Holocaust Survivor

Oral Histories

FRANKA CHARLUPSKI

June 18, 1985

Could you tell me your name, please and where you are from?

I'm Franka Weintraub Charlupski. I'm from Lódź, Poland and during the German occupation was Litzmannstadt.

Tell me something... whatever you remember about your life in Lódź before the war started.

Um, we were chased out from the City into the Ghetto only with what we could take with us. Some of the things were put on wagons and we were put in the ghetto. Uh, we got a room, and we all shared it, we were, um my father and my sister and I because my mother had gone to a smaller town before they closed the ghetto in order, hoping that uh they can find more food than what we were having. The ghetto, my grandmother had a bakery there and uh, four children and my mother went to Koshintz, which was a city in Poland, and uh after a while she didn't hear from us and she began to worry and somehow she sneaked into the ghetto to see what happened to us. Uh, and once she was with us she couldn't go back so my sister, Maladorf, then she became the um, the head of the family and she watched out for the other children. Uh.

How large is your family?

We were six children and my parents. Besides uncles and aunts and cousins and grandparents...

How large do you think the whole extended family was?

Oh, God. [Pause] Everyone had at least five, six children, uh, the parents, my mother had uh about five brothers and sisters. My father had about the same and there were grandchildren. I would say every bit of 50 at least.

How many survived?

[She sighs] The Wayne family is three. Ourselves, we are three, is six. On my mother's side one cousin, which is seven that I know of -- close. There is a possibility there are some alive and we wouldn't even know.

But, from 50 or 60, you think about...

That's about what I know of.

What did your father do in Lódź?

My father dealt with scrap, not iron um... fabrics. I don't know what you call it here, uh used to be a shmatteh place. We were comfortable, we weren't wealthy by no means, but we had a nice home, a nice home, three rooms for six children and parents, but at that point, we lived very nicely. Uh during the ghetto, the Germans needed my father's services so at one point, we could go out from the ghetto where the place was that my father had and I don't remember, he didn't sell it, he probably just worked for them and I did help him. But I can't remember what the situation was exactly. And, then after a month or so, we were completely locked into the ghetto and everyone worked. I worked in a factory, in a factory, I was very handy doing handwork, knitting and weaving. I did that. My sister worked there, my father worked in another shop, and we got rations. We got, let's see, I don't remember, three pounds of potatoes a week and a bread or and flour, uh there was no butter, maybe at one time we did get some. And, uh, we worked eight hours a day and at work we would get a bowl of soup, water, but it was called soup. Uh, we stayed from 1940 to 1944 and we worked all through there. I did get married in the ghetto. I

didn't have children, and in 1944 in August, we were taken to Auschwitz. We were separated, I was separated from my husband and my father and my mother and I and Rosa we went to one side and the men to the other and as we were walking we were holding onto my mother and somehow I feel now that if we didn't hold on to her, she probably would have been alive. This way they knew it was a mother and they pulled her out because she was between us. We went one side to the left and she went to the right. And we never saw her after that. She was gassed. My father, I don't know if he was gassed or if he went to a camp and died there, I don't know. And then Rosa and myself, we went to a concentration camp together, uh... yeah.

Let me take you back to the ghetto. How were you informed about the beginning of the ghetto? How did you find out?

Uh, we were just chased into it. It was all fenced in. We were taken out of our homes, and we just were chased like cattle into the part that was all fenced in. Uh...

Did you live in the Billute District?

Did I what?

Did you live in the, was it the Baluty District?

Yeah, in the Baluty. Right. That's a Polish possession. The Baluty.

Is that, you didn't live there?

Yes. Not before. Not before the war.

What was the section like?

Uh, it was a Jewish section, mostly. It was like any other, how can I compare it? Like Hastings Street here. If this is a comparison.

Inner-City?

Yes, it was a city. There were some nice homes, uh not private homes, they were all buildings, you know, four or five story buildings -- uh, you could walk around in the ghetto from one place to the other, you just couldn't get out of it unless you had permission. Um...

Do you remember Rumkowski?

Sure, very well. As a matter of fact, I just met his uh, um, the one that drove his carriage, what do you call the...

Rickshaw.

Yea, his son, I met in Florida. I remember him very well. At that time we thought he was saving us. It didn't turn out that way, although some did survive, some people did stay in the ghetto after you know, it was closed. They were hidden and they survived. As a matter of fact, I met some in the Concord last year that survived it. I didn't even know about it, I just found out that there are people that survived the ghetto, being hidden there.

When you received the orders to move, what did you take, what did you feel as you walked through the streets of Lódź?

Despair. You didn't know what was happening. And I was young then. I don't think I, thought the same thing then that I would think now, I was only 19 years old, I'm just... not realizing now, that I was just a youngster then. Uh, I remember walking one time in the street when the Germans did come in and I had a coat on and he

was walking with a Polish girl and she said she liked my coat and he took it off my back in the Fall and just gave it to her. And there was nothing I could do.

This was before the ghetto?

That was before the ghetto.

When the Germans first came in when the war began, what did you uh, what were your thoughts, what did you talk about at home?

I don't know, I don't think there was any talk. Everything was so sudden, so fast, that you only could think of how to, what to do in order to survive. That's when it came up that my mother took the children away. There would be less of a burden being in a big city and we knew we were going to be locked in because the talk was that he's building a ghetto. I can't remember the name of um, as a matter of fact, I just saw the film about the Lódź ghetto, um the Hauptscharführer, the one that was the German that was directing in the ghetto.

Bieboff?

Bieboff. Right! You know better than I do [she laughs], why do you ask me?

What do you remember about Hans Bieboff?

Personally, I had nothing to do with him, thank God. Cause once you have to do with him, you were in trouble. My first husband, someone did um, bring to the Gestapo that he had money or something, he didn't have it but someone did say it and they took him in and he was beaten and he had nothing to show that he had. Finally, after a while they did let him out. Um, that's what people did with the Gestapo, they had a special place where they were and some Jews were telling on

other Jews, some Volksdeutsche, we had an awful lot of Volksdeutsche in Lódź, in fact our neighbors were Germans before the war. That's why I could speak German and helped myself quite a bit during the concentration camp with my ability to speak German.

You described walking through the streets into the ghetto.

Right.

Um, how large was the room you were given?

Uh, I don't know. We had a room in the kitchen. You wouldn't want to live in it. [she laughs]

Where there facilities?

Facilities, yeah, yeah, yeah. This building had facilities, uh it's a, I don't know if people lived there before or whatever, then when I got married, I got one room, that's what came in my one room. Once I got married, I did get one room. You had protect... you got a room otherwise you couldn't get it. I had, we had someone that we knew that was in the uh, um, in the office where they were assigning living space and my husband knew the, was his friend and we got a room for ourselves, otherwise you would have to share it with somebody. So we did have one room we rented somehow and uh, I worked and he worked and um, money you didn't get, you just got your rations for the week or the month, whatever.

How did you get your rations?

You stayed in line. If you knew the policeman that was watching, sometimes you wound up with another pound of potatoes, which was a great deal. Uh, we had to

go to a certain place where the rations were given out. Potatoes and vegetables were in one place. Bread was in another place. Um, it was starvation. You could see people sitting in the street uh, looking like a moosleman. I was very fortunate through the whole... I was never a big eater. Food was not an important thing to me. And, as long as I could get a little bit, I was all right. But there were a lot of people that eating meant an awful lot to them and these people suffered terribly.

Was there disease?

Oh, yeah, there was terrible, people were getting tuberculosis, people were getting typhus, I mean uh, you live six, seven people in a one room or two rooms, you can't keep it clean. There was tremendous disease in the ghetto. Uh, we weren't sick. But I knew a lot of people that were very sick and there was no help. There was no medication, there was no doctors.

What was it like walking the streets in the ghetto?

Uh, we had a curfew. You could only be out so late, I mean inside the ghetto, you walked, there was no problem. I went to work. I came back from work. There was no entertainment, there was no, you didn't visit anybody because at a certain time you had to put the lights on and you couldn't walk the streets anymore, so everybody stayed home.

Did you see any violence in the street?

In the ghetto? No. Unless you went you tried to get out, I mean naturally, you were shot or you tried to something that they didn't care for, you were shot. But once you mind your own business, there was no violence in the ghetto per se. Unless you were

taken to the Gestapo or an SS man decided that you didn't suit him or he didn't like it, they would kill him or beat him up. There were Jews that they had beards, and they would interrogate them if they would walk in the streets or if you went by and didn't say good morning or good afternoon and it was only a pretext. He didn't care if you said good morning or good afternoon.

Do you remember when the deportation started?

Uh, I remember when they, where I lived, there was a five story building. And I remember one day, I was home, for some reason I didn't go to work or there was no work that day, and um, there was a truck inside, it was like a courtyard. And there was a truck standing there. And somehow, I didn't have any children so I didn't know anything about it, but the mothers somehow got to know that they were coming to get the children. And they were hiding the children. And at one moment I see something fly by my window. And I looked out and they were throwing children out the windows. Fourth floor, fifth floor into the truck. This was a sight that as long as I live, I'll never forget. Babies, two-year olds, three-year olds, cause once they reached seven, eight, sometimes you could hide them as they were going to go to work. This was the most horrible thing, at <u>that</u> time, that I saw.

Was anyone in your family taken away?

No, no. We all went together.

Aunts, uncles?

No, no. I'm talking about only my personal, my mother, my father, and my sister and I that were together. Nobody was taken away. We all went at the same time to Auschwitz.

Did you receive word from your other sisters?

No, not during the... not until uh... we never heard from them until after the war, I was in Bergen-Belsen and a fellow walked by and he recognized me and he said to me, "your sister is alive." I said, "you must be kidding." He said, "Marla is alive, I wish my sister was as alive as yours is." And we put our name... Red Cross had um, boards put up with names and we put our name out and she did see it and, uh, we got together.

And the other two did not survive?

The other three didn't. Two brothers and a sister didn't survive.

How old were they?

[Sigh] Boy, let's go back. If I was nineteen... [pause] they had to be 13, 11 and 9. Uh, exactly I can't tell which way when, but the sister I think was the youngest, yeah, the sister was the youngest. My grandparents naturally went, they went. My sister Marla was in another camp. She was in Poland in Czestochowa.

Do you remember any else besides that one recollection about the children being thrown, anything else that stands out in your mind?

From the ghetto? Nothing in particular that would uh, people were starving, people were sick, uh, I worked most of the time so the days I wouldn't see anything, uh. I would go in the morning to work and come back towards evening. Uh, no.

When you were younger, before the war began, how would you describe your life with your family in Lódź before the war?

Oh, we were an orthodox family, uh our children went to public schools, my brothers went to Yeshivas. Um, it was a normal batasher -- how do you say that?... household uh, with respect uh we were raised to respect people, to honor our parents' wishes, we were a normal European family.

Did you go to theater?

Oh, yeah, we went to theater, we went to movies, uh, we couldn't go on the Sabbath because my parents wouldn't allow it, but we did. Yes, we had a normal life, a European normal life. We went to shows, we went to dances, uh, we went to public schools, it's a different life than here, our children are growing up completely different.

Did you have non-Jewish friends?

Yes, I had German friends. Volksdeutsche, which was Germans that lived in Poland. Uh, as a matter of fact, I grew up with them. We were, we used to go to a village outside of Lódź. I don't remember how many kilometers it was. And the same farmer rented to the house to us every summer of I don't remember how many years, and in 1933, when Hitler came to power, they were sending. This was a German village. And the Hitlerjugend (Hitler youth) came in. And the kids asked me to go with them, there was going to be a dance and I went. At that time I was all of 13. I did that before, I used to go with them. And uh, somehow, it was different that time. I couldn't pinpoint, I didn't realize, I didn't understand, we never heard of it,

and I came home and I said to my mother, "you know, that's all you heard was juden, juden, juden... but I don't know what they were talking about." But they didn't treat me the same way as every year. We didn't know... it was just the beginning. And we never went back. That was the beginning of the anti-semitism brought in to the Polish community. I mean there was always anti-semitism in Poland, but there was a different kind.

You maintained your friendships with...

No.

Volksdeutsche...with none of them?

In the city, yes, we lived right next door. I mean, uh, we couldn't help it. But, Myfel Weintraub was their friend.

When you were sent to the ghetto, how did some of these people react?

We didn't live there anymore, we lived in another place where we didn't uh, this was uh, we lived with the Germans that was in 19..., I was born in 1920 in that place until about 1930, 1933. Uh, then we moved away. We lived in another part of the City and there were no Germans there. No. We didn't remain the friendship.

I just want to ask you one thing. Do you remember anything about a Friday night in your house? What was that like?

Friday night in our house uh, my father came home from work, everybody took a bath, everybody got dressed for Shabbos, we had Shabbos candles, we have Kiddish, and there was a meal, and God forbid, if you showed up five minutes after your

father made Kiddish. [smiling] So, uh, it was a very, very orthodox home, that I grew up in. Shabbos was Holy.

Now, in the ghetto, were there any similar kinds of ceremonies that went on?

Yes, my father did keep kosher, we didn't eat any meat, because there was horse meat. If we did get a rations, however once in a while of meat, it was horse meat. And my father wouldn't eat it. So my mother prepared Shabbos to the best she could from potato peelings, she made some kind of potato latka or a soup or whatever she had whatever she could do. But the Kiddish was an Kiddish and we bentshed whatever. He didn't go to Shul, he done it at home. My father did remain orthodox as long as I seen him he remained orthodox.

Did he have a beard?

Yes, a very short beard, as a matter of fact, my son looks just like my father. [smiling] You should see him.

Was that ever a problem, when he had a beard when they were in Lódź?

Uh, they did shave his beard. Oh there was at one time my parents were caught up uh, in um, they needed a picture, you have to have like another passport, uh ausweisschein, which is, it would be a passport, this is what you would interpret it here. And they needed pictures, and my mother was wearing a sheitel, a wig, and my father had to cut his beard for that picture and my mother had to take off her sheitel. As a matter of fact, these pictures remain in my home, my sister brought them back from Poland. Uh, that was the day when they were hanging on the

Bolletamarkt, Bollet Platz, that's they were hanging twelve Jews. They did something and everybody had to come out and see it. I remember that picture very well, too.

How did your parents react when they had their pictures taken in that way?

You know, I don't know.

How did you react to see your father without a beard?

It was a shock. 'Cause as long as I knew my father, he had a beard. And sometimes I walk by and see the picture now without a beard, I just can't believe it, it's my father.

When they started the deportations, when you and your family were taken, how did you find out about that, and tell me what happened when the transport came?

I don't know. You know what, I don't know how I found out about that, the only thing I remember is being near the cattle wagons. I don't know if we were told, or we were taken without notice, I don't remember it. The only thing I do remember is being at the train station, not the station where regular trains go by but where the cattle station was, and being pushed into the cattle car. But I don't remember how and when. I know it was in August, I don't know the exact date. And we came into Auschwitz, it took three days, I think.

Can you describe the trip?

The trip. Oh yeah. Oh, very well. Uh, we put on ourselves whatever we could. That means if I had two dresses, I put both on hoping that I'll have it. Uh, I had one pair of shoes so there wasn't more to take than one pair of shoes. I don't think I had a ring. I don't think so. Whatever you could. They told you. Whatever, just what

you have on yourself and what you can carry in your hand. And uh, my husband naturally did the same thing. As a matter of fact, we both had new shoes. And uh, this is what we put on. And we went to the station. Or we went or we were taken, I really don't remember. It's amazing that I don't remember it at all. It's like it never happened. But I do remember being in the cattle car and uh, we were, oh God, in one cattle car maybe 100 people. One on top of the other, no facilities, uh, people were dying right and left and right in the car from the heat, from hunger -- uh, from the smell, we would um, make like little holes with whatever we had to get a breath of air, and that is how we got to Auschwitz. And once we came into Auschwitz, we were separated left and right.

Were you with your parents on the train?

Yes. With my parents and my sister.

They were right next to you?

Right next to me. And um, once we came in, like I said, we held on to my mother and that was the biggest mistake, I think. It's possible not. Uh, if it was fate or what. But I think that at that time, my mother was, in 1944, my mother was 44 years old, [pause] and a healthy looking woman, I'm sure, she would have survived if we didn't hang on to her. She would have gone to work like all the other woman. But they did take her out and we never saw her again.

When the doors opened, on the cattle car, do you remember what you saw, thought, felt?

What I saw? There were kapos around and they kept on saying, "give us everything that you have." Which were inmates, the kapos were inmates. They could have been

Jews, they could have been Germans, Pollacks, uh, Russians, whatever. They were inmates. "Give us whatever you got because they'll take it away from you anyhow." We didn't. Because we thought maybe we would still survive. And then we were taken into the showers, undressed, we had to leave everything that we had on and whatever we had with us, they were right, we had to leave it, and we were shaved. I did not get a number. For some reason, I understood later that it was awful late, that they didn't have time to put numbers. So the group that came in August from Lódź. None of us had a number. And, uh, the SS men were walking by. Whoever saw, Holocaust - the movie, that wasn't one percent of what really was going on over there. I don't think anybody could watch the real thing. The way it really was. There was SS men walking around and the women were standing naked, their heads shaved and they were going with the whip on whoever they thought had a scar or a spot or whatever were taken out right away. You had to be perfectly clean in order to go through the showers to get into the camp. And my sister and I, and I found my girlfriend and my sister-in-law, and uh -- we got into the showers and we got, if you were tall, you got a short pajama top, if you were short you got a long one and were put into barracks. I don't remember how many in one barrack. With the straw bunks and uh [Pause] in the morning there would be an Appell, we were called out, ordered to stand up in fives and there was a little dish, some kind of a dish it was rusty, horrible, and it was handed from one to the other with a drop of coffee, and each one took a sip of it. And then, we didn't go to work, somehow I don't remember working in Auschwitz. I was only there three days and on the third day

we were sitting in front of a building, and we knew from other people, that this was the gas chamber and ready to go in. And it was late in the evening, because it was dark and it was cold, on an August night we were sitting and shivering. And, we're hanging on to each other because you couldn't recognize, one you let loose of someone that you... you couldn't recognize them. So, my sister and I and my girlfriend were hanging on, and a woman came, an SS woman with the whip and with the whip she was counting. And as she was counting, my sister was 298, I was 299, my girlfriend was 300. And we were taken away. We didn't know where we were going. But one thing we were sure we were not going into the gas chamber was the opposite direction and they took us through the showers and gave us another top and a skirt and a babushka. And we stayed overnight in the barrack and then the morning they took us on a train. Nobody asked, nobody knew where we were going. And we wound up in Bremeu. Outside of Bremeu there was a working camp. There were... when we got there, there were 500 Hungarian Jewish women. And we were 300 Polish women that came into that camp. [Pause] Uh, we were assigned barracks, same thing, uh -- straw bunks to sleep. And we were right away assigned to work. I don't know, somehow I was lucky enough I was assigned to the Hungarian women. And I couldn't speak Hungarian and they couldn't speak Polish or Yiddish. But some of them did speak German. Most of the Hungarian women did not like to have the Polish women in their group. Somehow I was lucky, they did like me and I stayed with them. And we would walk every morning eight kilometers one way and evening eight kilometers back in these wooden Holland shoes. They were open.

And we would work on, they were bombed homes. And we would clean the bricks and supposedly put them back up, stack them up, that they can reuse them. This was our work. In that place where we worked, somehow I wandered around and I met a German woman that lived around there. A very poor woman with one arm. And as I was walking by, I asked her if I could help her. Somehow the one arm bothered me, although she was German I really shouldn't have felt probably that way, but it did bother me and then I thought maybe some chance I would get an extra piece of bread. And the woman said, yes, she would appreciate that. And after I did it for her and stacked it up for her, she says to me, "why don't you come into the house?" I said to her, "that's too dangerous, it's dangerous for me and it's even more so for you. Why would you want to do that?" She says, "please come in." I did go in and she made lunch for me. Amazingly enough, this woman didn't have anything. Whatever she gave me, she gave it from her ration cards, because at that time Germans were rationed uh, with coffee, bread, butter, whatever. They had marks, uh what do you call it, stamps. Ration stamps. And I ate and she asked me who I'm with and I told her, I have a sister and I have a girlfriend that is with me and she gave me sandwiches for them. And she put on the radio. I says, "you are risking enough, why are you putting the radio on?" She says, "I want you to know what's going on. This is your only chance to find out." Then I would discreetly leave there and somehow I got back to my group and it went on for quite a while. And almost every day, I spent a couple hours in that woman's house. I never forgot it. And I felt, that I owed the woman an awful lot. In the same part where we worked, there

was a bombed home and uh we would steal, at that time it was called organizing. It wasn't called stealing. And I could never thought that I was capable of stealing, I mean I wasn't brought up like that and it wasn't in my nature, but I guess if you want to survive, you can do everything. And uh, there was a basement, and normally the Germans, they had everything in the basements. Just for fear, in case the house goes, the basement is safe. So they had butter, uh fruits, canned, you could find everything in the basement. One time, somehow, my instinct told me, and I got into a little basement window, and I found everything. It was a ball. And, I used to wear these pants, uh knickers? that are tight here [she points to the calf of her leg], and I could put everything in, they were quite wide. And while I was in there, uh there was a vest, a velvet vest, to this day, I can't figure out why I put it on. And I put that vest on. Not realizing, cause I knew it was a Hitler Jungen vest, but not realizing that I might have trouble with it. And a woman walks in and she happened to be the owner of that house, and she says to me, "what are you doing here?" I says, "it was cold out and I came in to warm up." And she says, "and what are you doing in my son's Hitler Jungen vest?" I says, "I just put it on while I was here and I was planning on taking it off and leaving it. It's just that it is so cold, you know." And she doesn't say another word then she runs out and she went the front door and I went back the same window and I was hiding. I did worry and I didn't because, out of that basement, the SS woman had a beautiful silk nightgown. I didn't need a silk nightgown and I got it out of there so I gave it to her. So she had to keep her mouth shut. Uh, but you never know there might have been another SS you know, SS man

around or something. I was hiding and she did go to the SS woman because the others told me and she told me that so and so and I look so and so and I was in her basement stealing. But I was never caught, and I was never punished for it. What I did get always hurt for is that I couldn't get up in the morning and my sister kept on begging me, get up already. You are gonna get hurt again. I used to be slapped all the time, because I couldn't get up in the morning. And uh...

Did any of other Germans help you?

Yes. We had a man who was a Wehrmacht and he lost his arm and then he didn't go back into the army and they gave him a position of watching us on another project that we were doing. He was the foreman. Very fine man. Uh, if we were like uh, there were, what do you call these that you keep in the ground, eh where you put away vegetables and uh for the winter, um, in Germany, they keep it and it's with straw covered up and we would go there and we did take. We take carrots, we took beets, whatever we could find, the potatoes and we would cook right there where we were working. And if the owner would come and say that the Judenfrauen, they stole his vegetables, he would say, "you must be mistaken, it had to be the Russians from the other camp." I mean, he would always be on our side. He ate the soup too that we cooked. But uh, he did, he was good to us. He watched over us. I don't know if that's the way he felt, but I think he did. Because he never scolded us, if they came and complained, he never said it was our fault or he blamed himself or he blamed somebody else, but never us.

There must have been air raids going on at this point.

Oh yeah.

Were you ever caught?

You remember that. Uh, we were once caught in an air raid and the SS men, I don't know for what reason, but they had to take us to a bunker. A shelter. And this was a shelter one side was bombed the other was in full tact, it was all right. Now the SS men took us to the one that was all right. And the Germans that were in there said they will not be there with the Juden. And he had no choice and he had to take us to the other side. At that point, I did think there was a God above, and a bomb fell, fell in the one that was intact where the Germans were and it didn't touch one of us in the open space. How it happened, I can't figure it out 'til this day. But uh, this is what did happen.

Let me ask you a question about uh, once more back in Auschwitz. Did you wonder what had happened to your mother?

Oh, sure.

What did you think had happened?

Eh, we were... I didn't think my mother would go uh, to the gas chamber because my mother was a healthy woman and a good looking woman. And she was young, 44 years. Uh we were hoping that she went to a... to work, to another camp. But we never heard. And then we never found out, but we know, she is not here, she would have found us or we would have found her. And my father, I know, that did go to a working camp and didn't survive.

Do you remember the chimneys? Did you question what the chimneys were when you first got there?

Oh yeah. Very well. They were going full blast.

Did you ask anyone about them?

There was nobody to ask, because we were separated. We were in separate. We came in it was late, August was late already, in 1944. There was no one to ask. We didn't, we really, in the ghetto didn't know that there was an Auschwitz. I didn't. I don't know about others. I didn't. And we didn't know that we are going to a camp that there is no return from it.

When you were in front of the gas chamber, what went through your mind?

Let's make it fast. [Pause] I mean, you sit out there and your mind starts wandering and you know you are going to death. It's not that there was a question. Although in this case it did turn out to be a question. That was just fate. I guess there was something, that's why I feel so strongly about it, that I must talk about it, because there must have been a reason that I, why was I better than the other six million? I mean, why me? Why there are others that did survive, but here, I was right there. And for some reason or another, I am here and thank God I am capable of talking about it. I just wonder where, there are some people that do claim that this never happened. Uh, the Professor from Northwestern. I never hurt anyone in my life, but I could scratch that man's eyes out right in front of him. And I wouldn't be ashamed at all. Where he can say it never happened, it's a pre-fabricated story.

How long were you in Bremen?

From end of August 'til the beginning of April; 'til the 7th of April to be exact, because we were liberated the 15th. When we, the Hauptscharführer that we had, said to us that they have to take us away because the Russians are coming and they want to save us from the Russians. So they gave us a loaf of bread, put us in the cattle car and took us to Bergen-Belsen. And we got there before it was dark so they wouldn't take us off the cattle car, so we had to wait until it got dark and then they walked us, quite a few kilometers into the barrack. Then we found out the reason why. There were dead bodies all over strewn. And this was already at the end. They were digging massive graves. And I guess, I don't know if they didn't want us to see it or uh whatever, they did take us during the night. When we got there, we were put into that barrack, the room was about this size, where I'm sitting right now, and there were 800 women with I don't know how many nationalities. You could hear every possible language in that room. And we were standing up and at one point, I had to go to the toilet. And I asked someone where it is, and they showed me out there. And uh, so my girlfriend said, "I'll go with you." And as we were walking, there was a funny smell, it wasn't a toilet smell, the toilet had just board and holes, uh but I couldn't recognize the smell. And I said to my girlfriend, I says, "Ruth, what do you think," she says, "you're right, it's funny but it's not a toilet smell." And as we got closer, there were arms and legs and heads separated, laying oh, I would say about fifteen feet high in the toilet. What impression this made, I probably don't have to tell you. I wake up nights and sometimes think of that scene. 'Cause nobody can see a greater horror than that. And we had to take, now this laid

there, but we had to take bodies, drag them by their hands and put them in the massive graves. There we had to do. And uh, when the English came in, the soldiers went berserk. They had to take, the first group that liberated us, had to be taken away. They went completely berserk. And a soldier is not... is used to horror and used to seeing death and discomfort, but these men just couldn't take it. My sister got sick that time, she had typhus, which I would say 75% of the camp probably had typhus at that time. And I, at night, I would lay on the straw and I would put her on top of me because she was bone and skin and she just couldn't lay on the straw. And one morning she says to me, she would like a piece of lemon. Now how in the world can I get a piece of lemon in the camp? So I ventured out and I went over to the English kitchen, and somehow, I made them understand what I wanted. I said it in German and somehow the soldier that was there understood what I wanted and he gave me a lemon. And I'm walking back to the um barrack and on the way there was a English Captain, I assume, walking with the German, probably his counterpart the Captain or whatever, and they speak German, and he's asking him to tell him, since he was in Bergen-Belsen, what happened in that time. And he says as far as I can tell you, nothing really happened. And I'm listening to this, and I don't know where I got the courage, and I walk over and I said to him... he was here for this and this length of a time and he doesn't know of anything that happened here. I'm only here seven days, let me tell you what happened in the seven days. And I told him when we came in, the water was poisoned, and we couldn't drink, forget it, that was out. We couldn't even wash up with it. And there

was nothing to eat and the bodies, I don't know really why you have to ask him if you just look around, you've got the picture right in front of you. And I can take you to the massive graves where I myself had to throw in bodies or take you to the toilet where I have to go one night where the arms and legs were separated... and he doesn't know? And he pulled off his stripes and whatever happened to him, I don't know, I'm sure they took him away. This was the experience in... and in Bergen-Belsen there was no food, and there were a lot of Russians, and if you walked with a potato and you did not hold it real tight, you never survived with it because the Russians would grab it right out of your hand. And after, when we were liberated, they opened all the um, the storages that they had. And there was plenty of food. There were cans of pork and beans, uh and these people were so hungry, the ones that couldn't stand it you could see if you walked into that place they were sitting with a can of beans in their hands and they were dead. Because what stomach could take pork and beans? They needed a little farina to get that stomach back working. The pork and beans was a killer. People were dying grabbing the food. After the war.

Were you taken to a hospital or a displaced persons camp?

No. No, no. We stayed in the barracks. My sister had to be taken in to the hospital and there were English doctors and French doctors, because she had typhus. We remained in the barracks until they cleaned up the SS barracks, then we were taken into the SS barracks. Which were regular rooms, two, three girls stayed together. And we stayed there for a few months then they took us to Diepholz, which was a

displaced person camp. It wasn't a concentration camp, it was a camp after the war. And from there, they wanted to send me to Sweden. And at that point, I didn't know if anyone survived yet and I refused to go and my sister developed gall bladder illness and a German doctor wanted to operate on her and I completely refused. At that point I wasn't going to put my sister's life in a German's hands. And I didn't. She was quite mad at me because her pain was excruciating. But I didn't. We went back to Bergen-Belsen and there was a French doctor and somehow with some certain medications he did control it and she was fine. As a matter of fact she didn't have the surgery until here in Detroit years later. And she was okay.

This has some effect on your life now. We have a few minutes remaining, you want to tell me some of your thoughts about why you survived and what you feel about it now.

Why I survived, I don't know. I guess it was fate. Uh, I have a family now, I have two children, I have three grandchildren. I have a wonderful husband. My husband worked very hard, but we are comfortable. I try and do as much charity as I can. I try to help others. I'm courteous. Uh, I feel I owe society something. I might be wrong. I feel that there must have been some kind of a miracle or some kind of reasoning that I was left alive. This is my personal, this is the way I feel. And, by doing charity, I feel I'm repaying, I'm being grateful for being alive, and having a wonderful family and naturally, the United States was my savior. We had the opportunity, we worked hard. But uh, I just love this country. You couldn't get me back to Poland for no money in the world. Not even to visit it. Never had the desire and I was born there, I grew up there, but I have memories that I don't wanna...

unless my children will insist that they want to go and see it. I would sacrifice and go with them. But other than that I have no reason.

You feel it is important to talk about this?

Definitely! Uh, that's one part that I'm doing because I feel that it is very important and the young people are very responsive. I've had some experiences, I've spoken to a Catholic all-girls school. I talked to some children at Wayne University, the response was tremendous. And very gratifying. I can't say I enjoy talking about it, but it gives me a great satisfaction that I can make someone else aware of my experiences and the letters that I get prove that these children understand it better if they listen to a survivor than they see it in a movie, or they read a history book. As a matter of fact, I was told that. That it's no comparison between reading a history book or seeing it in the movies than hearing it out of the survivor's mouth.

I agree. Thank you very much.

You're welcome. It is hot in here.