

1983, interview with Sylvia Malcmacher. Sylvia, would you state your name and spell it for us, please?

Sylvia, and the last name is M-A-L-C-M-A-C-H-E-R.

And your maiden name, could you spell your maiden name?

My maiden name is Zlate, first name. The last name is D-I-S-T-E-L, Distel.

And where-- and where and when were you born?

I was born in Vilna, Poland, on July, 9 1926.

What would you like-- which part of your experience would you like to talk about mostly.

Well, a little bit before the war, a little bit before the war.

OK.

Because this was the happiest I can remember because I was 13 when I finished high school. It was like seven grades in Europe. I don't know how it's here. And after that, it came the black period of my time.

I was the middle of three girls. I had an older sister four years older than me and a younger sister seven years younger than me. And I was the middle one. And Vilna was a very cultural city with Jewish population of over 80,000 Jews, which it meant a big population of Jewish, with Jewish theaters, Jewish schools, and organizations, especially the young people, along all kind of organizations. And then there where they spend, really, their time because there was no television to watch, like here, for the young people.

And we were never bored. We always had groups. And it was very cultural.

My father was a printer. I think that's the word for it. And my mother was just taking care of us. And they were considered, like, middle-- middle class, nice house. I went to a Jewish school. Like here is the Workman's Circle Schule. I don't know if you're familiar with it.

And we had a very nice, rich life-- not rich in the meaning of rich, but in the meaning of together, nice family. And then the black period of my life came in 1941. No-- in 1939, when the Russians-- when the Germans-- I'm sorry-- occupied Poland, by us we were occupied by the Russians because Vilna belonged, like, to Lithuania a long time ago.

And when the Russians came in, the young people didn't feel so bad because schools got opened, the education. They could go for higher education. And we never thought about that it's so terrible. But in 1941, by that time Poland was two years already-- other towns were already occupied by the Germans. We heard at that time that the Germans went into Warsaw, and it's terrible. But nobody thought that they'll come to us and it's going to happen to us. And nobody thought about it.

In 1941, the Germans took over. And then the really-- the bad times Holocaust started. They pushed us in a ghetto. And it wasn't--

How did they do that? They just said, you have to move today, and that's it?

Right.

How much time did they give you?

No time at all. From whole town, the 80,000 Jews-- well, so they couldn't push in everybody because the ghetto-- where

they located the ghetto was, like, in the middle of the town, where most of the Jewish population lived. So in every house, in every little house because it weren't houses like we have here, they pushed in like 10 families. But not everybody could go into the ghetto because it was no room. So it started right away with selections.

Did you know what they were?

Like, from the other street, people who were lucky were told to go to the ghetto. People who weren't lucky, they went right away to Ponary. It was, in Vilna, a place that they took away the people, and we never saw them.

And we were lucky because where we lived, our house was in the ghetto circle. So we stayed in our house with my family. But to our house came maybe 10 more couples-- families. We slept on the floor. And the people who came couldn't take with them nothing, just a bag and--

So you had to share with them?

--and go. The ghetto lasted, in Vilna, till 1943. But in the two years, the people who came to the ghetto, a little percentage were left to be deported to the concentration camp because every few weeks they made more selections and more selections. And it was done by-- they gave you, like, blue-- how you-- tag. Whoever had blue tags, you had to go out of the ghetto. Whoever didn't have those blue tags stayed in the ghetto.

Then the Germans went into the ghetto, took out the people who were left behind, and made rooms for the people who had the blue tags to come back. How did you get those tags? Just by luck. People who got to work, people who worked in the ghetto-- that was the way. So by the end, when the Vilna ghetto was liquidated, there wasn't that much people because in the two years, a lot of people were already deported to concentration camps.

Did you know what was happening to them when they were-- [CROSS TALK]

No. We didn't know nothing. My sister, the older one, was a furrier. When she finished high school, she went and learned the trade to be a furrier. The Germans needed those furriers to do the furs for the soldiers on the-- on the war.

So I was lucky because of her. The furriers they took out, out of the ghetto, and they put in a working place just for that purpose, to work the furs. Because of her, she took the whole family with her. So we were all together till 1944.

In 1944, in that place where we worked, in March the 27th of 1944, the German who was in charge of the whole place came in the morning and announced that all kids up till 16 years old, because they couldn't work, should go across the street-- it was a hospital there-- for examination, if they are healthy.

So my younger sister got all dressed up, and she went across. She never came back. Five minutes later, the Germans came with the [INAUDIBLE] us all, and they took all the kids away. And we never knew that it's going to happen that way because they said they're just going for physical examination. So I lost my sister in March 1944.

In 1944, in May, before the Germans knew that the front is going to-- the Russian front is coming closer to our town, they liquidated the whole place. And then they sent me to the concentration camps with my father, my mother, and my older sister.

Which camp?

[PLACE NAME]

There we-- we're all still together. We didn't stay there long, just maybe a week. From there they sent us to Stutthof. And there where my father was right away separated from us. He was a young man in '44. He was really [INAUDIBLE]. My mother was 44 years old.

He was right away separated from us, from me, my mother, and my older sister. And since we came there, I never saw

him again.

You don't know what happened?

People who were together, afterwards told us that the whole transport of those men were put on a boat and drowned on the way to another place. But they never took them to [? Auschwitz. ?] One survived. And he told us after the war what.

Me and my mother and sister stayed there in Stutthof. Stutthof was not really a working camp. It was like a death camp. But we were so, like my daughter asked me, Mother, how could you go through it and go on with your life? We never thought we'll survive. If we would give ourselves thinking about exactly what happened, what will they do, we never gave it a thought because today here and tomorrow me. We never thought that we'll survive.

So in Stutthof, we were there like a week. And then we were rushed out, outside again to be taken away to other places to work. I was standing there, behind was standing my mother. The hair was shaved already by then. She was 44 years old, but she looked like 80 already.

Oh, because she was--

She-- no hair, they shaved us, the hair. Nobody had hair. So when the Germans came to select for work to other places, they were looking for young, strong people. So right away they put my mother in the other side. Then came my sister. And they asked her how old she is. And she then she was 22. No, 24 she was-- 24. 22 was [? me. ?]

And he looked over, and she was a strong, young girl. The only thing was, she had on her leg a little scar because of no food and no treatment. So she grabbed a little cloth from someplace, and she wrapped around that scar. And when she was standing in line, he saw her and looked at that bandage, like. He didn't ask her what it was underneath. But he right away pushed her away in the same side as my mother because he thought that underneath is something real bad, that she is not strong enough.

And then I came. And he asked me how old I am. And I said, 18. And he looked me over. And he put me on the other side.

Not together.

Not with my mother and my sister. We got then separated. I went in another barrack overnight. And next day, they sent me out, myself, from Stutthof to M¹/₄hldorf to work.

But we were so naive, you know, that when I went to the other place to work, every day when people came, I ran out to look because in my mind I couldn't imagine that I would never see them again. I said, oh, tomorrow, with the next transport they'll come. Every morning I said to myself, tomorrow they'll come. But they never did.

How long-- when did you find out that they-- did you ever find out what happened?

After the war, in M¹/₄hldorf I worked, and I survived by working, washing clothes for the SS.

Were you afraid for yourself all the time?

All the time. But I was always like a good worker because I was afraid. So when I got chosen to wash that clothes, I did it good. And that's why they kept me there. Even we had to wash the clothes by hand. And it was winter, very cold. I had to go out and hang the clothes outside. And the clothes got frozen stiff. And you didn't dry through the day. So in the morning, at night, I had to take them in. And in the morning, again outside, like it to dry outside. It was no dryers.

And that's how I survived there, because I did a good job. So they kept me there to work, and I survived there. And we got liberated by the American Army in May.

What was it like?

We didn't know that--

The camp you were at, was it a death camp, the one you were in?

No. That was a working camp. The men had it very bad. People were working-- walking to work and dying in the baustelle.

Why did men have it worse? Their jobs were harder?

The jobs were harder. In there where I was, it was like the woman worked on the baustelle too. But it was a little bit easier for them than the men. The men were very-- there was no food. And I guess maybe women are stronger to survive hunger.

Did you have special friends who you were with, who you helped and who helped you?

I had a girlfriend from Stutthof, named [PERSONAL NAME], from Vilna too. And she is now in [PLACE NAME]. And we both helped each other.

Did that help you get through?

Yes. More like sisters because there were sisters, and they share-- they shared their portion bread. Because people lived like animals, it wasn't like sisters. Even they shared, they shouldn't have an inch more than the other. But that friend, I didn't share. I saved my bite, she should have it. And she did it for me.

She was sick, I did everything for her, what I could. And we really helped each other that way. Because otherwise--

Is that what most people did, they had one special person that helped them through?

That's what-- yes. Yes. Yes. And the thing is, you never-- as I said, you never thought that you'll ever survive. Nobody-- everybody was so hungry and beaten and--

You very thin? You were very thin.

I was thin-- no food.

And were you sick?

I wasn't that much sick. My friend was very sick. I could stand up a little bit more, but no food, no sleep, no clothes. And before the--

What about-- what about-- what did the women do about menstruation?

They didn't have any.

No?

They didn't have. As soon as we went in the concentration camp, I guess they put something in that little portion of food what they had, a medication. They stopped menstruating.

What was the food like?

We had a little bit of bread, portion. And people got killed by getting it. And by the end of the day, after they came from

the whole day work or whatever you did, they gave us a little bit of like to peel potatoes, the peel not the potatoes. They cooked the peels, like a little bit water. That was the soup.

So people really didn't have even a chance to survive. Those who did survive were only, like, I mean, if you would be survived, so in 1944, before the American Army took over, we didn't know that the end is coming. But the last few days, the Germans started to run away. And something went on in the camps, that the front is coming closer.

But we didn't even think what it's going to be afterwards. We didn't even think. And one morning, the American Army came. And I don't even remember my feelings because then I realize it. Then I realized that I had nobody. I was 18 years old, in '45, 19. I was [INAUDIBLE].

I was 19 years old. No-- nobody in this world because nobody came. I was looking every day. Nobody came. So I didn't even realize the impact when they walked in, that they are free, that they can just go out and go on the streets.

But how were you then? Were you sick or were you--

I was-- I was not that sick. I was not that sick. I could have walked. I was with an uncle all the way through. And he couldn't-- he was in the hospital till the Americans came and afterwards. And we [INAUDIBLE] a lot of people, after they got liberated, died-- after.

Why?

Because-- I'm going to tell you why. They didn't eat no food. And after the people came, the American came, they get some food from them, and they were generous-- fed things. And lots of people died from them, afterwards because all food was too much. A lot of people survived, and afterwards they died.

And my parents, my mother and sister, afterward, when we got liberated, I wanted to go back to Vilna because I still thought, if somebody survived, I'll find them there. I'll go back. So I was already on that truck to go back. After I got liberated, which was in '45.

But then came a whole transport with Vilna people. And they asked me, where are you going? And I said, what do you mean I'm going? I'm going back. My mother and sister is going to be there .

My father, he said, you, you can't go back because nobody is there. I said how do you know? What do you mean? They said, well, they were, evidently with here in Stutthof. And they all died from typhus. It's been around because of the dirt. No. It's like, was like everybody, after they got typhus. First my mother died of it. And then my sister was so young. She could have still been exposed at someplace else. But she was too sick [INAUDIBLE]

And-- and then I was just like, you know? Then I was just a few days put in a shack. Like, what now?

All alone?

All alone.

And how old were you?

I was, in '45, 19. No [INAUDIBLE] I didn't because the best years of my life I spent in the hell. But I was still hoping that, after war, like I survived, maybe somebody, maybe an uncle, maybe my mother's brother. You know?

You've never found anyone from your family.

I have two cousins in Israel, my father's brother's two sons [INAUDIBLE]. But after the thing, and finally the liberation came. Then we were [INAUDIBLE] even further because where do I go now?

What did you do?

Well, they send us to Feldafing. It was like a camp for all the-- DP camp. It was a DP camp. And then whoever survived tried to hold on to each other.

[AUDIO OUT]

--camp crowded?

I was at the DP camp-- crowded. But it was already no German guards by the door. And we tried to go on with our lives. I met my husband there.

Oh, really?

He's from Poland. And we got married in '46 in the DP camp, in Feldafing. And we were there with the help from the Americans till '49. And then we came to the United States.

My daughter, my older daughter was born in '48. And when we came here, she was 11 months old. And we started our lives. My husband went through the same hell as me, even worse because he was trying to hide outside the ghetto by the Gentile people.

And he was hunted every place he went because, for a piece of bread or a little sugar, they told them where he was hiding, even the next door neighbor boys he played together and he went to school together. So he had it even worse because from '39 on he suffered.

Was it hard to get used to coming to the United States, it was so different? You didn't know the language, didn't know anybody.

My daughter tells me all the time, Ma, how did you do it? Our generation wouldn't be able to do it. You came to a new country, not a word of English, not one word, no work. How did you do it? And really, I don't know what the answer is because it was heaven for us to come here. And we tried to make a life for ourselves.

And I think my children-- I have two daughters-- they are proud of their parents because they say they couldn't do it. We worked hard, and what I had to do.

You made a wonderful life for yourselves. You're very lucky.

Yes.

How old are you daughters?

One is 35, going to be. And one is going to be 31. I have one with me, the older one. And she is-- she can't imagine. And she said, Ma, you never talked to us about it when we were small. You know? I said, it wasn't easy, couldn't do it. But now we're opening up.

And her children-- she has a little girl. She's 10 years old. She told me yesterday-- I asked her, I said, does Robin ever ask about Grandma's mother? And she says to me, yes. She always asks me, how come Grandma doesn't have a mother? How come Grandma doesn't ever talk about her mother? How come I never saw a picture of her mother? Because for a picture of my parents, I would give away everything I own. But I-- no pictures. They took away.

So she said she asks. So how do you explain to a 10-year-old? I mean, does she? She said, well, I tell her that there were bad people. And they just did those terrible things, not because your grandmother was a bad person. They just did terrible things. And she said, so that's what happened.

Those bad people, could they come here? And she said, well, here we have laws that-- because I can't imagine. If she would ask me those questions, I wouldn't know how to explain it. I wouldn't know how to explain to a 10-year-old girl.

I think your daughter explained it very well.

I think so. She said she tells her here it won't happen because we have laws that it couldn't.

Do you feel like it couldn't happen again? Do you feel like it could happen again?

Well, I hope not. But the way it happened in Germany, the people didn't have food. And it was very bad for them. And one crazy person came up and said, I'll give you everything. And the Jews have everything. And they are the whole problem why we don't have nothing.

So--

Excuse me. Excuse me.

--about happening again, I don't know. But you have to really work on it. It shouldn't. I don't know. I'm not that smart. But I'm sure you have to work on it, the children, that our generation and our kids and their kids shouldn't go through with it again because when you are a Jew, even the people who were assimilated, who said they never knew that they were Jews, Hitler did not discriminate. He found out.

Even when your grandfather or great-grandfather were a Jew, you were the same Jew as anybody else.

Did you come from a religious family?

I came from a religious family in the sense they knew Torah. They knew Yiddishkeit. But they were more modern people. My father was a modern man. He didn't wear a beard, but he went to temple. And the house was strictly Jewish and strictly kosher.

I guess everybody in Europe, even the-- it was like this. So if it could happen again, I hope not. I hope not because it was bad. If it happens again, I think the whole world will be destroyed.

And the Jewish people from Europe gave a lot to the world, not just from Europe but we could be proud of--

Did you know, when you were in the camps, what day it was or when the holidays were?

Never. Never.

You didn't know when the holidays were?

Never.

Some people knew. I read that some people knew, today is Rosh ha-Shana.

They knew by maybe marking on a piece of paper every day or-- I never knew what day. I never knew what month. I never knew nothing because people were just worried about getting a piece of food in their mouth. That was [INAUDIBLE]. And for a piece of food-- but I didn't know. No, I didn't know.

I just knew, when we were outside, it was nice. It was not so cold. It must have been-- it must have been a different season. But otherwise, no.

And the hygiene was impossible.

The hygiene was impossible. People got all kind of diseases if they [INAUDIBLE]

Do you ever wonder how, how did I live through this?

Yeah, a lots of times, a lots of times. I don't have the answer for it. A lots of time, but I don't have the answer for it. That's how my sister is. I don't have the answer. It just-- you went day by day, hoping.

You had some special strength inside that got you through it? Was there some strong-- some strength?

No, I don't think so.

You think it was just mostly luck?

Mostly luck. Mostly luck because, how come my older sister, she was young and strong. And because of her, I survived because she was the stronger one. I was the baby. And she helped me to survive. It's not because I was strong or I was smart to know how to go. It's just pure luck.

I forgot to ask you, when you were taken to the camp, did you go on trains or trucks?

Trains for days.

In just big cars?

And big trains for days, and we didn't know where we are going. They opened up maybe once a day, put a little bit water. And we on trains.

No food?

No food. And in the trains plenty people didn't make it. It's not a matter that the stronger people survived and the weaker perished, or the healthy one survived and the sick went. It was no difference. It's just plain luck. And that was that, in my case, plain luck because I wasn't smart to know to go here or to go there. I wasn't thinking about it.

And when I was divided from my family, I didn't know that I am going to survive and they are gone. It was just plain luck. So sometimes I think I'm lucky that I survived, that I could marry and have a family, which I'm very proud of. But sometimes you think, why me? Why was I chosen?

I wasn't more religious than they. I was-- why was I chosen? But--

Most people say that.

As you know, when you talk to a rabbi and you ask them, they said, you don't ask any questions. You don't ask any questions. So I don't. I guess I was meant to be left for my whole family to continue with other generations.

And you were lucky, and you did a good job, and you have a wonderful family, and made a wonderful life.

Wonderful life, wonderful children, good husband, what else can you ask for?

That's everything. You're a very wealthy, rich woman.

Yeah. Yeah because richness doesn't count just by money. I wake up every morning, and I have them around me, and I said, I'm rich.

And you're lucky. That's wonderful.