

Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

IRENE HASENBERG BUTTER

September 22, 1986

Copyright c1986 by the Board of Regents, University of Michigan--Dearborn

All rights reserved. No part of this transcript or videotape may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the University of Michigan--Dearborn.

Can you tell me your name please, and where you were born.

Irene Hasenberg, I was born in Berlin in 1930.

That's not your married name?

Hasenberg is my maiden name.

And your married name?

Is Butter.

Do you remember much about Berlin when you were a child?

Not a whole lot really, I was back once after the war and saw the house in which I was born and raised, but I don't remember a whole lot about Berlin the City, just about my family and where I lived.

How long did you stay in Berlin?

I left, we came to Holland in December of 1937.

And what were the circumstances of that, do you remember?

Well, it was the rising of Nazism and Hitler and many historical events of course, which have been well documented that showed the persecution of the Jews in various parts of Germany. My father saw the writing on the wall in a sense and looked for a way to emigrate; was offered a job with the American Express Company in Amsterdam or Curasel, and given that choice, he chose Amsterdam. He left about six months, I think, before we did and all that time was very tense and my mother was frequently upset and all the arrangements had to be made for our trip to the Netherlands where we would be reunited with my father, but at the same time, leave

many relatives behind. And then, at one point, the day came and we went on a train late in the evening and slept on the train through the night and the next day we arrived and my father met us on the train station.

Um, how many were in your immediate family who...?

It was my parents and my brother and myself.

And the relatives you left behind...?

My grandparents, my mother's parents had lived with us ever since I was born, I think. So, that was a very close relationship. We left them behind; they were. My father's parents were alive in a little town near Hamburg, called Elmshorn, and many uncles and aunts and cousins lived in Germany, either in Berlin or some other part of Germany.

Do you know what happened to those relatives?

The majority of them did not survive. My mother's parents, the grandparents we lived with, both died in Theresienstadt. My father's parents died, they did not get deported, they died before then. My mother only had one sister, she and her husband also emigrated to Amsterdam and they were both sent to Auschwitz and my father came from a family of um, he had five brothers and three sisters and several of them had already emigrated to America, South America or the United States and the sisters, two of the three sisters were in Europe, in Germany during the war, but did survive. And so in that family, actually of my father's family, everyone survived.

But not of your mother's family?

Not of my mother's.

Was your family a religious family? Did your mother keep a kosher home for your sister and you?

No. We were not religious. My father was the more religious of my parents and they were not kosher although we did observe holidays and I certainly remember a time in my childhood, especially in the Netherlands, where we went to temple every Saturday. And my brother and I both went to, what you call Sunday School, I don't think it was Sundays but, religious school. And my brother was Bar Mitzvahed in Amsterdam.

Your parents, your father, did he consider himself a good German, did he identify with German culture?

Well regrettably, I am unable to answer that questions cause I did not know my father after age 13. And in the camps, we just never, I don't know my father from that perspective, I suspect he did. I think both of my parents were quite assimilated and considered themselves Germans.

They spoke German, of course.

Yeah.

German literature?

Oh yes. Yeah. And my mother who is alive now, she's 82, and reverts to German more and more, I mean she really, this is increasingly her preferred language and she's always identified with the culture in the literature, in the language and even after all these horrible things happened to us, she could not disassociate herself from

this heritage, the German heritage. It was always a big conflict for me, because the minute we lived, we started living in the Netherlands, I did not like to speak German anymore. And for all the years we live in Holland, our parents spoke German to us, because they didn't want us to forget it; my brother and myself, and we answered in Dutch. And uh, discontinued after the war in the United States, my mother would frequently speak German to me. I think my brother is not quite as averse to using the German language as I am, and I always answered in English. Now that she's older and her mental condition isn't that good, I've been compromising a lot in speaking German to her, recently. But what I do remember is a very serious conflict when my children were little and my mother used to sing German nursery songs to them and nursery rhymes and I found that very repulsive. I didn't want my children to be exposed to these songs, but on the other hand, I recognize my mother's right to do that. Those were the songs she knew. And so, I never expressed my feelings about it, but I did have very strong feelings about that.

You were six years old when you went to Amsterdam. What were your first impressions, what do you remember about the initial years?

Well, in the beginning it was a little difficult, because I didn't know Dutch. I went to school right away, and remember, you know, a little bit of harassment by kids. Kids are cruel, all over the world. But I learned very quickly, I learned the language and this was in '37, the war started in '41 or '40, I forgot when Hitler invaded the Netherlands, so I remember those as being very happy childhood years in the Netherlands, certainly before the war, before the invasion. We lived in Amsterdam,

which is a very nice city. We have quite a number of friends and quite a number of relatives, as a matter of fact, and there was a lot of happiness. It was carefree until conditions changed.

Did you find non-Jewish friends as well as Jewish friends?

Yes, yes.

Were you ever aware of the distinction between your non-Jewish friends and you and what was that like?

Well, my immediate neighborhood, I don't think any of the neighborhood children were Jewish. Although we lived in that part of Amsterdam where most of the Jews lived, but on my street, the kids I played with were not Jewish. And many of the children in the school that I attended were not Jewish and my best friend was not Jewish. And I remember feeling different from them in that way, because they celebrated different holidays, they went to church on Sundays, I went to temple on Saturdays. This was, I think, I knew I was Jewish and they were not and they knew that I was Jewish and they were not. But it wasn't a problem. But it was certainly a conscious situation.

Was there any anti-semitism connected with it that you remember?

I don't remember any anti-semitism that ever personally affected our lives while we lived in Holland, I'm sure there was lots of it, and I've heard other people talk about it, but I didn't experience it. And we, for example, we had um, the house we lived in, there weren't any Jewish families, and our neighbors were very close friends of my parents and in the end, meant a great deal, because one of our neighbors was a

photographer, and because he was a photographer and had many pictures in her house, she offered to save our photographs for us, because she felt that if the Nazis came and saw pictures in her house, it wouldn't look, it wouldn't be an obvious give away, because Gentiles were not allowed to associate with Jewish people after while. So she saved all of our photographs and, of course, this had been a tremendous treasure to my family after the war that we had all these pictures of relatives who did not survive, and I know many families who don't have that and it's an irreplaceable thing. So, our neighbors cooperated with us and protected us in any way they could. And after the war, we had a lot of contact and this one couple that lived in the apartment one floor on top is still alive in the Netherlands now and I visit them whenever I'm there and they are in their eighties. He's 87 and she's 82. And uh, we have a very strong bond. These are the only people left from before the war that I knew that still live in the Netherlands and each time, I don't know whether I'll see them again, but uh, that relationship has been a very important relationship to me throughout my life.

Before we talk a little about the war years, do you remember if your parents received correspondence or if you received correspondence with your family in Germany after your moved?

Well, yes. Because the first few years between '37 and '40 there was no problem. My grandparents even came and visited us from Berlin one summer and we received, there was free flow of the mail, so we even had relatives come through. I know one of my father's brothers, he lived with us for a while and then later on he spent a

good part of the war in Belgium. But he lived with us for a while and other people came through, friends of my parents came through on their way to the United States, for example.

Did you every hear any discussions about what was happening in Germany in your house?

I don't remember.

At what point during the war was there still correspondence even then?

No, no. All that stopped during the war.

How did things start to change? When the war began, do you remember what the conditions were?

Well, the invasion itself was very frightening, because there were bombers and airplanes and shooting and those were the first few days and then the Dutch surrendered and then things began to happen very gradually. The first thing was you had to protect, you had to install all kinds of curtains so the light wouldn't show at night out of your windows and that had, and there were all kinds of inspections, standards, so that happened. There were bombings one night, I don't know when this happened, how early after the invasion, but Amsterdam was bombed and we had a bomb fell right in our neighborhood and my brother and I found glass in our bed, the windows were completely shattered and then they began to build shelters and there were all kinds of attacks. So, the very beginning was the fear, the anxiety of shooting and bombing and the threat on people's lives. But that affected everybody, that wasn't particularly directed at the Jews, of course. That was the beginning of the war. Then the second phenomenon I remember was shortages, food shortages and

coupons where it was less and less possible to buy things. You had to go queue in the stores, you had to have coupons. There were times when Jews weren't allowed to shop and neighbors shopped for you. Or Jews could only go very late when there wasn't much left, and all the other people went earlier.

Is this when your neighbors helped?

Yes, we always had a lot of support and help from our neighbors. Then um, the restrictions began after you know the food shortages and Jews weren't allowed to do things. They were forbidden to go into cafes, they were forbidden to go to the theater, they were forbidden to ride the tram or the trains, there was a curfew, you had to be in at a certain time, then you couldn't visit your non-Jewish people anymore. You were not allowed to be in a house with gentiles. Gentiles weren't allowed to be in your house. Then came the star; wearing the Star of David. So very gradually there was more and more infringement on our lives and after we all wore the star and of course we had to have identification which indicated that we were Jewish had a big "J" in your identity card. Then the deportation began.

When the first steps began, up to the Star say, what were your reactions, what were you thinking about, do you remember, as a ten year old, when someone said you couldn't take a tram anymore?

Well, it's hard to remember what I felt. Um, I don't remember the tram being such a restriction because Amsterdam was a small town and everyone used bicycles, or you walked, and I didn't take the tram very often but I remember that my father used to go to work on the tram everyday. I mean, we wouldn't take a tram to school

because the school was very close, or to visit your friends, they all lived within walking distance or biking distance, but my father took the tram to work every day and then he couldn't anymore, he had to walk. It was quite a distance. And I remember one day he applied for a permit 'cause even Jews could get a permit to use the tram under certain circumstances and um, well, that was a disaster. He should never had done that, but I guess he got the wrong advice. So then we were arrested because he applied for a tram permit.

The whole family was arrested?

Yeah.

Who arrested you?

A Nazi came one morning. My father was at work. My mother was home alone. So, he took her to... there was a Jewish theater in Amsterdam, they used that to collect the Jews until they had enough of them to put them on a train and dispatch them to whatever camp they were supposed to go to. So my mother was taken to the Jewish theater by one of these guys. Then, he went and got my father from work and then they got the kids from school. So I will never forget the day when I was in class and the principal came and called my name, and usually it was a bad thing when the principal came and called your name. So um, I had to go outside and I found out that we were, my family was arrested and my brother and I had to go to the Jewish theater to be with my parents under arrest. That time, oh, I forgot to mention, we also were in Jewish schools. Jewish children were no longer allowed to be in a regular school. So I had to change schools and I was separated from my friends.

Before we finish this story about the arrest, how did you feel about that?

Well, that was a very frightening experience, because first of all, we didn't think we would ever get out again, and we did. And um, it was at a time, dates I don't remember, when many people had already been arrested in Amsterdam, and everyone was living in constant anxiety and fear of being deported. So, when this happened, it was a terribly frightening experience. We went to this theater, it was like a great big movie theater with the seats taken out from the center and the red carpeting and there were just people sitting on the floor all over the theater, hundreds of people and then they would bring meals from some outside source. And we were there a couple of days, you couldn't get out in the fresh air. You couldn't walk and people were miserable and they were moaning and groaning and some people were sick. The babies were taken into a creche across the street and taken care of there and the mothers could go and feed their babies but the rest of the time they had to be, stay in the theater. And I remember one time I was allowed to go with one of the mothers to the creche to play with the children there and that's how I got out but my parents and my brother didn't get out and I can't remember we were there maybe three days and then we were let free again. I don't know why. I mean nobody ever explained anything. They did tell my father that we were being arrested because he applied for a tram permit. And then, I don't know who got us released again, but we did and um, I remember that very clearly because we went back to our apartment and it was all sealed. And we were allowed to break the seal and re-enter. And then, um, the next few days, I remember that everybody in

Amsterdam, all our friends and relatives sent us flowers, and um, our apartment had this great big dining room and all the flowers and plants were put there and it was like a botanical garden. [laughs]

These are all non-Jewish friends then?

Some Jews. And, mixed, you know, whoever was still there. I mean it was such a rare occasion you know to be freed again, so it was quite a celebration.

When you were excluded from your school, how did you react to that, did you talk to your friends, did your neighbors say anything, what do you remember about that?

I don't remember too well the transition, but um, I also... in the Jewish school, I knew a lot of the kids, the Jewish kids who weren't in the school -- my neighborhood school that I attended so, in that sense it was also quite nice to be with all the Jewish kids. But it was a transition and I suppose it was just one of those one in a whole series of chronological experiences that there was nothing we could do about it.

Do you remember the razzias?

Oh yes.

The first one in February, do you remember that?

Not distinctly.

What do you remember about the razzias?

Well, the razzias were very frightening because what they would do is block off a part of the town, you know maybe a neighborhood or a series of blocks, and then the Nazis came with their big trucks and you know, the uniforms of the Wehrmacht, I don't know if it was Wehrmacht or SS or NSB which was the Dutch version of the

Nazis and all in their uniforms and their boots and they would just go from door to door, they would ring the bell, and if no one opened, then they would somehow break the door or break in or dash in or whatever way and get upstairs and there was always a lot of screaming and a lot of yelling and people were forced to leave on the spot with whatever they could carry. So this was always very traumatic and if you were walking in a part of the town where they started a razzia, you would try to get away as quickly as possible, just not to be caught there. But, it was very loud, and they had their loud speakers and if you were close enough to see it, you know, you would see tragic scenes of families just being disrupted and having to leave all of their possessions behind, just what they could carry. But we were all prepared for that, you know because um, the writing was on the wall. Sooner or later, unless the war ended, this would happen, and so we were always packed and in the summertime we had all our winter clothes, we had these big rucksacks and everything was always prepared in the summertime, the winter clothes were in that rucksack and in the winter the summer clothes were in there and it was all, we were living in such a way that we could get out of the house within minutes and still have something with us. So, our life was affected by the razzias and even maybe a year or year and a half before it happened. Now of course the beginning they didn't have razzias. They called people. They told them to report at a certain place and there was one family, good friends of my parents who were called and they had an elderly mother live with them, so she lived with us for a while and then she was called.

How were they called?

[Softly] Now let me see. They um, they were deported. You know, I don't know why she wasn't... they received a letter and they had to report at a certain day and time to a certain place and she wasn't on that letter, the grandmother, so why should she go if she wasn't called. So she lived with us for a while, but then she was also called later on. So, you were affected by this from the very beginning, because there was always somebody you knew who had left.

Did you wonder where they were going? Did you know where they were going?

Well, we knew where they were going immediately. Most of them went to Westerbork which was the main assembly camp in the Netherlands. And they were allowed to write. You were allowed to write, I don't know, two post cards per week, or something like that. And I even remember that there was a boy in my class, and I was very fond of him, and then one day his family was deported, and then one day I got a card from him. From Westerbork So, you could keep in touch with people in that way. I was very impressed that of the two cards he had that he was sending it to me rather than to a relative, but then by the time we came, that family wasn't there any more. So, you knew where they went immediately, but most people didn't stay very long in Westerbork and that depended on how long you stayed in Westerbork depended on what kind of category you were in. There were all kinds of lists and all kinds of categories depending on who you were and what kind of privileges you bought yourself and some... there were lists I remember people, the Jews, paid thousand and thousands of guilders to get on a list and were promised they would not be deported. They could stay in Westerbork, and of course,

eventually everyone was deported, practically everyone. So you bought time. If you had money, you could buy time. If you had some other characteristic that allowed you to be in a group that was not deported yet, then you could buy time.

Had you heard of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen?

Yes, we did when we were in Westerbork. Now I don't remember hearing about Auschwitz before we came to Westerbork. But, that may just be because, you know, I was a child and I didn't know as much as adults did or maybe others did. But some people claimed that nobody knew about Auschwitz and I remember distinctly that when the trains came back from Auschwitz in Westerbork was a camp where almost every week the train came and was filled with people and went to Auschwitz. Almost every week. And um, that's another story. Life in Westerbork really revolved around that train. But when the trains came back and people cleaned up the trains, they found letters and notes and so we knew about Auschwitz.

The Jews were cleaning up the train. Let's go back to Amsterdam.

I think even Anna Frank mentions Auschwitz in her diary, if I'm not mistaken.

As long as you brought her up, did you know her?

Yes, I knew her. I didn't know her very well. But our paths crossed a number of times. Anna Frank lived in Amsterdam and not very far from the neighborhood I lived in and as I said before, it was a small city, the Jewish community, at least the immigrant Jewish community was not that large and people knew each other and I knew what Anna Frank looked like but she was older and she wasn't in my school so I didn't really know her except that I knew one of her friends who is Kitty Edjudie

and she is the person who the diary is named after. She lived in my neighborhood around the corner and she and I were friends and through Kitty I knew about Anna. And then later on, I had another friend who was one of Anna Frank's best friends. She became my friend in Bergen-Belsen, that's Hannalea Gurslea. And through Hannalea I made contact with Anna in Bergen-Belsen.

Anne Frank talks about the star as a kind of turning point in her life, but do you remember when you had to wear the star? What was your reaction to that?

Well, it wasn't really a traumatic experience. I mean of course if you realized all of the implications that you were branded, but the Dutch people were very supportive and they made you feel like it was a privilege to be a Jew and you should be proud to wear the star and many Dutch people in the beginning wore the star, Gentile people. And so it seemed like a, well, we are proud to be Jews. And so, what is wrong with wearing the star? You know, it's a symbol of Jewishness, of the people you belong to. So in itself it wasn't that traumatic. Now it became, of course, a... there were difficulties attached with wearing the star because you had to have it on all the time, which meant you had to have a lot of stars, they had to be on all your garments. When the seasons changed and so on, suppose you went out in a coat and you had the star on your coat, but then it got warm and you took it off, you couldn't be starless, so that was a problem. People solved the problem by having little vests and wearing a vest over other things and the vest had the star. But um, the star was another way in which Nazis could abuse people, you know, by Nazis could do anything they wanted any time. They could, let's say, rip off a star and say it wasn't

sewn on properly and punish you for that, or they could stop you on the street, make you take off your coat and if you didn't have a star on your dress or garment you were wearing under your coat, they could punish you for that. You know, it was just used as a way of attacking people if it wasn't perfect. And um, in the camp, too, we had to wear the star, but, I don't know, this may be kind of bizarre or perverse, but um, I don't remember being hurt by having to wear the star and I still have a star which I have always saved and um, it's very important for me to still have that star.

You said you used to go to school and move through the city on a bicycle. What happened when they took away your bicycle when you weren't allowed to ride bicycles?

Yeah, that was very sad. Because, in Holland, people are born on the bicycle. [She laughs] And, that's just the vehicle you use from very young on, so I think I was very hurt when I had to turn in my bicycle. Also, I had very fond memories, because my father and my brother and I used to go on bicycle rides in the country quite a bit and so we couldn't do that anymore. So that was definitely a loss... not having a bicycle anymore.

After you were miraculously saved from the theater that one time, what was the condition of your family at that point, were you secure, did you feel that you had faced the worst?

Oh, no, no, we knew that was just a reprieve, and um, you know, I don't know how realistic or unrealistic we were. I have the feeling we always knew that the day would come. Our day would come and we would have to go. And there was never any security, because you didn't know when this would, this moment would come, and you always had to be on the alert, and you always had to be ready.

Was there talk of hiding, going into hiding?

Yes. There was talk of going into hiding... and... well, I think my parents were very ambivalent about the hiding. There were two major problems, one was finding a place to hide and uh having enough money, you know, having enough money so that you felt you could pay the people who would hide you for as long as that would take and there was no way of predicting how long that would take. And once you went into hiding, you had no food coupons, they had to be bought on the black market. And they were very expensive, so going into hiding uh, you know, it's really, people had to have resources to go into hiding or, either resources or find somebody in the rural area on a farm or in the country who was willing to do it without having the guarantee of money. And the other was, it was very dangerous. In a way, you see, we did not believe, at that time, that once we were deported, we would be killed and so when those people who went into hiding, when they were caught, were frequently shot right on the spot. And so, it was weighing the risks of going into hiding or going ahead and see whether we, maybe we'll survive even if we get deported. And I remember that the day when we did get arrested the second time, um there was a big razzia and um, I think it was our neighbors came, they had heard it on the radio, and they knew it before, and we were warned the day before, I think, the night before, I don't know, but it then did come early on, I think it was Sunday morning and my father had found a place for my brother and myself, and he said he wanted us to hide in the attic and then our... he had told the neighbor where it was, and our neighbor would then take us to this place after the razzia was over and things were

safe. But, as young as we were then, 12 and 14, we knew that sometimes when the Nazis came to a house and they knew there was a family of four and two of four were not there, they would shoot the two that were there, and so my brother and I said we wouldn't go. So. Hiding somehow, it wasn't the choice that my parents made or one that they put a lot of effort into seeking out.

Were you in a ghetto?

No.

When did they come for you? What were the circumstances?

Well, the circumstances were, it was relatively late in the game, uh, my father worked with the Jewish organization that the Nazis used in all these countries, they used the Jews to help them deport all the rest of the Jews and my father had a job with this organization... um...

So it's Joodsraad?

Pardon, Joodsraad, yeah, he lost his job with American Express because they weren't allowed to hire, to continue to employ Jews. And then he was employed with the Joodsraad and he had a job where, and I'm sure he is sincerely believed that he was able to help people, and he did in some sense, I cannot imagine that he considered himself part of the deportation machinery. Although in some sense, maybe in retrospect, people would classify it that way. His job was, he had a team of people working with him and they were allowed to go into the houses of Jews that had been deported and pack their belongings and ship them to the camps, to Westerbork that is. And that was my father's job. And um, because sometimes people were arrested

without any warning and they had nothing prepared, or they were just arrested on the street and they had no chance even to take what they had packed so they went just in the clothes they had and that was my father's position in the Joodsraad so... Because he had that position, we uh, outlasted a number of the razzias. But it was when the majority of Jews had already been deported, that's when they resorted to this house-to-house search. And it was a Sunday morning, and we apparently had heard all about it and we were ready and you could watch them and they blocked off the entire neighborhood and then you just watched until they came to your door. And they came and it was June 23 in 1943 and it was a very hot day, but since we knew about it, we wore several layers of clothes, because you can only carry so much and so in order to have more clothes, we wore several layers of clothes and then had the rest of what we were taking in a rucksack and then some food and some kind of other bag and um, we had to walk quite a bit because um, they, you know, there were hundreds of people involved and they didn't have vehicles, so we had to walk to one gathering point and then to another. Eventually, ended up at a train station where they had the cattle cars waiting for us, and um, I think it was reasonably early in the morning, like 10:00 in the morning, very hot day and um, just remember being um, perspiring all the time and having to carry a lot of heavy things and walking long distances and eventually, they loaded in the cattle cars, about 60 people in one car with one bucket of water and one bucket for, as toilet. And I don't remember how many hours we were in this train, it seemed like eternity. But actually the distance that we travelled, like today it would take maybe three hours on a train to get from

Amsterdam to that area and it seemed like um, it took forever, and I do know that by the time we got to Westerbork it was late at night when we arrive there. So, we were, all these hours, we were crammed into the cattle car and um, there were of course, people with varying reactions. Some were very old and very sick, some were petrified, there were crying babies, and um some people tried to keep up the spirit and sang songs.

What did you do?

I think I was kind of, the one thing I kept thinking about is, I thought that when I would come to Westerbork, I would see this boy who had written me a card. I was thinking about that, but uh, I was also upset 'cause there were a lot of people who were very upset and uh, I hadn't seen people in that frame of mind before.

When you were waiting for them to come, was there any conversation... at home?

I don't remember. [Pause] I just remember the incident of my father wanting to persuade us to hide in the attic and after that, I don't remember. I think we were just waiting in fear.

Did you talk before when all this was getting worse by the day, did you ever sit and talk with your brother, your father, your mother?

Not specifically, you know, not about what will happen to us, or anything like that, I remember that um, my mother had a bar of chocolate and eh, when a birthday, you know at that point there was nothing you could buy anymore, very few things you could buy, and when a birthday came, then they always got out this bar of chocolate for the celebration, but we wouldn't eat it, and the wish would be that there would

be another birthday to have this chocolate. [Pause] But um, I think my parents felt that even when we get deported, you know, we would probably survive. I don't think anyone thought of gas chambers, then. Or, um, you know, I mean the Nazis told you you were going to work and you know, you were just going to a camp, and I think people denied the severity of the situation and while it was cruel and horrible to leave everything behind and have your life disrupted, but I think we believed we would survive.

What happened at Westerbork?

Well, Westerbork um... the family was together, um in the same barrack. My, I think uh, I don't remember too much about work. Some people worked and other, and I think my mother worked in some kind of a sewing circle. I don't know if my father worked anymore. I can't remember that. Um, Westerbork was um, you know, it was pretty awful, but then in retrospect, it wasn't so awful. You know, because of what came afterwards was so much worse, but I... First of all, we had very little food, we were hungry, there wasn't enough food, we were always hungry. Although we had a lot more food then later on and we were allowed to receive packages. And um, there were lice. It was the beginning of the lice and a lot of people had all their hair shaven off. When we first arrived at night in Westerbork, I was, it was a very frightening experience. We all had to take off our clothes. I'd never seen naked people before. I mean, that is the way I was raised and we didn't go to movies. I think I saw two movies before the war um, "Hansel and Gretel" and maybe "Snow White", and those were the only two movies. I didn't see what people saw, see these

days. Uh, it was a very protected childhood in the sense, there was no television. I had never seen naked people before, and we were just in a large room, everyone had to take their clothes off and go from one room to another being examined for this and that and if people had lice, then immediately, all the hair was shorn off and that is one of the most degrading, humiliating experiences to have all your hair removed. Um, luckily that didn't happen to us, but there was a lot of problems with lice all the time. There were other kinds of um, insects, horrible insects, I remember. Worms with wings that were around the lavatories, they had little buildings of lavatories. And um, I remember dreaming about those horrible worms. Um, we had to be um, the barrack always had to be tip-top shape, there was certain rules and regulations. Somebody could walk in and um, just pick on anything and beat you for whatever reason. The whole camp wasn't all that..... uh, degrading, but what made Westerbork such a horrible experience was that every week there was a train. And the whole life in Westerbork revolved around a one-week cycle. On Saturday, the train would come back, see Westerbork was a camp that was built around a railroad track. The railroad track was in the center and then there were barracks and buildings on either side. And so, when that train was there, you had to see it all day long, you couldn't go anywhere without seeing that train, because it covered the entire length of the camp and so it was just the doom and the gloom of life was that every week there was this train and it came on Saturday, then they cleaned it and it was Monday night, I believe, at midnight that they turn on the light in each barrack and read out the names of the people who would go. And you never knew, you

never knew whether your name was going to be on that list that day, that night. And so if it wasn't, then you were in despair because other people were going and if it was, well, then, you pretty much knew where you were headed. So, all night on Mondays you spent helping people pack. The people were going whose names had been read or you would go to other barracks and check on your friends and relatives, whether they had been called or not called. And then, you would walk them to the train and say goodbye... [She weeps] and then the train would leave. [Pause] And I have never been able to get over it, because I have this reaction whenever I see a train, I still do. It's just somehow a part of me, there is something about trains that I have never been able to overcome. And that's what Westerbork was to me. It was the cycle of the trains.

How many Mondays went by at Westerbork?

Well, it, we were there from June of '43 to February of '44. So we were there for about eight months and I don't think it came every week. At the Anna Frank house in Amsterdam, they have a list of all the trains that left Westerbork and all the dates and how many people went on each train. But I think sometimes they skipped because decisions were made somewhere, I don't know, but um, still there were quite a lot of Mondays before... while we were there. And um, well the strange thing that happened that affected my family and shaped our future was that uh, we received some papers that protected us from going to Auschwitz and um, this I consider one of the miracles in my story, was that when we were still in Amsterdam, my father one day met a friend of his on the street and this friend said, you know, there's this man

in Sweden and he sends out passports, and what you should do is write to him and send him some pictures and maybe you'll get passports. This friend of my father's had just gotten his passports and usually passports were fake passports of South American countries. And it meant that you had, if you had a passport meant you were a citizen of that country. And that meant the Nazis couldn't touch you, by international laws, anyway. And so my father did that. Immediately, he sent four passport pictures and he wrote to with this man as though he were an old acquaintance and he said, I'm sure you wonder about, we haven't been able to write you for a long time and you probably wonder what the kids look like and I'm enclosing some pictures and he sent out this letter. And after we were already in Westerbork, one day these passports had arrived in Amsterdam and they were forwarded to us in Westerbork. And eh, my parents just couldn't believe it when they opened up the mail that, you know, that, first of all that they had come and secondly, that they had been forwarded to us. And that immediately changed our status in Westerbork. Uh, it didn't diminish the horror of the Mondays of the trains, but um, and you never could be sure about anything in a camp or during the war. But, you know, by certain rules, we probably were not going to be sent to Auschwitz. Uh, because of those passports. And um, my mother told me um, not a few years ago, something that I hadn't known before that, at one time while we were in Westerbork, we were on the list and eh, my father had a friend, he was his buddy during World War I, my father fought in the German army and that was his buddy. And this man and his wife also moved to the Netherlands from Germany and they

lived in the eastern part of the Netherlands and um, they were amongst the first people to be deported to Westerbork. And the first people, since they arrived as some of the first people, they had elite status in the camp because it is the first people who get the jobs and then usually um, in those jobs you're protected for some time. So they had, he had some kind of position in Westerbork where he could influence the powers that be. And so one time, we were on a list and he managed to get us off. And my mother told me this, but of course, I didn't know it at the time but of course that's a horrible experience, too. On one hand, you don't go but someone else goes because the number that has to go on that train is fixed. So, when your life is saved, or when you are protected from that train, that's not an unmixed blessing for any, any person experiencing that. So that is what did happen one time. And then those papers came and uh, it is because of these papers that we were sent to Bergen-Belsen in February of 1944.

What was the state of your family's health at that point? Was everybody well?

Yes. I um, my family was probably um, getting thinner, um but you know, food um; we had already experienced some food deprivation before being deported, because food was getting scarce all the time. In the camp there was more food deprivation. Um, we were all thinner, but eh, the only person who was in my family who was sick was myself, I had hepatitis and had to be hospitalized for a while. And um, yeah that was also one of the really traumatic experiences for me in Westerbork, because I had to be in quarantine and so my parents couldn't come and visit me. And being in the hospital there was um, was just awful, because um, one thing that occurred in the

hospital, is sometimes they brought in um people who came from other camps and were very sick or they, I saw people who had attempted to commit suicide. They would be brought in and their stomachs would be pumped out and um, there were people who were going insane, who were just screaming all night. So um, that hospital experience was um, was awful. I think I was there for two weeks.

This was in 1943 still?

Yeah.

Do you remember the train trip to Bergen-Belsen?

Yes, I remember the train trip very well, because for one we were in a passenger train this time, not the cattle cars that we had been shipped in going to Westerbork and we all thought that we were going to a better camp. We were going - from now on things were going to be better -- we would be in an inter-nation camp, we would have more food, we would be treated in civil manner, and the reason why I remember it was that we were with another couple, friends of my parents in one compartment, six people. And um, I think there was some denial there, I don't think we really were sure that things were gonna be better, but um this um friend, the man in this couple was kind of a comedian and he was telling jokes all night long and we spent the whole night laughing in this, on this train which was probably some way of coping with the uncertainty we were facing, because we know, we were in a regular passenger train, but uh, who knows where we were really going? So the whole night was spent really in stitches. They call it **Gallows humor**, you know the...

Do you have any idea why it was a passenger train?

Um, I think um, no. I don't know. I can't even say that all the people who came to Bergen-Belsen came in passenger trains. I don't know.

Maybe the passports?

The passports gave us a different status, but why that meant a better train, I don't know. It sure made a difference to us. [Pause in interview here.]

The people who were with you on the train that told the jokes; what happened to them?

Well, it is a very sad story. He um, the wife survi... the wife left... got out of Bergen-Belsen when we did but the husband didn't and uh, my mother said that the wife was a smoker, she was a you know, a a, what you call it, addicted cigarette smoker and um, the husband traded his bread for cigarettes for his wife and he died from undernourishment. It doesn't mean that he wouldn't have died anyway from undernourishment, but that's the way my mother told me the story afterwards. The wife um, she came out when we did and then went to South Africa to live with her daughter.

Before we leave the train, when you were still in Westerbork, were there people that you said farewell to that it was particularly hard to do?

Yeah. A lot of my family. My mother's sister and her husband, the cousin that um, who lives in the United States now and her parents, um oh, I think probably at least, at least a dozen relatives, you know cousins, uncles, aunts and many, many friends. My parents had a wide circle of friends in Amster... in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. So uh... and then you met a lot of people when you lived in the barrack, you know, you became friends with some of the people that you were close, you lived

to close to. So, there were always people you knew each time that you had to part with. And we knew, this... we wouldn't see each other again. I mean, when you took someone to the train, it wasn't like um, so long.

You went to the train with them?

Sometimes.

When you saw "Shoah", Lanzmann's film, what did you think about the trains?

Yeah. It's, to me it was remarkable that he struck on that theme because um, I guess I call it, I used to call it my hangup about the trains and the way I feel, I mean I could walk along the Huron River with my dog and the train comes by and I will be, I get choked up. Even when I don't think about it, I mean it is just an automatic response to the train. I always used to think of it as a hangup and now I interpret it differently now, I think it's, it is just me. It is just a part of me. And, I've asked other people about this, other people who were in camps and who were, had the same experiences, because I wondered, and I've never met anybody who had the same experiences, described them or admitted sharing that. And so, then to see it in "Shoah" was really a remarkable experience and to me that is one way of characterizing the essence of the Holocaust, of the deportation, is in trains because that's how people were always transported. There was no other way. And uh, all the moving around, the separations, the um, the disruption, is symbolized by the trains, and of course, if it was a cattle car experience, then even more so because of the trauma attached to travelling that way and the longer you had to be locked up in one of those cars the more horrible the experience was. But even for a short trip to be

squeezed into a cattle car like that and then someone uh, puts a bolted lock on you, and you know there is no way of ever getting out, no matter what. Um, it's um, [Pause] well, it's hard to even describe it.

The arrival at Bergen-Belsen, what was that like?

It was, I was panic stricken when I arrived in Bergen-Belsen. We were met by SS with big German shepherds and they were barking and you know, that was a custom of the Nazis, they had dogs. Dogs that they would, that they would use to threaten and sometimes use in reality. And uh, we had to walk quite a distance and they were keeping everybody in line, hundreds of people marching along and so they had these dogs. And I remember my mother saying to me, remember dogs that bark don't bite. But they looked so vicious, these huge German shepherds, that um, I don't think that I was that much comforted [she laughs] by what she said. And um, so it was another level of um, SS. You know in Westerbork, there weren't that many SS men. It was mostly run by Dutch people. And uh, actually by a very small group of even, it was mostly the Jews who ran the camp, and maybe there were four uh, Germans there. Hardly ever more than that, and some Dutch NSB'rs. There was another level of um, Nazism that was uh, exhibited there. You know, many more people of course, um, managing the camp, um. It was a very different scene, it was very dreary. It was larger, the barracks were very different, people were stuffed into barracks, many more people into smaller space. All of that became apparent right away. And because the Jews administered Westerbork, and this was not the case in Bergen-Belsen, the treatment was a totally different way of being treated from the very

beginning. And well I guess what it really meant was that um, it was apparent right away that things were not better here. This was not a better place than Westerbork.

Did you go through the same routine, having to take your clothes off?

I don't remember that. Maybe yes, but I don't remember it.

Was there lice there to?

Yes. Oh, yes. Yeah. That was a problem that got worse and worse and worse the longer we were in the camps. I mean, it was a plague. It just really, it was a horrifying experience to have lice in all of your clothes, all over your body all of the time. Not just head lice, but body lice. That uh, I think one has limited endurance to live with lice. These indescribable little things crawling over your body all the time and there is no way of getting rid of them. That was much worse in Bergen-Belsen than in Westerbork.

What happened the first night?

[Pause] I think my father and my brother were in another barrack. They had male and female barracks, but it wasn't that far away. But there was separation, it meant separation and uncertainty, not knowing what would happen and we had to stand and be counted a lot in Bergen-Belsen. I think that happened right away. Line up on a big square in um, rows of five, barrack by barrack and be counted and it would take them hours and hours and we would be standing in the cold. But um, other than that, I don't remember too much. I think my parents had to start working pretty soon. My brother who is two years older also worked. Not all the time, but I think... I was the only one in the family who didn't work in Bergen-Belsen.

What did you do?

Well, I took care of the laundry. Taking care of the laundry was a major effort there, because not only did you have to wash things with no soap, because we didn't have soap, we had something they called soap, but it wasn't, and only cold water, but you really had to sit by the wash line until your clothes were dry. Otherwise you'd come back and they were all gone. So there was no place to hang up anything unless you sat there and watched it. So that took quite a bit of time, and I stood in line to get the food for everybody, and I helped take care of the children, because little children were left in the barracks sometimes when the mothers had to go to work. And there was no school, I didn't have that much to do there.

There were children in Bergen-Belsen at this time. Were they all Jewish children?

Well, Bergen-Belsen was a very large camp, but we only knew of one section of it which were all Jews. All Jewish people. There were other camps there, prisoners of war and who knows what. We never saw it.

Did you receive a number?

No. There were no tatoos in Bergen-Belsen. There were two things that differentiated Bergen-Belsen from a lot of the Polish camps. It didn't have a gas chamber and you didn't get a number.

So this went on for how long? This odd routine.

Well, we were in Bergen-Belsen from February '43 til January '45.

February of '44.

'44. '44 to '45. So it was eleven months that we were there.

What do you remember that stands out in your mind, particularly?

Things got worse all the time. The um, the life in the camp deteriorated. Less food. More harassment, more cruelty, and more people coming. Because some point in '44, the Russians um, advanced to the extent that they transferred people from Auschwitz. And people came from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, which meant that um, and many other transports came, people from out of Albania, people from Greece, people from Hungary, so that we constantly had to live with more people and less-and more beds were crammed in. And the conditions, of course, became worse and worse because we were so crowded. The end, I remember, that they had, the bunk beds, there were three beds on top of one another and two beds next to each other, so, and two people in each bed. So you had six beds, twelve people shared six beds and six beds were very close together. And there was almost no space to put anything. The only -- and there was no dining room, the only thing you had was your bed, so you did everything on or in your bed. You had to eat in your bed, you had to store your food in your bed, you had to have all of your belongings in your bed, you slept in your bed. And there were two people in each bed. The bathrooms were very inadequate for that many people and a lot, of course as time went on, more and more people had typhoid fever and dysentery, and bathroom conditions were uh, just uh, unbelievable. It's, can't describe it. And then at one point, the um, they took um, people called Kappos, they were former prisoners of war or criminals, I don't know, maybe both or some of each, and they put them in charge of our camp. And they went around with rubber hoses and beat up a lot of

people, sometimes for no reason whatsoever or sometimes because you were in the wrong place, or you weren't walking fast enough or whatever, there was a lot of beating.

Were you beaten?

I never was. But my father was.

What were the circumstances of that?

Well, I don't really know because that was in the very end. I think he was um, it's the story when we left Bergen-Belsen, he was uh, that morning he was at work and um, they were asking people to go see, there was an exchange transport being prepared, it was towards the end of the war and Germans were very eager to get all German citizens possible to return to Germany from all over the world and there was some kind of an exchange deal and I don't know who transacted it, but the Germans had to provide an equal number of Americans to get German citizens back from Germany. And there weren't enough Americans in Germany to match the number of German citizens from America, so they were willing to use people like us who had falsified Equadorian passports. They were recognizing our Equadorian citizenship and trading us in for German citizens. Now in Bergen-Belsen, there were thousands of people who had these passports. And they were only taking a few hundred. So the way they proceeded to screen was you had to go to a certain place and see a um, Stabsarzt they called it, it was a way, the Wehrmacht doctor. And then he would just look at you, because the very fact that you could walk to this place and see him made you eligible, transportfähig. And so uh, the messages came

to all the barracks that anybody who had an American passport, American citizenship, should go and see this doctor in the particular place so we tried, my brother and my mother and I were in the barrack and my father was out at work. And um, so we tried to dress her, my mother hadn't been out of bed for several months I think, she had, she was ill, she was too weak uh, we were taking care of her. But, if we were going to get out, she had to appear in front of this doctor, so we dressed her and several friends in the building helped and we tried to walk her there and uh, somewhere along the way she became unconscious. We had to take her back. So we took her back to the barrack and figured, well, we didn't know what that meant. So, my brother said to me that he and I should go to see the doctor and we did. We walked over there, just to see what it was all about. And he checked our names off a list. And then, a little while later my father returned from work, but it was at that point, that day that he had been beaten and he looked very strange and he was not well and he just wasn't himself and he didn't seem to be, he didn't seem to be cogent anymore, he was, you couldn't understand what he was saying and it didn't make sense what he was saying and I think he must have been really badly injured. He was also in very bad condition by then, terribly undernourished and emaciated. And he came back and so we told him the story about the doctor and um, my brother suggested that I go with him, take him there and he stayed with my mother. So, we walked together to the doctor and he asked, you know, what's your name, and looks, looks, searches for our name on the list and he says um, uh you are John Hasenberg? and my father says, yes. And he says, well, your children have been

here already and he looks at me, checks off my mother's name and says, be ready tomorrow morning. So, that way um, the interpretation is that uh, that my mother and I didn't look very different which was probably true because we weighed about the same. Or maybe he just checked it off, I don't know. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing. So, we went back to my mother to the barrack to tell her, the next problem was, well, if she couldn't walk to the doctor, how will we get her to the train? And uh, but at that point um, you know, I think sometimes people can muster an enormous amount of energy that they don't think they have just because of the, I guess the um, the motivation to get out, if we really gonna get out, then I have to get out. And uh, especially I think she felt that way to save her children. So the next morning um, with the help of several people, she was walked to a bathhouse. We all had to go through to the bathhouse before going on the train, where they took all our clothes and put it through some kinds of process supposed to be a delicing, delousing process. And um, she was walked there. With help she made it. And then, we were all supposed to take showers and she was just sitting on a bench and a woman, one of the SS women came and said um, uh this woman looks like she's dying, I don't think she should go, and my mother who was half unconscious said, oh, it's just my stomach I think something didn't agree with me. And so, she left her alone and we managed to get her dressed again and got her on the train. Which is the miracle. The delousing process was one um, see it's always nice to point out some kind of inefficiency in the Nazi mechanism. They killed all the lice, but they incubated all the eggs and so, consequently when we put on our clothes, we had more

lice than ever before [she laughs] and when we went on that train, well then, so um, my moth..., we all four of us got on the train and it left that, that evening towards Switzerland, and uh it was that night that my father died on the train. [Pause] And uh, I, I still remember it, well, he had this beating experience on top of how the very poor physical condition he was in anyway uh, it really caused uh, a very notable drop in his well being because I remember that when we were all down in this bathhouse, the men and the woman were separated and I was looking, I went down the train to find my brother and father, I mean yeah, my father and brother, so we could all sit together in one compartment, and I couldn't find him and then I, there was somebody I knew and I asked if he had seen my father, and he took me there and I realized that I had walked by him several times and had not and was not recognizing him. So, something really awful happened to him, just at that point. And in the evening he needed to go to the bathroom and he needed some help so I walked with him there and I remember saying something to him, you know, we're almost free now [she cries] he said, I'm not gonna make it [Pause, she cried] and he fell asleep that night. [Pause] So he was the first person to die on the train which was a four day train ride to Switzerland because a lot of the railroad tracks were devastated and they had to make a lot of detours and sometimes the train would just sit and couldn't go anywhere. And uh, a number of other people died on that train before getting to Switzerland. [Long pause] One of the stories my brother and I sometimes talk about in connection with my father's death, which I think is, characterizes sort of what went on, in the morning the people heard on the train my

father had died and some friends came, you know, uh, to see us and um, they were serving food that morning. I don't know what the food was, but um, we were still very hungry. We probably had gotten a meal the night before, but you know, I mean we were coming out of a period of very severe starvation and my brother and I um, took the food and ate it, you know with great gusto. And um, somebody, an acquaintance came by to express his condolences, this person who had been with us in camp and he said to us, how can you eat when your father has just died? And somehow my brother and I talk about that. Frequently. How could this man say that to us. You know? Even now we uh, we are puzzled.

How did your mother react?

She didn't react. I think she was so weak she couldn't react at all. Um, I remem... she wasn't crying or saying anything about it. And I don't know, one way I sometimes interpreted it was that she felt that now she really had to survive [she weeps as she says...] and she used all her energy to survive, she didn't grieve my father's death at that point at all. Because she just fought for her life. [Pause] And she made it. It um, was a long period of hospitalization and uh, nursing, but uh, she's still alive.

She was hospitalized in Switzerland?

Yeah. She was, we, this train went to a town called St. Gallen and uh, she was immediately taken to the hospital the minute we got there, to uh, um, I don't know, several people were and, given I guess whatever they knew -- how did they know how to treat people like that? But they did everything possible. And well, she did tell

me that a few days after she was there, they called um, somebody called a priest to say prayers because the nurses or the doctors thought that she was dying and um, some other person was there, Jewish, Jewish person, I think another member of our group who was on the train, and said that we don't do that with Jewish people, we never say any prayers before someone has died. [Pause]

How long were you in Switzerland?

Well, that's another interesting story. My mother and brother were in Switzerland um from January '45 'til May of 1946, almost, well, more than a year. Long time, first um, well, then when my mother was taken to the hospital, they were, all the rest of the people they were also sick but they weren't as acutely ill as she was and remember spending the first night in a barn somewhere. Uh, where we all slept on hay in the barn, and um being fed there. And the next day they transported us all to a school. There was a, they had a, trans..., sort of a I don't know, remodeled a school into some of hospital, it wasn't a real hospital, but, so we all had beds. And my brother and I were had beds next to each other. And uh, I remember we wrote a note, somebody came and told us that our mother was in the hospital and that they were taking care of us and we remember writing a note to her. And then my brother had a um frostbitten toe. This is something that often happened because we had to stand so long to be counted in the cold for hours and hours and also kids outgrew their shoes and then to stand in the cold for so many hours with shoes that are too small, it was terrible on the feet and he had a frostbitten toe and he had, they had to do a little surgery on this toe to make sure that this wouldn't lead to a serious

gangrene or something. And so they did that the first day. And uh, then I think I was in Switzerland four days, I'm not sure. Then um, very shortly after we were in this school together, they came and said that people were now going to go to America. And uh, they were getting us all organized to go on a train and go to America. Well, I of course, oh and they, they decided that my brother couldn't walk so he would stay and I had to go to America and we did everything, my brother and I, of course, were um, I have no words for it, I mean, we couldn't believe it. Here the Nazis had not separated us once in these one and a half years of concentration camp. We've always been together and here we were free. What did this mean? Um, I was uh, 14 years old, didn't know whether my mother was going to survive or not, and uh, I protested. We did whatever we could and they kept saying, well, you know just be a nice little girl and we're doing everything you can, we can, and we've talked to the council. You just go on that train and we will get you to come back. And uh, I did it. I often had wished I had been more rebellious and just hiding somewhere and just not going. Screaming.

What agency was this?

It was the Swiss, I don't know.... you know the Swiss, the uh, they were flooded with refugees all through the war, of course, being a country of neutrality and uh, they, we didn't come to Switzerland to stay there, you know, even though the Swiss I'm sure knew that once we got there we were DP's, [displaced persons], but they didn't want to keep us, so um. One thing I forgot to mention that on this train to Switzerland, um, we stopped in several real inter-nation camps and picked up real

Americans, so there were not just the people from Bergen-Belsen with fake papers, there were also some real Americans in this group. And they were gonna go on to America. So um, I, all I can say is I often resented myself for the docility in that situation, it just seemed absurd. Uh, then we were on the train and there was an American lady who came from one of those camps we picked up and she was travelling by herself and she felt sorry for me. Uh being all by myself and you know, separated from my family and she said, so why don't you travel with me. And um, she was very nice. Of course, she came from a camp that was much better and she was not in any you know, concentration camp survivor condition, they were in pretty good shape these people. And she was very good to me and I remember I was sitting on her lap and she was hugging me and then the Red Cross came at one point through this train and everyone got a Red Cross package and she gave me her package and I had two packages and I felt like I was in seventh heaven. This all of the sudden, she comes, she goes out of the compartment and she returns and she's crying. And I don't know what it is all about. And um, and she tells me that she cannot take me to America. She is not allowed to take me to America. And uh, as we got off the train right at the harbor, there was this beautiful Gripshome, a neutral Swedish ship, and then next to it was another little dumpy freighter and the American people went on the Gripshome and the Bergen-Belsen people went on this freighter. And um, they never got me back, they never got me out of this group and we went to Algiers, North Africa where there was an UNRA camp; United Nations Relief Association. A camp in Phillipville outside of the City of Algiers on the

Mediterranean where there were other displaced persons. Not many, I think there weren't very many people in this camp and then my group came and we pretty much populated that camp. And um, there we were. Africa.

What did you do in Africa?

The beginning when we first arrived there, there were a lot of people who were quite ill. Adults. You know uh, they weren't acutely ill, but they were very undernourished, they were weak, and um, there were a number of medical problems they had so, because parents, they were hospitalized in the camp, it wasn't a real hospital, but it was the camp hospital. They had one barrack with all the children. The children whose parents were in that hospital and a few children that didn't have parents there at all. So we were in this barrack and there was a Spanish woman who was there, I don't know why, and she was kind of the housemother, and we were all together and trying to come back to life which in a way um, you know it was in January it was warm there, relatively warm, we were right on the ocean. We were fed, we got new clothes, um there were the administrative personnel of the camp um, showed a great deal of interest in us uh trying to make contact with relatives, if we had relatives outside of Europe. Um, you know, compared to hell, it wasn't all that bad. Uh, they organized classes for us, we were received instruction in English and instruction in French, we were able to go to the beach. Um, as time went on, all the parents got better and all the children went to live with their parents, we lived in barracks, they were like little houses, and families had whatever space they needed and um, it became very hard for me. Life then beginning was very difficult for two

reasons, one was I didn't know if my mother was alive and the war was still going on. There was no correspondence coming through. And although these UNRA people spent a great deal of time with me trying to you know, um send messages so my mother would know where I was, and trying to get me information. It took, it took an awful long time. I don't know how long. It seemed to me it took a number of weeks before I heard anything, maybe a month. And meanwhile all the kids went to live with their parents and finally there was only one other child and myself left over and there was a little boy. It was a very tragic story. He came from Poland and uh, the story was that he saw his parents shot in front of his own eyes. He was a beautiful little boy. But he was very disturbed. Terribly disturbed child. And um, he could never go to sleep, he had nightmares every night and um, you know, in some sense I really loved this child. He was probably seven, you know, he was maybe half my age and I felt um, sisterly towards him and um, and I wanted to um, be close to him, but he only spoke Polish so we really couldn't communicate by language. But on the other hand it was very traumatic to live with him because he was very disturbed. He was destructive and um, well. You know. Not surprisingly. So after a while, he went to live with another Polish family and um there was a German family who had lived in Yugoslavia that uh, my mother had become friends with in Bergen-Belsen and they took me in. It was a couple with two children. A boy a little younger and a girl about five years older than I was and so I lived with them. In the barrack.

In Algiers?

In the camp. And uh then in May the war was over you know, it was um, Liberation and um, by... And so people started going home slowly wherever their homes were. Uh, wherever they wanted to be all kinds of contacts were made and... And I can't describe that very well, but other people told me that there was the Joint Relief Organization [American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)] and the HIAS [Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Society], and they did a lot of work in compiling lists of survivors and sending these lists to America and all over the world and so our relatives found out um, around May I think, that we were survivors. And so, the UNRA people contacted the relatives and they got um affidavits ready and they all pooled um resources to pay the money for our passage. Well, my mother and brother were coming, for my passage and so um, this however, took a long time get all these papers together and also to find transportation. Be September or October of 1945 they dissolved the camp. There weren't enough people left there and those of us who were left, they put us up in Algiers in hotels and a group lived there in hotels until we found ships. And it was difficult because the Americans wanted to get all the soldiers home before Christmas and there was rarely a boat available to bring refugees to America and when it was, when there was a boat then they took these boats were the Liberty ships that they manufactured in 24 hours and they weren't made for tourists or for passengers and they took either men or women and they didn't take families so many times families had to be spilt up in order to get transportation. And so a um family that I knew um, consisting of father, mother and son, they finally decided they wouldn't wait any longer and the father and the son

went on a male boat and the mother um, it's my second adoptive mother said well, you and I will travel together. So she and I um had in December of 1945 a very turbulent voyage of 21 days from Algiers to the United States together on this boat and um we became very close and this is a lady who is now I think 87 years old and lives in a nursing home in Switzerland where I visited her this past May. I hadn't seen her in fifteen years. We kept in touch for a long, long time, but I hadn't seen her and last year when there was my 40th anniversary, last December was my 40th Anniversary in the United States, and as I thought about the event, I wondered what had happened to my adoptive mother with whom I arrived and called her son and anyway... in May, I had an opportunity, I was in Switzerland anyway, and I visited her. This was one of the most wonderful experiences um of this past summer was to see this woman again who was perfectly intact, um intellectually and um very frail physically, but her husband died years ago. And uh, together we spent several hours reminiscing and uh and we laughed and we cried, but the interesting part was that there were things that she remembered that I didn't remember and things I remembered that she didn't remember so when we parted we both had a larger pool of memories. And that was very meaningful experience so we traveled together on this ship and uh arrived on Christmas Eve -- it was suppos... we arrived in Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland. And the harbor was frozen, so after a long voyage with all kinds of disaster, probably too long, we had a car collision in the desert from Algiers to Bougie, which was the harbor where this boat took us from and there were I don't know about 12 people who, in our group, who were travelling to America and we

needed a taxi and a truck for all the luggage, big taxi and some people sat in the truck and on a Saturday afternoon, they collided. In the middle of the desert [they both chuckle] so there were many adventures this trip. So finally, we arrived in Baltimore on Christmas Eve and the harbor was frozen, and we couldn't uh dock. So the next day, on Christmas Day they took life boats and let us out down the boat and put us in these little ice cutters, these little motor boats, so we could get to the land in Baltimore. And then um, it was interesting, all of our relatives lived in New York City. Everyone was met by a relative who lived in New York City. But, that was 1945 and people didn't travel from New York City to Baltimore to meet relatives and so we, I remember, I had a cousin who had a friend living in Baltimore and they, so they delegated this friend and this friend and his wife were at the harbor and came with us to the train station in Baltimore and the next thing we get off at Grand Central Station and that was where we met our relatives. [Pause, very long pause] [In a sad, weepy voice] So that was the beginning of life in America. [Pause]

What did you tell them?

[Pause] I, I didn't, I wasn't allowed to tell them anything. They, they told me, um, the, I lived with a cousin of my mother's and her husband and daughter and these people had come from Mainz in the '30's sometime and had to leave Germany without any of their possessions. They had struggled, they were carpet sweepers, repair people. My, this cousin and her husband went everyday to hotels to repair carpet sweepers, they had a very modest income, and uh lived in a one bedroom apartment where the daughter slept on the couch in the living room and then had

to share the couch with me. Uh, they were absolutely wonderful. Um, like parents, parents couldn't have been better, uh I, they integrated me into the family, I went to school, they bought me clothes, they did everything, but I couldn't talk about the experiences. They told me, I think, either the first evening when I arrived or the next day, now you must start a new life, you are in America um, the past is behind you, and you mustn't speak about it. You have to forget [still in a weepy voice] And, they wouldn't, they wouldn't let me talk about it. [Pause] We didn't talk about it at all. My mother, my brother or I, with relatives. None of the relatives uh could, they just couldn't cope, they couldn't hear about it and even though my mother had a cousin in New York, and we were with two of the sisters of this cousin, they were in Westerbork, we saw them off to the train. We thought they would want to hear what happened to their sisters, they couldn't bear to hear about it. I mean they knew, they knew they were dead, but as far as the details were concerned... And um, I had, I had an interesting experience again this summer. I visited relatives of mine in New York who, I mean, the first years we lived, all lived in New York, we saw them every Friday night, we were practically every Friday night we were at this family for dinner. And so we certainly have always been in touch even after moving away from New York. But last summer, I was coming back from Europe and um, and planned to see these relatives. I hadn't seen them for a long time. Spent the night and um, we were around the dinner table and for the first time ever, they asked questions. It was very surprising. [Pause]

When did your brother and your mother come?

They came in June of '46. So I came December '40, let's see I came December '45, they came six months later, six, seven months later. I think my brother came in June. He came on a boat, my mother flew. She came in July.

It must have been quite a reunion.

Yeah. And we couldn't live together, because there was a housing shortage in New York, so the first, from '46 til the summer of 1949, we did not, we had not been able to get an apartment in New York City and lived in different places. But uh, my mother and I lived in, you know, in rooms, rented rooms with various people that we could find and my brother lived with a cousin. But in '49, we were finally able to find an apartment and then the three of us lived together.

Let me shift the focus a little, and I ask you about how um, how do you think all this affected your life later? What are your views of being survivor?

[Pause] Well, how it, how it affected me is you know, to, I'm still trying to figure out how it affected me. I sense that it has affected me in very profound ways and it probably in some way influenced everything I've done since I came out of the concentration camp. It affected my values, it affected my aspirations, it affected my relationships with people, it affected um, where I put my energies, but um, you know, I can't pinpoint, I just feel that I became the person that I am and that's a very important part of me. Now what's strange about all this is that um, like many other survivors, we didn't think about this, we buried it for a long, long time and while my relatives um gave me that very specific command and I, subsequently, I have often resented them for doing that uh, I also don't know how much talking we would have

done had we had listening ears, because I think if we ourselves were not ready to talk about it and really were trying to forget. And I, I don't think everyone um, reacted to it the same way. But, I feel now that you can do one of two things, you can deal with all of that, try to deal with it, and remember it and talk about it and write about it and express in whatever form is natural to you or you can get on with your life and I don't think you can do the two simultaneously, at least not at the stage of life that my brother and I were in. And uh, I think we chose to get on with our life and to get on with our life meant suppressing it, burying it, because I don't think we could have done what we did uh, if we hadn't. It's only in um, in the last decade I would say that even my mother, brother and I have talked about it. It came very gradually. Now for example, my father died on January 23 of 1945. We, I always have called my mother every year when I wasn't living with her. My brother would always call her on that day. We would never mention why we called that day. It, of course, was understood, but we wouldn't talk about it. And we rarely talked about anything. Except maybe superficially, you know. Remember that we had to live on turnips for a year in Bergen-Belsen, so we don't want to eat turnips again. Or things like that maybe we said, but we certainly didn't talk about what had happened. And um, in the more recent past, it has become possible to talk about it and in varying degrees and at varying stages of readiness for different people. And for me, it has become uh, a very important um endeavor to figure out what it meant in my life and to become, to recollect and to interpret and to try to figure out, well, try to understand it -- at least understand it in my own context, in my own life. And

uh, I don't know if I'll ever be able to figure it out, I'm still working on it. I have the inner drive to continue to work on it, but I don't know where it will take me. And um, you know, people have to state quite blankly, people are at very different stages in their processes. Some people, a lot of people aren't able to see "Shoah" and uh, I think that's understandable. I don't think anyone should be pushed to see "Shoah", but I had to see "Shoah", I couldn't wait to see "Shoah". And I have in the, in the um recent past read a tremendous number of books, have deliberately made contact with people with whom I shared that past, like visiting my um stepmother who in Switzerland this summer and other people. And um, the other thing is is that for all those years, no, I never told anybody I was a survivor. It was like I had two lives. That part, you know the Holocaust, and then post Holocaust and the two were separate lives and there were a lot of people uh, even people who are very close to me whom I've known for a long, long time who never knew it, and if they knew it, then, that's all. They knew the fact, but never talked about it. And I think that was partly me that I couldn't talk about it or I couldn't share it or I had difficulty sharing it and people really prompted me. I mean, it wasn't that people would say, you know, do you mind if I ask you and feel free not to talk about it. People never asked me. And a lot of people never knew. And um, it was about uh, I don't know, somewhere in the last seven or ten years that I began to realize this dichotomy in my life and become uh, dissatisfied with it. Feeling that well, if I have friends and people who are close to me uh, then how could they not know that part of me. How could they know me, if they don't know that. And so I've begun to talk a lot more

about it uh, to um, think more about, to read more about it, to be more open about it and to take advantage of opportunities. And one very important start in this whole process was the um, my daughter, well there's the whole issue of children. How does the fact that one is a parent and Holocaust survivor affect one's children in whatever one's relationship with one's children and also everything about one's children. Uh, that is um, an area that I have done a great deal of thinking about and still am, and my two children are very different in that respect, although I think it's just a matter of timing. My daughter, the older one has, since she was very young had a tremendous amount of curiosity about this, always asked questions about it and got very involved in it and as she told me when she was maybe ten, she says, it's in my genes, how could I not be curious about it, how could I not talk about it. And so she did um, I mean she's partly responsible for pulling me into this uh when she was in junior high school she had to do a major speech, a one-hour speech and she chose "Anti-semitism, Nazism and Hitler's Conquest of Western Europe" all in one-hour speech. But then she came home and she says, mom, will you be my visual aid? And uh, that was one of the scariest experiences, post war experiences that I remember, was to talk to a class of junior high school students about what it was like in the concentration camp, but I couldn't turn her down. And then uh, in 1980 she was my daughter is, has been in Israel for many years, she's gone to law school there, and she is about to become a lawyer and in 1980 she told me there was a first gathering of Holocaust survivors and was going to take place in Israel and she told me you have to come and we will go together. So, I, again, I did go and that was

another turning point for me in terms of facing uh, the, the, uh the Holocaust background.

In the few minutes left um, is there anything you want to add in terms of the importance of making experiences like yours public, education, your children, the next generation?

Well, I think it is very important, I don't know uh, for all children or at what times or in what context or how you would approach it, but I think it's part of our, part of our humanity, or facing our humanity is to acknowledge what happened. Not just the Holocaust, other similar comparable uh experiences as well and I think if we don't, if our children don't know about that, then um, uh, how can we face the future?

Thank you.