

--1982. What's your name?

Rachel Lefkovits.

Could you please spell that, Rachel?

R-A-C-H-E-L L-E-F-K-O-V-I-T-S.

And where were you born?

Czechoslovakia what city or village?

Dolha.

We want to discuss at the time you were taken into captivity. Do you remember what events-- the events leading up to that?

Yes. I remember being in-- I was a young girl. And it started out with taking away our rights for-- my father had business. He couldn't continue because it was taken away. His permit was taken away.

What kind of a business did he have? He had a-- he was a glazier. They were most of the walls of the people in town, they were maybe two Jewish men were left with permits out of all the Jews. And whatever-- if you did any business before you didn't have permits, you had to do things on the side, like black market.

I had a sister that her husband was in a working camp. He was not allowed to be in the army. So they took him for working camp. She had three children. So she had to make a living. She was selling yard goods. And they found out that she was doing this. They took her away from the three children, just came one day, and just took her away, not caring what happens to those children. They put her into jail.

And many times, my brothers were selling. We were baking goods and selling them, doing all kinds of these little things to make a living, a decent living. And whatever you did, you were not allowed to do it.

They just-- I remember one night, the-- they were-- well, the police, I believe gendarmeries, they were called, came to take in my brother for that reason that he was not allowed to sell these things. But these were baked by a different-- we did not bake these certain cookies. It was baked by this woman that also had to make a living.

Her husband was in a camp. And they wanted to know who made-- who did these cookies-- did this. And my brother made up his mind, he said, I will not tell them who did those-- and bake those cookies, if they caught me, they'd kill me. I remember my mother fainting.

And this went on and on. Then it started out with the laws, not being able to use the trains. Not that the-- we didn't have trains, we had these buses or any-- and curfews, wearing the yellow bands, and being restricted to using canes. And it was in-- we were taken away in 1944.

What-- how-- did people come to the house?

To take us away? To give you a little detail of this-- we were just about the last ones of taking away. We didn't know what was going on in the neighboring village, which was just-- we used to walk there. But we didn't know what was going on there. And they were taken away already two days before us. This happened to be on a Friday.

My father was finished with his work, was getting ready for the Sabbath. And we had a Gentile friend with a very, very big entrance in there. My parents had [? rich ?] [? blur-- ?] was Jewish, but we had a lot of Gentile friends that were big antisemites.

But my parents-- I'm talking about my parents, and I know that they're not the only ones that were human. And they were people. Not that because you are a Gentile, you are not a person that they-- that you can't be a friend with a Gentile and that you can't have Gentile friends.

This-- he was a Hungarian priest. He came over to our house that Friday afternoon, late in the afternoon, and he told us-- he told-- my father was not home because he was getting ready for the Sabbath, went to the bath. And telling my mother that they will take us away tomorrow morning, which is on Sabbath morning, and that we should try to hide our valuables.

And we did that, but we still did not believe that it will happen. We did give away our silvers that we had and other valuables to our neighbors, and let the rest of the people know what's going to happen because we were not supposed to know that this is going to happen. But I'm just-- I've always wondered why we did not believe that this is going to happen.

We knew that things are-- where they're taking people away from their towns. And here, we were sitting and waiting for it, just come and get me. And came Saturday morning, they woke us up.

How many of them were there?

There was-- there were a few of them. And told you, I mean, there were quite a few of them in our neighborhood. There would have been about four or five. Get dressed and come with us.

Was the whole family at home at the time?

No. Well, I'm told my brothers were in a working camp. And afterwards, my brother-- two of my brothers, and I, and my parents. My sister was in-- with a different town. She was already in a home with the children. She was back from prison. And OK. Just stop for one second.

You were saying, it was-- that this happened on the Sabbath.

Right, on the Sabbath morning, when we are. And it was time to get ready to go to temple. And then we are going to the temple, they took us in through this place. We went, they said we would take a few of your belongings. We did just as they told us.

Did they tell you where you were going?

No, no, just come with us. That's it. You have to come with us-- no reason, no nothing. No-- I'll tell you, you didn't even ask anymore that where you're going or what you're doing. There was so much-- so many restrictions that you felt that this is it, that you were going to shuls, the temples being burned and destroyed. And they took us into this-- gathered us together with all-- the whole village, gathered us.

All the other Jews in the village?

All the other Jews. We had to walk there-- all our neighbors, the Gentile neighbors out on the streets, just watching with smiles on their faces, our the best friends, supposedly, good neighbors that we thought. And we even had a next-door neighbor that had volunteered to do the searching.

We were all searched if we had anything on us that we were not supposed to have. And got us all set in from then on, we knew that they were taking us away to-- we went first to a camp, where they gathered us together, which was old barracks house-- from different towns. From there, they took us to Auschwitz.

Did they take you on train cars?

Well, they took us on train cars to Auschwitz. We were in those trains last night at the convention. They-- oh, I-- we were in-- there was this one particular speaker asking about trains. To some people, trains mean pleasure trip, or vacation, or sightseeing, or event. To me, a train doesn't have a happy meaning. In fact, I-- every time I think of a train, that's what comes into my mind first, of a train, where you were packed. I'm sure that you know about what happened on these trains.

That's right.

Right, packed like cattle, the no bathrooms. I don't even know how many days it took us to get there. You lost track of days took Auschwitz from.

Did the people have anything with them on the trains? Were you able to bring any belongings with you?

Yes, we had some belongings. We did have some-- I remember, my mother for-- we were getting ready to wear this. We were putting-- we were toasting bread for quite a few-- quite a bit of bread in case something happens, we should have something with us. And a lot of people have that. And you did take food with you.

So you all expected that you would be moving from that previous-- what was the name of that again?

Right, barracks house over there. But we didn't know where they are taking us. We didn't know what they will do with us.

Did they say anything about where you would be going?

Going to work, to working camp, before they took us to Auschwitz.

What did people talk about on the trains?

There, it's a very funny thing that people-- I feel we were already starting. At that point, you could become so inhumane. It's like you lead-- you walk into it like if you would know exactly. There's no-- you just-- you are not a human being anymore. This is your life. And you're going to-- they were not-- we were in so much, it was no reason.

What could we talk at that time? You were in so much standing that people wouldn't go. And you would say that there was no place to sit, no place to stand, and no place to lay down, sick people there. When-- by the time we got to Auschwitz, there were a lot of dead people in these trains. There were children crying. You have to if you were man and women together. You had to use bathrooms.

So people were talking?

Right. Well, we were talking, and we were pushing, and crying. And we knew that we are going to work in camp. We'll be-- nobody told us that we're going to be separated, that there's going to be a lot of like in the right side, which I'll tell you what that means, left or right. It was left meant to the gas chamber. And right meant going to be working.

As I said, by the time I got-- we got there, the water-- they couldn't move. There were tiny windows, just a couple of them in these trains. You couldn't look up. You couldn't even see where you're going, as if we would have known where it is. But we got there flowers. There were flowers outside. Was like you thought you're coming to a beautiful fine event when we got out.

There were these Germans, plenty of them, hordes of them, and music playing. We thought we arrived to a beautiful place, life would be-- after being blocked up, we were happy that we-- train stopped already. And soon as we got off the trains, we-- they started-- you go to the right, you go to the left.

What did just-- people think that was for?

We were told that they are going to the point-- I had a younger brother. And my mother was only-- my mother and father with me, they were only 50. My father was 50, my mother was 49 years old.

And I had a brother, who was the youngest, who was about 17. But being with the youngest, my mother took him by her hand. And he's going with her So he went with the left-- to the left with her. So children-- mothers with children did not go to work. They said, they are going to be taking care of the children.

And we are going to work. And that, we were told there that we are going to see then once a week. When I was told that, I thought, how can I exist without them? How can I go? How can I not see them for a whole week? This is that-- was finished. They took them on one side, on some other side, and started watching us.

They took everything that we had right there away from us. We are going to get different clothing. And we are going to get everything new, different. Took us in to shower. Had to shave us from top to bottom, and no hair-- in fact, this was very, very interesting.

Gave us clothing right then and there, the first day, first-- my first experience of being it was when I got a pair of these socks. One was different from the other. And I wanted to show it to them, that I got the wrong socks. Right then and there, I got a hit in the head and to this.

After that, we got dressed. We didn't know what's happening with the left side, my mother and father and the rest of the family. Took us into our barracks. We got our barracks as soon as we walked in. They were called the kapos, the ones that took care, they were in charge of us.

They showed us right away, [? the village. ] And we didn't believe it. They said, you see this smoke there? That's your family right in there. We didn't believe it then. But we believed it very soon after. And I would say, the next day because there were already piles of skeletons, which we had to bury ourselves. And in those piles, I couldn't look for my-- because they couldn't have been young skeletons like that, those were the people, sick people. And we saw that smoke going on, and on, and on.

Well, I stayed there a couple of months in Auschwitz. I was Birkenau. This was called the section that I was in, was Birkenau. We got numbered. I don't have the number. It was a couple months after I was there, we-- they needed 2,000 people to build over a factory. I was either an oil factory or a petroleum factory that was bombed before.

So from my group that we took, they needed these 2,000 people. I was one of them. And I never got a number because I knew that much, that if you get the number at that point, and later on going, you were able to get out of there. But if you were numbered instantly-- you had a better chance to get out of Auschwitz without a number.

I was picked to be the one also between those two guys to go to get out of Auschwitz to rebuild this factory. And they put us-- after they picked us out, they put us in a dark room, 2,000 of us, without, again, there [INAUDIBLE]-- without-- we had a big barrel in the middle of the room that we were using for a toilet in the room.

Was this is at the factory?

No. This was a week out.

Or was it--

Before we got there, before-- after they picked us out to leave. We were--

You were talking about the room.

Right. This German SS woman walks into this room where we were gathered to leave. And got to the door. They came in and started screaming, if there wont be total silence, there will not be left one of us in seconds. They were by us 2,000 people don't mean anything. Now, with 2,000 people, even the breathing alone-- to breathe, there is a lot of noise in one

room

And this is-- these are the kinds of SS people that we were exposed to. These are just very, very-- this was no special remark to ask anymore, this kind of remark. We kind of-- to get to this factory, which was in Poland, it was [INAUDIBLE].

Where?

Germany, Gelsenkirchen. For two months we built it and worked day and night. Were working there all bricks, with one piece of that bread, plain, bowl of soup once a day, in the evening after we got back from our work. We rebuilt it in two months. As soon as the day was rebuilt, we were coming home from work, and just got in to the barracks, and sirens started going on, signals and warnings.

And even though it was yet-- didn't know quite the purpose what was happening. We were never told, anyway. And we yet were not to look at them. And it took seconds, and there is a big explosion. We got scared that was in the barracks, everybody was so close by that, the planes and the fire, that we started running down for the barracks. And somehow, the guards caught [INAUDIBLE] the wire, electric curves around it.

It was an electrified fence.

Electrified fence. Somehow, that was open. Some places opened up. And we would have built there a wall. If there wasn't [INAUDIBLE], it was that way. We wouldn't know half where to run. We ran out of our barracks and started running to the field next to our barracks.

And they did the bombing over that. When they saw that so many people are running, we clearly didn't look like-- we looked like men with no hair. They turned around and dropped 2,000. 2000 were left that one night. And then--

You said, of the 2,000, 200 were left. Is that the people who got out through the fence, or those who stayed, or?

They were-- [AUDIO OUT]

They started. They thought they were German soldiers running around.

So the Allied planes were bombing and the bombs hit.

Hit us. And they would just fly-- I really, I still don't know how I stayed alive. I didn't think-- I had a few splinters that the-- that hit me. They're flying left and right. But I was surrounded with dead people, with people with legs missing, people that their faces were torn apart. One of my girlfriends, she was a very, very neat person.

She used to come only in her one dress. If we wanted our dresses washed, we had to do it at night and use the blanket to wrap around. And many times, I put on her red dress in the morning to go to work. And my-- that dress didn't have a time to be washed and dry out. This person used to wash my dress very often. And she was right in front of me.

And I looked at her, she had no face. And she saw me. And she says, hey, look, what happened to my dress? She said, it's all bloody. She didn't see her face. I saw it. There were people screaming and all around me that we-- laying, standing, no arms, no-- half of them. Some people-- they were just torn apart.

What happened to the injured? Was there anybody-- was there any kind of medical treatment there?

Well, they-- after-- this was-- this happened within seconds. All this happened within seconds all night. This was already in the evening. All night, we were dragging, bringing in people from the field to the barracks. And it was one that definitely, it really has-- I don't like to think of it.

But I do think back on it because it was really-- [INAUDIBLE] awful, very terrible evening for me, one of the terrible

happenings. They were lined up. There were ambulances that came afterwards. There were people laying and crying, kill me. Why don't you kill me? Why don't you finish me?

With great agony, with great-- either they were still alive, or they died after, or they were already-- and then there were 1,800 people dead-- 1,800 were dead. From the 200 that remained alive, many of them have part of their bodies missing or plastic surgeries by now for their faces.

This girl, by the way, is alive. And she-- I had met her. And she is just-- I assume and I feel that she would rather not be alive with her walks, the way she walks.

So they-- by the morning, by the time morning came, they started calling out-- we didn't have names, we had only numbers. We were numbered. They started calling out numbers around the-- at this point, even some [INAUDIBLE] some Germans. Why it [INAUDIBLE] me nationality, I really-- I'm not a prejudiced person. I wasn't brought up to be a prejudiced person, it just-- there were some very painful-- that said, there were some Germans there every time they called out a number.

Oh, this one is not also. This one also-- it was certain numbers they moved more because they knew who the individual was because they were-- how were we-- they were the-- we-- they were our guards. And being for a couple of months together, they get to know certain people. We were left of 2,000 200.

Had the Germans fled during the bombing?

They had bunkers. Nothing happened to them. They, as soon as they saw what happened, their-- all barracks were bombed. Ours weren't. They knew exactly which barracks are theirs. Of course, the-- there wasn't one German that was affected.

What happened to the 200 of you that were-- was the petroleum factory also bombed?

The petroleum factory was bombed. That was the bomb--

That's what I mean. That was the target.

--that's what they aimed. But that was the target, right. Right. We couldn't stay longer there anymore. There was nothing, no [INAUDIBLE], no reason for us to stay at the factory. They did not want us to be there again, that this was bombed this time.

From there, we were taken to a ammunition factory to work. And there, we worked shifts one week, day shifts and one week, night shifts. And we worked there until seven weeks before the war ended.

What happened at that time, the seven weeks before?

In the seven weeks before, we-- the war ended, we were in the Czech Sudeten. That time, the Germans were running away every time there, a city would be-- or a city would be-- they didn't want to be captured. They didn't want us to be captured.

They were retreating.

They were retreating. We were running away. We were walking for the rest of the seven weeks. We were walking from morning till night, slept in the woods, slept in-- if we stopped-- used to get up in the morning with frost on top of us.

Were this-- what did you all eat? We were getting one potato a day, basically. We had a couple of days before we were liberated, when a girl from our town decided to leave and [INAUDIBLE] in that town that we were staying. And she happened to walk into these people that reported her.

How-- did she sneak out?

She snuck out, just knowing that it's dangerous. But when you are-- and she happened to be the type of a person that was always-- couldn't take the hunger. This was just a couple of days before the war ended. The most beautiful girl-- she was the beauty of the town. She had sisters. Her sisters are-- she has a couple sisters that are alive.

But at the point they brought her back to the place where we were staying, followed by quite a few SS men, one on a motorbicycle. Getting off, we were gathered. We were supposed to line up. They lined us up before--

Before they brought her back?

--they brought her back. And all of a sudden, we see-- well, especially, me, I knew who it was. They-- this SS man jumps off his motorcycle, takes out his gun, and without any thinking or explanation shoots her right in the head. She was wearing a hat. And she-- we had to bury her afterwards.

He said, this is what happens to people that do what she did-- leave the group. I myself-- she couldn't have faced it. She was a [INAUDIBLE] person, little bit nasty. Take anymore, but I fasted every Thursday in camp, not because I was not hungry. I just fasted for hoping that it will help bring my family, that one day I will be back with my family.

It's a spiritual fast.

It's a-- right. So then I was, in a way, luckier that I was able to control my hunger. I can't fast now. It goes from one compared to the other, I already worry how I'm going to do it. And I don't know how I was able to do it then. But we walked for seven weeks from morning till night. And sometimes, we were late into the night with no shoes, no strength anymore there.

In those seven weeks, many, many times, I was ready to give up. I just couldn't walk anymore because my feet were already-- they just-- I couldn't do it. And they didn't want to leave-- we didn't want to leave each other behind. Because right in front, as we were walking, if you couldn't keep with the rest, with the group, they just right there, on the spot shot you or didn't even wait.

We saw half-dead people on the-- in the gutters. If you can't do it, they just shot you down or-- that girl was still hot when we buried her. And I knew, if I stay-- if I don't go on, what will happen with me. But it got to the point where even where it's impossible to do it.

The night we got liberated, I told-- I didn't go out with that one day group, to stand in line for it anymore. I didn't-- I couldn't-- I just couldn't stand. I couldn't walk anymore. I couldn't cope. I just told-- I had a group of people from my town. I told them, I'm not going. I just can't go.

They were-- I was not the only one. They were wrapping my feet with rags. And they said, you are coming. We're not leaving you behind. You're coming. And I knew why they were saying it. They're not just not could go any further. This is it, and that's-- can't be any other way. We were that evening in May, on a farm.

And they always closed the door. But then I locked it. And in the morning, let us out, opened up the door. And that morning, we saw already through the cracks that it's already morning, getting-- it's time to-- for them to open up the door. And nobody's there to open up the doors. As time went on, we started to have to use the bathroom, which there was no bathroom, but we had to use one.

And we starting knocking, banging. There was no-- nothing there. And a couple minutes later, after we already-- soon after, the doors open up and we hear the screaming, you are free. The war is over. This, you can not describe what happened in there. In fact, it's very hard to even remember.

Who opened the door of the barn?

This was-- we were liberated by the Russians, the Russian soldiers. They were-- we would have been much better off if we were liberated by the Americans. They were so very, very many of us that we were dying after the liberation the way they fed us.

The way they fed you?

The way they fed us. They just brought it out right there in front of us and cooked it and started feeding us with heavy meals. And this time, the meals, we were-- [INAUDIBLE]. And it would be so we were skin and bone by that time.

Of course, me, I was only in one concentration camp. This was already the end of-- from 1944 through the end of the war in 1945. And already, we were skin and bone. So people that started right away eating, watching what they're eating, of course, they didn't make it. They didn't make it.

There were-- there were very many announcements to warning people to be careful what they feed us with. But certain times, they started bringing in all these foods and all these hoards of foods, trucks good enough for-- the majority attacked it. And we were free.

Did you believe it when you-- when they first opened the barn doors? Did people believe it?

Yes. We believed it because there were no SS there to torture us. And they, of-- this was the Czech Sudeten, they fled. They fled, and we didn't see any more of them.

I don't know. I guess they were just in the concentration camp. But were there any kapos on the walk with you all, kapos?

Oh, yes. What happened to them after liberation? We were always hoping that they wouldn't be in our hands. If there happened to be one in particular in my group that was a very, very nice person.

And we used to even talk to her this way, that if ever we get out of this, we want her with us. But we never-- after the war was over, we never got-- we came across of these SS set. But that was just like coming across. And they just all escaped, which they knew that-- what was good for them.

Were you sent to a DP camp?

After that?

Mm-hmm.

After that, I right away wanted to go home to look for family. And we started out-- I started out. We-- I had some people from my town who were together. We started out to-- asking around. We were sent to a DP camp, of course, which was in Czechoslovakia first. And we started asking around, just if [INAUDIBLE] looking for-- for your family. I heard about two of my brothers being alive.

The ones that had been in a working camp? One that was in a working camp and one that was in concentration camp-- the brother that's older than me. And one was in a working camp. And then I heard of the third one, third brother that was alive.

One that was in working camp, I heard was already home, waiting for someone to show up. But I was in Hungary at this time, going for-- I heard the third brother was in Hungary in a hospital. And people had-- people have seen him. And then people have spoken to him. So I went to Hungary to look for him. To ask about them.

I came to Budapest and I walked-- I went to every hospital to look for him. I didn't find him. And I was ready to leave Hungary. I found him. He was walking on the street. And we were just-- we went straight to [INAUDIBLE]. He had just gotten out.



That was the hospital I looked at last, he had just gotten out from. And I did not get any-- he was in there. I did not get any information that he was there. And that's how he did not recognize me. We came face to face. And he didn't recognize me because of the way we all-- but I recognized him.

And from then on, we went home. From there, we went home together. By the time we got home, my other two brothers were home, waiting for us. By that time, they heard already that we are alive.

We did go home. I wish I would have never gone home. That was, I think, the terrible, awful thing to see how the house was taken down, used for animals-- cows, horses, found a little baking pin here, a little dish there, pieces of these things, my brother crying in one corner, me crying in the other corner, and both wishing that we would have never come back.

We remained there for a couple of months. My father used to do some business on the side, going, putting in windows. And before they took us, we had some glass left.

And that glass was taken the night they took us away. I-- we heard afterwards. Neighbors of neighbors took it. And they buried it in the ground. And it was very scarce. Glass was very scarce at the time. And one being jealous of the other, they had seen them doing it. And they told us of it. And that's how we-- that glass gave us a part of bread and butter, to have what to live on. We stayed there for a few months also.

How did your neighbors react?

They were not happy. They were not happy to see us. The majority were the people we-- I told you, that we had put some things away. We got everything back from them, these people. But they-- people did not-- were not happy to see us back. They were not happy to-- and by the way, we were always used to work, make a living, do-- if not one way-- can I-- let me just--

OK, sure.

What was I-- where was I at last?

Talking about the neighbors not being--

Oh, the neighbors. No, they were not happy. As I said before, there are exceptions, but very few exceptions. We stayed there. So my three brothers were there. One of my-- I had, as I said, a married sister. She did not come back. But they also had been some place away. And their things--