

Holocaust Survivors in Washington DC, April 12th, 1983, interview with Klara Snyder. Could you tell me your name and spell your last name, please?

Klara, with K-L-A-R-A, Snyder, S-N-Y-D-E-R.

And could you tell me your maiden name and spell it, please?

My maiden name was Weisz, W-E-I-S-Z.

Can you tell me where and when were you born?

I was born in Konyar, Hungary, 1926, March 23rd.

Klara, what would you like to start talking about? Do you want to talk about before the war?

Yes, I would like to tell about my family, how many, how they were, my own, and then, I go back to that.

Why don't you start, relax, that's it. So how many people-- how many children do you have in your family?

We were four children-- my mother had four children. Their name-- Jolan, Magda, Tibor, and my own, Klara. My mother had many children, but we are the only four who survived. My father's name was Naftali, Nandor, in Hungarian. My mother's name was Hermina.

I come from Eger, Heves varmegye, Hungary. I lived my life in a beautiful town, very happy family life. I had no problem-- no persecution-- until the German army came in to Eger. I was very good in my school.

How old were you when they came in?

16. I was very busy with my schoolwork. I had great ambition. I was going to be a great lawyer. End of story? Almost.

The Germans came in, in March, just on my birthday. Two days after, I saw my beloved father beaten down to the ground by the German soldiers. They cut his beard off. After that, when I saw my father, my life was never the same.

We were put into a ghetto, which the ghetto meant we were surrounded by the walls, and we were not allowed to go out to do our daily shopping, and daily work. We had to get by from the food what we had already inside, until we were one night put out on the street. The Germans and the Hungarians came during the night, and they only want what they said, everybody out.

I was standing on the street--

Were you in the middle of sleeping and they woke you up?

Yes.

And did you get time to get dressed?

Yes, we had time to get dressed. That's about it.

Did they say you could bring anything?

No, no, everybody just get out of the house and standing out on the street. We were standing outside on the street--

You're with your family.

With my family, yes. I didn't know what was coming. But apparently, many people did, because they were committing suicide and cutting their wrists right and left. The sirens was screaming, they were taking them to the hospital, trying to save them.

Then, by the next day, everybody was out of their houses, and we were ordered to go to a factory, where we were stationed for a while. We were put to work, but was just a makeshift work. And from there--

Where were you living now, when you went to the--

On the ground. This was a brick factory.

Only on the ground?

Have you ever seen a brick factory? There is a roof over the ground, which dries the bricks, they dry the bricks. So everybody was told to stay inside of this territory of the brick factory. And we were staying on the ground. It was no rooms, there was no facilities.

And you were still all together?

We were all together, yes. And then, maybe after two days there, the cattle cars came, and thousands and thousands of people were already gathered from all over, in this collective place, and we were put into the cattle cars like sardines. No room to sit down, no room to hardly breathe. The door was locked.

And then, the train started rolling. I had no idea where the trains were going.

I had beautiful long hair at the time, and my mother-- my mother thought that somebody might think that I look too good. So then, in the cattle car, she borrowed the scissors, and started chopping down my hair.

I was clinging to my mother all this time. My mother was very brave. We didn't cry. We were hungry, but mostly were thirsty. We had nothing to eat or drink.

We had no toilet facilities. The older people suffered the most.

Because they weren't well? The older people, is that way?

Yeah. And they had to stand all this time, but no room to sit down.

All of a sudden, my mother said to me, you have to escape. You are our only hope. You have to get out of here.

The cattle cars were locked, and at one station, I don't know where we were, would be at the border of Hungary going towards Poland, I couldn't tell where we were-- we were going with such speed that you could hardly see if you looked out, the stations where we are going by. But it was all strange places, I have never seen them before.

And then, they opened the gates, the cattle car doors, my mother told me, jump. I jumped. I was told to jump. I jumped.

I jumped down from that train, rolled under the train. The train was standing. And then, I went over on the other side of the train and rolled down on the embankment.

It was high brush there, but by the time I rolled down to that little valley, I felt a terrible pain in my leg. I didn't know what happened. I started running-- got up from the ground, I started-- tried--

You're all alone? The rest of your family was still on the train?

Yeah, on the train, yeah. I started running. And of course, time doesn't mean anything when you are scared-- it is forever.

I was running. I felt-- what did I feel? I felt a little hope that I might get away. I couldn't believe it in my mind, but my heart was beating, and I was running, and I felt I will make it.

Didn't take one more minute after that, the German soldiers caught me with their dogs, dragged me back. Because by that time, I couldn't even walk. My ankle was so sore. When I jumped, I must have twisted my ankle, and it hurt terribly.

I was not touched. I was just pushed around and pushed back on the train.

With your family, or somewhere else?

In the same-- where my family was.

Why did she tell you to jump and nobody else?

Not that many in that wagon, in that cattle car, were my age. And I was healthy.

What about your other brothers and sisters?

Nobody, not my brother or my sister were with me.

Where were they?

They were all in different places. My brother was taken to the camps-- in a forced labor camp. He was already taken.

My two sisters, my younger sister, older than I am, she was in Budapest in the ghetto. And my older sister was already in a concentration camp.

Oh, I see. So you were the only child.

I was home only with my parents.

So they put you back on the train with your parents.

Put me back on the train. And after, I would think, two days of very, very speedy riding on the train, we arrived to a place, which we had no idea existed in this world. They told us right away to jump off the train, stand in line, quick, quick, quick. My father was behind me, my mother--

Where were you? Where did you arrive to?

Auschwitz.

Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Dr. Mengele was standing there--

Where was your father?

My father was behind me.

And your mother?

My mother next to me. Mengele was standing in front of us, with a riding stick in his hand. He looked at me, he touched my shoulder with the riding stick, and he looked very approvingly of me. And he said, you're going to go to the work-- the brigade. You will be very good to work.

My mother was next to me, and she said, in German, she's my daughter. I want to be with her. And he looked at her, and with a half smile he said, don't worry, mother. You will see your daughter tonight at the mess hall.

My father behind me. I hugged him, because I had a fear that I will never see him again. But I believed him that I will see my mother.

We parted. My mother was sent to one side, I was to the other. I looked back at my mother. I took a double step, and she came back also toward me. And she said to Mengele that her foot is hurting, she won't be able to walk too far. And he smiled, very benevolent, said, don't worry, we make her well.

My mother and my father went away, straight to the gas chambers. Which I didn't know at the time what it was. I was sent also to a chamber. We were stripped naked, shaved, all our body hair, or hair on the top of our head.

Then we were deloused-- delousing means sprayed DDT on us. And then, we were thrown a piece of clothing to cover our body, and a piece of horrible wooden shoe.

We were marched straight to our barracks, when we were chosen be alive, for a short while, until the next selection came.

The blockova said--

What's that?

The blockova is the head of that block. It's in Polish. That was the name. The blockova said, don't report any sickness.

I didn't believe it. I thought, they don't want you to go to the doctor's. The next day, when my ankle was really swollen, I reported that I can't stand in that zahlappell-- zahlappell was the counting, which you had to stand on your feet for three, four hours every morning. I did it one day, the next day, it was too painful, and I reported sick.

They told us to stay in one room, in the same block-- meant the barrack. Block meant the barrack. They had no furnishing, no facilities to go to the bathroom. We were just laying on the floor-- was a wooden floor.

Then, when they called my number-- I was tattooed when I arrived, after the bath, I was tattooed. And they called my number. And about 40, 45 of us were marched out to a clearing. We were out there, standing, and nobody was around. We sat down on the ground.

And finally, I don't know who it was, came and just said, the doctor will be coming to check you out. More than a half a day, standing and waiting around in the clearing, a truck came. The order said to make a circle in that clearing right around that circle, right around that little Jeep type of truck.

And in the next minute, when we were finished making the circle, they uncovered that little truck-- a machine gun was on it. And the machine guns started going very fast. I couldn't tell you what happened. The only thing that I know, I was the only one who came out of that clearing alive.

I know was next to me a young woman from the same town-- I know her. She was pregnant with a baby. She fell over me. She knocked me over before the bullet could hit me.

I don't know if she grabbed me, or she just fell over me, I couldn't say. The only thing I know, I was knocked down. Because I was not too study on my feet to begin with, I guess. I was down on the ground.

I didn't look back, but I know nobody else walked out of there, because nobody came back to the barrack where I was. Coming back, crawling back-- I didn't get out on my two legs. I was crawling on my--

Did they know you were alive? Did the Germans know you were alive? What did they do after they--

Nobody-- the truck took off. That job was finished, the truck took off. I heard the engine, but I didn't see it, because probably I didn't open my eyes. But I know I was crawling.

I was crawling on my fours. I got back to this crossroad, and I was looking for the barrack where I came from. And there came walking to the guard house a German officer, who said to me, come here. I did. He set me down on a chair, and with one twist of his hand, he corrected my ankle.

He put an ACE bandage on it, tight. He asked me very, very nicely, is it tight? I remember that. I didn't dare to answer, because it was tight.

But I just lay my head, because I couldn't open my mouth. I was so scared. I couldn't say anything about what happened before.

I didn't say anything to him in German. I just went back to the barracks, and the people were asking me, where are the rest of you?

I just said, everybody is dead. I can't say what I felt, because I think by that time, the Germans gave us in the morning and at evening, some kind of a slop which had something in it which made us numb. When you take Valium-- have you ever taken Valium? Your mind is a blank.

You can't really feel. I don't know what they put into the food. it stopped all menstruation in one month's time. It could not have been from malnourishment, because we were well-nourished, and you don't lose that much strength in one month. They must have put something there.

I believe it very strongly, because I know the kind of a constant numbness I felt, and I am a very sensitive person.

That was your reaction-- your response to surviving that you didn't let yourself feel, maybe?

No, no, I don't think that. Because at that point, I could still cry some. I could still laugh some. Some.

Did you have special friends that you depended on, and who you helped?

I had many friends. And I know that my sister was in the next lager, but I didn't want to go close to her, or in the same block, because I know my sister was much older than I was, and she would have given me her food if she had seen me suffering. I know that. And I thought, I better stay away.

Did she know you were there? She didn't know you were there?

She didn't see me, but I have seen her. But you find out through the grapevine, from which town where the people were. I think she knew it. She hasn't seen me, but I did see her.

Then, after awhile, they chose me for work, and I got into a group of workers who worked in the kitchen. And I was very fortunate that I could steal enough onions and garlic from the kitchen, and I was going around to all my townspeople who survived, I was giving them. And actually, that was life. The garlic and the onions gave us enough vitamins that we were not sick.

I was a runner for a while, that I had-- they were sending me from one lager to another. And I was sent, taking messages. And at the same time, I had a little bundle tied under my dress, on my leg, and I would give out the garlic and onions to people.

Wasn't that dangerous?

Well, if they found you, they took away all the garlic and onions.

They didn't hurt you?

They wouldn't hurt you, no. Because that stealing potatoes, skin of potatoes, the slop, it was going on.

I got into a place at one time, where the same doctor who corrected my ankle, was doing research on twins. Artificial insemination, that was his speciality.

This same doctor could do the worst thing to me, he corrected my ankle.

After that, they put me from Birkenau, they sent me to Auschwitz-- Auschwitz factory. That was the former [INAUDIBLE]. And we are making a hand grenades there. And the important part, what I wanted to talk about, I don't know if history will know this, there was an underground in Auschwitz. There was an underground plot in this factory.

I was just one of the workers on the assembly line. I was contacted by somebody to try to steal the powder what I was working with. My job was to measure the powder, and place--

The gunpowder?

Gunpowder-- gunpowder into that grenade. They asked me to try to steal as much as possible, and as best I know, to find ways to take out every day some gunpowder. I know, I was one-- they must have been many, many more. I don't know who they were.

You did it?

I did it. They were searching you coming in and going out. I put the powder every day in my back-- all the way back in the tooth. Which it was a horrible, horrible rotten tooth with a big cavity. I put it in there. And that's how I took out a little bit at a time, but every day.

You put the powder in you tooth?

In my tooth.

It's loose, you just packed it in?

I tried to get a little bit of paper-- I didn't dare to close my mouth. We were supposed to sing the marching, coming, going, I was just mouthing. I didn't close my mouth all the way, because I didn't want to swallow.

It was bad, but it was not that much--

That was dangerous.

It was dangerous, because if they caught me, that would have been the end. But they didn't, and the final thing what happened-- all of us took out enough powder that the man who was an engineer, a French engineer, made a bomb, and blew up the crematorium.

History should know about there was a woman named Regina from Poland. I don't know from which part of Poland. Regina, who was the heroine, who was hanged right in front of us, without divulging one name. She didn't tell anybody.

She got caught?

Well, they found out that she was the leader of this underground.

Was she the leader?

I can't say.

You don't know?

I don't know. I was contacted at night. I don't know if it was a male or a female, that was just a hand, pushing me, and I was supposed to hand that little package, whoever it was. Like I said, I have no idea.

It was greatly organized. I didn't know it. I didn't-- I thought that was a very amateurish project.

They blew up the--

They blew up the crematorium. Which year?

It was the same time but Hitler was assassinated--

When he killed himself, you mean?

No, when he died--

When they tried to--

They tried to assassinate him.

What year was this?

1944 in [? a coup ?].

And you were how old now? How old were you--

17. But I want your history to know about Regina. And I want to know, also, that people should know the other very important part from Auschwitz. I feel like people remembering-- we are remembering less and less, I'm sorry to say.

There was also, by another French engineer, built a shortwave sender. In the same factory, where we were making the hand grenade for the German, it was a shortwave sender, which I have seen, and I have heard, and I know what it is like, a shortwave sender. They send messages to England, and the English receiver, they got the message. They know about Auschwitz.

This group of people who sent the messages, they begged them to come and bomb Auschwitz. The English replied, we haven't got the planes.

They sent more and more messages, bolder and bolder. We were quite desperate. The Russians came, they bombed the whole factory. The bombs were coming right at us.

The Germans were running down to the basement, and we were not supposed to move from our workplace, workbench. But when nobody was there, we got under the table. And many of us were caught by the flying glass, but none of us were killed.

Finally, I think it was in January, the Russians were very close, and the Germans said, we have to empty Auschwitz. We have to go. But before that, the Germans fighting was going from bad to worse. They would come into the factory, they

would come all over, and people who had still a little bit of strength left, they took all the blood they could, for the army was coming back, injured.

They took blood from the prisoners?

Was a constant thing that they took the blood. But at this time, it was really very-- up to that point, they would measure it, they would take two little bottles.

Did they take blood from you?

Yes, many, many times. I happen to have very good quality blood, and I was in good condition.

You weren't sick? You stayed pretty healthy? You were very thin?

I was very thin. At this time, I was getting to be weak, but I was still-- my color was good, my eyes were still very good, when they checked your eyes if you could give blood. And they took all the blood it was possible.

It was cold, the winter already. And that was, I think, one point that many people died, before we marched from Auschwitz, because we were becoming very, very weak. I remember the march from Auschwitz toward Germany. It was knee-deep snow. We had no shoes.

Barefoot?

Barefoot. But we had clothes, what we were given, two, three, or four layers of clothing-- no clothes, just dresses. I remember, I tied dresses on my feet, and we were marching.

And it's unbelievable what the strength you have when you have to do it. I was a weakling in my childhood. I was a very so-called delicate little girl. Marching in the snow, I didn't let any one of my friends fall, because if you fall, that was the end.

I was dragging them, pulling them, pushing them, going into the fields, stealing cabbage, stealing potatoes from the cellars of the farmers--

[AUDIO OUT]

Prisoners? But while you were marching, you could stop in the field and steal the food? And they didn't care?

They did care, they did care.

You secretly did?

By covering up for me-- I would go into the field. They were marching.

You were pretty brave. Took a lot of chances.

Yes.

Looking back, don't you think you took a lot of chances?

I don't know it's braveness-- it was survival. If you don't have the cabbage, if you don't have the potatoes, then you die. So what's the difference? I wanted to live.

The people who couldn't walk anymore, they were the ones who were shot. They didn't shoot at me. I would come back with an arm full of potatoes.



Marching through Poland, I must say, not one farmer who was giving us one piece of bread, not one.

Oh, the people saw you?

On the road, saw us marching, skeletons, dragging one after another. They know who we were, but not one person-- at night, to throw us a piece of bread.

Not one?

Not one. Marching toward Germany, at one point, at the border, they put us on the train. We were taken on a train, without food, without drink, days and days, all the fighting was all around us. And they were still busy marching us toward Hamburg.

Why were they marching? To empty the camp? You didn't know?

To find another camp to put us in. All the camps were full. They didn't want to take us. The trains were not wanted by the management of the concentration camp.

We stopped at Sachsenhausen. We stopped in Rosenkranzen. We stopped many places.

You walked the whole time?

No, at this time, we were on a train already from the border of Germany. I still don't understand, why were they so busy with us? A whole army was busy taking numbers, counting, taking, looking after us, and marching us. And the trains, which could have been used for better purpose, they were taking us from one lager to another.

Finally, we wound up in Mauthausen-- that's in Mecklenburg. And there, we were put into this one lager, where we have to work also in a field. But they make work, carrying grass blocks-- was spring already-- and they wanted us to move one hill with one side, and then another group would move that.

Why did they make work?

To keep us weaker and weaker, day by day. It was very hard work. You had to dig out a square grass block, and carry it on your arm, taking it to a good 2 miles distance. And then lay it down to make a beautiful hillside there. And then, the next day, the other group would take that and move it to somewhere else.

That's why I'm saying, it made work, because they didn't know what to do with us. But the point was that we should get weaker and weaker.

And were you getting--

Very-- when finally--

Were you still with your friends? Still together?

Few-- very few left at that time. Many of them died on the march, many of them froze. Many of them gave up.

How long was the march? How many days?

How many weeks--

Weeks on the march?

Weeks.

Were you saying to yourself, how am I living through this hell? Or did you say, I'm going to live through this? I can do it.

No, I was saying to myself-- you know, I didn't say anything to myself. I retreated to my memories of my beautiful home. I didn't see the landscape, I didn't feel the cold. I felt my home, my beautiful home. I felt the beautiful Friday nights.

I could see my mother's face lighting the candle. I could hear my father singing the Friday night songs. That's what I could hear.

I didn't see the horror. I think that was my survival.

So, this time you--

That I came out halfway sane, that was my strength. And today, this many years later, I'm a very strong woman. I went through a lot, those were my young days. In my older years, I went through a great deal. And I'm here to bear witness.

I was liberated on the last days of the war first by the Americans.

Tell me about the liberation, when you--

Liberation, it was in Mecklenburg.

And you were--

We were at the point that it couldn't have been more than two more days, we would have been all dead. We were at that state at that time. I survived because I was capable of going and picking grass-- the young grass coming up, the shoots from the trees, like a deer, I would go out and break a piece of a young piece of tree, and chew on that. And the grass, which was coming up in the land. I was eating that.

For how long were you eating that?

Couple weeks.

And they didn't give you anything to eat, by then?

No, by that point, they didn't have much, either. They couldn't give us anything. We were just at that point, that everybody died of starvation.

One night, we were with-- still, we had one guard with us. And the guard said to us, I'm going to change into my regular clothes. But I am still here. I still have the gun.

He changed his clothes, and shortly after, I haven't seen him anyone. But I know he said that.

At night, we heard shouts, we heard tanks, and the American army marched into that town. And by the time we could make contact, the American army marched out.

The next thing by morning, early morning, the Russian army came in. They found us, completely at the last minute. They came in-- anybody who could move, they started examining us right away. Fortunately, I was never a big eater. I was very well-disciplined-- that's what I have seen at my father's house. We never overeat, we never overdone anything, really.

So at the time when all the food was in front of me, and I was starved, I didn't overeat. Many of my friends died at that point, because they couldn't hold back. They ate all that hard-boiled eggs that gave us, fresh milk, milk straight from the cow.

What did you eat? What did you eat?

I ate potatoes. I ate boiled potatoes.

That was smart.

I didn't touch anything else. But for a week, I didn't eat anything else. And after all the grass, I ate boiled potatoes.

Did you feel better?

The Russians gave us also a very good soup, like a goulash type of soup. Was a lot of strength in that soup. And that started bringing us back.

Six of us stayed alive, only six of us.

And you said, what am I going to do now? What did you think about what you would do after? Did you think about that?

Yes, I had one goal-- to go back, and from that town where I was liberated, I carried a huge, big Luger. I was still weak, but I hid that Luger-- was tied--

It's a gun?

Yes, Luger is a German big gun, long nose, but very heavy, tied under my chest. And I carried that all the way back to Eger. And I had on my mind that I'm going to shoot them all, every one of my townspeople [INAUDIBLE]. I had such a hate, and such an anger in me.

But of course, we didn't do it. I went back to my hometown. A couple of months after, my fiance, when I was engaged to, he came back. We were married shortly, and barely a year after, I had my wonderful son, Peter.

What was it like when you went back to your town, and your home, and somebody else was living there?

Yes, one of my pictures from my album, my love letters, thrown around. All my belongings, all my family's belongings, everything was taken.

My good, wonderful neighbors, whom I loved so dearly, they robbed us. And many years after, I took my children back to the hometown. This was the second time, because the first time I was very bitter, and I hated every moment of it. I was glad I didn't take the children at that time.

But the second time, since I had family-- my husband's family was back in Budapest-- I went back again, and I took my children back. And I showed them all the memories, the good memories. All the time, I was looking for one face, one name I could point out to Bob, look Dan, these were my friends. They were so good to me. When I was down, they gave me a piece of bread.

I was searching, I was looking. I couldn't find one from that beautiful town of Eger-- not one. And then, I went up to Budapest. I couldn't find any of my old friends, either, nobody, I could show to my wonderful children. This is an honest, a good mensch, I couldn't find any. It hurt me very bad.

But after many years, after my son was born in Germany, in a DP camp, I didn't want to have him born-- I didn't want to bring him to that [INAUDIBLE] world, another person, another Jew. I had no choice. He was born.

I became softer, I became mellowed. I realized that if I want to raise a whole human being, I have to change. And of course, with the years, you do change.

It's not that I forgot. It's not that. But I don't have the hate in me anymore. All my three children turned out to be wonderful people-- the most beautiful people. Purpose? I don't know what was the purpose.

Do you ever-- do you always think about the fact that you went through that? Is it always part of your consciousness, that you are a survivor? Or is that just another part of you, and you don't--

No, I am a very happy person. I can wake up in the morning, every morning, and I look at the sun, and say, it's good to be alive. It's wonderful that I'm here in this blessed America. I work, I get into my parking place, I shut off my car, and I have not one moment of silence, but many.

And I thank-- I don't know who I thank, I don't know what I thank, but I'm grateful. I'm just grateful.

Sounds like you're very successful. You raised a very lovely family, and had all the things that are important in life. So you're lucky-- you should be proud that you could do that in the face of all that hardship. That you could still do it.

I lost a wonderful husband. The best man anybody ever could have. I survived that, too.

When was that? Recently?

10 years ago, at age 50. I have my wonderful sons. And you know--