

OK. I'm with Ruth Ronberg. This is Ruth Ronberg, and I'm interviewing Helen Zimm of Richmond, Virginia, originally of Łódź, Poland. And Mrs. Zimm is going to begin her interview with the experiences before the war.

I was born in Łódź, Poland. And when the war broke out, I was only 14 years old. My life was very carefree and wonderful. I have wonderful parents, loving mother and wonderful father and two sisters. I was going to school, and I was going to gymnasium, which not everybody could afford in Poland. But we were quite well-off, and my father believed that the women should be educated as well as a man. He always believed in that.

And I went to-- and begin to-- and I dream and aspirations, like many other people. But when the war broke out, all my dreams and aspirations were shattered because the Germans came in, and we couldn't go no more to school. And every single day of our life was another announcement, written up on the streets. You know?

My father-- the Germans came in to Łódź in 1939, very fast. They bombed the city, and they took it over in a very short time. But my father always believed that he was defying the Germans. He says, I don't think that we have to-- we're not going to give in to the Germans. We were very well-off. We have a factory, a soap factory, and a beautiful big store.

We and with two maids, we left our whole possessions. And my father and my mother-- and we left Łódź and began to walk to Warsaw because my father thought that we were going to go to Warsaw, the German won't take over the city of Warsaw so fast. They could give in smaller, but it was the capital of Poland. How could they give in?

And it was like a very terrible experience for us because we walked in the biggest-- and during the day, the Germans were bombing continuously. And on the same highways we were going was the soldiers and was the horses. Everybody was going the same direction, to defend in Warsaw. It was a terrible time.

I remember seeing fires all around me and people dead all around me. Every few minutes we have to hide away from this-- hide in different places because bombs are falling on us. And at night, we could rest and waited until the morning. Again came a new morning.

We walked a few days, I remember. And then, all of a sudden, was very quiet. In the morning we came in, we seen these horrible, monstrous Germans. They took over this part of the country. We never reached Warsaw. That was many, many miles before Warsaw.

The Germans came in. And they said-- right away they said, you know what? All the Jews, we have to hang all the Jews. This was right there they told us. They're going to go on the street.

So right away, when you--

Right away, as soon as--

Where was this?

This was before Warsaw.

Before Warsaw.

Before Warsaw. And then what they did, they arrested all the men and took them away, the men. Like, they were these prisoners, became civilian prisoners of war. They took our father from us, and we were devastated. And we began to walk back to Łódź, back to our city because we didn't want to go back to Warsaw. We didn't know nothing. Went back-- and when we came home, everything was all right so far. The maid kept everything in place, and our store was still fine.

And then we begin, being the oldest, we begin to look for my father. Where are we going to find them? They had posted names of people who were captured by the Germans. And luckily, I found-- we found the name of my father. And I went to Kraków.

I can't get over how brave I was, being just 14 years old, how much courage I had. I can't believe what you can do, really, when you have to. You can't believe what you can endure when you really have to endure.

That's true, because none of us know until we're tested.

It's impossible to believe. Anyway, I went to Kraków, and I got his birth certificate because you couldn't walk around Poland without birth certificate. And I brought my father back to home.

You actually found him?

I found him-- was wonderful.

Where was he?

In Kraków, in someplace, in the prison. And I brought him home. And we were very thank to God. But my father never rested. He said, we can't live in Łódź, he says. Because, he says, we're going to leave Łódź. We're not going to stay here. He was scared. He said something's going to happen to us. And because my-- we had a big factory, and we had a big store. And he said maybe something may happen to us.

And my father was a decisionmaker at home. He was very smart. And he said, let's leave, and we're going to go to a small town, where my grandmother lived, where we used to go every summer sometimes to visit them, to Żarnów. And I think this was a very good idea. When I think back, I think when we would go-- because Łódź was the first ghetto founded. They put-- before Warsaw was Łódź. They put all the Jewish people in the ghetto.

You were in the ghetto in Łódź.

No. We didn't go to the ghetto because my father said we're going to leave Łódź, and we're going to go to our grandparents. And what happened, we had-- with befriended some German, a German guy, who said he's going to help us leave Łódź. And he's going to take some of our things what we had, our valuables, is going to smuggle us again to the other place because you had to always hide.

He said, I'm going to smuggle everything. I'm going to help you. And you're going to go with me.

Excuse me. This was a German who lived in Łódź?

That's right. This is like a Volksdeutsche. You call them Volksdeutsche.

Right.

And he took our possessions. We trusted him and everything. Guess what. He took everything away. And we became poor. We didn't have anything, without anything. But we didn't have nothing. And we reached the small town, Żarnów. Being always well-off and living very comfortably, which was very hard for us to get used to when you came to the small town, Żarnów, which was almost had only 500 Jewish people. But my grandmother was there, and my aunts were there. It was wonderful to see them all together.

We moved into one room, five of us. It was very difficult. Times were very hard for us. We slept-- was only two beds, and we slept three in one bed and my mother and father in the other bed. It was a very hard adjustment for us.

Sure, because you were used to such a beautiful life.

We had a beautiful life. But we are still grateful that we could be together. And it was a hard time. And we

didn't have too much, but my father was a very smart man. And we had a soap factory. And he was thinking day and night about how he going to find out how to make soap. See, he has factory, but he remembered somehow--

The recipe?

The recipe for how to make the soap. And I still remember the name of our factory.

What was it?

[POLISH] That means Polish make of soap. And I still remember our phone number. Not too many people had phones in Łódź.

No, I'm sure.

123-14-- [POLISH]

You've never forgotten it. Never forgotten it.

Some things I never forgot. I can even remember when I went to high school. I remember. I knew three languages. I still remember some Latin things which we learned. Some things you remember, and some things you don't.

But going back, when we stayed in-- it was very difficult. And then, imagine that in that one room, we even made soap also in that room.

In that one room?

Everything in that one room.

This was in the home of your grandmother?

That was another home. We found a room. Then we stayed all together. And we made soap. And my mother was gone every-- twice a week. You know, in small towns, the people from the smaller towns came into the bigger cities, and they sold their ware. And we exchange.

They brought us milk and eggs. And we gave them, in exchange, the soap. And this was the way of our survival.

I would imagine, at that time, already the economic--

Everything was, yeah, great. But it was many times went to sleep hungry because the times were very, very hard. And what they did, they brought in a lot of people from other cities to our cities. They begin to liquidate the other little places. See? And they used to put people, more people. But somehow we didn't have any more but five so far because I know it was luckily we didn't. Some people, they put 10 people in one room, and the typhus spread out terribly.

Yes. And who was placing people? Was this Polish government?

That's what happened-- not the Polish government. But see, the Germans were very smart people, and they're very brilliant operators, organizers. Wherever they had any Jewish people, they always set up, like, a Jewish gemeinde, like a Jewish--

Organization?

--organization and a Jewish police. They'd make sure that the dirty work is going to be done by Jews.

By Jews.

They said, you know, we want you to bring us today 500 people, who are going to do-- want you to work on the highway, build roads. And you have to deliver to them. Every day there was another deliver them. Every day you have to bring something else because they wanted you. And the police was there. And they were always telling different things to do.

And we stayed in Łódź. And this-- and it was the times were very hard. And many times went to sleep hungry. We didn't have too much, but we still thank God that we were all together. We received letters from Łódź, from some of our friends. And they wrote to us that are being sent out to labor camps.

But my father was a brilliant man. I don't know how in the world. He says, I don't believe these people are going to labor camps. These people are going to die. They--

He knew. He knew.

He knew it somehow. They're not sending them because we don't-- we never hear from anymore. They're going [NON-ENGLISH]. That means they're being wiped out. They're being destroyed. And I'm going to do everything in my power that my children won't be destroyed. And he was thinking day and night, how was he going to save our lives.

And we stayed in that small town from '39 until '42. But he, the Germans were brilliant. They did everything systematically.

Yes.

First, they destroyed these big cities in the ghettos. But 1942 was like the solution, the Final Solution.

Final Solution, right.

And they begin to lose the war in Russia already. And they decided that now it's time to get rid of the small towns, the people from small towns. But from the small towns, they didn't give too much chance for survival. They put them in gas chambers. That one was too late. See, at the beginning-- now, '42 was the worst year for the Jewish people. The most people died in '42.

We had some friends in the Polish-- in the Jewish center, like, you know, some young boys. The policeman came to us, and he said to us, you know what? In two weeks our little town is going to be evacuated. They're going to evacuate us.

By the Germans?

By the Germans, they're going to evacuate us. They're going to send us to work. My daddy became frantic. He says, God, we don't have too much time. We have to do something because I have to do everything in my power that my children won't die. He knew it would be very hard for a older person to survive, especially men. But with children, he said [INAUDIBLE]. And he was trying every way to find a way how he can do it.

He went-- he said the only way to do it-- the first thing, when you had a birth certificate, it means you had a chance of life. You basically get a chance of life.

Even for a Jew?

Provided that the Jewish person has a Aryan look. Like, you have blue eyes and blue-- and you speak--

Blonde hair, yes.

And you speak well Polish. You don't speak with a certain accent because the Poles are very-- very, very-- not very wonderful people.

Some were very antisemitic.

Very antisemitic. And they were never helping the Jewish people. In my case, we were lucky. And my daddy went to a man. He said that he's going to make us false papers. And my daddy was very excited. And one day he went to that man. He said, I'm going to pay you. How much do you want for each certificate? We have three daughters.

Well, Daddy said, I'm going to do it. And he went over there.

And so he had some money left, [CROSS TALK].

No, he went over there at night, and he's supposed to give him the false papers. Guess what. He came home. He was devastated. His face was white like a sheet. He says, guess what, my children. He took the money. He never gave me nothing. What am I going to do? He says, I got money. He was so upset.

But my father never gave up. God bless him. Mother, should rest in peace with my mother. He never gave up. He looked. Then he says, it must be another way. If he looked for a woman, maybe somebody else. He didn't care which way we survived. He didn't even-- he believed even, when you would find a man, he would want to take me in, just live with me.

Anything.

As long of we should survive the horrible war. He was a very--

Very realistic too.

And very modern person. How many people can think like that?

He knew that the--

He knows.

Anything to--

He knew that's the end of us. Anyway, he luckily found a woman. And she said that she new me. She says, when you give me that amount of money, I'm going to give you a birth certificate. And for your younger sister, my younger sister-- I'm going to give two birth certificates. And I'm going to take you out from Zarnów to Warsaw. But I can't give you the other birth certificate to my middle sister because she has a very Jewish look.

Oh, I see. She was afraid to take the--

She was afraid. She didn't want to do it. And what happened, my father didn't have no other choice. He said, OK. We're going to do this. And that's what happened. Then my father gave us not too much, just a little knapsack. And we had just a knapsack. It was September, October 1942. In Poland is the very cold, you know were cold, begin to be rather chilly.

And she took us, my sister and I, which is the younger sister and I. And I'll never forget the last time when we see our parents. I knew that when we said goodbye, this is going to be it. Never again I'm going to see my wonderful parents anymore.

But my father said, don't worry. He says, I know you're brave. And I know that you're going to survive. Don't you ever worry. Have the great faith in us. But I want you to remember one thing, that you will survive, he says. You have an aunt, two aunts who live in Toronto, Canada. And he gave us the address. And when you survive, he says, let him know that you survive. And get in touch with them. And then- and I'm sure that she's going to help you out and be able to go to Toronto, Canada.

And that was a very cold, bitter night. I remember when we left to go by train with that woman. And we were looking around. We're scared to death to say one word because we're scared somebody's going to recognize. You always were scared of people because Poles were not very sympathetic to you. And when they seen you, instead of helping you, they said here is a Jew. And we have all bundled up, and I was scared to death and sitting very quietly on that train.

And then we arrived in Warsaw. And we stayed with that lady's grandmother, her own mother, in one room. And we stayed for a few days. And one day somebody knocks at the door. My middle sister came, the wonderful-- I was so grateful. And she told us what happened to my father.

She says that my father always never want to give up, somehow never want to give up. When he knew that people-- the other town was being evacuated, he didn't want to go on that big-- you know, they put them on a big market. And some people just shot. And my sister said there was a little baby, and the German took away the baby from the mother and shot the baby in front of the mother.

And she saw this.

She saw. My sister seen all these terrible things. And my father and my sister and my mother and another couple, they were hiding out in a barn, always defying them, always to trying to fight the Germans whenever you can. And they were sitting there very quietly, until in the morning, some of the kids who were outside and grazing the cows, anything, they were suspicious, opened the barn.

They said, look at there. There are Jews, [NON-ENGLISH] Look, who are they, sitting? Horrible people. Open the door, and they said, come on, the police. I want you to-- they are hiding out there, the Jews. Bring them out.

And these were children?

Children, young children. They took out my father and my mother, other people. And my father said, I beg of you, he says. Do anything to me, but just leave my daughter alone. I don't care. I don't care if I die, but leave my daughter. I want-- please.

My father was very well known in the city. You know, he was very respected. And he was always a leader. And the police knew him. And he says, all right, leave Mr. Drexler alone. And they left him. And they closed the eyes, turned around and ran and left my dad alone.

What happened after that, my father and my mother, the other couple, they walked around in the forest for days and days and days. They didn't want to go. They walked and walked. And my sister told me that all of a sudden they lost my mother. They couldn't find my mother in the forest. And my father screamed, Regina. Regina. Couldn't find-- she's lost.

Stop just a moment.

And in the forest, all of a sudden, they found another woman from my little town. And that woman was also, like a miracle-- God is above us. Like a miracle, the woman came around, and my husband said to her-- my daddy, I'm sorry-- said to her, where are you going? She said, I'm going to go to Warsaw. He says, do me a favor. Take my daughter to Warsaw. I said, I beg you, but don't mistreat her. I beg you.

You treat her good because she's very young and she was always very vulnerable. She was not as strong as I was. Daddy was always worrying about her more because-- I don't know-- she was very sickly girl. And he said, I beg of you. I entrust her. And I want you to take care of her. But--

Was this a Jewish lady?

No-- a Jewish lady also, a Jewish lady. It was like a miracle. She came from-- God send her. And he gave my sister the address where we were. And that's why, when she walked in, she found us. And we stayed with

that woman for a few days. We slept maybe five or six on that one big bed.

I remember very distinctly, at night were tremendous bedbugs. They were-- you know bedbugs. They were biting us. We couldn't sleep all night. Was terrible there. And we stayed there for a few days. But see, in Poland was-- when you were in Poland, every person had to register his names. You couldn't walk around without registration or birth certificate. And they became suspicious of you.

And I was scared that the guy, who was like a [? genitive, ?] who was on the-- we were living in there, he's going to become suspicious of us. And we said-- I said to my sisters, being the oldest, I said to them, you know, it comes a time in our life now that we can no more be together. We have to part. We can never survive no more together. We have to-- everybody has to go his own way.

You were much like your father, weren't you?

Yes. Yeah, strong. And I told them, my sisters. And that woman who we stayed with down there was a very nice lady. She says, you know, I know somebody who I think your younger sister, Halina can go. And she had a place where she would be like a maid in a place. And I was very grateful. And my other sister, who is now in Toronto, the middle one, she sent her to work for policeman. She lives through hell. It's too harsh.

Did they know she was Jewish? No, they didn't. She didn't tell her she was Jewish.

Nobody knew she was Jewish. But this particular man knew it. And he took advantage of it. He raped her. She lives through hell. I don't want to get into this. She lived-- she still has terrible scars, my youngest-- my middle sister.

And then I was at last. I said, I'm grateful that I took care of them, and they are going to have a place to be. But now, what I am-- what am I going to do with myself? What am I doing? What is my alternative? And I thought and I thought, and something came to my mind.

I said, you know, I'm going to have to find a way. And I said-- I was thinking to myself. And I decided I'm going to go on a train station. I don't know what ideas. Anyway, I went on a train station. And on the train station, every Tuesday the people came in there, in Warsaw. They came also with the [? grass. ?] They brought it on the markets.

And I talked to-- and I befriended a woman. I said, you know, where are you going? She says, I'm going to Milosna, 20 miles away from Warsaw. I said, can I go with you? I said, you know what? I know the recipe for soap. Can you believe? And I'm going to give you the recipe.

And you know, you could have a wonderful life. I'm going to teach you how to do it, and you're going to sell it. And you're going to make a wonderful life. She was looking at me. And she said-- she saw that-- she looked at me, and she thought-- I thought that she was very interested what I had to offer to her. She said, what is your name? I said, my name is Niusia Kazusek. I had a different name.

Of course.

Kazusek means, in Polish-- I said, my name is Kazusek, and I can teach you this. She says, you know, maybe it's a good idea. And I said, oh, God in heaven, thank you for this wonderful. All right, I was following her like a dog. And I said to her, all right, I'm going with you. I got in the same little train. And it was getting dark. And I was listening very much to the conductor, very carefully.

Can you imagine that was-- I was 14 in '42, a few years later, how many years?

Was that, you were 16 then? So you were 16 or 17.

Yeah, that's all.

That's right.

And I said to myself, I know. I'm listening very carefully to the conductor. And he says, Milosna. I got out first from the train, and I looked for that woman. She disappeared. I said, where is she? She practically ran away from me. I said, God, what do I do now? Where am I going now?

You're in this little town.

A little town-- I don't know nobody in the world. I had a birth certificate, but I didn't-- that was not enough. It was wonderful to have, but besides that birth certificate, you had to have a kennkarte. That means with your picture and everything. I didn't have it.

An identification card, yeah.

And I didn't have it enough. And I didn't feel 100%, like, sure of myself. Then I said, where am I going? And I walked from one house to another. And I was knocking at doors. And I came in. I said, my name is Niusia Kazusek. I said, I'd like for you to take me in. I'm going to do everything in the world for you and help you.

I said, my father is a great patriot. He doesn't let me-- I left my town because the Germans are taking in Polish people. They are sometimes. They were rounding them up.

Absolutely, the political prisoners.

There are no more. They're rounding them up and sending them to work some, the Polish people, because they needed them sometimes. But they never put them in gas chambers. You know, the Poles.

Exactly, right.

They took them in. And I said, but I didn't want to be around that. I'd rather work for my own people. I said, would you take me in? I'm going to sleep on the floor. I'm going to do any chores you ask me to do. I'll do for you. No, they didn't happen to be interested. And I walk from one place to another to another. Nobody want to take me in.

And I was walking, and it was very-- that was like a December 1942. Was very, very cold and bitter, was before the Christmastime, was a very joyous occasion for the Poles and everything. And I was already very helpless and very-- and I didn't believe that-- I think that everything is black for me. I had no way out.

And I walked and walked. And all of a sudden, I have seen a little store with a light. And I said, let me go in the store. I walked in the store, opened the door, came in. And I couldn't speak no more. I just was sobbing very hard. I said-- because I was just so weak and exhausted, cold, shivering. I said, I beg you. I said, take me in.

And the children were running around. I said, I'm going to help you. I said, with Christmas around, I'm going to help you do everything with the children. I'll help you with Christmas. I beg you please take me in. The woman looked at me, and I was crying so hard I couldn't stop.

She had-- somehow, she felt with me. I don't know she was like an angel in heaven. And she said to me, come on in. I'm going to take you in. I almost fainted like that. I was so grateful to God. And she took me in. And that was like one of the great breaks of my life because she--

You found somebody who was sympathetic.

But otherwise, I would probably have to go to the-- to the guy who is-- and how do you call a person who takes care of the small town, like a--

Like a mayor?

--the sheriff or the mayor, the sheriff in the place. I would have to go to him, and he would begin to ask me



questions.

Absolutely.

And I wouldn't be "kosher," very plain. And I would break down. And that's why this was like a miracle, that that woman take me in. And she was very nice to me.

Did she have many children herself?

She got three children. And she had a-- and she was a hustle and bustle before Christmastime. And I was helping her. And I was very grateful that she-- and I didn't know-- I went to church, and I knew the prayers. I went to midnight mass one time, I remember. And I was sitting all night. You know, my knees were all almost swollen from sitting here and praying.

Where did you learn the prayers, in gymnasium?

I knew that I had to-- I had to learn before I went on the-- you know, being as Aryan.

You mean, as a Polish--

Then I knew all the prayers, and I went to church, and I was scared to death. I went to church all the time. But I never went to the confessions. You know, I went, and the priest, he knew me. And he gave me this thing. But I never knew what-- I was scared of the confession because I didn't know how to act. And I was scared to death that one day he's going to come out to me and say, how come you didn't-- you know, when you are so scared of your life, you live in such a fear every day. But then he never bothered me, that priest.

You know, I went to church, and I brought the little babies. But he never questioned too much. But after living with that woman for a month or so, she says after that, you know, Niusia, I don't think I need you anymore. You have to leave.

I was very, very sad. I said, what am I going to do? She said, don't worry. I'll find somebody else for you. And I was going from-- I was-- [AUDIO OUT]

All right. Now we can start again.

OK.

We were talking about you had to leave that house.

Yeah. I had to leave the lady. And then the lady found another place for me to stay. And any time I had to go to another place, I was very, very fearful because I didn't know how people are going to accept me, what they're going to say. And all through day of my life, I lived in fear. I was like a fugitive, scared to death.

Were there Germans in all the places you went?

No, but I was more scared of the Poles. You wouldn't believe it.

That's interesting.

That's the tragedy of it because the German couldn't-- couldn't place you as much. The Germans, especially when you lived their way. When you-- they put you in ghettos. They knew all the Jew is there. But they couldn't spot you. But a Pole could always spot you. And when they spotted you, I don't know why they did it, but they did it. They used to say, here is a Jew.

Probably [CROSS TALK]

Always, always. And you know, that's such a great-- I remember like today. I was working for another lady.

She was a very nice woman. No Pole that I worked for, they never knew that I was a Jew.

Right.

I never would-- never would tell them because you couldn't trust them.

No.

I was very young, and I was working very hard, and I was very dedicated. And they always thought of me. But I always lived as a different person. I could never really reveal my own feelings, how I felt, who I was. I never could tell them that I was troubled, that I was worrying what happened to my parents, what happened my sister.

They never-- who can ever-- I lived always with all kind of questions and fears and prayed every day that nobody should recognize me because when they recognize me, it would be the end of me. That would be the end of me because they point the fingers at you.

When I was working for that woman one time, she had a little child, and she lived on the third floor. And it was very hard for me. I had to-- I never did nothing in my life. And I was so young. And I had to go to the third floor and bring water from the well, carry all the water up to the-- you know, to upstairs, and wash clothes and take care of the baby. It was very hard. And I couldn't-- I couldn't do it, but I did it because it was-- I had to.

There was no choice. There was no choice.

There was no other choice. And I remember one day, when I was at her place, she told me, you know, Niusia, they found a bunch of Jews and Gypsies. And you know what, they have to dig their own graves. I said, oh, God.

What happened, the Polish people, some-- the good ones, so-called, they're hiding on Jewish people because the Jewish people gave them all the possessions--

All their money, right.

--and the money. They're hiding them out. And after they didn't have no money, they called the Gestapo, say look what. They're hiding some Jews and took them out. And there was a group of the same people. And they had to dig their own grave. Imagine my heart. I said, wasn't that terrible, and that's terrible. That's what they did.

How can you have to heart the Polish people? You can't give up because they could have really helped. Some did help. That woman who we gave money, she was good because she gave me the money.

Right, and she found other places for your--

Sure. She was the only person, and I'm very grateful for her. And I never forgot her. And I think she was one of the righteous. We should appreciate people. But unfortunately--

There were too few.

--there were not enough people, not enough Poles who helped. Because if they really could try, they could have done it. But they never-- they don't have the heart. And they're antisemite. I think they were brought up-- they're always brought up with a lot of hate against the Jews. And that was big in them, and they just couldn't get it out of their system.

And-- so you went to-- you stayed in many places.

And another place.

After the war?

Yes. I stayed in another place with another lady, who was also very nice to me. She was an older woman. And she shared with me whatever she had. And she didn't have too much. And I remember, because I was undernourished, I didn't even-- I didn't menstruate because I was sick. And I remember, I was undernourished. And I remember I had a tremendous big stomach because I didn't eat well enough.

And I remember, I was applying for a job. And the woman didn't want to take me. She said, I think you're pregnant-- was the tragedy. I remember, I went to the doctor. She said, no, what's wrong with you because I was undernourished. See?

Because of these places.

I didn't much, but the people didn't have, but they share what they have. And I was grateful for it. And I was going from one place to another. And then when, in 1944-- during the war also, my sister lived next to the Warsaw ghetto. And I was always--

This is your younger sister?

My youngest. She was living next to the Warsaw ghetto. And I visited her--

Oh, that's--

--quite often. And I seen-- whenever I went to her, I seen the Warsaw ghetto. And my heart broke out, broke so much for these the Jewish people. I could never-- I knew I couldn't help them. And my heart went out for them. You know, it was very sad and nothing I can do for it. It was a very tragic and sad sight to see these people, these lonely faces under the tremendous high, nine-foot wall, just behind it. You know, and knew that-- and I thought to myself, God, when I live through the war, they're going to make a tremendous fuss over me.

I said God knows what's going to be. I'm going to be the only one. But thank God many more people survived. It's a miracle that we survived that war. And--

Stop right now. It's amazing though, that you were able to keep in touch, with all together.

My sister Nana, which was the middle sister, she had a very hard time in Poland. She lived through so much. That's just unbelievable. And she couldn't survive in Poland because, can you ever imagine, the Poles used to recognize her, maybe because she was so always full of fear. And whenever she went, they used to point her out. And she just couldn't live in Poland.

She came to me one time. And I-- and I told my-- the woman I work with her, this is my cousin. And I gave it my last money to her because she was almost starving. And the woman was so angry. How dare you giving to her. I says, I have to give her the money. I know her, she says. And I-- she couldn't survive. And she was walking around hungry.

And she came to me one time. And I said to her, you know Nana, I know what we're going to do. I'm sure you can survive. You have only one alternative in this world, to go to Germany as a Pole because the Germans don't recognize you. You know, and I said-- and we walked in Łódź-- in Warsaw, excuse me. And we seen a tremendous big sign. It says, go with us to Germany.

I heard that, yes.

And she had a big-- you know, she had a birth certificate. She got it from somebody who passed away. Somebody gave it to her. But she was older than herself. And she said, I'm scared to go. I can't go. They're going to recognize me. I said, don't, I said. I pushed it in because I was the brave one, and I was the strong one, and she was always the [INAUDIBLE].

I said, you have to go because otherwise you're not going to survive. You have to. And I pushed her in this with all my force. Go in. She went inside, and they began to interrogate her. And they asked her, how come you are only 16 or so, and you look so young. And she says, what can I do?

You're small.

I'm small and everything. And she-- and after that, she walked out. And they signed her up to go to Germany. And she was the happiest in the world because she didn't live no more fear.

Because it was something out of Poland.

At Poland, somebody is going to recognize, because everybody recognized her.

They'd recognize she was Jewish, you mean.

Everybody recognized that she was Jewish. That was the tragedy. She went to w as like a new life opened to her. She went through a lot, but at least she was not fearful no more from the Pole life, for being a Jew. Because the Germans send her. She was doing different kind of works. And while I always corresponded with her and I kept in touch with her, and she wrote to me letters. And she said she looked for these letters because I always gave her a lot of courage.

I told her to go on. And this made her feel wonderful. And she was very grateful for it.

And now we're about 1945.

No, not '45-- '44.

In '44, still '44.

It was around 1944, and the Russians were closing in on Poland, which we were very, very grateful. When I heard the Russians are coming, I left the little small town. And I was going, getting closer. I wanted to get closer to my city of my birth, Łódź. And I was-- I went to Lublin, which was closer there. And people were already-- some little places liberated. They're liberating different places.

I went to the district Lublin, and I worked there for a professor for the first time. I advanced.

[LAUGHS] To a Polish professor. [CROSS TALK]

I was like-- I was like a-- I was like taking care of his child. And he was wonderful to me. He liked me very much. And I was--

You don't think he guessed that you were Jewish.

Nobody ever-- never-- I never had any-- I was scared to death myself, but none of these people ever suspected me because I have blue eyes and blonde hair. And I speak a pretty good English, and I don't have the-- some people had certain accent or something about them they could spot. But they never could spot anything. He was very, very wonderful to me. And I stayed with him for quite a while, until the Russian closed in more and more.

When you heard that the Russians were closing in, did you then start getting nervous that they would maybe consider you a Pole, and you'd have trouble.

No, I was never worried about it. No, not then. I was never scared of the Russian because I knew that they are giving us freedom. But they were bombing a little bit our city, but I was not scared. But I heard that many of the concentration camps were already liberated. And many Jewish people are in Lublin now. And I went purposely to that city to meet some Jewish people.

I got in touch with them. And I met some in the road. They were people who were liberated. But I still was not very comfortable. I still didn't stay with the Jewish people yet.

You were still afraid.

I was still afraid of my life because I was-- I had a right to. Imagine what a great tragedy. I was working with a child. I was taking care of, and one day, I heard a great announcement. They say that people who are liberated from different concentration camps were killed by the Poles.

I heard that.

When I heard it, I was so devastated. I said, I can reveal no more. I was still scared of my own life.

Of course.

When I couldn't reveal, I still was hiding out. I still lived in a tremendous fear.

You were still with the professor?

I still with the-- can you imagine in this world, that the people who lived through Hitler come back to be free people, and their own people, the Poles, are killing them. This is inexcusable. How can we ever forget or forgive these people? This is unbelievable in this world.

When I heard this, I was very upset. I said, I can't-- I can reveal I am a Jew anymore. I'm going to still wait a little bit until I am sure that they get-- the situation is 100%. And I was right.

You were right. You were right.

I was right, and I waited and waited. But then it quiet down. And then all of a sudden, my sister found me. She went to the woman who I work for in Milosna. She told me that I went to Lublin. And in a miracle, she found me in Lublin. She found me and then she said she couldn't believe in this world that she did.

The professor I was working for was very good to me. And I said-- I was always very ambitious, and I always want to better myself. And I said, you know, I'm going back to my Łódź, to city I was born, I told him. And I'd like to learn how to type. And he-- I took lessons, typing lessons. Can you believe it?

And my sister, when she came, she says where is my sister-- my cousin. I said-- because she was my cousin, she had the same name. And she says to me, she couldn't believe that I'm alive. But she opened up a big trunk, and she recognized my clothes. She said, that's my sister. When she came, she says, couldn't believe it.

I was there, and I went to school. He was so-- the professor was so wonderful to me. He was such a good person. He let me go to school. He paid for it, and I took typing lessons because I thought, after I survive, I can--

You can do something, of course.

I can be independent person. I can do something. And that was a great help for me. And I was very grateful to him. And then, when I see-- can you imagine, when I see my sister? We see each other, but then we knew that we are free at last.

Finally.

And we decided to tell the professor now that we have to go back to Łódź. And he was very receptive to me. And we left his place, and we traveled to my city, which I was born to. I was anxious to go and see and find out if any of my parents ever been in this world survived. And I went into-- to my city. And I went-- the first

thing what I did, I went to the center, the Jewish center, like the federation. I walked in there. And I said, anybody from Drexler is alive?

I named many, many people-- my parents, my mother, my father, my cousins. Nobody-- everybody died in such a terrible, such a tragic death. Whenever I think, I get very sad, when I think how my parents went into the gas chamber. How did how did they scream? How did they think? I was very, very-- makes me very sad. It haunts me night and day.

How did they feel? How did they feel when they went there? Were probably worrying about us also.

Of course.

But you can't live with the past. You have to be grateful. I am very grateful that I'm alive.

And your two sisters with you.

And I'm grateful that my sisters are here. And I'm grateful that I-- but I have to tell you what happened.

Now, after the war.

I know. After the war, I found out that, unfortunately, none of our family, none of us survived, nobody except, thank God, my sisters were survived. But I remember in back of my mind what my father said. My father said, when you survive, you make sure, write somewhere in the newspaper. Let your aunts know that, you know. And I remember that very well. And I remember, even then, the address of my aunts. And I carried my father's photograph, through all this pain. And I have the photograph. I never-- I never parted with it. And it's-- and I was there already. I made a big portrait of my father.

Anyway-- [AUDIO OUT]

You had to let your aunts know.

Yes. I put in a paper, in the paper in Poland, an announcement. And I said that the daughters of Drexler Solomon and Regina Drexler are alive. Please, get in touch with us. We live in Łódź, Poland and so on. And like by miracle, one day we got-- we got a telegram from Toronto, Canada. And they said we are alive, and we are going to do everything in our power to bring you over to Toronto. It's just unbelievable what happened.

Was that a big announcement, or somebody told them?

I guess somebody told them in Forward. They probably put it to Forward. And they wrote in Yiddish paper. They wrote in a Yiddish paper. Because some people-- you always had it for announcement. And my aunt, they read it. And they-- from then on, we tried to get out of Poland.

I didn't want to stay too long in Poland. I knew that Poland is not a place for the Jewish people because the Russians were there. That's just as bad as the Nazis. And we begin to-- we want to leave. And I stayed--

[CROSS TALK] with your papers?

And we stayed in Poland until 1946. And we couldn't get out of Poland so easy because, see, the Russians-- you're not free with the Russians.

No.

You had to smuggle us. I had to smuggle through the border. I smuggled with my middle sister, the other sister. We smuggled out from Poland and went to Germany. From Germany, you had to go-- you could go anywhere. You can go to America, to Toronto. That was our desire.

Were you in a displaced-- DP camp?

No. When I came to-- that's right. When I went to-- we went to-- decided to go to Berlin, which is the capital of Germany. And we were in DP camps from 1946 to 1948. I was in the Berlin [GERMAN], in a DP camp. And I was working in different places in the office. I was working.

You could use your typing.

I was typing. I was doing different things. And my sister, which is the middle one, she was always the weak on somehow. She was at home. She was taking care of the-- you know. I was bringing the-- bringing the bread, like--

You had a room?

We had one room. That's one little room, but we kept it spotless and clean. Was nice and clean. We many times didn't have so much to eat. We just-- we had what they-- you know, that the German gave us.

Oh, the UNRRA.

Jewish-- we are very grateful for UNRRA, always. I am very involved in my community now, in the Jewish Center of Richmond, Virginia. And I'm very grateful to the people because when I work for the community, I receive an [INAUDIBLE] award, the service award for them, because I believe we should give. We should. I have a responsibility to what was done for me. I'm lucky enough to give back what they done to me.

Because you know how to give it back.

And I'm giving back. And I'm fortunate enough to-- to people who-- other Jewish people who are less fortunate, in the same predicament like I am, the Russian Jews or people from all over the world who have struggles. We should help them also. I feel very strongly about this is our responsibility. I'm very blessed that I can do it.

That's right. They helped you.

And I feel like I have to do the same thing to them.

All right, so in-- so you were in Germany how long then?

I stayed in Berlin [GERMAN] until '48. In 1948, the American army took us out because it was a blockade, Russian blockade in Berlin. And they took us out. I remember the beautiful American faces. They took us out from. And we went to another DP camp, which was-- the name of it was Foehrenwald. And we stayed again in another DP camp and waited until my aunt brought us over to Toronto, Canada.

And 19-- July 12, 1949 was a beautiful day in our lives. We came to America, to the wonderful free country of America. And we are free. And we met my wonderful two aunts, and they took us in with an open arms. And I had two wonderful cousins. We stayed with them for a month or so. But after that, I believe, I wanted to work immediately. I didn't want to be dependent on nobody. And right away, I decided to learn the English language.

I know when you come to a country, you have to learn the language because people respect you. You just can't walk around like a cripple. You have to know. Then I went right away to school. And I learned the language. And I became a very proud person, and grateful person, and stayed in Toronto, Canada, and until 1953.

And your sisters also?

My sister also was with me. But my other sister was left. And then she came to another city. And then I married my husband. I married my husband. I met him in Germany, but he came to visit me in Toronto,

Canada. I married him and went back to Richmond, Virginia, where my sister lived. And we all got together now. I'm very grateful for this country because it gave me an opportunity to build a new life and live as a free person and build a new life.

And I raised two wonderful human beings. I have a son, a lawyer, and a daughter who's a hospital administrator. My son is 29. My daughter is 26. And they are wonderful people. And I never instilled in my children any hate. I never told them they have to hate the Germans. I always told them about my experiences, and so did my husband because I know that's my responsibility, to talk about as long as I live because this should never be forgotten.

Because we forget history, it's doomed to repeat itself again. And we can never afford to do it. But I don't believe in hate. I tell him never to hate. The only thing I want them to do for me, and I hope that they want to continue to live as Jews and preserve the Jewish heritage.

And that's what anybody else forget.

And don't forget, because it's important, who we are. And we left-- we lost 6 million Jews. And hopefully they're going to marry Jewish people. I don't know what's going to happen, but I hope they'll do it. But only I'm grateful that they're wonderful human beings. They are to feeling with humanity.

And I'm very grateful for this country. And I'm grateful to be also here. This experience I'll never forget, that America gave us an opportunity to come here. And we are the witnesses of the greatest atrocity which is committed against humanity. I believe when one atrocity is happened against one people, it is committed against others also. When one injustice is done to one, it's injustice done to others. And we can never afford it should happen again.

And I'm grateful that, now, America also, the United States is going to have a memorial dedicated to the Holocaust tragedy, as Yad Vashem in Israel. Two years ago I went to Israel with my son and daughter also. And--

Was that your first visit?

That was my second visit because I wanted my children to share and also in my soul, in my happiness. I want them to know what it means to be Jewish. And I'm grateful that we have Israel because on the ashes of the great tragedy and on the ashes of the tragedy, we have a new country. And we are grateful for it. And we hope that America is going to support it, and we're going to support it because we have to have a land. Without a land, Jewish people are in very bad shape.

And I think that, when we would have Israel in 1939, 6 million Jews wouldn't perish because we had a place to go. People didn't want to take-- nobody wanted to take us in. It was a big ship who came to Norfolk, Virginia with a lot of women. No, the doors was locked closed for us. But now, any time anybody wants to go, there's a place to go.

When you have a country, you will have a parent, a mother and father. When you have no country, it's like you are orphan. Nobody cares for you, nobody loves you, nobody speaks for you. And Israel is our hope and our pride and joy. I love Israel, but I love America very much. I am a great patriot. But in the same time, I'm grateful for Israel. And I believe that we should support it in every way we can. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.