

My name is Beverly Kragen. Today is September 17, 1984. I am here to interview Helena Melnyczuk, who is a protector of the Nazi Holocaust. This interview is taking place as part of the project Faith in Humankind-- Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust Conference.

What is your complete name?

Helena Sophia Melnyczuk.

Where and when were you born?

On February 21, 1921 in [? Losice, ?] Poland at that time, it was.

Where were you living during the war?

In Przemysl. And then we fled in 1944 and we were living in Vienna. And after the end of-- during the war, yes.

What were your parents names?

My father's name was [? Walhadum ?] [? Zahykavich, ?] and my mother's name, [? Theodosia ?] [? Zahykavich. ?]

And what were their occupations?

My father was a professor of literature in primary school gymnasium. And my mother, she was a teacher as well, but she-- since she was a housewife, since there were three kids, so she didn't work.

Could you give the names and ages of your brothers and sisters?

Yes. I'm the oldest. The second brother is [? Volodymyr ?] [? Zahykavich, ?] and I think he was born on November 27, 1923, Orest on January 30 or 31-- [INAUDIBLE] in 1925, and [? Christine, ?] April 11-- April 8, 1936. She's much younger than I am-- 15 years.

Did your family belong to any particular church?

Yes, we are Ukrainian Catholics. Before, it was called Greek Catholics, but they-- since it's confusion, we are not Greeks. We are only of Byzantine right-- Catholics of Byzantine right. It means that Pope is still our superior, but now we call it Ukrainian Catholics.

How often did your family attend church?

Every Sunday and holidays-- religious holidays.

Were they involved in politics in any way?

I wouldn't say, you know. My father didn't belong to any party. He believed that the main thing is to learn-- to learn. The politics might confuse a person. [INAUDIBLE] and he was preaching it to his students that they should learn as much as possible, if they have the possibility.

Could you describe the area in which you lived in when the war began?

Well, Przemysl for Poland was not a big country-- 33 million, or how many there was at that time. So Przemysl, I could say it was not a small town, because we had even a theater over there. There were three to four movie theaters, and the Museum, and bishops-- two bishops, Polish and Ukrainian bishops-- and four or more high gymnasiums. In Europe, they call it gymnasium, not high school, like here. There was even a Jewish gymnasium, two Polish-- two or three

Polish gymnasiums, two girls and one men, and two Ukrainian gymnasiums. So it was comparable quite a big city, 56,000 or 57,000 inhabitants. Well, but to compare it now with other European countries-- but to compare with American? Not compare, you know, its a huge country.

And we are living in an apartment house. It [? never ?] old house, but we were living in an apartment house. [INAUDIBLE] yes, when the war started-- I think it was six different-- six separate apartments, and all other apartments were occupied by Jewish families, and we were the only family. That's why when the war started the second time, when the Germans came, all the Jews from the-- since they came to our apartment-- I was not there-- at that particular time, in '41, I wasn't home. But as my parents told me and my brother, all the-- they were scared because they already heard about those things which were going on in Germany. So they came to us. And they were staying with us for two or three days, about 30 people in our apartment.

It had three rooms. It was a typical middle class family apartment, three rooms, and kitchen, pantry, bathroom. And so, it was-- to compare with-- quite-- with other people, it was quite good.

And well, what else would you like me to describe? I was-- the war started in 1939 I just-- at that time, I finished my high school, gymnasium. And was prepared to go to study journalism in Warsaw. But, of course, everything in September, all my dreams were shattered.

Your family was the only non-Jewish family in this building.

In this building.

The other buildings around, where they were predominantly Jewish or non-Jewish?

I think mixed.

Mixed.

Yes.

There was not really a Jewish section.

No, absolutely. There was one Jewish section. It was even called Jewish Town. There was one Jewish section in Przemysl. But most-- I think that many Jews were living there. But there was no ghetto like it was formed during the German times. They were formed. They were living everywhere.

Did your parents discuss among themselves and their friends what was happening to the Jews?

I think so, of course.

I guess what I'm asking is were they aware of what was happening?

They were. They were aware.

Was there one specific incident that you can think of that made you aware of the persecution of the Jews?

The first thing which struck us, when they told Jews to wear those bands with a star. It was something we never saw before, we never heard before. So it was the first thing which struck us. And then, at first they were not living in ghetto, but after a while they formed ghetto. And it was as well something strange. During the Middle Ages they had ghettos, but it was 20th century.

Did you ever see any children being beaten?

No.

Did you see any signs stating not to buy or do business with Jews?

I-- no, I do not remember such a thing.

When did you and your family decide that they were going to help?

To help this specific family-- I must tell you that our family was always-- we were known that we are friends with Jews. The first-- I think our first apartment in Przemysl. It was in the building-- in a small-- it was in [INAUDIBLE], a small building. And half of the building occupied by-- was occupied by the Jewish family, by this family, this boy whom we rescued afterwards, the Schefflers. They were our immediate neighbors. And we were very friendly with them, really very, very good friends. They were very good people, as I remember.

Mr. Scheffler and Mrs. Scheffler, they were very good people. Maybe because they had children who were already grown up. They did not have grandchildren. And they liked us. We were small at that time. Really I was five or six years. My brother, Orest, was just born. So very often we were playing with them. We were staying in their house. Their older boys took care of us. They were telling us stories.

And the age of Scheffler, when we rescued, he was student in Ukrainian gymnasium. Because in Polish gymnasium, they were giving hard time, Jews hard time, sometimes, this chauvinism, Polish chauvinism was famous. And my family was known of that. Even my father's father, who was as well a gymnasium professor in [PLACE NAME], was known as a father of Jews.

Once, I remember it was in 1936 or '37, somebody sent us a paper, a Jewish paper from Lviv. And there was an article about my grandfather, Professor Victor Zahaikiewicz, how he was saving Jewish boys when they were tormented by youths in school or on the streets. And so he was very honored by Jews, my grandfather. And it was my father as well. He got it from his house. And so he-- we always had plenty of Jewish friends, I must say.

How did other members of your family and your friends react to what you were doing to help Jews?

Well, our family, we were all prepared. And there were only a few friends whom we could trust when we were saving, because it was-- that when you were saving the Jewish family you were subjected to the same persecution. They would be killed and we would be killed. Everybody from the household would be killed together, would be shot, that they found that they were. Well, no, people are not-- what was-- they never criticized us. It was our business.

Did the members of your church know what you were doing?

Yes.

Did anyone ever threatened to turn you into the authorities?

Yes, our housekeeper. My mother died-- and my sister-- my mother died in 1942. So, we-- I didn't know what-- I didn't know how to cook or what. Well, there was nothing to cook from anyway. Somebody had to take care of the house. And there was a woman. She was a housekeeper in, I think, one of the German officials, one of the high German officials.

And she did something wrong. And maybe my brother knows this better. And she did not come on time or I don't know. Anyway, this German official wanted to send her for work for Germany. The Germans, they-- they took people, not only Jews, but many Ukrainians and other people. They just took them and sent to Germany to work in the-- took from the street, from the house, or wherever they had possibility, from the streets very often, and they sent them to Germany to work in the factories.

So, this German official, he said that he will send this Maria to Germany for work. But my father, he was working in Ukrainian Relief Committee. Maybe you don't know, but there were relief committees. They were-- it was Jewish Relief

Committee as well, if you read the story about this committee in Lodz. It was covered a couple of weeks ago in New York Times, a huge article about this Lodz story.

So, he was working in the [? Belfer ?] section. She came to my father and was begging him if you could help her. And father was talking to this man and said that we need a housekeeper since our mother died. So, she was our housekeeper. And she was a beastly person. Very pious, praying always, but not always praying comes along with goodness, natural goodness.

And anyway, sometimes-- once I told her to do something in the house, to do some cleaning or what, but she did not want to do it. And she said to my father that if I will give her any orders-- that I shouldn't give her any orders-- that she would give us to the authorities. She was going to confession quite often. At first, my father was talking-- speaking to her confessor, whom he knew very well.

And then we to hold her-- my father told her and my brother, Maria, if you will give us up, your fate is the same as ours, and even maybe you will be shot-- you will be the first who will be shot because you did not give us up immediately. You did not go to the authorities and told immediately that they are with us. So, she shut her mouth and never mentioned it before.

But otherwise, for example, across our house, because it was the other-- then we-- during the war, in '42, we moved from this other apartment to the other because it was ruined. Not ruined completely, but shelling destroyed something in some rooms in the apartment. So we moved to the other apartment.

And across this apartment, we were living till the end, there was a police station, Ukrainian police station. And the chief of the police knew about that. He was a school friend of Edek Scheffler. And my father told him in case he notices anything suspicious so he would let us know. The Schefflers could escape or somehow we could camouflage this. So, otherwise, except of Maria, nobody threatened us.

So there were quite a few people living-- except of us, my father, sister, and Orest. I was, at that time, I was in [INAUDIBLE]. Some time I was living at home. Some time I was in [INAUDIBLE]. I wanted to be an actress. So I was in actor school over there. And there was, besides our family, there was Professor [? Petru, ?] escapee from the Soviet Union.

Excuse me, this is in your apartment building you're talking about?

No, in our house. In our apartment. In our apartment-- not our house. I say our apartment, because it was not our house. Professor [? Petru, ?] and then there was a friend of my brother, Orest, as well. He was-- he knew about that. And he was living with us because he went to school there in Przemysl. And later on, my husband, my fiance at that time, and not even fiance, a friend of my brother. And so, there were quite a few people living in the same house. And they knew about that. And yeah, nobody wanted to.

All right, I'm a little confused here.

Yes.

You moved from-- in 1942 you moved to--

Another--

--an apartment across from the police station.

Yes.

And describe to me-- this is the building that your neighbor was, the boy who you eventually rescued?

No. He was-- the building where we were living together with Schefflers, it was in-- we were living in that building in 1920-- Let me count. I came to Przemysl when I was three years old. I was born-- in 1924 till 1929 or something like that. We were quite-- , moving quite a few times, changing our apartment. Then we moved to another apartment, then to the other.

And in '39-- so, in between 1923 and 1929, we were living in the same building where Schefflers were living. They were our neighbors. And afterwards, they were still living in the same building and we moved to the other apartments.

And then they came to you for help?

Yes, they came to us.

I understand. Now, the present building that you were living in, this is not the same building that you described with all the other families were Jews?

Yes.

Yes, it is.

Yes. It is not the same. It is not the same.

It is not the same.

Yes. It was-- the other was [? Borski ?] 47. It was [? Tarnowski ?] 7.

OK, so this present building--

Yes.

--where you helped the Scheffler boy and these others.

Yes.

Could you describe that immediate building to me?

A pity I didn't brought a picture of it. Have you been in Europe? Have you seen these old buildings. How it's more--

I'm referring more to the neighbors.

Neighbors, across from us, there was Professor [? Azmora ?] living, a Polish family. Downstairs, I do not even know who was living downstairs and upstairs. Maybe Orest knows better. I do not remember. I think the people-- they were new people. I don't know who was living in our apartment when we came to this apartment. I think upstairs there was still one Jewish family living when we came. But I cannot tell you.

Do you think the non-Jewish people knew that you were housing this Jewish boy?

No, we couldn't tell anybody. No. I don't even know if the Polish-- this Professor [? Azmora ?] knew about that. Mrs. [? Azmora, ?] maybe she knew about that. But I have to ask Orest. You have to ask my brother. Maybe they moved already, because afterwards, they moved-- the [? Azmoras ?] moved from the building. And yes?

I was just wondering if you felt threatened by Maria and other people who might have known?

Only by Maria, but well, when she knew that she's in the same position with us.

Who initiated the helping behavior?

I think my father. He was the head of the family. And the decision belonged to him. We are still young at that time.

Did the Schefflers boy come to you?

He came-- you do not know the story, how it happened?

No.

Well, it was quite a horror story.

Excuse me one minute. I want to make sure the tape doesn't run out.

You were about to tell me the story of how the Scheffler's boy came to your family.

Yes. Well, it was in 19-- September, I think, 1943. They-- I presume they started to liquidate ghetto. He was living in ghetto at that time. And it was evening, dark, maybe 9:00, or 10:00, or what. I heard a knock on the door. And I went to the-- opened the door to the corridor. And there was Edek standing at the door. He pushed me into the room, into the corridor, small corridor and said, [? Halushu-- ?] that's my nickname-- give me the key to the cellar.

And I went automatically. I went to the kitchen. I took the keys to the cellar. I don't know if I went to the room and told my father that Edek Scheffler is here or just took the keys to the cellar, went with him to the cellar. And I noticed that there is a young woman with him. He said that's my wife. I didn't know that he married, but he married in ghetto. And opened the cellar for him. And they went into the cellar.

And the cellar-- you know how they are. Not like here, you have the room. There's a whole covered room. The cellar in Europe, in their apartment houses, they were just partitions. You could see through the wall, the wooden walls, you can see to the other cellars. So it was not a safe place to stay. But in the cellar, people were keeping coal and wood. Because there was no central heating, so we had keep our coal for winter.

And then I think I came and said Edek Scheffler came with his wife. And probably there was-- we were talking about that, what should we do. Or maybe we called them upstairs. Maybe my father called them upstairs. I'm not sure. It's so many years, 40 years. And I go.

But this, I clearly remember, when he said, [? Halushu, ?] you give me the keys to the cellar.

Did you ask him why?

No, I didn't ask him. Well, I knew that he needed it. He escaped. But afterwards, he came up. Either they came this evening upstairs. They came. And we were asking him the details. And details were quite gruesome. They started to shoot people in ghetto. And they were loading them on the cars. And somehow they-- he and his wife, either they played or they-- by miracle they pretended that they are killed. So they took them to the cemetery, SS, that people, and threw them over there.

So they came out from this. Because they were coming, bringing back and forth the new corpses. They crawled out from the-- from the corpses. And they came to our house. It was as well a very risky-- everything was risky, but there was a police hour. I think 9:00 or what. So, you couldn't appear on the street without German identification because you could be shot. But somehow, God help them to come to our house.

And so that's how they escaped. And I think they stayed maybe for a day or two in the cellar. But since we realized it's dangerous to keep them in the cellar because-- it was still, of course, summer. People were not going so often to the cellar. But still, we had to bring them food over there. And somebody would notice this unusual movement between cellar and our apartment. And so we decided to-- yes, it was impossible to keep them in the cellar, but on the other hand,

it was impossible to keep them open in the apartment.

But we had pantry. I think the pantry was the size of this small kitchen over here, they had it. And there was a huge cooper-- as we call it-- commode, or what. A trunk, a huge trunk. And in this trunk we put the mattress. And my father was a biblio man. He had plenty of books. And we had a big library. But still there was no place for all his books. And part of them, it was in this pantry.

So, my brother built some kind of camouflage from books so they could hide in case of something, after those books. They were sleeping over there in this pantry. During the day, they were more or less moving freely since all the household people knew about them. They wouldn't sit all the time in their pantry.

She was, this Edek's wife, she was helping sometimes. Maria told her to do some chores, to peel potatoes, or sweep the floor, or what. She took advantage of it. But on the other hand, when I think nowadays, it was better for her to be occupied for a young girl. She was a young girl at that time. And she was always in good humor. So she took everything, I think, cheerfully. We're talking a lot and so on.

During the holidays we have such a tradition, Ukrainian tradition, that on Christmas Eve we had holy supper. So we were sitting all together at the table. So we are sharing with them all the goods we had. We had very little because we were on the rations as well during the German occupation. We didn't ever get on our rations, food rations-- we didn't have any, for example, fat, any meat. If we wanted to eat it, from time to time we had to buy it on the black market.

And well, since sometimes it was quite harsh. When my mother was living she knew how to, for example, trade things, how to sell things from the house and buy it. But I didn't know how to do it. But there were good people, peasants, who knew my father. My father was helping them since he was in this welfare department.

He was saving people, many people from going-- being sent to Germany to work. So, sometimes they brought either a chicken or maybe a few eggs. Somehow we survived. And I think we were all slim and trim and much more healthier than now.

But you also had two extra mouths in your house--

Yes.

--to feed.

Yes.

Did you have any extra rations for them?

No.

So you were just dividing your rations.

Yeah, sure. But those rations were so small, so nobody cared. It was natural. I cannot understand how people are greedy right now. They are so greedy. Everybody wants everything for yourself. This is not understandable for me. We have to share things with other people. So, that's how they stayed with us.

And sometimes there were even such comical scenes. My father, he was studying in, before the war were first, he was studying in Vienna. And he met some of his old acquaintances. And he was in, as well, in the Austrian army from the old times, from that period. And besides, the mayor, that vice mayor, or how do you say, the substitute of the mayor, a German, he was as well a professor of arts. And my father was friends with him.

So, we had to invite two or three Germans to-- during the holidays. And Edek Scheffler, he was really something. There was a glass door between a small corridor, like-- I will describe it. Here was a small corridor. Here was this pantry. And

they were living. A small corridor. Here was bathroom and here [UKRAINIAN]. A [UKRAINIAN], a water closet.

The bathroom.

Bathroom, yes. And here was the door to our bedroom. And here the door to the kitchen. And over this door of our bedroom, there was a glass window. So Edek climbed on the door. And he was looking through the glass door who is there. And afterwards, we were making different remarks about that and that. So, somehow nobody knew that they are here. Nobody suspected if.

This is when you were having Germans to your home for dinner?

Yes.

And he was watching them.

Yes, he was watching them. And so afterwards we were making remarks about them. And once it a funny thing happened. As I told you, they were moving freely around the house. And my friend came to visit me. She was already married. And she-- somehow she came into the kitchen.

Usually, it is-- here, in America, kitchen is the room where guests even come to the kitchen. And over there in Europe, kitchen was the room where the maid was, occupied by maid, and mother when she was cooking. But Irene, she went into the kitchen. And then she came and said, who is that girl sweeping the floor in your kitchen?

And I was so shocked. I never told her that we keep them. I said, oh, it's Kristen's friend. Kristin was seven years old. How could be Edek Scheffler's wife be a friend of Kristen's? Somehow she understood maybe something. And she never-- she did not require an explanation. It was the only time that they were notice by a stranger.

And the other time I was a little scared-- yes, I was scared, quite scared, when there was a knock at the door, and I opened, there were two German soldiers. And I thought this is it. But they asked somebody's address. Because we were living-- our house was the last house before the German part. They had their part of the town there.

So, this was their last house where ordinary people were living. So, they were looking. So we directed them to the other building. But otherwise, everything went smooth, smooth, smooth, until we left. And a couple of days after we left, the Soviet army came in. So they were free.

Describe for me when they actually left and why.

When?

When the Scheffler and his wife left.

I cannot describe it because we left before they left. Yes. There was-- that Soviet army was approaching, was already approaching, coming closer to our town. And everybody who was-- many Ukrainians, they had to leave. My brother, my older brother, was arrested by the Soviets when they were in-- our part of the town-- there is another story.

Our town was divided in two parts because there was a river coming through the town. And one part-- this river was a-- division was between Germany-- or part of Poland-- it was Poland at that time-- Poland occupied by German and by Soviet Union. So part of our town belonged to Soviet Union. And the other part, over the river, after the bridge, belonged to-- was under German occupation. So we were living for two years under Soviet occupation.

And when they left in '41, oh, this is another story, doesn't belong to that. But you can find it in the history book or wherever, how they were-- what they were doing there. And coming there, the secret police, how they were killing people, and so on. And we were on the list to be-- not to be killed, but to be transported to Siberia.



Many of Ukrainian intelligentsia they transported to-- they took to the concentration camps in Siberia. And they arrested. My brother. My brother, older brother, [? Volodymyr, ?] he was-- he and couple, three of his friends, they wanted to-- they heard something that there's Ukrainian army forming on the other side of-- in the other side of [PLACE NAME]. And so, they wanted to join the Ukrainian army to fight the Russians, the Bolsheviks.

And they were trying to escape. They were arrested. Were caught, arrested, and they were sent to Siberia. And he was in concentration camp, [? Volodymyr, ?] [INAUDIBLE]. And so, there was no chance for us to stay in Przemyśl. We would be arrested immediately. And so we, like many of our other families, we just decided to emigrate. So we moved-- my father's brother was living at that time in Krakow. And my friend was living in Prague.

And he said maybe we would move to Prague. There were many-- there was quite an immigration, Ukraine immigration in Prague. There was a free Ukrainian university in Prague. So maybe my father could get a job. And so nobody imagined that the war would go so fast that Prague pretty soon would be occupied.

Anyway, we just left everything behind, took couple of things with us, and left Przemyśl. Because German army already left. And the Bolsheviks were approaching. So we said goodbye to Schefflers. They had nothing more to be afraid of. Maria was staying as well behind. She was living somewhere not very far away from Przemyśl in some village. So, she had the family over there. And we left.

Boy, it was, I think it was June, probably June '44. And two or three days later, the Soviet army came. So, they came out and so on. And they managed somehow. I think they went first to Hungary because they had some family here. Mrs. Scheffler's brother or some cousins were living in Hungary. And then they went-- they came to Germany and they were as well in displaced persons in Bavaria, as we were in the displaced persons camp. And he found us. Edek, he was always trying to keep in touch with us.

He really felt like a-- absolutely like a family. And he always, always trusted. And we as well, we felt him as a-- our feelings were as our close family, since such-- we are sharing together many horrible things. And then in '46 they arrived, I think.

I have a picture. It was-- I gave it to, I think to, as well, over to Mrs.-- to this-- now where is this picture? Oh, this is Edek Scheffler, how he looked, two of his pictures.

Where are the Schefflers living now?

Now they are living in Giv'atayim-- Giv'atayim in Israel. And I hope I have their-- no, I don't have their address.

But you still keep in close contact?

Yes, I will write to him after all of this-- all this story. I will tell him about that.

What happened to your brother who went to Siberia?

Well, it was as well a miracle. In 19-- I think '42, or what--? Yes, or, maybe Orest will remember. I am already getting senile, being 63. You can start being-- I'm forgetting years and names. Anyway, there was amnesty. Stalin gave amnesty when they formed Polish army under-- maybe you heard about General Anders. When they started-- in '41, they started again this war with Germany. They were trying to form a Polish division or what. And he was-- my brother was released.

Of course, this is another story which I will not tell. But there are always good people. The world is not without good people. Good people helped him to survive. Because he was sick with typhoid fever and so on. He was in Israel. He joined the Polish army and was in Israel. And then eventually he went to England, to Scotland.

Over there, he married a Scottish girl. And now, we are living in the same house in Grant Park. So everything-- it was a happy end. But my poor mother, she never-- she didn't live that long to learn about that. Because we learned about that,

that he is alive and well in, I think, 1947. He found us, our address through Red Cross and so on. And we made contact in 1947. And he was arrested in February '40. Yes, '40, yes, I think is year, 1940.

Earlier you mentioned that when you were housing a great many people--

Yes.

--that one of them was your fiancée and husband.

Now, he's my husband, yes.

This man is Jewish?

No. When we were housing-- when we were housing-- on [? Tarnowski ?] Street, I said-- I told you that not only us were living in this apartment, except with us was living Professor Petru, whom-- my father was a good soul. And this Professor Petru has no place. It was this, as well, always housing was always a problem. He didn't have no place to live. So, he just was living with us. He was teaching as well in high school.

And then my brother's friend and another friend, that's my husband now, when he-- he had an apartment. But something happened to his apartment. And then he didn't have a place to live. So, he was living in this house. And he knew the Schefflers as well.

So your family was known for having a lot of people living with them.

Yes.

And a lot of traffic coming in and out.

Yes. A friendly family. Well.

In what way has your war experience affected your religious beliefs and political involvement today?

Pardon me? In what way?

Has the war experience affected your religious beliefs?

I don't know if it's effected. I'm quite a religious person. Sometimes my husband is laughing that I am too religious. I'm going every day to church. I was in church already today. But I am not religious-- for example, there is, among us Ukrainians, we are talking about a recent pope who is Polish and who always stressing Polish affairs and so on. And he-- he's not-- for us Ukrainians, he's not that good.

This is our story, Ukrainians' story. I'm trying to-- we have faults. We are human and we all have faults. When somebody criticizes somebody too much, then I'm trying to-- I think that's my religious belief, is--