

All right. The following is an interview with Eve Bergstein. This interview is taking place on September 19th, 1984 at the State Department in Washington, DC at the faith in humankind conference. Eve was a survivor, not a rescuer the interviewer is Ellen Epstein of the Center for Oral History.

OK. I'd like to begin by asking you your complete name. I was born Eva Nisencwajg in Poland, a city called Staszow, September 12, 1936.

OK. And your parents. What were their complete names? My father was Abram Moshe Nisencwajg. My mother was Hena Weisbrod Nisencwajg.

OK. Now if we had more time, I would like to ask you about recollections. But since you were three and you were very young, as you've told me, I think we will skip directly into the period of the war since you probably don't have too many memories of your parents from that early age to share.

Actually, I do. I have quite clear recollections of my parents.

OK. Well then tell me what you remember about your father and what he looked like.

My father his appearance is-- what would stand out, you mean, in my mind about?

Yes.

He was, to me of course, very handsome. And I remember, a very optimistic, outgoing man. A very loving person. I have very, very warm memories of my father. And my mother also. She was more of a softer person and very pretty, dark. I remember, a very soft, warm person. My father, I remember him as the strength in the family.

What was his occupation?

He was a manufacturer and quite involved in local politics as well in Staszow.

Where is Staszow? What is the nearest big city?

Krakow, not too far from Krakow. We used to spend our summer vacations near there. My family was a very close-knit family. There were 18 on both sides, 18 members in our family. Two survived, myself and one brother of my father's, Henrik Nisencwajg survived Auschwitz.

Now, you didn't have any brothers or sisters. You told me yesterday, is that correct?

I did have a brother who predeceased me. He didn't die during the war. However, my mother was pregnant last time I saw her. And I understand-- now, this is what I heard from other people who were with her, that she did give birth in the forest somewhere outside Staszow to a baby boy. They both perished.

The people who were grouped together with her in a Partisan group in the forest outside Staszow were taking turns to go into town for supplies. And apparently on one of her trips to the town, she was recognized by one of the Poles in the city and handed over to the Germans.

What happened to the baby? I don't know. I would presume that she either threw the baby to someone or that he perished with her. So the irony of my story is that I was saved by one Pole and my mother was destroyed by another.

OK. I want to come to your story in one moment. But your parents were both in the forest with the Partisans?

No. My father was able to get papers and escape to Russia. My mother, he arranged papers, Polish papers for her so that she could pass as a Pole. Now, she went-- she decided to go into the forest and try and connect with a Partisan group in

the forest. I don't know why she did that. Maybe it was too difficult.

My family was quite well-known in the area. Because she was pregnant and expecting a baby soon, maybe it was too difficult for her to be out in the open too much. So she decided to join these other people in the forest. Friends, friends of theirs.

And my father did escape to Russia. But he was apparently just haunted by the fact that he had left her on her own and came back to look for her. He found out that she was dead and he was soon picked up by the Germans once he returned and sent to a camp in Radom, which was a munitions camp. It was a labor camp, really, where they were making munitions.

And I was told by someone who was with him after the war that he was killed trying to escape. He was organizing an escape party and killed during the escape.

And the person who told you this-- how did you find this person?

After the war, I was with this one uncle who survived. He came and found me with the Polish family that I was living with and brought me back to Krakow. At that point, I had a meeting with a woman who used to be my nanny. And she was with my father in Radom, told me the story of my father.

How I learned about my mother was from people who were with her in the forest and who survived the entire war in the forest. They are living in Canada and they told me her story. So specifically what happened to her, they didn't see. But this is what they heard. No one was with her when she was killed.

Now, do you remember exactly what happened the day that you and your parents parted?

Yes. Yes, I'll never forget that. It was in the late summer of 1941. The ghetto was-- there were rumors that the ghetto was going to be closed very soon. My father still had a pass to get in and out of the ghetto.

Wait, were you in the Krakow ghetto? Or were you in Staszow then?

No, in Staszow.

There was a ghetto. OK.

Yes. The ghetto was actually on, I remembered, [POLISH], which was the street where my grandparents lived, my mother's parents. We moved in with them into their house. And my recollections are of a very crowded house and with lots of people. But they are not necessarily terrible recollections because I was with my family and that was fine.

So it was 1941 and I was five years old then. And I remember one day my father saying to me that he has to take me to live with friends of his who I should stay with on a very temporary basis until this whole madness with the war is over and he will come and get me. So we prepared for the journey.

We went on foot and into the fields outside of Staszow. I had to say goodbye to my mother there at the house. And my grandparents, and aunts, and uncles. And it was a devastating day for me, of course. I think the most traumatic day of my life, probably.

And we walked rather in silence. I was holding onto his hand. And somehow I sensed on this journey that I would never see him again. I can't tell you why, but I had those feelings walking. I still remember them quite distinctly. Am I ever going to see my father again? My mother again? My grandfather again? I somehow knew I wouldn't.

I saw such violence in the streets, such hatreds in the eyes of the German guards when we were walking out of the ghetto, such degradation, humiliation of people. I felt like I was engulfed in some kind of terrible, terrible turmoil that there was no way out of.

When we met the Szumielewicz-- Stach and Wiktoria Szumielewicz were the friends that my father was taking me to. When I let go of his hand, I just somehow knew that this was the final farewell of death. I just sensed it is all I can tell you. It was very difficult. He promised that he would come back for me very soon and we parted. I never saw him again.

I walked on with the Szumielewicz to a farm that they were living on at this point. This wasn't their permanent home, but they were living there at this time. And there was an immediate rapport between me and Wiktoria. I felt her warmth, even though it was a strange hand that sort of took mine. But I felt her warmth and I trusted her. She's a wonderful woman, she really is. She was like a mother to me.

With her husband, the relationship was a little different. Somehow, I felt a little much-- a bit of an intruder, as if I were the cause of anxiety between them. I sensed that with him and I didn't feel as much at ease with him, if one can say that one was at ease at all.

And I can tell you about this particular day that it was the end of my childhood. A real metamorphosis took place within me. I stopped being a child, a trusting child.

I became a shrewd survivor from this point on. I knew that somehow, I quickly acquired all kinds of skills of survival. I knew that I couldn't say anything about being Jewish in order-- if I wanted to live. I knew that. She was quite worried about me.

Apparently, she tells me now, you know, that I didn't even speak a proper Polish because in my home, Yiddish was always spoken. And she for quite a while had to just keep me in the house, couldn't even let me out on the farm because there were workers there, and so on, lest they hear me speak with this Jewish accent and give us away.

So immediately, she would keep me in the house for a while. While I stood by the window and watched and watched these long columns of people with bundles on their back walking in the road next to the farm. And I knew they were Jews. They were pushed around with bayonets. They were shot at random. They were tortured. Some of them couldn't walk. And they were just killed right there and then.

And it was a terrible, terrible experience, which I suppressed during the day. I just simply watched in silence. And at night, I had these terrible nightmares every night. Because at night, these people all had faces. During the day, they didn't. I didn't really look at their faces because I was afraid, in case I recognized a face.

But at night, I visualized my grandfather being shot because he wasn't walking fast enough, or my mother, if I saw a pregnant lady during the day. And these terrible, terrible acts of violence did cause these awful nightmares.

And I'll call her Ciocia. Wiktoria is-- we decided that I would call her Ciocia. She begged me to call me to call her mother, but I couldn't. I just--

What does Ciocia mean in Polish?

Ciocia means aunt. So we settled on aunt because I just felt that I couldn't call her mother. I thought that would be so disloyal to my mother. You know, it would be as if I'm giving up on my mother being alive. You know, I have to hold on to that, that my mother was alive. And I couldn't have another mother. That was very important to me. So we settled on Ciocia.

And she would be right there for me at night when I would wake up. And say to me, you see, you're really not Jewish. You're having these terrible nightmares because you're seeing these awful things in the street from the window. But you're not Jewish, you're really my niece.

Well of course, you know what she was doing, she was trying to brainwash me somewhat so that I wouldn't give us away. And hard as it may seem, perhaps for someone like you, who was brought up in the security of this country, that I knew what she was doing even though I was five. I knew that she was trying to protect all of us by confusing me.

And I played along with her just so that she would have peace of mind. Later on, when she finally did realize that I wasn't a child, that I understood, and I had this innate, I guess, understanding of what she was trying to do, we had this tacit agreement between us almost.

She knew, really, that she hadn't confused me or brainwashed me. She knew that I knew who I was. But we didn't talk about it. We didn't admit it to one another because I wanted her to have peace of mind.

And so eventually, she was able to let me out on the farm. And this was all within a matter of a few months. This didn't take a long time at all. And then I was able to be outdoors a little bit, and feed chickens, and do things like that. Very short time.

I think it was just before Christmas, my two cousins joined us. This would be the children of the uncle that I told you who survived Auschwitz. That was Janek and Lucy. And I was thrilled. I was really thrilled to have them with me.

That was very short-lived, though, because we were now three children. And apparently, someone in-- one of the workers on the farm had reported to the Gestapo that three children, probably Jewish children, were being hidden by the Szumielewicz.

So one day, my uncle Henrik showed up to take Janek away because he had to-- he couldn't come with us. We were being sent to-- we call it and Polish a cloister. I guess--

A convent.

We were being sent to a convent, Lucy and I. But it was too dangerous to send a boy because he was circumcised. And so my uncle came to take him away. Lucy and I, in the middle of the night, were taken by the Szumielewicz-- we just abandoned the farm. And we were taken to a convent in Klimowicz.

There one day, Lucy disappeared from the convent. By the way, the nuns in this convent did not take Jewish children. We went with a cover story. Me, a five-year-old protector of my little three-year-old cousin Lucy, making sure that nobody knew we were Jewish children. So we stayed in the convent for a short time together.

One day, Lucy disappeared. I didn't know what happened to her. I learned later that my uncle came, her father came and got her. Now, there are two conflicting stories about Lucy and Janek, which maybe I should tell you about very briefly.

Because my uncle, who now lives in Brazil, actually blames Wiktoria and Stach Szumielewicz for the death of his children. He says that he paid them all the money in the world that he had-- and he was a rich man. To save his children. And that she called him to come and get them and wasn't able to do anything for them.

When he came for me after the war, he had intended-- he came with a gun intending to kill them if I wasn't alive. He was, I think, probably a very, very torn, confused person after the experience of Auschwitz.

And from my chats with her, I think that that was psychologically important to him was to blame someone else for the death of his children. I think he could not accept the responsibility that had he left them, maybe they would be alive today, or at least Lucy. Because Lucy was in the convent with me and he did come to get her.

My Ciocia says that he acquired American papers somehow at this point and thought that he was still going to be able to get out of Poland. So there are two conflicting stories that have given me a lot of anxiety.

Have you ever asked him about that story with the American papers?

Yes, yes. Because we've visited back and forth. I've been to Brazil, he's been here several times to visit me. He denies the story. He says that it's absolutely not true. He claims that my father and he both gave the Szumielewicz every penny in the world that they have in order to save the three of us.

And I asked him, why did she not hand me back? I mean, she looked after me, she was wonderful to me. He says, because she loved me very much and wanted me to be her own child. As I say, there was an instant rapport between us. And she couldn't have children at this point in her life. So I was to be her child is the way my uncle Henrik saw her reason for saving me.

Now, I was in the cloister by myself after-- after that, I was in the cloister by myself, well, amongst other orphaned children. We were bombed. Somehow, in the midst of this devastation, everything was in shreds, she found me. Ciocia found me there.

This was-- I was in that convent for about a year. And one day, just lying there in the midst of the rubble, I suddenly saw her face. She came and found me, and I went back with her and her husband.

And we moved from city to city almost. Not really in touch with anyone that they knew, not having any visitors of their family around, no one at all. We just always lived among strangers and I was their niece. Because I still couldn't call her mother and him father. So I was their niece, orphaned niece. This was who I was. And they, of course, gave me a new name, a cover name, Ivanka. I was Ivanka during the war.

The end of the war, we were liberated in Opatow, a city called Opatow. I should tell you, too, that during the course of the war, I actually saved Wujek, which is uncle in Polish. I really saved him from being taken into the German army at the very last maybe month of the war.

The Germans were coming around door to door, looking for any Poles, to conscript them into the German army. And I don't know whether they would have even been officially in the army, but just to help them fight the Russians. They were very desperate at this point.

And we decided, or the only thing we could do is that he decided he's going to be sick. Well, everybody was doing that. They were sick. All the men got into-- whatever men there were around were in bed very sick. So Wujek also, he was in bed.

And a young German soldier was coming through the door and shouting, where is the man around here? They had seen a man, and they know he's here, and so on.

And he was just about to enter into the room where Wujek was in bed, when I don't know why I did it, or where I even had the strength, but I was standing right by the door. And I slammed the door really hard and knocked this poor soldier right out. And then of course, we ran away. And we don't know what happened to him. And I don't know whether he was seriously injured or not. But he was totally knocked out and we could get away.

So we went in the underground then. The last nine months of the war, actually, I spent in a dugout hole underneath a building, where we were just covered in earth. You know, it was almost like a dungeon grave. It was where we were--

Were other people there with you?

Yes, there were people. We were just sitting on the ground and waiting through the bombings. And finally one day, you know, we were liberated and we could come out of there.

After that, we moved-- after we were liberated, we moved to Bydgoszcz. And Bydgoszcz was the place where Ciocia was from. This was her hometown. So for the first time in 1945-- should I go on?

For the first time in 1945, I met her family in Bydgoszcz. And I don't know what she told them about me. All I can tell you is that they did not know I was Jewish. She did not trust them, even then in '45, with the fact that I was a Jewish child. But they accepted me.

And I with me-- I became-- during the course of the war and the time I spent in the Catholic convent, but before I even

went into the Catholic convent, I had had some religious instruction. And then following the war also. This was in Catholicism. And sometime during the course of the war, I took communion and I became a very fervent Catholic. When the war was--

Excuse me, but I just can make--

When the war was over, and Ciocia had told me what had happened to my parents-- she was the first to tell me. She couldn't give me details, but she told me that my mother and father were dead. I decided I didn't want to be Jewish. I decided that I wanted to remain with her and be her child as long as I could still call her Ciocia, not mother. And she said that was fine.

She didn't press me about Catholicism or religion at all. But I needed it very much. And I didn't want to be Jewish, I wanted to be Catholic. I thought that our God didn't protect Jews. I also became convinced, as a result of my learnings in the Catholic church, that Jews were bad and maybe we deserved this punishment. Why did God allow us to be so punished?

I started very strongly to sort of devise this whole philosophy, you know, of Jesus protecting the Christians. And we were not protected by our God. So perhaps Jesus was the real God, and the true religion was Christianity.

And I really lost faith in being a Jew. I didn't want to identify with Jews. When I met Jews, I kept my distance. I didn't want to go near them. Then my uncle showed up a year later. Year after the war, my uncle Henrik showed up. And I didn't want to go in and see him. I didn't.

Had you remembered who he was?

I didn't even want to see him. Ciocia came and said to me that uncle Henrik is here, he survived the war, and he wants to take me back to be Jewish is what he told me. And I said, no, I don't want to see him, I don't want to be Jewish.

And apparently, he told me, later on, years later when we talked about it, that he made three trips to Bydgoszcz to get me away from them. As I told you, he had intended to kill them, he came with a gun, if I wasn't there, he didn't find me. When he found me, all he wanted was to get me back, and I didn't want to go.

Anyhow, apparently, when he came for the third time, he did threaten them with the gun if they didn't hand me over. And that was why Ciocia insisted that I at least talk to him. Well, he told me that-- he told me that my mother and father were alive and waiting for me in Krakow. But they were both not well and couldn't come for me themselves.

So I was very torn. Because you know, by this time, I had really learned to trust Ciocia. And I knew that she wouldn't tell me a lie. On the other hand, how could I take the risk?

You know, he was my uncle. You know, I remembered him so differently than the way he was. He was such a, you know, loving and outgoing man the way I remembered him. And here he was, this broken man that-- he looked barely, barely like the uncle I remembered. And he was so angry. And he frightened me. He really frightened me. But the things that he was saying to me, I couldn't ignore.

So I took the risk and went with him to Krakow. Of course, my parents weren't there. And I was devastated with disappointment. All I wanted to do was to go back to Ciocia. That was the only security I knew. He wasn't the uncle I remembered.

We were crowded in a small room. He wasn't even with my aunt. He was with this other woman who also survived Auschwitz, who I didn't remember. And we were all crowded in one room. And the scene was terrible. We were all having nightmares all night long. And it was awful, just awful.

Then he explained to me one day that he couldn't get out of Poland legally, that the only way he could leave was just to sneak across the border some night. And he was with this other person, Luta, who he later married, that became his

second wife.

And he and Luta were going to do that, so he had to put me in an orphanage. And the orphanage was being run by Youth Aliyah. You know, the Youth Aliyah soldiers were going literally door to door looking for children, Jewish children, who perhaps were saved by Poles or wherever they could find them. They were putting them together.

So this is where he put me. And I begged and I cried, and please let me go back to Bydgoszcz to Ciocia. And no way, he wouldn't allow that. He promised he would be in touch with me later on. And when he got out of Poland and I got out of Poland, we would reunite and go to Brazil, where two brothers were living. My father had two brothers who went to Brazil long before the war.

So I traveled with the orphanage out of Poland to Czechoslovakia. And from there, we went through Germany to a town called Schirmeck in France. All the time, I was trying to make contact with Ciocia to go back to Poland. And I couldn't, the orphanage wouldn't allow it. And I don't think my letters were mailed, because she didn't know where I was.

In France, we finally made contact. She finally wrote me back in France and said that that was the first letter she had had from me. And it was very, very difficult because I couldn't get back to her, she couldn't get out of Poland to get me.

By this time, I hadn't even heard from my uncle. I didn't know where he was. But an aunt from Canada made contact with me. What he did was-- he couldn't get into Brazil legally either. His brothers had to bribe some officials in order to get him some papers.

So he notified my mother's sister in Canada that I was at this orphanage in France. And she arranged for me to come to Canada. From there, I traveled to Canada, which I didn't want to do, either.

That was also against my will. Because I was in a home, a Mizrachi home there in Schirmeck. And I was slowly accepting my Jewishness again. The home was very religious, the Mizrachi home, very Orthodox. It brought back a lot of warm feelings to me of my Jewishness, of my home before the war.

And not that I ever became religious. I have a lot of problems with religion to this day. But it brought back the ambience of my own home quite a bit, just in the religious ritual, of course. Nothing else.

The children there were-- we were all being prepared for Israel. So we were being given religious instruction and Hebrew language. However, and you know, in '40-- this was 1946 to '47, the doors of Israel, then Palestine, were closed to us. So we were waiting.

Some children from other areas apparently did sail. And as you know, from books like Exodus, they ended up in Cyprus. So what happened at this point-- whoever was claimed by a relative anywhere in America-- Canada was included-- was just being shipped to that relative. They didn't ask us any questions, where do you want to go? They just felt that they had to-- you know, one less mouth to feed and one less child to worry about.

Because no one knew whether the doors of the Palestine at that time would ever be open to us. And all the journeys there were illegal, too. So here we were, about 300 children gathered from all over Europe waiting to go to Palestine. And we couldn't go.

And this is how I came to Canada was-- I was sort of shipped like a parcel via an association called JIAS. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

HIAS.

HIAS. It was called HIAS then, they call it JIAS, I think, now. And I arrived in Canada in August of 1947.

Just--

To my aunt.

--what happened when you arrived? Did you know-- did she know who she was looking for? I mean, how did you?

Oh, yes, I guess so. I had sent her a picture from France. And it was it was a very difficult thing, again, for me to be with total strangers, so many different transitions. Coming to an aunt, my mother's sister, but I had never seen her before. You know? She left Poland before I was born.

And adjusting to life in Canada was difficult, very difficult in the beginning. People didn't want to hear about Holocaust, you know, at that time. It was almost as if they wanted to deny it. And there was a very, very strange atmosphere and attitude to Holocaust survivors. I couldn't understand it.

I kept thinking, well, do I have something to be ashamed of? You know, where my expectations-- I can't even tell you what my expectations were because I don't know. I didn't come expecting any kind of tremendous welcome or anything like that.

But I also didn't come with any feelings of having to be sort of a second-class citizen, or some poor refugee, or something like that. Like that kind of stigma that was attached to the survivor at that time. You know, as if we were these poor refugees that had something to be ashamed of. That really bothered me.

And the attitude eventually changed. But when I was only 11 years old, that was hard to deal with. Not that anyone ever said anything derogatory to me. But the way they talked about others, you know, survivors of the camps. There was a very derogatory attitude is all I can say that I picked up on from people here.

Did your aunt have other children?

Yes.

And how was that with you coming into the family, with your cousins?

She had two sons that were already married and out of the home. She had a younger daughter, the girl was only five, who was a tremendous behavior problem. She had had her rather late in life. And the child was prone to tantrums.

And so I came not knowing a word of English and seeing this hysterical child, you know, banging her head on the floor every time she didn't get her way. And she had a difficult time with her. It was difficult for me. I didn't have anyone to relate to at all in that household. I was really alone, more alone than in the orphanage.

In the orphanage in France, we all formed little families, almost. Those of us who didn't have brothers and sisters created our own families, if you will. You know, we became very close to one another.

Are you in contact with any of those people?

We couldn't keep in contact, no. Because-- I have been in contact with some when I visited Israel because I made it my business to find some of the children that I was with. But we lost contact after that because they were all shipped out before they could have my address. They left Schirmeck. A lot of them ended up in Cyprus. They couldn't stay there much longer.

Conditions there in the orphanage after the war, I should tell you, were quite bad, too. There was not enough to eat. I know the Americans felt they were doing a tremendous amount for all of us refugees, but believe me, we were hungry, just as hungry as during the war years.

When I arrived in Canada, I was covered with malnutrition sores. And I didn't have them during the war. That was all during that year I spent in Schirmeck. The children who were very, very ill were given, you know, a little bit more food. Like an egg was a nutritious meal, you know. And there weren't enough eggs for all the children.



What was a typical meal in the orphanage?

Do you know, I can't remember exactly, except that stands out in my mind. The egg. You know, that some of the children who were very, very ill were given an egg. I don't know why it stands out in my mind. But it does. And I know that you had to be quite sick to get an egg. And some kids would pretend that they were very sick so that they could get an egg.

I know you want to get to the session. I'd like to just ask you two questions. I wish we could spend about another five hours. Why were the Schmulevitch, is that how you pronounce it?

Szumielewicz.

Szumielewicz. Why were they moving from place to place? I mean, did he-- was it to escape the Nazis? To prevent being discovered? Or did he not have a occupation that tied them to one city? And was this a normal course of things that people who were hiding people would pick up and run?

That's what I understood after the war, that-- or even during the war. If people became suspicious, they felt we had to move on. Occupation-- people didn't work in normal occupations during the war. Now, how he lived, maybe uncle Henrik is right. Because we always manage to buy some food. Not much, but a little. And food cost a great deal of money during the war. So perhaps they had money from our families.

What did he do every day? Did he work on the farm when you were on the farm? Was he--

I don't remember him working. He would be busy doing paperwork at his desk. And I really can't tell you what he did. He did not have an occupation during the war as such.

And your aunt-- the day to day existence of you and your aunt, before she would let you out on the farm. You remember standing at the window. What else? I mean, there was no baking or cooking, I assume. People didn't have--

There wasn't much to bake and cook with.

Right.

Well, my day to day thing-- well, after I was allowed to go out, I would feed the chickens, do a little chores around the farm. I remember doing that. I remember a little bit of cooking, sitting and cook, standing in the kitchen, watching her make porridge, maybe, things like that.

She was preoccupied with doing a bit of housework and giving me lessons. She was a teacher by profession. And she would be giving me my lessons as if-- we would pretend it was school time and we would have lessons, things like that. And I would be involved in helping her. Whatever she was doing around the house, so mending or cleaning dishes. I just-- just the day--

And when she picked up and moved, you had what, a suitcase full of clothing? I mean, did you have anything to take with you?

Next to nothing. Very little. That I would personally have, or you mean all of us?

Well, both, really.

You know, I don't remember details like that, as to how much luggage and stuff like that. That was--

Would you walk from town to town when you moved?

No, somehow we would be transported. But we weren't moving every month, let's say. We would be a year or several months in one place. And then the war lasted four years. We were in about-- OK. We were in [PLACE NAME] and in Klimatow.

And after that, I remember a town called Ostrowiec and Opatow. So that's four different places in the four years of war, '41 to '45. It was really 3 and 1/2 years, wasn't it? Because it was the summer of '41.

And in the convent, did you have lessons there? Did you play with other children? Your sort of every day, what--

What kind of way did-- how did I spend my days? You know, I've tried to think of that. I remember there being a lots of lineups for everything. For food, there was a line up. Waiting, and waiting, and standing in line.

And lessons I don't remember other than praying, a lot of praying. I don't remember actually being taught to read or to write or anything like that. And playing, just being with other children, not organized activity the way you would think.

And the same question for the underground. I mean, how many people were in this grave, as you described it? The earth and--

It was like--

And how large was it?

--A pit. I remember I was able to stand up, but Ciocia wasn't. It was quite small.

And people went out to get food?

Yes, yes. In fact, one day, I took my turn to go out to get food. And I went with another little girl who had become my friend. And she was killed right beside me because the bombs were falling and the shrapnel was. I was wounded a little bit that day with shrapnel in my leg.

But she was killed right beside me. And we just crawled on our stomachs to the bakery. And when we got to the bakery, we found a loaf of bread. The store had been abandoned. And I brought bread back with me. But she died.

And you were about nine?

At that time, I was a little bit younger. I was 9 in '45. This wasn't '44 yet.

And in terms of bathroom facilities underground, I mean, what do people do?

There was a corner where we went to the bathroom.

And how many people were living there beside you and your aunt and uncle?

I don't remember us being so crowded that we were on top of each other. But there were a lot of people.

And did people sort of divide up the tasks and organized who was going to do what, who was going to--

No, there was no organization. There was real terror. People were just sitting, listening to the bombs falling.

For a year-- nine months?

Nine months we were there.

Yeah.

You know, we came out now and then, as I said, for supplies. But that was our home for nine months. We couldn't come out. We also didn't know what I had done to that German soldier. And so immediately after, we knew they were looking for us once they found him.

To hear these stories, it's so unbelievable that anybody is alive who went through that. That's what strikes me every time I talk to somebody like you, is that anybody survived.

Well, sometimes I think that people can survive almost anything. You know, when I think back on my own survival, the thing that's difficult is dealing with it afterwards, and coming to terms with this kind of upheaval in your life, and trying to lead a normal life after. This kind of, I don't know what you want to call it, the interlude of madness, a vortex in your life.

It's afterwards, when the war was over, and particularly when I came to Canada and-- there weren't any other children, you know, in '47 who arrived when I did. And my friends at school were all Canadian-born children from very secure homes.

And I wanted so much to be like one of them. I wanted to pretend that what happened to me never happened. And that was very important to me, just to be one of them. And I started to really suppress all my memories.

After a while, I didn't even have nightmares anymore. I was pretending that all of this didn't happen. And I forgot Polish. I couldn't speak a word of Polish after a couple of years. And I guess it was a psychological sort of suppression of all of these events in my life. Because if I dwelled on them, if I thought about them, I couldn't live a normal life. And I wanted to very much because that was the survivor in me.

And can you speak Polish now?

I can now. But you know, when-- first time we brought Ciocia for a visit from Poland was right after my oldest daughter was born. I couldn't speak a word of Polish. And after about three days when she was here, it started to slowly come back to me. That's how much I blocked it all out. And at that time, I was already 23.

And was that the first time you had seen her since you had parted?

Yes. That was our first reunion.

And what was that like?

It was quite traumatic. It was quite traumatic. It was very difficult. I had difficulty coping with day-to-day life after she left. When she was here, I was fine. Polish came back to me and we were able to talk and converse in Polish after a few days. And I was just thrilled to have, you know, like a mother again to give me a little advice and so on with the baby.

And when she left, I had a lot of difficulties. I couldn't sleep nights. I kept thinking-- I kept going in and checking the baby, you know, to see if she was breathing. I thought for sure someone was going to take away my child from me and I'm going to lose her. I was terrified that I was going to lose my baby.

And she was perfectly healthy baby, normal. And so I didn't have any real reasons other than, I guess, all my insecurities came back to me at that point in my life. And it was a difficult time.

And your husband, you met him in Canada?

Yes.

And he is Canadian?

Right.

And when you told him your story, was this an eye-opener to him? Or had he known anything about?

You know, at that particular time, all that he knew about me was that I survived the war. When I first met him, I was only 16. And I would never talk about my experiences. Not with anyone and not with him.

And it wasn't till years and years and years later that I ever really told him my story. We didn't talk about it then at all. I couldn't talk about it to anyone. It took a long time. Was when I had Heni, and my eldest was born, and we brought Ciocia, that part of my life came back to me.

And I started to do some writing then at that point. And that was a bit of a release for me, too, the writing. And I've dealt with it as best I can.

Sounds to me like you've dealt with it better than most, frankly. I mean, on the outside, anyhow.

Well, I've just in the past maybe 10 years gotten a little more involved in Holocaust teaching. I've organized a seminar in our area for teachers, high school teachers. And it was very successful. That was just last June.

I have always searched for a meaning to my survival, I really have. And I do feel an obligation somehow. I don't know even how to phrase it. I mean, sure, marrying and recreating our family was, I think, the thing that was most urgent in my life. I wanted to do that desperately, you know, just to have a family again, my own family. So that was important.

And I did that at a rather young age. When I was only barely 20, I got married. And I had three children. I felt that that was important that I continued the link, the continuity and to have a Jewish family. That my grandparents, my parents will have continuity, even though they were so brutally killed.

But as their descendant, I felt this obligation very strongly to continue. Even though at times, I thought, do I want to have children and bring them into a cruel world like that? And these thoughts, of course, crossed my mind. But I decided, no, that that was one obligation that I had.

How often are you in touch with your aunt these days?

We keep a regular correspondence going. And of course, I've helped her over the years financially, also, whenever possible. During these difficult times, particularly. You know, in Poland, when there was a shortage of food, I made sure that she got all her parcels of food and so on through the International Service.

And your uncle in Brazil? His wife is still alive?

His wife-- this was his second wife. He had a new family after the war.

He did.

With two children again, a boy and a girl. Unfortunately, another tragedy struck him and he lost his son. He died of meningitis. The child was born with a heart defect. He contracted meningitis at the age of 14. And he died and that was a devastation to him.

My aunt never recovered from it. She is really quite mentally ill after Auschwitz and everything. And then losing a child of 14, a brilliant boy. He was a very talented violinist. Was too much for her. I visited them in Brazil just three years ago. And she's not well, I'm sorry to say. She was fine up until.

Had she had a family previous to Auschwitz?

She was married, but very young, and didn't have any children yet. She lost a husband. And she's--

Have you interviewed him about his experience in Auschwitz at all? Does he talk about it?

No, not on tape or anything. No, the interviews that I have done were for Dr. Kestenberg. And they were of child survivors like myself. That's her specialty. Children who were no more than 13 when the war broke out, that's what I've been doing for her. Now I have to meet my sons, sorry.

Thank you very much. I really appreciate you giving your time today.