

*Tape two, side one:*

ES: Eileen Steinberg interviewing Alexandra Gorko, August 19, 1985. Side three. Continue telling me about what happened when you got to Bergen-Belsen.

AG: There were sick people, mostly sick people. And there they put us to work. I was working on the railroad, putting rails. I never did any physical work beside nursing, and they gave me some kind of, I don't know what the instrument's called. They told me to put some screws in the rails, put them all together, and I don't believe myself that I could do it. And I even taught other people to do it. The rails went no where, but they punished us this way. They, they took advantage of us. They wanted to put our morale down. They knew that the end of the war is close. Of course we didn't. At that time we didn't hear any airplanes. We didn't know what's going on, and we thought we will never get out of there. People were falling like flies. People couldn't even eat. There was dysentery, typhoid fever. They kept food away from us. They didn't give us every day bread. They gave us some times only soup. They said that they have to give, to send every thing to the front for the soldiers. There is no bread for Jews. And we were work ing. It was a very hot spring that year. And they took away the clogs from us. We were bare feet. Our uniforms were dirty. They were almost standing up when we tried to wash them in cold water, which was a big exertion, because they didn't even let us near the tubs, the water. We had to smuggle our selves to the, to the outhouse. They didn't let us. Dysentery, typhoid fever was all over. People were falling at work. The other one had two, they gave us spades to put them in graves. It was going on like this. We never thought that we will survive. That, that, I didn't get sick, it was a miracle. I don't know how. Paula got sick. She didn't have typhoid, but she was exhausted. She was just falling off her feet of exhaustion. But we were still together. We were always together. We were holding to each other like, I never had a sister, but if I would have, I couldn't have a better one than she was. As a matter of fact, she is in France. In 1973 we finally could make a trip to Israel and to France, and we saw her. She is not well. One of her legs is, at the mus-... [muscle] is swollen. It looks like three of her normal, the other leg. In the camp, even in Mühlhausen, she had, cysts on her neck, which didn't heal. Open, and didn't heal. And it was always...

ES: Infected?

AG: Inf-, yeah. It was bacteria coming out and pus, yeah. And a nurse, he had to come, because pus was coming out and I suspected that she had TB. But she survived. And one day, it was a very hot day, in, it was probably, yeah, it was April. It was already April. The Germans disappeared. They, we didn't know where they are. One day, second day, three days they weren't there. And we didn't understand what happened. Not even one of them. So, the strongest of us, which I was too, I wasn't sick, we started to look for food. And we found warehouses, but they were locked and couldn't open them. And everybody ran to the taps of water and whoever drank the water, right away got sick. And I was hollering whoever was near me, "Don't drink the water! Don't drink the water! It seems

like it's poison, poisoned!" But people didn't listen, and it was going on like three-and-a-half days. All of a sudden we heard heavy machinery, tanks and we saw all the men coming in, soldiers on tanks, speaking English. And this was the English Army. General Montgomery's army. And we, everybody who could, fell on their knees and people who could pray, prayed. The other one was kissing them and hugging the English men. And they were older men like their 40's, even in their 50's. They were crying like babies when they saw us. They opened the warehouses, which were full of bread and sausage and beans and all kinds of food which they didn't give us, which they didn't have time to take with them, the Germans. The English people gave us their rations. We were asking for rice. I was hollering, "Rice! Rice! Rice!" But the, they were so generous that they put their rations into the rice, and 15,000 people died after they liberated us. 15,000 people were dead. 15,000 dead. 15,000 people died after. Then we were, doctors came, chaplains. Was one Jewish chaplain who spoke German, and he asked who has relatives in United States or in England. He can radio them, send radio telegrams. And to tell them where, and what cities, and he will find them. I went to him and I said, "You don't have to find my relatives because I remember their addresses and their names." And I told him, "I have two aunts in Philadelphia. One lives 2741 Jefferson Street, and the other, Jefferson Street, Germantown, and the other one lives at 2005 Salford Street. Her name is Marie Embinder, and the other is Adele Bronstein." And about three or four days later I was called to the office. They had already arranged an office and people were working, who could walk were working. They gave us clothes. They gave us soap. They gave us bandages and all kinds of medication. Doctors were examining us. They were English doctors. There weren't enough, so they had German doctors. The Germans all around Bergen-Belsen didn't know what was going on. They didn't know what was going on.

ES: They claimed they didn't know.

AG: They knew there was something there, but they didn't know. They thought we are criminals. And about three or four days later I was called to the office and they read to me a telegram which my aunt from Philadelphia sent, and asked that they are very happy that they got a radio telegram from this, I don't remember his name now, that English chaplain. And they're very happy that I am alive and they want me to come to United States and where is my mother and brother and husband. So I knew that my mother died. I hoped against hope that maybe my mother survived, but that I knew that they didn't survive. But I still had hope that my husband did.

ES: Because your husband wasn't Jewish?

AG: That's right. See, it's, it's fate. It has nothing to do with. A few weeks later the Swedish Red Cross came and took the people who were sick and people who were, had TB, typhoid fever. There was other diseases. They took them to Sweden. Then people who remained who had sores, who had, who coughed, who had all kind of, not serious diseases, didn't want to go to the German hospital, there was a German hospital. So I was, I offered

my services and we opened in one of the barracks a [husband says, "Sick room."] Sick room. Right. Like a sick room. Not a hospital but a sick room.

ES: Right in Bergen-Belsen.

AG: Right in Bergen-Belsen. We got medication from the Germans. The English Army brought some. Then they took from the Germans and came a Russian doctor who I found out, I uncovered him that he wasn't a doctor because he didn't know how to write a prescription. He was probably an aide somewhere. And I had to, asked me to write a prescription. So I told him to go away, because if not I would denounce you. I'm not a doctor. And he disappeared. There also was a Polish dentist who was a dentist. He helped people who needed, had cavities, had aches, and so on and so on. And we decided to, at about six months later, yeah, three months later I still was thinking I knew that I cannot go to Lodz, there is nobody, nobody there. And my father-in-law died before the war. He had cancer and he died in my arms in the hospital where I was working. So I was waiting for some sign from my husband. In the meantime, I found out that one of my friends is in Lodz, so I wrote to her and asked her to go to court and ask about my husband. And she wrote me back that they don't know about him nothing. He didn't come back.

ES: Was your friend a non-Jewish friend?

AG: Non-Jewish friend. No, she was Jewish.

ES: Jewish.

AG: She was Jewish, yeah, but she went to my, to other friends...

ES: She had gone back to Lodz then.

AG: Yeah, she had gone back to Lodz. Eva. And then so I decided that I am going to, he was, if he didn't come back to Lodz he was probably in the Polish Army. And I knew that there is a headquarters of the Polish Army in St. Georgio, near Rome. So I decided I'm going there to look for him. He doesn't know where I am and maybe I will find him somewhere there or I find some sign of life there. So, how I got there, it took me about three, three, four, about a week until I got to Italy from Germany. I had to change trains. I didn't have a ticket. I didn't have this. I didn't have, really I didn't know where to get off the trains, when...

ES: Running on schedule.

AG: On time. This was three months after the war ended. I went to St. Georgio. They didn't hear about him. They didn't know anything about him. Here I am, and I don't know what to do. Go back to Lodz, I knew that I have nobody there. Not nobody. What to do, I didn't know. Paula didn't go back either. So we were both staying there in Bergen-Belsen.

ES: You went back from St. Georgio to Bergen-Belsen?

AG: Back, yes. Back. And I was working again. I was busy. I was working. I received letters from my aunt, and packages and clothes. And I shared those, the food, and I shared the clothes. And I didn't know what to do. I was waiting. One day, [pause] I got a, someone came from the office for me that a English major is asking for me. So of course I

flew. I was sure that it's my husband. He probably was in the English Army a major. He is not a captain anymore. He is a major. And I came in there and I saw it wasn't my husband. It was, and I fainted. And I came to. This was the son of a doctor who was working in Lodz. He was in Switzerland. For Jews was very difficult to get into a Polish university. There was a *numerus clausus*. It was a quota. So, they were well to do. He sent him to Switzerland when the war broke out. He, and he stayed in the Polish Army. And he looked for his father, for his mother. There were lists all over with the names of people who survived. And he saw my name on one of the lists, so he came from England to Bergen-Belsen. Such a disappointment. At that time I decided I am going to United States. I am going to United States and, but I wrote to my aunt that I'm going to the American Zone of Germany because if not I cannot—this was the English Zone—I cannot get to United States from there. And she started to make papers for me to sponsor me. But I thought to myself, before I go, let me go to Lodz and see. Maybe some friends, maybe some cousins were left. I, we had a quite a family in Warsaw, not in Lodz but in Warsaw. Maybe I go to Warsaw, maybe it's someone survived. I went to Lodz. It was in May, 1946, yeah, 1946. And I came, didn't find any one, find one, a wife of a doctor who I used to work with. And she invited me to stay in her apartment and I stayed there and I didn't have any money. I had to work, so I got a job at the maternity clinic but I couldn't work there. I saw there women who were having children, coming from Russia. Mostly they came from Russia with pregnant, and there were babies in the clinic. I couldn't work there. And I took a job in a private house. Someone told me about a woman who had typhoid fever convalescing and I had a job there. And one of my friends told me, she was also a nurse and she survived, that one of the nurses, a German nurse, who had her children, who sent her children to England, survived, and she lives in a hotel on this and this street. And next day she is going to London to her children. And if I want to see her I have to go tonight after work to see her. And I was waiting for a bus. And to go to her, and I saw my husband approaching...

ES: You, your present husband?

AG: We knew each other, yes, my present husband. We met in 1939 in January. His wife was also a nurse, and we both took stateboard. In Poland you had to work three years until you could take a stateboard. You had enough experience to take that board. And we met that time. And we were in touch all through the ghetto. They had a little girl. And I didn't know. I lost touch when we were running away, when we didn't work any more, I lost touch with them. And I didn't know where they were or they survived.

ES: So this is the first time you had seen him in all those years.

AG: Seen him in, no, no, in about year and a half. As a matter of fact, in the ghetto he was sick. He was in contagious diseases hospital, and his wife was in quarantine and she couldn't get out from there to see him. And I did. I used to go every night after work, sometimes during the night; and I used to feed him. He was delirious. He had very high temperature. Delirious. He used to hit me, kick me. I used to bring some little bit of tea, lemon, something to feed him because they couldn't. They didn't have the time and

they couldn't feed him and I didn't know that time that he would survive, because he was very sick. When I was waiting for the bus I saw him approaching, and I thought to myself, "If he will recognize me, it's okay. If not, I will not stop him." I didn't look my best. I didn't. This was a year and a half after the war, no a year after the war, but, you know how it was, not the best of circumstances we met. But he saw me from a distance, and he ran and we, I didn't go to this nurse, this German nurse, Austrian really. And I never saw her. I didn't know if she would find her children or not. We were sitting in a café until they closed. They threw us out. We were talking and we told our stories. And about three weeks later we got married. And we got married, we moved. We went to American Zone of Germany. And by this time my aunt had already papers for me but she didn't have enough money in the bank to sponsor him, so she had to make arrangements for both of us to come. And we spent two years in Munich, Germany. And I was working in an apothecary. I didn't want to work in the German hospital with the German nurses. I worked in an apothecary. And he was working for the Joint Commission. After two years we came here in July, 1948. The rest...

ES: You started a new life here.

AG: We started a new life. We struggled. We worked very hard. I worked right away; a week after we came we were both working. We stayed six weeks with my aunt. I was working in my profession right away. He didn't. He had to struggle and work in physical work, which he wasn't used to. He got sick. But we made it.

ES: I wanna hear...

AG: We are very happy to be in the United States, the land of opportunity. We have a wonderful daughter and a very nice Jewish son-in-law. They are very much in love. They are very happy. My daughter is very talented, very intelligent, bright. And we have a wonderful *nachas*.

ES: You deserve it.

AG: Four years ago we both retired. We are filling our time with all kind of volunteer work. We belong to Action Alliance. We belong to Political Alliance. We belong to Senior Co-ops.

ES: You keep busy with all sorts of things.

AG: Yes. We are active in Northeast Regional Committee. My husband is a treasurer. I am secretary. And...

ES: Your time is occupied.

AG: Our time is occupied. We never forgot what we went through. We always talk about it. We talk about my husband's wife and child, about my husband.

ES: Mrs. Gorko, what was it that really kept you going? You were in so many camps and endured so many hardships.

AG: Only hope that my husband survived.

ES: That's what kept you going.

AG: Yes. I was seventeen when I married him. He was thirty. He was, I lost my father when I was thirteen. He built my character. He built my...

ES: He did a marvelous job.

AG: Thank you.

ES: Did you ever find out what happened to your husband?

AG: Yes I did. When I came to Lodz, I found one of his friends who wasn't with him, but he told me that many officers who were in the officers' camp and survived told him that my husband, his brother, his brother-in-law, and three more friends ran away to Rumania and they were found by the Germans with shepherd dogs in the woods in Rumania and they were shot. And the other ones who were in the camp were all through the war in the officers' camp and came back to Lodz, sick, malnourished, without hope, but survived.

ES: So you knew finally, once and for all, that he was dead.

AG: So I knew that he was dead.

ES: Thank you very much for sharing your courageous story with me.

[Tape two, side two, blank. Interview ended.]