

OK, I was born Giselle Friedman in a small town in Eastern Slovakia, which was known as Carpatho-Ruthenia. The city was called Khust. It was a small town of 20,000 population and about 10,000 Jews.

So there was a large Jewish community. There was a rabbi and a yeshiva and Rav Dushinsky, who emigrated to Israel, was one of the rabbis in our town. And he ran the yeshiva there before my time.

So we were fairly comfortable. My father dealt in wine and liquors and also mineral water. We were the sole dealers in mineral waters for health purposes.

And when I was born, this part belonged to Czechoslovakia with a multiethnic population. There were mostly Ukrainians and Hungarian-speaking people there and Jews. But from the end of the Second World War on, it became Czechoslovakia. And there was a smattering of Czech population, Czech people, who were brought there to just to populate it with the Czech ethnic culture. So we went to Czech schools.

And it was a good life then. We lived comfortably. And it was democracy. And there was always antisemitism there. The local population was antisemitic.

In 1939, after Hitler took the Sudeten from Czechoslovakia-- that was 1938 I think. In 1939, our part of Czechoslovakia became Hungary. And when the Hungarians took over, there was a brief period, maybe several months, of some kind of Ukrainian regime, which was extremely antisemitic. But they were chased out when Hungary took over.

And that's when our real trouble began because the Hungarians took away-- they were part of the Axis. And they took away our livelihood, the license to practice in business. And kids, we couldn't go to schools because children threw spitballs on us saying, Jewish death. So whatever schooling I had at the time was done privately by a teacher. And then tests were taken at the end of the year.

And there were serious problems. There was antisemitism. The young men, Jewish men, were taken to work behind the front as auxiliary army. And many young Jewish boys got killed that way.

And then there was one time there were waves of Jewish people of Polish origin who happened to be living in our vicinity were deported to the Ukraine and killed. Whole trainloads of people who had lived in our town and the vicinity were just rounded up and sent to-- we didn't know where. But then some escaped alive and came back and told tales of horror. They had to dig their-- that was the first-- these were the first reports of executions, being shot into the graves that the people had to dig for themselves.

As a matter of fact, one of my cousins and his family was taken like that. And I understand that a child sent back a report with somebody that it should be remembered that he had died, that the family had died in this way. So this was very frightening to us. But we still lived in our own homes. It's still possible to live somehow.

At that time my father was beaten up because he had sold secretly some merchandise because he couldn't have an open store. A Hungarian man was put into our store. He just took it over. So my father had to make some kind of living.

So he was selling mineral water secretly. He carried it to people so that we could live. And he was caught by a policeman. And he took him to the police. And he came home with swollen hands and he was black and blue. And he cried we are in great trouble.

And this is how we lived for almost five years until in 1944 the Germans came in. And they-- first of all, my sister was in Budapest, one of my-- two of my sisters. So one was caught and sent to a local concentration camp. We found out a couple of weeks later. She sent a postcard, which is rare, but we didn't know until then that she was caught.

And this was before the holiday, before Passover. And we had a terrible Passover of mourning. My father and mother were crying throughout because we didn't know what's going to happen to her. She was a young girl. She was under 20. And we didn't know what they're going to do to her.

And then shortly after that, the Germans closed up everything. They came in actually in force to our town. And one day my father-- this is on the eve of the Passover, my father was-- there was a quite sizable Hasidic community. My father wore Hasidic garb. He had black-- he wore this black Velvet like hat. And he had a full beard.

And on the eve of the holiday, he didn't come home. And I was waiting for him. And suddenly, I saw a man who was vaguely familiar to me. He wore a little cap with a visor. And he was shaven. It was my father.

He was afraid of the Germans, you know, that they might pull his beard out. So he went and shaved his beard. And this doesn't sound like much, but it was very painful.

Traditional.

Yeah. It was very painful to all of us. To him, I must have been. And the whole Passover holidays that year, the Jews were rounded-- the Judenrat was created. One of my uncles was in the Judenrat. And they came to collect money.

They were given a directive to get half a million Hungarian pengo, which is an awful lot of money. And they had to get it. So they went door to door to get money. And they were responsible for getting it.

And on the holiday itself, men were rounded up. They had to-- the Judenrat had to collect men to be sent to do some work. And we didn't know what kind of work.

So my father went along. And they were taken to the woods behind the town on a long, long march. And we didn't know whether they will come back alive or not. We didn't know it was-- everything was unknown. Everything was done without giving reasons or explanations. And it was total horror for us those few days. But they came back.

And soon after that, two ghettos were created in the city. We had to move with whatever we could carry into a section of town. So we slept in one bedroom. About two families slept in one bedroom. Our family had four children because my sister was away, one of my-- there were three of us altogether and another family.

And I don't know maybe some other-- I don't know in a small apartment, there were like three, four families. So there were not enough bedrooms. So we just-- several families went in the same room. And we stayed there for several weeks.

And every day news came back of horror, you know. This one was taken away, and that one was taken away. One day my sister ran out in the evening from the ghetto. She went home to see what's doing with our home.

And she came back completely hysterical. She was a young girl. And she said that they came with horse and buggy, several horses and buggies, and took everything that we had, that we had possessed, you know silver and linen and bed linen and whatever we had in the closet and clothing. And they just piled up, piled it. They found it. We tried to hide some of it in a cellar that we had in a cellar.

And my father said, what are you worried about? Material belongings will-- money, there will always be money. There was money. And there will be money. Let us just be alive.

And he was very pessimistic. And he knew that we're facing something that's worse than what we had been experiencing then. And truly, after several weeks-- well, this was in May, I think May 25, 23, something like that, we were told to get together whatever we had. And we were taken to the railway station.

We put our belongings to a flat wagon, you know just piled it up, and walked after it through the towns that we had built. The Jews had built it, you know. And we were going through a ghetto that was already evacuated two days earlier. You know the town was divided into two or three ghettos. So we went in several transports. So ours was the second transport.

But we were going through a town that had been vacated the day before, or two days earlier. And the local population,

like vultures, where we saw faces behind the windows you know. They were looking for stuff that was left behind by the Jews, like rats, you know?

And it's still breathed. It was still alive, you know. They were already rummaging there, looking for stuff.

And we came to the airport. We didn't know where we were going to go. And my father, who was a very scholarly man and very shy, very reserved man, he was carrying my sisters. I told you, my sister was Edith, was taken away. And they felt so bad, they packed her shoes-- she had a pair of alligator shoes, beautiful shoes. So he packed it and he carried it with him to give it to her when he sees her, you know.

And we were very depressed, very frightened. At the railway station, we sat down and waited for hours until the trains got ready. And then we were packed into these trains, about 70 people into a one of wagon with a cargo train, without benches or anything. And there was no room to sit down, to lie down. So we were just sitting near each other, huddled together.

There was one pair for toilet for all of us. And it was so painful because we had to make in front of everybody. And as the train was moving, it splashed. And whoever was sitting near it smelled and whoever was sitting near it got splashed.

And my father had no air. He couldn't breathe because the thing was closed. There was only a small window high up with barbed wire.

And so at some point, the train stopped. And he begged the guard to open the window a little bit because he couldn't breathe. And we had no water. And it was dark. We had no light.

We went through-- we traveled for about two nights, two days. I don't know how long it took. It seemed like about two days because I know it was a day time and night and another day.

And then we arrived in Auschwitz. And the door opened. And my father was holding us so because somehow he felt that this is the end. Haven't spoken about it.

Try again.

When the doors got open and opened with-- there were guards, prisoners, not guards, but prisoners open the door, prisoners who had been there for years. And they opened the door and said, jump out, schnell, schnell, fast, fast, get out, get out, get out. And people were looking for their belongings.

And they said, don't you see? Don't you see the fire there? What do you need belongings for? Just leave everything and get out. And they were really frightening us, you know. They didn't treat us very gently.

And we just tried to stay together. But it was impossible, you know, thousands of people. Suddenly, there was a big-- we were very tumultuous there and crying. And people were looking for each other. And suddenly, there was the SS. And they said line up and men here and women here.

And we were passing by then-- you know you don't-- I wasn't aware of what's happening. It was difficult. All we knew was that we were in a strange looking place, flat place. And there were high towers on one hand and a fence and the railway station. And far in the distance, there were barracks.

But it didn't enter our consciousness. We didn't know what-- I mean it was very difficult to see what's happening. It was so unreal.

So when the SS were standing there and we passed by them-- and we had neighbors who were very, very dear neighbors. We grew up with their kids. There was a big courtyard. And we grew up with the children.

There was a neighbor, a young woman. She had two little children, whom we-- I mean I used to babysit for them, little

kids, love them. And I remember-- and so there was the mother and the children and the grandmother. And it was a large family, a number of sisters.

And I remember they said, you go that way and we go this way. And I was following my mother. We tried to stay together.

And so we lost my father because he was among the men. But the women, I remember I saw this Scheiner family, first the children and their mother and the grandmother, you know, Mrs. Scheiner, the old lady, walking so nicely and slowly away. They were going straight to the gas chamber.

And then soon, we were in a place. And they told us to undress. And then they shaved us. They shaved our hair completely. And it was so funny to look at each other naked. We were a bunch of naked people and with shaven heads, and it was funny because we didn't recognize each other. You could stand next to your mother or sister, couldn't recognize her with a completely shaven head.

And then we got some kind of dresses that were either too long or too short, no underwear at all. No shoes. Only this-- I don't remember about shoes. But I know a silk dress I got. And it was long, so I cut strips same day and gave everybody to cover their heads because nights it was very cold there. And we just huddled together.

And then we were taken to Auschwitz. And we didn't know what happened to the others. And we still didn't want to face the reality that these people won't be alive anymore. We thought that they were taken to a safer place, you know, the old people and the children to be cared for.

And when we reached the camp where we were, there were long barracks. And the camp that-- the barracks that we were sent in didn't have the bunks, bunk beds. It had just earth on the floor know. There was no floor. It was just earth. And some places there were puddles, you know, like mud because it must have been a rain before.

And so we were told to sit down and sit like this, you know. And one person said-- we were sitting so that to take as little space as possible because there was just not enough space. Over 1,000 people in one barrack, that's how we slept at night.

And next day, it was awful, terrible. And then they gave us a piece of bread. They gave us-- it looked like a piece of bread, a loaf of bread. And everybody got about this chunk. That was the food.

It was awful. It tasted like sawdust. It just no-- we just didn't eat it. We didn't think that this would be our food for the future.

And then this was the first night. Next night, we suddenly noticed some men around. It was disorganization. So it never happened that men would come in to the women's camp.

But it seems that one group of men somehow came in there. And my father was among them. And he noticed that-- and he said, where is mother? And where is Gita? He didn't recognize us.

He was shaven too for him. And did you hear about Edith? And then they were taken away. And I saw them once more.

And then the next night, we were put into a regular barrack. And on the barrack was a very, very long, maybe 100 yards, long maybe 300 feet long barrack, about I should say 20 feet wide. And it had compartments. And in each compartment, there were three bunks, three boards, that were about 8 feet by 4 feet five, 5 feet, 5 by 8.

And on each board, about 16 people slept, like eight and eight. So we had room-- no blankets were given, no mattress, just the board. And we could just sleep like sardines on our sides. There was no room to lie flat, just on our sides. And then when somebody had to turn, then all of us had to turn. That's how we slept for half a year while we were in Auschwitz.

And there was one time-- is terrible existence. It was cold. And we were hungry. And we had no clothes. And we didn't know what happened.

Yeah, so the next day we were placed in this type of bunk. And we looked out through the window-- and several times a day, there was what was called Blocksperre, which is-- it's like sort of a curfew. You couldn't go out.

And we looked through on-- the top, under the roof, under the ceiling, there were-- we were on the top-- no, no, you could just go up and look out. Just under the roof, there was a slit. That was the window out. And we looked out.

And we saw a group of men outside. They were being lined up to be taken out. That was the men. It was like the second day after we arrived. And I saw my father there.

And I went to the door. It was tremendous wooden gate that opened out. And I went to the door to go out to see my father.

And a young girl about my age was sitting there watching. And she said-- she was placed there to watch nobody go out. And I said let me go. My father is there. And she said, I can't let you. I'm sorry but I was told not to.

And I begged her. And she didn't let me. And I didn't have the strength to just force her away from the door and go out. Maybe I would have been shot because nobody was outside. When there was curfew, there was curfew.

But that would have been the last chance for me to see my father because I never saw him again because he was taken away. And then he was brought back in October after we had left to be gassed because he was emaciated and deaf. They worked in mines, coal mines. After they used them all up, so they brought them back.

And so we stayed in Auschwitz like that. And my mother became very-- so my sister and my mother, one of my sisters and my mother, and my mother refused to eat the food. She couldn't tolerate the food. And she became very thin.

And so we had to run with her constantly in Auschwitz because Germans-- the SS came to select people out to the gas chambers. We had to be on the run all the time because we knew that she wouldn't survive a selection because she was thin. And she was about 45, 46 years old. But she just was of the age that Auschwitz wasn't for. So we were running.

And then the rains came. And there was big mud. And we had dysentery. And sometimes we had to stand in line for roll call for hours. And we had dysentery. And there was no place to go. And you had to hold it in.

And then in the heat, many times we stood for hour. And you were dying of thirst. And there were two-- in the whole barracks, there were two sort of, I don't know what to call them, two rooms, two latrines. And there were two rooms where there was a pipe with water taps.

So they were so crowded, all the 30,000 people. There were 30 barracks where people stayed. So about 30,000 women were there. And they all ran and tried to get into these two washrooms because everybody was terribly thirsty. And people fought tooth and nail to get there first because you just cannot imagine the thirst and deprivation that we had. This was a day-to-day thing.

I remember one incident. A girl was carrying a pail-- somehow it seems that she was somebody's helper, Kapos The Kapo were the older prisoners who had higher positions, who were supervisors. And it seems that this girl was somebody's helper because she managed to get into the washroom with a pail. And she was carrying out water with a pail.

And I just couldn't fight. I was very timid. And I couldn't fight to get into the bathroom. So I'm standing there. And she came out. And I very meekly said to her, I wish I could have some water. She didn't hear me. And she went on.

And suddenly, it seems that it hit her that somebody asked her for water. So she stopped and let me have some. And I remember, you know, it restored my trust in humanity, you know that somebody cares.

Such a small thing. Just not believing that this is happening to me, that's all I can ever think about talking to people is I couldn't-- I know that I couldn't believe that was happening to me.

Yeah, but it happens to you for a year. You just begin to believe that there is no other way, you know. You begin to believe that this is reality. It took a long while for us to realize that life is not that. That life is normal.

And one time, the nightmare, the biggest nightmare was that there was a big selection when fall came and the Russians began advancing. And they became very panicky, the Germans. And they wanted to evacuate Auschwitz. So they had selections. Like five times a day they came in.

And just to see them is incredible. You see about 20 SS come in, the boots marching in, lock the door suddenly behind them. And the panic that used to break out, 1,000 people rushing and just like poisoned rats, you know. What are you going to do? Because everybody had in their family somebody who was weak or a little bit sick or skinny.

And you know that just by pure statistics, so many people will have to go. And who is it going to be? And we always-- you know, my mother was very vulnerable.

So one day we couldn't escape. If we could, we ran out and we ran to another bunk. But this time we couldn't. And what happened was on the two sides, I told you, there were these compartments with three beds each on either side.

In the front of the barrack, there were two little rooms. One was the Kapos, you know the Blockaelteste, the eldest. She was the supervisor of the whole thing, a Jewish girl. She was a prisoner who had been there for two or three years already, from Slovakia.

And there was another little room, which was called the bread chamber where they used to bring the bread. And in the middle, throughout the middle of this long, long compound, there was a brick chimney. But it was flat, you know. It was not flat. It was sitting on the floor. It was like a flew. There was a stove in the front and a stove in the back or something. And it was connected with a brick wall about this big, about this high, you know? It was a brick--

[AUDIO OUT]

And they said, now everybody to one side. So they emptied one side. There was no room because physically there was no room because for all-- this was over 1,000 people, about 1,500 or so was the roll call. So all these people could only be in this room if they were distributed over three levels on the beds because there was no standing room.

But they chased us all in. And they said-- in one end of the barrack, there was this group of SS. And we had to get undressed and marched-- hold our belongings, our dress in one hand and then walk like this, pass them naked, so that they could see whether they see the ribs, if somebody was too thin or too emaciated. Then they would be selected out. I don't know. This was the procedure.

And whoever passed would go on the other side, the one that was emptied. Everybody was on this side. So we had to pass in front of them and then go into this other side. And people started to go over-- they were holding hands. And a whole bunch of people ran across. They took the risk and ran pass-- under the SS hand on the other side. And they couldn't do anything to hide because they knew that if they pass, the chances were very good that they will be selected out.

So there was panic. I cannot describe it to you. And we lost my mother. We couldn't find her. I lost my sister. I lost my mother in the tunnel.

And then we were passing. And suddenly, I saw my sister. We all-- we both passed. My mother isn't there. And I couldn't find her. And I keep asking people, did you see my mother? Did you see my mother?

And suddenly, a neighbor of ours comes. She was also-- she just came through. And she said, don't worry about your

mother. She'll live even-- she'll survive even in the fire. You know it was so symbolic. Why does she say this? Why is she saying this, you know?

And I didn't see my mother. And we began to worry. And I see more and more people are coming through. And she's nowhere.

And suddenly-- and then we realized that those who were selected out were put into these two little chambers in the girls-- in the Kapo's chamber and the bread chamber. That's where they send those whom they wanted to select out to eliminate.

So suddenly, everybody passed already. My mother isn't out. And I see the door opens. And these SS, 20 or 30, I don't know how many of them there were, go outside in front of the door and make a big chain with their hands, a big chain. And from the bread chamber and the Kapo's chamber, they chased all the people whom they selected out into the circle. They rounded them up.

And when they were rounded up, they took them to the gas chamber. And out of 1,000, maybe 500 people were selected out. In other words, half remained.

And when they left, suddenly we see my mother coming out. She's white as the wall. She came out of the girl's room, or the Kapo's room. And she started kissing us and crying. She says, Baruch Hashem. You know what that is? God bless-- no, God be blessed. God be blessed, I'm alive. God be blessed, I'm alive.

What happened? She was selected out. And she was together with an aunt of mine, a cousin, not an aunt, is like a second aunt, I don't know, some kind of relative, who also had a daughter, very lovely, very talented girl. And she was with these people.

This girl, Elizabeth, she was my sister's friend. She's a designer, a very talented girl. She got some kind of a nutritional deficiency, a vitamin deficiency. And she had her whole mouth and jaws covered with a white sort of blister. And it was extremely painful. And she couldn't eat. And so she became very thin. And she was selected out.

And her mother was older. So she was selected out and my mother also. And my mother said, look, let's hide. Get under the bed or hide somewhere in this room. The girl, the Kapo had some kind of furniture there. And they said, no, they'll beat us. They didn't want to take any chances.

So they stayed in the room. And my mother pushed the little cabinet away from the wall. It was on a corner. And she hid behind it.

And when the Germans-- after they selected all the people, they had so much, so many people that they didn't look who was hiding. You know, they didn't bother looking. So whoever was under the bed or whoever hid remained alive. So this is how we survived it.

But the same day-- about a day or two later, there were other selections, more. And we ran and ran and ran. And at one point, they selected us to go to work. They came. They want, I don't know how many people. And we pushed my mother in.

And this time, we were looking to be sent away because we couldn't stand it anymore because you never know if they selected, whether they select for Auschwitz or for gas chamber or whether they select to be sent away to work, to a labor camp. So you always took chances. So we got in. And a cousin of mine got in. And my mother was in and my aunt, my cousin's mother, and a whole group of people.

And we went to the baths. They brought us to the baths to give us a shower and disinfect us. You know, they sprayed things. And then they gave us clothes and a coat and I think even underwear-- I don't know-- and some shoes, men's shoes.

And after the baths, suddenly, they took my mother and my aunt, a number of older people who sneaked there, who got in. And they said, you stay here. So we were separated away from my mother. In the end, we were sent with a transport away, and my mother remained there. And about six or seven of her friends, all older people, in 40s, in their 40s, not older really. And they remained there.

And we didn't know. We thought that they were taken to the crematorium because that was the usual procedure until then. Only when we came back from concentration camp did we find out that my mother was alive. They were taken-- it was late. It was October or November already. And the Germans were panicky.

And I don't know whether the crematoriums, the gas chambers were still working. But they shipped them off to another camp. And in fact, they were liberated in January by the Russians. We were liberated in May. And I think that that's how my mother survived really because she couldn't have-- she had a bad heart. And she was all swollen. She had water in her body. And she had no medication.

And she waited for us. When we came home, she was at home. It was the biggest surprise in our lives because we expected my father to be alive. He was 48 or 49, a strong healthy man. And he didn't survive it.

How long did your mother survive after that?

My mother is alive.

Today? Oh.

Thank God.

Oh.

Yeah, she's in her 80s.

Bless her. That is incredible.

She's very strong lady. She came to America. And she started a life for us all. She was working. And she is independent. She didn't depend on us. She showed a great deal of stamina throughout her life.

She's in her 80s. By the way you talked I thought that she probably didn't live very long after that experience because she so ill.

She still has her heart disease. And she still has difficulties with her heart. But thank God, she's a strong lady, very, very sensible, very smart. People come to her. She always has company. People love her. They call her because she's really a mensch. Thank God.

So you're in New York.

We live in Brooklyn.

And your mother is also there?

My mother lives next door. We own houses next door to each other. So I just hop over, and I'm in her house.

And she brought up a grandchild. My sister married after the war. And her husband died a year later while she was pregnant, another victim of concentration camp. He was young man. He had a stroke. And this was in 1940-- three years after liberation.

And so she gave birth to this child. And we all brought it up for her. I mean together with her, my mother mainly. But--



Are you married? Or have family?

Sure. I have three children.

Are they here?

No, they didn't come. I came alone. My children couldn't get away from work. It was a shame. But they are very much involved with the Holocaust. They go-- they went to parochial--

It's hard to get away.

--to parochial schools. And so they know about the Holocaust. They are very much involved with Israel. They want to live in Israel. And they're very conscious of our heritage and of the legacy. They know it.

But they couldn't get away. My younger daughter just started working now. And the older one just came back from school. She finished her masters at MIT in engineering. She's an engineer.

Oh, my, that's wonderful. What prompted your pursuit of being a psychologist?

I was just-- I was first a designer, electrical designer. I was in engineering too. And then I took off to raise children. And I was very much interested in psychology. And so I'm doing it.

Do you have private practice?

Yeah. So how much time do you have?

Oh, whenever.

Yeah. OK.

Are you--

Yes, I think I--