OK. I hope this will pick up our voices. I'm sure it will. Let's see. It's [? 25 ?] [INAUDIBLE]. Perhaps as a beginning you can tell me a little bit about where you were born, and when, and a little bit about your family.

I was born in Munich in 1928. I'm 53. And my parents had lived in Munich, and their parents had lived in Munich. My grandmother, actually, came-- my maternal grandmother came from France, and my maternal grandfather came from Augsburg. And they were quite well-off. My maternal grandfather had a factory where they made silverware cutlery.

And my father's parents-- his father, rather, was in the textile business. They were the manufacturers. Then in '32, with the Depression, my father's family lost everything, and with Hitler coming, my father and mother decided to leave Germany.

What made them then decide to leave Germany?

I think it--

This was 19--

--32.

--32.

Yes. I think it was probably a combination of things. It was Hitler. It was the loss of the business, and I guess they had a fear of what was going to happen. However, they also felt that going to Holland would eliminate any kind of danger, and there they-- they didn't look forward enough. They were willing to leave, to make a move, and to this day I really don't know why they didn't immediately move to the United States. I've asked, and they said they don't know, they don't know. And then my father died, but--

You were a little bit of a girl then?

I was four years old when we moved. My brother was nine months old.

Did your parents ever discuss with you what life was like before they left? Tell me about that.

Yes. I think you would consider them to be part of sort of an upper middle class. Everything was terribly proper. Life had a lot of expectations. They were-- my mother was expected to get married at an early age. She was expected to marry into a family with money. My father was expected to do well. I was expected to be nice, that sort of thing.

We had a lot of expectations, but it was also a life that was-- we were surrounded by beautiful objects. We had a beautiful apartment in Munich. I remember that, and I was only four when we left. There was always classical music. There was always art. It was sort of a genteel surrounding, and even in Holland, when things were not that great financially, I remember that.

We always-- my parents had artworks. My parents had classical music, and this was just part of our life--

--of your lifestyle.

Yeah. And they traveled, even then. I know my parents-- my mother was 21 when she got married, and they went to Italy on their honeymoon. They traveled. She was in Portugal.

How about their feeling of any antisemitism?

They must have felt it because they left Germany, but I don't think-- in Germany, they themselves had no incidents. Nothing happened to them. They were accepted in school. My mother was at the conservatory of music. Now, they

themselves didn't feel it until the '30s when Hitler started. They were afraid they might be involved.

Did they ever tell you what they were afraid of, what incidents made them fearful?

No, they-- no, no. They were not religious people.

How about their parents?

Not a bit, not a bit.

No identification with a synagogue?

No, not-- they were members of a Reform-- it was called a liberal synagogue in Germany. But there was really no great emphasis. It was emphasis on being German much more than being Jewish. It was an emancipation, the emancipation. And we didn't do this because it might be too Jewish, or you didn't do that because it might be too Jewish.

That was the feeling. And there were no Jewish organizations?

Yes, there were Jewish organizations. I'm sure.

But they didn't belong to them?

You mean in Germany?

Yes, I mean, did your family belong to any Jewish organizations?

That I don't know.

But they did belong to a liberal synagogue. It would be interesting to speculate what they felt that caused them to pick up and go to Holland.

I think they knew that in Holland there was a much greater-- a much more liberal attitude towards religious freedom, and they just felt that once they were out of Germany, once they'd crossed the border, Hitler's influence would disappear.

For them.

For them.

But did they feel that it was a real menace for Germany--

They must've felt that it was a menace for Jews because-- I'm sure they must have felt very strongly, that combined with the fact that my father's business failed, and it was probably schande. And so in order to start somewhere, they didn't feel they wanted to invest money in a country where Hitler was running it, was in power.

So they left family and--

They left family, and very shortly after that the rest of the family also moved.

Where did they go?

My mother's parents to Holland, my mother's brother to Portugal. My father had three brothers. One went to South Africa, where he became director of a fur company, Johannesburg. Second brother went to London, was very big in textile business. Third brother went to Rhodesia, a tobacco farm. My father's mother went to London.

And this was the early '30s?

In the early '30s, and they all stopped in Holland. That's why-- I remember all of them stopped in Holland.

En route?

En route, visited with us from between one week to three months and then went on their merry way.

How far-sighted they were. Have you ever discussed as a family how they were so far-sighted to be able to--

Yes, but of all the far-sighted ones, my parents were the least far-sighted because they just made a--

--a small leap.

Yeah.

So tell me, did any of the family ever serve in any of the national army in Germany?

Not I know of.

Do you recall? Not that you know of? Did you-- you said that-- when you got to Holland, what happened? Where did you go? To what town, to what city?

We went to a suburb of Haarlem, which it-- it was like 20 minutes by train from Amsterdam. It was a nice, little suburban area, and we moved there next to a family who had moved in from Cologne, Germany. And the husband and my father started a new business in Amsterdam.

What kind of business was it?

Again, representation of textile manufacturers rather than manufacturing themselves.

Now, before 1940, say the spring of 1940, did you experience any antisemitism in Holland?

No.

None at all?

I really-- I knew I wasn't Dutch. I knew that. I wanted desperately to be one of them, one of the Dutch. I knew that. I was stateless. OK, once we moved to Holland we lost our German citizenship.

So you were stateless.

So in 1940 I was like 11 in the spring, and I knew I wanted to be Dutch. I had not really experienced antisemitism. I had experienced-- kids say, oh, but you are not really Dutch, or something like that but not often, very seldom, very seldom.

Very seldom.

Yes. It was a very pleasant lifestyle, yeah, very pleasant.

And that pleasantness lasted until about, what, '40?

1940.

But you felt secure, and your family made a living?

Made a living. It was nice. It was an awful lot of talk all through the years of what could happen, what could happen. It was not the greatest feeling of security, no. I mean I truly never thought about it in terms of security, but I don't think I ever felt terribly secure as a child. I felt secure in the family, that sort of thing.

But I remember ever since I was a little girl there was always talk about Hitler, and this could happen, and that could happen, this uncle is leaving, and that uncle is leaving. There was no-- it wasn't a settled kind of life.

So the statelessness that you describe kind of left you feeling that you didn't belong here or there?

Yes.

How did your family life change after the Nazi occupation?

Well, drastically.

They attacked quickly, didn't they?

Holland was attacked on May 10, 1940, and within five days Holland fell. By May 15 we were finished. Now, there was a-- we tried-- my parents tried to go to England, and I think this attempt lasted at least two hours. You couldn't get out. So we knew we were stuck.

So from the 15th of May on we knew that things were going to be very, very different, and then in September 1940 my family, being stateless, was taken by the Germans. We were told that within 24 hours we had to move from this little suburb, which was right on the North Sea, 10 minutes from the North Sea by train, we had to move east, inland.

So we moved, but we didn't have a place to stay right away. I know you asked about family life. So what happened is my parents stayed in a little pension with a Jewish lady and her husband by the name of Blumenthal.

These were Dutch people?

These were German Jews.

German also?

Yeah, Resi Blumenthal and her husband, Reinhardt. And my brother and I stayed with our former housekeeper. When we moved to Aerdenhout, this little suburb. A German housekeeper moved in with us, and she took care of my brother and me for about five years. So that might have led to '37.

Then she got married, moved east of Amsterdam to Hilversum, and she was there with her husband, a German Jew. And when we had to move to this particular town, she took my brother and me, and my parents went 10 minutes down the road to this little pension where they had a room. So for half the year we lived like that, so it was a big change.

Once in a while, we would eat with our parents. Like on a Sunday we would have a meal, or something would happen. And finally, my parents rented a house in this community, and we had a--

Was your father able to earn a living during that--

Well, he was still able to go to Amsterdam because it was as close from that place to Amsterdam as it was from the other side.

So that he could run his business?

Yeah.

He could run his business.

And I went to school there. By then I was in seventh grade, and it was the first time that I did have an antisemitic experience with my math teacher.

A Dutchman?

A Dutch maths teacher who failed me for being Jewish.

How do you know he failed you for being Jewish?

Because I did all the work. I was no great mathematician, but he would always grade me lower than other people who did the same thing.

Did you feel that there were many Dutch who were antisemitic?

Very, very few.

Very, very few?

He was the only one-- he and a French teacher, a French teacher. I don't even know that she was truly antisemitic. She just was very nasty, and I had a horrible time for a while. And then I got over that, and I did all right in her class.

But the math teacher-- he was very rough on me, and I was really no great math student, but I was not that terrible.

But the other Dutch people were--

Wonderful.

--wonderful.

Absolutely wonderful.

Did you have any experiences with Nazis or Nazi sympathizers?

Not then.

Your parents?

No.

Not at that time?

Not that I remember.

Do you recall a Jewish council being set up for this sort of--

Yeah, I know there was a big Jewish organization set up, and the name escapes me. But I have books, if you are interested, in Dutch on the destruction of the Dutch Jews, and they have photos of that in there.

Well, I would love to see that sometime.

Yes, I'll show you.

Are they books that came from where?

Holland.

You brought them with you from Holland?

I didn't. I found out when I was in Israel that I'm in the book three times.

Oh my. I would love to see them.

[BOTH TALKING]

And perhaps there's parts of them that we could go to photostat for our archives if they have any meaning to Dr. Levin.

You're welcome to it.

OK. I'll have to connect with you. I'll pick them up from you.

I have them here.

Oh, you have me here, great. That's great. Are there any-- now that we're talking about it, are there any mementos of the family that might bear xeroxing that would have significance for us?

I don't know whether my mother has anything. I don't think my brother has anything. I have a book of poetry that I wrote-- that I wrote.

That you wrote?

Yes.

Where you-- when did you write it?

When I was in concentration camp.

Oh, I'd loved to. Did you bring that along, too?

Yeah.

You're wonderful. Will you leave it with me?

Yeah.

And can we Xerox it?

You can Xerox if you want, and you won't understand it. It's in Dutch or in German. I forget.

Well, that's all right.

And I brought the star.

You brought the star.

When did you have to begin to wear the star?

I don't know, '41 I think. But I truly-- I forget. I know it was before we went to concentration camp because I know I had to sew it on my coat to go. But I don't know.

Do you remember how you felt when you had to put that on?

No. I know I didn't feel terrible because a lot of people wore them, and a lot of Dutch people put them on. No, it was sort of a defiance thing. A lot of Dutch put them on in the beginning, not later on.

To come back to this Jewish council or the community body, did Jews in your community look to that council for leadership, guidance?

Yes, I forget the name. I have to look that up. Yes, they did look for leadership. They did look for leadership. Yes.

And they trusted it?

Yes, because I think this is about-- I think this is why all these horrible things happened, too, is because people were much too trusting. People were sheep. In 24 hours you had to move. In 24 hours--

But we're talking about the Jewish council.

And the Jewish council-- well, people knew after a while that they were working with the Germans in part. They had to work with the Germans. But they trusted it, yes.

There was no resentment?

Yes, there was a lot of resentment.

Tell me about it.

I don't even know about individual, but you got to hear that so-and-so is on the council, or he's a rich Jew, he has all the diamond business. But that was all along. It was the Jews who had connections. It was called protection, and they picked that up in Israel after the war. They called it Proteksia. Those that had it, that had this connection-- they were able to save their skin.

Really?

To a certain degree. I know my father-- when we were-- running now ahead, but when we were in Westerbork, which is a Dutch concentration camp, my father had to work on some job where he had to be in office and a German general-- the commandant was in charge of this whole operation.

And because my father was very precise, which most German Jews probably were, when we had to go in front of the commandant in June '42 or in '44-- June '42, June '42, he said, no, we could stay in Westerbork, and that was because my father had done a good job. Had he not done a good job, we would have been sent to Auschwitz in June '42.

[INAUDIBLE] wouldn't been there.

This way we weren't.

You weren't. I think I better change this tape before we--

OK.

Do you mind?

No.

No, no, no. So anyway, your family were feeling-- did they feel then that they were going to try to emigrate, go someplace else? Was there that kind of feeling then when this was happening, or wasn't this on their mind?

When?

In Holland when things were closing in and--

Yeah, well, then they would have liked to, but it was too late. There was absolutely no way of getting out. Then they knew they were stuck.

Well, now tell me, did you know anything about the experiences of Jews in other parts of Europe? How did you get the news

Yes. I knew, for instance, that neighbors of ours in Aerdenhout left in '38 on a boat. I think it was called the SimÃ³n Bolivar. And I knew that the boat hit a mine in the English Channel, and I knew that the wife survived and the husband and two children--

Were were they going?

They were going to England.

To England.

Or possibly from England to United States, but whatever, they got out in '38. I knew others who got out.

From Holland?

Yeah. These people died, all right. The wife survived. The children and the husband died. We knew about it. We knew that.

But did you know about the experiences of Jews--

In Poland?

--in Poland then? No? Nothing at all?

No, I didn't really. I knew about Kristallnacht. We did hear about that. That was in '39? November 9. That we knew about. Sure, we knew about it.

How did you get the news?

By radio and by people telling you. But I truly can't say that I was aware of Polish Jews, or Russian Jews, or Hungarian Jews. I wasn't. I was not. But I was not even a teenager at that time.

Do you recall newspapers at that time?

Yeah, we used to read the newspapers.

Was there anything in the newspapers about--

I can't remember.

Of course, you were a little girl, a young girl, but did you get any feeling from your family that they were really, fully able to accept the reality that all over Europe Jews were being murdered, and gassed, and things like this were happening?

I don't think people knew that there were gas chambers. Who knew about gas chambers? We didn't know that. We never knew about the gas chambers. We knew that we were being sent to Auschwitz, but we didn't know that Auschwitz had gas chambers.

Well, what did you think it was? What was your preconception?

You might get killed on the way. You might get starved. You might get beaten to death. You might be tortured, but you didn't know which way you were going to be tortured. I never knew that. Nobody knew that where we were. Did you know it here that there were gas-- you didn't know they were gas chambers until after the war.

Yeah, I would guess you're right. Well, tell me about the deportation for your family.

So my family-- we were in Hilversum, which was this--

How do you spell it?

H-I-L-V-E-R-S-U-M, so middle size. It's a nice-sized town, had four radio stations, very pretty town. And again, it was the German Jews who were told-- and it was again 24 hours-- pack up, you're going to-- I don't know what they call it-- detention center or something.

So we did, and we packed up. And it was extremely cold. It was so cold that I remember the toilet was frozen. And I do remember that the rabbi from the Portuguese synagogue came to the station to say goodbye to me. This I remember. He was my neighbor, our neighbor, and he had always been very fond of me. His name was Rodrigues Pereira, and he came. And that just stuck with me, that the rabbi-- and he was the chief rabbi in Holland of the Sephardic.

And we went on a train, and this was a regular coach.

A coach? The Germans put you on the coach?

Yeah, and we--

And with others?

Yeah, it was maybe 60, 80, 100 others. I don't know how many they were from this little town. And we took this train ride.

Did they tell you where you were going?

And they said, you're going to Westerbork, and they told us where it was. It was in the northeastern part of Holland, and it was in January. And it was very, very cold, and they wore a lot of clothes. And I remember my father introduced me, met somebody on the train as he walked, and he introduced me to another young girl. And she was the same age by three weeks difference, and her name was [? Jo, ?] and we became very good friends. And to this day we're very good friends.

And this was my first friend in the concentration camp, and all people who had children kept their children except for two, and it was me and she. And we had to live in a barracks for women because we were just over 13.

A certain age. So you were separated from your parents when got to--

From our parents. My brother was with my parents, but [? Jo ?] and I were separated.

When you got to the concentration camp, was there any procedure there that--

Yes, we got food, and we were told to register. It was all very orderly. And it was not a bit scary, I thought. I remember you know --

Did your parents get scared?

I didn't ask them.

But you didn't get a sense of it?

My parents were always worried. My mother was always worried, so it was-- so she was worried. It was sort of a fait accompli. I had accepted that. There's always worry. And my father-- they managed reasonably well, and they did what they were-- they were very-- they were sheep. You had to register, they registered. You drank coffee, they drank coffee. They had to go to the left, they stood left. They did everything they were told to do.

So they were conformists, and so they just did what they were supposed to. But I remember that a young man came, and he was much older than me. He was 20 or 22 years old, so he was really--

--an older man.

--an older man. And he told me that there was a youth group in the camp, and I immediately took a liking to him. And his name was Leo [? Blumensohn, ?] he did have a youth group. And I thought it was going to be great fun, and it was. It was great fun. Can you believe?

No, I can't believe.

This was before the transports started. The people who were in this camp so far were illegal immigrants from Germany who had crossed the border in '37, '38, '39, '40, '41. They were there for years and years, maybe 500, 600, 1,000, all German.

Not Jewish?

All Jewish.

All Jewish?

But they had been stuck in this camp first by the Dutch. They've been put there by the Dutch. And the Germans left them there alone. So they were referred to as Alte Camp Insassen, the Old Campers. And then we came. We were the first contingent of new ones, and they were delighted to see us.

And they made it-- they made such a welcome for us, and there was no talk about Auschwitz, nothing. It was-- the whole idea was we were going to be detained in Westerbork.

What did you take with you to the camp?

One suitcase a piece, winter clothes, some summer clothes, some toilet articles, a couple of books, maybe some writing material, some-- maybe my mother took some what do you call -- medicines. I really don't know.

But all of your family possessions you left behind, your furniture and all?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

And what happened to that? You have no idea?

It was stored by Gentile friends, and we got it back after the war.

You got it back after the war.

Not all of it, but most of it.

So was there-- tell me about the conditions of life in Westerbork.

The first half-year was-- it was really not bad. I lived in this barracks with the women, but I ate with my parents. They had a room in a two-room apartment, which was a long barracks divided into two-room apartments.

And then finally we moved into another barracks where we had a bigger room, and we had all four of us in this one room. So then I moved out after that.

Did they do their own cooking or--

We could do our own cooking, and also from the camp we got fed. We could get-- like when I was in the barracks we always got our coffee in the morning and the bread. They brought it over.

This is year-- what year?

'42, January to June, July. It's all before July '42.

And what cooking you did-- they were allowed to go out and buy food?

You got food rations, and from that you could make things.

But money they didn't-- you didn't have? Was that taken away?

No, you didn't get paid money.

But the money--

But you could still go to Amsterdam once in a while for-- I got permission to go for a weekend to Amsterdam, and I remember I went to Amsterdam and I went back to concentration camp.

How amazing. And your parents could go off if they wanted to?

I don't know whether they were able to go more than once, but I did. I did. I went once.

Did you work in the camps?

Not in the first half-year. I went to school.

Your parents either?

Yes, my father did office work, you know whatever-- that's what he did. My mother-- she must have done something. I don't remember where she worked the first half-year.

So that-- you went to school, and what kind of schooling did you have?

It was a German-- it was in German because the kids who had lived there for several years-- they all came from Germany. They didn't even know much Dutch. And it was in a little schoolhouse, and the teacher's name was Mr. Gabel.

A little schoolhouse in the camp?

Yeah, like a little room in a-- really like a little schoolhouse, and we had lessons in German. We had lessons in-- then, because there were some Dutch-speaking-- we also had-- one of them taught us about cosmetology. I remember we had lessons in cosmetology and textiles. I was 13.

Was there any--

We had lessons in English. We had some English lessons.

How about Hebrew or Jewish content?

No, not in school. That was the youth group.

There was a youth group that taught this?

Yeah. The youth group met on Saturday afternoons, and there are pictures in the books on that. And we used to do a lot of hora dancing. And we used to have a lot of intellectual discussions on Saturday afternoon.

Do you feel that this was Israeli-inspired or Zionist-inspired groups?

Mm-hm.

You do?

Mm-hm. But it also was much more traditional Judaism than I had ever experienced.

What do you mean?

I mean I was not brought up with any kind of religious background. I went to Sunday school to learn a little bit, and I went to synagogue once in a while.. But it was much more Orthodox-oriented than I'd ever been exposed to.

A Jewish spirit?

Yes. And we studied the holidays, and we observed the holidays. And we prayed, and we-- it was really-- it was the works.

Did you enjoy that?

I loved it. My parents thought it was terrible.

But you felt strengthened from that?

I felt tremendous. This really gave me a lot of strength, and I had my prayer book in Belsen. I used to say the prayers, and I used to remember all the people that I was with who-- by then, most of them had been killed in Auschwitz. But I didn't know that. I knew they were sent to Auschwitz, but I didn't know whether they would've made it.

Did you get a feeling for Zionism then? Did you hear about--

Yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes.

And your parents kind of pooh-poohed it or--

I was called a rebbitsin, and they pooh-poohed it, and they thought it was-- it's pretty hairy.

Pretty tacky, huh?

Yeah.

So what about an underground? At that point, you didn't know that there might-- that there was an underground or--

No, I was never involved in an underground, and there was no such thing, as far as I know, in Westerbork, an underground.

But did you know of an underground in Holland at that time? Had you heard about it?

I know that later on I learned that Martin, who I was married to, had been on the underground, but I haven't been.

So here you are in Westerbork, and you're going to school and learning to be Jewish.

Oh, yes, yes.

And your family are working. And then what happened?

And then in July things changed drastically. Suddenly, the men were called from whatever they were doing to build barracks because we were told more people were coming, and they did come, in droves. And then the Old Campers were called in, as I told you, and some were sent off right away. But most were not. Most were able to stay.

The group that was sent was a group of old--

Sent to Auschwitz.

Sent to Auschwitz.

OK. I was for a while in the women's barracks. I was with a group of orphans from Utrecht, German-born orphans. And it was a very nice group, and again, they were all brought up very Orthodox. And I learned you know when I associated with them. And I was considered part of the group because I wasn't living at home. This group, as a unit, was all sent to Auschwitz with the first transport. And that was my first realization that you know --

Did they were being sent to something--

We knew they were being sent to something horrible, but we didn't know what it was.

How did you escape it if you were with this group?

Because I was not an orphan. I was registered as child of Margo and Walter. My living quarters--

--were with them.

--had been, for a while, with them.

Did your health-- was the family's health good, considered--

Yes.

--good in the camps? Did you ever get medical treatment there?

Yes, once.

Tell me about it.

In Westerbork?

Yeah.

Yes, medical-- yeah, I had-- I don't know what I had, like a sleeping sickness. It wasn't a--

I know.

I think it must have had mononucleosis because I couldn't stay up and awake. I kept falling asleep, and they put me in the hospital. And I do remember Leo Blumensohn was my first visitor, and was sure he was in love with me.

How about the medical treatment at the hospital?

It was-- what did I know? It was fine. It was Jewish doctors, Jewish nurse.

Jewish doctors?

Oh, yes. Yes, we had our own hospital. We had our own orchestra. We had everything before July.

And then tell me about in July.

So then they started with the transports, and that meant that every week, Tuesday and Friday, people were sent to Auschwitz, and every week people would come in masses, and masses, and masses, and the next Tuesday half of them would be shipped out, or 3/4 would be shipped out.

You didn't know how they made the selection?

The selection was made simply-- if they had no papers to show that they were sponsored-- that they had the passport of Paraguay, which many of them did--

What does that, Erica?

You could buy a passport from South American countries. Some people-- many Jews did that. So how can you ship away Paraguay nationals? You can ship away stateless but not Paraguayans.

I see. But your family weren't able to do that?

We weren't Paraguayans, but we had our own little papers, which a lot of people did, too. We had an affidavit to go to Israel, which an aunt in Israel had sent from Israel. And that saved us, too.

So then how long did you go on--

In Westerbork?

Yeah. We got there in January '42, and we left in February '43.

So where did you leave for?

Bergen-Belsen.

And tell me about how you were selected to go there and what happened.

It got so that anybody whom they could send they sent to Auschwitz. They just kept sending-- oh, thank you. They kept sending people to Auschwitz, more, and more, and more, and because we had this special paper they couldn't send us to Auschwitz. Since they started decreasing the numbers in Westerbork, we were then picked to go to Bergen-Belsen.

I must digress. I must tell you that when these people came in the masses my mother had to start working as a baracken leiterin [INAUDIBLE] to be in charge of barracks. She was in charge of the women's side, and a guy was in charge of the men's side.

So she came home one day, and she told me she's going to be baracken leiterin and man is coming over to meet her. He was just-- he just came from Amsterdam, and he's Hungarian. So he came in, very attractive, very charming, and after he left I said to my mother, you better watch out. I was 13 and pretty mature. I think he likes you. Well, this is my stepfather now.

Oh, for pity's sakes, this is the man she eventually married after--

That's the man she-- what happened was that she fell in love with him, [INAUDIBLE], and he fell in love with her. He was married. She was married. And after the war, when they met-- he was shipped to Buchenwald. She was sent to Bergen-Belsen, so they were separated. After the war, when we all got back to--