

Mrs. Lasker-Wallfisch, reel one. Can you tell me first of all where you were born and something about your family background, please?

I was born in what was known as Breslau. It no longer exists because it is Polish now, and it is Wroclaw.

Can you tell me what your father did for a living and something about--

My father was a lawyer. My mother was a musician, a violinist. And we were a very typical emancipated Jewish family with a very cultured background. I mean, my father was very interested not only in music but in literature as well, and we had Goethe and Schiller dished up every Saturday afternoon as children. So it was a very happy, very, very good home.

How many children were in the family?

Three. I'm the youngest of three. And we all played instruments, and everything was fine, really, until 1933.

Were your family a religious family?

No, not at all.

So they weren't believers, your parents?

No, the only thing that had anything to do with religion is my father used to go once a year to the synagogue on the High Holidays, which is the Day of Atonement, and possibly the new year as well, which is very close. They're very close together.

I think I went occasionally, because I somehow can see the rabbi who had a limp, so I must have been once or twice. But there was no accent at all on religion. We went to my grandmother for various-- sort of like Easter, what's coming up now, the Easter celebration.

I remember going to my grandmother, who did all the things that you should do, that eat-- commemorates the liberation from Egypt in those days of the Jews-- so you eat certain foods. I remember very well she did that, like salt water to commemorate the tears and all sorts of things that you do on that particular evening.

But my parents, when my grandmother died in '36, we did not continue it. And that was the end, really, of all Jewish observance.

What was the national composition of Breslau in those days? Was it--

It was German. It never occurred to me that it was anything other than German. Looking back now, I realized that there were a lot of Polish names about, with "ski" at the end. But it was a completely German town.

Did you ever hear Polish spoken?

Never, never.

You didn't speak Polish yourself?

No, absolutely not. It was a German town in those days.

Were your parents interested in politics at all? Do you remember?

I couldn't say. I couldn't say. I don't think particularly.

What do you remember about the Nazis taking over in '33, if anything?

Well, of course I was very young, but I remember certain things like that we had-- that laws came into being, like you weren't allowed to employ household help under the age of 45 anymore. And I remember that the cook or the maid that we had who was, I suppose, of that age had to leave because of that.

All quite strange. I didn't really understand. But I mean, the reason was the fear of Rassenschande, that God forbid, a Jewish man could rape a German lady. I remember that, and I remember more atmospheres than actual things, like in '33, when we children felt there was something not right.

But we didn't really understand why and what. And as I wrote in my book, it's that slowly, slowly words crept into the conversation, like immigration and visas and permits, and people started to leave, and we started to say goodbye to this person, that person. That sort of feeling of temporary existence.

Did it make your own personal life miserable?

Not really, not really. Another thing that I remember that I was very surprised-- we went to a private school, very small school-- that I heard the first anti-Semitic remarks then. I didn't really-- I didn't really understand what it's all about. Because we were so-- as I said, there wasn't any particular accent on Jewishness in our house. I didn't as a child understand why somebody should say "don't give the dirty Jew the sponge" in the school. What, were we eight years old or something?

And I did feel-- bit by bit, I mean, I have to try and reconstruct this. One began to feel isolated. Certain people wouldn't greet you in the street. But as children, you don't really quite understand what the hell is going on. And we were very sheltered at home, I must say. Very sheltered.

Do you think these people were frightened of the consequences of mixing with Jewish people?

I suppose so, yeah. I suppose so. I don't know. I'm not in their minds. But it wasn't done to be seen with Jewish people. There were exceptions, of course. But these are the things that I remember. I remember also very forcibly something that, for instance, when one was still allowed to travel on public transport, the Jews-- that must have been already at the time when one wore a star-- weren't allowed to sit.

You had to stand, and I remember going into a tram. And there was the mother of a schoolmate of mine from an aristocratic family, and she saw me coming into the tram. And she was sitting down, and she got up. That was a very silent demonstration. I remember that after so many years.

It must have meant a lot. They were obviously good people. I mean, she couldn't do it. She couldn't say sit down, but she saw me come in with a star. I was standing. She was standing. We never said a word. I remember that very well.

So there were these sort of small gestures, small gestures of--

Do you remember the infamous Kristallnacht?

Extremely well.

What happened in Breslau then?

Well, I wasn't in Breslau at the time because I was sent to Berlin to a cello teacher. Because I'll tell you what the situation was. I was a very gifted child, but there wasn't anybody to teach me the cello anymore.

Because all the Jewish musicians who came into Breslau had emigrated, and no German teacher would dare come to our house to give me lessons or see me come and certainly wouldn't let anybody see me come into his house. So there was

nobody to teach me the cello so I was sent to Berlin at a very tender age of 12 or something to study with a man called Max Rostal-- Leo Rostal. His brother was Max, also a very well known violinist who is still alive, actually.

And I had special permission to not go to school because I still had to really attend school, but there was some arrangement was made that I was allowed to have private lessons in school subjects and concentrate on the cello. And I was there on the night, the Kristallnacht night. And I remember my mother phoning up terribly excitedly that I should-- to find out whether I'm OK and come home quick, because I was not in Breslau.

What did you observe of it?

Well, everything, all the shops smashed up, and the streets were littered with glass, really. I remember glass, and another thing that I remember is liquor running in-- when they smashed up liquor stores-- running in the gutter. And of course the shops were just smashed, but they were looted.

But you probably know that in those days one could tell a Jewish shop. They had to have special writing on them, special regulation letters and a star, I think, as well. I mean, everybody knew a Jewish shop. It wasn't very hard to find.

I just remember this great big smashing-up of things and people were disappearing. I came-- I think I must have gone back home the next day.

Was it personally frightening for you, Kristallnacht?

I suppose so. I must have been. I mean, I can't remember the feeling of fright, but I mean, I suppose it's like a bomb going off next door. Yes. And one began to see that things got very serious.

What measures, if any, did your parents take to get out?

They took every single measure possible, and strangely enough, I am in the possession of the correspondence that my father had with various refugee organizations in London in trying to go to America. And they did everything. But you see, what spoke against my father was his profession. Because he was a lawyer, it's a very hard profession to emigrate.

I mean, in hindsight of course it's crazy to think that, but if you think a normal person with three children, a lawyer is useless in any other country other than where he can speak the language. In those days, he didn't realize it would have been better to be a lift operator at Selfridges, but one's standards only dropped very slowly.

And emigration was extremely difficult, and I think that is something that people don't seem to realize enough. Always people ask, why didn't you get out? If you think that the countries of the world opened their frontiers to the Jews, then you are very, very mistaken. This is not so.

It got exceedingly difficult. And what's more, it needed money. I mean, I've got it all in black and white, and I will give it to the museum actually because it's interesting.

There are questions of yes, we will deposit 50 pounds. I mean ridiculous sums. 50 pounds per child per year, and is that enough? I've got it all in black and white. It was very difficult.

Also, you see, America would have been the obvious place to go to because my father had a brother there. Very famous man, Edward Lasker, the chess champion is my father's brother. Obvious thing would have been to go to America.

America had a quota, still has a quota system. And my father was born in a place called Kempen, which is in Posen and came under the Polish quota. Now, the Polish quota was enormous because a lot of Polish Jews wanted to emigrate. Although he was German by nationality, his place of birth put him into the Polish quota. Polish quota was enormous.

The Americans would let in-- I don't know-- 2,000 from the Polish quota, et cetera. Probably our number would come up now. That's Poland-- That's America. England was very difficult. We tried to go to England-- very difficult.

And I gather from the correspondence that they would have only allowed us in if we could have brought proof that we will go further, just as a transit place. So there wasn't a place, really, that welcomed people at all. So it wasn't easy. Well, in fact, it was impossible.

And I also got letters from my parents begging to at least, realizing that everything was too late, can you please take the children, at least the children? Because there were English families that would take children in. And in fact, my sister had a place with a Reverend Fisher who was going to take her in. He had a daughter the same age.

And there was already a question of the school uniform. That had got quite far, this arrangement. My sister could have got out. And I was supposed to go to Paris, again, to study at the *École Normale*. But one didn't know that anyhow Paris wouldn't have helped very much.

And all these last-- this correspondence about that took place middle to end of August. And suddenly, it was too late, everything. The war was declared, and we were still there. Had the war been declared two weeks later, I would possibly have been in Paris, which wouldn't have helped me. My sister would have been in England. But everything fell to pieces.

So that's how it was. And then we were trapped.

Were you in Berlin when war was declared?

No, I was back in Breslau, because my teacher also emigrated, and the whole thing, that came to an end. I went back to Breslau. And I remember very well the day the war was declared because I had a very childish idea of what it was going to be like when a war is declared. I thought then you'll hear a lot of shooting.

War is declared. People shoot each other. I remember looking out of the window and thinking it's funny. The war's declared, and nothing has changed. And then of course, our war was a bit earlier than yours because-- well, three days, wasn't it, that the Polish air force, I think got destroyed on the spot.

But I didn't quite-- I found it hard to understand that it's a war now, but I didn't hear anything.

So when did the war start to have an effect on your own personal life?

I'll tell you what happened. It's strange. I mean, I can tell you that quite quickly because I have actually written about it now, so I have got it quite clear in my mind. But it is surprising-- again, I reconstruct this through the letters I've got-- how long we went on living quite normally, war or not war.

The only thing that drastically changed is that we had ration cards. And we had ration cards with a "J" marked on it for Jews and we had restricted shopping hours. I remember that. You could only go to certain shops at a certain time, Jewish people.

Otherwise, life, curiously, continued. Almost nothing very much had changed, only that one knew one should give up any idea of getting out. Although my father still hadn't given up. He had some sort of contact with Italy, and he was trying terribly hard to get to Italy, which would have still been possible.

Whether it would have saved us finally I don't know, but the Italians were better about the Jews than the Germans. In Italy, you could disappear a little bit. So he kept going and being quite optimistic. I mean, or not as pessimistic as he should have been, because he was still negotiating going to Italy and getting out. I mean, the whole idea is out. By that time, one wasn't too fussy where.

You see, a place like Shanghai one could have gone to. Didn't appeal to my father at all. But what will I do in Shanghai? Well, you know about that. Shanghai was the sort of place one could go the last moment still. I don't think he contemplated that. He thought that was too awful for words, which probably would have been but not as awful what in

fact happened.

So we kept going with this great plan to somehow go to Italy. That fell to pieces too, and these are certain things that I remember very well because we all trooped off to the Italian embassy with our passports, which we still had, or some sort of papers.

And the man nearly-- he was holding his stamp in his hand to give us the visa. And I remember that very well because he stopped half way, and then a conversation followed. Obviously, something was still not right. Anyhow, we never got the visa.

So then we went home and knew but you just have to-- my life has to go on somehow, but one didn't exactly-- but one didn't know exactly what was happening, but one didn't have too many hopes.

So we went through some sort of pretense of normality. I remember I went back to school. School was still going, and my sister started singing lessons. All these things I know from the letters which I found. And it strikes me as funny that in 1940, for instance, one should have singing lessons.

You were very young when war broke out. But did you have any conception as to whether or not Germany would win the war?

No, I can't remember that I gave it any thought. Or one was convinced they would. I mean, they won everything, didn't they, at the beginning? What changed then dramatically is that they started taking people into factories, Jewish people. One had to do war work, as it were. And my sister, who was older than me, was sent on to a rubbish tip. She had to sort out dead rats from toothpaste tubes which had to be recycled.

And she didn't last very long. She got very ill, so they sent her then to a paper factory where I joined her. The school closed eventually.

This was in Breslau?

That was all in Breslau. I've got all the dates. I've got all that written down. I mean, if you ever wanted to know about it, you could look it up. But it's not so interesting the detail, but I think it went on. School went on till 1940, late into the '40s, even beginning of '41, the Jewish school.

Then that was shut, and then one was called to go do this war work. So we finished up in a paper factory making toilet paper.

You mentioned the ration book. Were you getting inferior rations to the non-Jews?

I can't remember. I wouldn't know. Possibly. I couldn't tell you. That is not something that I remember. It was difficult. I mean, life got very complicated.

You see, we worked in this factory, and in '42, my parents were deported. But not us two. Because there was a list. They didn't need us, or they needed us to make the toilet paper. So it was just my parents.

And we decided we would go with them, because it's not a very nice situation, this. Let me just briefly tell you that we lived in a very, very nice apartment, which of course, we had to leave. So we moved in with an aunt of mine, sister of my mother's, in very reduced circumstances, but still always hoping that we might get away. That must have been early '40s, maybe even '39.

And from that flat, there was my aunt, my uncle, my father, my mother, my sister, myself, and a very old couple who were lodgers. I mean, we were lots of people in that flat. And bit by bit, people disappeared from that flat. My aunt and uncle were deported too.

But we didn't have a room more to play with because they locked-- they sealed these rooms. The Gestapo would come and seal this room. So they had gone, and then my grandmother moved in as well. It's unbelievable what went on in that flat.

Then my parents were taken, which left just the two of us with my very old grandmother and two old lodgers. So we suddenly had three old people to look after as well. And that was very difficult because we worked, and we were never free at the time that we were allowed to go shopping. I mean, life was really impossible, but we did all sorts of--

My sister just took her star off, and she doesn't look particularly Jewish, and risked it to go shopping. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any food, and these old people didn't understand one minute what was going on, why there wasn't any food in the house. And that was hard because we were very young.

And it was-- we hardly got any money in that factory because they paid you according to your age. I mean, I was a very good toilet paper maker, made a lot of toilet rolls and stuck the labels and et cetera, but I got such ridiculous money because how old was I, 15 or something? Just about enough money to cover the fare there.

I mean, it got more and more impossible really, the whole situation. But--

Did your health suffer because of the privations that this time?

No. No. Thank God, we've been very healthy. It wasn't particularly-- I don't think we were so deprived as it was very difficult to produce a meal. I mean, all sorts of planning went into it. Actually, it wasn't just us that we had to feed, but we had to feed these old people as well. And then the two other couple went, and we were just left with the grandmother. And eventually the grandmother was deported as well.

So it was just the two of us left. And of course, we were minors. We were way under 21. So the Jewish community got wind of that we were what was left of them. We were sitting there on our own, and so they stuck us into an orphanage.

What did-- what was understood in the Jewish community in Breslau at that time about deportation? Did people know the consequences of it?

I tell you what one thought. I think one kidded oneself that one was being resettled in the East. But rumors had already gone about rumors. Rumors had already gone about gas chambers, but you don't want to believe it. So it was a "resettling in the East."

And they were so cunning, the Germans. You were allowed to take a suitcase with you, you see. And I remember my parents, for instance, they had 24 hour notice. There were different systems by which they deported people. Some were just taken from the streets straight out.

My parents were given 24 hour notice to report at a certain place. So in these 24 hours, you packed a suitcase with warm things and this that and the other. Of course, as soon as you got there, the suitcases were taken off you. But one still lived--

You see, my sister and I wanted to go with them. And my father, who was a very wise man, said no. He said, I will go to the Gestapo and ask for permission, he said. Whether he ever went or not, I can't tell you. But he came back and said no. He didn't want us to come.

And also I remember his words. He said, where we are going, you'll get soon enough. So I dare say my father knew quite well what was happening. He didn't want us to go. In this he was very wise.

Where was this orphanage?

That was in Breslau. In fact, we didn't want to go in there because we thought it was terrible. It would cramp our style, but in fact suddenly we got meals served up, and we enjoyed it. We no longer had to be responsible for everything. But I

will just go back a little bit that in that paper factory we got involved with French prisoners and started making forging papers for French prisoners.

I don't know whether you read about that in the book. No? You haven't. In this factory where only Jews, Poles, and French prisoners, and the odd German overseer or whatever, foreman, et cetera. And we speak French, because I told you we had quite a good education. Although I never really went to school. I left school when I was 12. So I have no school education, but we were brought up with French at home.

So these French prisoners were in that factory. And of course it was strictly forbidden to talk to them. So that was already a good reason to talk to them, somehow, secretly. I can't tell you exact details, but we got involved with supplying them with all sorts of things, like civilian clothes which I had access to because my father's clothes were still at home. And we had a typewriter, and we can write the German script.

So we got involved in filling in certain papers, et cetera, which were-- in fact, they were leave passes for French civilian workers. I don't know how well informed you are about what was going on with the working situation in France, but you see, France had capitulated, as you know. So there were still French prisoners of war, but the Germans were in France and could pick up just any young man, which they did with alacrity, and send them to work in Germany.

But these people were not prisoners. There were two categories of French people in Germany, if you follow me. And these, the workers, the French civilian workers, had the right to go occasionally on home leave. So the papers we produced were for French civilian workers to go on home leave, only we supplied them to the prisoners so they could use them.

And in fact, Eric Williams-- you know the famous Eric Williams?

Yes.

Used one of those papers. He went as a French, as a French civilian worker. So that is only by the way. So we did that. And I suppose it kept our minds off what was really going on. It gave us something to do.

Who ran this orphanage?

It must have been some elders from the community. I don't know. Can't give you any names. I mean, it still was a perfectly nice place. I mean, it was fantastic, really, for us. We didn't want to go in because we were planning to make papers for ourselves as well and to get away. We were still trying to get away. But I must say, it was continuously in our mind is to get away.

So we finished up by producing-- because so many people disappeared from the factory where we worked, and we were being suspected of course that we had something to do with it because we were seen. We were caught several times talking to the-- they knew very well that we were doing illegitimate things.

So eventually it was decided that we should have papers as well, and we should go as upholstery workers.

Mrs. Lasker-Wallfisch, reel two.

Well, as I was saying, one was still, although it really was a pipe dream, somehow trying to get out by hook or by crook. So we got ourselves French papers as well, and we're supposed to be upholstery workers working in an upholstery factory, going [FRENCH] on leave.

Now, I must just mention that France was only half-occupied at that particular juncture. So the big idea was to get to the unoccupied zone. And it was unbelievably vague and really only people of this ridiculously young age like we would embark on such a venture. I mean, nothing was really organized about it. It's just that we had papers, and we were supposed to catch a certain train and go to Paris, and I had a number of addresses on me, contact names.

Maybe it could have come off, but it didn't come off because as we were-- you see, our worry about being in the orphanage, we didn't know how we could manage to get to the station, and people might ask us questions. But anyhow, we managed all that. We pretended to--

When the day finally came when we were supposed to leave, we pretended to go to work in the morning, but we didn't go to work. We went to stay the day with some friends who were a mixed marriage couple. And the train was supposed to leave in the evening.

And unfortunately, they insisted on taking us to the station, which had very dire results because we came to the station. The Gestapo was waiting for us. For some reason, they knew exactly what we'd been doing, obviously for a very long time.

So as we got to the station, we were going to board the train. We were arrested together, unfortunately, with my friends, only one of whom survived. The German part-- the non-Jewish part survived.

Do you know when this was, approximately?

Yes, 5th of June, I think, '40-- wait a minute. I'm not so sure about the date, but it was in '40-- early '43. Oh, in '42. Not absolutely sure now of the date.

It's funny. I remember a lot of dates, but that I remember-- yes, the date of the trial I remember, which we had, which I think was the 5th of June. Anyhow, it's not so important, but there it was.

So that was the end of all dreams of getting out. So we were arrested as French girls, and we didn't realize really how much they knew about us. So we kept up the French pretense for quite a long time, asked for an interpreter. Really unbelievably cheeky we were in those days.

It's a funny situation. I suppose when there's nothing you can-- nothing to lose, got nothing to lose, you just do anything, really. I mean, it wasn't even particularly brave. There was just nothing to lose. I mean, what can they do?

By that time, I think we must have been quite aware of the fact that the end was inside anyway. So it wasn't going to be good, so you might as well try anything. And also we wanted really-- eventually, we were given a medal by the French government because we got a lot of people out, and somehow somebody heard about it. I don't know how.

And they couldn't really understand why we did it. Because there's not all that much connection with me and French people, really, other than I happen to speak French. And I've been trying to analyze it in retrospect. I think it was unacceptable to sit and wait to be taken and put in a gas chamber without doing anything. It's not an acceptable situation.

So if they're going to get me, they get me for something, but not just because I happen to be born Jewish.

You were giving the reasons why--

Why I think in retrospect, you know? So--

How did they treat you once they'd arrested you?

Well, what happened is-- I mean, after the initial pretending to be French, which was really, really rather funny in retrospect, they put us in prison. It was-- actually, I mean, there are other things I can tell you if you want to know.

We had with us poison, because once what I was preparing for the worst, and we were I had a friend who obviously must have had access to these things. He gave us a little bottle of-- what do you call that stuff that you just lick? "Zyankali" it's called in German. Cyanide.



We had a bottle of cyanide with us, and this friend of mine who knew about our plans that we were going to try and get away, took it off us at one time. He said, look, give it back to me, and I'll give it back to you again when you're actually ready to go. Which he did.

But in the meantime, he had replaced it with sugar, which was really rather clever of him. The first time I had the bottle, I was smelling it, and it smells of bitter almond stuff. The second time I didn't-- he gave it back to me in exactly the same bottle.

So when we were arrested, we suddenly realized that this is really it, and maybe this is the moment that we have this damn stuff with us. So we decided that maybe we should use it. It's ridiculous, really, if you think of it now.

So we were sitting at the railway station at the time, waiting to be fetched by a car, I suppose, and driven to the police, to the Gestapo. And this car didn't arrive, so they decided that we would walk there, and it was blackout, a total blackout of course.

By that time, I'd taken it out I had it hidden in my stocking. I'd taken it out under the table and divided it and gave half of it to my sister. And then we counted in the street. I revisited this corner a few years ago.

We counted out up to three-- one, two, three, go. Lick. But we didn't die, which was quite a nice realization at the time. Because that was very clever. I mean, I really thank my life to this boy.

So there we are. Here we couldn't make a sudden end. We thought, well, we'll take it when the Gestapo get us, because there's going to be a terrible end to us. But it was sugar instead of cyanide, so on we marched.

They didn't treat us badly at all at that particular time. No, we were asked various questions, after we'd reconciled ourselves with the fact that we were still alive. And then they drove us over to the-- we walked over because it's very near to the prison, where we were given the normal things that happen to you in prison. Your clothes off and a bath, and still French. Everybody is speaking French.

And we were put in a cell because the Germans somewhere along the line are of course, very stupid, because they put us in the same cell which gave us ample opportunity to discuss the situation. So we sat there for a while, waiting to be called but weren't called. We just sat there, still being French, and we knew this was not a tenable situation.

Breslau is not a huge town. That we've been arrested was obviously known in the town. We didn't turn up at the factory, et cetera, et cetera. So we decided that we must get rid of this particular aspect and establish officially our identity.

So we went to the-- I don't know what you call it in English, whoever is in charge of prison, women's prison, the matron or governor, who was a very fine lady. She was obviously not a Nazi.

And we went there. I mean, come to think of it, we were only children really, and told her that we weren't really French, and that our names were so-and-so and so-and-so. And she took it all very well, but we had to go down and reregister with the people who'd exercised their school French on us a few days ago. So that didn't go so well. They were quite cross with us.

And eventually, we were-- and then we discussed how are we going to handle this when the Gestapo call us, what we were going to actually say. Because there were a lot of people involved in what we are doing, what we were doing, and one doesn't want to give people away and involve people.

I also managed-- I must say, when we were sitting at the station still waiting to be taken, I managed to get rid of that little book where I had a lot of names in, because that would have been not so good to be caught with that. Because somewhere they weren't all as vigilant as all that. I could do that. Just got rid of it in the lavatory somehow. I don't know.

And then we decided the only way to get away with it, without-- getting two people to lie simultaneously, it's very

difficult. If you lie, you have to be careful. So we decided that my sister, who was older, she would do all the talking and answer questions, and I would pretend that I was totally stupid and always did what my sister told me and that I didn't know anything about anything. And that was the line we eventually took when the Gestapo interrogated us.

I mean, some unbelievable things happened, really. I will just tell you that because it's such a-- it's a wonderful example of the stupidity of the Germans. We were arrested, of course, with suitcases. We each had two suitcases because we were [FRENCH], going away. And as my sister was already in the train when the Gestapo came, had stowed one of the cases away, and I was on the platform arrested, and then she came out. And somehow in that moment, a suitcase was left on the train.

We weren't even aware of it. But when we got to the Gestapo, the first thing they said, could you identify these cases? Which we did. And we said, well, there was one missing. And they took that very seriously, and they took all the particulars, and they couldn't have cared less, really, whether there was a suitcase or not.

And you'll never believe it. That suitcase turned up a year later in the prison, and I was called down to identify it, and it was that suitcase. Didn't even have a name tag on it. It wasn't locked. But the Germans are very, very meticulous. There must be order. It's absolutely ludicrous.

It was stolen from me later on by somebody else, but that had to be very correct. It was laughable, really laughable. So that was-- we had to identify the suitcases, and they took it very seriously, the case was missing.

I cannot say that we were particularly maltreated there. They were just asking us questions, what we did. And I don't remember too much about that interview, that interrogation at the Gestapo. Maybe it was nastier than I remember it, but I can't say that they pulled my nails out or anything like that. It was just questions.

And of course, they wanted to know as many-- involve as many people as possible because it must have been quite a big organization. I wasn't even aware, for instance, who produced the actual stamp on the papers. I didn't know that. We knew as little as possible.

As always in those cases, because the less you know, the less you can betray. And then an interesting situation occurred that there was a system with the Gestapo or with what happened in those days, is that after 21 days of sitting in prison, it was decided whether you're going to be handed over to the justice department or whether you stay with the Gestapo. Have you heard this before?

Yes.

Yeah. So after 21 days is the decision made, is Gestapo keeps you, which means straight in a concentration camp, or the justice department keeps you, which means you have a trial. And we were very lucky. We were taken out of the Gestapo clutches and put into the justice department because we had actually committed several crimes.

I mean, we've been guilty of forgery. In fact, our indictment was called Feindesbeihilfe, which is aiding the enemy, forgery and Fluchtversuch, which is an attempt to escape. Quite ridiculous. These were the indictments.

And it was very, very lucky for us that that happened, because then we were out of the Gestapo for a bit at least, and we waited for quite a long time for the trial. Whether that was due to intervention by colleagues of my father's, I don't know because my father was quite a well known man. It's possible that somebody knew the Lasker girls, or the Gestapo-- let's try and--

I don't know. It's possible, but it was lucky. And the people who were arrested with us, like our friends, of course they actually committed a crime of any sort, and they went straight to the concentration camp, and one of them died instantly. But we had a bit of respite, a year of respite sitting in prison, waiting for a long time for the trial.

When the trial finally came, my sister was sentenced to 3 and 1/2 years Zuchthaus, which is a penitentiary, which is more severe than a prison. And I was sentenced to stay-- I stayed in prison.

How was the trial conducted?

Ridiculous. It was the Sondergericht, it was called, "special court," or whatever you call it. I don't know whether-- have you come across that before, that Sondergericht?

Sondergericht, I know the title.

We were not-- no, we were allowed to have a lawyer. But he never came. Nobody would be seen to defend us. But we had understood enough by then to know that it would be very, very desirable to get a long sentence. We weren't even trying to defend ourselves, if you see what I mean. Because we had already understood that it is better to be in prison than to be in a concentration camp. Because by that time one knew.

So we weren't particularly interested in defending ourselves. We were more interested to get a good, long sentence, hoping we might stay in prison and maybe the whole thing will be over.

Well, you wanted to aggravate your case.

In a way, really. There was no question of-- you can't defend yourself. We had done these things. The trial was a farce, absolute farce. And we were sentenced. There were quite a few people sitting on the bench, too, many more than I ever anticipated. Quite a few French people.

But I can't go into details because I don't actually remember it. I just remember I was surprised how many people. We were there accused of these heinous crimes, and we were finally sentenced and sent back to prison. And then unfortunately my sister, of course, after a few days, they came for her, and she was sent to Jauer, which is a women's penitentiary.

And I can't remember exactly how long it took, but eventually, of course, they called for me. And I never finished my sentence in prison. Because what happened actually is-- I mean, once you've had-- you're out of the hands of the Gestapo. You're with the judiciary. Once the judiciary is finished with you, you're really back in the hands of the Gestapo.

So the people, for instance-- and there were some people who did not get a sentence. So you never-- you're acquitted, and you think you're going to walk out of the courtroom, but you don't. Because the Gestapo waits for you, and you are sent to a concentration camp.

But in my case, I had this respite in prison. But it didn't take very long. They called me and sent me to a doctor. You have to be-- had to have a medical before you go to Auschwitz, which is also so utterly ridiculous.

I remember that I told this doctor that he must know that he is wasting his time. I said, you know where I'm going. What do you need a medical for?

What is-- have

You have to sign that you're going voluntarily. I can't remember, but I'm a very aggressive person, and it gave me just pleasure to say it to him. It was so ridiculous. Because by that time, of course, we knew what was going on.

Because strangely enough, some people came back. It does happen that people were called back from Auschwitz to prison, I suppose, another court case or something. So by that time, one was quite well aware of what was expecting one in Auschwitz.

Had you personally come into contact with people who had firsthand experience with the camp?

Yes. I mean, a prison is a place of rumors. Although you sit in your cell and you are locked up, you get to know about

everything. Don't ask me how. Although you're not allowed to talk to the other prisoners, somehow you know what's going on. There are ways and means of messages, and I can't tell you now who told me what, but one just knew that Auschwitz's gas chambers-- that is actually a fact.

So yes. From this medical, I was sent back to my cell and given my civilian clothes. Actually, I'll tell you a funny story about civilian clothes, what happened. This is apropos of the suitcase as well.

When that suitcase, which had been lost originally when we were arrested-- then one day I was called down to identify a suitcase which was mine, which was already very surprising. It was then put, obviously, into the depot where civilian clothes were kept. And one day I see one of the prison warders-- they didn't all wear uniform, the prison warders-- wearing what looked awfully like a dress of mine, because my mother made all our clothes so it was pretty recognizable.

I couldn't believe it. But I looked very closely, and then the next day I saw her in something else. It was very obvious that she had my clothes. I mean, I don't know how she came by them. I don't know whether they raided the suitcases there or whether the prisoners who were in charge of the depot sold them. I don't know how.

But I told somebody about it. I said, this woman is wearing my clothes here. I mean, I'm the one that sits in the cell locked up. She's the one that locks me up, and she's a thief. And it came to the ears of what do you call her, over in the ward, the headmistress? Warden.

Warden. The head warden.

Or the governor.

Governor, yeah. And it was quite an extraordinary story. I mean, the whole prison buzzed with this story. And she called me and interviewed me and said, I hear this has happened. And I said, yes, I'm sorry it has happened.

It was very disagreeable for her because she said-- and I said, I'm quite prepared. If you like I'll go to court and accuse her. I was quite interested in staying where I was. And she actually said to me you know very well that the word of a Jewish person weighs nothing. But she was OK that, woman. I knew she was on my side. She was pleading with me to just forget about it because it will lead nowhere. Of course, it did lead nowhere.

But finally I mean just to come back to when they sent me to Auschwitz. Finally they gave me back some civilian clothes. Wasn't much left. And off I went in a prison train, and I didn't realize-- I only learned later that I was again very lucky. Because coming from prison, I was what's called a [GERMAN] haftling, which is a haftling with a file. Because I've had a court case, I was actually--

I don't know what you can call it. I was a-- I had a number. I had a name. So I never was-- I wasn't in a selection if you see what I mean. We were just a prison train arriving. It was very few people, and there was never a question of anybody on the ramp saying, you come in, you don't go in. We all came in.

So yours was--

It was lucky.

--a different experience from most people, going into Auschwitz.

Yes. I mean, all I remember that we arrived at night, and we were put straight into a barrack. I didn't even know then about the big selections. So in fact, it was very lucky that I was a [GERMAN] haftling. I mean, once you were in, it didn't make any difference whether you're [GERMAN] haftling or not. But I suppose the idea behind it was that in case a court case reopens that you may be called back or something like that.

Anyhow, you were a prisoner with a file. I had a file. Which was lucky. I mean, they would have probably let me in

anyway because I was young. I was able to-- would have been able to work.

So what do you want me to tell you now, what it was like to arrive, et cetera?

Please.

Well, what I remember about it was a lot of noise, a lot of dogs barking, screaming, shouting, and waiting all night for something we didn't know what. And then we were shoved into-- when morning came, we were shoved into another barrack, and all the ceremony started. The hair was shaved, and the number was tattooed, and your clothes were taken off you.

And that's where another very remarkable thing happened. All this was done by prisoners, not by SS people. This was all done by the prison. In fact, Auschwitz was run by the inmates, really. The SS appeared on the fringe, but the actual work was done by the inmates.

And the person who processed me asked me a lot of questions, because everybody always wanted to know what's going on outside, how is the war going, will it soon be finished, where do you come from, what do you do, always looking for people.

And I said-- I told her where I came from, and I said-- for some reason I said that I play the cello. Oh, she said, that's fantastic. And I didn't know what she was talking about. And she said, you stand here to the side. You stand here. Don't go anywhere.

And everybody else was going through, and I was still standing there, no clothes, no nothing. She also asked me whether I could let her have my shoes because they were going to be taken off anyway. So I gave her my shoes, which she must have hidden somewhere.

And I waited and waited. I didn't know what I was waiting for, and it looked awfully like something I didn't really want to see, because I knew the gas chamber looked like a shower room, and I was in a shower room. And I thought, oh, that's probably it.

But it wasn't. Because into this room eventually marched a lady who introduced herself as Alma Rosã©, who was the conductor of the camp orchestra. And she was highly delighted that a cello playing individual had arrived because they didn't have any such instruments at the time.

So she said, fantastic that you are here. Where did you study? I mean, it was a utterly ridiculous situation. I didn't have a stitch of clothes on. I had a toothbrush in my hand in Auschwitz-- Birkenau, to be correct, and discussing where I studied the cello and how delighted she was that I was there.

So she said that I must go into quarantine. We had to go this awful quarantine block where everybody had to go. It was so awful that very few people actually ever came out of it. Said you'll have to go into quarantine, but don't worry. Somebody will come for you.

And sure enough, somebody came for me. The cellist, they're looking for the cellist. So by that time, I'd been given some awful clothes. And I was taken to the music block, where a cello was thrust into my hand, and she wanted me to play something to her.

Now, I hadn't touched a cello for-- by that time, two years had elapsed since I was arrested. So I asked for a bit of five minutes' practice time and played her. Something anyway, I became a member of the famous orchestra then.

How big was the orchestra?

We were about 30-- 30, 35 or something. You see, it was very, very fortunate to be in this orchestra because it was-- I mean, everything is relative in life, but it was paradise compared to if you weren't in the orchestra. And what we did is

we tried to get as many people in as possible, never mind whether they could play, not play.

We had a lot of people in just to copy music because you had a chance there. You didn't have much of a chance anywhere else.

And they were short of cellists?

There wasn't one. If there had been one the day before, I probably wouldn't have been there. They were absolutely dying for a bass instrument. I mean, there was only-- it was a ridiculous orchestra.

I mean, don't think even in terms of a normal orchestra. There were some violins. I think only about two or three people could play decently. Mandolins, guitars. There was a-- what do you call it? A harmonica. You know?

Concertina.

Concertina. What else was there? I think a couple of flutes. Anyhow, before I came was only high instruments, you see. I mean, I was the first bass instrument, so I was like a-- I mean, I was like a revelation there.

Were they just building it up when you--

Yes, it had just started. I mean, they were waiting for the next victim to come in, you see, a cellist or whatever. But if it hadn't been for this conversation I'd had, a pretty casual conversation with a girl who was there to do the shaving of the hair, et cetera--

And did you gradually get more bass instruments?

Never. Never did any other cellist-- well, maybe there wasn't an interest for it. What we did-- eventually a double bass appeared, and one of the girls--