This is a taped interview with Judith Mandel Novak at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors on April 13, 1983. Mrs. Novak, can you tell us your maiden name and where you were born?

I was born in SzamosÃºjvÃ¡r. That's a little town in Transylvania. It's in Transylvania. And my maiden name is Judith Kohn-- K-O-H-N. In fact, I was just talking with my brother. And five generations of us was born in Transylvania around there. My grandfather was the rabbi there. And we were five generation-- that's how secure we felt there.

And when I was a young child, we moved to a larger city, to KolozsvÃ¡r. And when the ghetto started and all this, then my father said, oh, we have to go back to SzamosÃºjvÃ¡r because I know everybody there. I went to school with the mayor, and all the detectives, and everybody-- I know from my childhood. And nothing could hurt us. And what happened is when-- that morning when they came to pick up-- pick us up at 6 o'clock in the morning, that was May 3, 1944.

This was the Gestapo?

Yes. Well, local people came, like the teacher of the town and the detectives.

Were these people who were now in uniform?

They were no uniforms. I remember, they just detectives and teachers. They weren't in uniform at that-- when they-- as I remember. But they were my father's good friends. And they-- you don't know, in Hungarian, there is a you-- and I think it's in German too-- Sie and du.

Yes, a familiar and--

Yes, so they have. And they were in-- like du, they were like friends. But they made believe that they never saw my father. And they believed that he couldn't even talk to what-- they made a little exception that they let us take the broom and they let us take as much covers. We were the only one in the ghetto who had a broom. And they let us take as much covers as we wanted-- and more packages.

And I also remember that my father said-- when they took us in a wagon, they put all our family and our belongings. And my father said, don't cry. I don't want anybody to cry. And I was thinking, why is he saying? I didn't even feel like crying. I didn't think it's such a terrible thing.

How old were you?

I was 17. I was-- I just-- I didn't think that people are capable of bad thing. I thought, well, that's what my father said. They will probably take us to work and then bring us home. And we were wondering, shall we wear our walking shoes? Or I had new sandals-- should I wore my new sandals? Because it was, I think, a day after Pesach, a few days after Pesach.

And I had my new sandals and I had my new sweater. And I wasn't sure. If I lose things, if I want to wear my new-- and my father said, wear working shoes because they probably-- he also said-- I never talked about this. My father was a Cohen and a very religious man. And they were also maybe talk then that the-- please don't cry.

I'm fine. I'm fine.

I can't talk then.

I'm fine.

I'm talking like somebody who's not interested in my story. I tell it for the record. That's how it was. And I never told how my father talked to us. But I remember, he was a Cohen. And he always talked about religion to us. And he said

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that a Cohen cannot marry a girl unless she is a virgin. And he said-- but in the war, if something happens, then the laws are different. And I didn't understand what he was saying. I didn't care. I didn't understand what he was saying.

But you remembered it.

I remembered it after. I was a virgin even after the war. That's one thing what my daughter asked. Oh, my, here, I'm talking, I gave my name. She ask if I was raped or anything. No, I was never raped. I wasn't so pretty and I wasn't so desirable. And I was always hiding.

Maybe you were lucky too.

Yes.

Think of some of the things that you were. You were lucky.

Oh, OK.

Maybe you were lucky.

OK. Because also--

And maybe what your father said was right. Because in war, things are different.

Yes. But--

And I think--

--what I think he was telling us-- that we shouldn't feel so unhappy. I know the-- I didn't know, but it probably was thought that they take the girls to the front, to the soldiers.

History in war-- in history, in war, sometimes, the young girls don't fare that well.

Yeah.

And I'm sure he was worried about you and trying to make it--

Yes, to make us feel better.

--do you think he was trying to make you feel that if this did happen to you, that it was--

That it's not the end of the world.

That's right.

Oh, he also-- that helped me a lot. He also-- he was an exceptionally smart man. He also--

You were lucky.

--said that-- oh, that too. We were very religious at home. But he also always mentioned, to save life, you could do anything. You could do anything to save your life-- eat non-kosher, or travel, or-- and he always told us that he was taking his little niece, who is now in Brooklyn. She's now a grandmother-- in the train in Shabbat to the hospital to save her. Because her husband--

She was--

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--was in the army. And her sister was-- his sister was alone. So he traveled on Shabbat to take the child to the hospital to save the child. And she was saved. So she always told us, you could eat, you could do what you want to save your life.

So the first day we arrived in Auschwitz, I knew, I have to eat the food regardless if it's kosher or not. And I know many people who didn't eat. And they didn't last more than a week or so because they couldn't-- they didn't eat non-kosher food, they were so religious. But I knew that I have to eat. OK. We were in the ghetto from May 3 to-- about three weeks. And then we were put in the camp.

Do you remember what you took with you when you left your home to go to the ghetto? Did you take a lot of things with you or just a few things?

Yeah, but it's not important. What I remember is we took covers. And we were the only one who had a broom. And we-- and I also remember the first time that-- we always was brought up that to-- the aunts-- we were a very loving, big family. My grandmother-- and we all lived around.

We had a chance to come to America. And my mother didn't want to leave her mother-- and her father wasn't alive anymore-- but her sisters, and brothers, and aunts, and uncles. And one example is when we went in the train, in the wagon towards Auschwitz, we were 31 people from our side.

They put 60 in the wagon. And we counted-- we were 31, just my grandmother, her children, and grandchildren. So they were my aunts and my cousin. So we were a very loving family.

All your family was close.

And I felt, when I go sometimes to psychologists, or sometimes we are in a group, and they tell you, remember a room when you were a child, I always remember my grandmother's room, where it was cozy, and I sat next to her.

And secure.

And secure and loved-- I felt very loved. That's why I said, nobody could hurt me, thinking back, why I had so much confidence.

Maybe that also protected you from letting-- from-- do you think-- or do you think that helped you keep some of the bad on the outside?

Yes, also--

You were lucky to have that.

--didn't make me a bad person. I think-- I'm very proud of this. And it's not brought out with the Holocaust survivors that we were three sisters who went to the-- let me say, we arrived in Auschwitz Saturday morning. It was May 27. It was a--

19--

1944. And everything happened so fast-- down, down, down, we were 30 people. It happened so fast.

Did you all arrive safely in the transport at Auschwitz?

Yes. Yeah. We also-- I don't remember this thing when people say, they didn't know where to sit, where to stand, where to-- because I guess we always gave priority to the elder, to the younger, to the-- I don't even know.

You don't remember being crowded in the cars, and hungry, and cold?

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We were crowded, but not unhappy. I don't know-- not unhappy. I was with my family. And we didn't fight. See, with pure strangers, I guess, then you fight for a little seat, for a little place. Here, probably, we wanted to give as much place to the people who needed it-- for my grandmother, my father, my mother. Yeah, I remember us saving bread.

And then in the end, when we arrived to Auschwitz, then there were Polish people there in these striped clothes-- they were-- who were there already. And they came, and they said, eat up all the bread. And we wouldn't believe them because he knew already that they will take everything away before you go into Auschwitz. And at least--

At least have a full stomach.

But we didn't because my older sister had two little babies with us. And we wanted to save that the baby shouldn't-- should have bread. Also, when my father-- that's how optimistic we were all. When my father saw these people, when the door opened, and these people came to help us get off fast, fast, with sticks, and with nice and not nice, then he says, oh, see, I told you, we're going to work here. And we will get these uniforms. And we're going to work here.

But everything went so fast. My sister had two children-- a three-year-old and a one-year-old, which I loved. And she took the three-year-old and I took the one-year-old too. We also knew that the children, and the mothers, and grandmothers go in one place and the young people the other.

How did you know that?

These Polish people who helped us, they told us. They said-- they told us, they said, the mothers would take care of their children. I guess they want to see-- here, too, I see the good part. And they wanted as many Jews to survive as-- that's how I remember. They said, if you can work, go in the right. And if you-- the mothers and the grandmothers should go watch the children. You know what happened to the mothers, and grandmothers, and the children. But he said--

But they tried to protect the young mothers and have the grandmothers and the--

Yes.

In other words, your mother and your grandmother should carry the young children because they were going to perish anyway.

Yes. And they said-- and I thought, I want to go with my parents and with my children-- the grandchildren. I loved my niece.

Your nieces.

So I kept the niece. And I thought, when Mengele will-- I saw him in front of me asking. And I will say, I'm the mother. I was thinking, I'm 17. I could be a mother.

But the way he looked at me, and he said, in German, is this your child? I said, no, it's on them. He said, then give it to somebody. And I gave it to one of my aunt. I was so terrified and so. So I gave the child away. And I found myself to the right. And then I saw my two younger sisters were there-- 14, and 16, and me.

What about your older sister?

Oh, my older sister went with the child.

With the children?

With the children. And I don't know how--

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So she didn't listen. She didn't listen, she stayed with her children?

Yeah, they let her, probably. They-- everything went so fast that I really don't know what happened and how it happened. So anyway, the three of us were together all the time. And we were holding on.

What about any of you-- did you have any of your cousins? Were your cousins with you?

Oh, yes, and one cousin. Because everyone-- and my mother was the oldest in the family. And then her next brother had seven children. But the oldest was about 15. She was with us. And then I heard her 14-year-old brother was also in working camp. But none of them came home.

And what I wanted to say about Auschwitz-- we were there for five months. And I smelled that ovens day in, day on, and day off. And at night, it was burning. And the flesh was burning.

And I didn't know that they're burning human flesh. It never dawned on me. In fact, they were telling us, the kapos who were there already longer time, they says, your mother and father, they says in Hungarian, they are burning there. They burning your parents there.

And I didn't want to hear it. I said, how could you tell us? I mean-- and I didn't want-- until after I survived, once I was at my aunt's house, and we were outside, making pictures, and the meat burned, it burned, really, to coal. And I said, what is it? It smells like Auschwitz. What is it here? This was already in a DP camp, when we came back to-- and my-- we're going to America. That was in 1946. I was liberated in '45. Was in '46.

And I said, what smells? It's like Auschwitz. So we went in and we saw that the meat burned. And that, for the first time, I realized that that's what-- that's the smell I was smelling in Auschwitz. And I didn't want to know. I didn't want to. What else? I also wanted to say that-- how close we were, my sister and someone. My sister died two weeks before liberated. We were together for--

I'm going to have to ask you to speak up, Mrs. Novak, because we want to make sure that the tape recorder picks it up.

Yes. Also--

Well, tell me what happened. So that was the last time you saw your family was when they went to the left and you went to the right?

Yes. Oh, just-- maybe it's funny, but I remember the funny part and the good part. I don't--

Do you think that your ability to do that has helped you or helped you at the time to survive?

Definitely. Definitely. I knew that I have to adjust to the situation. And I knew, it's not going to be forever. And also, it helped that I had my two sisters. And I was the oldest. And I had to protect them. We never cried in front of each other. We never-- we always believed the best. We made fun of everything. We know. And even in Auschwitz, they took all your clothes away, and then they gave us new clothes.

What kind of clothing did they give you?

So I got a long yellow dress. No, I got a long purple dress. And one of my sister got a yellow dress, and one got a green dress. And then we were-- and they took away my nice sandals because I decided to wear nice sandals.

Your sandals instead of your work shoes, right?

And after, I saw one of the Blockalteste wore my sandals because they were beautiful. They were very pretty. I was then the big girl when I got my sandals for Pesach. And they were very unusual. And she wore it. And I used to go every day to look at it because it was something from home-- the Blockalteste, the kapo.

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It was the-- I was just going to ask you to please explain who exactly who she was.

Yeah, the Blockalteste. She was a Jewish girl.

From Poland?

From Poland or Czechoslovakia-- or Slovakia. Well, I want to say, and I got a pair of shoe-- they grabbed shoes. And I got one with a long shoe, long like from the '20s, and one regular shoe. So when I have-- they always said, we have to be like soldiers. I'm always going to stay like this, one out and one in.

And I always said, the three of us look so colorful with the yellow, green, and purple. It's so terrible. We always together. And we're so colorful. And we made a joke. I also wanted to say that I had the diapers of the baby. We all packed for everybody separate rucksacks, how you call it?

Rucksacks.

Rucksacks, yeah.

A backpack.

A backpack because we were thinking that we might be separate. And then when I walked already to the right, and halfway towards the crematorium-- towards the-- no, that was--

Toward the camp?

--towards the camp. Yeah.

Were you in Auschwitz? Did you arrive at Auschwitz or Birkenau first?

Birkenau.

Birkenau.

Birkenau, yeah. But it said, somehow, Auschwitz outside-- was music. It was a beautiful, nice day in the morning, like 6 o'clock in the morning. It was sunny. And we were very optimistic. I ran back to Mengele to tell him that the baby's diapers are with me. And I have to give the-- and I was hoping he will let me go with the children.

And he said, no, you'll meet them in about three days. You'll meet them. So you'll give it to them. And I believed it. For three days, I kept saying, no matter what people said, that your parents are not alive, I said, no, I-- Mengele said, I'm going to leave them-- meet them in three days.

What was he like? What was he like? Can you describe him?

Yeah, he was tall and very good-looking, blonde. And I thought he had-- we talked with a girl once. I thought he had a one glass.

A monocle?

A monocle, yeah, and tall, and very-- but he was very strong and very--

Did he have a cruel face?

No.

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Not to you?

No, no, no, nobody had a cruel face.

Just a cruel heart.

Yeah. They looked like angels. There was one woman who was-- she was so mean. And I used to smile at them. And then I got a slap in the face because I was even-- I wanted so much to smile to people, and they should smile back.

That was a smile-- the Blockalteste, just because she was 18 like me, and she was there with her mother. So I wish-- I wanted to-- I missed my mother very much. I always thought, if my mother would-- if I would have believed that my mother would not survive, I didn't want to survive.

This was at the time, you were thinking that?

That was in Auschwitz, yes, right. And we were there for five months.

Did you think that she was just in another part of the camp?

Yes. I thought she was with the-- taking care of the children. And at one point, next to our camp was another camp with old people and children. They brought them there for a few days. And that made my belief stronger, that there are elderly people with babies. I mean, it was logical that the mothers take care of the children and the grandchildren.

And we go for work. And I didn't mind that. But they didn't take us for work for five months. We were just-- we made up songs. I wish I could sing it for you, but it's in Hungarian.

You can sing.

My sister made up a song. I'm going to say it on Hungarian because it's a memory of hers. She didn't come back. And nobody knows this song.

Well, you know the song, and if you'd like to share it on the tape. But it's not really-- she-- they died just two weeks before. If they would have survived, the whole thing would have been different.

But I used to cry at night. I used to cry at night, how could God do this to us? At least my two sisters, they suffered so much. And then once, I have a friend in Williamsburg, two friends. They are very, very religious. And we were together. They also lost one sister.

Is this in Williamsburg, New York?

In Williamsburg, New York. For me, Williamsburg is only one. And I once said, how could we live with this? I used to wake up at night and cry so loud. I stayed with my uncle for a while when I came here before I got married. And I said, how could we live with this, knowing what my sisters gone through and don't-- are not alive?

So she told me-- they are a little older than I and they were more mature. And so they said, if you going to cry always, and you going to think of them, then Hitler will have another victory. So you're going to get crazy. And she's going to have another loss. And you will also perish the way everybody else. Said, but if you will be strong, and you create another family, and you-- then he-- then you won't. So that convinced me that-- I mean, this-- I got--

You found a lot of comfort in that thought, didn't you?

Yes, yeah. Also, once, I saw a young mother nursing her baby when I was-- that was in Germany, the DP camp. And I saw her look on her face, how she looked at that baby. And I knew that it's-- because I used to say, well, what's there to

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live for? If my parents wouldn't come back, my sisters wouldn't come back, and nobody, what's there to live for? And then I saw that mother look.

I know where she is now in California and the babies. I have to tell her once how she inspired me. He's now a very successful lawyer in Los Angeles. And I know where-- I know who she is. She had the baby in the--

Have you ever contacted her?

No, but I know how because there was some relation. There was some-- how she looked at that baby with so much love. And I knew that there was something to live for, to have a baby.

And I also decided that-- I didn't believe in anything. I felt, oh, for the first time, I'm free. My parents are not here. I'm not going to be religious. Because I always rebelled a little. I didn't want to be religious. And I want-- but then--

Do you think that any of your faith suffered from what you saw in Auschwitz?

I'm not so sure. I was always a little too intelligent to be very religious. I can't say-- no, I never thought of it. I never thought of it. I knew how to adjust to my parents. I don't know. I really don't know.

I was too occupied with other things in life. I liked music. I liked the opera. I was thinking of Israel. I had nice friends. I always liked music. And I didn't think about the future. But I remember, the minute when I decided-- after concentration-- this happened in DP camps, that I go from one place to another, that I want to be religious.

Move closer. So I'm just going to move a little closer so the mic is sure to pick up-- pick you up.

Yes. I remember to think that I want to be religious because I remember, this is what I could give to my children and my family, the only thing I know. I don't know how not to be religious. I don't know how not to. I saw-- are you religious? No?

In some ways.

Yeah.

In some ways. It depends on how you define religion.

Exactly. For me, it's tradition. I like a nice Friday night. And I felt, I like to sit around the table and sing. Now, I have a friend, a psychologist, and I said, but I like religion. That's why I keep it. She said, of course, you have a party every Friday night. That's religion. But this is how I brought up my children because it's a home. And it's a religion. But you would like me to talk about the concentration camp.

I'd like you to speak about what's important to you.

I spoke to them.

What did you and your sisters do? Well, let's talk about what happened to you after you went with them and you got your dresses. And they took your clothing?

Yes, well, everything happened so fast. We were terrified. But we had to get undressed, completely undressed. And for that, for young, religious girls--

Did they take you into a special room to do that with all the other girls?

No, we were maybe 1,000 girls who arrived. They took us in one big room. And all SS were around. And they shouted at us, get undressed, take off everything, and put your clothes in one nice, neat pile. And when you come back, you'll get

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it back.

Of course, we never came back that way. We went through the showers. We got showers. And we came out in another door. And everybody was given a dress, one dress we got, a dress and a pair of shoes, and went through. And so we were always waiting when we coming back.

This was the same first day that you arrived, the same Saturday morning?

That was the first day, yes. Yes. That was the first day.

Where did you wind up by Saturday night?

Well, we got-- we went to block 28, which was a very nice organized. We always thought that we were lucky, like you said, that we got-- see, some, they were-- we were-- we've got block 28. And they had beds. And some of those blocks-- this was in C Lager-- C like C, C Lager and block 28. And it was an organized, clean block because some of them didn't have beds. This one had beds.

Were they beds with mattresses or just beds with just wooden?

Oh, no. Just--

OK. Well, we wouldn't want to confuse anybody when you say beds by the average definition of a bed.

No. Those were [INAUDIBLE]. They were wood-- square wood. And there were five people on one side, literally like sardines we were. Because if we had to turn, we had to say the whole row, now, we want to turn. One couldn't turn without the other.

And we were five in one side and five in the other side. And our feet matched. It was really like sardines. And we were three sisters and two very young girls, again, from someplace. Sometimes, I think of them, if they're alive. They were very nice girls. And we got along nicely.

Did you stay together with them the whole time?

We stayed for about five months.

And what did you do every day?

We used to think-- we used to figure out how-- first of all, we had the dates always. We didn't want to lose track of the dates. I think this is also important.

How were you able to keep track of the day?

We knew we arrived May 27. That I carved in the wood. And it was carved in my memory.

What did you carve it into the wood with?

I think with a spoon. I think we all got a spoon and a plate. And then we were thinking every day what day of the month it was, another week. And we knew. We knew it, somehow, the three of us. And then we figured out how intelligent the Germans are, how they use their mind to put 32,000 people in such a small piece of land. Because there were 32 blocks-- 32 barracks. And in every barrack, there were 1,000 people.

So in block 28, there were 1,000 girls?

1,000 girls, yeah, between 15 and 35. That was the--

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And how many kapos were in charge or lager--

Oh, that's what I said. In our, there was a mother and a daughter-- Stefka and her mother. She was about 18, and the mother was about 38. But she was so mean, she was so mean that after the war, they killed her. They killed her.

Who killed her?

Some of the Jewish inmates. I don't know if it was women or men. But I heard. And I felt very sorry because I thought, if she survived for so many years and with her mother, they shouldn't have killed her. But she was very mean.

Even though she was so mean--

I didn't think anybody for--

--and caused so much pain?

I just can't see killing people. I can't see it even today. I tell you, when we were liberated--

Do you make a difference between killing and punishing?

Well, I don't think that we should punish anybody-- maybe punishing. But I tell you what happened when-- after I was liberated.

You were in-- were you in Auschwitz when you were liberated?

No. I went to work. And then we walked for five months. From January to May 5, we were walking. And that's where I lost my sisters and everybody. From 2,000 people, 150 were left. And we were put in a barn. And the American-- no, and there was a bomb planted in that barn, that it should-- that nobody should tell the story. We were in a very bad camp after.

Was this part of the Auschwitz death march?

Yes. Yeah, that was the death march, yeah, from May 1 to-- January 1 to May, we were walking. And they put that bomb there. The Americans-- that I read in the post when I came back here that the American soldiers came, and they opened the door, and they found a bomb which didn't explode.

And the American soldiers took us. One man picked me up. He was a big, husky soldier. And he spoke Yiddish to me. And he picked me up. I think, mostly, the Jews came to the concentration-- I don't know. I don't know. The American soldiers, they picked me up, they put me to the wall, and they made pictures. I always think, maybe someday-- but I wouldn't recognize myself, I was so skinny.

And I couldn't stand. I literally couldn't stand. They had to put me to the wall to take a picture. And this soldier, this doctor, he picked me up and he took me. They took me in a hospital. And there, they cut my hair again, which I was sorry for a long time because finally, after Auschwitz-- in Auschwitz, they cut our hair.

Did they shave your hair all the time or just the first time?

Just the first time. And then when the Americans-- we had so much lice that they had to shave our head. But they shouldn't have done it. If I would have known that-- because then when I went home, I still had short hair. And I didn't like that. It was-- and I didn't have nice hair anyway. I'm wearing a wig because I never had nice hear. I'm making all this on the tape.

It's OK. It's OK.

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Telling you everything. So what I wanted to say about-- I was there in the-- the Americans told us that they-- it was a army hospital. And they took the Germans-- [AUDIO OUT] --forever, but what I wanted to say about how I feel. You don't want to kill people-- that they kept us in that hospital.

And this doctor who came every day and spoke Yiddish to me, he examined me and he said that I will be healthy. I'm not sick. But if I'll eat and I'll be healthy. So and they said, don't accumulate bread. Don't-- we will give you everyday three meals. Don't accumulate.

But it was impossible to convince us. I took the toast and I hid it under the pillow. And I ate so much that I used to vomit every day. And I didn't care. The nurses didn't know I used to vomit, go in the bathroom and vomit. Because we just couldn't get used to giving up food.

What kind of-- do you remember what kind of food they gave you?

Oh, yes, they were very careful. That's another thing which the Americans-- I am very grateful for that. First, the American soldiers came, and they gave us meat. And they gave us everything.

They wanted to help, I'm sure. Sure. But they didn't know how--

They gave us chocolate and chewing gum. And then two Americans came in, I think, this doctor. And they took everything away.

Did you ever find out his name?

No. I wouldn't know because I remember them-- I had three cousins here in the army. I knew my aunt-- my uncles were here in New York. And I knew they were. And I couldn't think of their names. They had the same names I did-- one of them, one or two of them did. I couldn't think of them. I didn't ask his name. And I'm-- but I just-- I'm grateful for whole America. I'm grateful for the whole America. I really have a genuine love for Americans because of how-- what they did.

They saved-- you have a feeling they saved you, don't you?

Oh, yes. And so you asked about the food-- they gave us farina, and toast, and butter, and very light food. And very gradually, they made us eat. But what I want to say, once-- soldiers, I guess, are soldiers. And they come-- different groups came in. And we were already capable of walking.

Then one-- two soldiers came, and they took about five girls, and they said, now, come with us. And we'll show you one. So they went. They took us in a German house. And they took a revolver. And they told the German-- they had a-- they had somehow a store and a house in the back. They had a store with all kinds of materials.

And they took the pistol and they said, they told all the German-- the whole family, they were in a corner. And you could take whatever you want. I don't remember if was it a store or they just had a lot of material accumulated. You could take material.

This was the American soldiers who took you to do this?

Yes, to do this. And I started to cry. And I ran out. I couldn't touch anything because I cried. Because this is what they did to us. They caught a revolver and said, go in the ghetto. And they closed the door and things like this. I couldn't do it. But I know some girls came home with a lot of material, and blouses, some material. But I just never can get used to want to punish them. And I'm glad for them. I never-- I didn't bring up my children they should hate Germans or anybody. I can't see people growing up with hatred. I think I would cripple their life if I would tell them, hate people.

Do you think that's because you saw how other people's lives-- excuse me-- who were taught hatred were crippled and

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reduced to doing this to other-- to you?

I'm not aware of this. But I just-- I'm aware, as a mother, I want to protect my child from being crippled by hating people. I can't tell them, hate people because they did this to us. They're aware, I know, I could never go to Germany. I don't want to hear about Germany, I don't want to know. I don't want to buy anything German because that's what it-- now, my daughter lives in Israel.

And sometimes, in Israel, mostly everything is made in Germany because they got it as restitution. My brother explained that, that they got it as restitution in Israel. So they have to accept it. And my brother says-- he's a good Israeli and a good-- he says, we have to survive under any circumstances. And if this is what it takes--

He must have learned that from your father.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, well, he said, Israel must live. Now, it's-- it didn't-- he doesn't mean--

It's not just him, it's Israel.

Yeah, he doesn't personally. He says, Israel cannot be choosy. We have to. And the Germans-- at that time, there was a big commotion about 10 years ago to accept arms from Germany or not to accept.

I remember that.

And yes. Oh, so I told my brother, how do you feel about this? So he says, we have to accept from whoever gives us to survive. That's the main-- our main thing. So I just said-- they know certain things. I don't like the Germans. I don't want to have anything to do. In fact, in college-- I went to Brooklyn College. And I hated my German teacher. I took German as a second language because I thought, it's easier since I know Jewish. And I know the vocabulary. And I know German. So I went to the easy way out.

Easy credits.

Easy credits, this way, yes. And I couldn't stand that because he spoke German.

The sound-- do you think it had something to do with the sound of it?

Of course, definitely, the sound of it. So once-- and English wasn't my best subject because I was a foreigner. And I always felt, I cannot express myself as well in English as American young girls. And I wasn't a young girl anymore. But once, this English teacher told in class-- he says, in class, write a composition about somebody you hated very much and somebody you loved very much. And I didn't remember anybody loving or hating. I didn't know.

But I had-- in college, you have to write it fast. And so I wrote how I hated my German teacher because I hated his German accent, I hated his vocabulary. When he said Brot, that was for me Auschwitz, when Brot was so important. If he said fÃ¼hrer, that fÃ¼hrer was Hitler, and how I hated him with all.

So anyway, I got an A in that composition. Why do I? And since then, I am not so bad on writing. If I write openly and the truth, then I got As after. That wasn't d

That's wonderful. That's a wonderful story. You discovered the key to good writing is good thoughts.

And honesty, I guess. I guess not to want to make it nicer than it is. But Auschwitz, I definitely made nicer than it is. We must have--

Why do you think that is?

I wrote a little article about Hanukkah. I shouldn't go into that.

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If you'd like.

And my daughter said, how could you make such a sad story so interesting and enjoyable? I described how-- since we knew the dates, which kept us humane. All of a sudden, we realized, it was Hanukkah.

And we said, we want to make a little Hanukkah candle. And we sacrificed-- like I said, we sacrificed food for other nourishment, for-- I don't know how I wrote it. Anyway, we made a little candle from a little potato and margarine. And from my wool blanket, I put a wool.

A wick?

A wick, yeah. And we made a menorah. And we started singing. And the three of us sang. And I remember my sister's faces. They were so happy. We were-- we kept singing and singing, song after song. And I remember my sister's faces, the happiness that we were-- all of a sudden, we created a little oasis of happiness in the midst of so much misery there. And that's what I wrote down, how happy we were for a little while, for that evening. We were so happy.

Did other people join you?

I don't remember. And I didn't care. I don't remember exactly. I think most people were very pessimistic. And we didn't want to get that pessimism. We kept being optimistic. We never said our sad thoughts. But then my sister died. And that brought me to real hurt. It was April 23. And we was sitting. We were marching and marching since January 1. New Year's Eve, we started marching.

And at night, we usually got a little potatoes or something before we went in a barn. And that night, we didn't get anything. And we were so hungry. We were just sitting there. We were so hungry.

But we talked about what we'll do when we go home, what food we will make, what-- and I realized that my little sister, she's so hungry, she was leaning against me. And we never leaned with each other. We never complained to each other. We never-- because we always protected each other's feelings. That's why I say--

Or tried to bolster each other's feelings.

That's right, yeah. And nobody writes about this. And we made up with the sister, we never took anything from anybody, like bread or anything. And we always said, but if somebody would take our bread, we would also die in disappointment. But nobody took our bread either. Everybody writes how everybody was stealing each other's bread. We didn't have this.

She was so hungry. And she put her head on my shoulder. When I felt that, I looked around. What can I give her? Just something, anything. I wish we could eat straw. Then all of a sudden, she says-- which she never said before, and she said, if only once, I could eat as much as I want, I don't mind.

She said, in Hungarian, [HUNGARIAN]-- if once, I am saturated, I don't care if I die. And at that minute, she got cold. Her body was cold. And I didn't realize that she was dead. I was just holding her and holding her. And she was cold. I didn't want to believe her that she just died without.

And when I realized that she was dead, I-- that's also the first time I started to cry. I-- it was like a luxury. I remember, I started to cry so loud that I didn't care anymore what they say. And somebody slapped me because I was crying so loud. And it was at night. And I said, but my sister died. So says, we will all die anyway. You will also die. We will all die.

Where was your third sister at the time?

She was with us, but she must have been very weak also. In the morning, we went again in the line. And we--

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Did you just have to leave your other sister there?

No, we were pulling her. If I ever have misgivings, I feel, I was the oldest sister. I should have known better and not let her pulled. We should have given up. But we pulled her dead body. And she was so heavy. And my younger sister were so pale already. And then we had to left-- leave the body. And I'm sorry. I don't want to cry.

It's OK. I'm sure it's a very, very sad thing for you. And when you're sad, you cry.

Talk about it. And then my-- and the Germans grabbed my sister. And they put her in the wagon. Then I found out that they shot all these children from the back.

Your other sister?

Sister, yeah.

How did you find that out?

Because this girl from Williamsburg, who I said, she's in Williamsburg, she was in a Kommando where they went to bury the dead. Every night, about 30 people died. That's just natural death, like my sister. And then there were a few girls who went into forest. They didn't want people should know, the Germans.

They went in the forest, and a few girls, about five girls, buried the dead. And they got extra bread for it. I only found out after. I wasn't even aware of it. And I don't know if I could have done it. But she came back. And she told me that they shot my sister. And she buried her.

She wanted to tell me. I even remember the place, like she wanted to tell me that I should know the date and the place for the Yahrzeit to took. And after, I saw-- we all had certain blankets, different. And she had a brown-black-- not stripes, but I don't know--

Plaid?

Plaid. And I used to see that plaid blanket. Somebody else was using it. So I was looking at it. So that's how my other sister died the same day. And how I survived, I was also in a wagon. And I knew that this time, I'm also going to die. There is nothing to--

Why did they put you in the wagon that time?

Because we couldn't walk anymore. So they put her in one wagon. And they put me in the other wagon. And I guess one wagon was shot in that place and the other was-- we were supposed to go in another place. And we would have been the next wagon to be shot. But that was the day-- and I'm glad that I told of it-- when we passed from Poland to Czechoslovakia.

And once we got to Czechoslovakia, it's such a-- those Polish people would see us and they would just let us die, nobody. We went to Czechoslovakia, we were-- we were still maybe 300 people, some of them in the wagon-- let's say about 50-- and the others marching. And when they saw us marching by, the Czechoslovakian, they opened the window, and they start throwing bread, and cake in the wagon.

And I remember, I was half-dead because my sister just died and my other sister. I remember laying there. And I didn't care. I remember, the first food they threw, I didn't even grab. I remember how I saw the people from the window throwing bread and the SS soldiers staying with their guns, that they're going to kill them. And they didn't care. They just were throwing bread and cakes. And I didn't even grab.

And then a woman came down and picked up my head. And she gave me hot soup to drink, warm soup. And it was so good that I just kept drinking it. And then she came down. And I don't know if it was the same woman, but I always

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think-- she looked for me like an elderly woman, but maybe she was only 45. Well, everybody over 30 was elderly woman.

But I remember her face. I remember that she came. And she gave us warm milk. She gave me warm milk to drink. And I was thinking, I'll go home, and I tell my father that I drank first soup and then milk.

Milk.

Because I knew I could do it. And then we got so much bread and cake that I had almost to liberation.

The guards never took it away?

No, they didn't take it. They didn't want our bread. They had plenty to eat.

No, I meant just in terms of being.

No, no, at that time, it was-- that was in the end of April '45. And the war was over in May. And they were also-- May 5, I think, the war was over. And it was such a-- then we had enough bread. And that's how I survived. I think that milk and that soup-- and I--

Do you know name of the town where that happened?

It was near Volary because we were liberated in Volary. It must be-- I could look-- I always thought, I'll come home. And I think I was always good in geography. I'll take a map and I'll look up all the places in Dresden when we went through when it was burning, when it was bombed. I remember so many things and the dates because I thought, I'll come home, and with the family together, I'll tell them all these stories. But then my family didn't come home.

How did you find that out? Did you go back to your town after you were liberated?

Yes. How was it? I was-- for a few months, I was in a hospital. I couldn't move and I-- like I told you, with Americans. And that was lucky. Because--

The American Army, sure.

Yes. And also, we heard that the other side of Hungary or even in Germany were the Russians. And then the Russians didn't treat you very well. And they really raped the girls. And they were-- so the Americans used to say, don't go home. If you don't have to, don't go home. But I somehow felt, I wanted to go home.

And did you?

I did go home. Yes, first, I went to Budapest. And there, I found written-- you know what we did? And whenever we passed the Joint-- also for the Joint, if I'll ever be rich, I'm going to help the Joint because they helped a lot the Jews. They came, they established Jewish kitchens, and food, and place where to eat.

So as you passed through one town, you could--

As we passed through one town, then we wrote on the wall who came home. And I saw my uncle's name there. My uncle wrote his name. So I knew, I have someplace to go home. And so he was one of my favorite uncles.

That's wonderful.

That's finally something. And then I went to Budapest. And I found there my grandmother, and my aunt, and my uncle.

How did your grandmother survive?

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When I saw my grandmother, I thought that it's--

Because is this the same grandmother who, on the transport, went to the left and then--

No, no.

OK. This is the other grandmother?

No, this was my father's mother who lived in Budapest. And she survived in the ghetto. They did not-- from Budapest, they didn't take everybody.

Yeah, I know that.

Because yeah-- so she survived in the ghetto with her daughter and two of the three grandchildren. One grandchild was taken-- was killed with a bomb. And their father didn't come home. So and then I went home. And I'm glad that I went home. Well, I'm not glad. I don't really know. But just last year, I took my daughter to the town where I was born. I went. She wanted to go very much-- my brother, and his wife, and his children.

How did your brother survive? Did he go with you on the transport to Auschwitz?

No, he didn't. He wasn't among the-- from those 31 who we went, only two people survived-- two people came back-- this uncle who I told you, who is recently died. He died in New York when he was 70-- and I. Everybody else, 29 people never came back. And my brother, he was in the Hungarian Army. And that's how he survived.

He was a soldier at the time?

Not a soldier. He was in working camp with a yellow-- you know how the Jews went to working camps and that were. But he was 19. And they took him to work.

How did you find him again?

Oh, I went-- I found out from Budapest from my aunt that he was also there, that he also went through. And there was also a Joint there. In Vienna, there was a Joint where they gave us food and shelter. And Budapest was a Joint. Also want to tell you something interesting, that-- how I kept my humanity. I-- all through the concentration camp, I ate everything. I mean, I had to survive. And there was not kosher or non-kosher.

Absolutely.

But as soon as I came to Budapest, I felt, I only want to eat kosher-- not because anybody was watching me really. I said, I have to be some kind of a human being. I can't just let myself be hefker. I can't just let myself. I have to have certain rules and regulations. And when I came back to Budapest, I only-- and the Joint had kosher food and all these things.

Would you mark that as the time that you started to rebuild your life, when you started to--

Not really. I just had a rebuild my personality. I was a person again. I was aware of my feelings, of my will. I could do what I want. I wasn't hungry anymore. There was enough food. Hungary, there was enough food that I could eat kosher. And I felt that I'm a person again, yes.

But I didn't know what-- also what helped me a lot, my uncle sent a telegram from New York. I have three-- my father's three brother lived in New York. And he send me a telegram, I should come to Germany. And from Germany, they'll take me out to New York.

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Were they able to do that?

Yes. Yeah.

How long did it take for you to leave from that-- from the time you received the letter till you got to the United States?

Less than a year, I think, in '46. I came here in 47.

And your brother went to Israel?

My brother, yes. When I came home, then my brother said-- by then, he knew Hebrew already. And he heard all the stories about Auschwitz, he wasn't there. He said, now, we have to go to Israel and build on Israel. Because we can't let this happen again, we have to have a country.

And I started to cry. I said-- I didn't feel we need anything anymore. We don't have parents, we don't have sister, we don't have brother. I was hungry, I was tired. I don't want to go. At that time, they took you to Cyprus. It was in '46-- '45, '46. I started to cry.

I was thinking that I'm going to be again in a concentration camp with no food, with a lot-- and I hated being with a lot of people. I hated being with 1,000 people together. And so I-- so then he said, no, you don't. You go to America, to the uncles. And I'll go to Israel. And that's what happened, he went to Israel.

Do you see him often?

Oh, yeah. Now, my daughters live-- my daughter lives in Israel. My grandchildren are in Israel. And maybe someday, I'll go.

You said that your sister composed a song and that if you didn't sing it, no one would ever hear it.

That's true. But it's Hungarian.

But it's your tape.

I can really sing it then.

OK.

She sang-- that was in Auschwitz in the one. We were so happy doing that. [HUNGARIAN] That's it.

Would you like to translate it?

Yes. It's about every morning, at 4 o'clock, we run to the washroom to wash ourself. And then we run back to stay in line for the Zahlappell. They-- there we stayed always from about 5 o'clock till 10 o'clock in one line to count. As we thought, it's a joke because nobody could get out of there. Like I said, 1,000 people in a little thing-- 30,000-- 32,000 people.

And we were surrounded with electrical wires. If you just touch that, you became black. You become electrocuted. So it was a joke. And we always said, how could 32,000 people be in such a small place and one soldier could watch us? One soldier was watching us from-- it was a joke that they were.

But every morning, we had to stay in line, 1,000 people near our barracks, and be counted. And then if somebody was missing, then we have to go on with our knees. And it was raining. And it was cold. And my knees still hurts. But I don't want to acknowledge. As long as I live, I live. And if not, I'm OK the way I am.

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We used to stay on the knees because one child was missing. So this is what she said. Then we run back and stay in the line. And Stefka was our Blockalteste. Because Stefka counts everybody-- and if one child is missing-- because we were all children-- then you say, let here down.

Then you have to go in your knees until they find that one child. Usually, they found them that they went from 32, they went to 30-- block 30 or they found a friend. And nobody had names. Also, we used to joke about this.

But how did you refer to each other if nobody had names?

Oh, we knew our first name. But we were not-- if they looked for somebody, you didn't look for a name because our name was never taken in Auschwitz. I always say, they said, how were you in Auschwitz? Nobody took our name. You always said, I am number-- what was I?

Did they give you numbers on your arm and everything?

Yes. No, for me, they didn't.

How come?

I was 31-- no, I was 71,330-- 71,330. And my sister was 31 and one, 32. So we always used to joke that we says, I introduce myself, I'm 71,330, like the soldiers. No. No, because only if they took you in to work, which was important, I guess. Yeah.

What did you do for five months in Auschwitz?

Just when I came to this country, I went to the American consulate, they asked me. And at that time, I didn't want to talk. I said, nothing, we just sat there. And the truth is nothing. We went, like the song says, 4 o'clock, we went to the washroom.

And there, we had to stay in line to go to the toilet, and to wash, and stay in line till 10 o'clock. And then we got some black coffee. And lunch, we got some-- I don't know if we got lunch or not. Or in the afternoon, we again stayed in line. And again, we were counted. And we got some bread and margarine and maybe some soup.

Why do you think they kept all of the girls, if not to put you to work?

Oh, it was-- well, that camp where I was, they were always-- now, I find that there were always selections where they took-- like once, they asked for girls with long fingers that they needed in a factory where they made radios, or wiring, or something. Once, they asked for girls-- this I found out, that there were always selections. They selected girls. They wanted 500 girls, 300 girls.

And we were always left behind. First of all, we were not the same age. There was a time when they selected me and my sister. And my little sister was not selected. Then we somehow managed to get back to not to because we--

To stay with them.

To stay with her. And finally, we managed to all three of us be together. We went again and again through. But then they took us in a very bad-- and then they asked for 2,000 women to make this SchÃ¼tzengraben we were making, deep holes, which were five meter wide, five meter deep. But in the bottom, it was only a half a meter. So it looked like a cone.

Like a cone?

Yes. And we were under strict supervision of the SS and German engineers that it should be exactly-- it had to be exactly--

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Do you know what they were using them for?

Yes. Then they covered it with leaves, and they-- to camouflage-- how you say? And they were using it that American tanks would come, then they would fall in. So they were kilometers around the side, long, long lines of these SchÃ¼tzengraben, they called it. And it was very hard work. It was cold. It was-- but somehow-- why don't I think of this being so miserable? Because I was with my sister still.

And because you-- probably because you wanted to live and it was your nature.

I was hoping that we live to-- that we'll live and we'll come home and tell our parents the story. We would say, oh, I will never have to walk-- never have to take a train or a subway. We could walk. We are such an experts on walking because-- and we will never need to dig, I mean, to dig a garden or to build a house. We could dig. I mean, we were such an expert on digging. Now, I don't know it.

Mrs. Novak, we're about to run out of tape. And I was wondering if there was anything that you wanted to say before you ran out of tape? Or maybe I could tell you that your strength and your spirit have helped you to rebuild. And all the things that you did learn from your parents are not lost. But you've taken them and you've passed them on to your children. And they'll pass them to their grandchildren. And that should make you very proud.

Thank you. I'm happy to be alive now because I have two wonderful children. I have two very wonderful children and, I mean, seven grandchildren in one family.

That's wonderful.

And when I tell my daughter, when I look at Michael, my heart hurts from happiness. That's how I love them. I love them so much. And one thing with me, I don't care if I die tomorrow. I don't want to die because I have-- [AUDIO OUT]

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