

One, two, testing.

Your name is Lillian Eckstein.

Yes.

That's right?

You want me to talk to you from here?

Yes, you don't have-- the general direction, that's fine.

OK.

That's good.

My name is Lillian Eckstein. My maiden name is Lily, Leychu, Mendelson. I was born in Czechoslovakia, Nizni Verecky, in 1926.

We were a family of eight children, grandparents, aunts and uncles. We were a poor family. But we were very close, sharing, loving, and caring for each other.

In 1938, problems started. The Hungarians marched in and took away my father's ability to earn a living. We were driven to a point where we had no food in the house. We were forced into the kind of work in order to earn enough money to feed ourselves.

This is the part of Czechoslovakia a way to the east near Hungary?

Yes.

And Hungary took it over when the Germans went into Western Czechoslovakia.

Yes. Called Carpathian.

Was a rural area, farming country or town?

My father was in the lumber business.

That's right.

And they then took my father into the army. And we were left completely without the provider. The children were forced at the age of 9 and 10 to work in people's homes. And we were forced into other people's homes. And we were separated because we were forced because there was no food in the house, just plain and simple.

What age were you all? You were the oldest?

I was 11 years old when I was forced to go into people's homes to do their housework.

And your brothers and sisters were older than you mostly?

Older and some were younger. And they too were forced to do whatever we could in order to get enough food and clothing on our backs.

It was mostly a Gentile town?

Mostly Gentile town, yes?

Hungarians or Slovaks?

Hungarians, Slovaks, Russians. It was a mixture because that part of Czechoslovakia every half century was dominated by a different--

Empire.

Different empire, yes. In 1943, they took away our house because we could not pay the real estate taxes. And they forced us into the street.

Your father is still in the Hungarian army at this point?

Labor camp. When he was released, he came home sick or penniless. And we were forced into the street. So we went to Munkács. And all the children were divided. And we were forced again into all kinds of labor.

I wanted to go to gymnasium. I was a good student. I was a very presentable girl. Unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity.

In 1944, the Germans came into our city and created a ghetto, two ghettos. We were in that ghetto. I don't remember how long. One day, they told us we have to get ready and march into trains. We were forced into a cattle train.

All the town? All the Jews from the town?

Yes. And we must have been 50 people in one cattle town, including old people and children. And we were going-- we did not know where to. I don't know how long the trip took. I don't remember. And we arrived at night in a place called Auschwitz.

You were 18 years old at the time.

About 17 or so. We were pushed off the trains and marching towards a German soldier and towards a man called Dr. Mengele, where he directed-- he looked at us. And he looked at your faces. And he decided which one should go right and which one should go left.

My mother was 42 years old, a very attractive, educated, and presentable person. She had my little sister's child. And they wanted to take the child from her. She should go to her right. And she preferred to go to the left because she did not want to give up the child. She did not know what her destiny would be.

We were very bewildered not knowing where what was going to happen to us. I was chosen to go to right. I found myself marching into a shower where they took all my clothes, cut my hair, examined my body, and gave us the striped clothing. They send us outside to stay five in a row, called Zahlappell. I don't remember how long we were standing outside. We were then marched into--

Zalaka? What's zalaka?

Zahlappell. Zahlappell. It's called standing on line in German. We were then marched into a barrack where we were given quarters into bunk beds, six into a bunk, bunk bed.

And the next day, they took us for selection which people should go to work, which ones should be placed into different kind of work. My dream at home was to have an education. And I loved pretty little dresses. To my surprise, I was chosen to work in the Sonderkommando where they have selected the clothes from the people who were burned in the

crematorium.

We stayed in Auschwitz for many months. I don't remember how long.

How many of your family were kept alive?

I didn't know.

You were separated from all of them?

From all of them.

You went in with seven brothers and sisters and your parents--

Eight.

Eight. Eight.

Every one of us was in a different place.

Nobody was able to be in touch with anybody else?

They had-- we didn't know because I was bewildered. I didn't know if I lost my mind. Or if I some-- I just didn't believe that I'm a sane person. So I just went along with whatever was happening to me.

And I prayed in my heart that God should take me. But I wasn't lucky. I apologize.

No need to apologize.

A few months later, I don't remember months, we were taken, 2,000 girls, from Auschwitz called Oberschlesien. We worked in a Schützengraben outside in the winter. More than half of the girls died from frost, from starvation, from beating, malaria, typhoid.

I contracted typhoid in my head. I apologize. I'll be all right.

And finally, we realized that the Russians-- we heard at night shootings and planes. But we did not know what is going on. Apparently, the Russian army was closing up on Oberschlesien. It was on the border from Poland.

The remaining girls were driven one night-- woken one night. And we were marched in the snow barefoot towards Berlin, called-- I can't recall.

[INAUDIBLE] in Berlin.

We then were driven from town to town because the Allied closed in on them and the German soldiers. I don't remember how--

The German army had you?

Yes. I don't remember how we wound up. And I found myself in Bergen-Belsen. Out of the 2,000 girls, approximately 400 were left. Half of those girls had typhoid, including myself.

When they dumped us in Bergen-Belsen, we just couldn't move anymore. I couldn't walk. There was no food. I don't remember anything more about because I was very sick.

Wherever I turned, I saw loads, mountains of dead people. People were just laying in a coma on the streets. And we were just not normal anymore. I wasn't. I wasn't. I just-- I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

It's all right.

One day, I looked up at the observation tower. And I realized that I don't see a soldier there walking up and down with a gun. And I thought that I am hallucinating. And then I looked later again. And I heard shootings. But I thought, as usual, that the Germans are killing people, as usual.

And then I realized a few hours later that English soldiers came in a Jeep and took Bergen-Belsen. To their horror, they put masks on. And what happened to me, I don't know. But I found myself in a hospital being fed under venous.

And a social worker, who spoke Yiddish, were asking me who I was. I did--

Just in time?

I did not know what my name was. I didn't remember where I was born, how old I was. I didn't know anything. I thought I lost my sense. I turned into a vegetable. I lost my hair.

I tried very hard to search in my mind who I was. Little by little, it came back to me. I wasn't sure where-- when I was born.

One day, they told me I'm ready to leave the hospital. And I didn't know where to go. I had no money.

This is a British military hospital you were in? Or--

In Germany in a hospital. In Germany. They told us that we can go free of charge home. I boarded a train. And I went to Prague. Then I went back home on the train.

You remembered-- your memory would gradually come back. And you remembered your name--

Yes.

--your family and your--

Right. Yes.

But you still hadn't been able to hear from any of your family?

No. I went home and I searched for my family. They told me that they saw one here in Prague. They saw one in Munich. And they saw one in Bergen-Belsen.

And I filled out applications wherever I went. But nobody had a permanent place where they can be reached. I went back home. And I realized that nobody is there.

So I went back to Germany. And I applied to go to Israel. But at that time, the English would not permit the people to go to Israel.

So I waited in a DP camp called Ampfing, near Munich, for 3 and 1/2 years. I found an uncle in New York City, in the Bronx. And he had sent me an affidavit. And I came to the United States. In 1949--

Before the war he had left--

Yes, he migrated to America from Munkács. I came to America in 1949. I enrolled in school. I went to work in a

factory. I went to Monroe Night School. I got my degree, high school degree.

In 1950, I got married to a wonderful man called Michael Eckstein, who came from my area in Europe. We both worked 100 hours a week. We worked in sweatshops. We saved enough money to open up a laundromat in the Bronx. We worked 12 years in that laundromat.

We had two daughters whom we sent to yeshiva. We wanted to give them the best education we could. We taught them music. We took them to operas, to ballets, and summer camps, finally Yeshiva University.

Then my older daughter became a school teacher. At the age of 22, she had her masters, her bachelors in education. She was chosen to meet Ben-Gurion when he came to New York. They were pretty and smart. They were the pride-- they are the pride of my life.

Marilyn, the older daughter, at the present time is in Denver in medical school, married to a doctor. She has a little girl 2 and 1/2 months. My younger daughter, Irene, is a registered nurse. She works in Albert Einstein Hospital in the intensive care unit.

I am very happy at the present time. I am enrolled in Queens College. I work part-time, and my life is complete.

I thank God and I thank the United States of America to give me this opportunity to pick up my life. I will always appreciate this opportunity. Thank you. God bless you.

I forgot to mention that in 1955, I've heard from my sister, who at that time lived in Stockholm, Sweden. She was taken from a concentration camp to Sweden because she had contracted tuberculosis. She was in Sweden in a sanatorium for several years.

When she came out from the sanitarium, she got married. And she notified me that she is alive. Unfortunately, I have written candles, Yahrzeit candles, every year for her and for the rest. I did not know that she is alive.

How did she find you?

I brought her through the Red Cross-- through the HIAS. I brought her out to New York. She had a son called Max.

My name.

Max. Yeah. He was the pride and joy of the family. He was a social worker. He was 22 years old, engaged to be married. He came home one night for Sabbath through central park. And he had a head on collision, and they killed him. My sister since then is not the same because he was the pride and joy of her life.

I found a sister in Poland. She escaped from the concentration camp and married a Polish man who saved her life. She had three daughters. I brought them out to the United States. My sister died of cancer two years later. Her daughters are married and are doing fine.

You brought them up? How old were they when they came?

They were already in their late teens when they came to America. I found a brother in Sydney, Australia. I brought them-- send them affidavits. And he came to New York City. We were finally united. My brother contracted the heart disease and died.

I found a sister many years later in Munkács who was married and had two children. That part of Czechoslovakia, which is now the Soviet Union, I brought her out to the United States, where she is in the present time living with her family.

Two children, her husband too?

She has a husband and two children, a daughter who is married and a son who is in Queens College. My sister is doing fine. And I hope that we will be able to enjoy our children because they are the pride and joy of our lives. I love them dearly.

God bless you, America, for giving me another chance to be able to pick up my life. My children will do what I wanted to do because I live through my children. They are the pride of my life.

Thank you, America, for giving me an opportunity to pick up my life again. And I hope that I was able to contribute.

[AUDIO OUT]

I want to thank the people of the United States to give me another chance in life to pick up my life and bring-- how do you say-- give me another chance and bring towards society--

Contribute.

--contribute to the world. My children should be able to be what I could not be. I've tried my very best. I worked 100 to 80 hours a week to be able to pay for private schools, music, art. I am very happy that I had another chance to prove to the world that we could do it.

I worked many, many hours. I never went on vacation. We lived in a very poor area in three rooms. But my children got music lessons, camps, private schools.

And now, they are in medicine. My older daughter is in medical school in Denver, Colorado. Her husband is a doctor, a nephrologist. She has a 2 and 1/2 month old little girl.

That's wonderful to have a grandchild.

She is in Denver Medical School. They are the pride of my life. Irene is in Albert Einstein. She is a registered nurse. She works in the intensive care unit. My life--

She live, the girl--

Yes. Yes. This was Irene. I am very grateful to the United States of America for giving me another chance in life to prove that we can do it. I hope to go back to school and major in social work. Thank you, America, for giving me another chance.

[AUDIO OUT]