like they took a leg and flipped them over, like you flip over a chicken cutlet. It was horrible the way they were treated. I was very surprised. Those old age homes, they were terrible.

And she had a brain tumor. She was sick. The hospital threw her out. They said they couldn't take care of her anymore. And my sister panicked. She didn't know what to do. She had to go someplace. My mother was in a coma. There was a French-- is it a monastery? One of those things, a Christian place. A French Christian place in Jerusalem took her in and got her back on her feet. She couldn't--

The medical system, I mean, in Israel, I don't know. It's very cruel. Maybe they can't afford it, and maybe it's a problem. But as an outsider to look in, it was very cruel. As I see it.

I understand.

The way my mother was treated at the hospital, OK?

Can I ask you a little bit about sort of your feelings after the war? I mean, I know you don't have a lot of memory of what happened, but you know knowing what happened to you--

I'm very affected by the war. Terribly, terribly affected by the war. First of all, I'm aware that I don't have an extended family. Like I said, this knocking on the door, the sound of [? a cistern, ?] the food. I have flashbacks. I'm shy, but that has nothing to do with the war thing. That's just me, personality. My younger sister is not shy. I'm shy. And my older sister is not shy either.

I always-- throughout my life, even the reason I like this work that I was doing, literally I was looking for cancer cells, hidden cells really, which are really the hidden kind. Pathology, I work for pathology, it's always in a part of the hospital that's a little isolated from the rest. It's not that you walk in there's Pathology. You have to go in, ride up and down to find the lab, the Pathology lab.

So it was isolated. I had my corner. And I always find myself I was comfortable being someplace where I kind of was hidden away. Dress-wise, although my sister is just the opposite but that happened to me, I'm always dressed very conservatively. I never thought I should-- I mean, I dress so simple and so modest, so I'm not noticed. I always try not to be noticed.

So I think my whole life. I was very affected by what happened to me during the war. Even to this day, when I come to a place, I immediately find a where there's a corner I can go that nobody would notice me. It's something that stayed with me.

But what gave you the strength to move on despite all of this?

When did I feel-- I never felt that I was affected by the war. It's only when I started going to this child survivor things suddenly I became aware of those things. I wasn't even thinking about it.

I see.

We never talked about it, because everybody was a hidden child. Every Jew that survived, every child that survived in Belgium had to be a hidden child. We were all in the same boat. So we don't talk. We didn't talk about it. We survived, and some were luckier than others. Some had both parents. Some had no parents. Some had brother, sister. Some didn't. I thought I was lucky because I had a mother and I had three-- two sisters. So I was one of the lucky ones.

Now, you said that you grew up in an Orthodox home.

In what?

In an Orthodox home.

Yeah.

And then when you came to America, you were living with, it sounds, your mother and your stepfather, who were both very Orthodox. But then later on you mentioned that you're no longer Orthodox.

It started already much earlier. It started already much younger. When I was 15 and a half, 16, I was good at-- I was good at athlete. I was a good ping-pong player. We had gym. I didn't like swimming because I once almost drowned. And after that I never wanted to go swimming again.

The school-- there was a school outing. I must have been in fourth or fifth grade, maybe. And maybe sixth grade. I don't know. And when we went swimming, they told me to jump. And I didn't know how to come up. They didn't tell me, and I swallowed water. And I thought I was going to drown. And since this day, I never went back to swimming. I don't like swimming. Even when I take a shower, I still feel the water goes in my nose, I remember that incident.

But I was a good athlete. And there was a gym then. There was a Maccabi. And they had sports. Even in the last year in Belgium, I hid everything from my mother. I didn't tell her I was going to play ping pong. I didn't tell her I was going to the gym. I was a high jumper. I did pole vault. I did running, jumped the hurdles, the discus. I did everything.

I was very good at it. I was very strong for a girl. I didn't tell my mother, and she didn't know. I lived two lives. I pretended I was Orthodox. Even when I went to Jerusalem to visit my mother, I had clothes for the Orthodox area. And even once I wore a skirt. It was short. I mean, like above-- I mean, I was in my early 20s. Above the knee. Somebody said "Ava, watch out, you're going to walk on your skirt. You're going to step on your skirt," meaning you know.

So I did have two sets of clothes. When I go home, I used long sleeves. And then outside-- but I was never-- I never showed low cut or anything like that. I was always very modest, OK? And that's probably my background, that I'm modest about how I dress.

But I lived two lives, a double life. At home I pretended I was Orthodox. When I was outside-- but it happened very slowly. Being Hasidic is very difficult to change. It takes years and years. It's a very slow step, and you're filled with-- guilt-ridden to this day.

Once I was working, and I had to work in the lab. It was one of the Jewish holidays. It was Passover or New Year's. I don't remember. And I had to work. I covered the lab. I was in charge. I had to be there. And it was a Jewish holiday. And my assistant, she was on vacation. I had to work.

And I listened to the Temple Emanuel. They had service on the radio. And I listened to the service on the radio, and I

was crying. I said, I can never do that again. I felt so guilty for six months. It's easier for me to go than not to go. So every high holiday or whatever, when I say Yizkor or something up. I always go to the synagogue. I never miss.

But I was living a double life a long time. I was getting very good at it. I pretended to be Orthodox, but that I was not. Because it's not like I wanted to run around or anything. I just wanted to do sports. And go to school.

Your heart wasn't in it.

Because you wore shorts. My parents-- excuse me. My parents, they didn't approve of that.

Did you ever learn of any other family who may have survived?

All my friends are survivors.

But no one from your extended family? Any aunts, uncles, cousins?

There's nobody. There's nobody. I don't have an extended family. I do have-- OK, I do have one cousin, yeah. My mother was still here at the [? eleven fifty ?] and '73, I think, something like that. In the early '70s, my mother, somebody told her in the business, I think you have a nephew that lives in Washington, a son of your-- a brother of your husband. And so she looked into it. And she found him. And he came to visit us in New York.

And when my mother saw him, I'd opened up the door, she almost fainted. He was the picture of my father. He looked just like my father. And so we do have one cousin, a real cousin alive. But for some reason, we're not very-- he's married. He has children. His wife died. He got remarried. He's now in his 80s. He got married at 80, huh?

Wow.

And he is very happy. A very lovely woman, really nice woman. But for some reason, once or twice a year we meet at an occasion, a wedding or whatever, and he comes to New York. But we didn't remain close. I don't know why. The only really cousin I have. The only one. That's it. And this is the tragedy, really, of all the people, the children that survived, is having a lack of family. This is a terrible thing. And you're really aware of it when you see other people with grandparents and cousins and uncles and aunts. And we don't have that. It's really a big problem. Yeah.

Do you ever have dreams about anything that happened during the war?

I used to, but I don't remember. I used to. Occasionally I dreamed-- I never dreamed of my father. My mother, sometimes I dream of her. Because I feel so sorry how difficult she had those last seven years with a brain tumor. She used to tell me-- her head is like a carousel 24 hours a day. It just turns and turns and turns. She had such a horrible life. She suffered so much with the war and then how she survived. Really, she must have been a superwoman, how she managed to save her three children during the war. It was unbelievable. But no, I used to dream about the war. I don't anymore. No.

And you've been back to Belgium since.

I go back to Belgium now almost every year. But now I go and visit my sister. I stay with my sister. I go back to Belgium. I went back to the house where the Germans came and picked us up and picked up my father. That house is still there, but nobody is living there. The house is-- they're going to-- there were some Russians living there.

I went there last time. I went there two years ago. I went there three years ago. I just wanted to see the inside of the house, because all I remember, the stairway, we lived on the second, third floor. I don't remember, but the stairways was on the left. And I wasn't sure which house it was. So I finally find somebody to open up the door. And the stairway was on the left. So there was a stairway on the left.

I wanted to see the apartment, but there's nobody there. Even now if I go now in Brussels and Antwerp, I'm still going to



go back. If the house is still there, I'm going to go back again and see if somebody could open up the apartment, if they didn't destroy it yet. So I'm still obsessed with that.

I made so many mistakes in my life, but I have so many regrets. But who didn't make mistakes? A lot of people make mistakes.

That's right.

If you only knew when you're young what you know now, as you're older, if you had that sense. But that's the way it is.

Is there anything else you want to share with me about your experiences?

About the war?

About the war, or after the war.

I didn't marry, although I had a friend, a companion. He wanted to get married. It's not me. It's not his fault. It was my fault. I didn't want to. Because I came from such an Orthodox background, such a restrictive background, I always wanted to be free. The most important thing for me was to be free. And we were together 32 years.

Wow.

He died two years ago. I mean, he was in hospice care. I took care of him for two years. For many years. We lived together about 20 years or so. And over the last two years it was hospice. I was taking care of him at home. And he was a very nice man. I was very lucky.

It's funny, I didn't want to get married. For some reason, I don't know, to be free was the most important thing in my life. It was this restrictive life among the Orthodox. I mean, if you accept that, that's fine. It's a nice way of life if you like it. But for me, I was suffocating. And it's like I never had enough freedom.

It's like I never had enough freedom. And he couldn't understand that. He couldn't understand why I didn't want to get married. And then we weren't going to have any children anymore. When I met him-- we were together 32 years, but when I met him I was in my late 30s, and he was-- he was 20-- 15 years older. He was 55, 54, 55.

And he already had grown children. He didn't want to have any. He was divorced. He didn't want to have any more children. So we weren't going to have any children. It was already late. I know. I wasn't too sure at that time if I wanted. A lot of child survivors don't have children. Or they didn't want to have children. In case there ever was a war, they didn't want to put their children through that. And so quite a few of them did not have many children.

With me, I don't think it was intentional. It just was how things were in my life. I had my first boyfriend, we were together 10 years and he started with drugs, so that was it. I had to cut off. And then I was alone for two years, and then I met Joe. And I was very happy with him. I had 32 years. They were very nice years.

So it's longer than many marriages, I think. And I was lucky I had that. Very, very happy with him. He was a very nice. That's him over there.

I'm sorry for your loss. Be careful. I'll take a look at it.

So we're going to have to cut in about 5 or 10 minutes. Anything else you wanted to ask?

No, I think I asked most of my questions. No. You remember more than you think you do.

I do. Oh, that's what I was going to talk to you about and I forgot. OK, going back to Dr. Kestenberg, she said she wanted to interview me. So I said, no, I was young. I don't remember anything. She says, yeah, yeah, yeah, you'd be

surprised. I said, OK. I agreed. I had two 4-hour meeting with her? Two 4-hours meeting. She had a way of asking questions, and she was able to get things out of you.

She got a lot of details out of me. I wonder if that Institute is still there. I could find out how to-- Eva Fogelman is the one. Do you know who she is?

I don't, but--

Eva Fogelman, she's a psychologist. She has to do a lot with the ADL. She interviewed a lot of hidden children. I think she worked with the Dr. Kestenberg. If anybody you want that has some information, she would be the one. Dr. Eva Fogelman. She lives in a place here on the West side.

OK.

And she also works with the ADL. So the one that knows a lot or has an enormous amount of information, I mean, Dr. Kestenberg, she's dead now, but that institute, I don't know what happened to all those interviews. There's thousands of interviews. Very interesting to find out.

I can ask the people at the Museum what they know about that.

They would know. Absolutely right. It'd be interesting to see if I could get hold of that interview.

Sure.

Can you-- you can look at my interview. Can you look that up for me, my interview with the-- what's it called? The one-- the ones that interview a lot of people? What's it called?

Shoah Foundation?

The Shoah Foundation, right. I have an interview with them. Can you see how much different it is than this interview? Are you able to access that or not?

Do you have a copy of it?

I have a tape, but I-- can I-- am I finished?

Just like--

I'll leave it--

Would you like to be finished now? Hold on.

Yeah, yeah. Why don't we finish? Right.

OK. Sure. Well, thank you so much, Ava, for talking with me today.

Did I give enough information?

Yes, you were wonderful.

Yeah?

Thank you very much.

Maybe I give too much. I don't know.

[LAUGHTER]