

The date is March 2, and we're talking with Mrs. Catherina, or Ina Polak in East Chester, New York. Mrs. Polak, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? First of all, what was your name during the war and where were you born, and when were you born, and what was your family like, and your life?

Well, my name, as you said, is Catherina. Officially, everybody called me Ina. And I had the same name during the whole time. People did not change their name during the war.

I was born on January 3, 1923. My father's name was Abraham Soep, S-O-E-P. My mother's name was Toni Fredrika Soep, and she was born with the name Kauffman.

Her parents were German. They moved to Holland from Germany in the 1880s for the single reason that my grandfather loved-- who did business with Holland a lot in his profession, which was, I think, something which you would call now textiles. He loved Holland, decided to move there, and all his six children were born in Holland.

So my mother grew up totally Dutch, although, she spoke German very well, of course, because her parents spoke German. My grand-- I remember my grandmother speaking Dutch very well with a German accent. We lived a very free, carefree life in Holland.

My parents were well-to-do. My father was a diamond manufacturer in a-- he had a big plant in Amsterdam. He was, I would say, one of the two biggest men in his field in the city.

The diamond industry was big in Holland at the time. It has deteriorated after the war because much of the diamond people were Jewish, and most of them didn't come back. But then it was a big flourishing thing.

He was very well-esteemed. He was on all kind of committees, not-- in his field in diamond industry, but also in the Jewish community. He was for many years president of the Jewish community in Amsterdam, which is a little different than it's here.

People did not belong to a synagogue. People belonged to the Jewish municipality of each city, and actually paid taxes according to income to the city. And they maintained all the synagogues. You could go wherever you wanted.

Usually, you went to one that was nearest to you, especially since most practicing Jews-- or all practicing Jews, actually, in Holland were orthodox. There was no such thing as reform or conservative. And as I said, he was orthodox.

My mother was not brought up that way, but she learned to be a kosher housewife after she married my father. We went to a regular school. I was brought up totally in a Montessori system.

I went to a Montessori school when I was four years old in kindergarten, which was very progressive, friends of my parents thought, because Montessori had just started to be an educational system in Holland, maybe three or four years before I started there. Maria Montessori was very involved in Holland with the system. She started in Italy as a-- she started it in Italy as a program for neglected street children, and her methods were very explicit and very visual.

And Holland caught on to it, and it was really one of the pioneering countries. So I went in the Montessori system for my fourth till my 17th year, even at Montessori High School. I had a very happy time at school, and especially in high school.

Had a lot of friends. We led a good, kind of-- I would say luxurious life except I didn't realize that until I was much older. Because in those days, kids were not very spoiled, at least not in my family.

So it was always, don't take so much of this, and don't take too much butter, and do you have to make that phone call. And I thought my poor father didn't have it. But I realize today that it was more-- that was the principle of the thing. It had nothing to do with money.

And every summer we-- my parents were rented a house in-- on the shore for two months, and we all went. And it was like a big moving because all our kosher pots and pans had to go along. So a moving van came, and for two months we moved away.

And I thought that we were not very well off because my friends and their parents would go abroad to Switzerland and France for vacations for two or three weeks, and I thought it was much more glamorous than going every year like two hours away to the shore. But later on, I realized, of course, that that was a very luxurious thing to do.

And when I came out of high school, I did my final exams right after the invasion of Holland, which was in May 1940. And after that, I went to a secretarial school where I learned-- it was a very intensive one year course where I learned shorthand, typing, business correspondence, business law, bookkeeping. And the shorthand and the typing and the business correspondence was all in four languages-- Dutch, French, German, and English.

And German, French, and English, of course, we had in school for many years. So we had a good basic knowledge of it, especially-- maybe not so much in speaking as in reading and translating.

Can we jump back a little bit?

Yeah.

How-- you said you did-- you did go to a Montessori school. Did you have like a Hebrew school or--

Yes, we went-- there were-- I went to a private Hebrew school. And my father was on the board there, and we all-- there was no school in Holland on Wednesday afternoon and Saturday afternoon. Saturday morning there was school, except we never went because we wouldn't go to school on Saturday.

On Wednesday afternoon, I went for about 2 and 1/2 hours to Hebrew school, and on Sunday morning an equal amount of time, with homework. It was a very fairly intensive. We learned a lot-- history, translation from the Chumash about the holidays and everything. So I was very well educated in the Jewish religion.

Also, especially in high school, I had a very happy time. I had lots of friends. I always had-- even in the beginning, kind of a boyfriend. But you were a little shy in those days. You didn't really express yourself.

But we knew we were boy and girl friend. And when I was about 16, became a little more serious about each other and really stuck together till the day my boyfriend was arrested in a raid when he was 20 and I was 19, which was a terrible upset and shocked me. I got an asthma attack, which I-- which lasted for about three months.

I was in really bad shape and I had to stay home. I couldn't go in different temperatures, because it would set it off every time again. So I was confined then.

And by that time, we didn't have any central heating anymore, so I stayed in the dining room where we had a little potbelly stove. And that's where I spent about three months trying to get over this.

What about-- what-- did you have hobbies or other pursuits as a teenager?

Well, between the homework, which is quite a bit in Dutch high schools, much more than here, I would say, yeah, easily had maybe three hours of homework every night. And your school hours were longer, too. And the Hebrew school on Wednesday afternoon.

And on Shabbat morning, I used to go to shul. And on Saturday afternoon, we often had in the shul kind of a youth group where we play games and sang songs and stuff. Of course, without music, because everybody was orthodox.

And I played tennis, which I enjoyed. And in high school, we played field hockey. Everybody did that, so that was often done. On Wednesday afternoon, I guess, I was older then and didn't go to Hebrew school anymore.

After Hebrew school, went-- you went only through maybe age 13 or 14. My sister and I took private table conversation lessons, Hebrew language lessons, privately once a week at night. And then there was homework for that. I did a lot of homework.

And otherwise, this life was very much built on families. On Saturday-- Friday night we went to my grandmother's. On Saturday morning, we went to my grandmother's. And one of us would always stay for lunch there. That was half your Saturday afternoon gone.

Sunday mornings, we went to the non orthodox grandmother and met there with older uncles and aunts and cousins. Life is very much geared around family. And in high school, I spent a lot of time with my friends.

Almost every night after school was done, we would meet each other and have fun, play records and talk. And we were very-- we were a close-knit group to the point where we would spend all our free time together, and then go home and write each other notes and read them the next day. So that was kind of the extent of our life.

So can we then lead up closer to the war period?

Well, then in May, I-- oh, the summer of '93 I spent in England. I was 16. And my-- it was between my fourth and fifth year in high school. And the department of the high school I was in was only five years. So it was just prior to my last year.

So my parents sent me to England and I stayed there with a German Jewish family who they had to find somebody who was kosher. And not to be in London all the time, I spent also a few weeks at a boarding school in Kent near the ocean. But the kids that were there were from a London boarding school of refugee children. These were all children whose parents were still in Germany. They were sent to England.

So I spent about three or four weeks with this group. I hated it because I hate all mass productions where everybody has to do the same thing at the same time. I learned to speak German a lot because most of the kids spoke German, of course. And German came to me easier than English. And we had to pay a penalty if we were caught speaking German.

But I did learn English. I really-- when I came back after six weeks, I learned to speak and have learned to speak English. My father-- I was supposed to go back at the very end of August '39 back to Holland, and then it looked as if the Germans were going to make war, invade Poland. And my father called and said you have to come home early. I want you to be back. I think there's going to be war.

Had we known what was going to happen, he should have said it was going to be war, why don't you stay there. But I was 16 and that was even younger than it is now. So I went back, finished my last year in high school, did my final exams in May-- in June 1940.

But we were invaded in May 1940 on the 10th of May. It was a five day war. Holland defended itself for five years-- five days. They thought they were invincible because we had this beautiful water line.

They flooded everything so that the troops couldn't go over it, something like the French with the Maginot Line, never realizing that it was very easy for planes to fly right over the water and bomb. And after five days, the Germans bombed Rotterdam. And they said, if you don't surrender, then we're going to do the same to every city.

So that was the end of the war. And then the Germans occupied Holland. In the beginning, they were very low key. They didn't do much. They said we will honor Dutch law and Dutch can go on living as they wish.

And also, I have to add that most Jews did not see it coming. Few families moved away, moved to America. And they were kind of just before May 1940. And they were considered like traitors. How can you leave your country?

And World War I we were not in. We are not going to be in the next World War. So we were really caught. In the

beginning, it didn't seem so bad.

There were a little measurement slowly taken, and we could live with all of them. So you didn't have your bike, so you couldn't go on street cars, so you wouldn't have your radio. So you had to give your bikes here and you had to give in your valuables.

And except for some reprisal raids where they picked up mostly young men, one of which my part of a squad, which was in June 1941, already, no official deportation started until July '42. And then it started with the list where every week so many hundreds of people had to bring themselves to a certain point with their rucksack. They told you bring just the work sock and told you exactly what to take.

And you'll be shipped to a work camp in the east. That's all we knew. We had no-- not the slightest idea. We just-- we wondered what are you going to do with the little kids. What are you going to do with the old people and the sick.

I remember in one case, a woman who was a teacher-- kindergarten teacher, she knew that eventually she probably would have to go, and she had a little girl. And she was crazy about the cutest little thing. I see the child still in front of me.

And she said, oh, nothing's going to happen. I'm just going to put on a nurse's uniform and I say I'm a children's nurse. So wherever we go, wherever the children are, I'll be a children's nurse. Nobody had any idea what was at the other end.

I often wonder what we would have done had we known. There would have probably been, I don't know, riots, and many more people trying to flee, and many more people being caught, of course, too. But the Germans were clever. They didn't want all these uproars and everything. They just hid everything.

And of course, it didn't only happen in Holland. The same thing happened in Belgium and in France, except-- I don't know if my husband told about this already-- but in Holland, it's a very precise, punctual bureaucratic people, a little bit like the Germans. Everybody-- everything has to be in order and documented and in cities and in villages and in the country.

So every-- everybody who got born that was Jewish-- state that it was Jewish in Holland, and if they said you come and get yourself your passport with your J on your pass-- with your J on it, you come to this and you come and you declare yourself a Jew. So there you were with your J on it. And now you have to come and get your stars and wear them on your clothes. So we went.

In the other countries where everything wasn't so precise and so bureaucratic, a lot of people got away by just not doing it. Not everybody knew who was or what they were. But Holland, that's why the toll in Holland was so high.

So to what point did I come? Then I was arrested one night-- that the whole family was arrested one day because somebody in our house turned out to be in the resistance and Jewish, which we didn't know. She came after curfew.

They had followed her. They arrested her, wanted to arrest us. We managed to talk ourselves out of it because my father was a member of the Jewish council.

One of the SS men who came was impressed with our home. Everything was brand new there from five, six years before. So he arrest us the next day so that he could take the home.

In the end, he didn't live in it. The one who lived in it was a German. The German physician who was at the head of the biggest Dutch municipal hospital. He lived there all by himself in the big house with a Japanese servant and kept everything beautifully.

We saw the bullet holes in the door from when they arrested him and he was taken out. We were still in Germany then. The Dutch contingent of the Canadian army made it their officers' headquarters. So when I came back, I asked if I could see the house.

And there was a big huge mess because all these officers lived there and ate there on our best. The table was always pulled out with our best China and linens on the table, and they had maids in the kitchen and all. But after several months, we were able to get our house back after it had to be cleaned out, I think, by four people for five days so we could go back. So that's in a nutshell, our goings and coming back.

Can we back up? And you mentioned that your father was a member of the Jewish council.

Yes.

I would like to talk about your father a little bit of length later. But could you just discuss that a little bit? How did that come about?

Well, at one point, the Germans-- the German occupation wanted a liaison between them and the Dutch people. They really used the Jewish council. In the beginning, it wasn't realized. It was to help-- the Jewish councils thought they were there to help their people and not be a help to the Germans.

Right.

It slowly, slowly, of course, deteriorated. And like my husband always mentions in his speeches, it went from cooperation to collaboration. But again, nobody knew when they sent these people away that they were sending them to their death.

And the best proof is that of the whole Jewish council, I think, I don't know how many there were, about 15, maybe or 23 came back. So in the end, they went, too.

Of course.

And so it was a little bit of a position of influence, because my father got me a job in one of the offices of the Jewish council. They had different offices all through the city for different purposes. I wanted to go in hiding, actually. I didn't look Jewish.

And I had already found my way. I had false papers. I was having pictures made to put on, and I would go.

My father forbid me to do it. He said it's too dangerous. I have a feeling I'll get you through this. If they come for us and you're not there, they're all going to be in trouble because of you. You have to stick with us.

At the time, I wanted to do it. I was 19, I think, and you did what your father said. He was rather authoritative person for good reasons. He was really a presence. You can see from his pictures he's a very dynamic person.

Everybody had a lot of respect for him. All my girlfriends were afraid of him, because he had these penetrating eyes. So I did not go into hiding. I stayed with my family.

They took us out of that house because they wanted it. With our little rucksack, they put us in the Jewish theater, which was a transit point for people before they were deported. Usually, people stayed there one or two days, and then the ship-- were shipped off to the Dutch transit camp of Westerbork.

But because the Jewish council had started to keep our family out of it, we stayed there for five weeks, managed not to be sent away. They let us go on the stipulation we could-- got back into our house. So we stayed with my father's brother for a while, and then we got an apartment in the eastern part of Amsterdam, which was a poor neighborhood, and where they tried to make a little ghetto with the final-- with the remnants of whatever there was left of the Amsterdam jewelry.

There were also a lot of people from the provinces who had already been sent from the provinces first to Amsterdam.

They tried to more and more concentrate us. And so we lived in the eastern part for maybe six weeks or something with-- we were able to furnish with furniture of people who were also sent there from big houses who had a lot of surplus.

So they each gave-- they gave us beds and there was living room furniture. So we lived in the ghetto until September 30, 1943, which happened to be Rosh Hashanah. The Germans were always very good at picking these dates.

And that was really the last pickup. Those were the remnants of the Jews. And this was the last transport to Westerbork.

And so we arrived there the night of September 30, October 1st. And we stayed in Westerbork for eight months, which was quite a long time. I don't know if it was because of my father's Jewish council thing-- could be. You never quite knew.

He knew some people there, too, in the German Jewish hierarchy. Westerbork was a camp that had been set up by the Dutch government for German Jewish refugees before 1940-- between 1933, who had no relatives who would take care of them, and who had no money to take care of themselves. So it was already a little internment camp.

And these German Jews lived there with their families. The kids went to school. They all learned to some extent to speak Dutch. I have to give them credit for that.

But they didn't like the Dutch Jews too much, because they were the ones who kept them in the camp and didn't take better care of them. So when we came in droves, the Dutch Jews, the Germans were in charge, the German Jews, in the daily-- what do you call it-- management of the camp. And they lived in little houses. We, of course, were put into barracks.

My mother found like a second cousin who was in that position who lived there, and they kind of helped us in little ways, but always kind of grudgingly. We took care of quite a few of my mother's relatives from Germany-- cousins and second cousins who came. But we couldn't take care of all of them.

Right.

So some of them ended up in the camp. And they didn't have a bad life. They were just not free.

Right.

My father worked in the laundry, which was a nice job. At least was better than working in batteries and other dirty jobs. He took in dirty laundry and talked to all the people. He liked that part.

And everybody always said, oh, did you see Mr. Soep, this big sharp guy, he's taking in dirty laundry and everything. But I never had the feeling that he found it demeaning or anything, because everybody was in the same position. I was asthmatic, and my parents were always very worried about me. I was always sick a lot when I was a child.

And we used-- that second cousin of my mother's, who was there for a long time to see if I could get a cushy job, but I ended up in a linen room where the German Jews who had lived a long time got their linen towels and sheets for their beds. And I learned how to repair and patch sheets on the machines already. We had a little education there. It was clean.

And then all of a sudden, somebody decided, well, why is this young girl working in this job that's for old people? You can't do this anymore. And then somehow my father got me into the hospital compound, which had its own management and everything. And he managed with somebody I would get a hospital job. I ended up in a little room in the hospital, which is not a good job.

So I really never had any dirty work to do or anything. The conditions weren't too good for me because it was all straw mattresses and stuff. So I did have a lot of problems with my asthma.

I also got diphtheria there and ended up in the hospital with diphtheria in an isolation barracks, where there were old people with diphtheria. It was very prevalent. I don't really know why.

I know there was a lot of middle ear infections. I know that was because we were in a very sandy surroundings. It was all flat heath land and it was not a good climate, and it was always wind and we got sand in our ears. There was diphtheria a lot, and there was a lot of hepatitis.

Did-- now you-- when you mention these hospitals, were they--

They were barracks with like wards. A lot of people, but--

Was there medicine?

Yes. In Holland there was. The best doctors, the best German and Dutch doctors who were there, nurses, everything. It was clean. It was-- you were well taken care of.

While I was in the hospital with diphtheria, one night they decided to do-- the next transport wasn't full. They were going to empty the whole hospital, and everybody from the hospital was going to go in transport to Germany. Because my father in a panic, and he knew in the meantime, the higher ups in the Jewish German hierarchy who were almost as bad as the SS, I must tell you.

But they had influence with the camp. And I got out. I did not have to. Then when I came out of the hospital from diphtheria, we man-- I managed to get into tiny little barracks.

These-- the houses where these German Jews lived all the time in the middle had like a-- called an assembly room where they would go together for things. And they rebuilt those-- or they built them up as beds for maybe about 10, 12, 14 people. They call that the little halls, or something, which was a lot better than the big barracks.

So because I was weak and everything from the illness, my father managed to get me into that, which was a better existence. While I was-- oh, yeah-- in the meantime, I had met my husband in the camp. And we kind of became very friendly. And there was a little complication. He was married.

They had decided to split after the war anyway, so it was not like I was a home wrecker. But his wife, of course, didn't like it too much because it didn't reflect very well on her. It was a little embarrassing.

What did your parents think?

My parents didn't know.

OK.

Somehow there were enough people there you could always kind of melt in the woodwork. They did not know-- I tell you in a minute how they did find out. While I was-- had of diphtheria, my husband went on transport into Bergen-Belsen.

Now, we didn't know much about Bergen-Belsen. We didn't know much about the other camps, except that on the note that you got where you were deported to, Bergen-Belsen they called a privileged camp, Vorzugslager. And we were sent there in passenger cars while the ones to Auschwitz went-- were cattle cars.

Right, right.

So we knew there must be little difference. Everybody tried to do something to get to Bergen-Belsen. One of the things was the-- probably we were almost a Palestine list for Zionists, and the other one was-- my father managed to get South American papers that we were citizens of the country of El Salvador.

And he did that while you were at Westerbork? He managed to--

I think it was done while we were in Westerbork. I'm not 100% sure. And then the diamond industry that they wanted to set up, and a lot of people had bought-- had paid the Germans diamonds, 100,000 guilders worth of diamonds per person to get a stamp on your pass.

They were all different stamps. This was called the 100,000 stamp. The 30,000 stamp was for the baptized Jews. The 40,000 stamp was for some other protection. These were all protections.

This was all done through bribery.

Well, it was kind of-- it was an official bribery. They said if you give us \$100,000 to give you that stamp, you can go to Bergen-Belsen instead of Auschwitz. So we had a feeling that somehow it was better. Because the better was like you weren't killed the moment you got there.

Right.

And the families were together. Men and women were in the same camp. Where was I? Oh, I was now in Westerbork and in this little room. And then Jack was sent away, and I had met him there and we courted there.

And while-- then in May 1944, another transport went to Bergen-Belsen and we had to go on it. But my mother was in the hospital with hepatitis, so my father and she stayed back. I went with my sister, my father's brother who was married to my mother's sister, and my little cousins.

Really?

Yeah. And my father's brother's 10 years younger. My mother's sister was 11 years younger. So there were children of my parents married, but then later they married. And they had two little girls who were our cousins. But genetically, we're almost like sisters.

And we had the same set of grandparents, so we saw each other every Saturday at the one grandparent. Then we saw the other grandparent. So we all went to Bergen-Belsen. While Jack was in Bergen-Belsen and I was still in Westerbork, he sent me a card. In the beginning, you were allowed to send cards written in Germany so many letter-- words.

And he sent me kind of a love note to Westerbork, which arrived after I was sent away to Bergen-Belsen already. So my parents--

Parents got it.

--got it. So that's how they found out, which was kind of fun. My father was never too enchanted with any boyfriend I had, so I didn't expect anything this time, either, like most fathers of girls. They always think nobody's good enough for their precious children.

So I got to Bergen-Belsen in May of '44. We stopped at-- in-- I don't quite remember how long we were on the train. I would say two days and a night. And when we got there, we were met at the station of Salle, I think it was called, the station-- Saale or Halle, one of the two. Or maybe it's called Salle-Haale.

And we all had to get out and they loaded all our luggage. Everybody had their rucksack with their name on it and a bundle of blankets rolled up with the name stitched on it. It was all prescribed, what you have to have when you were deported. And everybody had-- was prepared.

And when we got there, we had to give all that off. We are a little worried about it, but we found it back in the camp. And we had to walk from the train to the camp.



I don't know exact-- it was a long walk, but it was doable. It was maybe an hour, an hour and a half, or something. And when we got to the station, I saw a man that I knew who later became my uncle. But of course, then I didn't know it.

And I asked him-- everybody was tense and wanted to know what's next. It was all so unknown. And we bombarded him with questions. Where are we going, and how is it there, and who is there, and what do you do there?

And all he did was just shake his head and he calmed us with his hand movements and said, it's all right. You'll be OK. Don't worry too much.

But he knew it wasn't the greatest deal. So then we got in-- it was late at night, or the middle of the night, when we got there. And they put us first in quarantine, everybody together from the train, or probably in a few barracks to see if nobody came down with something terrible.

And then we were divided over different barracks in Bergen-Belsen. And I was-- me and my family, and a lot of other people in the diamond industry who had anything to do with diamonds and manufacturers, polishers to cutters, the women who did certain type of very fine work, they were all put together on barracks. Because as they said, they wanted to set up a diamond industry in Bergen-Belsen with all these diamond workers.

I guess a lot of them were there, because they were-- they also were safe until that time because of the work they did. It was important for the Germans to have people to know these skills. And these were skills that were handed down from generation to generation. It was really families had the skill because they were doing it for so many generations.

And we never had to work because they claim you have to save your hands for the diamond industry. I was a daughter of a manufacturer. There was no reason-- I know nothing about diamonds. But they kept the families together. And that was kind of a privileged existence compared to people who had to work so hard, or dirty work.

Our only ordeal was this-- the roll calls, which they drove you crazy. You have to stand in rows of five and they counted. And if it didn't work out exactly the way they thought how many there had to be, then you had to stand again, or if they just wanted to punish you or tease you or whatever.

I remember the terrible cold in horribly cold weather and in horribly hot weather where you just stood there. And we got our three meals served, which wasn't much of meals, but it was something to keep you alive. I don't know how we passed-- how I passed the day, those endless days. But they did go by.

There was a lot of talk among the people, mostly about food. Everybody was exchanging recipes, what they were going to do to cook. And everybody always claimed they had had beautiful, wonderful lives.

Where you know, some of these people were-- some of these diamond workers were really dirt or poor. But if you heard them, they weren't. They left this beautiful lives behind them.

And then they got very serious about the diamond industry. The machinery was already on the-- in trains on the tracks outside the camp. And they set up a committee to-- how to go about it. It was all kind of stipulations.

The diamonds would come from there, and the people would live there, and they would get better food and better quarters. And I happened to-- and they came in and asked is there anybody who could take the minutes of a meeting. And I had come from the secretarial course so I could take German shorthand. It was all done in German.

Couldn't do it now, but I could do it then. And my father wasn't even there yet. But my uncle was there and he was on the committee with this group of other big time manufacturers.

And I remember one night we were already in bed, maybe 11:00-- the curfew was, I think, 10:00 the lights went out, or maybe even earlier. And for us, it was like middle of the night, all of a sudden, we all had to come to a meeting. And I had never taken minutes.

I did business correspondence, but I'd never taken minutes of anything. But some of the men kind of helped me what was important. And then I had to type them out later.

We had two or three of those meetings. And it looked very serious that it was going to happen, although, we couldn't quite visualize it. And then it was already the end of '44.

And then early '45, they realized they couldn't do it because they wouldn't know how to get the diamonds. Nobody would-- nobody would give them diamonds. And they also did know they were losing the war.

So they decided to just give up on it. Now, we were what was called the diamond list. You had the diamond list. You had the Palestine list. You had this list, that list. And when a list was no longer valid, they called it the list platz, exploded, gone.

And they sent all these diamond people, men, women, to terrible other camps except for two families, which was my family and the Asscher family. The Asscher was the biggest diamond manufacturer in Amsterdam. And we didn't quite understand why, and I still don't actually exactly understand why.

It could be that they thought it-- if they would still win the war, that they would have some people who were still knowledgeable and had the worldwide connections. Or if they were losing it, that they had somebody to show and say, see, we didn't kill everybody. Here are these people still. I don't know.

And my father was terri-- but in the meantime, my parents had come in September '44 after my mother got better. That was the very, very last transport that left Westerbork on the same day that Anna Frank left for Auschwitz, September '44. After that, there were no more deportations.

So the people who stuck it out in the Dutch camp until after the time were never deported and were liberated in Holland by the America-- by the American army-- the English army, I think. And my father was very, very upset that the other diamond manufacturers-- he knew he couldn't save everybody, but there were some others that were very prominent and they were his good friends. They were fine, fine people.

So he asked to be taken to the camp command to put in a good word for them, which was very daring because you couldn't do things like that. And he said, these are wonderful people. We need them. Why don't you let them stay?

And the man got furious and said, if you don't get out of here fast, then you'll go, too. Later on, some of the widows of these men got very upset and very mad at my father and wouldn't talk to him anymore because they felt that he had done something to save himself and had not tried for the others when it was really the other way around.

But people were very distraught and distressed after the war and said all kinds of things. We always like to blame somebody. But it was very hard for my father afterwards.

And also because he had been on the Jewish council, which was defiled after the war for what they-- also for being-- yeah-- did things that were not detrimental, really, to anybody. But it looked that way, like you try to save yourself.

You had to be appointed to this council, I assume?

Well, yes, they had two chairmen. One was this Mr. Asscher, and the other one was a professor, a university professor by the name of Cohen. So Asscher and Cohen were the leaders. And I think they picked prominent people from different fields.

I see.

And that's how he got on it. It's not that he went to and apply for the job.

No, no, right, right. Can we stop the tape and flip it over?

Yeah. The diamond group kind of dispersed, not voluntarily, obviously. The man was sent to, I think it was Buchenwald, and were mistreated. And I think one or two only came back.

The women were sent to the salt mines. And the very old and the very young children were sent to a different compound in Bergen-Belsen, which was the big women's camp known because Anne Frank and her sister, Margo, died in that camp. The conditions were terrible there.

Let me first say something else. We stayed in the same part of Bergen-Belsen, which was mostly this privileged camp, which was occupied by Dutch people, people from Greece, from Albania, the wives of the French prisoners of war-- Jewish wives of the French Jewish prisoners of war. And as of, I think, February of '45 by about 2000 Hungarians. They came very, very late.

After about a month, I think, that Asscher family and we were sent to a much smaller compound where the conditions were a little better, just us two families and a few other people with South American papers. And they wanted to treat us a little better, and they were going to-- we were going to be exchanged to Switzerland. And every other day, there was a rumor.

Then this woman would come from France and talk, and then somebody else would come. And every day we were going the next day. But it actually never materialized. We stayed in Bergen-Belsen.

And that was right next to that big huge women's camp. And we were in this smaller little more protected place. And people would come and say who was sick here and other children, and we would get a little extra milk for them, and stuff like that.

It wasn't great, but it was not quite as devastating as in the other camp which had deteriorated terribly towards the end with dirty conditions, and therefore, illness and people just starving to death and dying like flies. I got a terrible toothache one day in the smaller camp, and in that big woman's camp-- women's camp, there was a Polish woman dentist.

And she was kind of practicing. There was a very old fashioned kind of drill and everything. And they sent me there if she could do something for me. And I had to go into that camp.

And I can't even tell you, it was one of the worst experiences of my life, of my camp time, when I saw what was going on there. I saw the wagons full of corpses being dragged to the camp, God knows where, and heaps of corpses lying on the ground. And women in these stripe-- we wore our own clothes. We didn't have much.

Oh, you did? Oh.

Yeah. Whatever we had brought in our rucksack, we kept. So we had one warm outfit and one summer outfit, and that's what we wore. And that wasn't very clean, either. That's why you got all this stuff.

But these women were in the striped costumes and emaciated. And it was huge. There were-- even as huge as it was, there were more people than there was room. It was just a devastating experience. And I just was in there for an hour, saw the people lived there.

And a woman dentist looked at my mouth and was delighted because she showed girls who were working for her how a well kept mouth should look. Fillings from-- still from Holland and everything. So we stayed in that other camp till April 7. And they put us on a train.

And where we were going, nobody knew. They were trying to get us away from the front and away from the liberators. And I think they were trying to get us to go to Theresienstadt, Terezin.

We went-- the train-- we were on the train six days and six nights, I think. We left on the 7th, and we were liberated on the 13th.

Did you have any food on the train?

We had raw turnips, lots of them. We had a few cans of meat, I think, and bread-- some bread. So we had something to eat, but it wasn't enough, of course.

Of course.

The train drove-- rode, and then all of a sudden, it would stop for a few hours. Nobody knew why. Nobody knew what. You just didn't know what was going on. Nobody was going on.

As it-- there were 2,400 people on the train-- 2000 Hungarians and about 300 Dutch, and maybe about 100 French people. We knew we were getting close to the front. You could hear shooting, and they didn't know what to do with us.

We heard later-- we didn't know then-- that somebody from Berlin came, a high officer, and said to the train conductor that he should drive the train into the river. We were stuck at the Elbe River. And Hungarians seem to have heard about it and they had gold with them still. They came very late, and they had gold in their clothes, and they bribed the train commander to not do so. And he didn't.

And then the next morning, that same officer came back and saw this train still there and got very mad, and told the train commander that if he came back in the afternoon the train still was there, he would do so and so. And just after this guy left, all of a sudden, there were liberators, the American Knights Army. And they didn't know who we were.

They saw this huge train and all these people, and I guess these soldiers didn't know about camps. And nobody knew about it. So they didn't know what they were encountering there.

So they came with their drawn rifles and everything. And then we quickly enlightened them who we were. And then on that same-- maybe we-- according to my sister who I talked about this recently, we stayed one more night on the train because it was afternoon.

And the next morning, they brought us to the nearby village, which was called Farsleben.

Can you spell that? Do you know how to spell that?

F-A-R-S-L-E-B-E-N. And they quartered us with the people there. It was a farming village. And we stayed in a big farm, and the people had to feed us.

And I remember the first meal was-- what would you call them-- pancakes with bacon. And then it was a beautiful day. It was April 13, the first day we heard that Roosevelt had died the day before, April 12, 1945.

We were very devastated. We didn't know-- we thought still then-- still that he was fabulous.

You thought he was--

[LAUGHTER]

My sister and I took a walk, and some of the people that had been quartered where there were no other people in the houses, the Americans had provided them with food and big kegs, barrels. And we found in the village in the quarter somewhere a big barrel of food-- soup with bacon floating on top of it, that they had forgotten or something. And my sister and I went at it.

Now, we know a lot of people still died afterwards because they ate too much. We didn't know that, of course, so we

skimmed off all the bacon from the top, all that fat, and ate it. Spent a whole night in the bathroom. Thank goodness, that was all that happened to us. We were sick as dogs.

The next morning, the Americans came and said, we have to bring you somewhere else because the Germans are coming back. A front is never steady. You push them back and then they pull up again and that's what was happening. The Germans were coming back. You could hear it.

So he said we have to get out of here. So they brought us down to another village called Hillersleben, H-I-L-L-E-R-S-L-E-B-E-N, near-- oh, I can't think of it. Was it near Leipzig? And there was a military village which Hitler had built with big villas for the commanders, and apartments for soldiers and their families.

It was all brand new. And because of-- oh, and my father and somebody, a younger man, right away appointed a commander of the train by the Americans. Maybe they asked who can be taken because there was my father.

So we lived in the villa for a few days of the commander of that village, the German commander of the village-- beautiful villa. And we slept in these beautiful beds. And it was a huge yard. And in the basement, we found all kind of food that they had put up in jars-- meat, vegetables, fruits that was able to be eaten.

My father's birthday was April 17. We were still in that house. And we had kind of a banquet with wines and champagne and lace tablecloths and crystal. And it was like a movie. And then we cooked the food.

And then the American hierarchy who were occupying that part of Germany at the time came in with their higher ups. And of course, they wanted that villa. So we had to leave it.

We took some stuff. The funny part is that the man who was the commander, his name was Von Seither. And his initial is A, and my father's initials were A-S, too.

So we took some linens that had. I still have some of it. And we each took a set of silver, a spoon and fork, because we didn't have anything, of course. We had to have give it to Germans in Holland. We knew when we come back, we wouldn't have it.

And then they put us in little apartments where the soldiers have left. And that was very cramped. We lived with our family, which was big because my aunt and my cousins were with us, and a Hungarian family. And we just had one kitchen.

But everything was heaven to us after that. And the Americans saw that we always had enough food. They gave us bread and ingredients to cook, and we ate, and we ate, and we ate. I mean, I can't tell you.

We threw nothing out. Bread was stale. We made bread puddings. There's always some food standing there next to the bed. We just ate like crazy.

And then the Germans-- the Americans came-- what did I say-- well, towards the end of April and said we have to get you out of here. It's going to be a Russian territory. And their confidence in the Russians wasn't that great. They knew what was going to happen, that it wasn't good to be-- for us to be under the Germans.

So they send us away, except my father, by the time, had spotted typhus and was deathly ill. And he couldn't travel so he had to stay back with my mother. My mother stayed with him in that apartment.

But we left and they brought us somewhere where one night we had to camp out kind of in a entertainment hall-- was all wood, wooden hall. And just lie on the floor, sleep, tomorrow you go on a train. And that was-- gees, I know it all the time-- from where did we leave to go back to Holland from? I can't think of the name of the town now.

And one friend of ours, the father of a friend of mine, actually, said, well, you all go to sleep. I stay awake. I don't trust this place. It was all wood.

There were-- there was a projection room upstairs. It was used for parties and stuff. So we went to sleep. And all of a sudden, he started screaming, yelling, everybody out, everybody out. A fire had started in the projection room.

I don't know if somebody set it. It was because he was awake we were all able to get out with a little bit of belongs that we had. And we sat outside and watched this building, I mean, burn to the ground. It was a huge, huge, huge fire.

Now, I claim I saw something and my sister said it didn't happen. But I cannot have made it up. That on top of the building there were three pictures of Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels.

And as the building was starting to burn down, they came tumbling down one by one. And we all stood there and cheered. Now, she doesn't remember it at all, and she said I must have dreamt it. But I don't think I could have dreamt it up.

So-- but that was the day we're leaving anyhow. And they put us in these trains with apologies in these open coal cars. And my family and I, we happened to be in the first one. And these were steam locomotives-- with steam coming out.

So when we came back in Holland after three days, we were-- first, it was very tan, because it was beautiful, three days of summer weather, and pitch black face and everything from the-- and we were received in a big assembly hall of the Philips factories and now very famous.

Mm-hmm. Oh, sure.

We stayed there for one night, took showers. People-- it's a very Catholic country there in the southern part of Holland. The women who were there to help us and everything were absolutely shocked that we all walked around there naked going-- trying to get into the showers, getting bathed, and everything.

We had lost all shame there, especially, where we were because men and women and you saw everything. If you wash yourself on a little bowl, that's about the only washing we could do in the end. You saw everybody. Nobody looked at us.

But I remember that these women were just saying how horrible we were, and these Jews were of no shame, and stuff like that. And then people in the surroundings of Eindhoven, in the town where Philips is had volunteered to take people in, people who came back on these trains into their homes. They didn't have much, either, because that part of Holland wasn't free that long, either. And there was very little food, and it was all rationed. But we got extra ration cards and everything.

And a young couple that had just been married a short time in a small apartment who had one or three room got mattresses from the Red Cross and blankets. And my sister and I were quartered there for-- this was May-- must have been May 5, because it was the day that the western part of Holland for Amsterdam was liberated, which was quite a few months after the eastern part of Holland.

But we could not go back to Holland-- to Amsterdam and to the West. The conditions there were terrible. It had a terrible hunger winter. A lot of people were dead. Everything was devastated. There was no food whatsoever. There was no fuel. There was nothing.

So we had to stay in the eastern part until it was feasible to go back. And I think that was maybe the very end of May or June. And my parents were still in Germany. I still have a letter that my mother brought back where I addressed Mr. And Mrs. Soep, 5 Adolf-Hitler-Strasse. That was the street we were living on. And of course, that hadn't changed yet.

My parents came back in July. I've found a very good friend of mine-- I'm still very friendly with her-- who had been in hiding. Her parents had been in hiding. And they got their home back right away. Beautiful house with a lot of space. And they took me in until my parents came back.

Then we couldn't even go back in our house because the Dutch contingent of the Canadian army had taken our home to use for our officer's club. And so my parents lived in a small hotel, and I stayed with my friends, my sister stayed with her friends, until we were reunited in our own home in-- I guess it must have been July '45.

And my husband to be, the man I had met in camp and who I had had this courtship with and who I had mostly contact with in Bergen-Belsen. It was letters that we wrote each other. I didn't know where he was. Nobody knew where anybody else was, because he had been liberated.

But in the meantime, also on a train, by the Russians. And he got very, very ill and was sick for quite a while. And he wasn't repatriated until July '45. We had-- he had give me the name of friends of his, Gentile friends, and told me as soon as you get back, contact them and I will do the same.

And then you tell them, or whoever gets there first, where we are. And then we can find each other. That's how we found each other. And that was, I guess, it was July '45.

Then he started right away divorce procedures. And it was good that he did, because a lot of people had stuck it out together during the war and had decided to split up. So there were tremendous amount of divorces and the courts were swamped. But because he started right away, he was already divorced, I think, in August, September of '45.

And then we got engaged in October '45 and got married in January-- January '46. We got married very romantically in a horse and wagon, because there were no cars and no gas and no rubber for tires. So it was very elegant. Well, that's-- I'm sure hundreds of other stories there in between.

Is there anything that you feel that you'd like to include right--

Well, I guess for me, the most traumatic experiences that bother me the most now, not so much what happened to myself, I somehow have dealt with that, and everything came out pretty much OK, was the 1941 raid, which was a second raid in Amsterdam where the took young men. I don't think I mentioned at the beginning, did I? I mentioned to you--

No, we didn't discuss it.

--yeah--

Right.

--where my brother was taken who was then-- he's 41, he was born in 19-- so he was 22. He had just--

What was his name?

His name was-- his official name was Benjamin-- Benjamin Soep. We called him Benno, B-E-N-N-O. He had just married-- he had just been married for seven months. His girlfriend whom he met in Switzerland skiing in 1938, I think, left with her parents early '39 to America. They were one of the smart peoples-- smart families to try to get out in time.

They were terribly in love, very young, and very much in love. She wrote him every day. He wrote her every day. And she made it her business-- she went-- came back to Holland very, very much against the wishes of her parents. She was there, and also all of 20, I think.

But she just did it. And that was before the war broke out in Holland. And then, of course, she was caught. And although they were very young, they decided they might as well get married.

And because they got married, they lived separate. They got a very nice apartment. And the way he was caught is kind of very sad story, too. There was in Holland a farm where they prepared young men and young women. And they were all refugees from Germany and Austria, who were there without their families.

And they were preparing them for agriculture in Israel, Hachscharah. And one of these villages was closed, and they didn't know what to do with these people. So they asked Jewish families in Amsterdam, would they each take one of these young men? And we did.

And my brother did. And I remember my father saying to my brother, you are-- you all you just got married. Don't take somebody else into your house. But my brother was a real very orthodox, very good, very good person. He would literally not kill a fly. He couldn't do it.

And he took in one of these young men, too. And on this fateful day of June 11, 1941, they did a partial raid because a German had been killed in Amsterdam by resistance people. And they-- the reprisal was to arrest young Jews.

And they had a list of all these young men who had been caught up with the families. And they just went by the list, and they came to our house and took our guy who was also a very sweet boy from Vienna. And they also went to my brother's home.

And my brother-- the young man wasn't home. So they said, well, we'll just wait for him. And then they started talking and he said to my brother, are you a Jew, too? And my brother said, yes. And he said, well, then you go with these two.

So they sat there till the young man came back. And they-- and they were sent to a camp in-- just north of Amsterdam.

You know the name of it?

The name-- it was Schoorl, C--S-C-H-O-O-R-L. That was June 11, 1941. And my father who had, of course, quite a bit of influence because of the Jewish council, tried and tried and tried to get my brother out of there.

And he almost succeeded. But all of a sudden, it was June 22, 1941. That was when Germany invaded Russia. They first had the pact and then Hitler broke the pact and invaded Russia.

Right.

So all of a sudden, Russia was the enemy. So communists were the enemy. And they rounded up all that-- and there were quite a few in Amsterdam. They rounded up all the known communists. And they wanted that camp in Schoorl to put the communists. And here, they had all these Jewish kids and they send the Jewish kids to Mauthausen.

So that's how he got caught there. And then he still-- my father still tried to get him out of Mauthausen. And of course, nobody did. So that's how we lost him.

Is it possible-- back up a little, talk a little bit about his youth.

Well, he was the oldest son of the oldest son, you know with a decent Jewish family everybody thinks they are the top. He was a very, very sweet man-- boy.

He was not a very good student. He had problems. So he went to a very good high school, couldn't hack it there. They sent him to one that was a little more trade oriented, which wasn't as difficult, couldn't do it, either.

And then he went-- for a year, he worked in a department store as-- to learn a trade. And then my father took him in his business. And-- well, I mean, he died when he was 22. There's not that much to tell. He married this girl that he was crazy about.

He enjoyed skiing. Did he have--

He went skiing. He played tennis. He collected stamps. He was very religious. I mean, a lot of people were Orthodox and did it routinely. He was really without being-- you didn't see the very, very orthodox, like you see here with the



black outfits and the payots and everything.

But for Dutch ideas, he was really very orthodox, and meant it. It was not just you were born that way, that's why you did it. He was just a very good guy.

And he wasn't a Zionist? He was just--

He was a little bit. My father wasn't too involved with Zionism. He felt very Dutch. He felt Jews could live anywhere in the right surroundings and make their mark.

So that was a very bad experience, of course. His wife, who was stuck then with her parents here, but then came to live first with an uncle and aunt, and later on her own. And then she went through the camps with us and was liberated with us.

And she went back to America, remarried, had two children, divorced, married again, then got sick and she died of cancer. She was-- she never got over it.

Right. Of course.

She never did.

Would you like to stop now?

The other-- let me just go to the bathroom.

Oh.