

My name is Suzanne Helfand, and I'm here at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, to interview survivors of the Holocaust.

Could you begin, please, by giving me your full name?

My name is Szyja, and in English, it's James Frenkel. My address is 4634 North 80th, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

And could you spell that last name?

F-R-E-N-K-E-L.

Do you want to begin by telling me your earliest experiences before the war?

Well, before the war, we had a family.

Where were you born?

In Poland, in Bedzin. That was my hometown. When the war broke out, I was 15 years old. It was September of 1939. When the German occupation came in to our hometown, they put a curfew on the city. We weren't allowed to get out from our apartment. And the same night, we noticed that when we looked out the windows, we noticed there's big flames around us within a distance 10, 15 blocks, where the synagogue was. There was a big synagogue.

The next day, we got out on the streets. We found out. We saw the ashes. The whole synagogue was burned down. That was the beginning of the German occupation. Then they started to come in and our homes. They started to take away from us, like a golden ring, some earrings, whatever they saw.

And as it follows, they kept on coming in during the night. And they looked at the whole family, and they pointed to one in the family. In my case, they pointed to one of my sisters. They took her away, and we didn't know where she went. We figured she's in a labor camp. As time went by--

How old was your sister?

My sister was 20, 21.

And how many were there in your family?

We were four kids. As the time went by, they took us out. We had an order from them, from the Gestapo, from the city government but it was run by the Gestapo, under the occupation of the Germans. And we had ordered to go out and clean the streets, and do all kind of sanitation work. And then we had a ration of food, so much per day.

As time went by, they came in. And they did a lot of harassment. They kept on kicking us and beating us on the street, if we walked on the street in a part of the ghetto where we were.

Who was doing this?

The Germans.

The Germans.

The Germans, the occupation. Yeah. As we walked, say we walk down the street on a sidewalk, and if we saw a German policeman, it's called in German a gendarme. We weren't able to walk on the same side. We had to get off the sidewalk, and bow for them.

The next thing they did, if they saw there were a lot of Orthodox Jewish people with beards, and they used to call pejsy. That's those long hair around your-- what you call?

Sideburns.

That's right. So what they did is, they took a man who might have be 50, 60, 40. As long as he had a beard, he took him on the side. He cut off part of it. He gave him a haircut maybe part of his head, and they let him go, to go back.

To humiliate.

That's right. To humiliate them. I mean make fun, but just because we were Jews. I mean for no other reason than that. Well, as time went by, we were humiliated very bad with all. They even took away if you had a live animal in the house, or outside the house. They took away from you. You weren't allowed to have anything. I mean, you know what I mean, not even a duck, a bird, or a chicken, or something like that. They took away everything.

Then they kept on taking away all the Jewish businesses. In my case, I used to work part time as a little boy in a bindery, in a printing shop. And a Jewish man had it. And the janitor during that time, he was a janitor but when the Germans came in, they occupied Poland. So this janitor, what he did is he joined the Nazi army, I mean the Nazi party. And he joined the Nazi party. He knew some German from way back. So what they did, they made this janitor the general manager of that company.

And the Jewish man who worked all his life, and he had an employment about-- maybe-- it was a small shop of about 25, 28 people. He had to go and work as a regular worker. Well, this man was in an uproar. He was really angry. So one day, it happened I was there. I worked that day in the morning a few hours. At that day this man came up and he gave him orders. And he couldn't take it anymore. So he walked by.

He walked to his ex-janitor what now he's a Nazi party man, and he's the general manager of that company. He walked up to him and he wanted to choke him. He couldn't take it. He was hurt, because he had to take orders from him, and there they took everything away from him. So what happened this janitor, or at that time the manager really, he went ahead. He screamed. So some of the workers, they were Germans down there in the office that was on the main floor. They called for the police.

The police came with two German shepherds. I mean German dogs. They were about that tall. And they arrest this Jewish man, because he attacked this German, this Nazi. Well, they took him away. We didn't know what happened. In the meantime, I came back from work. And one day, they were on the streets, big poster that on this and this day, they want us to congregate us in a stadium. But it was alphabetically, you know?

And they gave us the date. And they told us they're going to give us special passports. We should come. The whole family should come together. Well, that was on a Wednesday at that time. We got to that stadium in the morning. We got dressed up. And we figured it will take maybe an hour, how long will that take. We came to that stadium. We noticed that there were some soldiers around outside the fences.

Inside, we came in. There was a little round table with three Gestapo, SS. They had whips. They were made out of iron. It was cable iron, cable. And on top, there was leather covered. And as the day went by, people kept on coming in, I mean families. And they started to call names alphabetically by family. The whole family should walk up to this certain table, a little table. And they were the judges.

They decide who shall die and who should not survive, but just leave the stadium for a short time, as it happened. Well, I walked up with my family and we came up. And I was 15 years old. My brother was 13. My mother was 42. One sister was already in a camp. They took her away from my house. We didn't know exactly where she was.

And he pointed to me. He says you go to number one. That means, number one was the group they will release us. They will let us out. My mother they put on number three. We knew what that was, because the rumors went on as we spent the day there, what happened, what they're going to try to do. So number three was to send, what they did with the

people, they put on number three, those people they took to Auschwitz, to the gas chambers.

Well, I didn't want to go. [CRYING]

It's OK.

And I said to my ma-- I says, I want to go with you. [CRYING] But my mother says, please, you go out. Go there. Maybe you will survive. Maybe you will be alive. And I did got to number one. They let me go.

They let me go. I couldn't go back to my apartment. I didn't have nobody. So I went to a friend, a friend who used to work with my sisters and my family in that particular printing shop and bindery, it was combined. And he says, you stay with me for a while. All right, I stayed there for quite a few weeks.

In the meantime, they made lists with people like myself who were left alone and young, we should report to the police. Well, I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go. I knew I would end up in a camp.

I will end up in a camp. So what happened, I was hiding for quite a few months. But this one day, one particular day, there were rumors that it's going to be quiet in the town, in the city. The Gestapo want to look around. The police, they will look around for us.

So I stayed in my home town, but not in my room, in my apartment. I stayed with those friends. And about midnight, maybe little later than midnight, there was a knock on the door. They came in. Two policemen came in, German policemen. And they looked at the list. They had a list, and they grabbed me, and they took me to the police station. They kept me there.

In the meantime, they kept on bringing in a lot of people, a lot of single people from other towns, little towns and neighborhoods. From there, they sent us away. They wrapped us up. I mean they took us on a station, and they put us on a train. They sent us to a camp.

The first camp was a labor camp.

Excuse me?

Yeah?

Before you go, they put you in a train?

Yeah.

What were the conditions on the train?

Well, on the train, we were just about, we were traveling about, oh, maybe two or three hours. It was a short distance, because the camp wasn't too far. But that was a small camp. It was about 350 prisoners. They put us in-- they were barracks. They put us, about 28 maybe 30 guys in a room, in a barrack.

Not in a barrack. A barrack was about 110 or so. There were about three barracks. It was a small camp. Well, the next morning, they start to take us out to work. We had to work under very bad conditions. They used to beat us all the time, it used to be behind our neck, back.

And any time we stood up and we were catching our breath-- you can't just keep on working because we worked with the railroad tracks.

How old were you at this time?

I was 15 years old.

You're still 15?

Well, I'm sorry. I was 17. I'm sorry.

OK, two years later.

That was two years later, yeah. That's right. At that camp, I was there about a year, a year and two months. Then they took me, they switched me to a camp in Czechoslovakia. There I spent about four months only. And then they sent me back. There we had to work in a-- we were installing sewer pipes. And the work, it was slavery. I mean, it was hard work, with shovels by hand.

Were they feeding you at this time?

Well, they gave us like two slices of bread in the morning. And they gave us a little slice oleo. And-- and in the evening when we came back from camp, I mean we came back from work, from outside work from the sewers where we worked, we came back in camp. They had lined us up at a barrack. And each barrack had like a barrel of soup, you know. It was supposed to be a vegetable soup. But you didn't see no vegetables. You had to look for the vegetables maybe. If you found one piece of potato, and it was 90% of water in it.

Anyway, we took that bowl of soup. We got in there, and we ate, well we were drinking it, not eating it. And then we were able to move around outside the camp, in the barracks. But there were high wires with electric wires around it. And they had guards around it.

After that camp, they took us to a concentration camp. We were about 5,000 prisoners there. There we got a number, because there was like-- it was called Aussekommando Auschwitz. It belonged to Auschwitz. See my number they gave me is 177160.

There we had the same conditions, barracks, the same way, except we had different kind of work. Well, I worked for a company. We were digging foundations. It was foundations for cranes. There was a lot of coal. They produced briquettes, coal briquettes. There we worked on that. We were pushing the barrels with sand, and concrete, and cement, and stones, and what have you.

And every time we did that kind of work, we had the Gestapo with us right behind us. They kicked us. They called us name, like verfluchte Jew. That means you dirty Jew. Well, the work and the conditions were bad. There I was about till 1944 in December. The end of December, as the war came closer to an end, the Russian army started to come from the East. And they penetrated East Germany already. And that camp was in East Germany.

They came closer to that camp, so that the Gestapo, the Nazis, decided to move that camp out, to push out--

And what camp was this?

That was Blechhammer. So they tried to evacuate us. They didn't want us to get liberated too soon from the Russians, because they wanted still to keep us and try to get work out of us, and maybe kill us later on. That was their plan.

So what happened, they kicked us out. They came around with machine guns in the camp one morning. And it was on a winter day, late in December. And they started. That was called a dead march. All the 5,000 prisoners, except a few of them were very sick. They were in a barrack, where they had a hospital. They couldn't even walk anymore. They left them there, and they planned to kill them after.

But I didn't know what happened to them. But anyway, we ran out of the camp with one blanket, and the suit was a pajama suit. We wore stripes. They look like a pajama, you know. But we had one-- they allow us to take along one blanket. We took that blanket along, and we started to walk. We started to walk. The snow was deep. The temperature

must have be around 5, 8, 10 below zero. We started to walk a whole day. And we kept on walking.

And in the evening it came. They took us into a farm.

Did you have shoes?

Well, we had wooden shoes. And what they did is, they divide us, 200 by this farmer, and 300 or 400 on the next farmer. So they pushed us in. The first few, say like about 50 guys or 100 guys, the ones they ran in first, where the cattle were. And then the next group came. Say, the next 100 guys came. They were laying on top. So what happened the next morning, the bottom row, a lot of those guys didn't have any oxygen. They couldn't breathe. So they were-- we found them dead. That's it.

Then whoever was there, they just throw them out. They put them in a field there. And the rest had to keep on walking. We walked like that for about over three weeks. A lot of people, the ones they couldn't walk, the ones they were behind, they were wobbling, they couldn't keep up with us-- what they did is the Gestapo, they went with the rifles, they killed them right there, if you weren't able to keep up with it.

So from there, we did end up in Buchenwald. That was our final destination. We end up in Buchenwald. That was beginning of 1945. And Buchenwald was a big camp. And we came into that camp. What they did, the first thing is they gave us new uniforms. And they divide us in different barracks again. And the next day, again, whoever was able to, he had the skin on his bones, had to go out and start to work outside the camp, had to carry stones, and they were heavier than we were.

And we were bones and skins. I mean we were down.

When you looked at each other, did you--

Yeah, we were. We didn't know we were just looking and staring at each other. I mean we were in the morning in a camp in a barrack, and they-- I mean they gave us the ration of bread, and there were fellas, I was with them. They were sitting there on bunk beds. We were four up. We couldn't even sit inside. We were just able to roll, not roll down. But--

Crouch.

We crouch-- and yeah, that's right. So in the morning when we got the slice of bread and a little bit of oleo margarine, we got out, and we tried to sit on the floor, and wherever we could. And some of the fellows, some of the prisoners, they took their slice of bread and they bite into it. And they were so weak in their system, their health was so gone, so bad, that they didn't even-- they weren't able to swallow that slice of that bite. They bite into it. And they choked to death.

They just-- they died, that's it. So what happened every morning, they had big trucks they came around those barracks. They picked up the corpses. Finally around April-- about the 7th or 6th of April, they started to give orders to take out prisoners and start to kill them out.

So what they did, they went by the numbers. I mean they barrack number 2, 4, or 5, 6, whatever. I was in barrack 60. They did-- they did it for quite a few days. I was enough fortunate that my barrack where I was wasn't next.

So the day came, it was April 11 of 1945. It was a sunny day, around 10:00, 11 o'clock. We heard Jeeps. And we opened up the doors on the barracks. We saw the American soldiers. And there was from a Red medical. The first day, came in the doctors, medical. What can I say? The ones they treat-- I mean in the war, on the front. The medic unit.

They came in. When they saw what happened, the corpses were laying around the crematorium, hundreds and hundreds, thousands of them. They weren't-- they didn't have enough time to burn them, to get rid of them. They came in, those soldiers, once they jumped off from the Jeep. And they came around the barrack, and they saw us. Their tears came from their eyes like little babies cry. They just couldn't-- they didn't believe--

These were Americans?

American soldiers, Yes. After a few days, they started to work on us. They gave us right away, they cleaned us up. And they put us in different barracks. They took us out from those barracks. They gave us the quarters where the SS used to live there, the German soldiers. It was better, a little better quality of housing.

So they took us in there. They gave us their pajamas, army pajamas, and they gave us-- excuse me-- underwear, green underwear like the soldiers. And they gave us all medical help we could get. I mean they tried to help us. Because a lot of us didn't make it. They were too far gone.

How much did you weigh at this time?

I weighed 76 pounds. I wasn't able to walk. And they give us the best help. And we were very happy and fortunate we were able to be liberated from the American army.

Now, you were being treated by American--

American doctors, yes. They gave us intravenous. But a lot of my friends, it was just too late. They were there for a day, or two days, or three days. And then they just died, diarrhea, diphtheria, all different. It was too late. I was able--

Were they able to give you more food to eat, or--

They-- what happened, see, that's where they made a mistake. When we were liberated there, some of the prisoners they were able to walk. So what they did, as soon they saw the American soldiers, they ran to a warehouse where they kept the food for the Nazis, for the Gestapo. But there were no Gestapo anymore. They ran away. They knew that the American army is coming.

So what happened is those prisoners ran in their warehouse. They got out. They took some food. They went in a kitchen. They made soup with bacon and ham and all that fat, all the greasy stuff. And they made vegetable soup. And a lot of the people, we were starving for so many years. I mean you only had a ration so much. And it's not that you can go out and get yourself a candy bar, or even a peanut, or peanuts, or something.

So what happened is they made the soup. And the poor guys, a lot of the guys, but fortunately I wasn't-- I just didn't feel good. So I didn't run, so I didn't want to-- I didn't eat the soup. So a lot of those people who ate that kind of food the first night, they were open all night. They kept them cooking. Those are the ones they end up with a lot of diphtheria and diarrhea. And so what happened, the American soldiers, they occupied when they came in, they saw what happened.

So they stopped. They closed up the kitchen. They didn't let them to continue to cook anything. And then they took over with the cooking. And that's what they did. They gave us a couple of spoons of rice, and some medication to stop the diphtheria, the diarrhea. But like I says, a lot of the people didn't make it, because it was just too late. Their bodies was run down, and it was just too late.

But the American army did the best they could. One more thing was when the General Eisenhower came into Dachau, and he-- that was a second and third day. And he-- he still saw what happened, all the corpses and everything, and how we looked. He gave an order to them, to one of the commanders, to go into Weimar. That's a city, the name of a city, a big city in Germany. That was about 10 or 12 miles from the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

And he gave an order to his command that they should bring in some Germans. They should see, walk them through the camp, and let them see what they went through, what they did to people. They brought about-- I would say maybe 100, 150 Germans. They walked down. They kept on saying we have [NON-ENGLISH]. We didn't know nothing about it.

Well, I don't know. Before even the occupation, they occupied Poland. And I was a little boy in 1933 when Hitler came to power. All the papers, the headlines was, the goal is for my folks, for my nation, the Germans to liquidate all the Jews. That's Mein Kampf. That's what he wrote.

Well, how could people when they lived 12 miles, and not only that, they saw. They saw those big wagons, those big boxes, car boxes, coming in with people day in and day out. That was a big, big camp, Buchenwald. And how they could deny it right there, there's no words. What can I say? What can I say? And that was the end.

From there, I gained a little bit. I was able to get together with some fellas, together from my section of Poland. So we decided we can go back. Yeah, what happened is that part of Germany where Buchenwald was, the United States Army had to get out, because they divided Germany in four parts-- French, and English, and Russia, and the United States.

So that part became that's what they call now East Germany. So the American army told us. They even gave us quite a few days. They say, we're going to leave. You're welcome. We're going to give you a transportation. You can go with us, travel to West Germany. But in my case, I was from Poland. And Buchenwald, if I were to go with the American soldiers, I would go farther West. And I wanted to go back to my hometown, see maybe if there's anybody left.

I was always hoping. Well, I did that. I left. I didn't go with the Americans. So we had to go on our own. So what happened, transportation was poor at that time after the bombardments. Great Britain used to bomb every day almost in 1944, after the end of the war. So what happened, we went.

We finally arrived. Our destination, my hometown, Bedzin. I came in. It was about-- it took me quite a few days. It took me about I think a week or so. I got there. On the Main Street of my hometown I saw some people. And they recognized me. They recognized me. And they say, your name is so-and-so Frenkel. I says, yeah.

I says, do you know anybody, if is alive. They say to me, yeah. My sister. I said, where does she live? They say-- they gave me her address. I said to my three friends, we were four guys. I said, let's go. It's still the light. We walk. It was walking distance. We walk down there. I ring the bell from the janitor. The janitor said, whom are you looking for?

I gave him the name. She says, yeah. There's four girls living up there. They were in camp. I walked up the steps. I went first. I rang the bell. One of the girls came out, a friend. I says here my sister is so-and-so, Jacheta Frenkel her name is.

And my sister heard in the back my voice. She came to it. [CRYING] And that was the moment I won't forget in my life. That's the only survivor.

What that feeling when you saw her?

Well, there's-- I just can't describe it. If that's the right, describe it. I mean there was a moment, a time where it's impossible. It's incredible. I mean I just can't, the feelings that are there. My whole body, my whole inside, my soul, my heart, my blood, I mean, everything was just I mean, I was so shaking for happiness, that I found at least one sister.

Well, the first thing I said to my sister, I said, listen. We're not going to stay here. I want to go back to the American zone, US. I don't want to stay in Poland.

How old are you at this point?

I was 21.

And your sister was?

She was 26.

I says, no. I don't want to stay in a country where I lost everybody, if there's no future, there's nothing for me.

And what was she doing during the war years?

She was in a concentration camp.

She was also?

Well, sure.

And was liberated, and she came back.

She was liberated by the Russians. You see? Where I was liberated by the Americans.

Was she the first one to have left the family?

And she was the first one they took out that night. And we didn't know, no.

And you didn't know what happened to her. But she survived.

She survived. She worked in camps, ammunition camps, and all different kinds of camps. And she survived. She was lucky. So I don't know, lucky, but still in a way. I said, the first thing I said, let's go, Jacheta. We won't stay here. We have to try to organize something. We have to try to go back to the West Germany, and be with the Americans. Because I don't want to stay in Europe. I didn't want to stay.

So we organized a group. We were about 12 people, survivors. And we tried to get through the border of Poland. But to go to Germany in the occupied zone, we had to go through Czechoslovakia to reach East Germany.

Well, the transportation was still poor. That was in 1946. So what we did, we found out that we can get to this one little town in Czechoslovakia, and catch a train at midnight.

Now how did you have the money?

We didn't have no money.

How did you--

The Jewish organization, our hometown, just gave us a few not dollars, but zlotys. But we didn't have no money. But the transportation, most of the transportation was working. But we had a few dollars just for the train ticket. So we got to that little town. And it was such a small town, the railroad depot was closed. The train took off. We came late. We didn't get the connection.

So what we did, we figured we would go somewhere in a motel or a hotel. So we got into that motel in the lobby there. It was in Czechoslovakia. And we were sitting and the guy asked us who we are. So we told him. We would like to go to Germany. But we have to cross the border.

Oh, they say, no. That's illegal. You have no documents here. So they called up. That was right on the border line, Poland to Czechoslovakia. They called the Polish police, the border police. They called them and they came in. And they say, OK. You bring them over to the border line the next day.

So what they did, they brought in the Czechoslovak police, and they were guarding us all night in that hotel. We were sitting in the lobby. And the next morning, at sunrise in the morning, they took us on a wagon with two horses, and they took us to the border. And they gave us over to the Polish people, the Polish people. Right away they took us, and they put us in a prison for crossing the border un-legal.

We told them the reason. We told them the reason. And they didn't believe us. They figured, who knows who they are. We showed them the numbers. I mean there was no way we could-- I mean they could take us for somebody else. No way.



So what happened, they kept us in prison. Before we got in the prison, they interrogate us with a lot of beating and kicking and to find out what we're doing, why we want to go back. We just gave them one reason. We want to go back. We have nobody in this town, this country. We lost everybody. We can't stay in a country where we don't have nobody. We have to see. We have to start a new future and get away from it.

So we got in, in that prison. Somehow, some people in our hometown found out that we were in prison. So they got a lawyer, and they put us on trial. The trial came up after we were four weeks in prison. Here, and we already had a little bit of hair, and we looked like human beings. In prison, they took us and they shaved us. They gave prison uniforms. It was a horrible life.

That they came for a trial. It was very-- it was publicized, very much so. It was in a different city, because the prison was in a little town out of the population. They kept prisons where there's a lot of land and farmland. They took us to town with machine guns. They walked with us to a courthouse like we were murderers, I mean it was horrible. People were watching. We came in, in a courthouse.

They started up. And we had this one lawyer. He stood up. And he was our defense lawyer.

Now, your sister was also arrested too--

My sister was in there, yeah.

And she was on trial with you.

Yeah. And the fact is, my brother-in-law too. She was engaged to a fella, and then they married in Germany. Well, the whole bunch of us, 12 of us, we were there. The judge stood up, and he gave the verdict. He gave the verdict. He says people like those, you see them down there sitting, they went through so much in their lives. All those years, they went through so much, and it was hell.

I can't say it in words. There isn't such a thing, he says. I let them free. They're free people. But they have to go back to prison just seven-- six or seven days. Sit out there. They won't sit in prison for crossing the border. And we went back. But at least we knew already we count the days every day. It was closer and we left. We left the prison we went back to our hometown. We got in touch with some of the Jewish people there, the ones there they were organizers for the people who come back.

And we told them. They said, well listen. Hang around a few weeks, and we will try another route. We give you another route to go. We took a different route. We made it. We came into West Germany in 1946. We got through Berlin. We got into the French zone, and then we got to the US zone. Finally, in the US zone, they were-- it was called for the DP camps, displaced persons, it was called UNRRA, U-N-R-A. It was called United Nations Rehabilitation Organization, something like that.

Well, they took care of us. They sent us to a camp, a DP camp. And in those DP camps, were also some ex-Nazi soldiers. There were camps. But they were nice camps. At least I mean we weren't with a guard. I mean we were free people. And they gave us food. They gave us three meals, and from there--

How long were you in this camp?

In that camp, we were-- I was there until '49. Finally, we registered right away. I registered right away with the American consulate. And see, everybody had a choice. But it didn't go so fast, because they had quite a few people, I suppose. But my turn came in 1949. And then it took, the investigation all that, until I didn't come to the United States until '51. It took that long.

So I was in the camp. Well, those camps already, I was a free man. I was able to go out, to go out in town, and go out at least to see something, I mean they see buildings, see a theater, see something. I wasn't interested in German theater, because I didn't have a love for them. I didn't care for it.

Was your sister married at this time.

My sister got married there, yeah. That's right. My sister got married. So she lived there together with her husband. And then we left. My sister left before me. She left in 1951. And I think she left beginning of January. And I left the end of January.

Now, did you take a boat?

Yeah, by boat. It was a transfer boat.

And when you got to the United States, did you arrive where?

When I got to the United States, they sponsored me. See, it was a Jewish organization.

Do you know which one?

I think it was JJ--

Joint Distribution?

Joint Distribution, that's right. That's the one. That's right. So when I arrived in New York, it took us about eight, nine days on a ship.

What was your feeling when you arrived in New York?

Oh, my feelings were, great. I was just my eyes opened up. We saw when we arrived in the morning before sunrise, we saw New York. And we saw the highways, the cars. I mean people go to work in the morning. And we had, well, that's what I said. I said, this is my dream. This is it.

So what happened is we got off the ship. And there were people from the Jewish organization. They gave us a ticket. And they had my name. They gave me a tag. And I went to Detroit.

And how were you treated by the organization?

Very nice. They asked me if I want a hamburger. I didn't know what a hamburger is. So the one lady came over and she says, it's chopped meat in Yiddish. So I said, that's OK. OK. Then they gave me a big delicious apple, real big. I still remember. That was a giant. And they put me on a train. I went to a train. They gave me transportation.

I got on a train. I came to Detroit. And from--

And how did you come to Detroit? How was it decided that you were going to go to Detroit to settle?

They, see, when you register in Germany in that DP camp, they decide, I mean where to-- they spread us out. They spread out. They sent so many to Michigan, so many to New York, so many-- my friends, a lot of them end up in New York, see?

And then I didn't know exactly where my sister was. But then I found out through the Joint Distribution organization. And they told me-- and she was in Milwaukee, and I was in Detroit. So I worked there. I went to an employment office. I registered. I took out my Social Security card. And they sent me to the job. And I worked there for a while. And then after about five months--

What kind of work did you do?

I went to work in a printing-- printing, lithographic. I started out, because I did started out after the war in Germany. So what I did is I went to the people there in the shop where I work. And I told them. I said I would like to take at least a week or so, two weeks, a leave of absence and see my sister. So I did go to-- I took a Greyhound bus. I went to Milwaukee. I came to Milwaukee. I took a taxi. I looked up, and he took me there. I had the address for my sister. And we had a reunion again.

But that was a short one. We didn't see for about, what? Two months or so. I saw there. We lived, in fact, I lived together with her for a while. And then I went to a different camp. She was-- she lived in a different camp. She was married and I was single. And we had a lot of friends.

And then I mean then we came. That was in Germany. But when we came to the United States, I says, no, I'm not going to stay in Detroit. I like Milwaukee better. So I came to Milwaukee. I did stay with my sister. We lived together. Then I met an American girl, nice girl. We went together for a while. We did acquaint with each other. And we decided to get married. We did go for about a year and a half. She was a nice lovely girl. She knew a few words in Yiddish, Jewish. And a good character, good nature.

I married and we have now three daughters, god bless them. I have a daughter 25, 22. In fact, she just finished school, college. And I got a daughter, she's going to graduate from high school this coming June the 8th of 1984.

So that's been a source of pleasure to you.

So I-- yeah, that was my great pleasure. And I do have a nice family. And great kids, and I respect them. They respect me and we do have a nice life. And I'm happy that I'm in the United States and I got a nice family.

Do you talk freely about your experiences?

Not from the beginning. But lately. Not from the beginning, but the last few years I started to dig. I started to like a little chicken comes out from an egg. That's the way I did. I don't want to shock them too much. But I do tell them here and there things what happened.

How do they feel about this?

Comprehend? I mean--

It's very hard to comprehend.

It is, yeah.

But how did they--

Well, they feel-- their faces turn kind of sad, especially my 18-year-old, well the other ones too. And they keep on asking. They keep on asking questions too. How did you live through? And how is that possible?

I said, well, a human being sometimes is stronger than an animal in the wilderness.

How can you account for surviving?

I don't know. I don't know myself. I really don't know. Because when they liberate me, the United States Army in 1945, the way I looked, my eyes were sunken, because I was so skinny. I couldn't walk. [CRYING]

How long did it take for you to physically start feeling--

Oh, it took me about at least four months. But thank God, with the good care of the United States Army.

What was the reaction, the feelings, when you see the people in your camps, and the terrible conditions, and one person dies, and the next person dies?

I know. We knew that-- we figure we are next. That's our turn. You see? But the last--

Do you almost feel numb after a while?

Well, no. It's all dependent I think to the individual. I didn't feel numb. I always felt that my day will come.

It's quite painful. Getting back to the camp, the conditions, were they-- did you have problems with lice and--

Oh, that's-- yeah, when we walked that march, what I didn't say at the previous on the first side, from that concentration camp Blechhammer to Buchenwald, well, we only had this one set. We wore this one set, there was a uniform but they looked like pajamas. They look like pajama, stripes. They gave us a dark blue blanket. When we arrived in Buchenwald. That blanket was not blue, but it was white from lice. It's unbelievable.

No human being in this world, on this Earth, would believe it, what we had. They took us. They had to work with us. They did try to clean, to clean us up in Buchenwald. Disinfect us with all this kind of infection. But it was just impossible, impossible, unbelievable. I mean you don't do that to animals, I mean wild animals way out in the jungle, or in Alaska. I don't know. You don't do that what they did to us. They just didn't care. They just didn't.

Did you know about the gas chambers when you were at the camp?

Oh, yeah. Oh, sure.

You knew that--

We saw it. We saw them. We were right there.

Because some people say they didn't.

Oh, no, where I was, in Buchenwald, you couldn't miss it. When we walked out, when they took us out to work, when we left that camp, we walked through the camp, through the barracks, and we saw the corpses laying around. Well, I saw it right there, next to me. I was laying in my-- it's not a bed it's a-- what you call?

A bunk.

A bunk. I mean right next to you. Excuse me, if you had to go out in a bedroom during the night, and you wanted to go back there, it was impossible. They put us together like herring in a barrel. One night, that was the only time, I couldn't get back. I had to sit out until in the morning. I couldn't get back in there. They pushed us so tight together, and so little room, space. It's unbelievable. I can sit here for days and weeks and tell you. I mean the little things, but here I'm just telling you. I mean it's just impossible.

Besides the cold, I'm sure you weren't given enough clothes to wear in these camps. And then you were faced with starvation. And you had the lice, and there must have been rats.

Yeah. In the camps, they kept us clean. I'm not going to say that. While we were in the camp, they kept us clean. We had to take a shower. They disinfect us.

OK, how often did you get to take a shower?

Oh about, I would say once a week.

Now, which camp is this in?

That was in all the other camps. We had showers. The only time we were with lice, with I mean in bad shape, was during the time when it was cold at that march. At that march from Blechhammer to Buchenwald. Because they tried to run us, to push us in deeper to West Germany, so that the Russians shouldn't catch us I mean too soon. They want us-- they still were hoping that we can work for them, and take out more strength, and then get rid of us. See? That's it.

But otherwise, in the other camps, they kept us clean.

And did you go--

They gave us a change of clothes once a week.

And did you go through with any one friend or person through all the camps?

I have, yeah, I have a friend. He's in New York. His name is Mayer [PERSONAL NAME]. I met him in my hometown the first day when the Gestapo took me to the police station, when they caught me, they round me up. I met him there in two camps we were in together for a while. And then we got together. And we were liberated together in Buchenwald. And he's still alive. Thank God, in New York. I write to him. We have communication, I mean, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Tell me about the kapos.

The kapos? There was some of them were murderers. They were very bad.

These were Jewish people?

Some of them, yeah, most of them.

And how they were treated after the war?

They, after the war, in fact, I saw a lady here, down here from her home town is Auschwitz. And this particular guy, I knew he was in one of the camps. I knew him, and what he did to people, it was just impossible, unbelievable. He used to whip him, and hit him on a place when we used to work outside of camp, construction or what have you, hard work. I mean the fact is in this one camp, we were emptying out like cement for building, for concrete to build, cement in boxes-- not boxes, I'm sorry bags.

There were about I think 50 or 100 pounds bags. We had to unload them from the train. But then what we did, we shook them out. And we put them on the side. And during the wintertime, we tried to put them underneath our pajamas for insulation. So we did cut out three openings, three holes, three openings, for your head and for your two arms. And we put them underneath our pajamas.

But when we got out from that, when we picked up our tools to go to work, we worked with our tools on our shoulder, about three or four pieces. It sounds funny. It made a lot of noise. Paper makes a lot of noise. So this one guard, he was a Gestapo. He says, what do those guys have here? He asked this German guy. See, there was a German guy in charge and they were watching us, and we don't escape. But we really didn't have place where to escape, where you could run.

A few did, but they got killed, because who would-- not too many Germans did hide out Jewish people, very few I would say. So what happened is where was I? So the German, this Gestapo says, what do they have underneath there? It sounds funny. Open up your jacket, in German. So we opened up the jacket, the whole bunch of us, maybe 25, 30 guys. We were in this command in this particular group.

He saw that the paper bag. He says, what the heck is the matter with you. And I can't say that language. I mean, it's terrible, four-letter words. They call us any name they could. And they kept on-- they say everybody takes that off. We couldn't wear them, no insulation or nothing. And those bags were just junk. It was just to bale, they throw it away.

But they were so sadistic, I mean they were so mean and angry for no reason, just because I was born Jewish.

What are your feelings about the Germans today?

My feelings, I will never change. My feeling, maybe for the younger generation maybe, I don't feel as bad. But as far as for the older generations, the ones they lived, when they were about, say like 16, 17 years old already, and those people they could join. It's not only the Germans, but all the other nationalities in the country, say like in Poland. Polish people, Polish citizens, they joined the Nazi party to take over, to be a general manager in a Jewish store, to take over the commerce, to take over the businesses from the Jewish people.

They joined them. Some of them were worse than the Germans.

They were prospering over the Jewish misery.

They were. That's right. They were prospering. That's the correct one. They took everything away. I mean from the corpses, if somebody had a gold crown, or a gold tooth, they pulled them out. Some of them they did it alive, when they saw them on the street. So that's why I will never forgive them. I can't do that. I mean, I don't care what they do now. But those people who lived in that era, in that time, and the ones they catch now. They did catch years ago there is no punishment for them. There's no point. It's impossible. Because they didn't do something to one person. They took millions.

When we used to work on the railroad tracks in one camp, in [NON-ENGLISH], we heard from miles, miles away, little kids in those boxes, you know, where they have say they transport cattle. You got a little window. That's the way they transport the Jewish people and those to Auschwitz, to those gas chambers. That's where my mother went. [CRYING]

Do you feel that you'll ever go back to Germany or?

No, I have no-- I have no desire to go back.

How did you manage with the different languages?

Well, there was a problem too. The war broke out. I was 15 years old. What education did I have? I didn't have much of an education.

Were you allowed to go to school in Poland?

Yeah, but we didn't have much schooling there. It was a country where, I mean the economics wasn't so good, so you went to school a half a day. A half a day you had to work, when you were about 12 years old.

Right.

So it was a hard life.

And then when you went to Germany, you started learning the language then?

Yeah, then I learned. I learned a little bit.

And when you came to the United States, did you know any English at that time?

I didn't know nothing at all.

In fact, that's why I-- I gave my name Jim. I listened to a song, some country Western song, and song had-- I can't recall his name. But the name I remember Jim. So I went to Social Security. They asked me my name. I figured a Polish name, hey, they're not going to be able to pronounce it. I couldn't pronounce it. So I say to that guy, Jim.

Oh, James. Yeah, yeah. And the funny thing was, I walked in the street in Detroit. That was my first town here in the United States. And I walked downtown there. And I remember about a Hudson company. There's a big Hudson Company. A big department store. And there were always some people come around and ask me about a street. And I couldn't even answer that. And I felt really bad. I said, in half German, [NON-ENGLISH]. That means, I don't know.

How long did it take you to catch on?

It took me, I would say about within about a half a year, seven months, I started to understand more.

How did you feel about--

I went in the evening to pick up a little bit spelling and writing.

How did you feel about the Americans and how they treated you?

How I feel about the Americans? There is no words. The only thing I can say is they're greatest people in the world. The government is the greatest government. We have the best country in the world. That's all I have to say.

There is always movements, but there's no better country in this world. That's what I say. And that day they liberate me in 1945, that's the day I will never forget. And the guys, the soldiers they were in there, and what they saw, they cried like babies, just like babies. They couldn't take it.

Did you ever talk to them?

Well they tried to talk to us. And they tried to give us some bars, some candy. Besides our rations we got, we had enough food. But we couldn't eat so much, we had to take it easy.

Are you an observant Jew?

I used to be. I used to be when I was a little boy. I used to do the prayers in the morning every day. But after the war, I changed a little. I still belong to a temple. I am a member. I bring up my kids with the Jewish way of living. But I'm not Orthodox.

How do you feel about intermarriage?

I'm not-- I'll say I'm not too crazy about it.

You hope that your children--

I hope and pray.

--will marry a Jewish man.

I hope and pray. But nobody knows. I only hope that. So I can--

We're running out of time. And I certainly enjoyed this interview with you. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude? Any special feelings you would just like to pass on?

The only thing I like to add is I'm happy that I did marry here in the United States. Like I said, my wife is a wonderful person. She's great. She's 100% behind me. And I got good kids. And that's what my life is, and my happiness.

Thank you so much for participating in this interview.

You're welcome.

It was a pleasure.

This concludes the interview with Szyja Frenkel at the Washington Convention Center.