Today is Wednesday, April 13. And I am here with Susan Karpfen of Elmont, New York. We're at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. And Susan, would you give your married name and spell it. And your maiden name, and where you're from?

Very well. Susan Karpfen. K-A-R-P-F-E-N. My maiden name, Schwarzbach, S-C-H-W-A-R-Z-B-A-C-H.

Would you like my mother's maiden name?

Yes.

My mother's maiden name Weidberg, W-E-I-D-B-E-R-G.

And where were you from?

I was born Skala-Podilska. That's in the Eastern Poland, right on the border between Russia and Poland, which right now is really Russia, Ukraine. It's not Poland anymore.

I just wanted to talk about an incident which was blocked out of my mind totally. Gay Pressman interviewed a woman the first day of the gathering. I didn't get the whole story. All I heard that she was born in 1943, and she has never known her mother or father. At that point I remembered that my mother gave birth to a sixth child. It was July, after she had lost her first two children. A son of 19, which was killed on his 19th birthday, and a daughter which were twins, she was 17.

That's OK.

That child which we all of us think of children with such great joy, such great expectations, we're expecting now as a mother knowing what a child means. For such an unwanted child, my father had gone to look for a place for us where to stay somewhere in the woods. I was 10. My oldest brother who was 17 and my other brother who was 13, helped my mother deliver the baby.

Afterwards, we went to the woods with the baby where my father was there. I remember it was a beautiful child, with all the hunger and dirt, and the child just thrived, just like in spite of everything else, it kept on thriving.

By September, they came with tanks and planes going to invade, an army. At that time, they killed my father and my other brother. I was lost for three days. And some peasant people found me. They knew my parents. I told them who I was. They said to me, just go to the Germans and give yourself up. Your father is dead in the woods. Your brother was dead. See, it was a small town. Everybody knew everybody.

I walked toward the part of the woods that I knew where we were hiding. I saw my brother. I knew it was him. He had a patch on his knee on his pants. Black birds, flying over.

OK.

Funny part, I'm not even telling you that story. I want to tell you about that baby.

It's OK. They're all interrelated.

And then I went just in the fields. They were all dead in the fields. And I found my father.

They had been shot?

They'd been shot. They'd been shot.

For no reason?

For Jews.

For being Jewish? They weren't accused of false crimes or anything?

No, just Jews.

Just been shot. I was very, very-- I tried to give you my emotions, my feelings. I kept saying, if I only find one Jew, I'm going back and pleading they should take me.

Why did I want to live that much?

I can never understand that feeling. I never-- I didn't think my mother was alive. I didn't think anybody was alive. I just felt like I was all alone in that world.

Being 10 years old is very young to be lost and not know where people are.

But that was not something that happened overnight. We were conditioned, when we reached that point of our life. It wasn't something we were sitting in our home and eating good dinner, and somebody just came in and did these things. It was just a condition. Yet, there was such a will to live. I will never understand the will of a 10-year-old child to live. The minute they would shoot, I would run. My mother would say to me, where are you running? I would just run.

I found my mother and my brother two days later with the baby. When everybody ran away, scattered in the woods, she just gave the baby the breast. And she survived with the baby. A few days later, my brother showed up. He showed up. He had run away too and he came back.

The peasants buried all these people in a mass grave in the woods. There were over 800 people were killed. We had nowhere to stay at that point. We went back to town. It was the Eve of Yom Kippur.

We took that baby, my brother and I, and written a note, there was a child born to a Christian girl that had no husband. And she can't take care of it. And would they please take care of that baby? We left it at the nunnery, on the step of a nunnery. And we were hiding in the woods to see if they'd take it. We rang, we knocked at the door, and we just run away. And we were waiting.

They picked up the baby. They took it in. And the baby had a very good chance to survive. But they didn't know how to take care of it, and it died.

How do you know that?

She told us later.

The nun.

The nun came to us later and told us that she knew it was our child, my mother's child. And she reported it to the police, because they have to report it, not as a Jewish child, but the letter they received. And they were taking care of it. You know what happened? We never want that baby. We never, never wanted it. It was so unimportant. There was such devastation. We were reduced to such animal there.

How could my mother mourn that baby when she lost a son of 19, another son, a twins of 17? And what was there to mourn? And all these years, I hardly ever think of that baby. But here-- a baby without a name. I don't know why. But that woman brought it.

All of a sudden, I saw in that woman, that 43-year-old child, that would have been today.

I'm sure that's what brought it back.

She would born at the same time.

I really wanted to tell you only about the child. I just want to talk about my mother now. Like all of us, we very rarely appreciate the wisdom of our mothers or the generosity, or anything else, but especially the wisdom.

She's thankful she's still alive. She's 83 years old. She's a beautiful woman in spirit, and in everywhere else. And she's not only been a grandmother to her four grandchildren, but to countless other people who call her grandmother.

Friends of mine that never had grandparents, niece's children, nephew's children, and she's really a grandmother to many of them. In 1967, I accompanied her to Hamburg to a trial for a German that killed my brother, my eldest brother. He killed him in June of 1943.

And perchance they were taking testimony in Canada on some SS from a nearby town. And that man that gave testimony for the other German mentioned that he knew about the German that killed my brother. And he said his name was Engel. And the district attorney, whoever he was, looked more into it, and they found him having a job in Hamburg, working there. But nothing happened.

They arrested him, and they brought him to trial. And my mother was the witness. At that trial, some other people came from Canada, from New York. I think a gentleman came from Israel to testify.

At that point, I really saw the strength of my mother. The German paper very eloquently described the beautiful lady with the gray hair, and the murderer picked up the pocketbook that she dropped by accident on the floor.

The trial lasted for quite a while. We just came to Hamburg for the few days that she and the other witnesses had to give testimony. He went free on a technicality. The statute of limitation, they did not find a murder first degree, because they didn't find he planned the murder. He found that the murder was occurring. It wasn't a premeditated murder, supposedly.

And the lawyer that defended him happened to have been a man, a German man that was in New York for a while. He came over and spoke to me. That he feels very strongly that he had to defend. He says, you know the American justice that one has to have a lawyer to defend.

And maybe I was wrong. I really don't know. I really could not-- I did not feel they were his peers that were on the jury. And I really couldn't feel that they would find him guilty.

Anyway, I really felt the strength of my mother then, and the poise, the strength. I don't think I could have that strength.

But you did. You survived.

No, I did not. When I walked into that room and I saw him, I was sick all over. I could hardly make it to the bathroom.

But you went.

I remembered that big German that was 10 feet tall, with those big boots, with that stick in his hand, with the German dog, walking into that house, looking. My father played the violin, looking at-- it was pretty early. When my brother got killed, it was already judenfrei. But I remember coming in before into the house, seeing the arrogance of him. I'm talking about the very beginning, the [NON-ENGLISH] Jude. You know, what are you doing playing a violin? Something like that.

I cannot tell you how tall he looked to me. I walk in, and there's a man maybe, 5' 6". I cannot begin to-- as sick as I was, she didn't blink an eye, my mother.

It was something she had to do.

She did not blink an eye. She went through three days of testimony. She did not break down once.

She sounds terrific.

She is. She really is. I tell you terrific she is, her son-in-law lives with her for 26 years.

She lives with you?

Yes.

She's got to be special.

She really is a very special person. She is the aunt of many people. Aunt is in Polish, [NON-ENGLISH]. There are numerous, numerous people that don't call her by anything else but mamma or [NON-ENGLISH].

That's terrific. Tell me about the house that she made for you when you were growing up. What do you remember?

What I remember, I remember my father being very generous.

What was we?

Had a bakery. We had a bakery. And we had men working for the bakery. And he used to sell the bread on the market. A grandmother lived with us. So it was to me a continuation of a three-generation household. It was nothing new that my children experienced, a three-generation house.

I regret being the youngest, well I was the youngest child for a long time, until the baby was born. There was not better educated in the-- that I was not better educated in the image of a Jewish person.

I really was too young, like my older sisters and brothers went to Hebrew school, to cheder. I did not have a chance to be educated in the Jewish things, to have a better image of myself as a Jew.

Your life fell apart at an early age.

A very early age. I really was brought up with a feeling that a Jew is nothing to be proud of, a Jew is something to be ashamed of, a Jew is nothing but being called names. It wasn't until-- It wasn't until I came to Germany and went to Hebrew school that I started to study Jewish history and started to learn that my pride in Judaism developed, and I feel very regretful. That even in the hiding place that I was neglected in that respect, that there was a certain way while they were still alive, I was not being taught.

I guess they didn't feel the importance of that time.

Survival was the most important.

Important thing. But I remember having such a low image of being a Jew. And when I read, in the Warsaw ghetto, no matter how the devastation was, they still went on with as little schooling as there was, or in the house tutoring. While you were still alive, you needed that nourishment. I definitely felt that I needed that nourishment.

And have you given it to your children?

Yes. Yes. I really felt very important about it. I really felt somehow I don't remember the older children. I remember going to bed and talking Hebrew between themselves, discussing poems and other things. And I just felt I was being so neglected about it.

It was true that when I started schooling, the war broke out in 1939, when I had to go to first grade. And that was under the Russian occupation, which there were no religious affiliated schools at that time. That might be a result of that.

We were not basically religious people at home. One thing had nothing to do with the other. The children did go to Hebrew school, or to religious schooling. But we were basically not very Orthodox people. We kept a kosher home. And we observed certain things, but not what you would call the standard Orthodox home.

My son suggested to me I should make a tape for the war years. And have it typed out. He'll type it out for me and put it away in the safe for simple reason that my mother and I were disputing certain dates and certain things.

You know what?

That's so unimportant.

What? They're so unimportant.

The dates are not the most important thing. The feeling and the experience is what's important. It shouldn't be lost. My cousin and I are here. And like everybody else, everybody's walking around looking at everybody's tag, what place he came.

And we came across a woman. She came from a town not far from our town. And she asked, did she know a certain man. Would you happen to be married her aunt during the war. She said, he was my first cousin.

And she did tell us he survived the war. And the peasants killed him after the war. They hacked him to death. And that brought me back to a story. Her aunt was from our hometown too. And I asked her if she was still alive. And she said she passed away last year.

And I remember it was January 14th. It's Ukrainian New Year's Eve. We were hidden about 10 people in a bunker. And they started to search this basement. And they were looking for hollow places, where the box would hide the bunker. I don't know whether you heard about that. Well, there would be a box with soil. And you would just bring it down, the box and that would cover up the hole that we were hiding.

And they were knocking with a piece of wood till they found a hollow place And they found us. While they went for the police to get the police, we escaped. It was January. It was snow and ice and cold. And my mother couldn't walk. And we tied ourselves up with ropes, and were pulling each other. And we went back to the woods to look for the bunker that we left in September when we left with the baby.

My brother opened the bunker. He thought he saw a bunker with dead people. It happened to be that the woman that I met, her cousin, it was her cousin that was dead. It was such a devastated night. I was sitting on the ground. And I turned to my uncle and I said, I'm just not going anywhere anymore. If they want, they can kill me. They can do anything they want to me. I will absolutely not move from this place.

By that time, it was maybe 4 o'clock in the morning. We had walked a whole night to look for a place. There was just absolutely nowhere to go. I remember he walked over to me and he slapped me in the face. And he said, you just pick yourself up and you walk.

Do you know, that was the only time I didn't want to live? It was about the only time I didn't want to live. Otherwise, there was such a tremendous urge of living that I cannot even understand it today. It must have been 1943.

It was before the first pogrom. Jews were just taken to working camps. We still lived in our home. We were hungry, that was for sure. My aunt, my aunt and her two children, came from another town. Their town was destroyed as soon as the Germans came. My uncle and his daughter lived with us too. That made five. We were a family of eight with our grandmother.

In 1939, when the Russians came, they had already confiscated my father's business. This would be going back to '41, which we had to scrape a living. Food was scarce. But life went on pretty well.

I remember looking out through the window. And they took the shochet. I think he was a distant relative of ours. Anyway, he was related to my step grandmother in one way or another. And the SS man was hairy. And he had his wife and two children on vacation. And we lived across a square. And he was teaching his both children how to beat up a Jew. They must have been 10, 12, no more.

These children had their summer holidays.

That's entertainment.

That was entertainment. That was entertainment.

And it was the shochet that they were using as an example?

I just somehow, that Jew, that little Jew with that beard, and those little children at the age of what I whatever I was then, it was such a shock to me that he used those two children to beat. He did not even beat. He was giving the-- what do you call-- not a stick. It was like from rope made. He was using it to beat them up. He was giving it to the children that they should beat them up.

I don't think after that really anything else surprised me very much.

Going back to the January of 1943, or January 1944, in April 6, we were liberated. I really must think it must have lasted 10 years. It couldn't have been three months. It could never have been three months. We were after that every day hiding in a different hole, in a different attic, in a different cellar.

Going up, begging a piece of bread. My mother would go with my brother for bread, and they would leave me with a rope and a knife. The knife was in case I remained alone, I should be able to dig up a potato or something from the ground. And the rope I should be able to get up on the attic to hide. And that's how she had my brother with a knife and a rope, and she had a knife and rope. She always told us never leave that. Always take this with you.

Every night, we would go out to beg somebody for a piece of bread. Every night we came back, another somebody else got killed.

[AUDIO OUT]

My father used to have a friend, a Christian man. He was assistant burgermeister, which is like a mayor of the town. And from my earliest childhood, I remember my mother would bake a Christmas cake for them, with little pink and green and yellow candy sprinkled all around it. I remember one year she wasn't feeling very well. She had a problem with her leg. But she went down from bed and baked that cake and gave it to them. And we were very friendly with them, holidays, Christmas.

And during the war, my uncle had given me a piece of cloth, maybe two or three yards cloth to make a coat for hiding. And after a month of not having any food and we really saw the danger of going out every night somewhere else to beg for a piece of bread, we really decided maybe we'll go to him. Maybe he will hide us. We saw the war was nearing, and was close to the end. And we were just going to get killed.

At that point, even Christians were not allowed to be in the street anymore at night. We were just going to get shot for being out. And we came to his house. We were hiding in his shed. In the morning he came in, and when he saw us he kept on yelling. Get out of my shed! Get out of my shed! I don't want to get killed with you! Get out of my shed! His daughter-in-law came in and she said to my mother, don't you go out of that shed. She says, if he wants to let him bring the Germans let him kill you in his backyard.

Well, my mother told him, just what she said. You want to, you can bring the Gestapo. If you want, they should kill us in your house in your yard, it's all right with me. I'm not going anywhere. At that point, he really wasn't the type of a person that wanted to do that. He might not have wanted to hide us, but he really did not want us to be killed, especially in his own home.

And he let us stay that day. And at night, he just made us go again. And it was all over the same thing. We were just like rats, not were we rats, but we were living with rats. We were bringing water up from the cellar. We were fishing out the rats and throwing them out and drinking that water. And just a day before we were liberated my mother went to another Christian woman that her husband worked for us at one time. He was a baker. She came in there.

They were a full house with Germans. But the Germans really could not tell whether we were Jews, unless the Christians were informing on us. They really never knew that we were Jews. She walked in. The Germans didn't say anything. As long as the woman introduced us as another neighbor, she sat down she gave her a glass of tea. She gave her some bread. And they were talking.

Meanwhile, they were detained because she could not give her any food to take along, because she was afraid of the Germans. So she was waiting they should leave. My brother was with her. I remained in the attic by myself.

In the attic?

Yeah.

Whose attic?

Well, we lived in a small town. That there was where most of the houses belonged to Jewish people. The town was deserted. The doors, windows, were all ripped-- the houses looked nothing but like skeletons. And we just would go from one attic to the other. We were discovered in one attic, we would run away to another attic. We would go to cellars. At this point, we were experienced. We knew where bunkers were, where cellars were, where hiding places were. We only went to an attic which had holes throughout the blocks, that if somebody came one end we could run away to the other end.

And when I saw about 11:00 12 o'clock, my mother, my brother didn't show up. I took that rope and went down that attic. And went in town to look for her in the streets. And I was being shot at that point, not for being a Jew anymore. Nobody was allowed to be in the street at that hour. I really must say I walked into a Christian house where my mother used to go there sometimes for bread. And I told her the story that my mother and my brother have not returned.

And he said to me, I don't want to know where you're hiding because if you go and be discovered, I don't want you to think that I told anybody. But go back and look for your mother. And if she's not there, you come back and I'll hide you.

My mother came back. And she said the woman, and the man that the bakers that worked for us, told us we should go to their house and they will hide us. She took us in. It was two or three days before we were liberated.

I had my first bath in eight months. She took my hair over a towel and she was combing the lice. They the white towel was black. She took all my clothes and burned them.

She was a heavy set woman. She gave me her robe. She put me in bed next to her, because her husband was in hiding. He didn't want to be drafted. She took the next day, my mother. She brought her up. And she took her bath. And we were infested with lice.

Three days later, we looked out through the window. And the Russians were walking, without a shot.

You know that I walked for weeks in the streets. I would get up early in the morning, and just walk the streets. I couldn't be tied down to the house. Do you know for years, there my mother worked. I would take my lunch and eat it outside in the street.

Where did you go after you were liberated?

We remained in our home town for a year with the Russians.

Were you able to go back to your house?

No. We didn't want to go back to our house. We didn't want to go back to our house. We stayed in somebody's house right near the woman that was hiding us the last few days. The Russians were with us a week. They were circled around. The Germans were circled around and they broke right through.

And we were occupied again a whole week by the Germans. Six more Jews got killed.

And then when did you come to the United States?

We went from our hometown. We were legally, we were allowed to leave for the part of Poland, the remained Poland. Because we were not Poland anymore. We became the Republic of the Ukraine, which is Russia. We went to Poland.

In Poland, we were in Reichenbach. We went to the border of the German, in Szczecin, and we crossed the border. They smuggled the border to the American zone of Berlin. From there, we traveled by train for weeks till we got to Munich.

Everybody describes the DP camps as terrible. I don't remember them as terrible. I was so happy there. Maybe I was a child, no responsibility of the future. But I was free, and I went to school, and I was happy. And I really remembered them as very happy years. I remember reading a book by a Schwartz, describing the terrible conditions of the camp. But I really didn't think they were terrible.

I remember having an army uniform. My mother dyed it navy or black, whatever was that green. The Eisner jacket, and that's all I wore with a pair of sneakers. I didn't need dresses. I didn't need shoes. I was happy within myself. And I never remembered them as bad years.

How long were you there for?

I was from 1946 till 1949. I don't remember them as bad years. I really don't.

What did your mother do during that time?

My mother worked for the-- it was a branch of the army. I think they were making uniforms in camp, which the Joint Distribution were paying them a salary. I went to school. My brother went to Munich, to ORT school. So he learned a trade.

And I really don't think the enormity of the war hit me till later years. It really didn't. It really didn't. I remember being able to read books and see movies. I can't today. I don't think they-- we were so busy being alive, I know it's hard for you to understand. But it was I really don't know whether was I-- possibly older people tell differently. Surviving with one parent even gave one a lot of strength. I never realized it until years later, when some of my friends did not survive with anybody.

The lack of somebody, of more of loving support. I really see it, I really wonder whether any studies were done on that. Because I really feel in my own adjustment having my mother surviving with one parent was in my brother's life and in my life a very good adjustment of whatever we went through.

But I guess everybody adjusted things in different ways. I think it was a good-- feel better about it than I thought I would.

Good.

Yeah. All right, thank you very much.