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Department of Sound Records

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EUROPE UNDER THE NAZIS 1933 - 1945
Zdenka Ehrlich

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CXW Where were you born, Mrs Ehrlich?

ZE I was born in Czechoslovakia, 1922.

CXW Whereabouts in Czechoslovakia?

ZE In a very small place called Blatna which was dominated by a beautiful castle with actually, the very first English garden that was constructed in my country. But we moved out of there when I was two into a place near Plzen which is the western part of Bohemia called Rokycany. And it used to be a fortress during the Protestant wars with moats which of course were filled and it was quite a romantic place. And I remember, looking back, that even the seventeen years in which I have lived in Rokycany was one of the happiest times.

CXW What name were you born with?

ZE Name?

CXW Yes.

ZE Zdenka, ^{spelt} /Z D E N K A which is rather difficult probably, for an English tongue to pronounce.

CXW But what was the family name?

ZE Fantl, F A N T L - Fantlova, being a female.

CXW And you were a Czech-speaking family?

ZE Yes.

CXW What did your father do for a living?

ZE He was an industrialist. He was involved in steel works and he was actually one of the very first people ahead of his time when he conceived an idea to manufacture petrol.

from coal which only now, so many years after, is the thing of the future. And he actually went into the venture with three other people and it collapsed. The whole venture collapsed. He poured a lot of money in it, the chemist who was a German chemist from Berlin ran away, a lawyer who was in charge of the whole business committed suicide and my father came home only to hear from my mother to say, "I told you". But he was a brave man and he swam through the turbulent waters and of course, nothing became out of that.

CXW Where were you educated?

ZE I was educated in Rokycany. We had a high school - a gymnasium which it was called - where we had all the subjects including Latin, German, which was more or less a second language, French. English wasn't taught at that time somehow, for some reason, I don't know why, neither Russian nor any other languages. I studied music, I wanted to be a pianist and when I was sixteen - that's right - and the Germans came in, I was expelled because of, suddenly, 'religious background'. Because family was of Jewish origin but we never actually practised any religion much.

You see, the Jews in Czechoslovakia were very assimilated because already since Middle Ages the Czech kings were favouring the Jews and let them develop in their own way and incorporated them into the life of the country. And I think, 1848, they became - what's the word - they got equal rights. And from then on of course developed normally as everybody else and there was hardly any difference. I never felt any different from my schoolmates. And of course, when suddenly, it came, the Nuremberg laws you felt odd - it didn't make much sense that you suddenly had to wear a star and be somebody else that you didn't know you were before.

/Were ...

CXW Were your family atheists?

ZE No. No, my father kept to some kind of rules, I think, more from tradition or respect to his parents on the main Jewish holidays which was about twice a year. From all I remember, they always had to do with food, either too much food or nothing at all. I didn't pay much attention to that at all.

CXW Were your family political at all? Were they interested in politics?

ZE Not at that time. My father was a Social Democrat and only during the occupation when he was listening intensely to the BBC broadcasts was then arrested because somebody denounced him. And the Gestapo came and took him out of the dining room, in front of all of us and that was probably the only time.

CXW When was your father arrested?

ZE 1940. The Germans came exactly 15th March, 1939 which I remember clearly. It was a Thursday and it was raining. And we didn't know much what was going on or how it all came about. We lived in relative peace until then, of course in a very democratic country, not much different style of living than you have now here in England. Everybody went around their business, children went to school, there were holidays, there were studies to be done and so on. And never did we think that anything like that sort of upheaval can happen in our country. Germany was far away. My mother thought differently, she thought it was too close. My father was a real Czech-minded patriot and he always said, "Never, it'll never happen here, nothing will ever happen to us". And so, ^{you} as a young girl, thought "well, he knows better" and went about going skating or doing the daily things.

CXW Why was your mother less optimistic?

/She ...

ZE She probably was a bigger pessimist by nature. And listening to the broadcasts from Germany and of course the menacing tone of Hitler she had her doubts.

CXW Do you remember the Munich crisis of 1938?

ZE Yes, yes. There was - before that - there was mobilisation. We had a very strong defence line against Germany. The army was fantastic, it was almost like the Maginot Line in France. And the national spirit was so strong that at that time of the mobilisation, people went freely - my father went out of his free will - to join the the army. And when it was at its strongest and its most enthusiastic, came Munich and everybody had to withdraw. And that was the biggest shock for the country. And soon after, they marched in and suddenly it became unreal. "What happened? How come?"

CXW Who did people blame?

ZE I don't remember. At that time I didn't really pay so much attention to how it happened, what happened, who was behind it, we only saw Germans. Who was behind it - the political scenario behind it - me personally, I didn't conceive.

CXW Was there any anti-British feeling?

ZE I can't really recollect that at all. All it was was the Germans.

CXW You actually saw Germans come in, did you?

ZE Of course, of course. When they arrived on the 15th March.

CXW No - I'm talking about in 1938.

ZE No, that was completely political.

CXW Before we come on to the events of March, 1939, were there any German speakers - large numbers of German speakers - in your particular part of Czechoslovakia?

ZE No, it was purely Czech. The Sudeten part was - you know in those days a hundred miles was a long distance - was much further to the west to the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia.

CXW But presumably, you came across German speakers in Czechoslovakia at this time?

ZE The only thing that we have noticed which was of change was that the German-speaking Jewish population from the borderline came inland as refugees although they belonged to the same country. And they were German-speaking but other than that, other type of population, we haven't seen, no, not at that time.

CXW Did you speak to the German-speaking Jews from the Sudetenland?

ZE Oh yes. I even fell in love with one of them. They felt displaced like everybody I suppose who leaves his home wherever it is.

CXW What type of things did they say?

ZE Well, they have lost their homes, they have lost their jobs, they were at the mercy of people who'll give them something. It was difficult to find feet or ground under their feet and they were extremely pessimistic because they already had a first taste of what can happen suddenly - that a feeling of security under which we have lived, personal and national, to them collapsed. We still lived under, let's call it even an illusion, that there is such a thing as security but only now we know it isn't. It can suddenly give way like a ground under your feet. When the storm gathers and it became

tornado it sweeps everything off.

CXW Now going on to March, 1939 when the Germans actually walked in to the whole of Czechoslovakia, you said it was a rainy day but can you tell me what your personal recollections were of that day, what you saw and heard in as much detail as you can recollect?

ZE It was a Thursday and about six o'clock in the morning - we were three children and parents, a family of five. My father came to wake us up and he said, "Quick, quick, children, come to the window, here are columns of German motor-cycle army on motor-cycles trundling through the town". And of course a child is curious. We all rushed to the window and had a look. And it looked very menacing, I remember the feeling of . . . they were helmeted and drrrrrrrr, drrrrrrrr, one after another in long columns like black ants. And of course, we didn't quite know what the consequences will be but the feeling was very menacing.

Then we listened to the radio of course which had a feeling of urgency and they always said, "Stand by, stand by". And the distance between ^{from} Rokycany to Prague to which they were heading is only 72 kilometres so it didn't take them more than an hour and a half maybe. And of course, once we heard that they have reached Prague and occupied the castle and there was big upheaval, we knew that is the beginning of the end. Then we knew.

There was no school which was good news at that time because I remember that we had a lesson in geography and I wasn't prepared for Sahara and I thought, "Oh good, I don't have to go to school because I don't know much". So these were all very mixed impressions but the one over-riding was of excitement, but undertone of fear underneath.

CXW How did the German occupation begin to affect your

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life personally?

ZE Much later. We had to register all the Jewish population - in Rokycany, I don't think there was more than about ten families. It still didn't mean much, it doesn't hurt to be registered. But then came the order that we had to wear the stars, the yellow star and it presented some problem because you had to sew it on and you didn't know whether you had to sew it on everything or just the coat and always wear the coat over it. And new rules and regulations started to appear: "If not, the penalty is so and so" and such and such. And so it started to be more and more menacing. The next thing came that all Jewish businesses had to be delivered to the Germans, the occupiers have to leave and the Germans will take over which happened. It came into German hands. I had nothing much to do with it so I didn't know what the formalities were but the business was closed. It was put under some kind of other leadership. We were allowed to stay in the house.

The next thing was that I was expelled from school. My father got a letter - official letter because all the offices and institutions were immediately occupied by German authorities so the Czechs had nothing to say, except those who collaborated. But they were then on the German side. So we became governed by the Germans, bit by bit, they have taken over the management. When it became law that no Jewish students are allowed to go on in their studies my father has received a letter from the gymnasium, "Because of new ^{rules and} regulations and Nuremberg laws your daughter - blah-blah-blah has to leave as from tomorrow". And that was it. I was seventeen, that's right. So I left school and all my mates said, "But maybe it's not true, maybe you can come back", and "Isn't it silly?" And do you know, it was silly in a way, it was hard to understand that suddenly all these rules are being applied which didn't really make much sense to you personally. So I was out of school.

Then, for some reason, English was always an obsession with me, Ever since - you'll laugh - the very first record of Fred Astaire singing, "Cheek to Cheek" and "You are my Lucky Star". I didn't know what he was saying, I was repeating it phonetically, like - I mean, it didn't make any sense but I was fascinated by the language. And I thought, "I must, I must learn it, this is something I will need". Surely enough, at the end of this session, you will see that the language saved my life in 1945.

So I persuaded my father - first, I asked my mother to send me to Prague to the English Institute. The English Institute in Prague was operated independently and of course they had no such clauses as to Jewish students or non-Jewish students, whoever wants to come is welcome for a fee which wasn't too much. And I thought, "That's an opening" but my mother who wasn't very bright said, "No, you're not going to Prague, it's bad for a young girl". I thought, "This is ridiculous". So I went around and I thought my father will have to say yes and I have to make sure that he will say yes.

So I went round to an old professor who was his good friend and pleaded with the professor to put a word in for me. And I said, "Look, I'm seventeen, I still want to study, I want to learn something. If I'm not allowed to go to my school I can go to English Institute. Why don't you ask, please?" So he did. My father came home that day and said, "What would you say if I send you to Prague to attend the English Institute?" I said, "Yes, would be alright I think, yes, I wouldn't mind". And I went, loved it. I stayed with my grandmother who lived there. Lessons were from eight till one and it was fascinating. I never spoke a word of English before. We had Mr Henchman and Miss Hinckley - I don't know where they were from - but they were real, they were real English. You know, for us it was like somebody from outer space. We had dictations and we had text books and we had to write our homework. And I

/was ...

was just so diligent I was first in the class - I didn't have enough. It finished June at the end of the school year, June, 1940. I had to go back home.

That time, the law has already been enforced that people who wear the star are not allowed to be out in the street after 8 pm. So that of course puts lot of restrictions on your movements and on your entertainment and seeing friends and so on. And my mother insisted that I come back home. So I came back to Rokycany, not doing anything much. I played the piano, I studied. That was allowed because I had a private teacher until one day - I cannot recollect exactly the date or the month - but it was 1940, September, October, probably.

One evening we were sitting all around the dining table, about eight o'clock in the evening there was not one but three or four loud bangs and rings on the door. And that time we already knew that the Gestapo was collecting people, arresting people on spec, there was hardly ever any valid reason. The maid - we had three live-in maids in those days - went to the door. And there were three, not two but three Gestapo. They all looked like Idi Amin, I'm sure - huge, big men.

That evening was the first shock where actually you came face to face with the brutal power of the Nazi regime. They burst in. It was full of noise, full of shouting, full of aggression. They grabbed my father and said, "Your name?" and he said, "Ernst Fantl". He said, "Jew Ernst Fantl " and hit him. And when they hit him - because I adored my father - I was sitting like - absolutely struck by lightning. I didn't cry, I didn't make a scene, I was frozen, completely frozen watching what was going on. They hit him, they kicked him and they said, "You take your things and you come with us". We had no idea why. He was very collected. He took his coat, his hat, looked over the scene, turned in the door - they were surrounding him - turned in the door and said, "Remember one thing . . ." - don't know how to say it in English - "Calmness is strength". And went.

My mother collapsed, had to be carried into bedroom and I remember what I did. I cleared the table, whatever there was I ate like a locust, yum, yum, yum, out of sheer fear, frustration, anger, something I can't explain. Absolutely what was there disappeared. My mother afterwards was terribly angry and said, "How could you do that? It only shows that you didn't love your father". I couldn't argue, I just couldn't.

Then we found out later what happened. He attended the sessions of the BBC, where he thought he was safe. And the man was an informer and everybody who was there at that evening which was the evening before they came to arrest him, were of course arrested. He was taken to Buchenwald, which we found out later and from the sparse news we had from him he was classified as political and was transferred to Bayreuth in Germany where he actually stayed until 1944.

And we had notes from him that he is in an institution, sort of a prison cell. He wasn't in a camp, it was a regular prison probably where they stick papers and make paper bags or something. And that he was a model prisoner, now he is in charge of the paper bags and that we shouldn't worry and that he is alright. So one member of the family was gone.

At that time of course we did not know how long the war will take, what will happen to us. We did not even anticipate that we will be all pushed out of the house and into the camps and out of this life. So at that time we maintained a contact with him as best as we could and as long as you are allowed to stay at home, you don't feel any danger.

That lasted until January, 1942 so it must have been at least a year and a bit - few months. I'm sure he was arrested September - October, 1940. Until then things were turning to worse, not for us but from what you could hear. Suddenly, there were rumours that people were being transported east - that was the word. Now in those days people didn't travel

that much so east was somewhere east, had no idea what it meant. Everything was kept a very deep secret. The news from the radio of course was already in German hands and none of it has been ever publicised, these were underground rumours. And there was nothing you could do.

Prior to my father being arrested, one of the things that came to us was that England has allowed a quota - to women, to come to Britain as domestic servants - that was the only allowance under which they could come. One of my aunts took the opportunity and she went and she lived in England - I think in Manchester first and then in London - until she died here a few years ago. I was always very adventurous and I thought, "Oh goody, why don't I go?" And we were still all at home so there was no feeling that we will ever be separated but I thought this might be a good thing. And I voiced this wish one day at a dinner time.

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So I said at the dinner, "Why can't I go to England?" And my father said, "You stay right here, put it out of your mind, you're going nowhere. You stay right here, we'll stay all together". And that was it. Well, as I can see now with hindsight, forty years later, I live in England not exactly as a domestic - only in my own household - and the whole family has gone. So I was separated, I was meant to be separated, I don't know which and that was the fate.

CFW Now, if I could ask you about something you said earlier, you were talking about collaborators amongst the Czech population - what kind of level was collaboration at in those days in the early part of the war?

ZE Well, a lot of people joined not exactly the party but if they were called upon to collaborate as informers, being rewarded for it, being given special privileges and this sort of thing, I think there were quite a number.

CXW Was there a certain type of person who would do this?

ZE I think it would be on every level, I would say, on every level.

CXW What type of person tended to resist?

ZE Intellectuals, artists and very ordinary people as well.

CXW Did you come into contact with any organised resistance by any political groups or other groups?

ZE I can only recollect a personal type of help that we got. ^{And} it was a teacher, a schoolteacher with his family who lived a little bit out of town near the forest. They came to us and they said, "Look, you don't know what's going to happen but it doesn't look too good for you. Why don't you give us anything that you want to preserve in case there will be confiscations". And so we put together photographs, paintings, things of perhaps personal value. And the people have kept it all the time during the war. And after the war when I lived in Sweden at that time they found me and handed it over and said, "We're so glad that one of you at least can keep it". And it's hanging now in my flat here in London. And that was very rare, very rare.

The other type of people were just the very opposite. When I came back after the war - I'm jumping a little bit - 1946, to the house it was occupied by the very family who denounced my father. They wouldn't even let me in, just through the door and said, "There's nothing here of yours, we have been given this flat by the Germans" and showed me the door. I wouldn't want anything back but it sort of closed the door for me forever. I haven't ever been back since and I don't think that I will ever go. It would be like walking over a cemetery.

/So ...

So you got really two types.

CXW Did you come across people who distributed leaflets or tried to sabotage the Germans or anything of that kind?

ZE No I didn't, not me personally.

CXW Now what kind of effect on living standards at this early stage of the war did the war have on German occupation?

ZE I think there was a shortage of food straight away, restriction of movements and waiting for what happens next. It was that sort of feeling of we don't know what happens tomorrow. You were in a constant state of expectation but never of anything good, that was the feeling. But of course, it didn't last very long because as I said before, 1942 which was soon after that, we were called to a meeting, given a transport number and told that on such a day we will have to leave the house. And there again, as we attended the meeting where all the local Jewish families which I told you was a handful, it was all German controlled to register our names and ^{being} given the transport numbers. And now there were only four of us because my father was already gone.

The numbers were S 204, S 205 and S 206, my mother, my brother and my sister and I got number S 716. And it frightened me. I thought, "I'll be singled out", I didn't like it and there was nothing I could do. And it was sort of ominous, it was almost like a sign of fate but I didn't know which way it will go - for me or against me.

Then we came home. We were allowed ^{to pack} exactly twenty kilo. Now came a big commotion, what to put into the twenty kilo because we didn't know where we were going, nobody ever knew where they was going. Twenty kilo is not very much. Somebody came and said, "It might last longer than you think, perhaps you should have only winter things". Somebody said, "Forget about winter things, put in soap, cigarettes". Cigarettes

started to be

a / valuta, cigarettes was the highest value you could carry. Because for cigarettes you could buy bread, you could buy even maybe freedom or privileges or whatever. Soap started to be very scarce so that again was as a bargaining value. And then somebody thought, "Food, how long does food last? - but perhaps warm clothes?" So it was all guessing.

20th January, 1942, we all gathered at the local station, were transported to Plzen from which the complete transport was loaded into a train - it was a normal train - heading 'destination unknown'. In the train, I remember I got a first taste of German brutality. There were women, men, children, normally dressed as we are now, you and me, sitting in a train going somewhere. Every now and then a group of German officers or soldiers or SS, I didn't quite distinguish the degree, moved in. But always with noisy, shouting, beating, made people, men particularly, shave without water - you know, we all thought this is ridiculous, this doesn't make much sense - until they were bleeding, they were beating them up and it was frightening. It was really frightening because I have never witnessed any cruelty or any aggression and I was very frightened. After about a day or two - it was a short ride - we arrived in Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt was a military town about which we didn't know much before that in north-west of Bohemia. It was actually built 1788 from what I know by the son of Maria-Theresa, Joseph II. And it was built strangely enough, for no particular reason, in the shape of the Jewish star. It was a fortress with reinforcements and it was meant as a military sort of establishment. And if one imagines 1788 was in time of Mozart, you suddenly appear in this place which changed character so completely. It became camp, not a concentration camp, a transit camp. The Czech Jews were the very first ones to enter it as early as December, 1941, that's how it started.

soldiers were huge, big buildings, five or six storeys high, very solidly built around a courtyard with ^{the} what do you call them? -

CXW Battlements?

ZE Yes, about half a dozen or eight of them, these huge, big blocks. And in between, amongst these were normal one-storey houses and shops. So at that time, during the peacetime it would hold about six thousand inhabitants including the army.

When we arrived the population or some population was still living there but the blocks - the barracks, ^{the} big buildings - were evacuated and we were put in. Each of these blocks were given a name by depicting a German town, so one was called Magdeburg, ^{I don't remember all of them -} Dresden, Heidelberg. And they were divided between men barracks and women barracks, men were separated from the women. So my brother who was three years older than me went somewhere else into what was called Sudeten Kaserne - is there an equivalent word for kaserne in English?

CXW Barracks?

ZE Barracks but they were solid buildings, as I say, five or six storeys high, brick and all. We were locked in and there was no way to communicate. There was no free movement because there was still civilian population. At that time everybody was allocated his living space which was represented by a bunk. So in a room of this size where we're sitting now, there would be three-storeys bunks and there would be at least nine people in here, that was your living space which was allocated to you - exactly the size of the bed, at the bottom, in the middle and at the top.

CXW And this is quite a small room, we're sitting in now.

ZE Yes, yes. So you get the idea of the density as it

developed later. Some rooms were big, some were smaller but of course they were accordingly filled. We were still allowed to use the clothes that we came in, nothing has been confiscated .

And slowly, the township of Theresienstadt was being built by the Germans or conceived as a model ghetto. More and more transport arrived, I think it was almost every day. And there had to be some kind of organisation looking after the running of the place. The first people were the Jews from Czechoslovakia and they were of all sorts. Because we were ^{really} surprised by the German occupation so nobody has had a chance to make any plans to leave or to escape or anything so there were all sorts of people, young, old, business people, intellectuals - the lot. Whereas in Germany, by that time, the population was only old because the young ones went long ago. A lot of people made their way to Cuba, to China, to Australia, to whatever because it was still possible.

Originally, the Germans actually asked the Jews to leave but then came the very sad thing that most doors became closed and there were a lot of them who couldn't get anywhere until too late. But by 1942, as I said, mostly the old ones have been left behind because then the transport started to come from Germany, from Austria, much later from Denmark and some from Holland. but that was only very, very late in the piece towards the end of the war.

So once all the jews from Czechoslovakia were in, being industrious people, they were put to manage the camp. And it became almost state in its own with its own government and offices, like a sort of microcosm of a government. There was the management of interior, there was the health department, there was the school department, there was food, kitchen, hospitals, administration, absolutely everything was running smoothly. People were working round the clock and it became extremely well organised place.

At the height of the Theresienstadt existence, instead of 6,000 were 65,000 people. So you can imagine the density and the organisation behind it. Not only transports were arriving ^{practically} every day but by then transports were also leaving and of course we didn't know where they were going. And they were assembled by the administration, 1,000 people at a time. And 1,000 people had to be found by hook or by crook, somebody had to go. And that was the most dreadful thing.

The three people in the management or in the government of Theresienstadt were all German Jews, scholars, all doctors, Dr Epstein, Edelstein and Murrelstein which was a very funny trio. They were responsible for running the camp. When the camp was full the civilian population has been evacuated and the camp has been opened almost like a ghetto where we had free movement. We could walk from one place to another, we could visit each other, even people started to apply to live together, families or couples. If they could find a little corner, a little room, they were allowed to live together. The ingenuity of the people was absolutely astounding, suddenly in the attics windows were sprouting out, little rooms were appearing and of course these were all privileges that you had to be either a VIP or an artist or know somebody, like everywhere else. It was all sort of a black market.

I personally, I worked in the kitchen which was always at that time, was the place to be in - kitchen meant working practically in the dungeons in the cellars of one of these buildings. Which were equipped with enormous containers where we were, I must say, cooking for, well, five thousand people at a time, maybe ten. But the cooking consisted of soup, sometimes a potato and sometimes a dumpling. All this has been organised to its highest efficiency. People were standing outside in the queue three times a day with tickets or a little block of tickets to be clipped. We in the kitchen were standing behind the containers with a ladle and everybody filed past.

/And ...

And I remember the very, very old people filing past always said, "Please miss, from the bottom" which meant maybe there is a piece of potato or something floating or something down there rather than just the liquid. We were young and there were a lot of us. We didn't see the misery as much as the old people who were alone and sick.

Apart from the efficiency of running the camp and I can again only tell you from what I saw because there were other divisions and other parts which I did not see or didn't know much about, like the hospitals, the way they were run and schools for children. Because schooling was illegal so they had to be grouped together and tutored by experienced teachers or professors. Since there were so many professional artists in music, conductors, soloists, stage designers, producers, actors, writers - all this was there only in the Czech contingent.

Suddenly, it had to come to the fore and Theresienstadt became an extremely culturally, busy place. We got permission - we never saw a German, there was a head office, the headquarters where they operated behind closed doors but they gave instructions to the management. So we didn't see them, we didn't see any of them at all. We knew the rules and regulations, smuggling was not allowed, all sorts of things were not allowed so obviously, everybody acted accordingly. And those who took chances came sometimes to a very bitter end, were put away in another fortress or tortured or sent out, whatever.

CXW Can you be more specific?

ZE Yes. Brother of a friend of mine who was in a division of transport or, yes, transport, they were actually allowed to go out of the camp, out of the town to bring in provisions. And they made contact with the gendarmerie outside the Czechs. They were smuggling in cigarettes because cigarettes was the highest denominator for anything.

There were a lot of people who would sell bread to be able to smoke. And they put the cigarettes at that particular day into a false bottom - you know, like heroin today - cigarettes at that time. When they came into camp, there was informer who informed the German authorities. They were searched, cigarettes were found and they were tried, not very elaborately, put away into a fortress which was another part of the camp and hanged. So things like that happened almost all the time.

Now the art in Theresienstadt was something absolutely unique. Because I joined the movement. We got permission to produce plays, to give concerts, all this was allowed. So immediately, everybody set to work. The designers occupied the top attics, adapted it for stage and plays were performed. I was in six of them, one was Moliere, Georges Dandin. Plays that were even translated, I remember Shakespeare was translated, "Love's Labour Lost", original plays have been written, some Czech authors have been performed, a lot of poetry, a theatre workshop has been set up by a producer who was a very famous name at the national theatre. Concerts were being given, music was composed, artists' instruments were allowed to come in and it became something absolutely unique.

I must say that ridiculous as it sounds the climate in Theresienstadt was ideal for any artist that he can dream about. He had no material worries, he didn't have to worry about how to pay his rent, how to pay his tax, what to eat or where to live and just give all his energy and his love and his enthusiasm to the arts. But it was only part of our work because part time, for instance, I worked in the kitchen which could have been middle of the night or we work in shifts. And the other half was in the theatre. And one of the most important part of the

/theatre ...

theatre was the satire. And this escaped the Germans.

And this was of course which kept the spirit of all the inhabitants so high, not only in song but in the content of it and what shine through was "Don't give^{up} don't give up, one day this will finish and then we will laugh at the ruins of all this".

CXW Can you give some examples of the satire?

ZE There was one particular man, called Karel Svenk. He was a communist, very, very left and he was extremely talented. He was a producer, he was a writer, he was a dancer and he was also a composer. And his group was the revolutionary, young group. And his song, he composed a song which became almost a national anthem for us inmates which was based exactly on what I said, "Everything is possible, don't despair, keep your head up, one day all this will finish and we all laugh" - not all, sadly.

CXW Can you still sing it?

ZE I don't know, not at this moment. I would have to cast my mind back. It probably wasn't a very interesting melody but the content of it meant of course everything. Then we did a play which was adapted there, it was a twelfth century play about the biblical story of Esther, how she saved her tribe from extinction. And this was put on a stage by an extremely, genius stage designer who if he had survived would be number one in the West anywhere, in London, in New York, whatever. He used the simplest material he could find to make a stage.

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To make a stage appear so simple and yet express the action which was taking place in such terms that today it would be rated ^{as} avant-garde.

CXW Now you mentioned earlier about the camp administration having to select batches of a thousand people at a time to be taken away. Do you know how those people were selected - or what kind of criteria were used?

ZE From what we remember the order that came from the headquarters would be: "Just old people". "Today, we want only one thousand of old people, over sixty". So they had to find a thousand people over sixty. Or "We want only working men up to thirty-five for hard labour". So there were some indications what the Germans wanted and if there were not - I mean, I can't speak from experience because I wasn't a member of the administration - how they put it together, it must have been a headache. It must have been a hard, bleeding headache who to put in because obviously, they didn't want to send anybody.

CXW But it must have been impossible to be fair because they must have known . . . I mean, obviously, if they had a relative who came into that age category, would they not refuse to send that relative?

ZE Yes, well, they tried but they knew somebody else will have to go. Certain people were so called, protected, a lot of the artists because then the German headquarters started to trade it in as a name of model ghetto and in the course of I think, 1943 they invited Eichmann to view this ghetto, how well we lived, what privileges we had, how well treated we were and so on; that we were not undernourished, that we were free to do what we wanted, we even had theatre and music and concerts - and all this. The visit came but it was highly organised of course. I believe there were also some members of International Red Cross present. Before the visit, everybody was engaged in town cleaning. The streets were virtually washed on the knees with brushes and soap and were spotless. People who lived in the shop windows - because shop windows were also living quarters, I mean, every inch had to be utilised ^{for people} to sleep somewhere - they have been evacuated, cleared. Things have been arranged in the windows

as though these are shop windows, children have been rehearsed to say, when the laager commandant comes, they will crowd around him. He will give them each a box of sardines which ^{was} at that time allowed to be sent from outside but of course it was never for eating, it was for sale or exchange for food or cigarettes or ^{by read or} whatever. They were all crowding around him and when he was giving them the boxes or sardines they would say, "Oh, Uncle Rahm, Schon weider sardine" - "Again, sardines". So this thing has been rehearsed properly.

We, the young ones, have been put into a group of young athletes. We were allowed to swim across the river and back of course, to show the freedom - normally, we were not allowed to swim in the river. Music was playing in the square, people were walking around like in a spa, everything was arranged. And sure enough, a car came, open car with Eichmann standing there in the middle and they sped through the town within five minutes. And that of course, was used for propaganda in German newspapers and the whole apparatus.

CXW So it was being filmed, was it?

ZE Oh yes, yes, it has been filmed and it's on record. After that, transports went every single day. The hysteria was growing in momentum and more and more people came in and out. I don't know according to the statistics how many thousands or hundred of thousands of people actually passed through Theresienstadt on the way in and out.

On the way out we knew only the word "Going east". We were kept in the dark, we did not know, the word Auschwitz was sort of hazy, we didn't know what was going on, we had no imagination or no image in our mind what a concentration camp actually looked like - like you wouldn't have if you haven't seen one. There is no reference to it anywhere but it was a frightening thing to be in a transport. Because once you were in, destination was very much unknown and we

didn't know anybody who ever came back, ever returned, only we were getting cards from - well, other people were getting cards from the members of their families - usually at very irregular intervals, "We are well, don't worry about us".

And what I found out after the war, these were usually sent before they went to gas chambers. So there was no way of checking what happened to them or are they well or aren't they well or nothing. It was all bamboozling - maybe it was humanitarian in a sense, I don't know. So everybody tried to stay by hook or by crook, as long as he possibly could. And as I said, the artists were mostly protected for some reason until the time came when the whole management - all three of the government figures - were taken into transport. And that was towards the end, 1944, one after another. And we found out somehow, the news filtered through that they have been exterminated but nobody knew how. I mean, everybody imagined shot but what else has been done, we didn't really know.

So until 1944 we lived with this menace of transport above your head, hovering, every day and only hoped for the best until October, 1944. Actually, in September, the month before, my brother was drafted in a group of young men so he left, and we didn't know any more where he was. October 16th, 1944, my mother, myself and my sister were drafted for the transport and there was no way of changing that or getting out. Most people were already gone, less transports were arriving, it was late, ^{actually,} in the piece, there were less and less people.

In that group were mostly the very, very prominent artists, conductor who survived - the Czech Philharmonic - whom I met again after the war in Australia, composers, soloists, instrumentalists, actors, producers, they're all in that. We were put in a cattle truck train, we were told to take only the most necessary things. We were dressed like you are dressed now. October - we thought, "Well, it still is

autumn, by the winter it'll be over". So we always thought a month ahead - two months ahead - hoping that it will be over and time went.

We were on the way about three or four days not knowing where we're going. There were no sanitary arrangements at all, we were sitting on benches. And at the end of the trip we arrived somewhere. And the destination was Auschwitz. Since we were not at all prepared for anything, the door opened and I recollect absolutely clearly because during the whole three and half years it was the biggest shock that I registered which is in my mind absolutely fixed, like - fossilised. You can perceive life or ^{anything} within a fraction of a second. It's like a laser coming through your mind, on two different levels. One level is what you see and one level is what you feel.

When they opened the doors what I saw was a world of something like if you would fall through a trap in a stage into an underworld. It was a world which I could not refer to either in terms of that I have seen it before or that I have read something about it or that I have heard about it, no. It was completely unreal. As far as the eye could see were low, grey barracks without windows for miles separated by barbed wire. From time to time there was a tower and the ground was yellow clay, wet. Not a sign of life except on the right, behind the barbed wire were what I would imagine - or what I would say were - not people but creatures, creatures from where? They didn't resemble people, they looked in rags, they didn't have any hair, their eyes were fixed in some kind of a terror. And you thought, "Where are these people from, I've never seen people like this? Where could they possibly be from?"

Further down, between the other barracks I suddenly saw a group of naked women running from one block to the next. I said, "What's this? Where am I? What kind of world is this?" You just could not perceive what it all meant. But

the door opened - I remember, it was probably once or twice I ever experienced what I could say was extra sensory perception - it was like a whiff of a laser that came even from left to right through my mind. Almost like a voice which wasn't a voice which said, "This is going to be tough, it has an undertone of terror and death and if they don't shoot you or push you or kill you, you're strong enough to survive". This is the voice that said to me.

And indeed it felt as though you suddenly dropped into some kind of an underworld which you didn't quite know how you will handle because you were totally unprepared. And then comes something that I have called afterwards, something - your survival kit - that is something that you carry with you, you never open it. It's not like Pandora box but it's there. And in time of crisis it opens. It doesn't come from your mind, you don't think about it, you don't even have any intellectual effort to apply, something is directing you. Some inner force tells you exactly what to do, what not to do. And the first thing that I felt was utter relaxation as though I would put myself into neutral gear. If I'm in neutral gear, nothing can go wrong. "If they push me front or back or left or right, nothing will screech so just relax, relax and see what happens next. Don't think, don't worry, don't be afraid, do as you're told".

The scene around me was full of commotion, people were screaming, crying. There were children, there were dogs, there were the guards beating everybody across the head and screaming, "Out, out, out". When we all jumped out we were put in to a long, long column and said to march forward. It wasn't a station that we know - platforms, no - it was the end of the line, the train just stopped and there was nothing. Just these barracks, ^{the} barbed wire, nowhere else to go, it was really the end of the line. A dirt track or was it bitumen? - I can't remember - which was leading inside the camp. On the

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right were these creatures in the rags . . . where I thought, "I'll never be like them, I don't know who they are", the naked women, I thought, "What are they doing there?" Then I saw some men on the other side in striped gear and in between all you tried to do is to avoid the guards and the sticks and the dogs. So you kept sort of inside the column and marched, you were carried on like a flood.

At the end of the line of the column - it must have been a mile - never forget it, three men in uniform. The uniforms were spotless, the boots were gleaming like mirrors. The man in the middle whom I know now was Mengele, Dr Mengele which we didn't - we didn't know anything about him. Never forget the impression, again, a fraction of a second I just glanced at him. He was very good-looking, in his perhaps late thirties, early forties, not a menacing face at all, rather sort of - not benevolent but not menacing. I remember his boots were so shiny, he was absolutely immaculate. He lifted his hand which had a white glove - he had white gloves on him, not exactly like a traffic policeman but it-sort of was a sign of distinction and importance - and looked at everybody who marched past him. And just made a very, very slow gesture, very light gesture and said, "Rechts, links, links, links, rechts" - "Right, left, left, right, left, right" and it went rather quickly. Nobody knew what meant left and what meant right.

What I know now what was happening and luckily I didn't know then and ignorance was a great bliss - it's part of the survival kit, you've got to be ignorant, knowledge is a burden because it's fear - right were all the young-looking, strong-looking people who still were capable of hard labour, I would say up to thirty-five, perhaps a few more years but not much over. Anybody over that went left, anybody who looked sick went left and all children went left. So that my mother was on my left, I was on the right and my sister,

/who ...

who was six years younger was in the middle. And Mengele was standing, looked at my mother, without any doubt he said, "Left" and on me without any doubt because I was strong and young, "Right", and nothing to my sister. I instinctively grabbed her and pulled her with me. And that was all I have seen of her.

We were marched off and from that moment everything went like in a whirl. Anything that followed was so unusual, was so strange and unreal that you felt more like in a painting of damnation rather than a human being because you really didn't know what was going on. Everything had to be done quickly. We were rushed into one of the windowless barracks and told to strip, "But put your shoes and your clothes neatly because you'll come back to it" we were told. So we have done as we were told and then came one of the most heroic deeds I have done in my life.

Before I left Theresienstadt I had a boyfriend whom I loved very much. And when he went to the transport before me he has made a little ring out of piece of metal, engraved, 13th June, 1942 - this is when he went - put it on my finger and said, "If we ever survive I'll find you". And to me, this was the strength, the tower of strength. I was wearing it and I had it on my finger. And as we had to pass through a very narrow sort of a slot, like sheep, through the control after we have stripped, one girl noticed this ring. And she said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, take it off because I have already seen or heard that somebody who had a ring was beaten up and put aside. And I thought, "I'll be damned if I get rid of this ring, I can't afford it, I've got to keep it and I put it under my tongue and went. And the girl in front of me had nothing but the guard asked her to open her mouth and didn't find anything. And I thought, "If he finds it, I'll take the risk, I'm just not getting rid of this ring, never mind what ever happens - come what may".

I went through the control, I didn't have to open my mouth,

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I went right through and I kept the ring. I have it till this day.

What happened after the control, there was a line of at least twelve stools where the German - we called them hairdressers afterwards - were sitting, German guards, with little clippers, you know, that are used for men's neck and we were shorn, like sheep. The head, under, over, front, back, the lot. And the effect was so devastating. You don't see yourself, you don't know what you look like but you can see your neighbour, your friend, your sister and you don't recognise them. Because they suddenly look like dummies from a fashion window - no hair, no nothing. We looked strange - "Who are we? what's going on?" Again, very quickly.

When we were shorn off they put us in a round room with steps right up to the top. And I must have some kind of an instinct of a monkey - straight to the top so I can have a view and see what's going on. There we were sitting, completely silent and I'll never forget this view looking over the room with these dummies. We didn't look like people and I thought, "That's what's happening, we are already becoming the creatures whom I saw when we arrived. And the change that takes place in your mental process is that you start following the rules of this underworld, of this place. The past, the reality that you remember is starting to recede and you are in the process which does constitute a survival of switching your realities. The one that you knew you forget and the one that is here becomes the reality. And you follow the rules and only so can you have a chance of survival. If you refuse to do this you're already on the way to extinction because it breaks you, you cannot fight it.

After sitting in the round room, they came with whips, chased us out into another big hall where people refused to go in. And they said, "This is showers, you've got to go in

/and ...

and have a shower. And blissfully ignorant as I was I thought, "Oh so what? why not? shower is a shower". I could see on the top of the ceiling were lines of pipes, this way, that way; on every crossing or every junction were the sprays and I thought, "Well, they said it's showers, it looks like showers, it must be showers.

But there must have been some other women in this group that already knew that there are gas chambers which looked exactly the same - again, which I learned after the war. They refused to go in, screaming and fighting and putting up a fantastic resistance. They were beaten up, pushed in, the door closed and water came. And I thought, "Well, I never was much in favour of hysterical women, they only make trouble. Of course, they said it's shower and it's shower and here is water and let's get out of here". We came out completely wet and sure enough, we were also the naked women who were running suddenly, from one barrack to the next in the cold. Of course, you didn't feel whether it was summer or winter, you just don't feel these things, that's cut off of your consciousness. We were running naked, without hair, looking like these creatures into another barracks.

In the next barracks they put us in a huge, big room to a count: five, five, five. And straight after, came a woman with a whip - "Five! Five! out! out!" - chased us into the next room. There were mountains, but mountains of rags, clothing that you had never seen, not even in theatrical wardrobes - Fellini would be pleased to have such imagination to put things together, what we saw. Behind each mountain of these rags was a guard, woman guard, always with a whip. We had to run in front of it, she grabbed something and threw it at you. And the next pile were shoes, men's, women's, everything together, grabbed a pair and threw it at you. So what I finished with was the most extraordinary outfit you can imagine. I got a green ballgown with paillettes, pearls in it of olive green, light material

Chekhov play or Dostolevsky or - can't imagine, two centuries back, a short coat which belonged probably to a ten year old girl - and shoes which saved my life - there was a pair of men's ballroom, black patent shoes, size twenty, or huge. In this outfit I left the building and in this outfit I survived the war until May, 1945.

In the end you started to look at yourself as a caricature. You thought, "I can't take myself seriously, this is not me but I got along with it. I'm not fighting it, this is absolutely ridiculous, it's more than fantastic, I mean, there is no such word that you can describe the situation." "There is no reason for it, it's too fantastic, but be it as it may, I'll keep this dress on, I'm cold, I'll keep these shoes and see what happens next".

After this, we ran into the next barracks.

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The barrack they took us into must have been a standard architecture employed by a place like Auschwitz which I found out later. They were exactly, all of them, the same. It was quite unusual. When we got in, it was a huge, huge barn sort of thing without any windows. It was divided into two halves, left and right and the middle, like a demarcation line was something which one can only describe as a chimney. A chimney made of red bricks lying on the floor, cold - it ^{was} probably never meant to be heated obviously but it divided the room into two halves. And the two halves were filled with bunks, three storeys high, the lowest one was practically on the floor, the second one was very close above. And the top was again very close to the ceiling. But these ones were not for one, two, three people but ten in a line. So in one block of three storey bunks were thirty people, lying like sardines, one next to the other. The worst probably must have been to be on the
/ground ...

ground floor. Again, I managed to get to the top and that's where I went.

Immediately, we formed a group of friends. We were all from the same batch, more or less, that came from Theresienstadt, good, clever girls, good mates. One of them was the wife of an opera composer, whose opera actually has been performed in Theresienstadt, ^{a children's opera} The other one was a wife of a very famous cellist who as we found out later, was drafted into the camp orchestra which was playing every day when the prisoners were being taken out and when the prisoners, half dead or dead, were being dragged back in to the camp, always accompanied by classical music.

There we were lying - because we couldn't very well sit - talking and waiting what happens next. You couldn't anticipate anything, you didn't expect anything. But then, something very strange happened. Next morning, we had a visit of two or three men who were drafted as the camp electricians. Obviously, had permission to move around. And one of them was an old friend who was looking for his sister, who got into our barrack. And he immediately came to me but he looked very strange as though not of this world. so much. And he asked me,, very matter of fact, "When did you arrive?" I said, "Last night". "Alone?" I said, "No, I came with my mother". "Your mother is with you? Did she go left?" I said, "Yes" thinking that she just is in another barrack, in another group with older women. He pointed through the door to a column of flames and said, "That's where she is now. She went through that chimney".

I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't know what chimney, I didn't know anything. I simply put it down that the man has been here too long and he went mad So I said, "Oh yes, probably". "Anyway and what else do you do?" And I didn't take any notice, absolutely not - just shows you

/that ...

that human mind is not capable of assimilating this kind of information without any preliminary reference or knowledge or notion, how would you know what is a chimney or column of flame? Nothing, so I dismissed him. And I thought, "He is mad and I'm normal, goodbye" and dismissed him. I didn't think more about it.

And there we were lying, day on, day out with intervals of being called to the parade ground to be counted, on hours on end, rain or not rain, we were drenched. We had to stand just like statues as long as they pleased, sometimes they counted us, sometimes they didn't and we just had to stand outside. Food was distributed once a day which usually consisted of a soup - I mean with soup with water - and some mysterious object was floating in it which resembled a potato or a piece of carrot or something. We were given a tin sort of a dish and a spoon, all our luggage has been kept, we haven't seen any of it any more.

So we were actually living in the rags that we have received the first day and that was to be it. So most of the time we just spent talking and lapping up rumours. Rumours always somewhere appeared from nowhere and the rumours were saying that there is a truck with a black hood. When the truck comes and picks up people, they go to gas chambers. And we had no idea what it meant but it didn't spell anything good. And there were some girls which became hysterical which anticipated their fate and never wanted to leave the barrack and were screaming when we had to go out. Well, in short, hysterical. So we knew or didn't know but we felt there is something sinister about the place but we couldn't really tell what it was.

The time went. There was no water for washing, we were just either in the bunk like the sardines or out on the parade ground. Once in a while they let us in into ^{what was called} a wash-room with a huge, big barn with taps all around the walls -

/dripping ...

dripping water, not running - dripping water. And there was always such a scramble for the drops to drink, not to wash - I mean, it was ridiculous. So that we didn't wash, we didn't brush our teeth, we did nothing, forgot about it.

The overseers in the block were voluntary and there, I first time came to the conclusion that people actually are divided into the ones who give their services and co-operate because they want to save their life and will crawl over the corpses, or the others who have enough strength to save their life otherwise than by crawling over corpses and they didn't give their services free. The ones in charge were usually Polish or Hungarian girls which we'd never met before, never seen before and they were very, very tough. They usually saved most of the food that came into the particular block for themselves and their friends and we were the outcasts.

One day, something very, very strange happened. It must have been about a week after we have arrived. We were talking, entertaining ourselves on the top floor when I noticed that across the little aisle which was between the bunks were other friends. So I crawled over and went for a visit. And as I was crawling back, right over the top, I noticed that underneath me is a guard in big boots, standing there, feet apart, looking at me. And suddenly, he shouted, "Down!" And I dropped down right in front of me, he looked me over and he said, "You come with me". I don't remember that I registered fear, I just did as I was told, I left everything to chance, to resist was futile and impossible.

So he took me out of the block and everybody else was frightened because they thought, "God knows, she'll never come back". I followed him which of course was illegal - to be seen outside the blocks where there was not a soul except the guards - I went behind him across numerous little streets in between empty blocks and we entered another block which was ^{absolutely} identical to the one where we were housed but

empty, completely, absolutely empty. The chimney was there and as he pushed me in I saw that the chimney was full of things. And as I looked closer, they were actually surgical instruments. My very first thought was "He's going to kill me, here and now and there is no way I can resist, no way I can escape, perhaps that's my fate". And I was completely relaxed. He pushed me. He said, "You lie down". I had to strip. But it wasn't what I thought it was going to be.

He actually wanted blood, put a syringe into my vein, asked me to pump.

CXW Squeeze with your hand?

ZE Yes, squeeze with my hand and as I was still strong,, and healthy coming from Theresienstadt which wasn't a camp, the blood was just pouring pint after pint. And I thought I was being very clever so I stopped squeezing my hand and he slapped me across the face and said, "Keep going". And so I must have given him a few pints of blood which again, after the war I learnt that they used for soldiers on the front. When it was over he said, "Get out". But before I got out and just gathered my clothes and threw it on me, he clipped my ear, just probably as a blood sample and I was out.

But I was in mortal danger because now I had no escort, I was alone, I could have been escaping and shot. So I thought the best way is to walk very leisurely, very slowly. So I walked very leisurely, very slowly, nothing happened to me, nobody saw me. But when I came back into the block, the two Hungarian women in charge of the block were hysterical. They were beating me up, "Where you have been, what do you think you are doing, we all will be shot, we all will be in trouble, it's all your fault". So that was much worse to come back than to get out.

As soon as I came back - about ten minutes later - the most feared truck arrived with the black hood. There was pandemonium. We all had to jump in, be loaded on to the truck and of course, the rumour was this is the end, we're going to be exterminated somewhere, somehow. Nobody knew what it meant, "What is gas chamber? what is chimney?" It was just words. So we got in. I didn't feel weak after the blood-letting. We all got in.

We were driven through the camp somewhere, in some direction, you couldn't see where because you had the black tent over it. When the truck stopped, we all jumped out and again we found ourselves in front of a barrack which was identical to every other one. And there we were standing in the lines of five, ten, fifteen, twenty and so on. And we were told or there were rumours that these are the gas chambers but we had to wait because it's busy, occupied.

The waiting was the whole night, the whole next day, the whole next night. No food, no water, no nothing, like if you are in a 'death row' and they don't bother about you any more, what's the good of feeding you, you're going to die anyhow. Strangely enough, nobody fainted, nobody passed out least of all me, after the blood. There we were standing and I thought, "I'm not going to be worried about it". Nothing went through my mind, how my life was before and what a pity I have to die now, no. You think of this moment, if you're cold, if you're tired, you don't anticipate, you don't plan. Life is now, where I'm standing, that's all ^{there is to it} and as my father said, "If you are calm, you'll be strong". And it came to me absolutely spontaneously, I ^{just} didn't worry.

Looking back at it of course, even the mere thought that you were standing in front of gas chambers waiting to get in, people would faint by the sheer horror of the thought - but

/not ...

not when you're actually there. They are two different things, when you're outside, when you're inside, you behave differently.

At the end of the two days and two nights, suddenly, a salvation. The Russian front must have moved on the east and suddenly came an order from the headquarters that a group of women, thousand strong - no - two thousand we were, in that group, be immediately loaded on a train and transported to the east to build fortifications against the Russians - again, another ridiculous story. How can you build fortifications against anybody? So instead of in, we went to the - more or less a station - or a rail. They loaded us in normal trains but warned us very, very audibly, "Don't think that you have escaped, you will be taken back. At the moment, we need you to work".

So we thought, "Well, now we're going and as the train moved it passed through my mind that whatever happens next can't be as bad, But it showed differently. Every time we thought, "It can't be as bad", it always was much worse. Every single step, every single change was for the worse. But human nature, be as it is, is optimistic until you find out otherwise.

The train went east for about three days, three nights. We had ration of bread which was always about ten inches - for three days. So it was interesting to see how people divide their ration, according to their nature. You would think everybody will eat it and that's it, no. I did. Whatever I got, I ate on the moment and then I stopped worrying. My mind was clear and I thought, "O-kay, I'll be hungry but I'm not going to be worried about will somebody steal it or should I eat more or should I eat less - here it is, now it is, now I eat". Mostly, they were divided into three parts, save it for next day and the day after, be constantly hungry of course. Or they would slice it in pattern, this way, that way, across, over, play with it. Some would exchange it for cigarette if that was available. And some were stealing.

So there were so many variations on the theme, what do you do with a ration of bread for three days?

We arrived in East Prussia. All this I know only after the war when I looked at a map because you couldn't possibly identify where you were. It was not even a village, it was a farm in East Poland, somewhere near Gleiwitz, a farm which had two huge - but huge - barns on each side of the road. So that's where we were accommodated and told we will be here for hard labour.

Winter started. In East Poland it's flat, the wind is like a knife. It was raining, we were wet, I in my ball gown and the man's dancing shoes, a little jacket over. So we suddenly found out the most precious thing to own is a needle. Everybody became a dressmaker. It's amazing what you can do. You pull out a bit of lining here, you sew it up so you have mittens, a bit of material somewhere else - you have a scarf over the head which had no hair on. All sorts of little things, improvements and did it help! I had two socks, one was purple, very short for which I was sorry, the other one was green and up to the knees so I keep changing it somehow to keep warm. The cold was the worst I have ever experienced. It doesn't come after hunger, it comes before hunger. Cold, there is nothing you can do, much.

Again, in the barn, we had long, long ^{sort of} planks of wood on which we were sleeping, ten-or fifteen in a line and one solitary, thin, paper blanket. The temperature dropped, something 20° below zero, plus the wind. Icicles were hanging from the ceiling right on us until they came to the conclusion that we'd probably all die so they gave us paper bags - like huge, big, paper bags for potatoes and sugar. And in it we were sleeping and it was lovely - better than an electric blanket. But of course the noise was awful - rattling - but we were so tired, ^{that} it didn't really matter.

/We ...

We did work. Every morning, five o'clock, out. They gave us a spade and asked us to dig truncheons - no, what is it called - obstructions?

CXW Trenches?

ZE Trenches - which again was fictitious because the soil was so hard as a rock that nobody, not even a bulldozer could get through, let alone us. We were standing in groups either talking literature or poetry or mostly, we were 'cooking', giving each other recipes. And on hours on end, from six o'clock in the morning till six o'clock at night, to stand on one spot is an ordeal. So we have devised games that each of us will have to give a big party and select a menu for twelve people from A to Z, the best she can do. And it went so . . . that two girls nearly killed each other because one of them said, "We put twelve eggs into this cake". She said, "Oh don't be ridiculous, you would never put twelve eggs into that cake" and they went really for their life. Because talking about food was a substitute for eating and you feel less hungry. Somehow, the mind saves you from starving. Of course, the menus were elaborate and five-star, every one of them.

Until the time came that the guards found that we couldn't really dig anything, the Russian front was coming closer and they drafted us into forests to carry huge trunks of trees into a sawmill. At that time, snow was very deep and it was sticking to the soles of the shoes like, well, what would you say?

CXW About a foot deep.

ZE A foot deep, you were wobbling on it. And there were only four girls under each tree so of course, the shoulders were bleeding. And we had to change and it was very important that four girls is a good team - it had to be - no troubles and no tantrums in marching and we were singing to keep the rhythm because without it, it was much more

heavy.

And I remember once we put it down and somebody said, "Let's go to 'ladies' right here. There was no guard. So we put the trunk down, disappeared in the forest and ^{as} I was coming back to the trunk, I saw the others ^{and} pass by - the four and four and four carrying the trees. ^{And} for the first time, I saw what we looked like and I thought, "My god, is this what we look like? This is what we do? It's terrible, it's unbelievable". And two minutes later you put the tree on your shoulder and off you go into the sawmill.

In that place which was called Kurzbach we stayed all winter once, that was November, December and part of January which was the worst. Worst frost and cold, absolutely unimaginable. Nobody got a cold, nobody got pneumonia, mind over matter. Don't know how you do it - I can't do it now but I did it then. We didn't get frostbite, nothing.

One day, we came back from the work, we didn't go back into the barracks. The laager commandant said, "We have to clear out of here and tonight we start a march". That was 21st January, 1945. So whatever we had on, ^{the} way we were, we got another ration of small piece of bread for three days which was mouldy but nothing matters - you eat anything. And we started the march that night.

But other things happened in that camp which are also worth mentioning. Some girls actually were ill and there was one room somewhere set aside for those who couldn't, absolutely couldn't cope. A friend of mine whose husband was a doctor and she was a very, very good friend, was in the sick bay. That day when we were marching home - I mean, I was always at the end of the line, never in the front, try to disappear from view, as invisible as possible. I noticed we had a new guard, a very old man - you would imagine him with a pipe, slippers at home, sort of - he looked a good soul, had a rifle. And he suddenly sidled up to me and said very

softly, "Can I give you something?" I didn't want to offend him, I couldn't imagine what he can give me and I said, "Yes of course", to please him. He put his hand in the pocket and took out a bun, a real, white bun which we haven't seen for years. And he said, "I'm sorry but it has been eaten by a mouse". And I looked and sure enough, inside the bun was a crater, beautifully structured by the mouse so only the crust was really there - inside was a hollow.

And I thought, "How marvellous, never mind the mouse, she also needs to eat". But hungry as I was - I would have gobbled it up on the spot in two seconds but there was my friend. Hopefully, this will go up and I get a tick - up, upstairs, when I go. I thought, "I'll save it for her, she is more ill, I'm not", put it in my pocket, took it back, went into the sick bay and gave it to her. And she was very pleased but she didn't eat it. She couldn't eat any more and left it lying next to her and somebody ^{So nothing became} stole it. / But it moved me and I thought, "Not every German, not every guard is a bastard, there must be some good people amongst them who do this against their own will because they just fall into the pattern and they can't get out of it." And it was a nice, warm feeling and I often think of him, how he did this.

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CXW You were mentioning the supervisors in Auschwitz - did you have a special name for them?

ZE I don't remember.

CXW These weren't called kapos, were they?

ZE Laager commandant, I think. We didn't see them much, really.

CXW You said they were tough, in what way were they tough?

ZE Menacing. If anybody stepped out of line, he got it.

They were screaming, they had whips, they had dogs. You knew that they were not up to any good so you tried to keep out of the way as much as possible.

CXW You said they were Poles and Hungarians. Were they Poles and Hungarians exclusively?

ZE No, I think some of the transports must have been mixed together or when our batch came, we were put together with the others in one barrack. I don't know how it came about.

CXW Is there any significance in the fact that they were Poles and Hungarians or is it just coincidence?

ZE Well, they were also in occupied territories. I think they must have been Hungarian Jews at that time, in that camp because even Auschwitz was divided into political camp, into gypsy camp, into Jewish camp, I don't really know all the divisions that they had. But when we were leaving, then I was thinking about the chimney and all this. And only once I was out of there ^{sort of} I started to get a notion but no details - we didn't really know anything about it and I refused to think that my mother went, as the boy said, through the chimney. Somehow again, you know your survival kit looks after you. It shuts off the things you're better off without knowing. It fools you a bit and so preserves you, you don't dwell on it.

CXW Now I interrupted your narrative with you saying that in the second half of January, 1945 you had to move off because of the approach of the Russian army.

ZE Yes. It was 21st January and as we moved out, about half an hour out of the camp we heard a very strong explosion and the news was that the sick bay has been destroyed. So anybody who was there was killed. The Russians must have been about a day behind us because we could hear the shots

from the cannons, well, whatever armoury they had - I don't know - but it sounded like an army. But of course, the Germans have moved us deeper and deeper into Germany so it was quite clear to us that they didn't want us to be taken over by the Russians.

In this way, we marched a fortnight, day and night, along the flat, windy and icy cold countryside. One night it must have been 35° below zero centigrade. I have never seen it before but we all had completely white noses like pieces of ice, completely frozen. And we learned something that I didn't know was possible - you could walk and sleep at the same time. So we have devised a way that the five of us were supporting the girl in the middle who was hanging on for her sleep and the feet and the legs were still moving. And you could actually relax and get some kind of relief and then we changed accordingly so that everybody could have a go and sleep while walking. It wasn't exactly sleep-walking but it was a different kind.

Before we left - there are also stories which are in a way, funny, in a human way. Somebody found a storage of raw potatoes and thought, "We can't leave this behind" and distributed the raw potatoes to anybody who would have it - of course we all wanted it - stuck it in sleeves and wherever there was room. But they were heavy like hell. It turned to be like stones. And we were eating the raw potatoes, were lovely, juicy like apples and it sustained you because it had starch and ^{is} all sorts of things.

And behind me was a girl - she was a milliner from Prague - and she came to me and tapped me on the shoulder one day and she said, "Excuse me, do you think you could lend me a few potatoes, I will return them to you after the war". So you know, things like that sound very funny now but didn't then. She didn't survive, even with the potatoes.

/Ten ...

Ten days, ten nights. Sometimes we stopped and were allowed to sleep in barns with horses or sheep or cows or whatever was at hand. Because the farmers, the Poles, all had evacuated and we saw them on wooden carts with some of their possessions, bundles and beddings and whatever on the road. And of course, they had a tent over the carts and when it was raining they were dry and we were all wet. And that's where we spent some times, the night and it was lovely, very warm with the animals, smelled nice. Nobody was frightened that somebody will get kicked, not at all.

Until one day - I think it was after a fortnight - we realised that there are only about six hundred out of the thousand that we were originally because whoever couldn't go and follow any more and fell on the wayside, was shot. It was just so merciless. Nobody could defect, nobody could say, "Please leave me here, alone, I want to die" or "I want to go back" or something, no. There were guards following us with rifles and whoever stepped out of sight, that was the end. So we just had to keep going until we reached the river Odra.

CXW Oder?

ZE Oder in Poland. Which at that time of year - the end of January - was extremely wild, there were waves and stones and absolutely wild, huge. We stopped in front of the river and the commandant said something almost like - an oracle; "Who can't any more, can stay." Now you make something out of that. So we reasoned and we thought, "What does it mean? That means what he says, those who have no more strength to cross the river on a raft. open raft, will have to stay here - but for them, will they be shot before the Russians come? or what will happen if the Russians come, we know nothing about them, so isn't it better to go, to follow, keep going?"

Those who really couldn't keep going, they stayed and indeed, they were liberated the day after by the Russians who transported them back to eastern Czechoslovakia. And they

were at home before the end of the war. But this is a moment of decision, nobody can do it for you. There were people who reasoned this way, people who reasoned that way and I thought, "I'm strong enough to go, to keep going so I'll keep going". That was my decision at that time.

We boarded the raft which was open, the water was over it, it was just so dangerous. Got across the river and there was another, at least another five days march the same way until we reached a camp - concentration camp - called Gross-Rosen which is further west, into Germany. That ^{camp} was actually, a men's camp and for the - well, not first time but - after many, many months we have actually seen other people than women. They were all ⁱⁿ the striped suits and had a very fancy haircut. They had - what is now here, very fashionable - completely shaved head but the middle part was about three inches high, like a road, sort of in the road. Then there was another fashion where they had all hair but the middle part was shaven. Some kind of distinction, I don't know.

But these men must have been there a long time because the first column that I saw coming back from the day's work, whatever they were doing - I don't know - looked as though they were not of this world any more. The eyes were hollow, there was no expression in them, they were like dead men, still moving. It was ^{just so} strange.

They put us in some kind of barrack on the floors and that was the shortest transit we had, about a week. We didn't do anything, we didn't go out, there was nothing. After about a week they said, "You have to go further". Again, on a railway line and this one this time, they were open trucks but very, very low that are normally used for coal, transporting coal on the railway. Loaded us in and it was really, a transport of death. You never knew - always we thought, "Whatever comes after will be better" but it always was a shade worse, much worse, closer to death. You were really moving towards the end.

We all jumped in. The truck was already completely full when they brought another twenty-five people, squeezed us in absolutely like sardines. Where you are now, between us would be impenetrable wall of another ten, fifteen bodies - couldn't reach you.

CXW In the space of a couple of feet.

ZE Oh, you could stand only on one foot. There was not enough room on the floor. Again, my survival kit tells me, stand close to the edge, don't move inside because it's a living mass, you will be trampled down. I hung on for dear life for five days, five nights inside the truck. We moved through countrysides day and night. There were no people anywhere, there was no sign of life anywhere, the villages were deserted. We had no food, we had no water.

Once, I remember, was snowing one night and it was oh, a godsend. We licked it from everywhere, from the shoulders and lapping it up. But inside the truck was pandemonium. Every now and then, hysteria broke out and those who didn't have enough strength virtually fell to the ground and the mass of bodies just closed over them. There was no other way. And I remember once, as I was pushed, I lost my footing, even on the one foot and hanging on the side of the truck. I lost my footing and I fell backwards and for a whole night I was sitting on a dead body and the only space there was for my hand to support myself was on her open mouth, on her teeth. She was dead.

This way, after about six days, six nights of torture we stopped. And it happened to be Weimar, the Weimar of old German Weimar Republic. On a side track the guards came, opened the truck and within minutes, in front of every truck - and it was a long train - were mountains of corpses that'd been thrown out of each one after these few days of journey. They just couldn't make it. Our shoes were lost, everything, excrement on the floor, the dead bodies, the corpses, the lot.

/So ...

So
/that was only a little stop.

After that it must have been almost a relief for the ones that stayed that there was more room, human nature being as it is - if it ^{just} wasn't your sister or your somebody, you didn't even know who the people were. The train came to a stop. We were in Austria, Mauthausen - little did we know what part of the world we are in - no map, no information, no nothing, no timetables. The train stopped.

We got out, barefoot because the shoes or whatever . . . I found mine, I wouldn't be without my shoes, they became my friends. They showed us on top of a rock was a fortress, Mauthausen. That's where we had to march, right up, like climbers, exhausted, hungry, thirsty. The thirst was such a torture that I would rate it as number one, cold number two and hunger number three, in that order, definitely. Because when you're so thirsty, dehydrated, your mind goes, you become delirious.

Came up and it really looked like a fortress out of huge slabs of granite. They pushed us in. There was a very narrow sort of a passage, on both sides were the big slabs of granite. And suddenly, somebody grabbed my hand from the back - like this - banged me against the wall - it was a guard - and he said, in German, "You see, every slab of stone a head". Of course, I didn't know what he meant. Again, after the war, what did I find out? This was an exclusive camp for men and it was a quarry, granite. And the prisoners were taken down into the quarry, each one loaded with a huge slab of granite, climbed up and when they were right at the top they got a little push from the back and down they went to their death. And that's what he meant - every slab of granite was a head. I don't know how many thousands of prisoners perished and there were political and there were ^{of} all nationalities, not only Jews. So that was that kind of place.

/As ...

As we passed through the passage, again we went into a shower room. The same story happened as in Auschwitz, we were told "These are showers". They were showers. Pandemonium, hysteria. And I remember when the water came, it was hot and rusty. I just had my mouth wide open like a fish, lapping it all up, never mind the washing, drinking, drinking, drinking, water, water, water.

After the shower we went across a parade ground into one of the barracks where again we were housed. But this time, space was at a premium so if you imagine, a block of three bunks which normally would be for three people - this was for twelve. Each bed was for four girls so we were really crouched in each corner like monkeys. And it was a skyscraper with twelve people in it and this time I was at the bottom. There was no way getting up. Again, we devised a plan how we can actually sleep,^{so} we made an agreement that till midnight two girls will really squeeze themselves to the barest edge so the other two can stretch a little bit and sleep and then take turns to change.

We didn't do anything. We were there, kept inside, once a day on the parade ground to be counted until one night - well I have done something which defies even my definition of it or what actually happened. Things that you can do in either despair or in absolutely desperate attempt to save your life are beyond the normal rules that we understand.

It was night and I remember I was woken up by light - we actually had a window in that big room, was one window, about that big - light which came in intervals like a lighthouse, on and off. And I was very curious so I thought, "Let me see what's going on?" And we were on a first floor but little bit higher than first floor - you know, just sort of above ground. So I got up, was standing at the side of the window, looking. Here was a parade ground, completely, utterly deserted, empty. Searchlights from four sides, on and off. When they were on, from that corner diagonally, two prisoners with a wooden box on handles, full with

clothing ran from one corner to the other, transporting these rags. As they ran, the guard came after and the lights were on, then it was all off. I don't know what gave me the craziest idea to snatch it. No thinking, no premonition, no nothing, a decision, I've got to have it by hook or by crook, I've got to have some clothes. Because the rumours were we're going further and it was so cold that anything will do.

The timing was deadly. I've never done anything like this before, never after. The timing was . . . after they passed the light went on, the light went off and just as they were coming second time I didn't think whether there is a guard or not. I opened the window, I jumped out and I was already in a weak state - I wasn't any more what I was at the beginning of the journey - jumped out, ran behind them, grabbed absolutely armful of whatever I could grab, ran back, lost half of it on the way, threw it in the window. And how I got back in the window, till this day I will never know. Never. A cat just . . . God help me, just some strange power that one can summon up in a moment like this. I closed the window. There was alarm.

The girls each have been immediately ^[alerted] - they got some of the clothing, we put it all on. And there was no evidence. None whatsoever. They didn't see me, which window it was, they knew somebody, somewhere. An hour after, was a parade on the parade ground, counting. I came through scot-free. They never found out. And sure enough, next day they counted us, put us on trains and we left Mauthausen. Again, we didn't know where we will be going, what will happen next.

But before this happened, the last time they were counting us, it was already morning. A very cold but very sunny, blue sky, beautiful winter day. And my friend, the wife of the composer was already in such a state. And she was a visionary. She always knew that she will not survive but I will. I don't know how she could be so sure but somehow,

she was. She suddenly stepped out of line which was unthinkable, in the parade ground and walked away, simply like you say, "I've had enough". Walked away, went to the wires which were not electric, leaned on it, looked at the sun and simply slumped and died, that moment. And I thought, "My God, it's so easy, one can expire like you blow out a candle". And so there were one less. They gave us somebody else in the line and off we went to join the train.

This time it was a normal, absolute luxurious train for people, not for animals, not for coal, not for goods but for people. So we boarded the train. I slept in the little net for compartments and we actually drove through Czechoslovakia. We could see people, we were shouting out through the windows but nobody spoke. They didn't give us anything. We must have looked a sight, we were just a very strange cargo but as it happened the train went west through Rokycany, believe it or not. As we went through Rokycany and it stopped on the station, I fished out a piece of paper somebody had and piece of pencil or something and I wrote a message to our accountant. I said, "I'm on this train but I don't know where I'm going, regards, all the best". They got it, sent it to me after the war.

Came through Rokycany. The next stop was Plzen, behind Skoda works. The workmen were fantastic. They all came to the fence and started to shout, "Why don't you run away? we'll hide you". I left the train - like mesmerised, absolutely ignorant whether they will shoot me or not, I ran to the fence and I said, "You have bread?" They brought two huge, big loaves of bread which they threw over the fence and I took it back to the train. And of course, we had a feast, all of us until the next stop.

The next stop we experienced for the first time air-raids, the phosphor bombs, they went "Eeeeeeezh, boom" and it was music to our ears. We thought, "Well, now it can't be too long before the end of the war" - this was February, '45 - "any day, from now on any day, don't lose courage, keep going, we're

already ~~like sticks for fire~~ ~~it can't last~~, there will be end soon. But as I said before, every stop was worse.

After about again, five days^{trip,} the train stopped and it happened to be Bergen-Belsen which I didn't know. My very first impression was "This is beautiful". It was all forest, trees, birch trees, nothing menacing, no guards, no barbed wires, lovely countryside.

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There was even a bit of snow on the ground, I mean, it was winter. And I love winter, I love snow and it always conjures up a feeling of utter happiness and peace in my mind so I was really quite happy to see where we finally stopped and I thought, "Nothing really bad can happen in a place like this". How wrong I was.

We marched again from the train to the actual camp which again, compared to all the others like Auschwitz or Mauthausen, was quite mild-looking because it was set inside the trees and the forests and it took all the menace out of the atmosphere. We were put again in the usual, familiar barracks with the three bunks - twelve people - at each. And soon after, they told us that we will have to go out, whoever is capable of work. And the work was never really worth mentioning because there was no such thing as work. It was just whim on their part to chase us out and chase us back in. We didn't do actually, any constructive work or any work of any sort, productive or otherwise - out into the fields and back again but very hungry. There was hardly any food at that time.

War was closing, coming to the end which we didn't know and there was less and less food. And food was - what was food at that time was always the watery soup with piece of vegetable floating in it - if you were lucky - or piece of potato peel - if you were lucky. Hardly ever a piece of potato. Meat or things like that didn't exist so of course

/we ...

we started to be severely undernourished and we looked it.

One day on the way out I spotted in the fields something shiny. So I got out of line, picked it up and found that it was actually, a very good knife, must have been from the headquarters - kitchen - with the cross, the hakenkreuz.

CXW Swastika?

ZE Swastika. And I didn't care. I kept it and I thought it will come handy. You could cut little pieces somewhere off a bone or you come across some rubbish tin, you can fish out something, clean it up a bit and so this knife became a very, very treasured possession. Until one day we were searched and it was Irma Graese who was laager commandant in the women's camp in Belsen who found it on me. And she took it by the knife and was banging my head with the holder which was heavy and I thought for sure she's going to crush my skull. And when she finished with me, she threw it away and kicked me and the next one came. I just couldn't imagine that I can be without this knife, despite of everything - the girl said, "For heaven's sake, don't move" - I said, "I must have it" and I got out of line and got the knife back and ^I have it till this day. Again, something I had to have and nothing can stop me and so you need guts and luck and determination and all this rolled into one.

Towards March an epidemic of typhoid broke out in the camp.

CXW Was it typhoid or typhus?

ZE Typhus I think. People were suddenly dying but dying like flies. We all looked already like walking skeletons, didn't see ourselves ^{but} we did know how we looked. But there were more and more dead bodies littered everywhere so in the block in which we were which was about three hundred women lying on the floor - bare floor, nothing. I had my shoes under my head because they were

night or each morning those who my most precious possessions. And each still could move had to drag the skeleton of the dead body - four of us - on the blanket and throw it out on the pile amongst the trees which I found at first so beautiful and so peaceful, it became a living cemetery. Piles and piles of corpses, absolute skeletons. I mean, now we have seen the pictures of it but that's exactly what happened. You are so hardened against these things because you're weak and you cannot spare any spare energy to worry about what you see or what's happening. You can ration your energy only to the moment in which you live. Your emotions are nil, your fears are nil, you stop even conceiving what's happening, you don't care any more because you're so weak, so ill, that all you really try is to keep breathing, no more than that.

To make matters worse the German guards and the management closed every water tap and there was no water. And if you have typhus you dehydrate and all you need is liquid, liquid, liquid. And this of course made matters so much worse that the death rate must have been thousands per minute. And if you're so thirsty you don't think. Where should you get the water from? We crawled out and we drank from puddles like a dog, anything - just. "Is it dangerous?" Couldn't care less - "Give me water".

They opened a well somewhere nearby - I don't know where I was, Block no. 11, I don't know - and I got near it. And I had a tin, sort of a dish. It was full with - I think it was a refuse - dipped it in and whatever came into the dish, I drank. I was so ill that at that time I thought "I will really die myself". People were honestly, were dying just like flies and the strange thing was that those who were not in such a deteriorated physical condition, the minute they gave up and said to themselves, "I've had enough, I don't want any more", they died but there and then like, just dropped down. It became more and more desperate. There came a time when I myself could not see that I'll make it.

/This ...

This was 15th April. My sister was dead, all my friends around me were dead. I was one of the three hundred on the floor, some were alive, some were dead, you couldn't tell the difference any more who was breathing, who was not. Nobody came in into the block. They left us absolutely to our devices - to perish, human refuse, who cares.

15th April, still was a rumour the English army has arrived, it said. How did we feel? No different. It could have been angel from heaven, it could have been anybody, it was too late. There was no strength left even to understand the news. It just - nothing ^{mattered} any more. There was really no immediate evidence that the English army has arrived, at least for us - we were the end of the camp somewhere, don't know where we were - probably because when they came they had to take it systematically. I mean, everybody needed help then on the spot but it was impossible. If they had to do a work of rescue they had to have some system, I can imagine. From the beginning: this line, that line, the one after. It just couldn't be done all at once.

So a fortnight passed till the end of April where I don't remember any big improvement. Perhaps there were more rations, perhaps it didn't reach us, perhaps some of the kapos - you know, the girls who voluntarily were in charge were keeping it, I don't know - ^{I was} all I know, half dead. So dead that medical profession, if they had seen me in the state I was, four ^{and} half stones - the intestines were hanging out because I had not enough strength in the muscles, it was just like a dying animal lying there on the floor - completely left to her devices. My lips were blue from thirst, I was delirious.

Until the very last day when I was as close to death as one can possibly be. The second time in my life when I had this whiff of the laser, the last voice from the survival kit. The first one was when I arrived in Auschwitz and the second one was this one. I was lying there on the floor at night and throught the little slit between - in - the wall, it was wood, was a beam of light. And as though the light meant something, it said, "This is the end". ^{Full stop.} And the voice inside

me said, "No it isn't, it can't be". I don't know where the strength came from, I lifted myself on the knees because I couldn't stand - I had no muscles - my arms looked like brown paper hanging everywhere. I had only the eyes and the teeth, the rest was gone, four and a half stones, ^agrown-up woman, you can imagine what it looks like.

I couldn't stand, I had no muscles, no flesh, crawled on my knees. "Out of here, out of this, here is only death, I must get out". Over the corpses over the living, I don't remember who they were, out of the barrack, through the clay - it was very wet, the yellow clay - out, any direction. And then I remember it was sort of . . . gave a gasp and I thought, "I didn't make it" and I collapsed. But when I came to, I was lying there, nobody picked me up, nobody had ^{even} seen me - one more, one less, didn't make any difference. I looked around and where I had collapsed was actually, the hut with the red cross on it. I mean, I'd got a little bit of strength - I crawled in through the door, the door was open and there was a long hall. On the left hand side behind the door was a pile of stretchers, about three, couldn't have been very high. But for me in that state it was a sky-scraper. And I thought, "What a pity it's so high, I could really, if I could pull myself a little bit up I could really climb up and lie there for a little while. But I couldn't make it so I just sat down in the corner behind the door. Half of the door was closed where I was sitting, the other half was open.

I didn't care where I was, who comes, who goes. I saw a few guards - Germans - who were already drafted by the English army to help to work for them as orderlies or whatever. Must have been evening because the door closed and I heard a lock and was dark. I was very happy sitting there not knowing what comes next. The stretchers were here, next to me was the door and at least I was out of that block of death.

Middle of the night, suddenly the door opens, light is switched on and in front of me an English officer. Immediately

he looked at me and he said in English, very, very severely, "What are you doing here?" And I was so pleased to see an Englishman instead of a German.

And the English came from that time when I was in the English Institute and I smiled and I said, "Nothing, I'm just sitting here" because that was exactly what I was doing. He used his official voice and said, "What block do you belong to?" - obviously, he was under instructions to do the right thing - I said, "Block no. 11". "Well, I'm afraid you can't stay here because this is a Red Cross station, we are busy here, you have to go back and wait your turn". More or less, you have to stay in the queue. And I knew that is something I cannot do. I was a very obedient girl, always said yes, always was no trouble but this was something else. This was my life and I knew.

And I said, "I'm sorry, I cannot go back and I will not go back because if I do, tomorrow I'll be dead and I know that." And I said, "You have been here now few days and you can see what you see, that life here is not worth that much - your nail on a little finger. But I tell you something: If you imagine somebody of your family in my place and you leave me here I will live and you will save one life".

He looked and didn't say anything. And I said, "Because if you think and want to make me go to Block 11, I would ask you to shoot me right here because I will not go". He was standing there listening, it went through his head and suddenly his face went like - you know, when you see in films, when it starts swimming - it changed from this official, military face where he observes rules into the human face who was underneath. I have no idea who he was. And he said, "Right, you stay right here, don't let anybody touch you and I'll come and pick you up tomorrow morning", lifted me up, I had my evening gown but this time of course, the lice were promenading up and down like on Promenade des Anglais in Nice all over, the short hair that I had was full of lice.

He picked me up like a little match, took me to another room where there was some kind of -like examination table, put me on top of the table and he said, "Here you will lie and don't let anybody touch you, I will be here in the morning" and left.-

After he has left I felt so dirty on that beautiful white table. I crawled down, lay on the floor and I thought "I've been lying on the floor for so long, one more night won't make any difference. People were coming and going, nobody put any attention. Ten o'clock next morning, sure enough he came. He came with a military truck - sort of Red Cross or ambulance car - where when the door were opened there were four stretchers, two at the bottom, two on the top, all full. But he brought one extra and a sheet. He came, ripped off this memorable costume, threw it - kicked it - into the corner, wrapped me up in the sheet, strapped me on the stretcher which was lying sort of in between the four - illegally - closed the door and off we went.

And I remember when the car started to move I looked back, sort of found enough strength to turn back and through the slit of the back door I saw Belsen retreating and changing to the past. And I thought, "After this, nothing but nothing can ever happen to me". And so he saved my life.

CXW How long did it take you to recover, to get to normal health?

ZE I was taken to Sweden by the International Red Cross as one of those who desperately needed help although I was struggling and I wanted to go back home. But I went to Sweden, I was in hospital about three months and after that we were on the expenses of Swedish government, we could choose if we want to go to work or be repatriated home. But I've stayed.

CXW Now, you mentioned Irma Graese - did you know the names of individual guards like her at the time or did you

learn them subsequently?

ZE Learnt afterwards. Yes, we didn't know who they were. We recognised them by sight but we didn't know the rank or name or anything. We knew how they behaved and how to avoid them most of the time.

CXW Did you give names to them of your own?

ZE ~~Not really.~~
/Not that I remember. We didn't see them that often.

CXW So did you just refer to them as 'the blonde one' or something like that?

ZE Maybe or just 'a guard'.

CXW Did you attempt to memorise what the particularly bad ones looked like in case there was a possibility of bringing them to justice afterwards?

ZE Not at that time. We were completely unsure what will happen next, if the war will finish, if we will survive, there was no really, at least in my mind, sort of revenge or as you say, memorise them, no.

CXW Did you get the impression that the bad guards were doing it simply because they were ordered to or did you ^{ever} get the impression that some of them ~~were~~ actually sadistic?

ZE All of them were sadistic. It was quite clear that this was almost a hysteria on their part as any other hysteria. They went that far that they had to go further, there was no way back for them. They had to be more and more cruel. I think they were lost people, anyway.

CXW Was there any difference between the male guards and the female guards?

ZE We didn't see the male guards really, very much.

because they were in the men's camp. We only saw the female guards and those as I said, we tried to avoid if we could.

CXW Do you think that the camp experience was worse for women than men or worse for men than women or was it just the same?

ZE Well, according to the statistics that I have read after the war, it was worse for the men because the men, somehow, genetically, are not equipped to withstand that much physical hardship, malnutrition and everything that goes with it than women. Women somehow, are genetically equipped to survive more and longer and that was the outcome of the statistics taken after the war.

CXW Was there any difference between men and women mentally? - from the point of view of survival?

ZE I cannot tell because we were only - I was amongst women. I can only say that the higher the intellect, the worse chance they would have because it's stalling the process of survival. It really is breaking your resistance and weakening you because you see quite clearly the hopelessness of it, you cannot anticipate that you can actually go through. Whereas more women ^I can only again talk about myself - where the old saying ^{that} 'ignorance is bliss' was positively saving me from the disaster. I did not believe anything I saw, I rejected it or my mind rejected it as though I couldn't afford to know because that would weaken me.

CXW Did you ever experience anything that could be called boredom whilst you were in the camps?

ZE No, never, never. You were always actually living on the high, constantly, much more attuned to what was going on around you, it was living in constant insecurity, you didn't know what will happen next, maybe the night, maybe next morning, what will come next, "What will they come up with

next?" "Will you have to leave?" It was a constant sort of kind of tension. You were much more aware of everything, you lived at a higher level, all your senses were acutely aware of things.

CXW Did you get much quarrelling and fighting between inmates?

ZE No. We were all very co-operative, helping each other, even cheerful.

CXW But was there - some people have said there was a 'dog eat dog' attitude?

ZE If they were hysterical we would talk to them and ask them to stop the nonsense because they could see quite clearly, it didn't help anybody and it was futile and useless.

CXW To fight for things?

ZE Yes. People were stealing though, that, yes. Stealing bread, stealing water, stealing pieces of clothing although that was rare because that could be identified but your ration of bread couldn't. And once it was gone, it was gone. You had no way to go and complain to anyone, that you had to guard against.

CXW Did you ever see any ^{thing} of the experiments on human beings?

ZE No - except the one when I had to give blood so I could imagine that it did take place and I have a few friends who did survive - who now live in Australia - who were experimented on. One woman who was sterilised, that sort of thing, yes.

CXW You talked several times about the impossibility of
/resistance ...

resistance but did you ever see any acts of resistance?
 either open or covert?

ZE No, never.

CXW What about escape - did anybody attempt to escape?

ZE Not from what I recollect. I only heard after the war, that my brother tried to escape and he was shot. But how it happened, I don't know.

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CXW Now, you talked about the typhus which you suffered from at the end, what other sicknesses did you actually have whilst you were in the camps?

ZE Earlier, I remember that I had scarlet fever in Theresienstadt. Since then, nothing. I was never ill, I never had a cold, somehow I felt I can't afford it. Living now in comfort, I have a cold at least twice a year and at a drop of a hat I would have bronchitis but not then, no. Otherwise, I'm very healthy after all this and if everybody was as healthy as I am the medical profession would be out of business.

CXW What about the mental state of people, did people actually go mad in the camps? would you say?

ZE Well my friend, as I told you, in Mauthausen gave up. She must have gone mad-because she just walked peacefully away as though she would say, "I've had enough of this, ^{you can keep it,} I am going" and she went. Died on the spot. It can happen, yes, if you give up you can die. If you don't, you don't die so easily. Actually, I would say it takes a long, long time and a lot of hardship and a lot of suffering for a human to die. It is not as easy. And that's why at the end of the war, these skeletons were the witnesses of it, how long it takes before the human spirit gives up, not the body, the spirit.

~~The spirit is really mind of the matter, mind over the matter.~~

If you don't want to give up you can survive the unimaginable as we have seen, it ^{is} possible. And it ^{is} all that matters. But it doesn't come from a will or your intellect, it is something we don't know. The will to live is a mysterious thing.

CXW Was there anything—or what you might call—religious feeling or religious practice in the camps?

ZE I myself haven't come across any because we were the young group and in our group, no, we didn't have any such practice at all.

CXW What about praying, did you come across people praying?

ZE No. The old ones, yes. In Theresienstadt, of course. They were praying, they were attending religious ^{sort of} services amongst themselves and relied very much on the religious tradition. But since we were not brought up with any such tradition, it didn't strengthen us and we didn't use it.

CXW Would you say that any particular nationalities amongst the inmates seemed to be more resilient than other nationalities - were any ^{of the} nationalities - seemed to be able to withstand the suffering more than others?

ZE I don't think it's a matter of nationality, it really boils down to a personal attitude and it is only your attitude how you control your life. Survival - people often ask me, "You must have been very lucky that you survived?" and I stopped, thinking about it and I thought, "Well, it really is more complex than that." It is a combination of many things, luck, yes. You've got to be lucky, first of all, so they don't shoot you because afterwards it doesn't matter what you try, you have no chance so luck comes into it. But that's only a very small part, the rest is up to you.

The ingredients of survival, I would say, is first of all:

you have to be relatively young, strong and healthy - your physical condition is extremely important - plus the luck. But then comes the vital, the most vital part and that is your attitude. If you're attached at that time, if you're married or have a child or worry about your mother, ^{that} / drags you down, you are a victim. That will weaken you and you have very little chance. If you're not attached, you have a much bigger chance because then you are free, relaxed and you can let be pushed, whichever way, nothing is stalling. And the very last thing is this, as I call it, mysterious will to live which comes from God knows where, is simply to keep going, come what may, you will stand it all. Until the time comes when actually, you are at the brink as I was. And if it wasn't for the helping hand or saving hand who saved me, I would have gone over the brink because there is a limit to everything. But until then the human spirit is so much in charge, so much over the matter that it can survive anything, the unimaginable. Yes.

CXW Were you always with Jewish people or did you mix with non-Jewish inmates as well?

ZE There weren't any non-Jewish inmates in the camps where I was and in the groups.

CXW So was Belsen the worst camp for you?

ZE Definitely, definitely. Auschwitz was the shock, where you got the shock treatment but if you were not pushed into gas chambers you had a chance to live at least for a reasonable time whereas Belsen with the epidemics and the lice and the no water and the diseases, was really decimating the population at a tremendous rate. And you had absolutely no defence except to hang on for dear life. And therefore, it was the worst, yes.

CXW When you were on the march being marched westwards, did you suffer from the war in any way, in the form of air attacks or anything of that kind?

/No ...

ZE No, we didn't even hear any except some of the bombardments from the Russian side but that wasn't in any serious way.

CXW Whilst you were on the march, did you get any help from civilians that you passed?

ZE No, none at all. We saw them while they were being evacuated but they stuck very, very closely to themselves and nobody wanted even to see us, let alone give a helping hand.

CXW What do you mean, they didn't want to see you?

ZE They didn't want to have anything to do with us.

CXW Did they look away or what?

ZE Yes, more or less. I suppose they had enough problems with themselves, that they had to leave their homes and go, God knows where.

CXW Did you think that the Germans might win the war, ever?

ZE Well, we had really no way of judging but we were only hoping that the war will finish and ~~that~~ Germany will lose. We thought there is no other possibility. The strange thing that happens to your mind is that you completely lose sense of what you remember from your previous life prior to the camps. When we were sitting in the camps it was a fantasy to imagine that at that moment, other people in other countries would sit around a table, eat and go to bed. That was unthinkable, it didn't exist. What existed was what you saw, where you were and what you could expect from the situation yourself.

And that is also a kind of very mysterious process that happens

This is an archival transcription of a spoken word recording. It is not a verbatim transcript and it has not been edited for accuracy.

It blots out - it renders it a fantasy, what you remember, I was dreaming about one thing, to have a pair of stockings that I could pull up and they would be holding and not rolling down constantly into my shoes. What you were dreaming about were the immediate things which you missed, warm clothes, shelter, comfortable bed, something to eat, something to drink and peace.

CXW And human relationships?

ZE Human relationships were at a high. It was terribly important to have a mate with whom you could share your thoughts and share your hopes and talk about what will happen when. And so we were spinning dreams - what will we do when the war finishes, where will we go, whom will we see first, will our parents come home, will our brothers and sisters come back, what plans will we have after the war? And of course, none of that happened. None because most of the people didn't live to see the end of the war and those who did, like myself, didn't see the family come back. It was like a tidal wave that comes over^a whole continent and sweeps it all away in one go. Out of the blue - from nowhere and then it's peace again. And you ask yourself, "What was it all good for?" And you come up with an answer, "I don't know, not much - it can happen again - what was the point?"

CXW You mentioned the love affair that you had with the boy in Theresienstadt. Did that type of relationship totally finish after people left Theresienstadt?

ZE No, no, it kept me, it kept me alive - the thought that he will survive and I will survive and we will get back together. That was the candle I was holding practically, hanging on to - the flame.

CXW Yes but ~~what~~ I mean is, am I right in understanding that there was no possibility of love affairs after Theresienstadt

/for ...

for anybody in the other camps?

ZE Ah, you mean mixing, no, no. They were strictly segregated camps, miles away - nobody could get out.

CXW Did the experience that you went through alter your opinion of the Germans?

ZE Well, I didn't know much about them before. After the war there is only one thing that I feel. I don't feel animosity, I don't want revenge, I feel justice belongs to God not to me. I have been enriched and impoverished by the experience, I have lost everything, my home, my family, but I have gained I think. I have gained a vision of life, I have gained a wisdom and appreciation of life. Before the war - and perhaps in normal life, as we all do - I feel that we live within such very narrow limit of our abilities like what I would call five-finger exercise on a long keyboard. Because we don't need to expand. Everything is here, we live sheltered, comfortable lives. But through experience like this where you are really pushed by the circumstances, by your fate that you have been caught in the middle of such upheaval, you are pushed miles to the left, miles to the right so that you actually scan the whole keyboard which enrich you. And when you come to the brim and you look into the abyss and you see that is the end and you come back into the five-fingers, my God you are a rich man.

Because looking back you conceive the span which you have absorbed - your only security. That is a kind of security which you can call your own, on which you can always rely. You know what you're capable of. Not that you would want to do it the second time but you have gained a yardstick, a new yardstick for life, for people, for judgement, for absolutely everything. And the yardstick measures whatever you encounter and it is the only yardstick. Compared to what you went through, nothing is difficult, nothing we need, nothing we can't live without, as long as life is here and our human relationships and that is all that matters.