

My name is Hilda Schwartz.

Where were you born, Hilda?

Hilda Schwartz is my married name, now, since I came to the United States. My maiden name was Henja Kirshenbaum.

Hilda, could we start with a little bit about your youth and work forward, chronologically, some of your memories from that period of time?

The town I was born in is Radom. I was the oldest daughter of Aaron Hava Kirschenbaum. It's so difficult.

It's OK.

My father was a merchant that was actually traveling, from town to town, where they had the markets. And a very proud man, very religious person. And with that heritage of Judaism, coming all the way back from a Hasidic origin.

I was attending school, public school, Polish schools. At the same time, also going to Bais Yaakov, which means the House of Jewish learning's for girls. And that is Bais Yaakov. I had-- it was a strictly religious home with Orthodox observance, not fanatics but Orthodox kashrut, and the Polish-type of Judaism.

Also I was proud of it. As a child, I had a very strong urge to see what the other world was like not just the Jewish world. And I would want to go ice skating. Because I saw children on skates. And that would have been very much against my parents' belief, especially as a girl. And I had an sister. I had two brothers.

But I did go ice skating. But if I would go ice skating, I would look in to see how many Christians are there. If there is going to be some incident, right there, because I was typical-Jewish looking, black hair and the typical Judaism was on my face, which a Christian would recognize. And occasionally, there would-- there are many Jews. And beatings would start. And my biggest fear was not that I'll be beaten up, but that my father or mother will find out that I went ice skating.

My brothers? We were a very devoted family. And this is why I am crying. My brothers knew that I would go ice skating. They would go, to watch me, that nothing will happen to me. And I'm, right now, alive here because of that particular brother.

Oh, well this was till I was about age 13, when I finished public school. And the family had moved to a town, Łódź. And as I said, I always wanted learning very much. And I wanted very much to go on to gymnasium, which was very against my father's principle, because a girl should not be too much educated. Otherwise, she's not going to get a husband that eagerly or a Jewish husband, that is religious, that he wanted. But thanks to my very beloved uncle that prevailed upon him, that I should go on, I did go to gymnasium.

And it was really very happy days that I went, but the stipulation was that I'm going to go to a Jewish gymnasium where there are no boys and only girls. And that was fine as long as I could get the education. It was a much larger city. And it was a wonderful cultural Jewish life. And I just loved it. And the family loved it.

My brother went on to school, to a very fine school. Because, for boys, education was the thing to do. Being Jewish education, secular education, it was the thing to do.

1939-- I'm trying to make it brief-- war came about. My father, as a young man, had an obligation, to the Polish Army, to follow the army, otherwise he's going to be a deserter. He began going to the Russian border when the Army left us. It was the most difficult moment of-- that I can remember, except two other incidents when he left.

But evidently leaving on the road, he saw the futility of it, the nonsense. He returned back. And we remained

in Łódź with the fate of the rest of the Jews. Łódź was very close to the German border. It was a very Germanic city. It was a city-- textile industry flourished.

And my father was in that industry, so were his other forefathers and people. And the reason he did go to Łódź? Because of his brother that felt that he should come and to be his partner. He--

Then, of course, within a very short time, they decided to create a ghetto in Łódź. And that is a site that, really, I wish someone had pictures. It was the same type when the Marrano Jews, I would compare to. We always had pictures, the way the Jews, the Marrano Jews were, you know, in the taleisim. You know that picture, in the taleisim, with their children going?

This is exactly what happened. The Germans announced that the ghetto is open. Everybody is going out. One grabbed, being that it was Friday and Shabbos was being prepared-- one grabbed the soup. The other one took the challah. And one took this. We didn't think of taking the essentials. Because, at that time, we really weren't aware of what the Germans are capable of. But we grabbed as much as we could. And we went into the ghetto.

And immediately, they were assigned Jewish leaders that were designating places, sharing and so forth and so on, and the designated buildings, whatever they were.

Did your whole family go--

The whole family.

--to the ghetto?

Right. At that time, I had lost, through an accident, my sister. Which, by the way, was a beautiful girl. But that was an accident. And she was young. And that was also part of the reason why we moved to Łódź. That was before the war. Now, I don't want to mix that up.

What happened after your family moved into the ghetto? What was that like?

We moved into the ghetto. I could really not even begin to explain it. Because we were there a very short time. It was impossible to live. It was crowded. It was chaos. It was just unbelievable to begin to even think of being there. And I am talking about the first two, three days.

Rumors were always going around of any kind. They're going to do this. They're going to do that. Well, somehow, being the oldest child, I had taken upon myself a certain responsibility of protecting them. Previously to the ghetto, we, my brother and I, being that we originally lived in Radom, that was not annexed yet to the German Reich, just like Łódź was. My brother and I, we're going back and forth, on two occasions, transferring back some funds to Radom, such as jewelry, which was really very humble.

When I say, jewelry, I want it to be understood, not in the American sense of diamonds or a string of pearls was jewelry. The pearls might have not even been the real pearls-- a gold ring, a little bracelet, but it was jewelry. Some money, Polish money, some objects that we, under the times then, considered very valuable.

Therefore, I began suggesting to my parents that maybe we should begin thinking of going back to Radom and delay the presses of being under the German Reich. I wasn't smarter than others. I wasn't wiser than others. I just felt, well, there are the Poles, there. And here are the Germans, already.

But my parents feared that move very badly. It meant hiring a horse and wagon, from village to village, trying to avoid the German soldiers, trusting the Poles that we never trusted. Because they very well knew, if you were running, you had valuables. Well, valuables to them were more pronounced than what--

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

--then what valuables to us were. So you stood the chance of harm from the trusted and the oppressor.

Now, what do you do? You begin thinking.

Am I still on?

No.

You begin thinking, or you start weighing-- what is the best. We decided there was somebody that was highly recommended. He had come back several times. He knew the routes. We took him. We reached Radom. We reached Radom. It was fine for about, I would say, a couple of months. The money that we brought became completely called in value, began losing, because we did not exchange, like in any other wars. Money, you exchange it, and then you figure, well, there's no point exchanging, because it's not going to last too long. Therefore, we'll sit with the money and that will have values or you exchange just a little bit to have, from the day to day, living.

Well, we were outsmarted. Therefore, financially, we were already very poorly situated. It worried my parents terribly. It worried them to a point where we began eating less and less to stretch it for longer. But it was-- little did we know that it didn't make any difference. The ghetto began there. They roundups began there. And now, this is where the struggle really began.

They made a ghetto. We went into the ghetto. We were fortunate. We knew people there. Therefore, we got our quarters-- half of a stable. In one side of the stable were two cows, a horse, and some chickens. The other side of the stable, divided by bales of hay, we lived.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

It was beautiful. It was really beautiful. I don't want this to be understand sarcastically. But this was the most beautiful time that I remember with my parents. [CRYING]

[SOBBING] I can't.

Tell me about the time when you were in the stable with your family.

[SOBBING] Oh, god, I can't. I can't do it. I can't do it. Oh, why do I? I can't. I don't watch pictures. I don't read books. But I wanted to be [INAUDIBLE] my kids don't know a thing. [CRYING]

No, I can't go on. I promised myself that I want to.

You can. You can do it.

What could I do?

This is for your grandchildren.

No. How do I do that?

You tell them what happened.

I can't. I want them to have it. Am I on?

Yeah.

[CRYING]

Maybe shut that off for a minute.

Talk to me about what happened after you were relocated in the ghetto, when you were living in the stable

with your family?

Well, it was beautiful. You know why?

Maybe I won't look at you.

It was-- we were all together. We knew. We already heard what's going on. But as if we would be sensing that these are precious moments. And there were instances where my mother and I didn't go to the shtiebel at that time. The shul was-- I don't think it was part of it. But we would go together. Because, if my father and my brothers went, well, you know, maybe we'll be separated then. So we went with them.

And we came back. And we didn't have a tablecloth. We had a sheet. And that was the tablecloth. And then we just knew we are together. Well, I'll go ahead.

Well, at the ghetto, at this time, it was two ghettos, one, the ghetto in Radom, on Wolanowa, and one on Nowy Swiat. And one day, when we got up, we heard that the other ghetto was all rounded up and all taken away. You just said, they were all taken away.

The cries, carrying [? sons-- ?] there was some family, my family-- and by "my" I mean aunts, uncles, cousins that lived over, the other side. They were just taken away. We knew we the next. But you hoped. You prayed. You asked God, why, when will it end?

Then this ghetto began organizing working groups. I wanted to go to work, because I figured by going out in a group, the group consisted of-- they came in. They round up. They asked different skills-- painters or whatever. My skill was only knowing the German language.

My father and mother were very unhappy. But then, again, I decided I have to begin thinking of bringing in some bread, some food, and not the money. The money was not-- you couldn't buy anything for the money. Oh, you could, but it was big money. And I went with my brother. That was my oldest brother. Not my oldest-- I was the oldest-- my brother after me.

His name was [PERSONAL NAME]. My son is named after, my oldest son, which would have been against the religion. You don't name your child for somebody that died young. I named him. But I went. But he was my protector. He went to work, too.

I was tested in my German. And I worked in a German office. He worked on the fields. I would leave-- left for him, on the steps, when he passes by, he'll have his lunch. And he'll put some--

Oh, my God.

We managed very well. There were some Danish people that worked there, too. These were the kindest, the nicest, the most outstanding human beings I have ever, ever encountered except my husband. They helped me so much that my family actually was not hungry because of them.

Not only do they give me food, they gave me clothing. They gave me medication that they had sent. They had sent to them from Denmark. There was never any string attached. There was no thank you required. They had to be very careful doing it. Nevertheless, they did it.

They were really the only contact for me and my brother, because we were on the outside with a belief that there are yet people, that are not Jewish, that have a heart.

If ever-- I only saw their faces. I have never saw-- I never had contact with them. They only put the food, or whatever they had, they put it in a designated place. And the designated place was a shingle, that they tore away from that barrack, that I was sitting in. And they would put it there, in. And if it got dark, I would go out and take a look that nobody was around, and I would take it.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

This lasted for about two or three months. One day, they decided that they will have two bosses on different hours. That meant they parted me from my brother. It was a very difficult time, because then I never knew if my brother arrived there. And he never knew if I arrived there. But we managed even with this.

He would pass by the window to take his bread. And I would see him believing I've never known him.

One morning, late October, during the night, we hear-- we heard some shooting. But we figured, well, the Germans or the Ukrainians or whoever got drunk, and they having whatever. We didn't know. My brother had left, because he left two hours before me. He would go 4 o'clock. I would go 6 o'clock.

And when I walked out the whole street, that I walked through, was nothing but bodies, dead bodies and bodies. And in these bodies, I began looking for no one but my brother. And to think, I was happy when it wasn't my brother. That's what they did to us. It wasn't my brother. Maybe the word isn't happy. Maybe the word was not concern. And I walked among them, bodies of people that I knew, that I went to work with every day.

When I came to Wolanow, I was told they beat my brother up, unmercifully. Because he thought that I was dead. One of the Danes saw once my brother, as I found out later, taking the bread. And he realized that that must be somebody that I wanted him to have. He saw him being beaten up. That Dane made an excuse, that he wants to finish him off, for the Germans that was beating him. And he took care of my brother four days. And he was all right.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

A lot had changed from that day on. We became very frightened, my brother and I.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

We went on.

But he lost a lot of his will. It was very obvious.

I didn't know enough to talk to him.

But then, the ghetto in Radom was closed-- what they called, "closed." They killed a great amount of people. The rest of them were told to go to the places where they worked.

My family went to the Wolanow. And there we left and lived in the barracks. Again, we were together. The men were separated from the women. My father was with my two brothers. My youngest brother was then-- yeah, he was six years old.

My mother worked in the kitchen. My father worked, with my brother, in the fields, supposedly road building the road to Moscow, from Germany, from Berlin, through Poland, to Moscow. And I continued working in the office.

They made clearing. They were cleaning out from the weak, every once in a while. And the cleaning out would be lining everybody up and killing them out. A child was not supposed to be there. We were forever hiding my little brother.

One of the roundups, it was very fast and furious. And there was nothing we could have done with my little brother. (SOBBING) There was a barrel of manure. I stacked that child into the manure, covered up his face, with his hand and said, either you want to live or you want to kill mama if they will see her with you. And I stuck into the manure. That's how he survived this one.

I got sick with typhus. We can't-- I'm making this very short.

Go ahead. Continue talking.

When I got typhus, I had to be in bed. My brother was on the roads. He knew that they were going to kill. He overheard a conversation, with the Ukrainians, that they're getting a lot of vodka to go to the camp and to kill all the typhus patients, otherwise typhus will spread into the rest of the population, meaning the German population.

He ran ahead of them to hide me from their guns. My brother had lost interest in life, so I thought. He made it. He buried me under the bedding, at a bed, and told me, I am under the bed. And if you're going to say a word, they're going to kill me. Don't cry, because I am under the bed.

That was fine with that. [CRYING] God! I don't want to do it. I don't.

Did you want to give it--

No. I don't want to do it. No.

We'll stop for a little bit.

If I making too long a time.

No.

Well, I survived the typhus. A lot of people did not. I lost all my hair. I lost my hearing for a short while. My hearing gradually came back. As weak as I was, I knew. That time, my brother really forced me to go back to work. I went back to work.

And we went from. Wolanow. The camp began-- evidently, the Russian Army was advancing. And they evidently decided to consolidate different camps. So they liquidated the camp in Wolanow. And we were on the road to go to another camp.

When was this, Hilda? Was this in 1943?

No. At the beginning of '43, the beginning of '43. And we were on our way to the camp Blizyn. That's right, we were on our way to the camp Blizyn.

They made a stop in Radom. At the stop in Radom, we were in the wagons, the same transport wagons, trains that were really the most horrible thing. Because we knew that these wagons take people to the end of the road.

The stop was made in Radom. Evidently, they needed some extra people in Radom. One of my German bosses, that really was a German.

And of my hate to the German, it is absolutely. I cannot begin with that. Because it's not a natural hate that I have. Because there shouldn't be that much hate in one person, but I do have. I would like to rid myself of it. But I can't. I don't think I ever will.

And I wanted to go back to that place, in Radom, because I felt-- by I, "my family"-- because I felt, at least there, we knew people. And it'll be a little easier than in that place, Blizyn. But it was hard to tell where or what. In retrospect, probably maybe more would have survived had I gone to-- but it's hard to tell.

And we were taken off in Radom. And the one that was my boss, that I thought that he admired my German, and that I was always doing work for him, (SOBBING) he was the one that tried to point out my little brother, and only because I wore a thick coat. I got into the coat, away from my mother, and told me, to step by step, go with me in my big coat. It wasn't a coat. It was a blanket not a coat.

And we got to Radom. There, again, we were in the [NON-ENGLISH], which was the ammunition factory, on

Szkolna, and in the camps. Again, the same type of camp as Wolanow was, but you had not too far to go--

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

Shh, shh.

You had not too far to go to work. And there we stayed until they liquidated that camp. And we were take on the very famous walk, from Radom, to Tomaszow, because the Russians were advancing. On that walk, there were about three or four wagons, and I put my mother on a wagon. She was 42 years old. But I figured, as long as she'll get a little rest?

Neither I or my brother stepped away from that wagon, trying to see what it is. Suddenly, the wagon got an order to go faster. And we grabbed my mother off the wagon.

Within five minutes, everybody on the wagon was shot. All the wagons were shot-- children, women, and young girls that wanted just to rest, because they couldn't walk. I can't-- I don't know exactly what it is in mileage, but it's two cities, very far apart. Nobody would think of walking.

A lot of people died on that march. A lot of people buried themselves under the ground. The Germans were smarter than us. They had dogs that smelled out the human bodies after they buried themselves. We Jews are bright. We beat them with this. We used feces and the night.

Human feces to cover up the places where the people buried themselves. Three of the people are, here, right with me at this gathering, that buried themselves like that. A lot of them perished, because the Polaks caught them. Because you were chased not only by the Germans. You were chased by the Polaks, too. You never knew who was worse.

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

We reached Tomaszow. We were put in jails, no food. And that's-- Tomaszow is the end of our being together. There, we were put in wagons to Oswiecim, Auschwitz. Separated my brothers, me from my mother, myself and my mother, my brothers and my father.

I have skipped a lot. I've skipped a lot of different incidents, because I can't. We got there. They took me with my mother. I didn't know, until after the war, where my father and brothers went. Since I was the protector, I tried to see what is ahead of the line, because I didn't know what Oswiecim was. I didn't know what Auschwitz was. None of us knew.

Because I was in front of the line, because I wanted to see-- well, not in front of the line, somewhere in the beginning of the line. The order came, older women should be gassed. My mother, 42 years old, not yet, she was the older woman. Not a gray hair in her head.

Dignity on her face, I held her hand. I says, Mama, I'm going with you. She says, you are not going with me here. I said, you don't know where you're going, Mama. (SOBBING) She says, [SPEAKING YIDDISH] They beat me. And I wanted to go. My friend is there. She knows that I fought, and I wanted to go with Mama. I wanted to go with you. [CRYING] I really wanted to go with her. Believe me, I did.

Thank gosh, my head, Paula Juli is here. She took her scarf. And she bandaged me, and Mama was gone forever. This was the last time I saw my mother, 42 years old. My daughter's named after my mother.

I was happy my mother wasn't there with me. I was very happy. She would not like to see me the way I was. It wasn't a place for a mother to see her daughter. And I wouldn't of liked to see her there.

No. Well, you know, I think I decided, right after that, that I want to live. I don't know if I decided or I don't know if I was telling the people that we should live. That's what they tell me now, here, when I met them now. They always say to me, Hilda, you always say, we can't give up. You're always saying, don't give up. But I think my mother dead of in a terrible--

Well, Auschwitz is a history that's recorded.

And what happened to you at the time of liberation?

I wanted to get out from there. And one day, I was staying with my cousin, that I met there. I didn't know she was there. At this point, I was all alone. And I met her. She was my cousin from Łódź. And we were very happy being together.

And one day, I was with her. And they were selecting a group to go to work. In Auschwitz, they did not shave my hair for some reason. I guess because I was knocked down and the head was bloody. And she says, let's get out to that work group. And I had no shoes. And I said, where am I going to go without shoes? Winter is approaching. I just stay here as medic.

She says, well, but let's not part. And with this, they parted us. They divided the line. And she just waved to me. That was my last, last relative at that time. After the war, I found out that the work they took her to was the ocean, the sea, where they shot them. That was the work where they took her to. And I didn't go, because I didn't have the shoes. And she had shoes.

From there, they picked us to go to camp in Sudetenland. The group I was with, from Radom, I stayed with. They became my brother and sister, my mother. And we stayed together, as much as we could, when they didn't separate us.

And we were in [NON-ENGLISH], worked for the very famous factory that is now a very well-known German - well, no, a German factory, ammunition factory. That the guy said, now, the German guy recently said, we volunteered for it. Until, there, we were liberated, May 9, '44, right?

1945.

'45. And Germans saw their children, with my grandchildren, with their children.