

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SARAH SCHWIMMER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Gladys Bernstein
Date: April 22, 1985

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SS - Sarah Schwimmer¹ [interviewee]

GB - Gladys Bernstein [interviewer]

Date: April 22, 1985²

Tape one, side one:

GB: This is Gladys Bernstein. I'm here at the Civic Center in Philadelphia, at the American Gathering of the Jewish Holocaust Survivors. I am here with Sarah Schimmer...

SS: Schwimmer.

GB: Schwimmer, pardon me. And we are going to hear about her experiences during the Nazi Holocaust. Sarah, please tell me something about yourself, where you were born, where you spent your early childhood.

SS: Well, I was born in, in Irsava.

GB: And that is where?

SS: Czechoslovakia it's kind of a medium town, with a nice sized Jewish population. I am one of, I am a child of a family of, I had actually 14 more, 14 sisters and brothers.

GB: How, where did you come in the family? Were you the oldest? Were you the...

SS: I am the twelfth.

GB: Twelfth.

SS: Twelfth in the family.

GB: Of fourteen.

SS: Yeah. Fifteen.

GB: Fifteen.

SS: Yeah, because there were twins.

GB: Oh.

SS: And I had married sisters and brothers at home with their own family already. I was the...

GB: You all lived together in...

SS: In one place.

GB: In one place.

SS: Yes. I had two sisters at home where they had, each of them, one had two children the age of 12 and 10.

GB: How, how old are you now?

SS: I am now 59 years old.

¹née Weber.

²Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

GB: So in '33 you were how old?

SS: Twelve years old.

GB: You were twelve years old.

SS: No, in '33 I was only seven years old.

GB: Seven years old. What was your father's occupation?

SS: My father was a blacksmith. And we lived a very nice, happy family life.

My sisters were, they, since we are coming, I come from a big family, I had already married sisters. And their, and they had families already. So, and they made, they had businesses of their own. And we made a nice living.

GB: Were you an observant family? Were you...

SS: Yes, very, you know, as an average in those areas, in Czechoslovakia where there weren't any less observant or more observant. That was one road, everybody was on the same level, in religion.

GB: I see. Was there a local synagogue which you attended?

SS: A big, we had a big synagogue, and we had a little synagogue for people that they were Hasidim.

GB: I see. And...

SS: And we belonged to the big synagogue.

GB: And what was your religious education, your Jewish education?

SS: Well, the boys went to *yeshivah*; after they finished elementary school, the eighth grade, they were sent off to the *yeshivahs*. Girls, well, I didn't have a chance to go far enough because I was too young when the war broke out. But the girls were, tried, my parents tried to give the girls an occupation.

GB: How many girls were there?

SS: We were eight girls and seven brothers.

GB: What was your relationship with the non-Jewish community? Was there, were there many non-Jews in your community?

SS: Yes. We had, actually we were approximately only one-third of the population.

GB: Population. Did you yourself personally have any association with the non-Jewish people?

SS: Oh yes. We be--since my father was a blacksmith, and my sister was a beautician, we were constantly involved with the two religions, I mean the two interfaiths, because people were coming and going, and we had a very good relationship with our neighbors.

GB: What, did you go to the public school? What was your...

SS: Yes. I went to Czech schools. That was elementary school, until 1938 when the Czechs had to leave. The war broke out in 1938. The war broke out, and the Czechs had to leave. And then we were stopped from getting a proper education.

GB: I want to know a little bit more, before the war broke out. Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organization, any Zionist organization?

SS: No. My family was very religious, and actually we, the children were forbidden to belong to any of, any Zionist organizations. My sister, the one that was at the age of 20 at the time of 1934-35, she wanted to go on *aliyah*, to Israel. And my parents didn't let her go, because it was against, you know there, the, everybody was following the rabbi's advice. And if the rabbi said, "No, it's against the Law," so she couldn't go. But she was very much inclined to belong and to follow the Zionist movement.

GB: With the outbreak of the war in Europe, were you aware of what was happening around you? Well, did your family know anything about what was going on? Did you realize? And how was the war discussed in your household?

SS: Well, it was, until, the Germans did not occupy Austria. We weren't concerned about the war. We were going after our daily rou--our lives, and weren't concerned. But once the Germans occupied Austria, the news started spreading all over that there is war and there are hard times coming. But nobody was thinking that something like that could ever happen. We thought that we are natives! My grand, great grandfather, grandfather, and my parents were born in the same place. Nobody would have ever thought that something like that would, could ever happen.

GB: At any time did you or your father or your, any of your family other than, you mentioned your sister, think of leaving?

SS: Leaving where?

GB: Leaving Austria, leaving your, Czechoslovakia?

SS: Yes, yes. At the time, in 1936, my two older sisters left for Belgium, because that was when it started already to become difficult and my mother said, "Go children." She did not want to have all the children in one place.

GB: And did they leave?

SS: They left. They...

GB: They left.

SS: They left. So I had two chil--two sisters in Belgium, in Antwerp.

GB: How did the actual invasion of Czechoslovakia affect you and your family?

SS: Well, it was a very black day for everybody, although it was a kind of a very mixed up situation because we are at the place that it was kind of like a bouncing ball. The Russians were claiming that area, and the Hungarians were claiming that area. So, for weeks they were going like, you know, going on back who is gonna come in. After the Czechs left--the Czechs were driven out--and after that, it took about a week until, we didn't belong to anybody. And after a week the Ukrainians came in. And that's, then when hell started already. The Ukrainians had in mind to completely annihilate that area. They didn't want to have any Jews. But they didn't last long.

GB: Then the Germans took over?

SS: Then the Hungarians came in, and my parents, since my father was a Veteran of World War I, and he remembered the war, World War I, how it was during that time, they remembered still the King Joseph, Franz Joseph, that everybody lived so beautifully there. So, they were welcoming them with open arms. Everybody went out with class and everything and they were welcoming. But it turned out to be a disaster. As soon as the first Hungarian *gendarme* walked in into this village, they started pulling the beards and arresting the men. And it turned into hell. And everybody, I just, I would see my father, “What happened to those Hungarians? I remember Hungarians when I was a happy citizen.” And nobody could believe that something like that could happen. And as soon as the Hungarians walked in, and they started following the German rules.

GB: This was in 19-...

SS: That was in 19-...

GB: ‘40?

SS: 1938. No, 19-...

GB: ‘39?

SS: 1938, the beginning ‘39, yes, because it was in the spring, before Purim it was, 1939.

GB: And you were still in your home.

SS: I was still in my home, and I was only 12 years old at that time.

GB: What happened, how did you have to, how did it come about leaving your home? How did you leave your home?

SS: Times became difficult. They took away my father’s business, my sister’s business, my other sister’s business, my...

GB: You say one sister was a, had a beauty parlor?

SS: Beauty parlor. And my brother-in-law had a haberdashery store. My other sister had a, also kind of a, she was going on markets, you know, also selling clothing. They took away all these businesses, and we were a family, well, my parents still had at home four, five kids. My sister with four kids, the other sister with two kids, and there was no, nothing to live on. Since they closed down everything, and the rationing started. Jews were allowed only to take, stood in, stay in line for a piece of bread. And here you had little children, you had to feed them! So I was the one that had to get, go out at night [pause; tape off then on] to stand in line and bring home a piece of bread for the children, little bit milk. And that was going on for approximately a couple of months. And the reserves were drying up, whatever we had. And we had to live without because we, what ever was at home we had to give away and try to support the kids and to, for survival. And then my older sister and I said to my mother, “Listen, we cannot stay at home. Somebody has to bring in some money. Otherwise we’re gonna starve. We have to leave home. We’re going out to Hungary, to Budapest.” And so, the first day after Pesach we picked ourselves up, my sister and I, and we went off to Hungary. That was in 1940. And we worked. And my

sister was a beautician. That was the single one. And I was a seamstress. And we worked there.

GB: Where did you live? You, just the, that you and your sister were alone in...

SS: Alone, in Budapest. We tried, we got a bed at a fa--in a family, one family. We paid for that bed, and we slept in one bed and we were several people in a room, but each of us were renting a bed only.

GB: During this time your mother and the other children and your father were still in Czechoslovakia?

SS: Right. They remained at home. And we tried to send home money that they would be able to survive. But times, I guess got worse at home. And once I went home to visit--that was in 1942--for a holiday. I went home and somehow, they just got, they lived themselves, they were resigned for the way of living how it was coming. They didn't even care anymore. It was some kind of a living that you were looking out for every day just to survive. My brother-in-law was taken already, the two brother-in-laws were taken already to the camps.

GB: Work...

SS: To the working camps.

GB: Labor camps.

SS: The labor camps. And they were sent to Poland in the labor camps. And so my sister and the other...

GB: Do you know which labor camp?

SS: Well, I don't know, because...

GB: Did you ever see them again?

SS: Never again, because he got, they got, you know, when the time, somehow, whoever came home after that, they were burned alive in the barracks, in Poland. They got sick and they, when the Germans were retreating, they didn't left anybody behind. Just burned up the barracks. And nobody came home. They sent home the *tefillin* from my brother, to my sister.

GB: Did your, the rest of your family ever come to Budapest?

SS: No, only the two of us remained there.

GB: Did you ever see your, the family that remained home, again?

SS: After 1942, never again, no.

GB: Do you know where...

SS: My little brother came out, the younger brother, we brought up my younger brother to Budapest in 1943, to take him out from there, in case something happens, that at least somebody will survive. And so we picked him up, and he lived with us. We tried to teach him a trade there. We gave him to a place to learn, as a furrier. So he was young. He was only 12, 13, 12 years old. And the, we stayed there, and we, you know, at that time it was still normal life in Budapest. It wasn't so bad in 1942. And, so we sent home the money and my mother used to write letters and said, "Children, we don't know if we gonna see

you ever again. The times are getting worse, and the talk is here that we are not gonna stay here much longer.”

GB: How old were you when...

SS: I was, in 1942 I was 14 years old.

GB: You remained in Hungary, in Budapest until September of '44. What happened in September of '44?

SS: In between when the, we found out, in 1944, Pesach 1944, we found out...

GB: That was April of '4-...

SS: Yeah.

GB: April of '44.

SS: Yeah. We found out that our parents were taken away. And my little brother picked himself up, and he ran away. He went home. He went home, and he hardly reached home but he reached home last day before they were taken away, and he went with my parents. And they were taken away to Beregszáz [Hungarian 1938] in to the ghetto. And from Beregszáz the ghetto they were...

GB: Bereq...

SS: Beregszáz, Beregovo [Czech 1920], Beregovo. That's the next big town. Yeah. To the ghetto. And from there they were taken to, away to Auschwitz. So my mother, my father, my three little, young, two brothers and sisters, and my married two, two married sisters with their children, were taken away to Auschwitz. But we got a card in between, from some place, Schwarzwald. That was a sign. They thought that they're gonna send a card from some place that they will try to eliminate the pressure on the people on the outside that they are working some place, in a camp. But we found out that Schwarzwald was in Germany. And they were taken to Poland, in 1940, the beginning from 1944 we knew we didn't have any more any parents. That was the end of it. We knew already because the rumors were coming in and young children were running away from everywhere coming to Budapest. And we knew already that we lost our parents.

GB: And you continued to work and to go about your daily routine, knowing that this was...

SS: Yeah.

GB: Going on around you.

SS: That's right. We, but we did not have any choice, because to go home, we couldn't go. And that was the only way to survive. We were hoping maybe some of them, since there were young people, that they will survive.

GB: Did you hear or know of Wallenberg? Of course, we hear so much about him now.

SS: I was there, and my sister actually was at the Embassy.

GB: The Swedish Embassy.

SS: The Swedish Embassy. When I belonged to the underground...

GB: You were...

SS: My sister did not know that.
GB: Oh you were involved in the underground.
SS: I was, belonged, yeah...
GB: What was your...
SS: I was belonged to...
GB: What were you doing with the...
SS: I belonged to an organization called *Dror*. That's a Zionist organization, *Dror*. [*Dror* is a Zionist Youth Movement which planned resistance.]
GB: Oh you did?
SS: And when it started happening that the Germans started persecuting the Jews in Budapest, we started to organize the youth that it will somehow get a hold of each other, we would know where which one is, in case something comes up, we will...
GB: Like a lifeline...
SS: Right, that's right.
GB: From one to the other.
SS: Right. So, I belonged to that organization, and since I was, there was some kind of a little bit of an underground we shouldn't tell each other where, who are we and which are we, even my sister did not know about it. [tape off then on]
GB: You were I was asking about Wallenberg and you...
SS: Yes.
GB: Said you were, belonged to this organization.
SS: There were rumors by that time that young children could be saved and sent to Israel. And there were children that they were picked up, and sent to Romania. And from there, sent to Israel. If they ever reached Israel, I never found out. But there were. My two colleagues, two boys, I was in contact with my two colleagues, two boys their names were Moti and Betsalel. And we tried to be constantly in contact. It came to a point where we were driven into the ghetto. Once the Germans came in in September, we were driven, everybody had to go into the ghetto.
GB: In Budapest.
SS: In Budapest. And the ghetto wasn't easy, because you were hurled into one room so many people, and there were hours you were able only to go out to get some food. And during those hours, we had a chance to be in contact. The situation got worse, and they started taking away people from the ghetto. And they came...
GB: Did you know where they were going when they were being taken?
SS: They were saying that they were taking them to labor camps. So, we had to go into hiding. I took my sister in the burned out ghetto. And they were shooting over our heads. People lying in the streets in the double [unclear], streets, dead, wounded. They were shooting just like mad. It was like hell would have just broken down. And I said to my sister, "Listen, there's only one way to survive. You have some clients that are gentiles. Let me take you there. They love you. Let me take you there, and don't worry for me. I'll

survive somehow.” And she went. She consented. So, during the shooting I picked her up and I took her to that place, in the [unclear]. And she went in. They said, “Okay.” And I went into hiding. I was hiding under a roof. [tape off then on] Burned out airplanes.

GB: You were all alone?

SS: All alone. During the day I tried to get in contact with the two boys. If there could be any connection that we, where we can meet, and make some arrangement, what to do first. But it was impossible to get hold of them anymore. They went, put on Germans’ clothing, both of them, and volunteered to train there, [unclear]. [pause] And through that way they tried to get in contact with the organization, with the youngsters, through the organization. I couldn’t get hold of them. No food. No clothing. No water. No nothing. How long can you survive under troubles? Monday it was pouring, terribly pouring.

GB: This was in the spring? In...

SS: No, that was already in September.

GB: September, oh.

SS: It was pouring, and I came out from hiding to see if I can get some food. And I couldn’t get any food. I hadn’t got any money any more. I got into a desperate situation. I decided, “I will have to check out if my sister is not home, in the ghetto.” And as I was walking towards the ghetto, I didn’t have a star on me because I was in hiding. And if they would have asked me--I didn’t look like a Jewess, and my name is a German name--so it was easily for me to escape.

GB: Your name was...

SS: Is Weber.

GB: Weber. Was Weber.

SS: That’s right. But, as I was getting closer to the ghetto, a German came and just didn’t care who I was, picked me up, and hurled me into the truck, and took me into the ghetto. And I went in. And my sis--surely my sister returned from the hiding place.

GB: From the gentile family.

SS: That’s right. She said she couldn’t stand it there. She was uncomfortable. They were very afraid. They felt that they were gonna be persecuted. And she left. She came back to the ghetto. So I said, “Okay, if you’re not going anywhere, I’m not going anywhere. We have to stay together.”

GB: Your sister was younger?

SS: Older.

GB: Older.

SS: Yes.

GB: How much older?

SS: I would, she is six years older. But I was the daring one. And so, and the following day--that was on a Sunday--and the following day they came out and took us, everybody from the ghetto, into the horse racing stadium, everybody. There were thousands and thousands of youngsters, women, and children. And we were standing and my sister

next to me. And we were standing there and standing, and nobody knew what was going on for the whole day. It started to get dark already. Suddenly, they decided they have to just do something about it. And they went, and they just, well, they made a big commotion. They were shooting and they were running and they were screaming. A big commo--they made a big commotion, and they just cut off one part of the population in that stadium. And they went and they separated us, from, me from my sister. She was thrown in a different place. I was going to another place. And we were taken to the out skirts of Budapest. I was screaming, "Where are you? Where are you? [unclear] where are you?" It did not help. I didn't find her anymore. That was the end. Thank God she is alive.

GB: We'll get to that.

SS: Yes. And we came to that little village on the outskirts of Budapest. We were put into a school and the next day we were sad that we should give up everything what we have. All the jewelry, all the clothing. Because we're gonna go into a working camp and we're gonna get, we have to, we can't carry anything with us. And sure enough, everybody threw down everything what they had. And, we were taken out to make trenches.

GB: For the Germans?

SS: For, yes, because the Russians were already coming. We were, we heard already the shooting! From the Russian front, they were so near that you were, it was just like if it would have been a couple of miles away. And we had to make trenches. We were working there for approximately a week and one day--I have to tell it in honor of the *nebbech* [misfortune] of those two people that were so innocent--and just shot for no apparent reason. They took us out to make trenches, and one of the German Nazis was unhappy for apparent reason. And he came, and one girl, beautiful girl, tried to run away, and they caught her buying a toothbrush in a supermarket. And they brought her to the outskirts where we were making trenches, and they stripped her naked, and shot her in front of all of us. [weeping]

Tape one, side two:

SS: ...all the *tsuris* [trouble] that we had to go through later on. The next day they took a father, with a fa--mother, with a son, and other 10 men, and just picked up any reason to kill them. Picked them up, and they stood this young son, about fourteen years old, [weeping] and then this S.S. man, "You, you, you, you, come, and make the graves for these men. We want to have those graves in 10 minutes. If not, you're gonna go in." Well, I didn't have a choice. We had to work like horses. And, when the graves were finished, they didn't hesitate. They put up the father in the front, and the 10 men next to him, and then put the son in front of his father. He said, "You see, if you will try to run away, your fate is gonna be wind up where your father is." And they just shot him there, next to the trenches. And even didn't have a chance to cover them properly. They left them there, open, the grave. At night we had to, we went back to the barracks, and we never returned to that place anymore, because we were taken on a march to Germany.

GB: Oh you were in the, in that march?

SS: Yeah.

GB: The death march.

SS: Meanwhile, my sister went to the Swedish Embassy in Budapest. And she cried, "I have only one sister left! My mother, my father, my whole family is gone. Let me save her! Give me a passport for her! And let me save her!" She didn't want to budge from there. She said if she would have to die there, she would have not budged from there. The police were trampling with the horses over people, like it would have been some kind of a garbage. They didn't care who fell down, who was, just, nothing. But she said she did not want to move from there. She said she had to get a passport for me because she wouldn't be able to survive. She managed to get a passport for me, and from the Wallenberg Embassy, from the Swedish Embassy. And she said she is gonna send it out with a messenger. You know, you saw in the film, how he went to the border? That's how the passports came to the border. But, she remained in the Embassy, and they sent out. By the time the passport reached the border, the Hungarian/German border, I was over already on the other side in Germany. So that was what. Let's go back now to the march. From that little town, from the trenches, we were taken on the death march to Germany, up to the German border. We were marching forty, 50 miles a day, in the heat, and in the rain, no food, no clothing, no shelter. We were sleeping around on the edges of the streets, from town to town. And slowly, slowly, we were getting less and less, because who wouldn't, wasn't able to march, they just shot down. They left them in the gutters there. And that was going on for 10 days. No food, no nothing. When we came to the German border, and we, I forgot the name already. What is it? I don't know this.

GB: Hegyeshalom, I think.

SS: Hegyeshalom.

GB: That's in Germany? This is...

SS: No, that's the border...

GB: The border...

SS: Between...

GB: Between Hungary and... [between Hungary and Austria]

SS: Hungary and...

GB: Yeah.

SS: We were relieved, because we thought once we're gonna get to Germany, just let's finish with us. We can't take it anymore. Whatever will happen, just line us...

GB: Do it now.

SS: Line us up, please, and just get over with it.

GB: You lost all...

SS: We lost all the hope. We, there was no hope anymore for anything. We knew, the majority of us were youngsters, that were, our parents were not alive anymore.

GB: Did you ever, you mentioned the two young friends, boys.

SS: Yeah.

GB: Did you ever...

SS: I'll come to that.

GB: Oh, okay, good.

SS: I'll come to that. Let me stop here, getting [tape off then on]...

GB: You got to the German border?

SS: Border, and we were stationed into trains to take into Germany, into camps. Meanwhile, before my sister went to the Swedish Embassy, when she came back to the ghetto, those two friends came to the ghetto in German uniform, and made a big commotion in the house, "Everybody out! Everybody out! Out!" But my sister did not know that these are Jewish...

GB: These were friends.

SS: Jewish boys and that they are the friends, my friends. And they walked in into the apartment to my sister and caught her like this, "Where is your sister?" Of course, there were other Germans next to them. And she says, "I don't know where my sister is. She left. She, we were separated. And I don't know if she probably is in Germany already! I don't know where she is, if she is alive altogether!" And Moti says to her, "*Ich zick Suri!*" [I am looking for Sarah.] Then she looked at them and she says, "Oh my God, why couldn't you come one day earlier?" [weeping] "She is already over the border." So they picked themselves up and left the house. And she never saw them again. A day before the liberation, they found out they were Jews, and they were hung on the [unclear], on trees, [crying] the two of them next to each other. [tape off then on] Twenty years old. [crying; tape off then on] From that ordeal, from Hegyeshalom we were taken by trains. That was already a paradise. We got a little bit of food, and we were sitting. We weren't any more able to stand up on our feet, after marching 10 days, no food, no nothing. So, actually, only a third of us reached that point. And we reached Ravensbrück. No, we first came to

Buchenwald, standing a day in Buchenwald. [tape off then on] A girl from hometown, she was much older, I was a youngster. She was, she could have been my mother, a much older girl, but she was still a girl, Kadush Argi [phonetic] Kadush Argi I think she was, her name was [tape off then on]--me she says, "Sophie, did you see your father!?" [weeping] I said to her, "What do you mean, my father?" She says, "I spoke to him! I saw him here! Your brother-in-law is here. Your brother is here! Your father is here!" [tape off then on]. How come they didn't make a grave [unclear]. She said, "Well, your father doesn't look good. You would have never recognized him. And your brother Mazl [phonetic] didn't have any glasses anymore. And they changed. [crying] And I couldn't forgive myself. At least I would have seen them one more time. The following day we were taken further, and we went to Ravensbrück.

GB: Ravensburg. Brook. Ravensbrück?

SS: Yeah. When we got there, we were taken into a big *zelt* [tent], like a shed made from material. We were hurled into a...

GB: Like a tent?

SS: Tent, yeah, a tent we were hurled. The mud was up to the knees, and no lodging, no nothing. And they kept there, in that tent, for three days, before they were able to give us barracks. And nobody was able to get to us because they didn't want to have, that we should have contact...

GB: Contact with anybody.

SS: With inside that they wouldn't find out what was going on the outside.

GB: About what was going on.

SS: But we went through that. So, once we came through the selection there, somehow, I don't know what their purpose was, but we were three girls--Erika, Ilsa and I--from the whole transport we came from Budapest. We were the three girls that they left our hair. We were all, had all long hair, long. It was pitch black like a tiger, the other one was brunette, and I was a blonde. We, the three of us had long hair, and they, we didn't understand why they were shaving all the whole transport, and we were the three of us left with the hair. So I said to my girlfriends, I said, "Listen, we have to get hold of scissors. Because it's not gonna be good if they have some, if they left us with our long hair, there must be a purpose for it." So, we managed to get kerchiefs, and tie it around the head, and for the first piece of bread I managed to get a pair of scissors from a inmate, and we cut off our hair, that we wouldn't be, seem different...

GB: Different.

SS: Than the rest of them. Because we knew that Mengele is supposed to come into the camp the following week. And we were only 16 years old at that time, young, energetic. And this, I said, "Why would they suddenly choose the black hair, the long hair, and a brunette, and a blonde?" So we cut off our hair, and we were, there, it wasn't, you know, we weren't working. And the three of us tried to manage. We were working in the coal...

GB: Mines?

SS: No, it's not a mine. It's a, it was a storage. We had to work, to load the coal on the ships that they would go to the destination on the, from that, from this side of the lake to the other side of the lake. And vegetables. They had those big warehouses underground. And that's what we were loading. We were loading about approximately 20 to 30 trucks of material a day, the three girls of us. People were bringing the stuff, and we were hurling on the trucks. And then it was taken down to the ship, and there it was emptied into the ships. But, we were grateful that, for that at least, because you got already a little bit of warm food, a potato or something, once a day. So we didn't care, but we were resigned already. We couldn't care anymore anything. We were so down already. We couldn't, and the worst comes, the worst was that the inmates. You know, they tried to break you so much, even if you had a little bit of spirit, they tried very hard to break it down. "You won't survive! You better give up right now! Because there is no way we will ever leave this camp ever again!" With such words they came.

GB: That's what they would tell you?

SS: Yeah.

GB: Was there any...

SS: We were 20...

GB: Spirit...

SS: Thousand women in that only camp, that, next to it was the Siemens. That was another 20,000 women! In my section where I was, that was a section they were coming and going. And Mengele used to come and just take out whoever he wanted, and ship out wherever he wanted. And next to it was a camp for women. They were stationed there, and they were working in the Siemens factories. But, so, you just, you know, for some, we said, "Whatever will happen will happen. There is no way out."

GB: Did you have any idea what was happening at that point as far as the war was concerned? Did you have, did any word come in about the Allied forces?

SS: In December came the last transports from Budapest. And they said, "We were taken out from under the nose of the Russians." The Allies were closing in in Budapest. No, the Russians, were closing in. And they were still taken out and brought to Germany. And that was the last thing we ever heard. That was the end of it. There was one girl, I guess she was fed up. I don't know, she must have been in that camp, concentration camp for quite a while. But I guess she lost control over herself, and she got berserk and she started running out. And as she was running towards the fence, they finished her off. But there were many things like that. But the misery in those barracks. Every day you were stepping over dead bodies, from the hunger. And you were lying next to your mate, in the morning you tried to shake her, shake her, and there was nobody to answer anymore. Each day was less and less and less.

GB: How were you personally able to keep your spirits up, keep your...

SS: By working. I would have gone mad. I said, "I have to work, because I wouldn't be able to survive anymore." Just working. I was working. I didn't think what how much work and how heavy the work was. Just working, working, and working.

GB: Tell me about, how were you liberated?

SS: Well, from there...

GB: From...

SS: But, bef--between, in...

GB: Ravensbrück.

SS: Ravensbrück we stayed until January. On Christmas evening, we, every day you know we were taken out for a count. And Mengele used to come in the morning, "You, you, you, you, you, come with me." And we knew some of them, the younger ones, they were sent into a different place. The good, in good shape, the youngsters, were taken to a working place. But it came Christmas night, and they, the Germans got mad and they took out all the Jews, and all the Gypsies, and let us stand for 48 hours, not dressed, not food, and nothing, outside. And they were singing, and they were dancing, and celebrating Christmas. After Christmas, they took the Gypsy *Lager* [camp] was emptied completely. That was the end of the Gypsies. Mengele came again. That was January 3rd or something. And he came and he selected the youngsters. And we were taken away. I got so sick in those box wagons. I never thought I'm gonna be able to make it anymore. Absolutely not. I got sick, and I stopped eating. And I just, I guess I was emotionally completely down. There was nothing that would hold in me anything. We were like this for two weeks in those box trains.

GB: Boxcars.

SS: Yeah, boxcars, were for two weeks. And, we came to Burgau. That was a tiny little camp, very little camp. There were, most likely were not more than 500 women in that camp. They didn't have time any more to arrange any working place of anything. But when we got out there, somehow my little girlfriend, Ettel, started pushing me, "Suri, you better start getting to yourself. I don't want to lose you. I need you!" She was younger than I was. "I need you! I won't make it without you!" And she started pushing, opening my mouth, with force, and trying to give a little bit of water in my mouth that I would not dehydrate completely, after 10 days of no food and nothing. But, when we got to Burgau, we didn't do anything there, so we sat in the sun all of us. And I guess the sun slowly, slowly brought out, the warmth brought out a little life in ourselves. We didn't stay there long, because the allies were coming already. Then we heard, the first time, that they are evacuating the camps wherever the allies are coming...

GB: Coming through.

SS: Forward, heading towards deeper to Bayern [Bavaria]. And on a nice day, after about three weeks in that camp, we were again taken to the boxcars and we were hurled into the boxcars and taken to a third camp. And that was Türkheim.

GB: Türkheim.

SS: Yeah. That was Türkheim. We got to Türkheim. There it was not much time, but there we went out to work on construction. We had to *schlepp* big blocks, cement.

GB: Builders?

SS: Builders. They were building some houses for the OTE or something. I don't know. Again, the o--well I have, I never was able to figure out what they...

GB: Was it just busy work? Did they...

SS: Busy...

GB: It was busy work?

SS: Yeah, no, but I wasn't able to figure out for whom they were working, what...

GB: Well that's what they were just giving you something to do?

SS: Yeah, what the OTE, this O-T-E was [possibly Organisation Todt Einsatzkommando – forced labor construction enterprise]. There was some kind of initials for that.

GB: Oh.

SS: For that organization. I have no idea, never to, well, was able to find out. And there we stayed, our barracks, I still have some place a picture, underground. Only the roof...

GB: Was on top of the ground. Everything...

SS: Was on top of the ground. And inside, in the ground, was a trench, and then on both sides was the soil was piled up, and there where you slept.

GB: You slept on the ground?

SS: Yeah, on the ground, you know, where we will be able to go through. And on the side, and on two sides, the barrack was as big as the, this, well...

GB: About eight feet.

SS: Eight feet, yeah, about eight feet. And there we lived. But there were already men on the other side of that camp. And we tried to figure out what do they know. We came to this camp, we don't know what's going on. We was left so little. "What is going on? Maybe you heard of something." That was, that's in the Bayern. So, one of them said, "Listen, just try to do your work. There is no point of getting into trouble, because here they don't play any jokes. They just, if you don't obey, take you straight into the forest and you never see anybody again." So, we were trying to obey but thank God, there we survived, and on April 27th was already gone. Was already, we were there. The April 24th they started to evacuate the camp again, because the German, the allies were coming closer.

GB: Did you hear any guns? Did you hear any...

SS: No, no, nothing. Nothing at all. And in between I just said, "You thought that the Germans didn't know." We were taken into town to bring food for the S.S.

GB: Yeah?

SS: And you want to tell me that they did not know that we were KZ'lers [concentration camp inmates]? They saw us in our striped clothing. They saw us in the

streets that an S.S. is walking with us, and guarding dogs are walking with us! We weren't able to move. We were there only to do the labor. You want to tell me that they did not know that we were prisoners there? They did not want to know. They did not want to even, they looked away. They turned their heads because they didn't want to see us. On April 24th, in the morning, they decided they have to evacuate the camp again. And everybody had to go out. And they were taking us. And I was working in the kitchen at that time. And I looked at their faces. They was already practically, fathers, on the ground. There was one father with a son there, so he left his father because he couldn't go anymore. He was completely emaciated. There were times that fathers took away a piece of bread from [weeping] their children what was opposite way, because they couldn't control their hunger anymore. There were times when they were biting the flesh of the dead people! [crying]

GB: I'm sure.

SS: Because they couldn't control their hunger anymore. They didn't know that they can survive any more even if they had that food, because that was already poison. It didn't take long then they were gone, too. [tape off then on] just couldn't think like a human being. We were just like a wolf. You didn't know what to do with yourself. There was no dignity anymore. There was nothing left in us anymore. [crying; pause; tape off then on]--away on the 24th to a place. And I remained in the camp because we were to be taken the last ones, the group that worked in the kitchen had to go with the kitchen. And we heard that the allies bombed the train not far away. And nobody survived there. So we, at that night, we ran into the forest. We were about 15, 20 people, running to the forest. And we hid among the brushes in case the Germans come, shooting, in the forest. So we said, "Listen, it's better than to be shot on sight. Whatever will happen will happen." Then we heard at night the shooting and the bombing. And we stayed in the forest for two days. The third day it became quiet. And one of the boys said, "You know some thing, let's go to the outskirts of the forest, because it seems to be very quiet. We'll see what's going on in the camp." And he came running back and said, "Let's go out! Let's go out! I saw an American tank in the camp! We were, we are liberated!" And that was the 28th of April. We were liberated by a black regiment completely black. And we were scared of them to tell, we didn't know, we never saw a black person before. They were giants! All of them were giants! We said, "My goodness! What kind of a people are these?" Until the captain came.

GB: Was the captain also black?

SS: No. The captain was...

GB: Was white.

SS: The captain came, and he said, "Don't be scared. I'm the captain of the regiment, and this is my regiment. You can come out. And let me give you some food." And so we came out, and we stayed in the barracks about a week. And then we were taken back to Czechoslovakia. And then...

GB: You went back to Czechoslovakia?

SS: Right. And then only the ordeal started. Going back to Czechoslovakia, I have to tell that, because I don't want to, I don't want anybody to think that there are not decent people. We came to Czechoslovakia, to Prague. Walking down on the street are Russian soldiers, a captain. We were talking *mama loshn* [Yiddish for mother tongue]. So he heard us talking *mama loshn* and he came over. He said, "*Kinderlah* [children], are you Jewish?"

GB: The Russian soldier.

SS: Yeah. He was a captain. You know, you can see tall, blonde. "Are you Jewish?" So we says, "Yes." "Where are you coming from?" So we said, "We've just come from Germany. We're going home." "Where are you going home?" So we said, "We've come from the Carpathians. We're going home." So he says, "*Kinderlah*, don't go home. Go wherever your eyes carry you. Don't go home!" So he says, "Why are you going home? Do you have anybody in, at home?" He says, "You don't have anybody at home. If I would be able to leave my family, I would never go back to Russia." And that started us on the road to Israel. We were walking through Europe, at night, from the Russians, from Budapest. The Russians, to the French, from the French to the English, from the English to the Americans and back to the English, until we reached Marseilles. And from there we went *Aliyah Bet* [illegal immigration to Palestine during British Mandate].

GB: So you were able to...

SS: Walking.

GB: Get in.

SS: Yeah.

GB: Walking?

SS: Walking!

GB: Walking?

SS: Walking whole Europe! Walking.

GB: Walking. How did you...

SS: [unclear]...

GB: Feed yourself? How did you clothe yourself?

SS: Well, at that time, at that point already, there were camps established, DP camps. So, we were able to get in and get a meal. And then we started to group ourselves. So we were actually about, our group was about 15 people and we were trying to get to a point where we're gonna belong to an organization that we would be able to go to Israel. And then, when we reached Bregenz, in Austria, from there we decided we have to belong to an organization.

GB: So what organization did you...

SS: And we chose, we were from home religious, so we belonged to *B'nai Akivah*. And so we made our way slowly, slowly, belonged to a *kibbutz* here and a *kibbutz* there. I have pictures where we were, everywhere, and during, after the war, until we reached Marseilles. And in Marseilles we went, I got so sick that I went down to 38 kilo.

GB: A skeleton.
SS: A skeleton. They didn't want to take me *Aliyah Bet*. But, the family said,
"If..."
GB: Wait, tell me about your sister.
SS: Yeah, she went to the Embassy and she said she is not leaving.
GB: Yeah?
SS: No way. And before, the time came that the Jews had to, were not able to
go in the streets because there was, let's say if-

Tape two, side one:

GB: Talking about your sister...

SS: She went back to the Embassy. And they were pushing and shoving, as I said before, the police on the mountain, the mounted horses...

GB: Right.

SS: The horses were trampling over people. They didn't care. "You have to leave! You have to leave!" And time came that they had to leave because it was the time they weren't able to be in the city. Whoever was in the city, the Germans shot dead! They didn't care. You're in the street, that's it. That's your fate. So, she said she doesn't care anymore. She's not budging from that gate. And they were screaming and crying, "Let us in! Let us in!" And apparently, it must have been Wallenberg, because I wasn't there, and, it must have been him, that he opened the gates, and then a stream of people just ran into the gardens. And there's where she stayed until the war was ended. I met her in Budapest.

GB: When you went back after you were liberated.

SS: Back, that's right. I met her in Budapest, because, oh, when I got to Budapest, first thing, I went where we lived during the ghetto. And I asked around, and they saw my sister. So, since she wasn't deported, so they saw her coming and going after the Russians came in. So they told me that supposedly she is in a, some kind of a organization or club. And I went looking for her, and I found her there.

GB: But she's still in...

SS: Well, she is in Israel.

GB: Oh, she is in Israel.

SS: She is in Israel. And then my, from my whole family, seven of us returned. The two sisters from Belgium, she, my sister was hidden in Switzerland with the two children. They are also survivors, my niece and nephew, because they were in, what's it called [unclear] [tape off then on].

GB: They were hidden in a convent.

SS: That's right. And my they took away my brother-in-law to camp, from Belgium. She went back for her children into the convent, and she smuggled herself out to Switzerland. And she was in a camp in Switzerland with her two children. So she came back. My single, my other sister from Belgium came back. The third one never returned and her husband, with the child, from Belgium. My brother from France was in Auschwitz and in Birkenau, was approximately a year in a bunker, in a what is it called, in a for punishment. Oh, he went through a lot. But he came back, thank God. And my little brother that went away from Budapest...

GB: That ran away?

SS: He came back, and the two brothers that they were in the labor camps in Yugoslavia, in, what is it called?

GB: In the army?

SS: No, no, Yugoslavia, in the working, they came back. So we met in Budapest, and from there we made our way. We never returned home. We made our way to Israel.

GB: And how long were you in Israel?

SS: Thirteen years.

GB: Thirteen years. And, how did you meet your husband?

SS: I knew my husband in concentration camp.

GB: Oh, you did.

SS: I saw him, I--he knew me. I did not know him. And, after the war, at the time of liberation, when we came out, when the Americans liberated us, he came out from the forest, too, and we stayed in the same place. And that's how we...

GB: And you went to Israel together.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

GB: And your family.

SS: And I got married in Graz.

GB: In Graz.

SS: Graz, and I have two children, give birth to the children in Israel, two daughters.

GB: And they are...

SS: And they are?

GB: They are here with you? Or...

SS: Yes, they are here. One is a...

GB: In Brooklyn.

SS: Both of them are married. One has four children, and is a teacher. The other one is a social worker.

GB: And you were able to renew your life?

SS: You have to.

GB: Start all over again.

SS: You have to. Because otherwise, it would have just broken. But, there are plenty of times, it took me, a matter of fact I had even a nervous breakdown during the time. I was very sick, and here already in America, in 1945 I had a nervous breakdown. It was piling up. And I couldn't cope with it, and I couldn't talk to anybody. But, thank God, I got out of it. And we managed to establish a nice family, and I have lovely two children and grandchildren and I'm living for them, that's all. I--today, nothing makes me happy, nothing in the world makes me happy, as long as I see my children and grandchildren and they are happy. I couldn't, materialistic, nothing is important to me, nothing. I don't care for anything, but I said, "Children," but I--that's what I managed to tell them, "Remember children, you should remember one thing, you come from a very rich, Jewish background, and a very big family. And practically half of us were wiped out. But you should remember, never, never permit yourself to get to the same stage as we were. You should learn to fight, if anything, die with your head up, but never slaughtered like sheep." [End of interview]