

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

MALVINA GERLICH EISNER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Gladys Bernstein
Date: April 22, 1985

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Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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ME - Malvina Gerlich Eisner
GB - Gladys Bernstein [interviewer]
Date: April 22, 1985¹

Tape one, side one:

GB: ...Bernstein, and I'm here with Malvina Gerlich Eisner, in Philadelphia, at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, on April the 22nd, 1985. And I am here to hear the story of Malvina Gerlich Eisner. Malvina, tell me something about your early childhood.

ME: I was born in a small town, rather a hamlet, called Svidnicka [on northern border of Czechoslovakia, south then east from Krakow, Poland]. Since there was very...

GB: Where is this town?

ME: It is in Czechoslovakia. It is in Slovakia, Slovakia, yes.

GB: When were you born?

ME: I was born in August, 1924. Since this little hamlet had only a one-room school house, and my par-, grandparents on my father's side lived in a large town, at the age of six I went to live with my grandparents in order to be able to go to a better public school than was available in our town. And I used to come only home for holidays and summer vacations.

GB: Where was this town?

ME: The name of the town was Bardejov. It was a very lovely town, with a nice Jewish population. Forty percent of the town were Jewish. It was, there was a spa near this town, and the town itself was an old historic town. It had a beautiful square with a museum in it, and a beautiful church, a Gothic church, and a park, and it had a moat around it from the wars yet, so they could close the drawbridges when the enemies attacked. Anyway, that's where I spent most of my childhood years, and lived there most of my life, before concentration camp.

GB: Was this school that you attended at your grandparents' town, was it a public school?

ME: It was a public school, yes.

GB: Did you have...

ME: Public school and Junior High School...

GB: High school?

ME: That's what I attended there.

GB: Did you have any Jewish education?

¹Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

ME: Yes. There was an after, it was called Bais Yaakov², it was at the very beginning when Bais Yaakov developed in Poland, that gradually girls used to get a Jewish education more than before that.

GB: They don't usually, yeah.

ME: Yes. And I did attend an after school Jewish...

GB: What...

ME: Jewish lessons.

GB: What trade was your father?

ME: My father, my moth-, my father was from Bardejov, and his name was Moses Gerlich, Moshe Aaron Gerlich. And he married my mother. Her name was Rachel Spira. And she lived in the small town. And when she got married, she was given the business, and this was so to speak her dowry. And my father went to live...

GB: What kind of business was it?

ME: It was a grocery store--a general store, which was usually...

GB: Yes.

ME: The Jewish occupation in those days, yes.

GB: Did your, you had sisters and brothers?

ME: Yes. I was the second of nine children. But, of course at that time, I was, when I went to concentration camp I was only seventeen years old, and my youngest sister was three years old. Nobody returned, because I did not go with them together. I was at that time when the raids started--in Czechoslovakia they took the girls first--in 1942. First they took the girls, later on the families.

GB: You were still, you were still going, up till 1942 you were leading a normal life, going to school?

ME: Not really.

GB: Tell me what...

ME: I finished school in 1938. Then I went home, and I stayed at home about a year or two. I can't remember exactly. And then most of the girls used to learn to sew, because sewing was a very important...

GB: Occupation?

ME: Not the occupation...

GB: Craft?

ME: It was a very important thing to, simply to the survivor, because there were no ready-made things to be gotten in those days. So everybody had to learn to sew in order to be able to make things for themselves. It was a very practical thing...

GB: Right!

ME: Let's put it this way, yes. And once girls learned to sew, whether they used it or not later on, and some of my friends with whom I went to school also learned

²Also Beys Yankev or Bet Yaakov - women's educational movement founded by Sarah Schenirer (1883-1953) http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Schenirer_SarahBaisYaakov.

to sew at the same time. That's why I went back to this town where my grandparents lived. And at that time, I had finished my cour-, my sewing course. I was beginning to earn money already, by doing some sewing to earn money, because in 1940, or maybe a little bit even before, the Jewish, some of the Jewish businesses were taken away. And my father lost his business--my father lost his business. It was taken away from him and given to a Gentile man. And life was beginning to be very difficult, because we were a large family--regardless large or small--but certainly it was much harder with a larger family. And I stayed in the city, and I was sewing on consignment for somebody and earning some money. And during that period, which was 1941, that was in 1941, they were beginning to talk about many Polish--we were living very close to the Polish border--and Polish Jews used to smuggle through the border, to escape what was happening in Poland. And they used to come to the town where I lived. And they used to tell these terrible stories, which was very hard to believe, that they were real. And somehow some people, they were far sighted enough and they, if they had a great deal of information, you know, from other sources, and they did believe it, and they did make some provisions and some did emigrate, especially those who could afford it. But some rich ones also remained around and did eventually end up in Death camps...

GB: Did you get any, much information about the war and what, what was happening?

ME: Well, I remember there was one young man who came to my grandparents. He brought them regards from an uncle, like my grandmother's brother lived in Poland, and he knew them. And he brought regards, and he told us that he escaped, and the terrible things were happening. They were taking people to these labor camps, and they were torturing them terribly, and people were dying. But somehow you felt it was another country. Perhaps it will not reach here. And it was just too horrible to think that it might, and people felt rather helpless, and they didn't know how to, how to deal with it.

GB: When did you feel the effects of the war?

ME: Well, as I said before, life was becoming very hard economically, because it was very hard to make a living, so you struggled very much. But of course, I was sixteen years old then, so no matter what, I could not feel it as intensely as an adult would, because when you are young, you don't have the understanding and the maturity. And you just, you just think it cannot happen, because I remember the worst thing that I used to know about that could happen to people was when my parents or grandparents used to talk about the First World War. And that seemed something very far removed, that happened in the past and cannot happen again. And, of course, this was much worse, and it was in, in my time. However, it was hard to relate to it. And, therefore, we were like, we knew that something bad was happening, but we somehow did not feel it yet, literally, on our skin, you know. And then, this was in the Spring of '42, they said that they are going to round up the girls. I don't remember that it was from age thirteen or

fourteen, up to twenty or so, just the girls. And I remember I wanted to go home to be with my family, but my parents wrote to me, "Do not come home, because they will take you immediately." Because they knew who I was, how old I was, and I was eligible for this transport. And they said, "You stay where you are." And sure enough, after Passover in '42, in our town there lived a man by the name of Lurie. And he was a, an Orthodox man, but he had a great deal of, he had contact with the authorities, and he was a very influential person. And he accomplished that it was declared that our town had an epidemic, and that's why they cannot deport the girls. Like, he got a postponement. So that during that time some of the girls hid, and I also did hide. There were some, what do you call it, when they went looking from house to house? I forget...

GB: Search.

ME: Searches, yes. And they found some, and some didn't, they did not find. And, no, after the epidemic period was passed, that's when they made these searches. Yes. And I was hidden with a cousin of mine on our attic, and I remember we heard them searching downstairs, and somehow they did not open that particular door. And we stayed there. And we did not go with that particular transport, which was about April, or early May, the first transport in '42, yes. After that there was some reprieve, and then they started to make all kinds of, give out all kinds of rules and verdicts. So you have to bring in your jewelry. You have to start preparing yourself, because everybody is going to be resettled in a different area, and start preparing for that, and start packing, and how much you can take, and what you can take. And all this was happening while I was with my grandparents. But I could not go home, because, as soon as I would have come home, they would have taken me away. So they felt, why should I go sooner than I have to, or maybe perhaps I can hide or in some way escape. Then, before *Shavuos*--this was happening between Passover and *Shavuos*--and before *Shavuos*, I think it was, then it was, became very definite. There were orders given out, and there were placards all over town. Everybody should prepare himself, pack their things, and be ready for deportation, for...

GB: Resettlement.

ME: Resettlement, yes. Did I mention that I had eight, four sisters and four brothers?

GB: Yes.

ME: I would like to...

GB: Go ahead. Please.

ME: I would like that to be in, in the record.

GB: I asked you. You said you were number...

ME: I was second child.

GB: Second child.

ME: Yes, of nine. So, actually eight perished in the Holocaust.

GB: Eight.

ME: Eight of them, yes. I had a...
GB: There was one...
ME: I am the only one left.
GB: Only one?
ME: Only one left. There were nine.
GB: Yeah.
ME: Okay?
GB: So you had eight siblings.
ME: Yes.
GB: Your older...
ME: My older brother...
GB: Brother.
ME: Did not survive, no. They all went together to Treblinka.
GB: I, I wanted to know...
ME: Yeah.
GB: Was your older sibling a boy or girl?
ME: A boy. A boy. There were four boys and four girls. I was the fifth girl.
GB: [pause] You remained in, with your grandparents...
ME: Yes.
GB: And you did not return...
ME: I did not return.
GB: You were told that you, you had to pack up your belongings...
ME: Everybody.
GB: Because you were gonna be...
ME: Everybody did.
GB: And how long before you were asked to be resettled?
ME: That was soon after Passover.
GB: Passover.
ME: Yeah, these, these orders came out.
GB: And you--and where did they take you? Did they take you together with your sisters and brothers?
ME: No. I did...
GB: Where were the...
ME: I never did go back, and...
GB: Oh, your...
ME: I never saw them again.
GB: Sisters and brothers remained...
ME: Yes.
GB: With your parents?
ME: I never did go back, and I never saw them again.

GB: The time was 1942 when you remained with your grandparents?

ME: Yeah, yeah, I mean earlier...

GB: What about your grandparents...

ME: Because I had been them...

GB: Did you go, did you go away with your grandparents?

ME: No. I--at that time we started to think, some people were going into hiding, younger people. And I had a cousin and two male cousins. And they said they would like to go into the woods to hide. And they said we should go along. And everything was so, you do what you want, you know? You didn't know what was right and what was wrong. And we decided to go. We packed our baggage, you know, whatever we took along, a blanket, and some clothing, and, of course, food. And one evening we just walked out and went to the woods, the four of us. That was before *Shavuos*. And while we were in the woods, we created some kind of a shelter for ourselves. You know, between the trees, the branches. And one day a peasant came around, and he knew why we were hiding, because they all knew what was going on. And we gave him some money, and we told him to go to the town. And I told him to go to see a friend of mine whose father was a dentist. And they had a, one of those exceptions that made you legal. You know, he was necessary...

GB: Like a pass?

ME: Yeah. He was important for the welfare of the town or whatever it is, as a dentist. And I wrote a note to her, and I told her where I was. And I told her in the note if she wants to send us something with this man, and to let me know what's happening. And then he came back. I think he brought us some food. And he brought me a note, and the note said that my grandparents were deported meanwhile--I mean, the whole town was more or less vacated, except for some exceptions--and also that my parents went through the town, because the train, the railroad, went through that town, and I don't remember whether she said that she saw them, or somebody knows that, they probably asked for me, or my father asked for his parents. So they knew that they did go through that, through Bardejov, towards the point where they concentrated all these people, in Czechoslovakia first. [pause] Soon after this man kept coming, and he was menacing--you know, he kept asking us for money...

GB: More money.

ME: Yeah. Eventually things just reached a, [calling someone: "Gita!" Tape off then on]

GB: All right. Go ahead. Your parents went through the town, so you knew that they were transported somewhere.

ME: And they did find out at that time that I am in hiding. And they were very happy.

GB: Oh, your parents knew.

ME: Well, people came to the train from the town, and they gave these people maybe some food or something. And my parents inquired about me, and they were told that I am in hiding. And I heard, afterwards, you know, that they were very happy about it, that perhaps I am going to be saved. You know, it was, and also I remember, I have a cousin who is in Israel. Her name is Leah Weiss. And she told me that when they were taking her, my parents, my maternal grandmother was still alive, and she was with them. And as they were traveling through that other town, she was, she was in her 90's. But she was telling them very quietly that, "Miriam is in hiding." And she was, she was alert enough to know that that was good for me.

GB: Your name was Miriam...

ME: Yeah, Miriam.

GB: Actually, so you changed Miriam.

ME: That's my Hebrew name...

GB: Yeah, Hebrew name.

ME: But Malvina was my formal name, in my papers, yes. And she was very happy to tell people that I am being hidden. She understood what the situation was in her own way. Also, okay, I don't know if this belongs here. I just will mention it now. After the war, when I did come back to my hometown, because I needed some legal papers--that's why I did return--and the peasants said, "Oh, when your parents were taken, your father said, 'Whatever you see is happening to us, will happen to you.'" This is what my father said to them.

GB: Right.

ME: That you will be punished for what you are doing.

GB: Oh, I see. What was the relationship with the non-Jewish community?

ME: It was pretty good. My father was a very wise man, and he was a good man, and he understood, he was a good human being. And when people were in need, he helped them. He was not the type of a man that some people represent the Jewish characters as taking advantage of the Gentiles. He was in business. He wanted to make a living. But if people came to him for help, sometimes he...

GB: He would...

ME: He would...

GB: Put out a helping hand.

ME: He did put out a helping hand, to lend them money when he, and he gave them on credit, rather, whatever was necessary, until, you know, these peasants lived from day to day. Sometimes they said, "When my cow will have a calf, and I will sell it, I'll have money." And he gave them credit on that account, so that they did appreciate it. However, once the...

GB: Things got tough...

ME: The climate was the way it became, everybody's hostility came out. And even if it wasn't there, it was stimulated, and everybody reacted to it. So, they did respect

him. I don't know if they loved him. I don't know if there is such a thing, you know, but they said, "When you are in trouble and you need help, you can go to Moshka," they called him Moses, you know, "and you can, he will give you a helping hand."

GB: How long did you remain in, remain in hiding?

ME: Not very long. Something like three weeks. And then this man kept coming, and asking us for money. And I don't think they had any. And we were afraid that he was going to report us.

GB: How many of you...

ME: Four.

GB: How many were there?

ME: Two, two boys and two girls. Yeah. And we felt we weren't safe anymore, because he was menacing, and we knew he was going to report us. So we just, one evening we picked ourselves up and we left. And we returned to my grandparents' apartment, which was sealed on the outside, but we went in through the windows. And we just lived there.

GB: In hiding?

ME: In hiding. We could not, we did not go out during the day. And in that same yard there, there were a few apartments. And one apartment was occupied by people who had permission to stay, so that sometimes if we needed something, they helped us out, and also we used to go out and get some food, and we knew it will not last long. And a friend of mine, who had this exception that they could remain, she also helped us, you know. She occasionally brought us some food. And we were living in a kind of waiting state, you know, because we knew...

GB: In limbo.

ME: Somehow, yes, in limbo. We knew that it cannot go on too long the way it was, unless you made other plans and went further, and went to Hungary or other things, but somehow, I wasn't sophisticated enough, you know. This, one of those people was the one who came from Poland, and he wanted to escape. He said the best thing would be to go to Hungary, to continue. But, somehow he never did that, and we never did it. And one evening, the other young man, he was climbing over a fence, and when you saw somebody climbing over a fence, it was immediately suspicious. And somebody saw him, a Gentile man saw him, and he told the police. And shortly after that the police came. It was one evening, and they came into the apartment and they took us all to the local prison. And in the morning we were taken to a central point. And from there we were taken to Auschwitz.

GB: This was when, in 1942?

ME: This was 1942, in June. [pause] And from then on...

GB: You remained in Auschwitz for how long?

ME: I was in Auschwitz from 1942 till the end, till October, 1944.

GB: '44.

ME: '44.

GB: What was your...

ME: Occupation?

GB: Living arrangement?

ME: [chuckles] Yes.

GB: What was your work?

ME: Well, at the beginning it was like everybody else's, and later on...

GB: Describe it, you describe, for yourself.

ME: We went out, you know, immediately you were changed. Like I remembered when I came in, there were some of the girls there with whom I went to school. And I, of course, I hardly recognized them, because everybody was transformed, with the haircut and, at that point they were already emaciated. And I, when I heard about one classmate who had died already, this was like three months later, it was still a normal reaction, because I had just come from a normal, more or less normal environment, so that the emotions were not numb yet. But, as things were happening, you were in shock, and you, you did not have too much time to think. You just had to act upon all the orders that were constantly being given to you by the Germans. And, of course, the hair was cut and everything was taken away, and you were put on, you put on the clothes that they gave you...

GB: What was your daily routine?

ME: And at that time we went out every morning, and they are doing some grading, what you call, like they were digging up hills and making things level, leveling things.

GB: Rakes, and raking?

ME: You know, yeah. It was, it was, with a shovel. It was work. It accomplished something. But it was hard. And we had to march for a long time to reach those places. At the beginning, it was fine because one still had one's health and energy, but soon everything started to catch up with you. Your feet became irritated from the, at the beginning they left us the shoes, and once the shoes went, you wore wooden shoes or whatever you found. And infections developed immediately, and then very little food, and slowly, slowly it affected your health. And we came to Auschwitz, and soon after, maybe four or five weeks after, they moved us to Birkenau, because this was getting too crowded. And Birkenau wasn't too far from Auschwitz. It was closer to the area where the crematorias were. When we came to Birkenau, it was used, supposedly, for some soldier prisoners or something. It used to be some type of a camp before.

GB: Prisoners of war?

ME: Prisoners of war. From, from old times. I don't know, because it was these...

GB: They had, the barracks existed before?

ME: The barracks existed with these bunk beds, you know, not beds, like...

GB: Cots?

ME: Just bunks, bunks built into the walls, separations, bunks, separations, bunks, you know. And we were placed in these. And compared to Auschwitz where we came from, this was terrible. Auschwitz was a country club because you had running water in each block. So when you came home you could wash yourself, and also you had water to drink. But here it was very hard to reach the water, and the luxuries got far away, you know, to go to the bathroom. And the, the rooms themselves were horrible, and dirty, and dusty, and immediately typhus broke out full force, and everybody became sick. I did not become sick yet, and one day, usually everybody, people used to group together. You found your own kind, so to speak, that you, first of all it was Slovakian girls who spoke the same language, and also to whom you felt more, you could relate better, you know. And we were a group of girls. And one day someone told us they are looking for a group, they want to form a *Kommando*. Everybody was a *Kommando*. Each group, whatever they did, they were a *Kommando*. And they want to form a certain *Kommando*. And, we said, "What kind of a *Kommando* is this?"

GB: And, whose suggestion was this?

ME: This came from, from the Germans.

GB: Germans.

ME: Sometimes it wasn't from the Germans, but one of the German inmates who were in charge. And they want to form a *Kommando*. And the *Kommando* was to, *LeichenKommando* it was called. *Leiche* is corpse. *Leiche* is a corpse, in German. And they want to form this *LeichenKommando* to pick up the corpses from the streets, you know, from the, and bring them to one area. So we said, "What a job," you know, after all, we never saw a corpse in our lives. And we were all 17 years old. And, but they told us that if you do this job, you will have enough [to someone else: "Yes, Gita?" tape off then on]--they said the advantages, if we take this, if we do this work, we will have plenty of food. We do not have to march, we do not have to stand *Zählappell*. *Zählappell* is roll call, which was, in itself, a murderous thing.

GB: Why, because, what happened at roll call?

ME: Because you had to stand from three o'clock to six o'clock till they counted you.

GB: Oh, my.

ME: You were not yesterday at the program? There was one thing on roll call. It was excellent.

GB: No, I didn't.

ME: It was excellent. I wish I had a copy of it. Becau-, it was done by a poet, Peppercorn or something like that is his name. And, you had to stand and stand and stand. By the time you were ready to march you were half dead, you know, from standing. Okay, it wasn't so cold at that time, but when the winter came, it was terrible. So we do not have to stand *Zählappell*. We can have more food. And we don't have to

march out to work. We can sleep longer. So we said, "Well, why can't we do it? If we won't do it, somebody else will do it. Let's try it." And all the, the whole, this whole group, I think, were about 18 or maybe 20 girls. And we said, "Okay." And, this was the group, and we had certain, what do you call them, ca-, like then you when you take somebody on a...

GB: Stretcher.

ME: Stretcher, so to speak. And every time, you know, a corpse was lying around, we just had to come and pick it up, and put it in a certain area until they took it away, you know, took them away. Of course it was very terrible at the beginning. And then you just did it automatically. Because things were happening all the time. You just became very...

GB: Callous.

ME: Callous. You did not think. You just did what you had to do, and your main objective was to have as little com-, as much comfort, or as little comfort as possible--not to be too tired, not to be too hungry, not to be too cold. And that's about it. And, unfortunately, it was a very busy job, because people were just falling like flies. Suddenly it was, the people were dying in such masses, in such, that it could not be handled with...

Tape one, side two:

GB: ...Selection...

ME: Meaning that they...

GB: As a rule they cut out, oh...

ME: They, they weeded out everything and everybody who, who looked like...

GB: At roll call...

ME: They can't function.

GB: They do this at roll call?

ME: Yeah, yeah. They made a selection. This is, this was called a selection. They got all the people out, and they went through them and looked who looked whether they can still go, or if there is anything to be got out of them. Otherwise, be removed, so that suddenly the camp was almost empty. So one morning our *Kapo*,¹ who was in charge of us, told us that they have to make this *Kommando* smaller because there aren't so many corpses anymore, so they don't need so many workers. So I was one of those who lost a job. The irony of it, I was crying, because I and...

GB: Because you got cut...

ME: Some other, and some other people could not do this work anymore, because there weren't enough corpses. But why it was so terrible is because it was, it was maybe October or November. It was getting very cold, and, of course, Poland is very cold, you know, it's European winters, European fall. It was getting rainy and muddy...

GB: Right.

ME: And very, very miserable in every way. And suddenly I have to start getting up at three o'clock in the morning, stand *Zählappell*, and march out into the, into work. And then I became sick also. I also caught typhus. And as I was working every day, the, those girls who remained on the job told me, "When you come home every day, stop here. Perhaps there will be something else available, so maybe you could get another job." And this is what I used to do. I envied them so that they could have the job, and have their comforts, and I was getting weaker every day. And I was really like about to fall apart. And one day when I came home they told me, "Tomorrow morning hurry quickly after the *Zählappell* and come to this particular spot, because they are going to organize a certain *Kommando*, a new *Kommando*." We didn't know what it was. And sure enough, in the morning--I couldn't sleep all night--in the morning I couldn't wait till it was over. And how am I going to get over to that place, because it was like at the other end of the camp. And the mud was very deep, and sticky, and the, the camp was full of ditches, because in order for the water to run off. And if somebody fell into a ditch, nobody could pull you out, because nobody had the strength to pull you out, so that was the end of you. And I remember hurrying to get to that place in time. And this *Kapo*

¹From Italian *capo*, "chief", "boss", an inmate appointed by SS to head a work gang made up of other prisoners.

who was in charge was the same that was in charge of the other group, when I was working. And she recognized me. And she picked one, this one, this one, and she said, "Und du," "and you." And I was picked for this new job. And this new job was called *EssKommando*. *EssKommando* means Food *Kommando*. *Essen* is to eat.

GB: Eat.

ME: Yeah. And our job was, it was a group of about 20 or 25--I don't remember--and our job was to take a wagon, and bring the food from the kitchen to the sick, sick blocks. There were a few sick blocks. And that was also good, because it was, you didn't have to get up early, you know. You had enough, you had a little more food. And more or less the same conditions as in the other group. So, which was very good, but I...

GB: So you didn't have to stand roll call?

ME: No, no roll call. So, it was fine, and I, I was beginning to feel stronger, because I had a little more food, and I had a little more rest. And one day, as we are pushing the wagon from the kitchen, I suddenly had to go to the bathroom. Because everybody was suffering from diarrhea all the time, more or less. And, I said this to the group, and they said, "Oh, you are just lazy. You don't want to push the wagon." I said, "Well, believe me or not, I'm going." And I did go to the bathroom, and when I come back, I see the wagon is standing in the middle of the road and nobody's by the wagon. I couldn't figure out what happened. So I ran to my block to find out what happened. So the, the *Blockältester* from our block where I lived says to me--she was a Jewish inmate--"You are here? Go and hide fast." Because I looked terrible. She said, "They just made a selection, and they took everybody to the selection. And that whole bunch from the wagon was also taken to the selection." And I hadn't...

GB: When you say selection, when you, when you say that, what does that mean to you?

ME: It means they put the people, they tell them to, to go to a certain place, and they select who should come, and who should go, and who should stay. They select.

GB: Did you know where they were going?

ME: Oh, yes. We were so close to the crematoria. We could see everything. I mean, this was, I mean it was the first year, but we knew already what was happening. We knew immediately what was happening over there. And, and I hid. I did not move out of the block, till some of the girls came back. From that whole group, maybe eight came back. All the others were taken. And, this is where you...

GB: Who were in your group?

ME: Mmm hmm?

GB: You, you say that, you indicated that may-, some of them were not Jewish?

ME: Oh, no, they were all Jewish.

GB: All Jewish. Okay.

ME: Those were all Jewish.

GB: Okay.

ME: Those were all Jewish. But, when you're talking about what made you survive--luck, chance, faith...

GB: Faith.

ME: God, you know...

GB: God.

ME: Everybody gives it a different name.

GB: Yeah.

ME: But these were chains of circumstances that made you survive. Otherwise, there was no way. First it was one job, then it was the other job...

GB: There was no rhyme nor reason.

ME: No. Then it was my going away at the right time, being at the right, in the right place at the right time. And when I came back, I looked more sick than any of those girls. Mostly, because I had just finished typhoid, and I was skin and bones, hardly was able to walk, but I could push along with everybody else. And when they came back, they said, "This is what they meant," and I was one of them. Then, later on--I don't remember what happened to this *EssKommando*. But another *Kommando* was created, and this was called *SchmutzKommando*. *SchmutzKommando* meant, *Schmutz*, you know what *Schmutz* [dirt, filth] means?

GB: Cleaning...

ME: Yeah...

GB: Cleaning.

ME: But it was, it was a fun job, because...

GB: Oh, a fun job [chuckles].

ME: Really, really, considering how things were there, it was a fun job. Our job was to walk around, around the sick blocks. We were six girls, and we used to go in twos. We used to have like a pail and a stick, and we used to pick up the paper around the block, you know, to make it look like this is a, a country club, you know, [chuckling] it's very clean and very neat. This was the job, and it was one of the best jobs, because it was very easy--no strain--with all the other advantages. You know, no *Zählappell*, no roll call, more food, and the environment, you know, you just had your friends and you're with the same group.

GB: Freedom, sort of.

ME: And nobody else came in...

GB: Sort of...

ME: Yes. And that's when I became very sick. While I was in the *SchmutzKommando*, I suddenly became extremely weak, and I could not walk. And there was a doctor from Czechoslovakia. Her name was Emma, and some of the girls called her to come and examine me. And she said I have pleurisy and pneumonia and I'm

not going to last long. And, I found out what's happening, so the other girls--I didn't go out to work--the other girls just covered for me, and I stayed in. And I had a friend who came from this same area where I lived, from the small town. And she was, we were kind of friendly, and she worked in the place called *Rotkäppchen* [Little Red Riding Hood] or *Canada*, where all the food, all the stuff that was brought. When the people came in, they had to leave everything there, and they did the sorting of those things. And they always smuggled something into the camp. And she, when she used to come home from work every day, she used to come in and bring me something. And those days, I remember the, that was already, let's see, I can't remember, it was the Spring of '43, Spring of '43. And she came, and she always brought me something, some food, some little delicacy from these transports, I remember, like olives. I'd never eaten olives, because olives, you know, Czechoslovakia is not a country, a tropical country, you know.

GB: No.

ME: And *Halva*² she brought me. Little things. And gradually, you know, from rest and a little more food, I, I did recuperate, yes. And then Passover came. I remember Passover distinctly because there was one woman in our group--she was from Krakow--her name is, her name was Frau Orleans. And she was one of the first women to, who started the Bais Yaakov movement in the girls' schools in Poland. She was a very educated person. And she was like a, like a den mother so to speak. She was very, a very good influence on us. And Passover came, and we knew it was Passover. And she made a *seder* [Passover evening home service]. We made a *seder* in our corner. And we did not eat bread all eight days. We organized potatoes, and we cooked them, you know, we had various means, and we tried to avoid bread. And, that, that was the last Passover I re-, the first Passover and the last one I remember. Later on I don't, I don't remember the Passovers, because there were two mores, you know, two more of them while in camp, yeah. And, okay, I should go faster I guess. Okay, you want to ask...

GB: Tell me, while you were in the camp, did you know what was happening as far as the war was concerned. And that in '41, did you hear that the United States entered the war? When did you find out?

ME: I, I, we knew very little.

GB: Very little.

ME: We just was wondering what the outside knows about us. This was our interest.

GB: Right.

ME: And we knew that planes were flying, and nobody, nobody cared to...

GB: You didn't know what was happening? You didn't know what was happening to the Germans?

²A sweet confection of crushed sesame seed in honey or other syrup.

ME: Well, people did come in, you know, from, there were always new transports, you know. And they did tell things. But we were so involved, you know...

GB: In your own...

ME: We were just interested how does it affect us?

GB: Were you, you were not involved in any resistance activity?

ME: I was not. I was not. After this time, we were transported to another camp, and I was in Brzezinka when the Hungarian transports started to come. It was all Auschwitz.

GB: Yes.

ME: And we were Birkenau, Brzezinka. Birkenau is Brzezinka, it's the same thing. One is Polish, one is German. It's, *Birke* means "the white trees" that...

GB: Birch.

ME: Birch.

GB: Birch trees.

ME: It was a birch palace or something.

GB: Where, I mean under what circumstances were you liberated?

ME: I was in Auschwitz, and we worked in the sauna where the transports, the Hungarian transports came. I was cutting hair. This was my job, before I left Auschwitz, cutting hair.

GB: Cutting hair?

ME: Yeah.

GB: And that was another job that you had.

ME: Yeah, that was a very good job also.

GB: After picking up the...

ME: Yeah, yeah.

GB: Trash.

ME: That was the next one. Working in the disinfecting center and also cutting hair.

GB: When you recovered from...

ME: Yes.

GB: Did you go back to your job in...

ME: Yeah.

GB: The *Schmutz* job?

ME: Yes, yes.

GB: And then you, then you got another job...

ME: Then later the whole group of us was sent back to the sauna. The sauna was where they, bathing, you know, and disinfecting clothes.

GB: More people were coming in all the time?

ME: Oh yes, constantly, constantly...

GB: More people coming?

ME: New people constantly.

GB: More people coming? In and out?

ME: In, coming...

GB: In, and, out.

ME: Well, in was one way, and out was the last way, yes.

GB: Out was the other, that's right.

ME: And then later on they took this very group we are working in the sauna, and they transferred us to Brzezinka. Well, when the Hungarian transports started to come in '44, full force, and very many, and we were working also in the sauna, cutting hair and doing things like that. At the end of '44, towards September, October, they said that our group is going to be sent some place. Now we did not believe they will send us some place, because we were as close to the crematoria as from here to that hall there, whatever you call it.

GB: Yes.

ME: I could not believe they will let us live. And they changed, we used to wear civilian clothes while we were working in the sauna. They put on us the striped things on us. They told us to take some things with us, and they put us in a bus, and they took us away. And we did not believe that we are going to see the sun again. And they took us to Hindenburg. Hindenburg was a...

GB: Yes.

ME: Small town, and ammunition factories were around it.

GB: Right.

ME: And that's where we were. That's where they took us. And this Tauber, who was an S.S. man, he was in charge of that camp. And he looked at our numbers, and he could tell from our numbers that we were very early comers. And he gave us the compliment of saying, "*Ihr seit doch von den Alten.*" "You are from the old ones, from the early ones." And we made it up till now. And he gave us jobs inside, you know, like *Stubendienst*, [room service] which was like you take care of the rooms and things, a little bit easier. And we stayed in that camp November, December, and January. The Russians started to move in, and suddenly they told us, "You have to take everything." And they emptied the food, gave us as much as there was, you know, bread and whatever to take along. And we started marching--in the, you know, in January, in the deep of the winter, till we reach--And we marched about two days, and then we reached a certain place where they put us in boxcars, you know, in the, in a train with boxcars. And they packed in, it was--you always hear about these things, and that's exactly how it was--till we came to a certain camp. After riding for, I don't know whether it was days or a week or more, till we came to a certain place where they let us out, and they fed us, and then again into the boxcars till we reached Bergen-Belsen. That was the last stop, Bergen-Belsen. And, Bergen-Belsen was at that time, the last thing, you know, they concentrated as many people there as possible, because as the Russian front was moving east, not,

wait, westward, they kept moving the people westward. And they could not care of those so many people, and food was getting scarcer and scarcer. And they said that the last few days that they are going to, to feed everybody poisoned soup in order to finish off everybody. But, whether they were too late for it, or they did not have time to do it, whatever the reason was, the English came in on April the 15th, and then when we were liberated, and that was the end of the...

GB: Do you have any bitterness?

ME: Bitterness is a very mild term, heh. It's, em, [pause]...

GB: You were able to...

ME: I, I can...

GB: To renew your life.

ME: I can say one thing, that we preserved our humanity...

GB: From your father?

ME: Remarkably, all those girls that I was with, we were just as human as, as when we went in...

GB: As you went in...

ME: Perhaps more human, because we became even more sensitive. And we know how easy it is to be, easy it is to become dehumanized. It is unbelievable. And I think the important thing is to really nurture your humanity, because it's very brittle, and it can just disappear very easily, under very little provocation. Certainly we had enough provocation and, to become dehumanized, but that was the only thing I feel that we can be proud of from this experience, because brutality brutalizes, and we certainly did not become brutal. That's the last thing we became. We just became more understanding, and we know what a human being is capable of, if, if we do not look out, for ourselves and for others. I would just like to mention the names of my siblings [weeping].

GB: Your siblings, your sisters and brothers?

ME: Yes. My oldest brother, Moshe, eh Avraham Shlomo, Yesoa Yehoshua, David, and Myer Ze'ev, and my sisters Esther, Sara, Fayga, and Chaya Rayza. On my mother's side, there were some cousins left, and I have two aunts in America and one aunt that survived in Europe. However, at this point they are all gone. However, on my father's side, nobody survived, because my father had only one sister, and she was, she perished in the Holocaust. And I want to mention the name of my grandfather on my father's side, Menachem Mendel, and my grandmother Ziesel, who had two sisters, Brocha--who lost her husband in the First World War, and she remained with one daughter, Sara, who lived with my grandmother--and another sister of my grandmother, Leah, who was blind, and who also lived with my grandmother. She took care of all of them. And I think they were very special people, very strong characters, and good human beings.³

³Her personal history sheet indicates that she emigrated to the United States May 5, 1947.