

Session number 9122 reel number four. Mrs. Brunstein, reel four.

Then I said, I cannot remember exactly how long I was in Auschwitz, whether it was a few days, or in fact, a couple of weeks or three weeks. With a few people I was together with, with whom I came to Auschwitz from the ghetto.

One day we were just lined up and told to march on, which we did. Nobody questioned anything. And we were taken onto a train and told that we were going to a labor camp in Germany. And this is exactly how it was. We came to a labor camp in Germany. The journey this time was horrendous, but not quite as the leaving of the Lodz ghetto. We were given some food and we were told by the German guards that we really are going to a German camp.

And some of them actually told us in quite human terms, you're going to a German labor camp. We came. And soon found out that we were near Hanover in a small village, which was called Hambiren Waldeslust.

Maybe it's nice to us, it actually means-- Waldeslust means joys of the forest, or lost in the forest. And there were 400 of us placed in barracks. We each one had a separate bunk to sleep on.

And we were taken daily to work. And work consisted mainly of clearing the bombed ruins near Hanover and Hanover. The man who was in charge of the camp was one of the most vicious characters, one of the most vicious Germans, that I have come across throughout.

He greeted us by saying, again, that we have not come to a pension, not to ask how far we are from Poland. And if we wanted to get back to Poland, we could only go back through the sky. By the sky meant you have to die first before you can go back.

He took out a cane, and he said and this is my dolmetscher, which this is my translator. And he speaks all languages. But I do not advise you to come in contact with him, and for the very slightest disobedience you will come into contact with him.

We were given the outfit, the well-known striped uniform, just the dress. And just a dress and a pair of knickers and wooden clogs. But we were given every day food. And we did not work every Sunday. There was water. We could wash.

And after Auschwitz, this seemed a comparatively nice place to be. Quite a few of our friends died there. Some were taken to work in salt mines, and could not stand it, could not survive.

We were also taken to work with German women, which means the SS women guards. I'm not the one to say whether women are more cruel than men. But the few that it has been my misfortune to encounter were certainly very cruel. Small little incidents even illustrates their cruelty for pleasure.

We were working amongst the ruins. And a huge frog appeared from nowhere. One of the women guards picked up a huge stone, threw it on the frog, and the blood splattered all over. And she said this is what I would like to do to all of you and laughed. I know it's a very, very minor incident and it's only a frog. But it illustrates quite a lot.

One of the German guards was certainly a very perverse animal. And he talked of us about his sexual experiences and would-- that is during work-- he was to look. And if no one was watching, he seemed to take great delight in making sure that a few young girls who were there would listen to him. And he would tell us in detail exactly of the kind of things he liked to do. And even that dead corpses are also a form of enjoyment to him.

This we were subject to listen to, and used to like us how we enjoyed it, or could we tell him something about it, or tell us about ourselves. Well, one of the guards who seemed to have a little humanity inside him now and again would tell us that he in his young days used to be a member of the Communist Party, and that really he isn't here because he likes it.

Did he do anything for You?

Well in the sense that he would maybe look away a little of whether we worked as hard as we should. Or on the way to work if we passed some fields on which food was growing, he would occasionally look away and let one or two get out of the row of people, and just snatch a few potatoes or something. Well, this is actually it's quite an act of courage that he displayed to let us do it. It was very much appreciated.

There was one guard who was a man, he told us he was 72, but that he was forced to do what he was doing. I don't know whether he was an SS man. I really cannot remember whether his insignia said SS. But I do remember that on a few occasions he shared his food, not shared, but actually gave it to some of us. He would always choose the youngsters.

It was terribly important to see a little act of kindness, because you really felt that maybe all is not lost as far as the human race is concerned. Because we had our doubts by then.

He once took a little apple and we hadn't seen an apple since before the war, and he cut it in fours and gave a little quarter to each one of us, to four little girls. And even in that camp, there again we immediately as we felt we could, we would meet in little groups, listen to the older people of what they had to tell us of life before the war, of the books they had read, of the things they did.

And to us, being 11 before the war broke, out and then going through all that, it was all important. Because it helped you. It helped you to keep some kind of sanity, and to know that there is a world outside. And that again began to hope that maybe we would survive. But the most important thing and the driving force for survival was the fact that we felt we had simply to tell the world of what had happened. Because if no one did, then it would be the end of the world.

We stayed in that camp until I think it must have been February. And then we were told that the camp would be disbanded and that we would have to march, to go on foot. And the place we were sent to was Bergen-Belsen.

What was the march like?

Just march on foot in the coldest of weathers until we reached our destination. If you couldn't make it, you just didn't make it. And it is wrong to say that the German people didn't know. And I'm not making here a judgment for everyone. I'm not qualified to do it, except for my own experiences. We passed villages. We saw German people. We saw houses. We saw curtains. We saw lights in them. We heard people talk. We saw children running. We heard people sing. People, it's as if you were talking about another species. We didn't seem to belong to it.

But they saw us. So it's wrong to say that they never did see or never heard. And they must not be allowed to get away with it.

Did they ignore you or did they react in any way?

They just looked on. They just looked, but they saw us. And we certainly didn't look pictures of health. We were prisoners in the striped garb of the camp, with a number and the yellow star.

We reached Belsen, and there, of course, another inferno started. And once again, because what greeted us and because of the nature of the camp and how it was laid out and spread out, that I find it difficult to recall in detail how it happened and exactly what was there. But we were put in barracks again, hundreds of us, with no washing facilities whatsoever.

There were some toilets. And if I remember rightly at one time, we were taken en masse, you could not just go any time, just taking en masse to toilets, to bogs. Many of my friends died there. Typhus soon took over.

I did at one time manage to work in one of the kitchens there. I don't know how it happened. A friend dragged me. And she said in the morning after the roll call, whatever, I don't know how they could do roll call. But somehow we were counted in the mornings. She said if we run to this spot, there may be a chance of going to a kitchen to peel potatoes or whatever was there for peeling, which meant that you could eat a raw potato.

And one day, I saw the man who was in charge of our labor camp. He was also in Belsen. And on the way back from work in that kitchen, I saw him. And there were a few men with whom he was amusing himself. He was making them sing and dance. The men really were living corpses, exactly like the ones you see nowadays on the documentaries, those who survived Belsen. He made them sing. He made them dance.

And because as we walked, the march was usually very slow, one somehow managed to see everything. He later made them count. And as they counted up to 10, he just very cold bloodedly shot them. And we just saw them fall one by one. He did not have to account to anyone. Why he did it, if it was a whim, it was OK.

Was this the man who was in charge--

In charge of the labor camp near Hanover. Yeah. He was later captured. I don't know his-- I never knew their names. I know that he was an obersturmbannführer. That I do know.

He was the one who was talking about the dolmetscher.

Yeah. This was the one who was talking about the dolmetscher. He used to bring his little two-year-old boy for weekends to our camp. And we used to see him teaching the child how to march up and down and say Heil Hitler. He was a gorgeous looking little blond boy.

And actually what I cannot understand to this day is how a man like this could have love, and obviously he must have had some form of love for his own child. I just failed to understand it. I fail to understand people engaged in this kind of thing, partaking in such atrocities, writing a caring letter to a wife and child at home or maybe inquiring how the children are doing at school, which they did. I just fail to understand it and I never shall.

One day, when I was in that kitchen some precious stones were discovered by one of the girls. I said, some were discovered. A German discovered that one of the girls had some precious stones.

And as punishment, we were taken outside, all of us. And we were meant to crouch, not to kneel, not to stand, but to crouch with our arms outstretched for four hours on end. And of course, we were quite sure that we were all going to be killed. There again one of the miracles, why they didn't kill us, I don't know. I also fail to understand how anyone could have possibly kept a precious stone. I think this was actually a Polish woman, not a Jewish woman, who was discovered to be carrying a stone.

While working there, I felt that I was getting ill. And when I meant ill, I knew that it was not just a normal malnutrition, but typhus was rampant. And I felt that I was losing consciousness while I was sitting in this kitchen, which I actually was almost knee deep in water. And I did lose consciousness.

And friends dragged me back to camp. And from then on, I remember very little, except that in this isolation block, not all typhus people were isolated, but some were. And I was taken to that isolation block. The people who were actually on their way out or were considered to be on their way out, were put near the bucket. And I know that I was put near the bucket.

The three women who were on the same bunk with me died next to me. Others were put in the bunk. And they too died. They were just simply thrown out of the window on the heap of corpses.

And in this-- well, consciousness would come back now and again. And by then, it mattered. I do remember thinking to myself, well my dear ones, I was thinking of my family. I've come that far. Now obviously it is the end, and we knew that the end of the war was coming within days because people had seen the Germans just leave. They were leaving, not everyone, but some were just running, leaving.

One or two even came to others and asked if they had an opportunity, would they say a good word about them when everything is over.

What did they say?

What, the others? Don't count on us. I know that for days there was no water, there was anything. There were rumors that everything was poisoned. Whether it's true or not, I can only recount of what I heard at the time. When the actual end of the war did come, I do not remember the day because I was unconscious.

And when I did come to, I found three or four portions of bread on my bunk, and tins of condensed milk, Nestle's condensed milk. I shall never forget. The British had liberated us. And this was obviously the first thing that they had to give to the inmates, these portions of bread. And they gave me every portion, although I could not consume it.

But I do remember the great regret I felt when I saw the bread. And I saw this. And I thought, oh God, I've been hungry for six years. And I have so much dreamed about eating. In fact, it's such a demoralizing factor, hunger. You really forget about everything. All you can think of is to do something to that stomach to stop it giving such pain. And the pain is so demoralizing that you're almost incapable of anything.

And the dream was to sit down one day when the war is over and just eat, that time should cease to exist. So that you could just sit and eat for as long as you want and stop when you want. And there were four portions of bread. And I could not eat a bite. So I remember it to this day. Somehow I've always felt, what a shame I did not get that one satisfaction as soon as the war was over.

And then yeah, when I was told or I knew it was over, the first moment was disbelief, but then of course you believe, because I only had to look out of the window and I saw the Germans in uniform clearing the corpses, and the inmates having to be restrained, because they were quite capable of killing them, and really violently attacking them which was quite understandable.

But I do remember my own silent prayer. Please, I hope I'm not destroyed as a person. I said, in spite of everything I just have to go on. And I still have to believe that there is some goodness. And I hope they have not destroyed me or taken away my belief in men. That was the most important thing to me.

And I have to go on that way. Otherwise, there would be no meaning to survival. And then it was throughout the years and months all you could think of was to survive. And when it did come, it was very hard to accept because then everything came back. Then you knew that you're never going to see your mother again, or your friends, that a whole way of life was taken. And it was very hard to live.

So all you dreamed of was living. And then when it finally came survival was very hard to cope with.

Can you remember getting any treatment?

Yes, yes. I was taken to-- well Laurie-- Laurie wanted to try because he was so, we've known each other for years. I didn't know this was going. And it's strange that I never talked about being in Auschwitz, neither did this man who was with the medical corps.

This is Dr. Wand.

Dr. Wand. Yes. He asked me which block and so on, quite possible that he was on the block I was. But the very first place was simply a make-do place, a kind of school, not a kind of school, a school. And we were in-- I was put in a corridor simply because there was no other space, no other room.

They did all the cleaning, the disinfecting. Because we were so full of lice that no amount of cleaning seemed to clear it. In fact, the lice I had were under my skin. And they're are very, very difficult thing to cope with. Very difficult. It's hard to describe for anyone who has never experienced that, what it means. They were just there. And it actually is a pain, because it itches. It itches.

And no matter what you do and no amount of cleaning in the beginning will get them away. But after all the cleaning which they did and disinfecting, we had no clothes. In fact, for a long time I just had the sheet. Each time I would get off my bunk, would be with a sheet around me. And I cannot remember exactly what treatment I did get. But I did get quite a lot of treatment.

And then I gained some strength and started walking. I was very fortunate at the time. I'm still trying to find that man. I was befriended with another young girl by an Anglican priest, British padre. I think his name was John Davis. He took very great care of us. He was very nice. He had a wife and two children. I still somewhere have a photo of his.

He just wanted to talk to me. I spoke no English. But somehow, yes, I learned a few words of all places in the ghetto. I told you before. We tried to keep our sanity I learned a little bit of English. And he knew a little bit of German. And he wanted to know all the things that I have been through. And he wanted to keep in touch. And he was extremely nice.

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Mrs. Brunstein, reel five.

I was fortunate too to be befriended by the British padre, who was a extremely compassionate man who seemed to have the right approach. And he asked me a lot. And I did impart quite a lot to him. And he said that he was writing letters back home and telling them, because he found it very hard to accept and believe what he saw.

One day, he came and brought me 200 cigarettes. But that wasn't for smoking. A kind of black market developed in cigarettes in Belsen. And for the cigarettes, I managed to get someone to make me a little jacket out of a blanket and a little skirt. Because I cannot remember ever being given an allocation of clothes. It took a long time. But slowly, one accepted-- no, I wouldn't say accepted. I still cannot quite accept what happened.

But you just knew it was so, and I started meeting people. I met a friend whom I knew way back in the ghetto who was together with her sister. And the sister was alive when the war ended. And then she was taken to hospital. And then she couldn't find her anymore and has never found her.

One of the reasons also, and I think they realized it later, hundreds and hundreds of people died after liberation. They did not have the right kind of nourishment to give us after so many years of starvation. So the food which they gave on the very sick stomachs could not be digested. And people developed dysentery. And they were too weak to be saved.

And the woman and the two daughters with whom I traveled, if you can call it a form of travel from the ghetto to Auschwitz, she looked me up after the end of war. She was going from barrack to barrack, looking at people. And when she saw me, she broke down. And she said, here am I. Her name was Mrs. Rosenberg. She said here am I, Esther.

She said Hela, her elder daughter. She says, Hela is dead and Sonja is dead. And the war is over, and I am alive. She said, but I won't be alive. Because I had strength to go on before. But now I have no more strength. And I don't want to get even this strength. She said it's too painful. And she did not last very long.

And this happened to very many, especially to mothers who have lost children. It's very hard if you lose a parent at a young age. But I think it's almost unbearable if you lose a young child or any child. In fact, I know of one person who had lost a little boy and survived the war, and remarried and had another child. And that child never had an identity. It's always been the other boy.

Once you were liberated, did you want to get away from the camp as soon as possible, or did you find that people were frightened of leaving the camp?

Now once we were liberated, yes, you were afraid of getting away to an unknown place. I was not strong enough to make my way back to Poland. But this is where I wanted to go. Because I wanted to look for relatives. A, I had hoped that my father would certainly have survived, because he was a very strong man, strong in mind. And he gave courage to many people.

I met a person in Belsen who had seen my father at the beginning of '44, and she said that he helped many people to survive with his encouragement and strength and also any practical help he could give. So I was quite sure that he would have survived. But he was taken to Germany with a transport and he did not survive.

I was quite sure that my two brothers would survive. And most certainly I was that my elder brother who went to Russia would survive. So my thought was to get to Poland. Transport was not provided by anyone. No one really bothered about it. And I was too weak to get to Poland on my own. People did. You made your way and I don't think any authorities at the time were very perturbed about paying for your way. But I wasn't.

And I was quite ill at the time, there's things wrong with my stomach and things. So I was sent to Sweden with the-- I think it was the Swedish Red Cross. I think the Bernadotte fund, the Folke Bernadotte, and came to Sweden as early I think as-- not I think, I'm sure as August '45.

Did you have any desire yourself to take revenge on the Germans?

Physical revenge?

Any kind of revenge?

Yes, I think I would be quite a superhuman, which I'm not, not to think of it, not to think at least of the man who was in charge of my camp whom I saw in cold blood shooting people who I knew derived pleasure and joy from doing it. And I couldn't just accept it that he was a sick man, though I know obviously it's sickness. I couldn't. I knew it was calculated, calculated murder. Yes.

I would have liked them to really suffer. If possible, suffer the worst can be, but really suffer because they have sinned. And when people talk nowadays, isn't it time you forgive the Germans, I don't know what they mean. First of all, no one has asked us to forgive them. They haven't come up and said, please, forgive us.

And what do they mean by forgive? Forgive those who committed the crimes? No. Forget? You can't. Blame all the Germans, no. That I never did. The majority, maybe yes. Blame the young people? No. I can't blame young people. If I do that then I will get reduced to their level. They hated Jews and other minorities. And we think it's wrong. We think it's wrong for anyone to persecute any minority. So how can I do the same?

Could I ask you about the kitchens in Belsen? How were people selected to work in the kitchens, because it must have been a sought after job?

Well, everything I think is like in normal life. You just know someone who knows someone. How the beginning of the camp was set up and who was in charge, I don't know. We came there when the camp was an established thing. Some people had to work at it. Those who had the key positions like actually doing the cooking must have been appointed by the Germans, and could have been maybe Germans themselves. Because in the actual labor camp, the cook, the chef, was a German.

In Belsen, I don't really know who was selected for the job, those who were there first? But work in the kitchen for peeling potatoes or vegetables, this I think you just found out that in the mornings they were taking people. If you found out from someone and you were strong enough to make your way, and you were in the front line of the queue, maybe you were taken. I only worked there just a few days.

Do you think it's enabled you to survive?

No.

So you didn't get really get much extra food?

No. No, we didn't. But it meant at the time-- I don't think anyone who really was in a physical state so poor which was beyond survival. I don't think he would have survived just by having worked one or two days in the kitchen. If you were in a labor camp and you worked in a kitchen, yes.

In fact, the few people in my labor camp who worked in the kitchen from the beginning, they were chosen and I don't think at that time there was any nepotism in it. They were just chosen. Or maybe they were asked, who can do so? And who had this instinct of survival, and was the first one to say, I did this kind of work, I'll be good at it, was taken.

But those few young girls who actually worked there, they were menstruating in the camp, whereas most women did not menstruate, almost from the beginning of the war till the end of war. Because of malnutrition. So yes, you were physically a bit stronger if every day you had that little bit much more food.

But in Belsen, as far as my own survival is concerned, I don't know what I can accredit it to at all. In fact, I was quite ill in the ghetto. And those friends who have survived when they met after the war and they were saying who else might have survived, I was never on the list of those as possible for survival. So it's just one of those--

So the people who worked in the kitchens in Belsen weren't a well-fed group of people?

But the kitchen, the people who worked in the kitchens all the time would be better fed. It's simply because they had access to snatch a raw potato or a raw sweet, or a raw something. And yes, this meant a little bit more food. If your stomach was filled a little bit more every day and you had water, and also there was water which meant that you could probably wash your face and clean yourself.

Well, this is such a luxury when you haven't got it. Or there would be a nearby place where you could go to the toilet. Well, all this was not available to us in the barracks. We would just simply go outside, whether you had diarrhea, whether you had dysentery. It just made no difference. If you survived, you survived. If you didn't, you didn't.

If you had strength to take off your garment and delouse it, not that it helped, but you just thought it helped a little, you did it. If you didn't, so the lice got at you and got the better of you.

One of the most horrifying accounts that you gave was about in the Lodz ghetto about the throwing of the babies from the third floor. Do you mean the Germans who were doing it were actually laughing about doing it?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Was it just one baby or more?

Oh, babies. See, even in the ghetto, people lived, and people loved, and people even got married, and people had children. I suppose it just means that the human race will go on despite any conditions one is in.

But we used to sometimes wonder whether babies should have been brought in. So many of the young people I knew, the young mothers I knew, they did not survive simply because they went with their babies.

Do you think that your experiences in the camps have changed your attitude towards life?

Oh, certainly. It's colored my whole life. How can it not?

In what way has it brought about--

I just probably look at everything in life with the experiences at the back of my mind. I know that I probably place my values in a different way. I know that it's nice to have material things. And having been deprived of them for so many years, it's certainly nice to have them. But I just know that everything can be so temporary that I cannot attach too much importance to it. Although when we had very, very difficult times here in England, and both of us, my husband and I, were working very hard and bringing up a young family.

And I can't recall it, with maybe just a little bit of bitterness that when I first had a job-- I came to England simply because my brother had survived, and he came with a group of children from Theresienstadt. And he was the only member who survived.

So naturally, I wanted to come to England. The only way I could come to England was on a domestic resident permit. I was not allowed to do anything else. Then I managed to get a permit to work in the Yiddish theater. I always liked doing things of that sort. And it was because of my Yiddish elocution and they needed a very young person and I did some stage work.

When this came to an end because the theater closed, I started working in a dental surgery. And I liked it very much. But I was not given the permit. The people were very nice, and I was despite everything, somehow I was quite a well-adjusted young person. And I did my work reasonably well and learned quickly. They had to apply to the home office for a permit, because I was an alien. And I came over from Sweden on a Polish passport. Permission was not granted.

Then they said that-- they were a very big, probably one of the first group surgeries that I knew then. It was soon after the National Health Service came into being. And they were their own dental technicians. So they said, look. You're a young person. You've been through enough. It would be nice if maybe you learn some kind of profession. Because my dream was to continue some form of education.

But I had no one to pay for me, or no one to keep me. So they said it would be nice to teach you the job of a dental technician. I said, fine. I would like to do it. And they said we need someone. And we would like you. So I said, fine. They said, well leave it to us. We'll apply to the home service and we say we specifically want you. They did not grant me permission. So I had to go back and officially do again domestic work, because that was the only work I was allowed to do.

So although I say I can't recall it with some kind of bitterness now, but just I regretted it that after having been through what I had been through, and being willing to work and well enough to work, I was not allowed to work.

I think you were telling me earlier about some soap that you came across in the camps.

Yes, well it was soap that we had in the-- I think more so in the ghetto. I cannot quite remember them in the camps. Though it's possible that we did. Which had the initials either RIF or RIS. And we were simply told, and I don't know where the information did come from. I must say so. I cannot be the absolute authority on it. But RIF was supposed to have stood for [NON-ENGLISH] which means pure Jewish grease, or RIS [NON-ENGLISH], pure Jewish soap. Which was supposed to have been made out of the gassed bodies.

And we were actually using this soap in the ghetto.

Did you believe it?

It's hard to say that we have believed and used it. But in the face of everything that was going on, yes, it seemed quite probable.

There was also something else that you wanted to say about survival and being a Jew.

Yes. It is important for me to have survived as a Jewish person. And I definitely am part of the Jewish nation. I was given an upbringing which was very humanitarian. I mentioned before that my father was a leading figure in the Jewish socialist movement.

But also to retain your own identity and nationality, which means to hold the tradition dear, the culture. And it's very important to me to pass it on to my children. And I think it just is important. And it adds color in the world as such. You know, ethnic minorities to remain there that I would like to see the time when we can all live together nicely and share each other's treasures. But it is very important to me, and probably more so because of what I have been through, just



because I was Jewish.