

--1. Where were you born, Mrs. Brunstein?

In Poland, L³dz.

And which date was that?

6th of May, 1928.

And you were telling me earlier that your name at birth was--

Zylberberg.

What did your father do for a living?

My father worked in textiles.

Doing what?

He was a foreman in a textile factory, at the time I remember.

Did your mother work, or was she a housewife?

Housewife.

And how big a family did your mother and father have?

We were three, two elder brothers.

Where were you educated?

At a private Jewish day school.

So how old were you when you left?

11, when the war broke out.

Can you tell me what relations were like between Jews and non-Jews in Poland before the war?

Well as far as I remember as a little girl, I had non-Jewish friends. But generally we were scared of the non-Jewish population.

For what reason?

Simply because they did not like us. We felt persecuted, very often made a laughing stock. And generally we were scared, physically too. For instance, I remember as a little girl, going to do homework at a friend's house and being rather scared of coming home alone in case some Polish boys would-- either they would recognize me as being a Jewish girl or they knew me, and they could simply throw stones at me, calling me dirty little Jewish girl, and usually would refer to the religious side of it as well.

Of course, you know, it was very hard to live with as a little girl because I couldn't understand. I liked some of these people very much. But that simply was the everyday life. And of course, with only be in a Catholic country, it always would be referred to as Jews being the Christ killers. And therefore, we were not liked, even by the children.

But that is not to say that we did not have non-Jewish friends. And I would never say that absolutely each and every one of them was like this. But the general feeling was of being scared and not feeling secure.

Did you suffer violence yourself from these children?

Oh, now and again. Oh, yes. Of course-- just simply beating.

Were they boys or girls who did it?

Boys and girls.

Were you able to retaliate, or did you just have to suffer it?

No, we did fight back. We did fight back as best we could. And the atmosphere at home and the particular upbringing I had was not a very religious one, but it was a very humanitarian one. My father was a leading member of the Jewish socialist organization, which was called Bund. I don't know whether you've heard of it, but it was very-- and there was a Polish socialist organization, the PPS. And amongst those people, my father had many friends. And they did work together.

So you know, this is not to say that all and every one-- it's just that the majority, I would say, would be like this. And we did not feel that the authorities did much to prevent this kind of feeling.

Did they do anything at all?

Well, I personally cannot remember an awful lot. But I have one instance in mind. I was going home one evening with a little friend and her mother. And we passed a house. And I think they had-- I'm not sure what the-- it was called the National Party, [NON-ENGLISH], who were outspokenly antisemitic. And this woman looked very much Jewish, if you can apply such a term as looking Jewish, but what the Poles would term as looking Jewish. And she was beaten up. And no one came to her rescue.

So that left quite a deep impression on me as a child. And when I did question my father or mother, and I very much looked up to them. And I was very, very fortunate. I had a very, very loving background. And when I did question, they would simply answer, these people are sick. Don't take any notice. And one feeling they have always given me-- don't be consumed by hatred. They are sick, not you.

Now, going on to the war, do you have any recollections about the actual battle between the Germans and the Poles in 1939?

Well, I have very vivid recollection of the day the war broke out. And I was on a school holiday, and we were recalled. It was the 1st of September. It was a Friday. We were recalled to come back to the town. And two days later, our own city was bombed. Not very much, but it happened so that one of the bombs which fell was next door to the house where I lived, at the block of flats where we lived.

And the following Friday, the Germans actually were in our town. And the battle as such, if you ask me, I cannot really recall. I just recall the German faces and soldiers appearing in uniform and the general scare. That was indescribable, really quite indescribable. I was absolutely petrified as a child.

I suppose there was a little bit of excitement there because I've heard so much about the big war, the First World War, which my father used to tell us. And I could not believe that I, as a child, was actually experiencing something which I only heard about or read about.

And of course, everyone thought it would be a blitzkrieg and that it would soon be over. So we tried as best to cope with it. And food was scarce almost immediately. And to come back to the question how we felt, you know, vis-a-vis the Poles, queues would form for bread or any food. And Jewish people, if they were recognized, were simply thrown out of

the queue by the Poles, not by the Germans-- Germans too, but by the Poles.

Even my own brother-- we would, as children, go to queue up, thought it's safer. But my elder brother, who was blond and blue-eyed and did not have the appearance of a Jewish boy, stood next to me in the queue. I would be thrown out, while my brother was the one who managed to bring some food home.

Did Polish antisemitism get worse after the German takeover?

I don't know whether it did get worse. It was so bad, whether it did get worse. But I do remember remarks to say it's all your fault. It's all the fault of the Jews that we are suffering, that Poland is invaded. You know, it was thrown to us, it's your fault.

Did the Germans at first take measures against the Jews?

Yes, almost immediately. I can not remember how soon after, but it was within weeks that we were wearing the yellow star. At the time, it was-- that's right, almost immediately the yellow star. And that's how we were recognized as Jews. And it would be punishable if you were recognized as a Jew and would not have the star on. Some people did not put the star on simply in order to try and get food, or at the time, transport was still possible to try and go to a different town, where they thought it would be better.

So we did have a little bit, just a little bit of school in the beginning. When I say in the beginning, soon after, say within weeks. And they tried to bring order in again. And I would walk to school wearing the yellow star. On one particular day, I put on something different on which the yellow star was not on and walked like that to school. And my mother appeared, sort of an hour later, absolutely petrified, trying to find out whether I had arrived at school, bringing the two yellow stars with her.

Did people treat the wearing of a yellow star lightly, as a joke? Or did they--

No. No.

Did they feel indignant about it or what?

We did not treat it lightly. We just said this has been known in history before. This is our fate. We have to. But we were outraged. But we just accepted it.

What other measures did the Germans take?

Beating up people, getting people-- getting them out at-- you know, you could simply-- father could go out in search of some work, and they would decide, at one particular street, to take in so many Jews. And some of the people never returned. Either they were killed or tortured. We just accepted it. That was it.

So very soon, it did not take long for us to feel that this was a war, not a-- not for jokes, that it was against a population, not just not just a military war, that it was against us as a civil population, as civilians.

Were there any survival measures that you could take, anything to make your life easier?

Well, just simply trying to live as best as we could. Some people did try in the beginning, and a lot of them did escape into Russia. And that was a question. Well, it cannot be as bad there. At the time, there was the pact, the German-Russian pact. So many people left for Russia. Some people tried to get Aryan papers to go on the other side and hide as non-Jews.

Did anybody in your family decide to take either of those options?

Yes. My father had to leave town by the very end of 1939, simply because he was a leading figure in political life. He

was well known. My uncle, who was a journalist on the Jewish socialist newspaper, was arrested with three other leading figures only, I think, two or three weeks after the outbreak of war. And then my father was warned to leave, that he was actually on the list. So he left for another town.

My elder brother, who was 18 at the time, decided that he would go to Russia. So he just simply left on foot. I don't know exactly how he got there, but we had news that he did reach Russia, which means the occupied territory. Bialystok was a-- actually, my husband was there as well-- was occupied by the Russians. And many Jews who fled Poland, this was, I believe, the first place that they would get to.

Unfortunately, this brother did not survive the war. I know I may be jumping, but it comes to it. He did not go deeper into Russia when the German-Russian war broke out in 1941, when the Germans entered that city. And what actually happened to him, I only heard many, many years later from a girlfriend of his, that the entire Jewish population was called out onto the marketplace. And each one was shot. And my brother was-- he was born-- and he was 21 at the time.

So this was soon after the Germans took over that part of Russia.

1941, yes. I think it was '41. Yeah.

Where did your father go to?

My father went to a small town, which is called Skierniewice. He was there for some time with the wife of the uncle who was arrested. It was her hometown. And he was not known there as a political figure.

Then when this town was made judenrein, which means free of Jews, he was in Warsaw for a short while. And then he was sent to another town, which was called [NON-ENGLISH]. And I do know that he was still alive at the beginning of '44 and did have every hope of his survival. But he did not.

What actually happened to him, I do not know. I have met someone who knew him at the time when he lived in that place. Because there again, he was the head and busy with the-- any underground work which was going on.

Were you able to keep in touch with him as he was moving about?

No. We had two or three postcards. Somehow this was allowed for a while. I don't know whether he ever received anything from us. But we would receive just a little postcard, which said, I'm well and I'm working-- probably the only thing he was allowed to write.

How did things develop for you and the rest of the family back at home?

Well, my brother had left. My father had left. So there was only my younger brother, actually older than myself, but the middle one, and my mother. By the beginning of '40, I think-- or maybe even before, it was obvious that they were going to form a ghetto for the Jews. And they made sure that all the Jews who lived in other parts of the town, the nicer part of the town, were herded in to one part of the town. The actual ghetto as such was closed on the 1st of May, 1940.

The street we lived on was, at first, outside of the ghetto. So we, too, had to leave our home. And we went to friends, who lived nearby. And if I remember correctly, there were about 14 or 16 of us in two small rooms and the kitchen. And every single apartment in the block would be occupied thus, 14 15, 16, 20 people until they allocated the exact area of the ghetto. And then people were told simply to go and find places to live.

So my mother, brother, and I found one room. And there we moved in. And from then on, life became very, very difficult. We still tried. We did not lose all hope or even humor. It was of paramount importance to continue with some form of education.

My school was reopened for a short while. Some of the teachers were still in the ghetto. Most of them had left for Russia. And we had just a little bit of learning. And of course, it was important that, while going to school, we would

receive a soup. But this did not last long. Then they closed all schools.

But while we still had the little bit of learning, German was introduced as the compulsory language. And it's not strange, but I think it probably shows the will to survive, that we took it all very seriously, the learning. We were sure the war would end soon. But even if it didn't end so soon, it was important to gain something and not to be backward.

We would form groups and go to each other's places. And elder friends would take groups and teach us, talk to us about Polish literature, Yiddish literature. We would sing or recite, even make some kind of small performances, concerts. In fact, quite a cultural life was going on in those adverse circumstances. And I think it was our saving grace.

We would not give in. And Łódź was not the only place. In every ghetto this was happening. People were composing, people were writing, and we managed to have compassion for characters and literature.

In what way?

Just simply by feeling the injustice that was being done to people. So it did not take away our human dignity. We would not let it be taken away from us. How shall I continue? I'm trying.

Was there any resistance to the Germans that you came across, either by Jews or non-Jews?

Well, resistance, physical resistance against the Germans in the Łódź ghetto was simply not possible because of the way our ghetto was, geographically and otherwise. You could not easily escape or smuggle out of the Łódź ghetto, like you could, with difficulty, in Warsaw, through the sewers and, therefore, beg for arms, gather arms, try to work together with the Polish population. Because even though they hated Jews, it's the Germans that were their enemy. And the Poles were great patriots.

But the resistance was in a sense that we people had radios. People listened to news. They spread the news. And this was our form of resistance.

I don't think, or I personally cannot remember acts of sabotage in places of work. I was working myself-- and I'll come to it later-- when everyone had to work. Yes, at one time I even remember we did stage a demonstration in the actual ghetto. As schoolchildren, we demanded heating and food. It was dispersed, and it was OK. I don't know, the Germans might have been aware of it or not.

But the ghetto, once it was closed, became a kind of autonomous state. It was run by Jews. We had Jewish police. We had all kinds of departments. It was a kind of government. And we sometimes fought against those very people when we thought that their behavior was wrong. Thinking back on it now, probably there was not very much that they could do.

But the fact probably remains that, like everywhere else, some people were nicer than others. I cannot remember at what time I was actually going to work. But then everyone had to go to work. And I worked in a carpet factory.

And the carpets were made, handmade carpets, on weaving looms from old rags. They were made-- those carpets were apparently for the German troops.

The factory was within the ghetto, was it?

Oh, yes. Yes. They were. See, I can only go by my own recollections, and I was young. Unfortunately, I did not write down many things soon after the war. So I can only recollect now of what was happening.

But it soon became apparent to us in that very factory and in other places, that dreadful things were going on. Every so often, people would disappear, and no one knew where they had gone to. And then the people who were sorting out the old clothes and rags for the use in the factory came across clothes marked by relatives that were sent back into the ghetto. And from those very clothes, we had to make the carpets.

So of course, we started questioning, well, where did the people go? If they've taken away their clothes, what has happened to the people? We were unaware of what was happening. Although, as children, I think many others did know. Because, as I said, they listened to radio. Many people had contact with the Polish population. How, I do not know. But I know now as a fact that it was so.

My own--