

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SYLVIA SCHNEIDER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eva Abraham  
Date: August 8, 1989

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Gratz College  
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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SS - Sylvia Schneider<sup>1</sup> [interviewee]

EA - Eva Abraham [interviewer]

Date: August 8, 1989

*Tape one, side one:*

EA: [beginning of tape is very difficult to understand] Where were you born?

SS: I was born in Cologne. [tape off then on] --two sisters, an older sister Ruth, and a younger sister Yohanna. [whispers: What's going on here?]

EA: Were you always Sylvia?

SS: Sylvie. Zylvie.

EA: Zylvie, O.K.

SS: Sylvia being an English family name. Actually it was a very unusual name in Germany.

EA: Yes, I didn't...

SS: I...

EA: How did you spell that?

SS: The same way it was [unclear]...

EA: With a Y?

SS: With a Y. In fact one of my teachers always called me Zylvia.

EA: Yes, [unclear]. How did your parents find those names for you?

SS: I have no idea. I have no idea. Because my sister's name was Ruth, and Yohanna, which was more common then.

EA: Right. It's very interesting. Your parents also were from Cologne?

SS: My mother came from what was at the time Poland, a small town near Krakow. It was actually a spa.

EA: Oh!

SS: I have forgotten the name, but it might occur to me. My father came from Belgium, and before that from Russia.

EA: He was born in Belgium?

SS: I believe so. And his parents...

EA: Where did they meet?

SS: In Cologne.

EA: What was he doing...

SS: I think the marriage was arranged. My grandfather was a very old-fashioned man, and their marriage was arranged.

EA: Your maternal grandfather?

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<sup>1</sup>née Balbierer.

SS: My maternal grandfather. My paternal grandparents I never knew. I once met my paternal grandmother. She came to visit from Belgium. And she was quite senile, so I really never got to know her.

EA: But your maternal grandfather heard about you father? How?

SS: And I think...

EA: Do you know?

SS: I don't remember. I know that he was at the time in Cologne. My father was at the time in Cologne.

EA: Doing what?

SS: He was a teacher.

EA: Hmm. Of what?

SS: Oh, languages.

EA: Oh!

SS: My father spoke many languages.

EA: Obviously Russian.

SS: Seven.

EA: Belgian? Flemish?

SS: Flemish, German, and I don't know how many other. I think seven all together I was told.

EA: Oh really.

SS: Yes.

EA: You don't remember him?

SS: I remember him very vaguely. I but, I remember him somewhat, yes. I remember him, I remember what he called me, "*Schäfchen*." He called me, "*Schäfchen*"...

EA: Oh, not little lamb?

SS: Which means, little lamb.

EA: Too complimentary.

SS: Little lamb. Little lamb. Yes. And, and also *zylbucha* [my pet Zylvie]. That was because I cried very easily. I was a cry baby.

EA: You were built near the water. [German idiom]

SS: Near water. Yeah. And so I have strong memories of those two. [noise]

EA: Actually gaps are O.K. because it's a conversation of course.

SS: Yes. Yes.

EA: You know, everything is...

SS: Yes. Yes.

EA: So they were more or less the same age.

SS: Similar. [tape off then on] Similar in ages, yes. Very emotional! Requested to stop.

EA: How old roughly were they when they met, do you know?

SS: No. I just know how old, approximately how old they were when their children, when we were born. I think my mother and father both were born somewhere around the turn of the century. I don't know if it's a year or two before or after. I'm not sure. I think before.

EA: Did your mother already have a profession or...

SS: My mother was very artistic.

EA: Oh!

SS: Yes, she did dress designing and dress making, was very good with her hands, did needlework, art needlework. *Kunstgewerbe* it was called a dress.

EA: Indeed.

SS: Yes.

EA: Did you inherit that? Are you artistic?

SS: I think I probably am somewhat. I think I would have been had I had the training.

EA: You had the interest?

SS: Yes, I do a lot of needlework.

EA: Do you.

SS: And I have done some painting.

EA: How about your children?

SS: My daughter?

EA: Your daughter.

SS: No, she in that sense is more like her father. But, although she has done a little. She does needlework beautifully, actually. Beautifully, yes.

EA: How about that.

SS: Yes. I was wrong. She has inherited some of it, yes. Also, I think I inherited my love of music and literature from my mother. I don't know what I inherited...

EA: Was she a performer?

SS: No. No. But she was known never to go anywhere without a book under her arm when she was young. She was very studious.

EA: And your father of course taught. What kind of a system did he work in? In the school system or the university system or...

SS: I am not sure. I have so little recollection of my father, unfortunately, because I, he was, I knew him only until I was about five or six. And then he became ill with tuberculosis, and I only saw him once again, in Poland, some years later. So, at that part of my life I saw, I remember very little of him. Let's put it that way.

EA: But you must have some memories. He was young and [unclear].

SS: Yes, yes. They are isolated memories but, and they are quite strong.

EA: Yeah, sure.

SS: And I also know that he was a very affectionate man. Both my parents were affectionate.

EA: In what way?  
SS: There was a lot of hugging and kissing going on in our family.  
EA: There was?  
SS: Yes.  
EA: Oh!  
SS: We were very, I felt very loved as a child, by both my parents.  
EA: Now...  
SS: And there was great affection between me and my older sister. My younger sister died as a small child.  
EA: How small?  
SS: I think she was under two. She died of pneumonia.  
EA: Why?  
SS: Yes. And my mother lived in constant fear of course of our being tubercular because of my father.  
EA: And of course that was the time before antibiotics were...  
SS: Yes, exactly, yes. And, but actually we were quite healthy, the two of us. My older sister, Ruth, and I, were quite healthy children.  
EA: Yes. Good. Do you have that fear still now or...  
SS: No. No, not at all.  
EA: No.  
SS: I don't remember having any such fear ever, actually.  
EA: That's good. That's good. So what do you remember about your home life?  
SS: I remember going to school. I remember being ill as a child actually. I remember being in the hospital.  
EA: Oh? For what?  
SS: Pneumonia.  
EA: Oh, you also had it then.  
SS: Yes. Yes. But I recovered. I was sent to the country to recover. I already...  
EA: Where did you go?  
SS: I went to *Bad Kreutznach* which...  
EA: [chuckles]  
SS: Is a spa I suppose you would call it.  
EA: Mmm hmm.  
SS: A resort. And there was...  
EA: Yes?  
SS: I was in a convalescent home there. And that was a...  
EA: Did you like it?  
SS: I loved it. Actually.  
EA: Did you!?  
SS: Yes, I thought it was lovely.

EA: With other children?  
SS: I don't remember being with other children.  
EA: You were away from home.  
SS: I was away from home, after being in the hospital.  
EA: Right, alone.  
SS: Alone. My mother came to visit me at the hospital of course, but...  
EA: In the hospital, but not in *Bad Kreutznach*.  
SS: *Bad Kreutznach*, no. I wasn't there a great length of time. I think I was there four or five weeks.  
EA: That's a long time for a little girl.  
SS: Yes. But I wasn't, I was really well treated and I was not a, I don't remember being really unhappy.  
EA: Hmm. So who did you play with or, how old were you?  
SS: I was four, between four and five.  
EA: Can you imagine now? A four-year-old being sent away for four to five weeks alone, to a convalescent home, with adults?  
SS: Well, it apparently was considered necessary at the time I suppose.  
EA: But you had no detrimental memories of it.  
SS: I had no bad memories of it, because I think my home life was very secure at the time. So I didn't feel a, I knew my mother was there and she visited. And I knew I was going home.  
EA: Sure.  
SS: I had not started school yet. When I came home my sister was already in kindergarten. No, actually first grade. My sister was in first grade.  
EA: Was that the public school?  
SS: Public school. It was a Jewish school, not a public school.  
EA: Oh, a Jewish school.  
SS: A Jewish school. Yes, well at...  
EA: Why?  
SS: That point, well, it was 1933, '34. And it was 1933 or 1934.  
EA: Why did you have to go to a Jewish school?  
SS: Because it was, Hitler was already in power, and we were segregated. Jewish children were not to mix with Christian children.  
EA: Was that a law?  
SS: It was a law, yes [unclear]. The Christian children were not to be contaminated by us.  
EA: Now, how much of that did you know?  
SS: Oh, I was well aware of it.  
EA: At that time?  
SS: I was well aware of it. I was aware of everything.

EA: How?

SS: Because my mother was a very modern woman, and life went on, and very little was kept from us. She tried once, when I was shopping with her, and we saw an old Jewish man being arrested. And he was dragged, physically dragged out of his shop and pulled along the street shouting, "I haven't done anything!" And my mother tried to push me into a store. But it was too late. I had already heard, seen everything. She tried to hide me.

EA: To hide you.

SS: And it was too late. I had seen it, had heard. I was terribly, terribly shocked by it. It is a very vivid memory. It's my first vivid memory of the beginning.

EA: Did you ask?

SS: Yes.

EA: You...

SS: Yes.

EA: Were free to ask your mother...

SS: Oh yes, yes.

EA: What's going on?

SS: Yes.

EA: What did she say?

SS: Well, I was told to be quiet, bec--out of fear. I was told to be very, very quiet.

EA: Did you bring it up at home again?

SS: No. I don't remember bringing it up, but from then on I was aware. My sister and I were both aware.

EA: Do you remember talking about any of these things?

SS: I remember hearing my family talk.

EA: In hushed voices or loud so that you could hear it?

SS: No, it was hushed because it was dangerous. We were aware that one must talk quietly at home, and never outside the home about Hitler or anything to do with the regime.

EA: So you knew to be quiet.

SS: Yes, yes. I remember feeling, I suppose you would call it a split. There was one life at home, and another life outside the home. One was relatively safe behind our doors. But out in the world it was extremely dangerous. And this was 1935, 1936. It was very early in the...

EA: That's early all right.

SS: Yeah.

EA: What year were you born?

SS: I was born in 1928.

EA: So you were seven.



SS: Yes. My sister was a year older. My sister Ruth was a year older. There was only about, there were fifteen months between our ages. She was fifteen months older than I. And very soon we were no longer able to go to school.

EA: Even to the Jewish school?

SS: To the Jewish school alone, we had to be accompanied.

EA: Well it wasn't safe there.

SS: Yes. We went for a while just the two of us. And then we picked up, on the way we picked up a distant cousin who then walked with us.

EA: What was her name?

SS: She was also our age. Her name was also Sylvia.

EA: Oh!

SS: Interestingly enough. And...

EA: So the three of you...

SS: The three of us would...

EA: Would go to school...

SS: Go to school and back. Then one day on the way home from school we had dropped off, the cousin had left, and we continued our way home. And there, it began, the Hitler Youth began to taunt us. And...

EA: Children or...

SS: Men, young children. I would say teenagers, early teenagers.

EA: In what way?

SS: They began to shout at me, "Don't go with a Jew!" I did not look Jewish, being fair, red headed, fair skinned. My sister was the opposite, very dark, and looked Jewish where I did not. And there was, in the beginning it, they said, "Get away from the Jew! Don't have anything to do with her!" And...

EA: But they only shouted. They didn't physically...

SS: At that point it was just shouting. And we became very, I became very frightened by that. My sister was much braver, at least I thought she was. And perhaps she was, actually.

EA: In what way? Did she answer them back or how did she react?

SS: No, no, it's, well I think it's, well the reason I thought she was braver is because I didn't know what she was feeling. I just knew what I was feeling, [chuckles] which perhaps explains that. Also she was an older sister, and I always thought of her...

EA: Fifteen months?

SS: I know, but she was always more serious, and I remember her as being the clever one. I was the cute one, and she was the clever one. This is the memory I have. I don't know how much truth there was. Probably quite true. And one day, on the way home, from, we were being chased by some of these Hitler Youth. And we just couldn't run fast enough. And my sister was hit on the head, and fell backwards, and hit the back of her head on the curb stone...

EA: Oh my.

SS: Of the sidewalk, and lay there bleeding.

EA: Were you...

SS: And I cou-...

EA: With her?

SS: I was. I couldn't find anyone to help her. And so when she was able to get up, I had to walk home with her, holding my handkerchief over her head. And my mother took her to the doctor. She was stitched up. And then we forgot about it, until...

EA: Could you go to any doctor at that time?

SS: Well, we went to Dr. Auerbach, who was a Jewish doctor and lived around the corner from us. I assume that he was our family doctor. I remember going to him ever since I could remember.

EA: Do you think you could have gone to any doctor, the nearest doctor?

SS: I...

EA: At that time?

SS: I don't think so. I don't think so.

EA: Why not?

SS: Again, Jews just didn't do that. Also...

EA: Was it a written law do you think or an unwritten?

SS: At that point I suspect it was unwritten. But of course within a very short time notices began to appear in shop windows. By this time, I think it was 1938.

EA: Like what?

SS: *Juden unerwünscht*, Jews Are Not Wanted Here, which meant not only that they were not wanted. It meant that they were not allowed, basically. I do know that some of our local shops did not want these signs in their windows, but they had no choice. Or they claimed they had no choice. And although they told my mother, "You can continue shopping here," my mother did not. I think not out of fear at that point, but out of pride. And I learned that she was a very proud person. Later on, it seemed that we were constantly being harassed by Gestapo, who would knock on the door morning, noon, night, any time, and when the door was opened would shout at my mother, "*Heil* Hitler!" And my mother would answer, "Good morning," or "Good afternoon," whatever the case would be. And they would repeat, "*Heil* Hitler!" And she would say, "Good morning," until I, cowering in the corner would say, "My God", I would say to myself, "Why doesn't she just say *Heil* Hitler so they'll stop?" And I was terribly frightened, and not very courageous at all, not like my mother. But she continued to say, "Good morning," and eventually at that point they just asked for her passport or what it all, whatever they came for.

EA: Is that what they wanted?

SS: They wanted to see her passport, papers of some kind.

EA: Why should she have a passport in 1936 or seven?

SS: I have no idea. I was not old enough to understand.

EA: Was your father home at that time?

SS: No, he was not.

EA: Were they asking for him?

SS: I don't know. I really don't know. I hid. I was terrified of the Gestapo. Then I remember in 19--early in 1938 I think it was now, and of course all of this is being said as I remember it. I...

EA: Sure.

SS: Time may be not, you know, the dates may be somewhat wrong when I say '37 it could be '38 or...

EA: I understand.

SS: I remember coming home from school and getting caught in a tremendous mob of people. And when we looked up in the distance, we saw very, very clearly a car, an open car. And in it was a standing figure, Adolf Hitler.

EA: Oh *really*?

SS: He was coming through Cologne, yes. And we tried of course to run away, but the crowd was so tremendous we could not, we were actually caught up in it. We couldn't move. It was a, really a mob scene. And the physical...

EA: Were you curious, like everybody else?

SS: No. We were terrified, and wanted to get away and go home where it was safe, or relatively safe. No of course we weren't curious. We were far too terrified to be curious. We lived in a state of fear. And everyone was, their hands were up in the salute, shouting, "*Heil Hitler! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!*" And, my sister looked at me and I looked at her, and her hand came up and so mine came up with relief, and of course we raised our hands, because we were...

EA: [unclear]...

SS: [unclear] we were afraid not to. We would have been killed. I think we would have, I mean the mob was so frenzied that we didn't dare not. I think that, I would not have done it unless my sister had. I took my cue from her at all times. And once she did, I did too.

EA: Sure.

SS: And I remember feeling disloyalty and guilt, but we did it. We had to, actually. There was really no choice.

EA: You remember those feelings?

SS: I remember exactly what I felt, exactly what I felt.

EA: What a dilemma for a young child.

SS: Yes, it was, really it was. I remember we did not tell at home.

EA: You did not?

SS: No. That's the one thing I remember not telling. I think it's because my mother was so courageous, and I was ashamed.

EA: Oh, you didn't tell that you didn't put, that you...

SS: Had...

EA: Saluted.

SS: Yes.

EA: But you did tell her that the crowds were there...

SS: Yes.

EA: Before Hitler and so on.

SS: Yes. Yes. But we did not tell that we saluted. Because I remember how many times the Gestapo said, "*Heil* Hitler," and my mother did not say, "*Heil* Hitler." So how could I possibly admit that I raised my hand in such a salute? I didn't dare. I felt too ashamed. Both of us.

EA: Well, that's interesting, yes. Did you...

SS: I was in constant, constant fear. I mean we absolutely lived in fear.

EA: Yes. And yet physically, except for that Hitler Youth incident with Ruth, you had not personally...

SS: No, except that we heard at home such and such happened to so and so. We knew what was happening, because we had friends who were taken to concentration camps. My father was missing.

EA: Oh? Missing how?

SS: He had gone to see his mother in Belgium.

EA: Regularly, with a regular ticket and so on.

SS: Yeah. And he did not return.

EA: What year was that, Sylvia?

SS: This was in 1938.

EA: Did not return?

SS: And my mother was sure that he was in a concentration camp or something had happened to him.

EA: There was no communication even? No letters? No phone? No nothing?

SS: Nothing. No. We did meet him again later, but I'll come to that.

EA: Yes. Oh my God and no phone call?

SS: Nothing. No. We could not find out where he was at the time.

EA: Now your grandmother was living in Belgium.

SS: My grandparents, my maternal grandmother, yes.

EA: Yes. Your maternal grandmother?

SS: My paternal, I'm sorry.

EA: Paternal, yeah, his mother.

SS: His mother...

EA: Yeah.

SS: Was living in Belgium. My grandparents, my grandmother had died in the meantime in 1933. But I remember her extremely well. I was five when she died. But my grandfather was still alive in '38.

EA: Then you...

SS: And they lived in Cologne, my maternal grandparents.

EA: That is your maternal grandparents.

SS: Yes. Yes.

EA: But we're now talking about your paternal, your father's...

SS: Mother.

EA: Mother.

SS: Yes.

EA: Was living in Belgium.

SS: In Belgium.

EA: What city?

SS: In Antwerpen.

EA: And he just went to see her, and was she living alone or...

SS: I think so. I think so. I'm not sure, but as far as I know she was living alone then.

EA: [unclear].

SS: And I don't remember what happened, I don't know what happened to her, actually. I don't know. So then we were existing in this way. And one day, in October of 1938, to be exact it was the 28th of October...

EA: What happened then?

SS: We went to school, oh, in the morning, first thing in the morning at about 6:00 the Gestapo came again, asking to see my mother's passport, and left. We went to school, where we began to hear terrible rumors of people being taken away. And finally we were told to go home immediately.

EA: This is amongst the children?

SS: Yes.

EA: They were telling about their relatives and...

SS: There were rumors that something was happening in the city.

EA: On the 28th of October already.

SS: I don't know where they, October, in 1938, yes. And we came home and we were told that we had to go to the police station.

EA: Now when you say, "We were told," do you remem-...

SS: Oh, the Gestapo came. One of, a Gestapo person came to the door and said that we were to come to the police station, and we would be going home, you know, coming back almost immediately.

EA: They did assure you of that.

SS: Uh huh, yes.

EA: Did you?

SS: No, of course. I've never been home since. That's the last time I ever left the house. I've never been back.

EA: There and then.  
SS: There and then. No clothes, no suitcase, nothing. We were just asked to come to the police station.  
EA: You went. You...  
SS: My sister.  
EA: And Ruth, and...  
SS: And my mother.  
EA: The three of you went there. As you were.  
SS: As we were.  
EA: How did you get to the police station, Sylvia?  
SS: Do you know I cannot remember?  
EA: I believe you.  
SS: I remember walking out of my apartment, walking downstairs, and walking out. But the next thing I remember is being at the police station. And I remember being put in a--some kind of conveyance. I suppose, it wasn't a bus. I don't know whether it was a truck or a...  
EA: Was it green?  
SS: Some kind of [unclear].  
EA: What color was it?  
SS: I don't remember. I don't remember.  
EA: Probably the "Grüne Minna" [Green Maria]  
SS: Could very well be.  
EA: Does that mean anything to you?  
SS: Like the black maria, huh? Something like that, yeah. Like a...  
EA: A green, yes. A [unclear] and it's green...  
SS: Yes.  
EA: That was the famous [unclear].  
SS: And the next thing I knew we were taken to the railway station.  
EA: Wait a minute, no, no, no. You were at the police station.  
SS: Yes.  
EA: And then what happened?  
SS: And then we were...  
EA: Were you alone?  
SS: With my parents. A lot of other people were there.  
EA: With your mother.  
SS: Yes, with my mother.  
EA: Right? Mother and Ruth and you.  
SS: Yes, my mother and sister, yes.  
EA: O.K. So, and other people there?

SS: Yes. There were people there. That's when we went into the conveyance and were taken to the railway station.

EA: I beg your pardon?

SS: We were taken to the railway station.

EA: Right there and...

SS: Yes.

EA: Did you have winter clothes?

SS: No.

EA: My--you were taken to the railroad station by a police conveyance.

SS: By the police, yes.

EA: And then what?

SS: And we were put on a train.

EA: Do you know where?

SS: Where to, you mean?

EA: Yes.

SS: Well I just know where we ended up. I don't know where...

EA: You had no idea...

SS: I had no idea where we were going. I don't know where, I assume my mother might have had some idea. I don't know. I don't think she did.

EA: How did you feel?

SS: Thoroughly frightened. Very frightened. As time progressed I got more and more frightened, because we began to see more and more terrible things. We began to see, from a few people, it became hundreds of people. Every time we stopped, the train stopped, hundreds of people were put on the train.

EA: Oh, were you stopped a number of times?

SS: We stopped constantly. After all, we were in the, in Cologne. And we crossed the whole of Germany. And, we ended up, I remember at one station, we ended up at the end of the day at a station where another train pulled in opposite our train. And there were a lot of people there who were very disturbed, and apparently had been travelling perhaps even longer, because they had had, well none of us had had any food all day. And there was a, some organization came with bread. And I think we ended up with a piece of bread.

EA: Were they German organizations?

SS: I have no idea.

*Tape one, side two:*

EA: Somebody gave you some food. You don't know who the people were?

SS: No, I don't. I have no idea who they were. I assume it was a Jewish organization. But by that time we became aware of talking to other passengers, that all of us had Polish passports, every one of us. So it seemed as if all Polish citizens were being deported to Poland. This is what we thought. And to some degree we were quite correct. Now, you have to realize that in Germany, when a child was born, it was not automatically German. You took on the nationality of the mother.

EA: Of the mother?

SS: Or the father, I don't know. It must have been the, well, I think it must have been the mother, because my mother had a Polish passport. And we were Polish, according to the Germans we were Polish, not according to the Polish, Poles. Of course they didn't agree with that at all.

EA: That's interesting, because you mentioned that your mother was from Krakow.

SS: Yes.

EA: And your father was born where?

SS: I believe my father was born in Belgium.

EA: O.K., that's interesting, isn't it? Because you would think it's a patriarchal system.

SS: Well, of course you have to realize my father wasn't there, my mother was. And here were two children. Do you follow me? I don't think the German cared very much, the German state cared very much about having two children left alone there. You know?

EA: That's correct.

SS: And so, there we were. I know that we were never considered German. Because birth didn't mean anything.

EA: Particularly if you were Jewish.

SS: Yes. You know. So, where was I?

EA: You traveled by train in...

SS: Train to the...

EA: To the Polish...

SS: [unclear]...

EA: And what were the Polish...

SS: To the, towards Poland.

EA: To the Polish border.

SS: We arrived I think at night. And we were dumped at a place called Zbaszyn, which was a no-man's land. It was not German, and it was not Polish. It was on the border, as I recall. And there we were dumped at the railroad station and there were many people



already there. And there were people still arriving. And this went on all night. It was bitterly cold. We had no place to even sit.

EA: What was there?

SS: There was a railroad station, a waiting room. You can imagine, there were...

EA: A waiting room.

SS: Thousands of people. And that night somebody covered me with an overcoat and I slept on a table in the waiting room, on top of a table. They asked people to let the children, some of the children, lie down. The following morning organization began. There was an old abandoned mill, and we were allotted where to put the bed. We had little areas, and to sleep on we had a bunch of straw, and our family was, you know, put together. We had, it was a very tiny amount of space.

EA: Men, women, children?

SS: Everybody together, yes, yes. They were, the...

EA: But you were together with your mom.

SS: Yes, for a while. Eventually the children were separated from the parents, in another building, I think a church. There were also some barracks there.

EA: What kind of barracks? Soldiers'?

SS: I'm not sure. I'm not sure whether they were for soldiers or whether they had been stables. It was that kind of very rough kind of thing. And we were getting some food. There was a convent nearby and I think we were getting some food from that source. I'm not too familiar, being so very young, and not concerned too much with that kind of organization. I haven't...

EA: Of course not. Of course not.

SS: I haven't got enough information.

EA: But there weren't, you don't remember nuns in uniform coming, you know, in their habits?

SS: Just vaguely, but only in the very beginning. After that, some other arrangements were made.

EA: What were, who were...

SS: What apparently happened was that the Germans deported us, and the Poles refused to let us in. And this became our home, these dreadful conditions. It was the beginning of November by then, and it was terribly cold in that area. Poland, after all, was freezing. We had inadequate everything.

EA: Did they have blankets?

SS: No, straw we had beneath us...

EA: And you...

SS: Eventually...

EA: Left in October, therefore...

SS: The end of October, by the time...

EA: You had no clothing with you.

SS: No, nothing. And the conditions were unbelievable, just unbelievable. On top of which, people were going mad. I remember one man went absolutely berserk. He was a doctor. He went completely berserk. People became violent.

EA: Towards each other?

SS: No, I think they became violent in terms, they were mentally ill. They became mentally ill. I remember one or two children, frozen to death, later. [weeping] It was just so terrible. It was absolute hell. And people constantly, in the middle of the night, having nightmares. People screaming for their parents. Crying, "I want to go home!" There were husbands separated from wives.

EA: How was your mom? Was she comforting towards you?

SS: Who?

EA: Your mom.

SS: Oh yes, of course. As supportive as she could be. I do remember feeling, "How can my mother manage? We have her, but who has she got? She's got no one."

EA: She had you. [unclear].

SS: No, for security, you see. We had her. I felt, I remember very strongly feeling, "Thank God I have my sister and my mother is with me. They are my security." We were children. "She'll take care of us. Who's going to take care of her?"

EA: Did you remember thinking that?

SS: Oh yes, yes. This was my constant worry.

EA: Interesting.

SS: I felt that we were, we had more safety than she did, because she was our emotional safety, but who did, she had no one. She did, however, have a sister in Krakow, who was married to a Polish Jew.

EA: Hmm.

SS: And she managed to get word by mail to her.

EA: Really?

SS: Yes. And, well we were in this place during the winter. There was no running water. One had to go to a pump and get water. And the conditions were so terrible. And we talked at first, you know, the talk was all about going back, going back home. But of course after a while that became impossible. We spent the entire winter there, in these dreadful conditions. All of '38...

EA: '38.

SS: End of '38 into 1939, my sister, who was born in January, her birthday was there. So I know we were there January. My birthday's on the 4th of May, and I remember my birthday there, my eleventh birthday I spent there.

EA: So you were there from October...

SS: Until...

EA: Until after May.

SS: Yes. May 4th was my birthday. I remember my mother somehow getting a birthday present for me there, an orange. I had no idea how she got it. I know it was the most precious thing, and that I hid it so that I wouldn't have to share it. Because I had not seen anything like it.

EA: Have you any idea where she got it from?

SS: I have no idea. It was just, it appeared by magic! And, this orange, I kept saying, "I'll eat it tomorrow. I'll eat it tomorrow." [crying]

EA: It's O.K.

SS: And in the end it was rotten and I couldn't eat it. I couldn't bear to eat it, because I wanted to save it. I saved it so long that I could no longer eat it. I don't know why this was so traumatic to me, but it was. I think it's pathetic. I think it hurts me more in retrospect...

EA: I'm sure of that. It did.

SS: Than it really did at the time.

EA: I'm sure.

SS: You know, I think that's why I'm so upset by it now. Because it seems so sad, that I could not even enjoy such a tremendous treat, something that I never saw again until I came to England. And even then, hardly.

EA: Sure.

SS: So it was really, it was awfully sad.

EA: In those days of course there wasn't the import and export like we have it here.

SS: No, no, an orange was a...

EA: [unclear]...

SS: Was a very precious thing...

EA: Yes.

SS: It was a [unclear], particularly when we ate basically potatoes and when, and we even saved the peels and cooked that when there was nothing else. I mean, everything was...

EA: Did you cook in Zbaszyn?

SS: There was a like a field kitchen set up.

EA: Who were the responsible people? Were the men? Women? Soldiers?

SS: I think men and women.

EA: Oh, of...

SS: We...

EA: Of these...

SS: You know Jews, they manage to organize everything. They were put to work, in other words.

EA: Yes, of course. Yes.

SS: So you'd keep some kind of order there and to, eventually even they tried to have some classes for the children and occupy them. But I remember long, long periods of inactivity and too much thinking and worrying and wondering, "Are we going to get out of here?" And rumors, and fear, terrible fear.

EA: Do you remember being with other children?

SS: Yes. Yes, there were other children. We were eventually put in a different area to sleep. I think it's because there was, we saw too much as children. I mean people lived as man and wife, and we were so in the middle of everything. We were not, there were no walls. Everything was visible. And you know, people when they are so insecure and so frightened and so worried, they, there is a great deal of comfort in sexual intercourse between husband and wife. And these things did occur, and we as children were just, we shouldn't have been there. And so we were just...

EA: You were eleven years old.

SS: Yes.

EA: So you really had...

SS: Yes.

EA: Your sexual awareness very close.

SS: Absolutely, yes. And so the children were eventually put in a separate area. I think that there was an old, it had been a, it was an unused church.

EA: But you were with Ruth.

SS: Yes.

EA: Were the conditions a little better there for the children, or did you still sleep straw?

SS: No, we still slept on straw. My aunt sent us a package, which came through once, and I remember getting a toothbrush. Oh, it must have been in the parcel. And this toothbrush...

EA: Could you have gone to Krakow?

SS: No.

EA: Why not?

SS: The Poles wouldn't let us in. That's why we were on the border to begin with.

EA: So you did not...

SS: We did eventually get to Krakow though.

EA: Oh, all right. I'm sorry I interrupted.

SS: It's all right.

EA: You got a package?

SS: And I remember getting a toothbrush. And this toothbrush was my only possession. And it became my identity. [both chuckle] Yes. I remember I, every morning when I woke up, the first thing I looked for was my toothbrush. And one day, in the middle of, one day, one night, my mother came to where we were sleeping, which she never did,

because the children were separate, and she woke us up. I think this was at the end, towards the middle or end of May. That's about as close as I can get it. Actually, it might have been the end of May, perhaps even the beginning of June. But I think it was the end of May.

EA: In '39.

SS: Yeah, '39, yes. My mother woke us up in the middle of the night and told us to be very, very quiet, that we were going to go out, and we were not to make any noise or wake anyone. Everyone was sleeping. And there was a man with her. He looked like an official. He had a uniform. I think he might have been a Polish policeman. I don't know. And I immediately groped, in my sleep, or in my still sleepy, I groped for my toothbrush. And I couldn't find it immediately. And my mother said, "Come quickly, quickly, and quietly." And I couldn't leave until I finally found my toothbrush. Then I was able to go with her. I couldn't leave my toothbrush behind. It would be like leaving part of myself behind. And we left. We were taken to the railroad station, just my mother and my sister and I. We went on a train. We were on the train during the night. And my mother told us we are going to *Tante Ghatti* in Krakow, but to be very, very quiet. I think, I don't know whether she told me, but I have a strong conviction that we were illegally. My mother somehow got someone to get her out of there. Or my aunt, perhaps, in Krakow, had managed it. But we did get out of Zbaszyn, at a time when no one had got out. And we went to Krakow to my aunt. And I remember arriving there. And I had three cousins, girls, three beautiful girls.

EA: Hmm.

SS: My aunt and uncle, my uncle was very religious. He did not get on with my mother, apparently, because she was, although we had come from a religious background and had a kosher home, my mother became suddenly very anti-religious.

EA: Really?

SS: Yes.

EA: You as a little girl remember a religious home?

SS: Oh yes.

EA: *Kashrut*?

SS: [unclear], yes, yes.

EA: And you went to synagogue?

SS: Very Orthodox. Every Saturday. Then from synagogue straight to my grandfather's house for lunch.

EA: Ah!

SS: And, yes, I know all about the orthodox life...

EA: Do you have warm memories of this?

SS: Yes, of course I do. Yes, yeah, very.

EA: That is beautiful.

SS: Yes.

EA: Because there was singing, your, you said there was music and your mother was somebody who would sing?

SS: My mother, yeah.

EA: The *shabbas* songs?

SS: Yes, she made *shabbas*, yes.

EA: Do you make *shabbas* now?

SS: No.

EA: Not at all.

SS: No. I also went away from it. But, [sighs] I'm lost. Oh yes...

EA: Your uncle, you were with your uncle, aunt and uncle.

SS: My aunt and uncle, yes, and my cousins. And we could not leave the house, because we didn't speak the language. For safety we were given three phrases to learn by heart, Polish phrases, in case anyone ever, by some accident we were discovered. And...

EA: Do you remember them?

SS: No.

EA: I bet you do if you think hard.

SS: Probably, yes.

EA: What were they? Do you know what they meant?

SS: I know what they meant. One meant if someone, we were, if someone said, "Where are you going?" I was to say where I'm going, "To my girlfriend's," or "my friend's." Although the thing is we never really left the house.

EA: Did it ever have to, did, what all right, "I'm going to my friend's." What else?

SS: That's all I remember.

EA: Did you have to use it at any time?

SS: No, no, because we never left the house.

EA: Because you didn't...

SS: Yes. And...

EA: How long for?

SS: How long were we there?

EA: Yes.

SS: Well, let's see, it was May, the end of May. In June, no, early July, my mother had been trying to get us on a *Kinder* transport.

EA: And, was that from Zbaszyn already?

SS: Oh...

EA: Oh, you mean from Krakow.

SS: [unclear] from Krakow.

EA: From Krakow.

SS: We had heard even in Zbaszyn about the *Kinder* transport. But she had to try again from Krakow because we were no longer in Zbaszyn, and if we were called, we

would not be able to answer. So she continued trying to get us on from Krakow. And finally we were told we were going. My mother took us to the train station, took us to Warsaw, where we, from where we went to a place called Otwock [Otwock is near Warsaw], which was near Gdynia, and where these children were naturally awaiting a ship to Eng--to go to England.

EA: From Warsaw?

SS: Yes. Well, she went with us as far as Warsaw.

EA: O.K. Oh...

SS: There she put us on a train...

EA: That's what I...

SS: To Otwock, where we were going to be met. I remember being on the train with lots of other children, in Warsaw, whose parents were also putting them on the train. And I remember some of the mothers grabbing their children back. They couldn't let them go. And part of me wanted my mother to come and drag us back as well. Part of me wanted to go into safety. And part of me was rather upset because she wasn't crying. I thought, "What is this?" And then as the train began to go, my mother turned, and I saw the tears coming down the side of her face. And I felt relief. She did care. Now why I thought she wouldn't I don't know, but you know, children have strange thoughts, and fears.

EA: Isn't that interesting.

SS: And there was something about being put on a train which makes one question. I, perhaps I didn't realize how close the war was, or, it really was, or how really necessary it was. But I never felt, so many of my friends have told me they felt they were going on an adventure. I did not.

EA: You did not.

SS: No. I was terribly aware of what was happening in Germany, and in Poland. I was aware of all this dreadful antisemitism. And I was aware of the danger we were in. I was age 11. I was, and long before. I seemed always to have been so terribly aware of the danger, and full of fear, terribly full of fear. And so I knew it was important to get away. However, my mother continuously told us that she would come too. She was making every effort to come, and that she was going to start learning English. I think this was all done to...

EA: Release your...

SS: To comfort us.

EA: But do you know that she didn't make, or do you know that she didn't make inquiries about getting out?

SS: For herself?

EA: Did any adults...

SS: Yeah.

EA: Did any adults have a chance to get out, Sylvia?

SS: There was, no. No. Not at that point. At least my mother didn't. She had no opportunity to get out.

EA: And you knew nobody in America?

SS: My, my...

EA: In England?

SS: In England, no. No one.

EA: Did you have relatives anywhere in the world?

SS: My mother had an aunt in America who would not help.

EA: She tried?

SS: She wrote to them continuously, in 1937, 1938. And this woman wrote back and said, "It doesn't go with speed."

EA: I beg your pardon?

SS: "*Es gait nit mit.*" It doesn't go with speed. This all takes time.

EA: And she took all the time you didn't have.

SS: Took too much time. We didn't make it.

EA: And how about your father's family? Did they have any relatives in the...

SS: I, we...

EA: Anywhere?

SS: Knew nothing. I don't think so. I don't believe so.

EA: And at that time adults were not allowed out.

SS: No.

EA: There was no way.

SS: No, one needed someone to bring you out.

EA: O.K.

SS: By that time it was too late.

EA: I think maybe for the children we need to get something in there, because there were definite immigration laws, were there not?

SS: Yes, yes. I think that with my father being missing, my mother dared not go anywhere.

EA: She had, she wanted to find him.

SS: Yes. Yes.

EA: And the other thing is that you were on the Polish quota.

SS: Yes.

EA: Every country had a quota for emigration.

SS: But we weren't in the Polish quota.

EA: Why not?

SS: We were illegally in Poland, in Krakow, you see.

EA: You had no passport of your own, did you.

SS: No, not in...

EA: What sort of papers did you have?



SS: Well, when I came to England I had a Certificate of Identity.  
EA: Proof?  
SS: That I, proof that I was a human being. That's all. Really no proof of...  
EA: Date of birth?  
SS: Yes. It did give my date of birth.  
EA: Did it have a place of birth?  
SS: Yes.  
EA: Who authorized that, or who wrote it out? Do you know?  
SS: I think it was written out when I arrived. No, it was written out by the refugee committee that got us to England.  
EA: Oh in these...  
SS: And that was made out at...  
EA: Certifi--in Krakow. That was only made out...  
SS: In Warsaw.  
EA: In Warsaw.  
SS: Yes. Where we...  
EA: In Warsaw.  
SS: Yes.  
EA: So, all the time that you were between Köln [Cologne] and Zbaszyn and so on, you had no papers whatsoever?  
SS: I didn't, no.  
EA: You had no identity, did you?  
SS: No identity at all. No. I didn't get an identity until many years later, in 1947, when I applied for American citizenship.  
EA: No, you got your first identity...  
SS: Five years later.  
EA: I guess...  
SS: It wasn't till 1951...  
EA: In...  
SS: When I became a citizen of the United States.  
EA: Isn't that interesting. But then you were very aware of what was going on.  
SS: Oh, I was more aware than any, than many of the friends that I had spoken to. I was really extremely aware, for such a small child.  
EA: So you were on the train with Ruth.  
SS: And we arrived at this place where we met some of the children that we knew in Zbaszyn, who had already from there been sent to this place, to this orphanage. It was an orphanage. It had been an orphanage. There were no orphans there. We were the only children there. And when the ship came in, to be, you know, to be loaded with these children, names were called. And in mid-July, the names, the list came. Everyone was terribly excited. There were, I don't know how many children were there, but more than

would fill a ship. And this was in July of 1939. It was getting quite late. And the roll call came. And of course it started with the A's, and since we began with B, it didn't take long before we heard Balbira, Ruth. And then it went on. And it went on. And it went on. And I said, "My God, what about me?" And she said, "I'm not going without you." And I said, "But you must go." And it was horrible. We were going to be parted, and I was going to remain there all alone. And I was terrified. And that's exactly what happened. My sister went.

EA: Oh, you're kidding!

SS: Yes. And I remained there. Yes. I wrote to my mother, and she wrote back, and assured me that...

EA: Where did you write? To your aunt's...

SS: Yes.

EA: And uncle's house?

SS: Yes. And of course there was correspondence between my mother and the two of us in this orphanage. I have the letters that she wrote, and I have letters written to my sister that since, in England. Ruth arrived in England in July of 1939 and went straight into a Wyberlie [a hostel].

EA: To what?

SS: A hostel, a...

EA: Hostile?

SS: A hostel, called Wyberlie.

EA: Wyberlie?

SS: Yeah, that was the name of it, and it was at Burgess Hill, in Sussex. And she corresponded there with my mother and with me. And my mother continued to write me at, from Krakow, to the orphanage in Poland, where I was. And she told me not to worry, that there would be more transports, and that I would eventually get on a ship. And July came and went, August started. And it wasn't until the 25th of August that the second roll call came, and my name was on it. And I thought...

EA: Oh my God.

SS: "Thank God I'm going and I will be with my sister soon." And, I went on the ship, which ended up the last one to leave, because it was, it left five days before they came marching into Poland. And on the 29th of August...

EA: Hitler marched into Poland on...

SS: On September 1st. I left on the 25th of August, five days before, six days, no, five days.

EA: Oh my God. And you went by boat?

SS: Yes. And I arrived in London on the 29th of August, which again was four days, or three days before the war started, four days, before the war broke out in England, which was the, you know, which started on the 3rd of September. And we were taken to a restaurant in London. [unclear].

EA: Oh, you were...  
SS: [unclear].  
EA: You arrived in Dover?  
SS: No, in London. We came straight to London.  
EA: You came...  
SS: Yes.  
EA: Straight to London?  
SS: They opened up the bridge, and we came into London.  
EA: How about that.  
SS: Yes. And...  
EA: Who met you there?  
SS: We were taken to a restaurant by a group.