

Interview with Helen Balsam

March 15, 1992

Bronx, New York

Q: I'd like to get really the whole of your experiences and that includes your life before the war

A: Before the war?

Q: Right. So we can start out with your name at the time, your date of birth, and then let's talk about your family -- your brothers and sisters, how many, where you were within that hierarchy, what your father did, where you lived.

A: Yes. I also would like to, well not much but during the war years, I would like not so much to dwell on my own life as I experienced a very dramatic or tragic episode with my father. I'd like to tell you about this and that will take a little bit of mine.

Q: Okay.

A: Personal story.

Q: Right.

A: My name is Helen, Helen Balsam, home Rosenbloom. Helen Rosenbloom.

Q: Your name was Helen ---?

A: Helen -- my name is really Hava, Havula (13) but -- Havula Rosenbloom -- but after the war, it was a difficult name so we changed it to Helen. That was after the war. My name's Helen Rosenbloom. I come from a family of -- we were five children. I was the oldest.

Q: When were you born?

A: I was born in 1927, December 16, 1927. I was the oldest and the others were small children when the war broke out. My parents and the whole family lived in Bedzin. My father was a traveling salesman.

Q: What did he sell?

A: He was like traveling to the neighboring little towns where we lived, the surrounding little towns. He was selling everything that they needed. He was a very enterprising kind of person. I never remember lacking anything. There was always food in the house and we lived pretty, pretty nice.

Q: Did you own your own house?

A: No, we lived like -- we had two rooms. It was pretty comfortable and my mother was home. She was taking care of the children and the house and my father was, as I said, a traveling salesman and he was doing pretty well.

Q: He sold mostly like household ware?

A: Like -- whatever they needed. Like if they needed a material for a dress, or for a coat; or if they needed shoes. Whatever they needed, he used to travel and bring them whatever they needed. I was going to school.

Q: Go to public school?

A: Yeah, I was in sixth grade when the war broke out.

Q: Were you in Polish public school?

A: Yeah, it was really a Jewish, it was just Jewish children, Jewish girls. It was a girls' Jewish school which was a public school; it wasn't a private school. But Jewish children, when I was going to school, the Jewish children, the girls went to Jewish public school and the boys; my brothers, one of my brothers was already school-age, was in a public school for boys, but Jewish boys. Jewish children went separately to school.

Q: There's a fairly large Jewish population there.

A: Yeah, Bedzin had a --. I don't know how true it is but they said it was 32,000 Jews in the town. Is that true?

Q: I have about 22,000 in 1931. So in another nine years or so, it's possible.

A: It's possible, yeah. Every summer when school ended in June, we used to go to a resort place where my father comes from. He comes from Olkusz which is like 25 kilometers from Bedzin. We used to go every summer, we went and spent the summers in Olkusz. It was like very good times, very good memories I have from those summers.

Q: You would stay with your grandparents there?

A: No, we didn't have grandparents but my father had distant family that lived there. We used to rent like a farmer's house and spent like two months, July and August. In 1939, that was in the summer, in September when the war broke out and we were ready to come home, the beginning of September, my father was a young man at the time yet. He was born in 1906, he was like 37 years old. He was

mobilized. He got some notice to come and register because the Polish had -- the Germans had declared war on Poland.

Q: So the Polish army ---?

A: The Polish had to come and register and be ready for the war. So my father was also because he used to -- as a young man, he was a soldier. He was in the medical corps so these people, they were like the first ones to be called in. He went and he registered and we went home by ourselves. I remember my mother and children, we came home and my father was already --. They were fighting on the Oberslassen (ph) on the Upper Silesia (?) they were fighting with the Germans. The Germans were pushing them toward the East and he was ---. The Russians in one of the towns on the eastern front; his company was surrounded by the Russian army which was coming in from the other side. He was caught and he remained with the Russians, on the Russian side. For a while, he was contemplating to come back or not to Bedzin. He didn't want to come back because the Germans were already there. He decided not to come back but he wanted my mother with the children to go there. But she didn't want to go; she didn't want to give everything up and go. So, she didn't go and that was the biggest mistake. But since she didn't go, he stayed in this place in Vloff, Lemberg. He stayed there, the Russians, this was Poland before the second World War but the Russians had occupied it and he stayed there. He didn't want to go into deep Russia thinking that one day he's going to come back to us. Sure enough, 1941, when the Germans and the Russians started, when they broke their agreement... Just for a while there, they had this agreement not to fight. But then they broke this agreement and they did attack; the Germans did attack. My father was in that town where the Germans came in, in Vloff and they -- all the Jews in that area when the Germans came in, they murdered them. They took them out and they dug their own graves and they machine-gunned them. But my father somehow, got away. He was telling us because he did come home -- he was telling us that when they took them out, they were hiding in basements from the Germans, from the Ukrainians mostly, were surrounding these houses where they knew the Jews live and they took them out. One of the Ukrainians recognized him because he used to work -- my father was like a supervisor in a factory there in Lemberg and he recognized him and he said to his friends, he says, he's a good guy, let him go. So he did let him go and that's how he, at that time, he started to smuggle back to Bedzin from there, from that part back to Bedzin. Quite a few people at that time did come back. They saved themselves from the massacres and they did come back. The Germans found out that these people ran away and they came back to the east. We were called the Third Reich -- they came into the Third Reich and they started looking for them. They also were looking and my father was scared. He didn't have any identification because everybody had to have identification. He didn't have any and he had to voluntarily join a group that went to a labor camp. Didn't give his name or anything. Somehow, we had somebody who helped us that he shouldn't because if they would have arrested him they might have sent him to Auschwitz. But this way he went to a labor

camp. That was 1942, that was May 1942 he went to camp, a labor camp. We were chased out at that time from our home. We were put in a ghetto, in the Bedzin Ghetto and it was only a matter of time that we were going to be sent away also. But somehow they gave out cards for the young people, the young, able people, they gave out yellow cards and for the mothers and children and old, they gave the green cards. In 1943, in May just a year later, after my father was sent away, I was -- police came and I was taken out and sent away to a labor camp myself. Three months later, in August, my mother and the children were sent to Auschwitz, to the extermination camps. Tapes aren't working?

Q: No, it's running. What was the name of the labor camp you were sent to?

A: The labor camp was called -- it was in the area of Hirshburg. It was the immediate area where the camp was, was called Seletog Rees (word missing), that means big mountains, Rees (word missing). We worked, I worked in a textile factory. We were 300 women and there were barracks. Every room was occupied by 16 girls. Every morning we used to go, five o'clock, used to go to work and we used to come back, five, six o'clock in the evening.

Q: The factory was within the complex?

A: Not too much, not too much. In the morning, we marched out; we were watched and marched out to work and in the evening we came back. The gates were opened and we were let in. We were surrounded, the barracks were surrounded with wires.

Q: What did you do in the textile factory?

A: I worked at the machines.

Q: At the looms?

A: Looms, yeah. I used to operate three machines myself. Other girls, some of the girls worked in the spinnery where they used to make the cotton but I worked in the textile factory. That was 1943 to -- from 1943, 1944, a year later --.

Q: Late 1944?

A: No, I was until 1945 but 1944, on the outside of our camp, on the outside of the wires, they started putting up barracks. We didn't know what the barracks for. We thought they bringing in more women but it was October, 1944 and they started -- brought in men, Jewish men. They came -- we found out they were coming from the places where the camps were, where the Russians were advancing. Like the Polish, the closer to the Polish borders, Germany was closer, the Germans were coming, like Breslau. So they were pushing these people into Germany. We were a little, we were Lidershassen. Our area was closer to

Lidershasen. Closer to Germany, it wasn't in Germany but it was closer to Germany and these men were brought into this barrack, to these barracks. One evening, when I came home from work and they were bringing them in by the droves, every day, thousands and thousands were being brought in. They were -- they looked so haggard and thin and muddy and --.

Q: Were they brought in by trucks?

A: No, walking, walking; just walking. But it didn't faze me, it didn't faze me because I was occupied with myself and everybody was just going to work and coming from work. We realized what situation we find ourselves so we didn't really worry too much what was going on. But one evening I came home and one of my friends was telling me. She says, Helen what would you do if your father came, was one of the transferred? I knew my father was in camp. He was sent away in 1942.

Q: You didn't know which camp though?

A: I didn't know, no. So when she was telling me this, I says why are you telling me this? She says, well, I hope you are not going to get too excited but I think somebody asked for you. I think its your father because he came. He didn't know where I was. But he knew he had a daughter who was 16 years old. At that time I was already 17, 1944, so he took a chance and he asked. He ways, by the wires, they were standing by the wires and talking with the women. He says, could a Helen Rosenbloom be here. Oh, yeah, there is such a girl! So when I came home and they told me this, I got very hysterical. I said Oh God, this is the happiest day of my life. I met my father, my father. Nobody, I was the only one and I was just in heaven. I didn't know what to do. I didn't realize that this is not such a good thing for me; not such a happy thing. At the time, I was kind of rejoicing. I went in; I wanted to see him, hadn't seen him in two years and then he was in Russia and I didn't have a chance to see him. I didn't know what to do. So I ran into this woman, this German woman that was overseeing us. We were not in the concentration camp yet, we were just a labor camp. I ran into her and I don't know where I got the courage because she was a very stern person. She was a big woman; I was a little thing. I ran into her and I started crying and I said, could you please do for me, my father's here, my father came. Could I see him, could I please see him, just for five minutes. She listened to me, I don't know what made her like that. She really listened to me. She says, you know, I'm going to do something. I'm going to see that you see your father. She went into the other side; she did go in and she spoke to this oversharfuhrer; he was a killer. Tell you later why I know.

Q: She was just a ---?

A: She was just a woman, a German woman, a very prominent kind of a woman, she must have been. She was very respected but she was a real German woman that

took care of Jewish. They trusted her that she'll be enough, good or bad enough to lead a camp. She went in there and I did meet my father. They brought him in. Everybody, all the girls, were 300. All the girls were standing there in the big corridor in the barrack. They brought him in and he was very thin. He was like this. He had a little head, a shaven head and muddy, full of mud. When I embraced him, I could see the mud just on him. My uncle, it was an uncle that came with him, my mother's oldest brother. Just he happened to meet him in that camp when they brought them -- when they brought all these people there, he happened to meet him there. He brought him in so I met the uncle and my father. We saw each other for a few minutes.

Q: They came onto your barracks?

A: He came in -- they brought him in. They brought him in and we met and I was very happy; he was very happy. He asked me, where's mamma, where are the children? I said, look, just the two of us now. I told him the truth. My uncle asked me, where are my children, where? I said, I don't know. Anyway, so I said to myself, what can I do for him. I'd like to save him because this was a place that they brought these people in to die. They used to take them out, this was October, November, December; it was cold. It was so cold, they weren't dressed. They take them out in the morning for work and brought them back when it was dark. You know in the winter, it gets dark early. They used to keep them standing after a day's work, used to make them stand there and look for the -- if they find something on them. So if they found on somebody a potato or a piece of bread that they brought back -- that they got somehow from somebody; they used to beat them. They used to make them fall down and get up, fall down and get up and I used to see that. I was crying day and night. Then they used to bring back a lot of dead people from that work whatever they did outside. I used to worry. Every night, was for a few months, this was going on. Until from October, 1944 to 1945, January, beginning of January, I used to give him everything that I could throw over the wires, bread --. The bread that I got in the morning, I used to get two tiny pieces of bread; at night I used to get the potato; so whenever the soup, I couldn't do it. But whatever I got that was solid, that I packed, I used to throw over the wire. I didn't eat. This is for a few months I didn't eat anything. I used to go to work. The little food that we got, we got very little, I used to give to him. At first, he didn't realize, but then he asked me, from where do you have it? From where do you --? I said, don't worry, don't worry, I have, I have.

Q: You were able to talk with him through the fence?

A: Yes, yes. We used to stand, we used to talk. Somehow and he used to tell me, don't worry, he says, you'll see, we'll survive and we'll be together. We'll take care of each other and a soon as we get liberated, he used to tell me, because he was big politician -- used to come home and bring me the news. Oh, I heard this and I heard that, soon the war will be over. I heard it from this one and from that

- one. We'll soon be liberated. As soon as we get liberated, I'll send you to Aukvotks. Did you hear of the city Aukvotks?
- Q: No.
- A: It's a resort, by Warsaw. The people, the rich people, used to go to -- for the summer. People also that used to have TB; lung --.
- Q: Was a spa of some kind, right?
- A: Yeah, spa. It was a very elegant resort place. He says as soon as we get liberated, I'll send you to Aukvotks. I never forgot this. Anyway, this was going on from October to January, beginning of January. I felt myself getting weaker and weaker but I was -- I'm little but I'm a strong person.
- Q: You pretty much just eating the soup that you got?
- A: That's all I used to eat a whole day. At night, we used to get a soup, a very thin, like a spinach soup, and potatoes, like two potatoes. The potatoes, right away, I didn't even feel like eating them because I knew they're not mine. I used to throw them with the bread from the morning. I used to go away in the morning not eating anything and that was going on for months. I felt myself getting weaker and weaker. I just wanted him to live. In January, I don't remember exactly but I know it was the beginning of January, we were awakened and we had to dress fast and they said we are leaving the camp.
- Q: Up to that point, you still had been working in the factory, in textile?
- A: Factory, continuously working in the factory. We were told to dress and that we are being evacuated from the camp. I looked out and there was nobody there on the other side no more. They took them out also. It seems that they were also advancing towards us, the Allies or the Russian army, whoever it was, was advancing in our direction. We were sent out. They already had begun, the (words missing), didn't see him no more. They -- we went on that march, walking, it was snowing and cold, was blowing --.
- Q: Did they give you any idea where you were heading? Did you have any idea?
- A: No, nothing, nobody says, nobody told us anything. Just told to go. We were going and going and at a certain place, we were put on trains. Those cattle trains and before we passed, I know it was before Czechoslovakia, we were shot at. Planes were coming down, later on we found it must have been -- we were told, it was either American or English that were shooting. Because on the same trains they were also bringing ammunition. They were covered up, the ammunition and we were in these cattle trains.

Q: How long had you marched before you got on the trains?

A: We marched day and night, a long, long time. We put on those trains and were shot at. A lot of the women that I was with was shot and killed.

Q: Through the train?

A: Through those little openings, was little openings in the trains that you had, those cattle trains. It was rrrroo flying back. This girlfriend of mine, in the winter when it was cold, in camp, in Tr(rest of word missing) we used to sleep together when it was cold. This girl was slow kind of person. Whatever she did, she did very slow, always. That was her nature. When we heard the shooting, everybody like fell to the ground. The first thing we did was put on our shoes because we were sitting on the trains without our shoes to be a little bit more comfortable. The first thing we just put our feet in the shoes and we laid down. But she decided she was going to, she had these shoes with laces, she was going to lace up her shoes. It just tore her feet to pieces. She lived until we brought her into Mauthausen. We came into Mauthausen and she died there, in Mauthausen, this girl. But there were other women that were shot or were killed. There were some Hungarian girls. Anyway we were brought into Mauthausen and Mauthausen stays on the mountain. Walking up to the camp, we saw blood on both sides just trickling down, both sides of the road going up to the mountain. We knew that we're going to a very nice place. We came up, we saw a lot of people was shot out there. We stood in Mauthausen, we were in Mauthausen from – must have been like March, beginning of March to April. Also we were put into one big room, was like a barn. Thousands of people packed in, just had enough place just to sit down, just like this. In the morning, we used to go out just in the air and then they chased us back in. Then we were taken out from Mauthausen after a few – I would say about a few weeks we were there, three or four weeks, we were there and we were taken out from Mauthausen. We were lined up and as we were lined up we met up -- we didn't realize that it was so many people there. There were a lot of Jewish men we met that were also lined up to go out from Mauthausen.. By the gate going out from there, they had baskets with breads; by the gate standing. I'll never forget that scene. The men, they threw themselves, they were standing SS men, young German guys were standing at the gate by those baskets. They were supposed to go out. There was pushing, there was pushing. The men, they threw themselves at those baskets and they were standing there and beating them with the guns they were holding. It was such a massacre, was such a killing going on there. Everybody was beaten up but mostly the men. These men were so many years in the camps. They came from starvation and they saw bread so they threw themselves at those baskets. They were -- a lot of them just got hit in the head. They just ran away and some of them were killed.

Q: What was the bread there for?

- A: They wanted – they – some people grabbed the bread. Some did but others didn't. Others got hit. Some did and some didn't. Some were lucky and they got the bread and they got because there was such a pushing with thousands of people going through that gate. Anyway we went through the gate. I don't remember going for that bread and none of the women that I was with; mostly men. We went through the gate. This was in Austria, 1945. This was April. Again we started walking and we walked and it was raining day and night; it was pouring. We walked without food, like every second or third day they gave us a piece of bread and some water. At night we slept on the fields.
- Q: Under nothing, just --?
- A: Under nothing, it was just wet. We were just laying there in the fields and we were so tired, we just slept. At one point I noticed a young German soldier taking a young Jewish guy in one of the fields that we were supposed to have been resting, where we rested for the night. He took a young guy, a young German soldier. There was a pond on that field. He took that guy and he put his head in the water and other Germans came and they looked on what he did until the guy was dead. He just dunked his head in the water, dunked him in the water until he was dead. This was 1945 already, the Germans knew they were losing the war.
- Q: You saw this man being --?
- A: I saw this. I never forget. I saw that young guy, a beautiful – he didn't look like he was ready to die. After walking for days and days, I don't remember how many days but for days we were walking and walking. And Austria is a small country. I don't know why we did that walking but while we marched; while we marched like in the daytime; we had to march like in fives; behind us there were thousands of people going. The end, there were German young guys on motorcycles riding and whoever fell back, if you were weak, you couldn't walk, you were wobbly; there was shooting, shooting. All the way you heard shooting like; it was like you were used already to it. On both sides of the road in Austria, on both sides were just piles and piles of death, dead people. This was going on until we were brought into Gunskilkin. The woods -- there were woods. They brought us into the woods and there were barracks prepared. I heard later on that they started with 7,000, there were 7,000 that came in. We were there in Gunskilkin for 10 days. Very little food, no water, no food, no toilet. In the barracks, were no floors, was mud. You went in, you were lucky to find a little space to sit down. But when I came in, when I came in to Gunskilkin, I felt like this is the end. I am going -- this is my last stop. There was a stump, a tree stump because to put up these barracks, they had to chop down the trees. There was a tree stump and I sat down on that tree stump and I felt myself like expiring. This girl, a Hungarian girl came over to me. These Hungarian girls came to us in 1944 when they were brought to different places from Auschwitz. We received a transport also of Hungarian girls in 1944. We had to teach them the work in the textile factory. This girl with her sister was put to my machines and I had to teach

them the work. The others maybe weren't so kind to them. They didn't speak Yiddish, they didn't speak Polish. You couldn't communicate with them. It was very hard to communicate with them. They were different than we were. You see the Polish people -- we were used to suffering, so many years, since 1939. They just recently -- so they were a little different than we were. They were -- and some of our people, some of the women that I was with, treated them not so nice. But I felt sorry for these two. One was a very pretty girl. She was so pretty; she had dark hair and blue eyes. She was so attractive, she was so gorgeous and she had a younger sister, also a very pretty girl. The sister must have been maybe 13 years old but she was nicely developed so she went through Auschwitz. They stood on my machines and I taught them and I was kind to her and she looked forward to stay with me. I used to somehow communicate with her. She came over to me in Gunskilkin and she says to me --. She saw me sitting there. She says, come on. She says come with me. She took me away from the people that I was with, my Polish friends, Polish Jewish friends. She took me with her. She says come with me. I went with her and we found three places. She was very smart. She used to go out and bring somehow a piece of bread. They used to bring in some rations. But there was such a pushing that not everybody could do that. If you were weak, if you were sick, you couldn't do that anymore. But she, she used to go out and bring in for her sister, she brought for me. I hardly could go out. When I used to go out, it was only when I went to the bathroom. I already had dysentery and I had to go very often. They had these outhouses. There was a big walk. Until I got there, the mud was so -- was impossible to walk. People used to stick their feet in and that's where they fell and that's where they died. We used to walk over dead people. By the toilets, by the outhouses, there were stacks and stacks of dead people, stacks of them, just there. I used to go there. I used to just look away and just go in and come back. I felt myself sick and her sister was very sick also. She was okay, the sister was sick. That was for ten days, laying in that mud and not washing. Every time I touched myself, I used to take off lice that were so big like my hand. I used to put my hand under my arms -- everybody was crawling away. Unbelievable lice, I have never seen in my life. I was there in camp and this was unbelievable. Friday May the 5th we heard some commotion and it started -- we were free but most people --

Q: The commotion --?

A: Most people were sick, everyone. There were some that still could walk but most were very ill. That was Friday. Next day, Saturday, I decided I'm going to join my friends, my previous friends from camp that I know from home. I joined them and see what they do. So I went there and they decided that they're going to go out. We were all sick, we were all holding on to each other and we walked out from the camp, everybody. That was Saturday morning. As we walked out, we saw Americans on tanks. They were throwing candies and gum and everything, they were throwing. They saw what was happening. The roads were full of these people that were walking out from the camps. They were throwing their rations,

cans with all kinds of food. But then after a day, they decided to give us, these people give us shelter. We got shelter in these houses that -- was like a camp, a soldiers' camp. We got these -- a room. We were five girls. My friends, we got one room with beds, with these cots that the soldiers used to sleep on. It was very nice, it was clean and there were kitchens opened up. I don't know if it was Red Cross or whatever. All over, kitchens opened up and they used to cook and they used to feed so food was no problem. But we were sick and I, especially, was very ill. But I wanted --

Q: Still with dysentery?

A: Dysentery, continuously dysentery, But I was very weak, very weak. But I wanted to live so much. The will to live was so tremendous that I can't believe that today people want to live so badly. I was young, I guess, and that's what made me strive for that. But I was pushing, I was getting up in the morning, dressing, but I could not help myself, very sick. I had a temperature; I didn't realize. I was going out, I was walking, I was washing up. I was dressing, I was -- but I felt myself very sick. One day I woke up in the morning, very high fever. I realize that I had high fever and I was full of spots, was brown spots all over me. They called up emergency or whatever at that time was. I was taken to a hospital, I had typhoid, very bad. Typhoid and TB and dysentery and everything.

Q: Let's pause for a second.

(End of Side A)

A: I wasn't put -- it was like a makeshift hospital. The doctors were German, the nurses were German. I was laying, I remember myself falling asleep, like dozing off and waking up, dozing off and waking up. I find myself on the floor, on a straw sack. For the longest, longest time, I wasn't put into a bed? There were beds but they thought I'm dying because I looked like I was dying because I didn't eat anything, I didn't drink anything. I don't remember getting an injection or a medicine, nothing. I was laying there and there were others that were laying -- was like a corridor. We were lined up and laying there and I wasn't out into a bed. This was going on for a very long time. then after a while, I woke up and I did find myself in a bed, in a white -- white sheets.

Q: Days later this was, or --?

A: This was a very long time. This was May, June, July. This was three months later. This was August already. I found myself in bed, in a bed and a nurse standing over me. She was taking the temperature and she was smiling. She says, you know you're going to be okay. She said in German to me that the fever fell. Your fever fell, she says, and you're going to live. You're going to be okay. But I was still -- I was laying in a bed and behind me was a window. The window was open, it was summer and I could hear voices downstairs, laughing and people

walking. I was conscious because I was very weak. You know when you're weak, you just want to sleep. When I heard the noise and I heard laughing and I heard talking and I said would I like to do that. To be able to walk and also laugh but I couldn't. My feet didn't want to get up. I couldn't get up and I had to be -- she used to bring me in the pan, the bedpan a few times a day and this was going on for a long time. But one day -- I couldn't eat. I couldn't eat but I had a friend. I met a man in that camp where we were brought in, in that soldiers' camp, when we were brought in, after Gunskilkin, I met a Polish man that was in Mauthausen as a political prisoner. He was a Christian. He was much older than me but he liked me. I don't know -- at the time I didn't realize of his intentions but I needed a friend. He was good to me and when I started getting better and my friends found out that I'm alive because this was a long --. They didn't know what had happened to me; they couldn't find me. They didn't know what had happened, they thought I'm dead. But they did find out that I'm alive and they started to come and visit me. They told him that I'm alive, that I'm okay. He came to visit me and since I couldn't eat and I looked very bad, he says to me, what would you like to eat, what would you like? There must be something that you would like to eat. I told him, I remember how my mother used to cook rhubarb. I had this taste or rhubarb, a lot of sugar, sour and sweet. I would like to have rhubarb. Well, tomorrow we're going to have rhubarb so he brought me rhubarb. I started eating the rhubarb and he brought me sandwiches with salami and butter and cheese. I used to sit and I had to eat it up while he sat there, I had to eat it up. But one thing he says to me. He says, you eat it up. If I see you sharing this with your friends, I'm going to kill you. He did that. I ate, I started eating. Then my friends started bringing me different things. But I still couldn't go down, I couldn't walk. But I made up my mind one day, I am going to go down to the bathroom. I'm going to walk because that window did it. That window I had behind me. That sun, those beautiful days gave me such an incentive to live and to want to be normal, so I said I am going to go down and I am going to walk. I'm going to the bathroom. To go to the bathroom you have to pass a corridor and I started -- I went down with my head was going like this. My feet were like rubber but I was holding on by the wall. Took me an hour until I got to the bathroom. All the doctors, I'll never forget that scene; all the doctors and the nurses were standing there like they -- they were looking like they saw a ghost. That's how I must have looked. When they saw how I looked, very bad. But after that time, I walked down. I went, I did it on my own and I went back and I did it again and again. A few days I went and I joined my friends, these five girls that I was with before, before I went to the hospital. I was weak for months, very weak. I was laying most of the time but they were very good to me. They shared everything they had with me and they --. I recuperated, not fully but I did get back a little bit where I could function. Then I met my husband. We left that place. That place was called Hirschegg, by the way, the camp of the German soldiers. The area was called Hirschegg. We left Hirschegg and we went into Lintz. We married 1946.

Q: In Austria?

- A: I never met my father again. I was looking for him. I was going from camp to camp because they had these places, these displaced persons camps. People that were coming from all over. From there, they were going to Israel or to America, or Australia or whatever. A lot of them passed through Austria. I made sure that I pass every camp and I looked. I wrote letters and I left my name everywhere. It seems that he was killed on one of those, on that march that he disappeared.
- Q: You don't know for sure?
- A: I don't know what happened, what could have happened to him. He was killed or died from starvation. But we married and the following year, 1947, our son was born in Lintz, in Austria. The following year, 1948, in December, we came to the United States where my husband had some family. We've been here since and I'm doing pretty -- I think I'm doing pretty well for somebody who's supposed to be dead. But it seems that it was -- I was destined to live for all of them, right?
- Q: I think so.
- A: I carry this, I do live for all of them. I try to live for all of them. I try to be as strong as possible. I'm trying to be helpful to my husband with my strength. He gives me a lot of strength here. He is a strong person. We are two survivors.
- Q: I have a couple of questions. That moment in Gunskilkin, when you sat on the stump and felt like this was the end, that was a bad feeling that you were going to die, you felt? Not that this was the end of the war?
- A: I felt -- no, no. That wasn't the end, no, no. I heard nothing about the end of the war. I just -- we were fighting from day to day for the existence of our lives. A piece of bread made you go on another hour or another day, that's all.
- Q: Those barracks were horribly crowded.
- A: These barracks in Gunskilkin was, if ever somebody imagines hell, this was hell. Because it was -- what they did is they put up the walls, the barracks. They didn't put up any planks, nothing on the floor.
- Q: It had been raining?
- A: This was March, March April. It was raining -- it was like coming down day and night just like curse. On top of everything else, it was just pouring, raining and mud. You were laying in mud. There was enough space, there wasn't space for everybody because I know of people -- I remember people standing. They didn't have place to sit down. The bathrooms that we had to go to, those outhouses, with those stacks and stacks of dead people. In Gunskilkin, you have graves there of thousands of people, thousands. Young people, young guys, young --,

everybody was young. Old people couldn't survive, everybody was young. I remember seeing laying there people from Auschwitz with the stripes. They were laying there with the striped suits. These people had been there, had been years in camps. The last minute, this was just days before liberation, they died. They died of --. I was, I was, really this was, I don't know how I survived. I was so sick and I was laying there. Nobody, I don't remember anybody giving me a little water or a pill, an injection, nothing. When they brought me into that bed, when I found, when I opened up my eyes and I saw this nurse standing by me, it was like coming back from the dead. Then next to me was a bed with somebody that she recognized me, this girl. She says to me, you know this bed where you laying, my sister just died, that's why you got the bed, she says to me. I think I'm very strong or there's some higher-up that wanted me to live. But I wanted my father to live very badly, I wanted him to live so much.

Q: What was his name?

A: His name was David Leon. I wanted him to live. I said -- I used to pray to God every night, I said, take my life and let him live. When I saw what was going on there -- how they used to torture these people. All the days in the cold, not dressed and not fed. They used to bring them back into the camps at night and if they found a piece of bread or a potato, they used to torture them to death. There was my father amongst them. How can a child see that? I used to adore my father. My father was a very idealistic, a very wonderful person. He was the one that used to say that for us Jews, I remember as a little girl, he used to tell his children, he says, for us Jews, there is only one way for us to exist is to have our own country. People must have a country. That's why I'm a Zionist.

Q: What do you remember about when the Germans first came into your town?

A: When they came in, September, the first thing they did. We had the most beautiful shul in our city. If anybody -- I think most people remember that shul as like a -- like the temple in Jerusalem. Inside was the work like Michelangelo. I remember being just twice, maybe twice or three times in the shul. It was work like Michelangelo's work on the ceilings.

Q: It's called the Great Synagogue.

A: Oh, was that a gorgeous synagogue, outside and inside. It was a dream. First thing is that they burned that synagogue. They threw, as the synagogue was burning, they threw pigs and cows into the fire. They used to shout. They used to take out people in the talasim. There was a lot of -- across from the shul was a mikvah. Not far from there, around in that area, lived a lot of Hasidim. They used to take them out and shot them and threw them in the -- when the shul was burning. This is the first thing they did.

Q: Many homes were lost too, weren't they?

A: Around there, the whole area. We went back in 1979, Irving and I went back to Bedzin. We went to Poland, among other cities, we visited Bedzin. I couldn't find the place where the shul was. I wanted -- not so much to see where we lived even, but I wanted to see what the shul --. I wanted to know if I recognized the place where the shul stood. All the houses around were burned, destroyed. There was a church not far from there. The church stood but in the middle where the shul stood is one little tree is growing. One tiny, little tree is growing. If I ever cried, that was the place. I cried, believe me, and I'm not a great -- but that's where I cried because I remember that burning of that shul. This was such a beautiful edifice, it was the most magnificent thing.

Q: Were you a religious family?

A: No, not so much. My mother used to light candles and we used to observe the holidays but my father didn't go to shul too often. He went to shul only when a nice cantor came from some place, a big cantor. He loved to hear singing, cantorial. He, himself, liked to sing and I take that in my life to sing also

Q: Did you go to Hebrew school?

A: No, but I had a teacher, a Hebrew teacher come in. We had, my brothers went to Cheder but I had a teacher come in, teaching me Hebrew.

Q: Let's see. In some stuff I had read that in 1940 or '41, a lot of refugees came into Bedzin. Do you remember anything about that?

A: 1944. They came --. 1944?

A: 1940 to '41.

A: Yeah, they came in from Germany, a lot. Then they came in from the areas where the Germans took back from Russia. Where the Jews lived, the Owstuk and that whole eastern Poland area where the Jews did not escape into Russia. Where they remained, the ones that weren't killed because most of them were killed right then and there. They self-dug pits, they were machine gunned. But the ones that escaped, a lot of them came back. That's when my father came back. That was - 41, they came back from the east. A lot of them came in, came to us because Bedzin was a Jewish town. They found shelter.

Q: There were a couple of deportations of thousands to Auschwitz

A: Every day, every day were deportations, every day. Every day they marched people to the trains. But I don't know how we remained until 1943. I think my mother, my mother worked. She had some kind of a -- like a protection because she worked in a hospital.

- Q: Did she work all the time, like when you were growing up also?
- A: No, no, no. But the Germans made everybody work. She worked in a hospital during the war. I and my brother next to me also had to work. We worked in a factory of leather pocketbooks, how do you call, cases, leather cases, we used to work. The two little ones --.
- Q: This was from early on, when the Germans first came in?
- A: Yeah, we had to work. The two little ones, I had like a three-year-old and a five-year-old little one, a sister five-year-old, three-year-old brother, they were left alone home. We had to work.
- Q: So there were four children altogether?
- A: Five.
- Q: Five children?
- A: The two brothers and I had to -- they were young but we had to go to work. That's how we remained, we were working like we showed that we are productive so we worked and we stayed on. They knew that they'll get us eventually.
- Q: What about the forming of the ghetto? That was like in early '43?
- A: Forty-three, no, '42.
- Q: Forty-two.
- A: Forty-two, end of '42. Forty-three, maybe in the beginning they put everybody and I wasn't there. Maybe they put everybody there but little by day, they eliminate every day, every day transports went away. They eliminated -- most men, young men and young women were sent to labor camps. Families with children were, mothers with children, grandmothers, were going to Auschwitz. From our area, everybody went to Auschwitz. Because it was only like, I think 30 kilometers from Bedzin. Was the closest.
- Q: What was your mother's name?
- A: Balcia
- Q: B-a-l?
- A: B-a-l-c-i-a.

Q: Was your father born in Bedzin?

A: No, he was born in Olkusz. That's where we used to go, summer resort.

Q: That's right. How do you spell that?

A: O-l-k-u-s-z.

Q: Do you know the date of his birth, approximately?

A: I know only 1906. My mother also, 1906. By the way, I didn't tell you a very interesting story. Five years ago, I thought I'm all alone, I don't have anybody, not a cousin, nobody. I had a family, my aunt, one of my mother's sisters, went to Russia in 1939, '40. What happened to her is -- she had four children, this aunt. She lived in Kartavitsa. Her husband was taken into the Polish army at the same time that my father was taken in. He, when the Germans were pushing the Polish soldiers back, he lived in Kartavitsa which is almost on the German border. I don't know what happened; he got himself lost from his company or what. He started marching back to Kartavitsa with his shoes on -- with his uniform -- I don't know, he got lost. He was going in that direction to Kartavitsa. A Polish officer saw him and he shot him, killed him. While he was laying there, he was dying, he was telling the peasants that came around, he says, my wife, I have here my address wallet. They did come and they told her. She buried him. She took the children and she went to Russia. It was right in the beginning, she went to Russia. I knew about that. I was a young kid, I was only 12 years old but I remember it. After the war, couldn't find them -- thought they died. A lot of people died in Russia. But five years ago, I went to a wedding. I'm sitting there with a woman and we started talking and she asked me from where are you? I said I'm from Bedzin. I ask her. She says I'm from Kartavitsa. I says Kartavitsa, I had family in Kartavitsa. She says what was their names. I said their name happened to be Boshnitza. She says Boshnitza, I know Boshnitas in Israel. She says, my sister lives in Haifa and she has a store and she has Boshnitas coming right into the store. I know she deals with people Boshnitza. I says maybe it's different people, maybe it's not those Boshnitas. She says to me, I'll find out for you. That same evening, she called me back and she asked me the names. I remembered the names. Sure enough, it was these Boshnitas, the children were still alive. There were two girls, and two men and two women. They were children at the time. They were younger than we were. I met these cousins but it was a very -- the meeting is just also -- beyond how we met. Because when I called him, he couldn't believe it. He thought somebody's playing a game with him. After all these years! I says look, my mother's name, I gave my mother's name, my father's name, don't be afraid. I think you are my cousin, I said. Sure enough, he started crying also. He says, you know I have so many people sometimes calling me and telling me that and then I'm disappointed. So anyway I met this uncle that I met with my father in camp.

Q: Oh, really?

A: He was at that time 92 years old but he recognized me. He was living with one of my cousins because he lost his whole family. But he remarried and his wife, already second wife had died. He was living, an old, old man, living with one of those cousins. He recognized me and he asked me. He says, he told me about my father, how he remembered my father was with him and how he met me. Ninety-two years old. He lived then and for a few years I had the pleasure of going --. He went into a home, a very fine home in Israel and we used to go visit him. His head -- his body was going but his head was so good.

Q: Did he know, did he know what happened to your father?

A: No, they lost ---.

Q: They were in camp together?

A: They met in Seelotog in that camp, they met there. But then when they took them out, they lost each other. What happened that he survived and my father was a stronger man, was tall and he was stronger and he didn't survive. This uncle was a little guy but he survived. So I have these cousins, I have these four cousins. But they are, one girl lost her -- both of her legs are dead, frozen in Russian and she is a cripple, one of them. She's suffering but they're doing okay. I keep in contact with them and they always call me and I call them. It gives me a good feeling. After all these years. This just happened, just five years ago and I was looking for them. I looked everywhere. This is my story. Life goes on as they say, right?

Q: Yes, it does.

A: I hope that this will never, never happen again.