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I am immediately transported back to fifty years ago as you mentioned, December 8 and it was December 7 that I was in Budapest with my mother and my sister Chicha and we had gone to Budapest from the small town where I lived in Kisvarda, Hungary because we had received instructions from my father in America to go to see the American consul in Budapest on Monday morning. It was December 8. But we are now December 7 and my mother and my sister and I are enjoying a very happy and special breakfast at a friend's house in a beautiful part of Budapest, Buda, as a matter of fact, and we are looking forward to the appointment tomorrow morning because that appointment is going to bring us to the promised land of America. And we were full of expectations and joy because we are the chosen family, the lucky ones who will escape Hitler's hatred and it was Sunday morning and we were having this wonderful breakfast and the radio was turned on by our host and we heard the announcement that Hungary has declared war against the United States and that was of course Pearl Harbor, December 7, and since Hungary declared war against the United States needless to say there was no appointment at the American consul the following morning so the very happy Sunday morning turned into a very tragic day, a very tragic breakfast and that announcement on the radio resulted in our eventual deportation to Auschwitz [Japanese naval forces attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 at 7:55 a.m Hawaii time; Hungary did not declare war on the United States on December 8, but Germany and Italy did so on December 11; Britain declared war on Hungary on December 6, 1941; the United States declared war on Hungary on June 5, 1942].

So Hungary was not the promised land in 1941?

Hungary was the cursed land from the day I remember. I was always called the dirty Jew, smelly Jew, the translation is smelly Jew. And I was called that by my classmates and as I was walking down the main streets of my home town Kisvarda the riffraff hanging about referred to me as the smelly Jew. I was not smelly, a very dear child of a wonderful Jewish family. I had to live with this insult always and we thought that that's the way it is everywhere. It's certainly that way where I am living. The anti-semitism was fierce always. If it was not on the surface it was so deeply imbedded in the character of the people we shared the town with, the non-Jews that it was a living presence always. I do not remember anything but an anti-semitic atmosphere. That's what I grew up in, that's what I lived in, that's what I hoped to escape. When Hitler came of course all that was intensified a thousand fold and there was no escape.

Could we back up a little bit and talk about the family and growing up in Kisvarda. When were you born?

In May 28 1921.

In Kisvarda?

In Kisvarda.

Your family?

They were, my mother I believe born in the town she grew up in she came from a town called Hajdunanas. I have never been there it was some kilometers away, probably not very far, but those days it seemed far. And she was the daughter of a very distinguished rabbi. It was a whole line of rabbinical background. From what I understand it was a very distinguished rabbinical background her mother was a Schreiber [scribe]. The word *Schreiber* is a writer [a scribe] and I think in Hebrew it was called *Sofair* and there is great distinction to that name and I think that all of the *Schreibers* are the same family all over the world. My grandmother I think was actually the one who inherited the rabbinical seed. It comes from her father I believe. And that she must have married my grandfather whose name was Halpert and he became the rabbi of the town Hajdunanas and then he died before I was born and my mother had enormous respect and high, tremendously high regard for her father. I always heard her talk about her father, not so much about her mother whom we knew and I don't know, we weren't crazy about her, but my grandfather my mother spoke of with tremendously high regard that he was an extraordinarily intelligent man and a great Talmudic scholar who has written Talmudic works as many members of the family have written many large Talmudic contributions to the Talmudic literature and I remember big books that were written by them, various members of my mothers family. And my mother claimed always that her father as she spoke of him she would say that he was a very sensitive man and that he was very intelligent and he was so sensitive that he could not live with the idea that man kills his fellow man and evidently he died of a heart attack. But my mother always associated his death with the first world war that it was such a blow to his philosophy of humanity that he couldn't live with the brutality of the war even though I am sure that he knew the history of the world was full of wars but probably because he was right in the midst of this world wide conflict which was evidently not much of a war in comparison to the one that followed it. And I always heard these very sensitive talks about my grandfather. She evidently loved him very much. I never met him. He died during the first world war, several years before I was born. My mother was one of seven children. There were five girls and two boys. Both of the boys became rabbis. My uncle, one of my uncles, was the rabbi in [ph 124 Shumkutch?] which eventually became Romania and Transylvania you know

after the first World War and I remember him well because he came to our house once and I remember him on a Sunday morning listening to the radio and because in his own home as a rabbi he did not have one in those days and he was an enormously tall beautiful looking man with a long beard and the long kaftan and a remarkably sophisticated for the position he was in. And my mother's younger brother became the rabbi after his father died in this town, Hajdunanas, but also very tall and very distinguished looking gentleman. Whenever I heard about my mother's family from strangers, visitors, people who we met as we travelled somewhere, that they were a very special family because the members of the family were very intelligent and very cultivated people. My mother was in particular spoken of as the most intelligent of all. The kids who had worldly ambitions that she could not fulfill because she was the daughter of a rabbi. She had to toe the line so to speak and could not do really what she wanted to do, but her mind was so active that she absorbed all of the worldly influences not only that came her way but that she sought out and she was a reader. She's read such an enormous amount. She was so cultivated and her ambition was to become a physician which she, of course, could not fulfill because of the status of her family. You know the very religious rabbinical daughter would not go to a medical school, of course, but she would have to get married at the age of eighteen or nineteen to a chosen groom who was of high reputation. My father was the son of a landowner, a very religious Jewish family from a small town. But an arranged marriage came about because he was an outstanding Talmudic Yeshiva Bucher. How do you translate Yeshiva Bucher? [Yeshiva student]

Rabbinical school

Rabbinical school and he had an extraordinary mind. As people were talking about my mother being so very intelligent he was being talked about as being the most learned Talmudic student and indeed he was really famous. Even to the point if today I go to one of these weddings, the descendants of these people who come from my mother's hometown or my hometown or any other part of Hungary, they would remember this very intelligent Toby, my mother's Yiddish name.

Toby

Tereza, Terry Maria Tereza was her Hungarian name

Maria Tereza?

Maria Tereza, evidently she was named after the Hapsburg queen and my mother named me after Queen Isabella. I don't know what the association is the royal hangup.

Could you please spell your mother's name?

I think it was T E R E Z A .

And her last name?

H A L P E R T

And your father's?

My father's name was Menhir. I heard it spelled as Menyhert the e has an umlaut [accent], Katz K A T Z. And he was a very handsome looking man, a really beautiful face. He was totally different from my mother. My mother was steeped in this quiet worldly knowledge and cultivation of music and literature and my father shut all of that out entirely and was only interested and focused in on Hasidic and Talmudic matters and Talmudic world. That was his world. So they were really two opposites, yet giants in their own rights

equally matched in level of intellect

Yes the level of intellect was on par evidently but one was in total opposition to the other.

What kind of schooling did your mother have?

Probably public school and probably not much schooling because that was forbidden also in that circle but tremendous self education. That was probably on par with any college education that we know. The six children who came to this insane world of Auschwitz and some of us survived, then to America - whatever we are is what my mother poured into us; not my father at all because we were not interested in his world but my mother poured so much into us that I feel we have had an education on top of whatever little education was available to people in our station. It was so hugely enriched by my mother who endowed us with it, never stopped. I remember we would ask her questions and she would say "How would I know. I was six years old a long time ago." Two minutes later she gave the answer, of course. She had the answer to almost everything. We all talk about her with such rich memories and admiration and I am sure it is justified. So many people cannot be wrong. So many people who still mention her with such reverence. I personally was

unquestioningly like my father. There was something about her and he was nowhere near as good and gentle as my mother. He was much rougher in many ways but somehow I liked him. I always had criticism from my mother but I didn't like many of the things, many of her ways, but I am my mother's daughter and I am trying to fulfill her expectations of me, almost totally ignoring what my father might have expected from us. As a matter of fact I think all of us are fulfilling the expectations my mother had of us and trusted that we would come through with those values that she poured into us that were so important to her. And I think we did come through intact almost with her values and her ideas about life both in humanitarian method which was the number one issue in her life - to be an absolute humanitarian. Although she was fully aware of the cruelties that man is capable of. I think that probably she didn't know the details of Auschwitz. She never even heard of Auschwitz because maybe in this country there were headlines in the New York Times but we never heard the word Auschwitz. We lived in a totally repressive country where fascism was the order of the day. We didn't know anything. We only knew what Hitler fed us in the controlled press and the controlled radio. So we had absolutely no way of knowing anything and we certainly didn't know they were burning people and because we were the last country occupied, all those years passed us by with deprivations. We did not get enough potatoes or enough bread because Hitler stole everything from my country. But we lived in our homes and we had no idea. We never heard the word Warsaw ghetto, only some of these people who were in leadership positions all over. The world knew a great deal more than we knew. We are even accused today. Why didn't we do something? Why didn't we go. Who knew anything and certainly who would expect that the war is not going to end and we will be alive. We have suffered deprivations, separation from my father and everything sounded terribly ominous and frightening from what we heard of Hitler's speeches which were on incessantly and that he hates the Jews but none of that added up to a crematorium and we knew that certain people were caught and interrogated and beaten. We heard these stories from people who passed by trying to escape from neighboring countries which were occupied by Hitler, like Czechoslovakia and Romania. They passed through and told us some horror tales. Those people were interrogated but no one said anything about people being transported in cattle cars to another planet named Auschwitz and burned. When we heard these gruesome stories we were as incredulous as people are today when we tell them about the holocaust. Who would believe it?

What kind of stories did you hear from refugees? Were they coming from Poland or Germany?

No not from Poland or Germany. They usually came from Slovakia and Czechoslovakia and Romania. Those around us who passed by managed to escape and they found a nice lodging in my home because my mother was always in the forefront of aiding the disadvantaged. So as children we listened to some of these tales but there were not that many people who escaped and found their way to our home and how much do children believe; today there is television to show them what happens in Ethiopia and children starving and all these horrible things that are. But at least it's shown on TV. It is more believable. But then the kids go back to school and go and listen to their

rock and roll music and figure it is far away, it's not where we are; it's not going to happen to us, we are human beings.

Speaking of school what kind of schools did you attend? Can you tell us something about going to school in Kisvarda?

Yes, there was a Jewish elementary school that my family was not allowed to attend because my father was an anti-zionist. And they taught about zionism in the Jewish school. It's kind of crazy. My father sent me to a non-Jewish school, the town elementary school, then we would go to junior high there. And it starts somewhere early. We didn't go to gymnasium, but very few Jews attended the gymnasium and it wouldn't have been people like my father's children because he wouldn't allow us to go for that worldly education. Wo you know it starts somewhere after Junior High and maybe it starts early enough, before eighteen.

Fourteen or so?

Probably there were some kind of courses that we were attending. I remember that one time Hungary was friends with Italy when Mussolini was still the good guy and there was something called Istituto Italiana di Cultura and we attended courses like that and there was a tremendous amount of self education and reading and a tremendous amount at home and my mother's prompting and the kids all were very interested in all of the worldly matters and that kind of education went on in the home forever. When my father went to America we were able to send Rachel to a more....

Rachel being your younger sister?

My younger sister. My father was no longer there so my mother was able to send her to further schooling. I don't know how far she got but then when it came to my youngest sister, Potyo, it was the antisemitism. When Hitler came was at our doorstep I know that she was brutalized. Her school life was cut short with real brutality. I think she was thirteen and a half when she was killed. I think she was thirteen in January and she was killed in May in 1944. But as she was going to school she was - I don't know a year or two, sometime before they deported us I don't have the time frame - she developed the - what is this thing you get?

Appendicitis?

Appendicitis, and she had to be operated on. In those days an operation like that was a major event and you had to stay home at least six weeks after the operation. I don't know how long she was in the hospital but she had to be removed from school and had to have surgery. When she was at home recovering and was getting very lonely and anxious to go back to school and my mother went to her school. They refused her. She was not permitted to reenter school because she was out. Once she was out for that long time they got rid of her and that was another Jewish kid they got rid of and they don't have to take her back. She was no longer in the school system. They refused to take her back and I remember the child suffering enormously, pleading with my mother that she should go back to school and beg the principal to take her back. She was lonely and she was not learning anything and all her friends were in school and it was a tragic time. In the end she wound up in Auschwitz and she never went back to school. But I remember it with great pain, how she suffered from not being allowed to reenter school. Now some of the other Jewish kids probably continued but this was a good way to get rid of another Jewish child. There is lots to say about my sister Potyo who was truly a child of war, as we all were children of war, but none more than she was because she was really born into the war. She was 13 years old. I'm talking now about 1944 so she must have been born in 1931.

Her name was?

Her name was Helen but we called her Potyo that's some kind of endearing term for I don't know "the little one"

The baby in the family?

Yes, the baby in the family.

And that's spelled?

POTYO O with an umlaut [accent]. And she was a very beautiful child and different from the other children in my family. Hitler was riding high already when she was growing up and she didn't even know anything else than a life that is colored by Hitler and his speeches and everything else. She was a different kind of child from the rest of us, tremendously self-centered and obviously a very intelligent child. You know I have great pain talking about her even now and by now she would be well over 50. She would be an old woman and it would....

Over 50, that's not old.

But to me she is that child, that beautiful 13 year old lean child who evidently knew nothing but fear and love in her - this enormous love for the family and this fear of what Hitler's era did to her and the war came. She was 9 years old when the war broke out and I can only think of her as fear and love and by fear i mean the fact that she was so terrified of being torn away from the family. She was already a tall little girl a normal not a little bit of a child, but a growing little child and she insisted on sleeping with my mother. When my father left she always slept with my mother, but even when my father was home she wanted to sleep with my mother because she was afraid. I remember I do not know if other members of my family remember her crying out in the middle of the night having terrible dreams and it was Hitler, something about Hitler. So this was a child of fear and love. The love of her family was enormous and I think her death might be somewhat the result of her wanting to be with her mother because I am sure that she hung onto my mother, wanted to go with her wherever she was going and sure enough Mengele did ask her. From the accounts I heard from my sisters, my two sisters who were on their way to the crematorium because Mengela picked us out separately. He picked out Chicha and myself first and my older sister, Cipi, and Rachel kept going to the crematorium and then Mengele turned around the group and made another selection. I think Rachel still to this day does not remember if it was Potyo or she who answered Mengele's question of "Du kleine, wie alt bist du?" and you little one, how old are you? And the indication was that he asked her for her age to contemplate to pick her out. Had she said 15 he probably would have put her out to the life side but my sister Rachel does not remember if it was the child who answered, Potyo, that she was only 13, not saying that I am 13 and a half but lying a half a year, or she, Rachel, said it; and that sentence haunted, has been haunting Rachel all her life and she still doesn't know if she said it or the child said it and she's never free of guilt and its been a terrible life for her because she has been suffering tremendously. And Potyo wanted to go with my mother. Whether Potyo was killed with my mother in the crematorium or whether she was put in the open fire that they built in those days when the Hungarian Jews were brought in. The crematoriums were working day and night in Auschwitz and they burned according to the Kapo who told us, who was there many years before. She survived a number of years. Eventually she was killed also, but she told us that never had she seen in Auschwitz this kind [ph 510 homage] as when the Hungarian Jews were brought in. And whereas they used to burn 10,000 people a day they were burning 10 to 24,000 people a day and the crematoriums. I think there were 5 of them. Four or five of them were not proved sufficient enough for the daily carnage so they built open fires and evidently Elie Wiesel saw some of these live children being thrown into the fires because there was no room in the crematoriums. And I am still haunted because I don't now if Potyo because she was a child was thrown alive into the open fire or if she was put into the crematorium but I do know this much that I saw the flames and I heard the shrieks and it was obvious that in addition to the fire that was burning in the crematoriums there was another fire to accommodate the extra world of the extra burden of Jews that they felt had to be burned up so there was a lot of live burning.

Do you recall the date?



Oh yes it was May 31, 1944.

Just a day after your birthday?

No, we left Kisvarda on the May 29 and my birthday is on May 28 and that's the day we were packing for what they called the deportation and we didn't know what the hell it meant, deportation. But we were packing getting ready for this.

Who ordered you to pack?

Who ordered us to pack? The sixteen year old SS who came into the ghetto of Kisvarda with a silver pistol and a dog. I guess a German Shepherd and this is the first time we saw the Germans because after that point Hitler marched into Hungary on March 19, 1944 Sunday afternoon then in quick succession because they have learned their own method of madness by then so well of how to kill Jews. First they started manually killing one by one then they developed these incredibly sophisticated ways of burning them and gassing them and burning them and all that, and by the time it came to Hungary what they started in 1939 what they started in Poland, let's say, ended up in Hungary as a push button system and that's how they were able to desecrate the Hungarian Jewish population in a matter of three weeks I believe. 600,000 Hungarian Jews I believe, it was a highly developed system. But Hitler marched in on March 19 1944 and probably about four weeks later, which was the day after Passover they allowed us to stay in our homes on Passover, for Passover, and the day after Passover we were herded into the ghetto.

By the Germans?

By the Hungarians.

By the Hungarians?

By the Hungarian Gendarmes the most cruel creatures on the face of the earth with their high hats and feathers and rifles and shoulders.

No Germans in Kisvarda yet?

No. It was the Gendarmes - the I don't remember much activity by the policemen but I do remember the Gendarmes. I remember clearly two Gendarmes took each family into the ghetto. They came to each home - two Gendarmes - and delivered them into the ghetto with their fifty kilos on their backs. And we did not see the Germans. Evidently the machinery worked in such a way that the Germans had no authority on the fate of the Hungarian Jews until just before the deportation and then they seemed to co-mingle with the Gendarmes - the Gendarmes and the Nazis, the SS. The first time we saw the SS was on Sunday afternoon May 28, 1944, on my birthday. And he came in with the Gendarmes and they lined up all of the ...I remember this beautiful sunny afternoon in May and we were ordered out of our cramped quarters and I think in each courtyard they lined them up - I think the gendarmes did that and the ghetto police and people who worked in the ghetto in some kind of leadership positions - and we were to appear in the courtyard and then the Nazi came and he announced each name. As he called out the names, the names that were called out had to move over to the other side.

How did they know the names?

The names were collected well in advance by the Jewish management -people evidently the Nazis had dealt with from Budapest throughout the country with this. They had various.....

Did you have a council?

Yea, they had a council I guess.

How far back was this council set up?

Oh this was after Hitler marched in but before we were taken to the ghetto because this was when we were in our home yet. And they had an actual census taker - one or two people assigned for these jobs. Whether they were paid jobs, I don't remember. But I know that they came to our home. They went to each home with a form and they listed each person living in that home. So there was no escape from that. You couldn't lie and say Mrs. Katz lives here but her children are not living here - everybody was listed. And they compiled this - it was a regular census taking of Jews.

Only of Jews?

Only of Jews, of course.

And no one suspected anything?

Noone suspected anything. We knew that Hitler is doing his things but what this would result in, we didn't know. This was another craziness that we had to comply with. And a lot of the orders prior to taking us to the ghetto were handed down to us by a town crier in the center of town, in the circle; the town crier with his drum and his little funny hat and his uniform with a very important air about him. He was an absolute idiot but he knew how to tap this out and how to read enough to read the orders that came to him from Budapest or from the council, certainly from the Nazi machinery. And he would read out these orders. Whether you were in the town square or not you had to know the orders. Not knowing the law was no excuse of course like it isn't here either. The kids would run home and tell their parents that these were the new orders and all that and then an hour later he would appear again and give out new orders - Jews cannot have bicycles. You have to take them into the town hall. Jews can have no radios. This happened all the time and larger news came from the Fascist newspapers that we were still able to purchase in which they what the Jewish star has to be made of - how many inches of the yellow star, which side of the coat you have to wear it on. All of these things came from the newspapers and then they were repeated by the town crier and the restrictions - every minute something else - every hour something else. All of this was heralded through the radio while we still had the radio, before we had to turn it in - and the newspapers and the town crier. We were bombarded with it day and night.

You had to move out of your home, didn't you?

We did not have to move out of our home until they took us, until the two gendarmes came and took each family from the home and took us to the ghetto and then we ...

So you lived outside of the ghetto?

We lived on the main street in a perfectly beautiful home.

And you weren't forced to move into the ghetto?

Not for - it happened so fast. He marched in March 19. I don't know when Passover was then.

April

Well, we had our Passover at home and the day after Passover the two gendarmes came to each home with the list. In this home in this address these are the number of Jews who live. And we were given orders to take 50 kilos of our best clothing and best food. Of course which they confiscated immediately. They made us bring our finest clothes for the Germans.

So you brought your best clothes?

Oh absolutely. I remember what I was wearing when we boarded the cattle car. I was wearing a beautiful big flowing cashmere coat with brown suede platform shoes made to order. They were beautiful and I had a beautiful big handbag, beige, matching my coat. It was summer. It was May, it was hot but we didn't know where we were going. We dared not take our best coat.

They didn't tell you where you were going?

Deportation, to the east. Whatever that meant, we had no idea.

Do you recall what your mother was wearing?

I'm afraid I don't but it seems to me that she was wearing a wig usually, but this time she was wearing a kerchief on her head instead of wearing a wig and I remember her frantically shopping for last minute food. They had kept the Jewish food stores open until a minute before they took us away, ten o'clock in the morning or whenever they had to close the Jewish shops and I remember my mother sending me out to the store. That was very fancy, like a delicatessen kind of store right outside of our courtyard on the main street. And she sent me out for a quarter pound of butter or something and I remember how the lady (by the way lived in our courtyard also, the people who owned the store, and they were very successful and it was a very elegant store.) She was counting the pennies how I paid for the butter. In that respect it seems like insanity that I had to give every last penny that the butter was priced at because I guess she thought she was coming back. Of course, she was killed immediately. She was a young woman. Her husband and her two children, they were all murdered immediately. And then the gendarmes came and rolled down the iron roller the way they used on the stores there. Shut the stores down. But I remember my mother went out to the market. There was a marketplace where you would buy live chickens, fruits and all kinds of things while they were available. I clearly remember that my mother, a woman who came from such a religious background, went out to the market and bought ham because she wanted her children to be well fed in the train on that trip going east because there was no use trying to be kosher anymore. At least to her it was more important that her children should have some

nourishing food than that it should be kosher. I'm not even sure that she ate it but I remember that she bought ham for us - so that we would have a ham sandwich on the train. We didn't know then that it was a cattle car.

You expected to travel in a passenger coach?

We had no idea because we didn't see these cattle cars before they pulled up. As a matter of fact we never saw them until they pulled up because we sat out at the railroad station on the sand. We were kind of lying down and devastated by heat and thirst and then we were guarded by Germans and the gendarmes and everyone with rifles and we just couldn't stand on our feet so we lay down on our backpacks. The insanity began but we didn't know what we were waiting for and we waited all the way till the afternoon. I think they took us away in the morning from the ghetto to the railroad station. We didn't know what we were waiting for. So we were at the railroad station but there were no cars yet. There were no trains. And then these cattle cars pulled up. That's what we were waiting for all day, evidently. And the cattle cars pulled up and they shoved us in and the little window in the cattle car was barred with iron bars and then we found ourselves 75 or maybe more standing in this cattle car like sardines. And then the fun began.

This was when you were separated from your baggage at that point?

No we were separated from the baggage - I am talking now about Kisvarda - we were not separated from our baggage until we arrived in Auschwitz.

So the baggage went into the cattle cars with you?

Yes and we were trying to sit on those baggages. I remember my mother was sitting against the wall, the far wall of the cattle car on these baggages that we had arranged for her and she was sitting there with my sister, Potyo, and my brother kind of laid down in front of her, he placed some other backpacks - it was 50 kilos each of us carried and he laid them down. But there was not enough room so he lay on top of that and we sat on top of him, sort of. And of course there were no sanitary - there was some kind of a....

A barrel?

It wasn't a barrel. It was something smaller than that. That's what we used for a toilet and it was splashing all over

A bedpan?

It wasn't a bedpan. It was one of those big [kubel] 803 we used to call it, [kubel]. Then it was splashing all over. By this time the whole thing was out of this world. People screaming, and I had my period and I couldn't change my napkin, and people were dying already and going mad.

Did anyone argue or resist in any way before getting on the train? I imagine the moment you saw these cattle cars, must have been a shock of some sort.

We were surrounded by men with rifles. They all wore rifles, the SS had the -----[814] those pistols. And all these aides, Hungarians and Germans, they were all wearing rifles and we knew they shoot immediately. You know if your spine was crooked they'll shoot you.

So you were too afraid to complain?

Oh there was no way to oppose, to do anything because these were not fighters. These were children and old people. The young men were all taken away long before into the labor battalions. And these were all young people and women and children and old and sick. What were you going to fight with?

Your entire family?

The six of us. The six children and my mother. My father was already in America. But my brother did try, fought the best he could. He went over to the Nazi at one of the stops, when we were already choking because there was no air through that barred window, and he tried to make a deal with him to take off the bars so that more air would come in. I think that there was one at this end and one at the other end, I don't remember. And he tried to pry it I think with his hands apart to get some air. And as the train stopped he dared to go over to the Nazi and offer him some kind of bribe and for some reason I seem to remember, but he could tell you this better, there was some kind of a scissors they needed, or something or other, I wish you would check with him. He gave them a scissors or something and then he didn't keep his promise. He was going to pry the window open but he didn't keep his promise. He took the scissors. I don't know if I'm telling you the story right.

It's something that you might want to check with him. But he fought to get us air, I know that. He fought as best as he could. And the rest of us I guess want to stay alive until we finally arrive at this "east" place that we are deported to and where the families will be together we heard. And they will have good treatment. We will work for the war effort but we will be treated well. We heard these talks somewhere along that we will be treated well and work for the war effort and families will be together. So all we wanted to do is arrive at this precious place, you see, this east where we are deported to and the families will be together. So let's get this insane trip over with because after this everything will be all right. And after that, two days later, we arrived at someplace that said Auschwitz M[861]. And we had no idea what that meant. And then it all began, you know. Mengele and the crematoriums and the whole thing but you probably don't want to hear about that. You have enough of that. All over. My mother, I remember, sitting through those two days from Monday afternoon through Wednesday afternoon. That's how long the trip took. She sat against that wall cuddling my little sister and her eyes were filled with perception of this thing that we are in and that we are going to and there was no question that she knew in her soul what is happening. She knew that this is the final road, the final trip, that this will result in death. I don't know how she could have known there was a crematorium or a gas chamber but in her soul it was obvious that she knew everything and there was only one prayer in her eyes as she kept looking at her children that they should survive this, that they should outlive this madness because there is a world out there that has humanity still locked in somewhere and this is a passing madness of a madman but there is goodness and there is dignity and there is life and there is purpose and man has a mind with which he can create wondrous things and we should live up to those images in her head, those ideas that she had rather than what the moment is which is evidently the ugliest part of humanity and that we have to go beyond that and look for that in man which is noble and creative and good and has intellect of mind. All of these things were written in her eye. She spoke to us silently. She knew everything. I remember her having kind of a resigned look. I will not live but remember that there is so much to live for and you all should live for what can be not what is now here in front of us. To me it was unmistakable that she never stopped transmitting these messages while she was rocking in that hideous cattle car. That car was jerking like this. I just have no doubt about it that she spoke to us all the time without saying anything. And I think her legacy was heard by us and understood and in some mysterious way it added to the effort that we made to stay alive. Had we not come from such a noble heart as she had I don't know if we would have been able to make that kind of effort to survive. But there's no question that she handed down that legacy. Now you can say this about all mothers, that their love carried through those who survived and they remembered their mother's legacy. This is the way I have to talk about my mother because she had such largeness in her heart.

I can't put it any other way except that for two days she fed us her vision of a humanity that's greater than what Hitler has created.

It seems like she had two visions, the vision of death and the vision of the triumph of humanity.

She had the vision of her own life and the triumph of humanity.

Was she the only person in your car to imagine that this was the end?

No, I shouldn't think so. I don't know if we saw it as the end. Remember we were young and healthy and not willing to bow our head to Hitler. There is the fighting spirit for you.

Determination?

Yeah, we were not willing to accept Hitler as the last word. There is something else out there and we're going to destroy this Hitlerism, this Hitler world when we're free and we can add our voice to those who create a better world. And I guess we always tried. We heard. After all it's that spirit that moved me to wheel the stroller through the Washington marches in the Vietnam days. I took both my kids, my husband and my two kids and we protested the Vietnam war. It was that same spirit that we have to fight for a better world, and I fought.

Were there discussions in the train? Do you recall any discussions among the various families? You probably knew some of the other people.

There was no way to get to anybody.

No, within your cattle car.

Yes but within the cattle car there was no way to move to the other end of the cattle car so we were in this spot, in this tiny little spot, the seven of us and you couldn't even go to the left or to the right. There was no room.

But you recognized some of the other people?

I don't remember anybody or anything. I only remember this little group huddled together trying to make it through the night.

Very little talking?



Remember the clattering of the cattle car is very noisy.

Prayers?

I don't remember praying. I'm sure people were praying but I remember hearing screams and nightmarish screams of all kinds. People were going mad and people were dying, and the moans of the sick. Who can ever describe that kind of ride. You know it is very hard to tell after so many years but I think we were focused in on my mother's soul and that soul must have been incessantly feeding us messages of life, not death. That's how I see it. You will talk to my brother and I don't know what he will say but this is my inner interpretation of that trip. No, we didn't see anybody.

It was dark, wasn't it?

Of course it was dark.

You had no windows.

No light. Who could hear from the screams and the tremendous noise of the rattling of the cars. You couldn't hear your own voice. You could only hear your inner voice which gave you a mandate to live or end it right here - let me die or go on. Philip was an extraordinary force of strength. He was all of 19 or 20, 21 and he knew that he was the man in the family that he's responsible as

like he was the father of these six women. He was just great. He always has been. He is still the father of us all. He is treating us as if we are his children and that my mother ordered him to shield her children. And he was shielding us all the time and he tried. How he managed to talk to the Nazis, I don't know, but he tried to do some kind of negotiation. His story might be entirely different than mine but these are my inner interpretations of what my mother was and my baby sister who couldn't breathe. Probably wouldn't let her finger go. She must have held on to my mother with her entire body and everything within her. My older sister, Cipi

she was one of these suffering more grown children because there were only the two little ones and my brother who was shielding everybody and then there were the three grown girls and she had the bewildered protective look about her if I can remember. But she was very protective also, always. She was a very good-hearted woman who had a tendency to speak first and think about it later. But the first instinct was always good - to be good. I remember when somebody came into our house as they often did, the gypsy lady who had nine [ph] 1048 million kids and she would come to my

mother and say my children are hungry and my mother would pack things in her potato sack that she came with. My older sister had a tremendous amount of goodness in her. I really remember one Friday the lady came from a very poverty ridden area of town - a Jewish woman and said that it's already Friday afternoon and she doesn't have fish or chicken or largeness (shabbat bread). She doesn't have it because she doesn't have a penny and it's getting too late in the afternoon and she still doesn't have anything for the shabbat.

They were so religious that even if they had something on shabbat they wouldn't cook it so it had to be Friday afternoon. And I clearly remember that my older sister had a gold ring with her name in it. I don't remember what they called it but it was very fashionable in those days that you would have a ring with a kind of circle here and your name was imprinted in it and she had this gold ring that she's gotten for a birthday or something or other and when she heard this lady come and cry that her children are hungry, she doesn't have anything for the shabbat, she just took off her ring and gave it to the woman. She was extremely good-hearted and she acted upon the first impulse. She thought about it later but she would always act immediately and some of her acts were acts of native goodness. I was so focused in on my little sister that outside of the strength of my sister Chicha who after all is responsible for our survival, there is no question about that. I remember her for her strength and I remember my brother for his bigness not even all of this world but also of another world of great ideals, goodnesses. I was duly focused in on the little one most but I remember my older sister. There was always some kind of envy because she had the best clothes and she was the one to be married off and she was very elegant and very well kept and you had to pay homage to this older sister always.

How old was she?

She must have been 26, 27, 28, something like that. She was a grown woman.

But not married?

Not married because there were no men around. They were all in the Munkaszolgalat, the labor battalion. But I remember her most for her determination to live. She was the one, of course, who didn't survive but I clearly remember in the second camp, not in Auschwitz but in Birnbaumel when she was wearing this blanket, some kind of blanket that we had and we tore to pieces and each one wore another part of the blanket or sometimes we had a whole blanket and she was bundled up in this blanket, frozen to death in the January snow and frost of Eastern Germany which is like the North Pole. I just remember her standing with that blanket on, weighing probably 50 pounds, a frozen skeleton that's still alive. She said to me armless, legless, but I want to survive. Even if my arms freeze off and my legs freeze off, no matter how much of me is left, I want to live, I want to survive. It made a tremendous impression on me because I didn't think of her as death. I thought that she would be more depressed because I remember at one time that she had a failed love story

where one of these men who came to my town with this labor battalion and she was in love with one of them and then they took him away. The whole thing busted and she was terribly depressed. This was when we were still at home. She felt like life was not worth living without him. I don't remember his name. But she looked like she just doesn't think life is worth living without him. I remember I was surprised she was so tremendously pro-life, how she wanted to live, even if only part of her is whole. And she's the one who didn't make it. That much can be said for determination and human spirit. It's just another indication that there is absolutely no way to tell - you cannot tell what made one survive. There are no rules to this game that can be detected by any normal human being and while psychiatrists make these idiotic utterances that survivors' guilt I am supposed to be feeling. On top of everything I carry in my battered heart I am supposed to be feeling guilty for surviving. Survivors' guilt.

I have never yet been able to consciously put my finger on that pronouncement because I feel guilty about everything I do today; if I say a cross word to my husband, if I mistreat my children, if I insult anybody, if I'm not kind, if I'm not sensitive and G-d knows I am sure I do those things. I feel very guilty about those things but I have never consciously felt guilty about surviving. When I hear these learned pronouncements and these psychiatrists seem to know so well why we survived and how we survived and what we feel and all that. What comes to mind is always what Golda Meir said once, I heard her on television, who said that she feels guilty not because I didn't do everything within my power but because I wasn't there. So I was there. I have no reason to feel guilty. If there is a survivors' guilt, it's mysterious to me. Maybe they know something that I don't know but I didn't kill six million people.

You didn't kill anybody.

I didn't kill anybody. I didn't kill my mother. I didn't send my family to the crematorium. Hitler did. I can't see why I feel guilty. I feel guilty about all kinds of other things. I think I feel very guilty about the fact that what this whole experience left me with is that I may have treated my children in the way not other people treat their children but with more worrying, more caution, and infinitely more anxiety than normal parents who have not had my experience. I think that in that sense I have victimized my children. I think there is no question in my mind that children of survivors are deeply wounded by the experiences of their parents and they refuse to admit it but this tremendous drive to excel, nothing less than Harvard would do for some of them is always making up for the pain and deprivation that the parents have experienced. I think our children are in some ways more sensitive because of the tales that the parents have told them but it's a very complicated issue of guilt between the parent and the child. They feel guilty for what happened not out of their volition. It's not their fault, but what happened to their parent was something far more gruesome than happened to any other parent unless in individual cases they have hideous experiences. But on the whole their parents have experienced horrendous gruesomeness in life. Two really great victims of this outside of those of us who survived - because those who perished are no longer even victims, they're just nothing anymore, but we are the living victims. I thought the two really innocent victims are our children and their children - the perpetrators - the Nazis whose children and

grandchildren have to live with this knowledge though they don't know anything usually because their parents won't tell them. But they suspect it. Maybe my father is a murderer. And which child wants to be fathered by a murderer. Afraid to ask, they don't get any answers. Generally, I suppose that's what happens. And I used to say that they're the true victims, those children and ours. And then I've had quite a number of terrible experiences with German children and I stopped saying that and I say it's only our children who are the real victims. It's not quite true probably because there are probably a lot of sensitive German kids who are suffering tremendously. But I had two or three lousy experiences, so I stopped saying it. I just focus in on the fact that our children are terribly punished emotionally by being truly the extension of Auschwitz because when we are gone, long after we are gone, when none of us will be left, perhaps decades later, these children will be the nearest thing that you can touch that is connected to Auschwitz. It is them they will ask how was it to grow up with a mother who was a survivor of Auschwitz. You know I'm talking 50 years from now. I expect that our children should live longer than we live in our age. But you know, 20, 30, 40 years from now there will be nothing as commonly visible as it is today that you can find a survivor here and there. So they will be the nearest link to the reality of Auschwitz. I don't envy them. As a matter of fact I have noticed in some of these gathering that we have had in Israel, in Washington, in Philadelphia, the survivors, that the media was kind of wise to that reality because I have noticed how they go after our children rather than us. It's as if we were already gone and let's better ask those who will be here with us for a long time, their children. Who knows what it is to be the child of such a person. I want to hop back to some of the antisemitism that I grew up with that was really mother's milk to me.

Being a Jewish girl in a Hungarian school in 1933?

Yes. First of all I had to be sort of the best student because I was this terrible minority of one or two there. I think there were two of us in the class who were Jewish. So I had to be the best student. So was my friend. We were both extraordinary students.

Jewish friend.

This Jewish friend of mine.

Did you have any non-Jewish friends in this class?

None that I could trust. I might have had some superficial friends. I might have had, but I remember this one. Leah, I don't remember - something like that - was her name but her second name was Halpert I think and her father was equally...

Not related to you Halpert?

No, not at all. But her father was so terribly religious, as mine, and did not want her to go to a Jewish school which would teach her something about Zionism so she was very bright and she was a good friend of mine and she was decent and darling and intelligent and the two of us just simply had to be the best students. But you couldn't win because you had to be the best student because you were such a minority and if you were the best student they hated your guts because you were just a damn Jew who was smarter than the next guy.

Was this all girls?

No, it was a mixed class.

Boys and girls.

Yeah. These very same kids that I was in school in the afternoon if I walked out later in the street, I just heard them say, "Dirty Jews, dirty Jews, dirty Jews." You can't be a winner which is what I apply as well to the fact that we cannot win this ugly reality of our life that we are survivors of this madness because vis-a-vis our children. We cannot win because so many of us have shielded them from Auschwitz. We did not want to tell them anything about it. So there were those parents. And they were losers because the kids came back at them. Why didn't you tell me? I know my niece did and so did others. I had told them and my husband was very helpful and tried to impart some of the information because they were seeking it out. But I must tell you they wanted to know it and they didn't. Early in their lives they were already torn by conflicts because they wanted to know so much but they did not want to know so much. I clearly remember when my children were going to school, this Fieldstone we just mentioned, and we were walking distance from the school. We lived in over there. I remember my older one Peter who said one morning, "Mommy, how did my aunt die?", referring to Potyo. They heard that maybe she died in an open fire alive they threw her in. Mommy how did my aunt die, Potyo? And I realized that as he asked me the question he had his hand on the knob. He was opening the door to leave for school. So he wants to know but he didn't really want to know and he left without finding out. But this terrible conflict was already imbedded in there at such an early age so the end result is that there are no winners in imparting the knowledge or not. Those of us who did lost in a sense and those of us who didn't lost. There's no way to win something as big as this, you cannot.

I would imagine too that you found it difficult to think of Potyo as an aunt, thirteen years old.

Clearly, sure. That's a very good point. As a matter of fact when I was saying aunt I was wondering who I was talking about because she was just a child. But indeed she was my children's aunt. And would have been a lovely wonderful aunt of some fifty odd years.

Not to mention a beautiful wife and a great mother.

And a mother herself, yeah. There's not even any point to talk about that. But in that same vein as I mentioned some further antisemitic winds that I got -

In Hungary?

Yeah, I must tell you the story that pained us, or pained me, I don't know if the others know it the same way. But the way I know the story of my two brothers, twins, their names were Shmuel and Barry.

Barry? Could you spell it, please.

I don't know how you would spell it but it was Beryl and Shmuel. That would be the Yiddish name.

Would that be Samuel?

Sam would sound right and maybe Bernard. But I don't remember their non-Jewish names though they had them because they had to be registered by their non-Jewish names.

So you had three brothers, then?

I originally had three brothers. I don't remember - it seems to me yes, they were born before Potyo. They would come between Rachel and Portyo. They were not identical twins. They were two delicate little boys that I remember in their swaddling clothes. I didn't know about this because something evidently happened and they shipped us away from home and they sent us to my grandmother in

Nyiregyhaza. When we came back we found that we only had one brother out of the twins left. My mother was kind of totally destroyed. And they were telling us that we came home because something terrible had happened but we're going back to my grandmother and then we're going to come back home again.

They sent us back and we didn't come back again because something terrible happened again and what happened was that the twins had a wet nurse and the wet nurse's child got ill with some kind of lung inflammation of some sort - I don't know what it was, maybe TB for all I know - but her milk was infected with whatever this was and her child recovered. She was breast-feeding the three children. Her child got ill and recovered and our two children got very ill. My parents had a philosophy in life when something is wrong, when somebody is ill, you seek out the best possible care at any cost or any religion or any anti-semitism, no matter what it is you will get the very best care. So you go to the most famous man in the field. The most famous man in the field, evidently, was in this children's hospital which was very famous in the country, in Debrecen which was near the town where my mother was born. My mother and father immediately took the children to this hospital. One died and my mother came home, I think, to sit shiva. You know what that is, I think. After the dead, you have to sit for a week on the floor, and that sort of thing. It was the time before the child died that they shipped us off to my grandparents. She evidently left the other child there ill in Debrecen. And I guess left the other child there and a week later or so the other child died as well. And somebody, I don't remember who, told us that when the other child died my mother left the hospital and charged out to the street absolutely crazed. She was screaming. She was totally crazed by it. And then she came home and finally we heard the story of what happened and she was absolutely convinced or she had facts, I don't know, because conceivably she had friends. My mother was a very social person to whom people talked. She had real friends. In any field, people she touched trusted her and confided in her and everything. So I suppose she must have heard this from other doctors, young doctors, perhaps Jewish doctors, colleagues of - there were a lot of people involved evidently in the two cases of death of these children. And my mother was absolutely certain that the children were victims of antisemitism; that they had experimented on them and treated them as Jewish children, not necessarily to be saved, but to learn from. And that they were sacrificial lambs. She never recanted on that. She maintained forever that the children were victims of anti-semitism.

Back in those years, which goes way back, I don't remember when those children were born, but this was before Hitler. But curiously the place, the hospital, was known for a sense of anti-semitism. So it wasn't her imagination. She either had proof of it because they were twins that they were a subject for experimentation.

How old were they?

They were eight months old when they died, within two, three weeks of each other. Of course my parents could never be consoled and that's how Philip remained the only son after that. My mother's instincts were to be trusted on the whole in all of the big issues.

One for instance which stands out in my mind always - I sort of cannot live it down. In a sense it does add to my pessimism which my family will testify that despite the fact that I show strength and have survived and all that - I am afflicted with a sense of pessimism. And G-d knows at this stage, I have enough to be pessimistic about, all of us, because the world is taking from bad turn - always seems to be making worse turns than last time and G-d knows what will become of the world now. Antisemitism rising everywhere in the world. So there is enough cause not only to be skeptical but to feel deeply sad about the state of the world and particularly in regard to anti-semitism and I always thought I should be involved in the activity of leaving something behind for future generations about this whole event of the holocaust because I was there, I'm a first hand person, I have a certain responsibility to leave the truth behind. I have done it very much at my own expense and undoubtedly at the expense of my children and my husband. I paid very dearly. They pay very dearly for what I have done in order to leave enough of the truth behind so that when the revisionists make even bigger noises than they have made all throughout these years after my survival, our testimonies will be there so that we can counteract their evil pronouncements regarding the holocaust. The holocaust never happened.

Do you believe in G-d, Isabella?

No. I have had tremendous trouble with the question of G-d because I never saw him when I needed him and I really have questions only. I have absolutely no answers to any of them. How can I have any answer to them when I remember standing in Auschwitz on a summer day when evidently planes were flying overhead - probably those were the planes that were going to take pictures of the Krupp [Buna] installments. Those are the pictures they have of Auschwitz itself. The allies have had those pictures and they didn't bomb Auschwitz, as we know now. They didn't bomb the rails. It must have been those planes that flew overhead that we saw way up there. Whichever planes they were, I remember standing in Auschwitz in Lager C on a very hot summer afternoon in 1944 and as the planes flew overhead raising my hands in prayer saying G-d, please let them kill us with their bombs. I'd rather die by the bombs of the west or the fighting forces or whatever I might have said - I don't remember - but I'd rather die by the bombs than let Hitler have the joy of killing me in the crematorium. I don't want him to have the last word. I really wanted to die. There was no way out. Certainly there was no way to imagine that I'm ever going to survive that. Since I have no other fate except dying, why shouldn't I die by the bombs. And the planes flew over us and never bombed us. It was only this much that I asked of that almighty G-d in those circumstances and I wasn't granted this much. I cannot give you an answer on the question of G-d because I will as long as I live ask where he was hiding when they burned 24,000 people a day in Auschwitz and we, the few survivors, had to live with the stench of 24,000 people burning a day. Even G-d has to forgive me for asking this question. Where is an answer? Give me an answer to that question. Where was G-d when the smoke was so thick, so gray, so dark. There was no sky. There was nothing blue to be seen on some days. Nothing but smoke around the clock. My children throughout the years have been very conscious of thick smoke. I remember riding along in



the car with my question via New Jersey and there would be a big fire in these - I don't know where they keep these gasoline tanks or something...

The oil refineries.

Yeah, all kinds of fires and as soon as the thick smoke appeared, my children looked frightened, and looking at me and looking at the smoke and trying to find out what's going on inside me because I see the smoke that I used to speak of and my children were frightened for their mother to see smoke because it reminded her of the burning mother.

If it could remind them, it certainly reminded you.

You can imagine. So is that a way for children to grow up? And then I can ask, "Where is G-d? Why doesn't he protect my children from having these terrible feelings?"

And you were brought up as a religious girl.

And I was brought up in a very religious home and I cannot answer your questions nor anybody's. I don't know what to do.

A religious girl who was forced to attend the public school because of her father's religion.

And coming from a long line of rabbinical background. I am sure that in my mother's side, I have nothing but rabbis as great great great great great grandfathers. I'm sure that that's the whole lineage - is rabbinical. But I welcome any of my ancestors to send me a supernatural message if you will about the question of G-d and Auschwitz. Under normal circumstances I perhaps would not have had to question.

Who helped you survive, if anyone?

My sister. My good sister. I go back to Chicha but I must tell you about my pessimism I started out with. My mother was so accurate in her pessimistic outlook vis-a-vis Jewish survival.

She was also optimistic, remember?

Yes, because she hoped that her children would live and she expected them to live. But my mother, throughout the war years while Hitler was making his big noises and big moves and was dancing all over our graves all over Europe, even before the war broke out in the 30s when I was old enough to remember, my mother used to say (all the time I heard this) Hitler will lose the war (there was no war yet) - Hitler will lose the war but he will win it against the Jews. Nobody put it more accurately, more astutely

than she and she fed our young minds with this absolute truth. She proved to be absolutely right. And she had this submission that could not be placated by any kind of foolish talk about what Hitler will turn out to be.

Is this when you decided to seek visas to leave Hungary?

No, my father had come to America on a business trip in 1936 in connection with the World's Fair.

1936?

I think it was '36.

'39 I know there was a World's Fair in New York.

Yeah, but he must have come earlier to make arrangements for a Hungarian wine pavilion. He was a wine and liquor wholesale merchant. He came to America to make arrangements for a pavilion and one of the Hungarian ministers (I understand from my brother and he can give you the accurate name) made a comment after they issued the necessary papers to him. He was quoted as saying, "It's a dirty shame that a G-d-damn Jew should represent us on the World's Fair." Antisemitism was in the highest places and lowest places and everywhere.

Your father heard this?

Well the quote was handed down to us enough so that my brother remembers it very accurately. He remembers the name of the Hungarian official, some very high official. In any event, my father came early before the World's Fair to make arrangements for a Hungarian pavilion and he returned

within ten days to Hungary. He came on a visitor's visa and he returned. In those days, anyone who came to America would never dream of returning. They came as visitors, whichever way they came, they stayed here. That's all they wanted was to escape those poverty-ridden lands of Poland, and Hungary and all of them. My father was the only one who returned. And because he returned within ten days and he came back because it was Passover and he had to be home for the seder. The American consul trusted him so much because he was a weird person to return from America that when he came to ask for another visa they just issued it to him with no questions asked. He was very trustworthy. So he finally went back to get a visa because my mother urged him to save his family and go to America. My mother saw this very early.

Was this after the outbreak of the war?

No, before the outbreak of the war. Hitler was already too powerful and my mother was too frightened. He got the visa and he had the visa in his breast pocket. People were offering him all kind of monies to buy the visa off him and somehow convert it to their own names or picture or whatever it was. My father of course wouldn't give up the visa but at the same time he refused to come back to America because he kept saying that America is not the kind of place - you don't want to bring up Jewish children there - they have people from all over the world - there is not enough Yiddishkeit, Jewishness and religiosity. I think now there seems to be a lot more of surges of Jewishness and religiosity. These kids going around with their skull caps and everything. There's a lot going on that's very Jewish consciousness. I welcome that. But he was afraid that if he brings his family here his children would not be Jewish enough. They will absorb too much of Americanism rather than Judaism. He was reluctant to come back. My mother constantly urged him - you must save our children. You must go back. Finally he agreed to come to save his family. He came back and arrived with probably the last boat that brought him here. The war had already broken out. Courtesy of the great Franklin Delano Roosevelt who was such a great president. He didn't have a Jewish soul. He didn't want to save the Jews. He wanted to win the war. The Jews were not uppermost in his mind and we know now he refused to bomb the Auschwitz rails and he did too much that was terribly, terribly wrong. One of those things was that when a Jew such as my father from Hungary who was already in this country and applying for his papers to remain here to eventually become a citizen, and asked for papers to bring over his family of seven so at least they could save those seven people from Hitler's murder. He, I understand, spent all his waking hours knocking on the doors in Washington at the various authorities - give me the papers - give me the papers - save my children. And they managed to postpone it long enough so that by the time they would give him the papers, Hungary had declared war against the United States. Witness the beginning of the statement I said that on December 7...

Yes, I recall. So two years to get papers?

They dilly-dallied. They would have had to give him the papers immediately. Let's save one Jewish family. There is some legitimacy here because the father came here for that purpose and some of us were underage and could have come under his auspices. They managed to sabotage this Jewish family and they managed to sabotage all of the efforts to save Jews. This is not my story but it is well documented in G-d knows how many books. So Hungary declared war against the United States and there was no American consulate because we were allies of Hitler. So were the Japanese. The whole thing was aborted. So then my father evidently spent another year and a half or two years - 41 until 44, I guess - to try to get papers to come to Israel since the American plan didn't work. So he was knocking on the doors - get me papers to go to Palestine.

British-controlled Palestine.

Yeah. And he was desperate. Day and night he worked to get them papers to go to Palestine because America was out of the question. And he finally succeeded again with so much postponement from these gentle souls who were not interested in saving at least one Jewish family. By the time we got the papers, Hitler had occupied Hungary and I remember the papers had arrived and there they were - seven documents to get this family to Israel and Naziism was already in full force in Hungary. I always say I don't know what we used it for, toilet paper or what, but it was worthless. And instead of

going to America or to Palestine .....

How did you finally escape?

I never mentioned to you that Philip, my brother, was torn away from us immediately in Auschwitz but his last plea to us - actually it was a very dramatic and very unusual act of defiance on his part - that when men and women were separated and we made it to the life side and we were led into this huge wet monstrous place where they shaved us and threw a rag at us in Lager C - no it probably wasn't Lager C - and we saw two other monsters - this was Chicha and I - and we saw two other shaved monsters in rags who we barely recognized, but they looked familiar and these are our two sisters whom Mengele was originally leading to the crematorium and then he changed his mind and took them out to the life side. As we were shaved and looking absolutely hideous some kind of a magic force appeared--my brother Philip who by now was wearing a striped uniform. He was shaved and evidently his group was ready to be led to the camp where they were going to lead them - whether it was A or B or wherever they led the men. Evidently he kept looking for his sisters and he knew already that his mother was no longer alive. There was somebody who shaved him and he was evidently a prisoner in Auschwitz who was one of the people who shaved him and it was somebody he knew. He could tell you more about this. And he said to him that your mother is already dead, or something about the smoke that there is your mother. My brother evidently passed down the word to the others, to the next guy and the next guy. Tell them to say kaddish. We no

longer have parents. He was evidently looking for whatever was left of his family hoping that the girls, because they are young and healthy, that they are on the life side and he kept peering through this window and this incredibly brave human being, despite the Nazis all around, managed to climb through that window because he saw us and he flew into the window. How he did that I don't think he knows. And he put his arm around these four naked-headed monsters, his sisters. And he shook us and he said, "Listen to me! Eat! Eat everything they give you. If they give you shit, eat shit, but you must survive. We must live. We must pay them back and create a better world." And he flew out. He was back through the window and he was gone. We never saw him again until we were in America. But he managed to - talking about resistance, what this man did, we never ever forgot - I don't know if he remembers the words he said to us. I clearly remember them as these words. How the others remember them, I don't know. These are the words I remember and whenever it looked like we were finished, there is no more life left in us, somehow this vision came up of Philip saying you must eat no matter what they give you because we must survive. And then for three weeks he was evidently in Auschwitz. He was the most ingenious public relations man or communication man probably in the world because he found pieces of wood in his camp because they were still building the camp and there were pieces of wood. He somehow managed to barter his bread probably to a prisoner who had been there longer and probably had a little chunk of a pencil. He carved every day on a piece of wood - you must live, you must live, you must survive. And he would say on that, my sisters are in Lager C. Their name is Katz. Whoever finds this piece of wood please toss it over the next camp, Lager they called it, until it reaches Lager C. And these band of resisters, these prisoners, managed to throw it over the wire, Lager to Lager, until it reached Lager C. And we got the message every single day for about three weeks.

Who would catch it?

Somebody would find it in the same spot the same way and we would go there looking for it because by now we were trained. It was a secret language of the most powerful underground communication in the world and we found the piece of wood or somebody brought it to us because by this time they knew us so there were some people who knew us. They brought us this life message and then one day it stopped and then we were certain that he is up in smoke or Mengele took him to another camp. We never heard from him again until we arrived in America. An American soldier found him in a hospital and wrote to my father because the only thing - we didn't have any belongings - the only thing we were all schooled in at home, by my mother, I guess, or by each other, that if we ever lived through this war, we should remember one thing - my father's address, 166 Ross Street, Brooklyn, where my aunt lived, and my father lived with his sister. And that's what we remembered, this address. That was the only document we had, that was the only paper, which was not a paper. It was in our head, engraved, 166 Ross Street. He gave this address to the American soldier who liberated him. He found him in a hospital with a bullet in his leg. He was in six concentration camps while we were in two. He tried to escape, after he tried to make a deal with the Nazi who he caught changing his clothes, I believe, because he wanted to escape when the Americans were so near that they were overhead and they were in the cattle cars shipping them

further into Nazidom. But this is something he would have to tell you. But in any event he shot him in the leg . He didn't want to kill him, it looks like, but he shot him in the leg and this American soldier found him in the hospital. We didn't know anything about him, this whole saga of six concentration camps and the bullet until he arrived in January 1945. I will return to how we survived. When Auschwitz was beginning to be liquidated in the fall of 1944, we spent all our energies - whatever was left in our 40 to 50 pound human being that we each weighed, 40, 50, 60 pounds, and I had typhus throughout the nine months that I was in the camps, whatever energy we had we spent it on only one thing - to run away from Mengele's selections, because if Mengele will select the four of us, one would go to another camp, one would go to the crematorium, one would go yet to another camp, one would stay here. We cannot afford a selection if we still want to be four sisters. We were a rather large family. There was another family who had six sisters. We were probably the next largest because they were decimated. Families were totally decimated. Because we were close in age, young and healthy, he picked us out. So the four of us made it all the way through six months of Auschwitz in the worst times of Auschwitz and escaped Mengele's selection even if we had to run, as we did one night, and he shot after us, but he didn't get us in the dark. So we remained alive. We tried anything and everything to remain together. We made it sort of to the entrance to the crematorium

where they were going to take us out of Lager C in November on a bitter cold night and put us in the crematorium and then as it happened so many times we were unable to figure out what they were going to do and they changed the orders once more. Instead of putting us in the crematorium, they put us on trains, on ice-cold trains, with heated cars for the Nazis and ours were ice-cold. They took us to another concentration camp called Birnbaumel, or that's the way I remember the name, in Eastern Germany. We traveled, I don't know how long, frozen to death and starved. We arrived in a place called Birnbaumel where they had a thousand prisoners in a forest in umbrella-like paper-thin wood structures with no floor. It was only ice. The walls were ice and the floor was ice. It was eastern Germany in a forest.

What were you wearing?

Rags. Chicha was wearing a wooden shoe and one regular shoe. The only thing they let us keep were eyeglasses and shoes and the shoes wore out and somehow all kinds of wooden clogs appeared. My sister had one wooden shoe and one regular shoe.

Coats, blankets?

Rags and whatever we could somehow manage to - maybe they gave us something or we bartered something. We had a little more clothing than we had in Auschwitz but certainly not enough to keep you warm in the forest. Every morning we had to go to the other end of the forest through the town where all the Germans saw us. They said they never saw us. They were going to work and to

school. Twice a day they saw us coming and going. They had to stop traffic for a thousand of wretched skeletons to walk through the town to reach the other end of the forest to do Schatzarbeit [*Schutzarbeit*] digging ditches for the tank traps. In the frozen earth, if we wanted to start digging, we had to heat up the earth first because the earth was frozen. The Germans stood there with their incredible coats and uniforms and rifles and they would warm their fat rumps at the fire and they would chase us away with the butt of their rifles because heat the earth, not the Jews, you know. This went on all winter from November to January and we got thinner and frailer and sicker and my typhus was raging. How I didn't die, I never know. I had typhus for nine months. The doctor said under the best of care at home I would have died in days. Finally after digging the bloody German earth and watching how the Nazis were so gentle with their murderous dogs and what they did to us. Finally the end came. We were in Birnbaumel in these icy huts and on a Sunday afternoon on January 21, they gathered us in a tremendous hurry. The word was always los, los, schnell, schnell, fast, fast, whatever the hell it meant. We had to line up in funferreih always five in a row. They counted us and within minutes they marched us out of the camp. Had we hidden then, which we didn't know, had we hidden anywhere, they had no time to come looking for us and the people who were in the so called hospital which was called the Revier with their legs frozen off and they had gangrene and they couldn't take them out and they didn't want to shoot them because they didn't want to leave the evidence behind - dead bodies. Those people were the ones who survived because if we had hidden anywhere we would have been liberated that very afternoon because the Russians were that close but we didn't know anything about that. We only knew that we had to go very fast - run, line up, and march out of the camp. We were out on the road on Sunday afternoon, bitter, bitter cold, snow and ice all over and we had to march fast and fast and faster. We were led out of the camp and we were marching towards the west where Hitler was ostensibly ruling. We didn't know where we were going. We marched until the evening. In the evening they had put us up in another evacuated camp where a thousand girls had been taken out of. We spent the night there and that was Sunday night and Monday we marched another day in these hideous conditions. Rachel was coughing. It sounded like she had TB. It was terrible. But the four of us were still together. Tuesday morning we tried to fight back again. One night we were housed in an evacuated concentration camp and the second night they put us up in several barns. The cows were in one barn and the straw and their bedding, I guess, was in another barn and we gathered enough strength, inner and physical strength, to try to make it once more and we hid ourselves in the straw, on the top level. We thought if they come with their pitchforks to drive us out of our hiding place well then that's the way we'll die but let's try it anyhow. We successfully hid ourselves. Several other people had done the same thing. They had no time to pitchfork us out of the hiding places. They knew that some of us must have been hiding in these straw refuges. Cunningly, as always, they began to boil potatoes. It's not that they wanted to feed us but the smell would lure us out from the hiding place and that's exactly what it did. The four of us who struggled so hard to remain four together gave up our hiding place because the smell of potato was irresistible. To eat once more was more important than perhaps freedom and we voluntarily gave up our hiding place and lined up for the potatoes, the four of us together with the others. By the time we reached the kettle in which they were boiling the potatoes, there were none. They were all gone. But by now we were prisoners again.

How did you get away now?

This was Tuesday morning. Sunday we slept in the camp and Monday we slept in the barn and Tuesday morning on the 23rd, we were prisoners again, and we lined up and we marched again. By this time a great many girls had died and anyone who couldn't march was shot right there. It was Tuesday morning, I don't know what hour it was, late morning probably, they were marching us. We were in this town called Jagadschutz and there were three sisters in the back of us who escaped so the guards who were in the back guarding us in this marching line and the guards on the two sides went all back to shoot two girls, as we later found out, and the third one had to dig a grave for the two sisters. Only the guard in the front remained. My sister Chicha, who was the heroine always, was at the end of the line as we entered this little village called Jagadschutz. There was a little house of a blacksmith and she had enough presence to figure out that if no smoke is coming out of the chimney - they didn't have any sophisticated fire, heating arrangements - if no smoke is coming out then they must be gone. They must have escaped from the oncoming liberators, whoever they were - Americans or Russians or who knows what; we didn't know anything about the status of the war. But they have escaped evidently and she bolted and ran out. She had made another attempt to escape but by this time we agreed that ostensibly we're not going to be aiding each other in the same way as we always did. There was no question that we were always going to do the same thing. This time we said somebody has to survive. Whoever can, let's make it. So she bolted and she ran into the little house and she ran up to the stairs. Nobody was in there. It was ice cold. She went up to the attic. Rachel was marching right next to her and she ran. Nobody looked back. Nobody said anything. I saw Rachel and I ran and I was certain that Cipi standing next to me would do exactly the same thing. Rachel and I ran into a little doghouse. The dog was gone. They took the dog away. We hid in the doghouse crouched. Suddenly in this deadly silence and snow and it was a snowstorm but it was beautiful, white, it was Christmas time like Christmas time, peace on earth, good will towards men. We were crouching in the doghouse and then we heard these steps in the silence, this absolute silence and snow. It was the Oberschutzfuhrer, the Nazi with his dog. He was walking on the road cursing the Jews mumbling things at who escaped behind holding him back from marching ahead away from the liberators and taking his precious cargo along. Whether the wind blew our scent away, I don't know, but the dog evidently did not smell us and he passed us by. Evidently Chicha was watching this from the window in the attic and she yelled out all our names and said Cipi, Rachel, Isabella are you all here. And we said yes, well we're here, Rachel and Isabella but Cipi is probably in the next house because she had to do exactly what we did. Once the Oberschutzfuhrer was gone my sister yelled down, "Come on up here to the attic. Here I am and I found a frozen cabbage and it's delicious. We ran up and a few minutes later the door was slightly opened and there were three other wretched creatures who escaped and they made their way into the same house. But it wasn't Cipi. This was the 23rd of January. We stayed in this house and had another anti-semitic experience when a forced labor worker from Poland, they were working around in Germany, they were forced laborers. He came and he wanted to chase us out because he wanted to take the contents of the house. He threatened us that the Germans are all around and they are going to kill us and we'd better leave. I think Chicha told him if this is what you want in the house you can take everything but let us stay here and eat some before we die. Leave us alone. He finally



left. We stayed there Tuesday and Wednesday. Wednesday night the lights were cut. Chicha was smart enough to say the Germans must have left. They cut the electricity. Sure enough it was true. It was Thursday morning. We were in our warm bedding, barefooted and suddenly we saw a tremendous army entering the village, blood splattered soldiers, fighting soldiers, spent completely, and all kinds of war machinery, and we didn't know who they were. They didn't look like the Hungarian soldiers we knew and they didn't look like the German soldiers. Who were they? Suddenly we saw the sickle and the hammer and the red flag. We knew that was Russian. We ran out barefooted in the snow and we started to scream. We are liberated, liberated. It was an insane sound. You probably heard it on 42nd street. Then we started to cry like nobody ever cried. We are liberated, we are liberated. But where are they all? They are all dead.

And Cipi?

And there was no Cipi. Now that we were liberated we went looking for Cipi. We spent six weeks there on the road waiting for all the survivors who survived pass through our town going towards the train and all we looked for was finding Cipi. We never found her. All those bastards who say today forget it, it happened long ago, I have only this to tell them. To me it happened yesterday because it took me thirty some years before somebody related the story to me of what happened to Cipi. I looked for her for all those years. If I saw a familiar walk I followed that for blocks. I went to buy some bread in a bakery and I thought maybe this old lady is my sister who disappeared thirty some years ago. And even today when I know that absolutely certain that she's dead, if I see a head that looks familiar, I run. I never had any peace from that but I know from this eye-witness, one of the girls who was with us, her name was Eva [Philip] [ph][385] who told me that 30 some years later when I told her now you can tell me. I met her a couple of years before and she started to tell me what happened and I broke down crying so terribly that she stopped the story right there. But I told her now I am sitting in my kitchen and I'm very comfortable. You won't see me cry. You're talking on the telephone. Please tell me what happened. And then she told me that Cipi followed me some minutes later and they caught her and they beat her so brutally that she thinks she went crazy. She wanted to die. Three more weeks they marched in the most wretched conditions and they refused to kill her. She begged them kill me, kill me. They knew that her sisters were gone. She said she doesn't want to live, please kill me. They refused to kill her because they knew that she suffers more alive because her sisters are gone. She lost them to freedom. Over and over she begged them to kill her and they refused to kill her. There were no more barbed wires so she had no way to kill herself. Another indication that you could not die when you wanted to. You could only die when they wanted you to die and only die their way, not your way. They dragged her to Bergen-Belsen for three weeks in that condition. Somebody saw her there. All she could say was my sisters, thank G-d they're in America probably. They're free. At least they live, at least they're free. She was lovingly talking about us to this person who later on was liberated, came to America, and she couldn't cope with memories of Auschwitz and hanged herself. But she left us with Cipi's words. Then she was liberated. My sister Cipi was liberated. And then she died. And in those heaps of Bergen-Belsen, those mounds, those miles of bodies that they were churning up with

machinery, one of them was my sister. And it was that same Bergen-Belsen that that damn Reagan went to Bitburg and I don't wish him a good day because he did that. He went to Bitburg to honor the SS forty-some graves and it was my sister Chicha who went, not along with him, to Bergen-Belsen on the same trip to protest him because it was that Bergen-Belsen that he was at that they wouldn't let my sister in, I think. He went to Bergen-Belsen also. He went to Bitburg and ed-Belsen. My poor sister went to protest Reagan's attention to Bitburg. Coming to the same ed-Belsen where my sister perished and I will always be angry about it, always, always hate him for doing that, for going to Bitburg.

You wrote a poem about your youngest sister, did you not?

Yes I did.

Would you please read it for us?

By the way I want you to know that we were the very first survivors of Auschwitz to reach this land. We were put aboard a merchant marine ship called the Brand Whitlock in Odessa. Finally we made our way to Odessa by April, from January to April. We were put aboard this ship and we were through half the world for nearly five weeks and arrived by some mysterious coincidence on the very day the war ended. We arrived on May 8, 1945. That made us the first survivors of Auschwitz. You want to hear the poem that I wrote about my sister: Ring around a rosy, six million is only a number, but each somebody's mother, somebody's child, somebody's lover, somebody's bride. Potyo was just thirteen; she was my sister. She had the wisdom of a child of war. She was full of fear yet tiptoed with tenderness, laughter and love in a world of madmen. She was a weeping willow, a song of sorrow, a poem of infinite beauty. Why does Hitler hate me? Why does he love hate? Mama, I am only thirteen. I have songs yet to learn, games yet to play. Give me time to live. Give me time to die. Mama, how can I do all the living in just an inch of time? On a wretched piece of earth, alien land of terror and chaos, on another planet called Auschwitz, Mengele points at Potyo - Ring around a rosies, pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes. -- That it was.

Thank you, Isabella Leitner.