

Left our town all together, the whole family.

OK. I just want to say we're beginning an interview with Mrs. Dora Riss. Is that how you--

Right.

And could you just begin by telling us exactly where and when you were born?

I was born in Poland, in Pruchnik, the town, and I was married in 1939. Five months later, they took us September. We left our town, and it was a big family. We were nine children. And we live in-- 13, 14 people left all together. And this was-- and the were survived.

OK, let me--

Are you a [INAUDIBLE]?

--before you go on, tell me exactly what happened when you say you were taken away. Exactly at the hour that happened.

Yeah. Our town was first not a big town, and our house was the Gestapo. A few people not-- and this was our-- we were happy. Because he told us as soon as we leave the house, and we're going to be survived all together. And this we did.

We took horses, and we went-- you know, we went to another town. This was [PLACE NAME]? There was a part between Russia and Germany. And every-- we were staying a few days, and they took all three my brothers, my father, and my husband, and my brother-in-law, Germany took them.

And some people, very rich people, they paid them, and they let them out. And then they took us to Russia. The next week--

When you say they took you, I'm really interested in all the details. I want to know exactly what they did because it's very hard for people today to understand.

They came at night from the Russia-- Russian people, and we had to pack everything. They took us to a big-- not to cars, on the big trucks, close trucks. He took us three weeks, they took us to Russia to Asino. This was the last stop. And there was too many people. And they sent us-- after two weeks, they send us to Ural.

All right, now how did-- they got you by train to Russia?

Close-- you know, like cattle taking.

Cattle cars?

Yeah.

And was there any food on the cattle cars?

They gave us food. They gave us food. And what did people do in terms of sanitary habits? I mean, did they stop the train so you could--

No, no. Just same-- same place we had. They stopped, you know, every other day they stopped and gave us food a little. And that's three weeks between details like that.

I think it's very hard for people today to understand what it was like.

They can't understand how that was.

I understand, but I'm thinking about I came out here today with two children, and people say, how could you bring two children? Somebody-- you were five months old?

My son, five month old.

Now, what did you do with your baby on the cattle car?

Very bad. I had to feed him.

And you were nursing the baby?

Yeah. And I had nothing to-- I lost my teeth, and I can't [INAUDIBLE] because no milk, nothing. We were very hard. I suffered a lot.

And what did you do with something like diapers? I mean, what did you do with the children? They ran around nude?

Well, we have to stay to watch the children. We have to stay for kipyatok, hot water in the line, and to take-- the whole family help me. And we wash the diapers, and we cleaned the babies.

But on the three weeks you were on the train, you were able to do this also?

Yeah. We had to do this.

And they would stop you when you would get off, and you would--

Yeah, they feed us. They gave you food.

And what did people talk about when they were on the trains? Did they have any idea what was happening?

They were miserable. Yeah, we knew. We're going to Russia. And there was big barracks, you know. You slept a few days. Then we-- was too many people. And it took us too Ural, to Sverdlovsk.

But did they tell you were going to work camp?

Yeah, yeah. You had to work. My husband was an accountant. He was a bookkeeper. He worked in the office.

Did anybody talk about trying to overthrow the Germans at that time?

No. We had a choice. We were in-- on the Russian, we had a choice to go home or to go to Russia. And my father was the one who said, no, we're not going back to Germany. We're going to Russia. And this what happened.

Is that what saved you?

Yeah, that what saved us. And we were in Sverdlovsk, but what reason was we didn't know, they arrested my father. Because they said he was a rich man at home.

And they arrested. They kept him by a few weeks. And after the army, the Polish army-- what's his name? They let him out when we went to Poland.

This was after--

This was after, right.

Now, when you were in Russia in the Urals, could you describe your day to day life? What did you do on a Monday morning, for example?

Well, I had a baby five months old, so I couldn't work. And the rest of my family used to work very hard. The [INAUDIBLE] was about 10 degrees below zero. It was very cold because we had in our apartment, we had ice at night, so cold.

We had to bring wood to make warm our apartment. And was what I had. They used to work on the-- you know, in--

You were living in an apartment by yourself, or were there other families?

No, no. The whole family together. We had 15 people. We had three rooms. Three families, three rooms.

And the other people from your town were in the same general area?

Not from the town. We had nothing to do with the town.

But when the Gestapo came to get you, it was just your family that was taken, or were they--

Just our apartment. It was-- the town was Stryi in Poland. And they took the whole family together.

And how long did you stay under those conditions?

Two weeks what they said.

And then from there?

From there, they took us to Asino, I said. The end of the start from the train.

And what happened at that point?

I told you before. Because too many people they were there, and they sent us back to Ural, to Sverdlovsk. And we were there till the army-- Polish army. I don't remember his name.

And he sent us-- we could go anyplace we wanted. We went to Samarkand, and that used to work on the tail road, the whole family. And then from there, three years later-- we were three years there. And they send us to Poland, to Lw³w.

And from Lw³w, we registered to go on to Germany. We went DP lager two years. And from there, we went-- we registered to-- we couldn't go to the United States. We had family in Ecuador. We went to Ecuador for three years. And from Ecuador, we came here.

And what year did you finally get to Ecuador?

To Ecuador, we went '45, right?

I think '48.

'48. '48.

But you were--

My son was terrified. He was 7 and 1/2 years old.

But prior to the time you went to Ecuador, you were in Germany at that point?

From Germany we went to Paris for the visa. We went for one year to Paris. From Paris to Ecuador. We waited almost a year, 11 months. And HIAS helped us. We were without money.

And what was your husband able to do?

Where, in Ecuador? Well, we had family there. They helped us. We made our quilts. And then we paid to United States by ourselves.

And you finally came here.

I came here, my parents were here. We came here.

And how had your parents gotten here? They got here because they had a son here, and a family you could go to a son or to parents. Not to relatives.

And at the time that you were in Paris, how long was that?

It was 11 months before we went to Ecuador.

And what were you doing in Paris?

In Paris--

Were you in hiding?

No. Paris was fine. This was after the war.

Oh, this was already after the war.

After.

I see. The time, I was losing it.

Yeah, losing the time.

I see. I see. Well, I still-- what interests me most of the stories that people have to tell, when you read a history book, I don't think you get the individual flavor of how people managed on a day to day basis, how they just got through the necessities.

Let me tell you something. Many time, we were without food. We had to suffer a little. And then we had to adjust to-- like in Russia, they worked. We got coupons. And for the coupons, you get food.

You see, no extra. Just for everybody, for the family, you got food. And it was very hard. What can I tell you?

[NON-ENGLISH]

Like we were in Sverdlovsk.

I can understand.

Yeah. We were in Sverdlovsk. Well, it was very cold there, and my brothers, my whole family went to work. And we

had to sleep a little longer, 12 to 2:00, to eat less. And instead of three times, we ate two times.

And mostly, we ate potatoes. And this was fill up.

I was thinking [NON-ENGLISH]

And the [NON-ENGLISH], we had children. We had to take care, and we had to wash the clothes, and prepare food for the rest of the family. And take your coupons to go collect your food. Was that the woman's job to do?

This was my mother's. Because I had a child, my sister had a child, we couldn't go out. And the rest of the family, they went to work.

And did people--

And the worst part, they arrest my father near Ural. And this was part of our life. They took him away.

And then we went back to Poland, and we couldn't stay there because we couldn't go to our town. And after we went to Germany, and from Germany, we went--

[NON-ENGLISH]

This is after.

[NON-ENGLISH]

I'm sorry, I hope I'm not interrupting.

It's all right because--

She's going off the topic.

Well, everybody-- I mean, it's the normal pattern. I just-- I was--

You just want to extract that.

What do you want to know, ma'am?

Is it OK if I interrupt? I'm sorry.

Go ahead.

All right. [NON-ENGLISH]

I speak English. I understand.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Not just for the winter. For the summer.

[NON-ENGLISH]

From Ural, we went to Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

All right.

We went the rest of the three years. Altogether, Russia we were three years.

[NON-ENGLISH]

[PHONE RINGING]

OK, it's finished?

[NON-ENGLISH]

Me, myself? I had a child. I didn't go to work.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Yeah, for the child. And the rest of the family, you have to prepare everything. We had to work for them, right?

[NON-ENGLISH]

Right.

[NON-ENGLISH]

How to say?

[NON-ENGLISH]

They used to work in a forest, and for the government.

This was your husband?

My whole family with the brothers. My whole family was--

They were a group of nine who stuck together through the war. There were six brothers, and three sisters, and several brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws. They went through as a group of 15.

And the brothers went out every day to chop wood. That was their job they were assigned. They kept alive by doing their job and stealing and eating food, or whatever they can get.

All right, but she said she didn't know why her family was singled out. But they went only as a family unit of 15.

What happened was they-- my grandfather was a wealthy man in his town in Poland. The Gestapo moved into the town, took over the house, and shipped them out immediately. That was before anything happened to the town, before--

Before there was everything.

Before anything else, any other developments happened, they were the first to be sent out. And they were even sent out early enough, from what you're saying, that they had a decision to make about whether they actually wanted to return to Poland or stay there. And at that point, my grandfather made the decision to stay in Russia rather than chance going back to Poland again.

And this is we survived.

That's why they were alone.

I understand.

The whole family together. He didn't let nobody go in different ways. Only together.

And then the others eventually got here, as well?

The family? Well, after we were in Germany, I couldn't go to United States because only to children. Only to the children. And we had-- my family I had here were a son. And he went here.

And I went to Ecuador because my husband had-- has family there. And they paid for us, and we went.

Everyone survived of the nine and the extended?

Yeah.

That's extraordinary. Yeah. And after a few years, we came here.

After the war, they were parceled out to different parts of the world. Two of her brothers ended up in Palestine and fought the war. Several came here. She went to Ecuador. There are cousins, and brothers, and sisters-- people who were not shipped out immediately died. Massive numbers of people were killed in that town.

There were-- my grandmother had-- was one of 10. Two brothers survived, and seven were killed.

My father had a big family.

Other people were killed in that group. Another lady had 17 children, and all 17 died. And all their children died.

We were lucky because the Gestapo was in our town. And--

Because they happened to have been there at home, they were shipped out early. And they were lucky to have gone to Russia.

Yeah, to say to us, will you go? It's better for you. Better leave the town and go. This is the reason the whole family was alive.

All right. How early on did people know that exterminations were taking place?

We didn't know about that before we left.

At what point did you find out?

When we were in Russia, in '43.

And how did you find out? If it wasn't printed in the newspaper, how did you find out?

Was on the radio. I think we heard in the radio in Russia. This was in Uzbekistan we went. Yeah.

We knew everything was going on. That's when the paper came-- the radio.

Was there any paper?

Was a paper then. In Russia?

Yeah.

Oh, yeah.

[NON-ENGLISH]

We were in Uzbekistan. My husband used to work for [NON-ENGLISH], and [NON-ENGLISH], for--

My father worked for the military governor. He somehow got a job doing paperwork for him, so--

He knew everything was going on. He was an accountant in the home. He knew everything was going on.

And when you found out, did you feel that the rest of the world knew also?

Yeah, we knew what's going on in Poland. We knew everything.

And what-- do you remember any discussions that you had with your husband or with your sisters and brothers in-laws or whatever about why people weren't doing something for you?

You know, we left our town because my father was a rich man. And they tell us, as soon as possible, leave the town. Otherwise, you're going to be--

[NON-ENGLISH]

Look, [NON-ENGLISH], we expected to also be dead then. I see.

But you said, for instance, that HIAS has helped you in Ecuador, or to get to Ecuador.

Now, this was before. This was after.

Do you remember any discussions that you had about why somebody in the Jewish world outside of Europe wasn't able to do something to help you?

We knew everything was going on. We knew everything. We couldn't help them.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Yeah, sure. It was--

[NON-ENGLISH]

We couldn't do nothing. We couldn't help them.

Did you wonder why somebody wasn't helping you?

You couldn't help us. You couldn't [NON-ENGLISH]. When the Polish army came, Anderson, he took out a lot of people from there to Israel. In fact, my two brothers left.

Your two daughters?

Two brothers. The youngest brothers-- the youngest.

Are their families still in Israel now?

No, nobody. They came here to be together.

They fought in the war-- in the '48 war. [INAUDIBLE]

I think it's very unusual that your family has so many survivors. I think that--

Yeah, the whole family survived. We came here the whole family. Only we lost here my parents after a short time. My mother was healthy the whole time. She passed away when we came here. She was here three years.

And then my father was with us. All brothers got married. And my sister was in Israel, also.

Is there anything that you can think of that-- discussions, or feelings, or something that went on in your family that enabled your family to hold together like this?

No. This was a good part. The whole family was together. We were so close.

Yeah, but why your family instead of somebody else's family who tried and--

This what I'm telling you. In our house was a big house. And we had the Gestapo there.

The what?

The Gestapo. And he said to us, as soon as possible, leave the town. Otherwise, we can't survive. Even on the Russia side, you see there was supposed to-- the border.

[NON-ENGLISH]

No, this--

[NON-ENGLISH]

--this is the whole idea. He was-- we came all-- we didn't live together with the parents after I was married. Only we came to be together with the parents, you see? And this was the good part. A man from Gestapo said to us, as soon as possible, leave the town. Otherwise, you can't survive.

I understand.

Yeah. And all together, we went all together. We were in Russia together. Then we came to Poland together. Only I couldn't go to Israel and to the United States because didn't let us. Only to a son, to a child.

If we went-- we had-- my husband had an aunt in Ecuador. We went to Ecuador. We were three years. And after the-- we came here.

OK, hold on.

I had a small child. We were--

[NON-ENGLISH]

[INAUDIBLE], he went to work. He went to work.

He had a job or--

Yeah, he-- knitting he learned. It was the Hadassah. It helped us a lot.

In each country, did you learn the language of the country, or did you--

Well, I'm not so fast in language. My father's-- my husband used to speak eight languages, very fast.

Is he here also? No, he-- yeah.

Is there anything that you can think of that you feel hasn't been told to your family or your children that you would like to talk about in terms of--

Like what?

Well, I don't know. I mean, I think it's very interesting how certain people survived. There's one story that people--

We have 15--

Winters mean that-- well, this is what I was just going to say that people who were able to attach themselves to at least one other person were able to survive. And if that person died, if they found another person. Now, I'm wondering whether your 15 together--

This is the good part. In our house, we had the biggest house in the town, people. And it was a big family. And we said, my brother-in-law, he was in Germany a few years with a nice German. And they said to him, leave as soon as possible. As soon as you leave, it's better for you.

He went on the Russia side, let's see, with horses, not with a car. And the whole family, we went together. This was-- we were lucky.

We left everything. We had a lumberyard and a beautiful house. We left everything, and we went without nothing.

Have you ever gone back to the town?

No. No way.

Did you ever maintain any kind of correspondence? Did you ever have any childhood friends who weren't Jewish that you contacted at any point?

Let me tell you something, because we didn't-- we couldn't take everything with us, just a little bit. And everything we left in our neighbor's house, you know, non-Jewish people. And we left everything. You mean like--

We didn't contact them--

--china, and silver, and things like that?

Everything That was about five months, six months after my wedding. Had plenty of things, you know. And we never came back. We never wrote to them. That's it.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Your children.

Your childhood in Poland, would you like to talk about that a little bit?

What, with Poland?

Before the war, when you were growing up before you were married.

You want to know?

Can I ask you some questions?

Oh, sure.

All right.

Yeah.

Tell me when you were young, you were born [INAUDIBLE]

1914.

1914. So that was just the end of-- you were growing up at the end of World War I. Do you ever remember any discussions of that war in your family?

No, no. Nothing.

And as a young child--

Matter of fact, my father was in the army. It was very hard. And the school was in our town, public school. Then it was in a different town because the town make the business school.

And did you go to cheder, as well?

Into cheder, yeah.

And tell me again, I know I keep asking you the same question, but it's something that I'm very interested in. When you were 10 years old or thereabouts, tell me what a typical day was like in your family.

There was a big family. We are nine children. When I was 10 like that? Used to have a lumberyard business. Everybody helps. You went to school, and--

Go to school in the morning.

In the morning, you know, how long I had to go. Sometimes a half day, a whole day. And at the times what I was free, I was to help. The whole family was to help.

And what would you do when you were 10 years old in the lumberyard? What kind of things would be your job?

We used to sell. 10 years old, even 8 years old, you know.

And who would come to buy, the Polish peasants, or--

Mostly Polish. They used to build houses-- not like here. Only from wood. Wooden houses you used to buy.

And your father had a good relationship with the non-Jewish?

Oh yeah, until we go to Russia.

Do you ever remember any antisemitic comments or anything as a child?

Not the whole time because they used to make money from us, you know. Only one time, this was the last year. To tell about the Jude's?

And used to make from-- I'm not going to tell it. I don't know how to explain. It was very interesting.

Let's do it in Yiddish.

No, it was very interesting. They used to make like a man, a big-- from cotton, or from-- just a big man, and they used to sign on the man, [POLISH], a Jude's [POLISH]-- uncle. This was interesting. There was another time-- you can understand.

It's Polish. I don't understand it either.

Can you have this closed?

--we didn't had any problems in our town.

And when you went to the public school, you had non-Jewish girlfriends that you went to school?

We were friendly.

What kind of games did you play as a child? Do you remember any? Did you play in the street and play--

Not too many. It was a big family. We had to help in the house. And we had homework like that. And we used to help in the business all the time. All children.

Did you have Friday night dinner together?

Oh, yeah.

Can you describe that for me?

Yeah. It was always a nice, big family. Very good. Nice and-- and the father was with us.

Would everybody put on clean clothes?

Oh, sure. Friday afternoon, everybody was dressed different, you know, for Shabbos.

Was that the only day you had a bath, or did you--

We had. We had.

Did you have plumbing in your home?

We had plumbing. We had a nice house. Beautiful house. In fact, we had two tenants, a doctor and a lawyer, in our house. Was a nice house. It's nice kept.

And what kind of food would your mother make for Friday night dinner?

Friday night, you know, what kind. You know, fish, and noodles. Chicken, like that.

Did she make the noodles herself?

Yeah, yeah.

And do you remember ever helping her make noodles?

I used to help.

Yeah, it's no problem.

And of the nine children, what number were you?

I was the fourth.

So you had others under you to take care of.

Yeah. Matter of fact, we came-- everybody was here, and two girls were in Israel. They went with Anders' Army from Russia. Well, this is also interesting. They went to Israel.

Then we went-- the whole family was together. My mother passed away. They all came here from Israel, from Ecuador. You know, we came here and were together.

Was your family very religious?

They used to be, yeah.

Did they keep kosher?

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Did you ever go to the shochet with your mother or something to have a chicken killed?

That's right. I used to go, right.

Could you-- do you remember that? Could you talk about it a little bit?

No, no. I remember. I remember this. I used to go sometimes.

[NON-ENGLISH]

No, no. We used to buy. We used to buy.

You'd buy the chicken?

The chicken, and we used to--

And take it?

Yeah. Is this interesting for you?

Well, I think it's-- you know, it's not that it's for me. It's the idea that people today don't understand that you buy a chicken, and you walk with it to the butcher, and then you bring the chicken home with you.

Yeah. Used to go to the shochet, right. He used to kill.

--going on the streetcar with a chicken, you know. I mean, that's so removed from what children today know. A 10-year-

old child today--

No, we had a very hard time in Russia.

[NON-ENGLISH]

In Poland it was easy. You know, it was nice.

And did you ever have servants in your home?

In our home?

When you were growing--

It was a synagogue.

--in Poland.

A synagogue.

No, I say servants. People to help your mother with the nine children. Did you have someone--

Oh, we had-- no, we had a help. We had a help. The laundry we had to do by ourselves. You know, not with a washing machine.

Right. But you did it in the home. You didn't--

In the home. We had a help always. We had two helps, one to the horses, and one to the house. Was a big family. We had a help in the business also.

Can you describe a memory of a certain birthday where you got a certain present when you were young, or--

I don't think so. [LAUGHS] It was a big family.

Someone had a birthday party?

Yeah, from friends used to make birthday parties. Or not in the family. We had a nice party. Cooked, and nice meals. Yeah.

Do you ever remember a special present your parents gave you when you were young, something that sticks in your mind-- a special doll or something you may have gotten?

Well, we used to buy us not too many because it was a big family. And we didn't had too much time to play with.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Yeah, yeah. From the parents?

Yeah.

Yeah, I had a doll, a ball. You know, not too many presents.

[NON-ENGLISH]

A special?

[NON-ENGLISH]

No special. No because it was a big family. We didn't bother too much with.

And what about the summers? What kind of things did you do when there was no school in the summer? In the school was a nice little town. And yeah, we had activity there-- the ball, and swimming also.

Did the more wealthier people, did the mothers used to take the children to the country to get outside the city, or you were already in the country in your town?

Oh, in the country. We didn't go too much.

Do you ever remember your parents ever traveling anywhere outside?

Oh, they were. Yeah, they were traveling.

Where would they go?

Oh, you want the town where they went?

I mean, outside of Poland, or mostly within Poland?

Inside. Ukrainians, Krzeszowice, like that.

Was it a big event when they would pack up to go?

Yeah, they had to go for the health. They had to go there.

And who would take care of you in the--

Of us? Yeah, my older sister. So about seven years she took care of us. And we had the help, you know, a maid.

I mean, you don't-- I think the children then had a lot more responsibility on them than they do today.

Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

They were expected to do many things that people don't expect their children.

Like me, I watched the younger children. I was the fourth in the family, and after me, five children. We used to watch them. We used to help a lot.

What can you--

And everybody came here to the United States-- the whole family. If they came from Ecuador, I lost my mother.

[NON-ENGLISH]

And my father was with me in my house for 12 years.

[NON-ENGLISH]

We used to have stores, business. Used to work. It wasn't a big town.

OK, well, thank you very much.

You're welcome. You're going to know something from-- and not too much, right?