Mrs. Lasker-Wallfisch, reel 3.

Yes, there was a men's orchestra, I think, that was much bigger. Anyhow, I remember there was an arrangement made that one of the double bass players from the men's orchestra came to the women's orchestra and gave lessons to a Greek girl. Of course, all these things were always used as-- for other purposes, as far as we were concerned, that messages were brought.

And anyhow, so I was a member of this orchestra. And we played marches. I mean, our job was to play marches in the morning and marches in the evening at the camp gate so that the people who went out on the-- there were lots of factories around there-- Buna, and IG Farben, and all this. And thousands of people marched out to work. And they marched to music.

So we did that in the mornings. We went and played marches. In the evening, we went and played marches. And during the day, we went back into the block, and we-- all sorts of music was gotten hold of, usually piano transcriptions of selections of stuff, whatever was that was fashionable at the time.

And then we had a whole team of people to-- then it had to be orchestrated for the funny instrument that we were, and then a whole team of people copying out the music. That's why a lot of people were saved just being copyists. They had nothing to do with playing instruments.

And then we learned these pieces, various pieces. And then we were the amusement of the Germans. They would come in and want to hear some music, especially after selections, when they were quite worn out from their efforts of selecting people to go to the gas chamber. And we-- on Sundays, we did concerts sometimes in the Revier, which was the name for the hospital, was called the Revier-- and sometimes, in the open air, between the A and B camp. Anyhow, we were busy people playing music.

So these were traditional German marches which--

That we played? Yeah, yeah. In the morning and the evening, we played marches. But otherwise, we played things, like selections. You wouldn't probably know about-- in those days, there was a man-- Peter Kreuder was the rage, Zarah Leander songs, whatever were the hit songs of the period.

And selections-- but you see, Alma RosÃ©, who was a very, very good violinist-- I mean, she was fantastic. She played things like "Zigeunerweisen." And later on, we had a Hungarian. Because Alma died. Later on, an Hungarian lady came, who was marvelous at sort of Monti's Czardas sheet. She had a Gypsy band-- it would be light music, call it light music, we played. We had quite a few singers. And various Arias were sung.

What was the background of this Alma RosÃ©?

Oh, very interesting because she was the daughter of Arnold RosÃ©. It probably means nothing to you. But he was very well-known musician. He was the leader of the Berlin-- of the Vienna Philharmonic. He had a famous quartet, the RosÃ© Quartet. And he was related to Gustav Mahler, hence the name Alma.

In fact, I think Alma's mother was Mahler's sister or something like that. But Alma was the niece of Gustav Mahler. I mean, there was a tremendous musical background there. And she was a very remarkable lady. She had a very, very strong personality. She was very dignified lady.

There was a film, which should be scrapped, and a book, which should be scrapped, on the women's orchestra-- I don't know whether you came across-- was They Were Playing for Time-- where Alma is totally wrongly portrayed. Because the few people of us who have survived, we are very well aware of the fact that we can thank Alma for it, really, because-- and she was terribly-- this orchestra had to be very, very good, as far as she's concerned.

She was used to very high standards from her father. And that's how she was brought up. And she was dead-set on that.

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We must play terribly well. And she was very strict and very disciplinarian. She was not particularly nice to us. I mean, we really had to-- I mean, god forbid you played a wrong note, you got punished, et cetera. But we were often very furious with her.

But it was better to be furious with her than to realize what was going on around us. She put blinkers on us. And she had put blinkers on herself. We must play these stupid pieces so well that we could play them to her father. When something was really acceptable, she said, now, this was good enough for my father to hear. So we had this concentration on making music, rather than looking out the window, where the gas chambers were extremely busy.

Apart from playing these light music pieces, could you also get some kind of spiritual consolation from playing more serious things for yourself?

Well, it's funny you should ask that because that happened just once, that somebody-- there was somebody in the orchestra who had a very good musical memory. And she wrote from memory the "Sonata Pathetique." I think it's only the first movement. And we played it in the evening for fun, like chamber music. I write about this in my book because it was quite remarkable that we should do that.

Otherwise, that was-- that's all I remember, that she wrote this. I actually, funnily enough, think it was the "Moonlight Sonata." But other people who were there maintain it was the "Pathetique." I'm not in a position to argue now. I just remember that it was a Beethoven piano sonata that we played. And it was quite tremendous, really.

You see, we did the same thing in a funny sort of way in the camp as my family did before we got into the camp. We escaped into-- tried to escape into higher spheres somehow. Like my father would read Goethe and Schiller till the bitter end-- and talk about literature, et cetera, et cetera. And we would make music at home, we made music, anything to just get away from what was actually happening.

How did the women's orchestra compare with the men's orchestra? Did you get to know much about them?

No. I think they were probably better. I don't know. I mean, I never heard them. There is not really-- very little contact between them, apart from what you've already got, the occasional messages one could send, et cetera. I mean, I know somebody now who, in fact, became a member of a very well-known quartet, LaSalle Quartet, who went to America. And he visits me. I mean, he was in the men's orchestra.

Well, it was more or less the same thing. I don't know what the standard was, whether it was better or worse-- probably better. So then the day came that the Russians advanced from the east. And the Germans started the great marches. Because they didn't want to be caught with all this mess that they produced.

And so eventually, the day came when somebody came in the block and said-- you see, our music block was the only block where the Jews and non-Jews were mixed because anybody who could play was there, you see. So there were quite a lot of Polish people there as well. And then came that rather nasty moment where Poles or whatever-- Aryans to one side, Jews to the other.

And we thought, now is the moment that we go to the gas chamber. But in fact, that was the moment when they sent us to Belsen. That was the big transport of 3,000 people who were put into the cattle trucks, which you no doubt have heard a lot about, and sent westwards. And after a few days of rather nasty traveling, we arrived in Belsen.

How did that compare with Auschwitz?

Totally different. It doesn't compare at all. You see, the difference between Auschwitz and Belsen basically is that Belsen was a nothing place. That was a-- it was in the LÃ¼neburg Heath. We went straight into tents. It was a very small camp.

And I don't know whether you know anything about the history of Belsen. It started off as a-- it started off, actually, with-- I think it was built for the German Army as a maneuver place. And then it-- I think French and Belgium prisoners

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went there. And then Russian prisoners went there. And then it became a recuperation camp. And it had all sorts of functions. It was never an extermination camp.

You see, Auschwitz was an extermination camp with all the paraphernalia that goes with it Belsen was just a camp, barracks. There was no actual extermination plant there. But they didn't actually need it because the conditions were such that you just perished there.

So if I compare Auschwitz and-- Auschwitz was a place where you got killed. In Belsen, you perished. That is the basic difference, perhaps. Belsen wasn't meant as a-- I mean, it wasn't set up as an extermination camp. Auschwitz was set up as an extermination camp.

But what happened then, eventually, just to not go into too many details, is that more and more camps were emptied as the Russians advanced altogether, as Germany got smaller and smaller. And, as you know, there were thousands of camps. They were all concentrated into the west or into the center. And thousands and thousands of people arrived. And Belsen wasn't equipped for any of it. So there was no food, no water, no nothing, no sanitation, nothing. That was really the diabolical end.

Were they attempting to make you work there?

Vaguely. Vaguely. There was-- we worked for just a bit in something called a Weberei. Weberei really means a-- Weben means-- I don't know why I can't think of the English word now-- loom, like a loom. What's the word?

For weaving?

For weaving. But it was nothing to do with weaving. And what we did is to make plaits of cellophane, very long plaits of cellophane. It must have been some type of Ersatzgruppe or something. I don't know what they needed it for. We made these cellophane plaits the Weberei. But that came to an end as well. I mean, it was total chaos, really, in Belsen. In the end, of course, the Germans fled it themselves. And in the end, we didn't even see any Germans anymore. There was nothing, nothing happening.

Just a disintegration of the organization?

Total disintegration. But you see, what I learned afterwards is that had they wanted to-- they could have alleviated the disaster because they found huge magazines of food quite near. There's a very good book on Belsen where all this is-- I mean, huge food magazines, depots. But they didn't give it to us, certainly.

What is no bread no water, no something-- I mean, you've seen the pictures. I mean, that's what happened in Belsen. Nobody needed to kill you there because you did the-- get the job for them, really. So this is basically it. And I mean, if you happened to be alive on the 15th of April, 1945, you were a very lucky person-- and not die afterwards from eating suddenly, which, of course, happened.

So in view of the disorganization at Belsen, there was no question like there was in some camps, like Buchenwald, of some particular group, like German left-wing people being in charge?

No. No, that was not at Belsen at all. I know that was the case in Buchenwald. No, there was no organization, nothing. I certainly wasn't aware of it. But I don't think that-- no, I would have-- by now, I would have heard about. No, there was nothing. No, people just sat and waited to die, really, basically.

Do you remember who you were with in Belsen, which group of people?

We were together the orchestra that-- or the ex-orchestra, we all stuck together.

So you don't-- you'd been deported as a group from Auschwitz?

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Yeah. When the orchestra was disbanded-- you see, in Auschwitz, also, things started-- you could feel that things are coming to an end. I mean, Alma had died, to start off with. So without Alma, we were already not the same interesting orchestra. And I think the Germans must have gotten quite worried because the Russians got closer and closer.

And they tried to empty Auschwitz out-- or certainly Birkenau. They tried to destroy the crematoria, as you probably know, which they didn't succeed very well because they were very well-built. And the Jewish contingent of the orchestra was sent to Belsen along with thousands of other people.

But we stuck together as a group, although we were no longer an orchestra. But we were a group of people, like a camp family, which was very important. And in my opinion, the only hope to survive is if you were part of a group. Because you could do things for each other, or bully each other, whatever. On your own, you didn't have much chance of survival.

How big a group was it approximately?

We are still in touch now to the day-- I mean, who's left. A lot of people have died in the meantime. We must have been about 15 people or something like that, 10-15 people, and some very close friends. But we certainly-- we stuck together as a group.

What do you remember about the liberation?

What do I remember?

Yes.

I remember very well about the liberation. I wasn't very well at the time. And I kept hearing rumbling noises. We heard that there was something going on. And quite a few people thought that it might be the liberation or something. But I got very annoyed about it because I didn't want to believe it. I remember getting very furious when anybody said, I think these are British tanks outside, sounds like tanks, or something. I didn't want to know.

But eventually, I remembered, I can see the tank now with Mr. Singleton sitting on it-- he's no longer alive now-- coming in with a loud hailer, saying that we should keep calm and we're liberated. But we should stay where we are and keep calm. And so I remember that very well. And I also remember that then, the British left because they didn't expect to find what they did find. And they didn't really know what to do with it.

Did you speak any English?

No. And they came back two days later with help. And meantime, they left us at the mercy of Hungarians, which was very nasty. Because the Hungarians had a very funny position, really. They were really with the Germans. They were in between people. And they were very scared of us. And they shot quite a lot of people. And once the British went away-- I don't exactly what they were doing, but they tried to get help because people couldn't cope with this.

You mean the Hungarians panicked in some way?

Yes. Well, we were left in charge of the Hungarians, who were on the watchtowers. I must read it again, actually. It explains it very well in a book that I've got. And they panicked, yes. They were scared themselves what would happen to them. And there was a lot of shooting going on, which was utterly unnecessary.

But you can imagine. We're liberated. So we were quite a formidable mass of people, of course. We-- people didn't really know what to do with us. British didn't know what to do with us, how to feed us, what's the next move.

It must have been a very difficult situation for them as well, apart from the fact that it was so hideous, what they saw. And the smell was just unbelievable. I mean, we didn't smell it. But the people that came in-- I mean, there's never been anything like it, like this, what they found in Belsen.

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Were you and the rest of the women's orchestra in better condition than most of the others?

Not in Belsen, no. By that time, we weren't in orchestra. We probably arrived in better condition. But by that time, when I was in Belsen for-- must have been the best part of six months.

What do you remember about the return of the British and the bringing of food and supplies into the camp?

I remember that a lot of people died because they suddenly started to eat. How I escaped that particular thing, I really don't know. Well, didn't-- although you had been so starved that you didn't really know how to eat anymore. But anyhow, we managed to somehow not fall into this trap. My sister spoke a certain amount of English. So that was a help.

And I remember Patrick Gordon Walker coming in with a BBC van. And I was called to sit in that van and talk, like I'm talking to you now, only in German. Because then they wanted to send messages to people, find out whether anybody had any family. Because then in England, for instance, they would play it on the BBC.

You would hear people looking it-- I was-- I had a sister here in those days. And I had an uncle in America. So there were messages go out. This is Anita Lasker speaking. I have a sister. And I'm still alive. And that's how my sister found out that we're still alive. And very soon, well, my sister immediately started helping the British because she speaks English. They were desperate for people to speak English because communication was impossible.

And she started working with the army being interpreter. And eventually, I became an interpreter as well without speaking English. But I worked in an office. And I mean, life became very nice, really. I mean, it took about three weeks before they burned the old camp down. You probably know about that.

Yes. Did you witness that?

Yes. And we were all moved to-- along the road to the camp, which is now a British Army camp, which was a German Army camp. There were German barracks. And we had a very nice interpreter's house, which was a little hut. Must have been the gardener's hut or something, where we lived as interpreters and had a very nice time, really, very soon.

We had all sorts of privileges. We could use the officer's bath. And we could-- the whole sort of thing. I've got all the passes. Actually, I've given it to the museum. They've got it there at the moment, the book with all my passes, that I was allowed to enter the camp and-- on an army vehicle. Because they couldn't really let us out. We were liberated.

But there was a lot of looting going on. And they were desperately trying to organize, to get the sick people out. And it must have been a formidable task to sort this mess out. And it took a very long time to be sorted out because I went back there two years ago. And I saw gravestones there-- 1953. That is eight years after the liberation. So some people never made it.

I've interviewed some British medical students who were recruited to go to Belsen to help out. Were you were aware of their existence?

I was aware of-- funnily enough, of a Canadian team, medical team, because one of the Canadians was a musician and became a conductor. And we talked about it. Apparently, I showed him around the camp. And I wasn't aware that he was he at the time. But he remembered me. So I knew there were-- of course, I knew there were medical people there.

From what you've said, it sounds as though there was no chance or no actual taking of revenge against the guards.

Oh, there was. There was, of course. I mean, there were-- well, as you probably know then, the Germans were made to clear up the bodies. And we were standing there, watching them. And a lot of people wanted to get at them.

But the soldiers, the British soldiers tried to keep us away. Otherwise, they would have been massacred there, of course,

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there was a-- certainly, it would have been-- if they had been given a chance to do it. But we weren't exactly very powerful people physically, you mustn't forget.

Did any of the British take revenge against them?

Not that I know of. I think the whole thing for the British-- I mean, if I think that they're young chaps coming in there, must have been totally and utterly devastating experience. I don't know that it would actually engender a feeling of revenge. I think you were speechless that such a thing is possible and that a man like Kramer was still thinking-- there was a pact made between the British.

I mean, I didn't know that at the time, of course. The British knew. They were near the camp. They knew there was going to be a camp. And there was some communication that if you leave the camp intact and hand it over, we will let you go back to the front or something like that. So some Germans were there, including Kramer, who was the commander. A lot had left. But some were there. And the camp was duly handed over.

They didn't realize that, of course, it wasn't just a prison camp. Maybe the British thought that was a prison camp, that after what they saw, that they wouldn't just let them go, say, well, thanks very much for handing us the camp. You can go home now.

But I think, you see, a man like Kramer was so used to living in these conditions, he probably didn't see anymore that this was not acceptable. Like us, I mean, we lived among these bodies. I mean, this is-- was no more to me than a body. So for the innocent who comes in, it must have been quite staggering. We grown into this. We didn't smell it anymore.

Did you know the names of the VIPs in charge of the camp, like Kramer, at the time?

Oh, yes. I mean, Kramer happened to have been very interested in the orchestra always. So I knew Kramer, anyway. Oh, yes, we knew the names-- not of everybody, but we knew the names.

How did he show his interest in the orchestra?

Oh, he would come a lot to listen. And he liked music.

So you were performing in Belsen?

No. We no longer performed in Belsen. But Kramer was in Auschwitz before he came to Belsen eventually. And he recognized us. And there were some people in the orchestra-- one of them was that Hungarian fiddle player who I was telling you about, one a singer, and another a girl who played the harmony-- what do you call it-- harmonica--

Concertina.

--concertina. And he-- these three girls were quite often called into his house in Belsen to just perform privately. I mean, I didn't have a cello. So there was no question of that. But somehow or other, these people went and played for him.

When you were in Auschwitz, did the women's orchestra get better food and conditions than the other?

Yes. We had better conditions. We had beds to sleep in. We didn't sleep on these awful bunks, these-- that [GERMAN] they used to call, the shelves that you see. In the quarantine, for instance, were shelves, were about seven, eight, nine, 10 people. We had beds.

Occasionally, we had additional food because Alma RosÃ©, she was very respected lady, although she was Jewish and she was a prisoner. She had a great deal of dignity. And she was quite capable of going to the camp commander and say, we want some additional rations. And we would get them.

What kind of things?

Perhaps an extra slice of bread or whatever. Occasionally, parcels would arrive. For instance, people would send parcels to Auschwitz, which were never distributed to the people. I mean, probably, the people who they were meant for were dead. So there was a parcel block.

And occasionally, we would be given a parcel which wasn't at all meant for us. But that was a sort of extra. Yes, we did have better conditions. I mean, they were still not good, but compared to if you were not in the orchestra, very important difference.

And you had separate beds?

Well, we had a bed to sleep in. Yeah, which was already luxury, total luxury.

And any heat in your block?

Yes, I think there was heat. There was a stove, definitely.

This is Lasker-Wallfisch, reel 4. And were there facilities for the women's orchestra to keep themselves clean?

Yes, there was water. As long as there was water, you could keep yourself clean as you wanted to keep yourself clean. I mean, in Belsen, for instance, we-- it was very difficult. I mean it was very, very hard to keep clean because there was no heating, no nothing. It was winter.

The taps were outside and you had to really make yourself-- force yourself to keep yourself clean, which we did because we were, as I said before, in a group. And we would make sure that you have to wash and strip every day. In the end, there wasn't any more water. So that was out.

But in Auschwitz, certainly. I mean, we were sort of a showcase, you mustn't forget, the orchestra. If somebody would come visiting the camp to see what conditions are like in Auschwitz, we would be the people that would be shown. We looked extremely acceptable there. We were-- you see, where there is orchestra music. And look, they look quite good. Can't be so bad here.

Were films actually made of you?

I don't know. That I don't know. It's possible.

And the instruments that you had were good standard instruments, were they?

You see, the instruments were obviously instruments that were brought in by people who had been deported, you see. I mean, people often ask me, where did you get the cello from? Well, it's obviously, if you happen to be a cellist, and somebody comes to your house and says, in 24 hours, you have to report to X place and to be sent to the east, you take all the things that are important to you, which would include your instrument.

And that was obviously somebody else's cello. I don't think it was a particularly good cello, but it was a cello. I didn't even think in terms was it good, bad, or indifferent-- it was a cello. But that's where the instruments came from. People brought them and who were no longer alive.

And Auschwitz was an unbelievably wealthy place. I don't know whether you've heard the word Kanada mentioned to you ever. Kanada was the name for the warehouse. When you arrived in Auschwitz or at Birkenau, everything was taken away from you. Well, obviously, if you have a restricted amount of stuff to bring, you bring the best that you can possibly lay your hands on.

Now, all that stuff is taken away from you and put in a big warehouse. So you can imagine, there was a collection of unbelievable wealth there-- fur coats, god knows what, instruments, everything. I bet you, you could name it, it would

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be there.

So there was tremendous trading going on, of course. People who worked there would trade. And you could buy things. I mean, I've given the museum my jumper that I was liberated with, which I organized in Kanada, which started life as a very, very nice red angora jumper, beautiful. Well, you can have a look at it now, what it looks like after two years of wearing day and night. So they've got it now.

So it was called Kanada as a place of unbelievable wealth?

Wealth, yes, must be. I never thought of it, why it was called Kanada. You work in Kanada. It must be Canada is a wealthy place. That's where everything was.

Did anybody ever compose music for the orchestra? Because I know, at Theresienstadt, they had an opera.

Oh, they had opera, yes. No, I don't think so. I don't think so. But Theresienstadt, that was a-- they did it for themselves, somehow. It was a totally different structure there from Auschwitz. I mean, we were sort of-- we were employed to produce the entertainment.

You mustn't forget, these were the days-- I mean, if you look at it from the point of view of being sent to Auschwitz as a guard, terribly boring place, really. I mean, there was no television. There was no cinemas, nothing. It's in the middle of nowhere. You have to entertain yourself somehow, you see. That's what we were really meant to be, apart from the marches that we played for them, for the prisoners. We were the place of entertainment you go to relax yourself and hear a bit of music.

Did you have to play at executions?

No. But I mean, we played-- our block was very close to the crematorium. And I don't know whether you heard that in 1944, finally, they caught the Hungarian Jews all in one great, big bunch. They held out quite long. And there was an unbelievable influx of people.

And the crematoria couldn't cope with them, really. I mean, there was-- it was just flames sky high. And they threw people into the flames alive. I mean, they just had to get rid of people. It was just unbelievable. I mean, inferno isn't in it.

And we were playing there in the block away. But we weren't actually sitting in front of the crematorium. We were very close to the crematorium. But we weren't actually sitting in front of it, playing.

But this music business, you see, there's-- it's like you go to the dentist now, you get music. Or you take off in a plane, you get music because it somehow befuddles the mind a bit. There's a sort of psychological background, too, to this. Where there is music, it can't be so bad.

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