HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

GENIA GOLOMBEK

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Nora Levin
Date: August 24, 1981

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GG - Genia Golombek [interviewee]
NL - Nora Levin [interviewer]
UI - Unidentified Individual
Date: August 24, 1981

Tape one, side one:

NL: We are interviewing Mrs. Genia Golombek, G-O-L-O-M-B-E-K, called in America, Jennie Golombek, August 24, 1981. This is Nora Levin interviewing. Mrs. Golombek, please tell me where you were born and when and a little about your family.

GG: I was born January 17, 1923, in Lodz, Poland. I had...

NL: Your family?

GG: Mother.

NL: Mother and father.

GG: Father and two younger brothers.

NL: And what were their names please?

GG: Abram and Simcha.

NL: They were younger than you?

GG: Yeah, I was the oldest one of the three.

NL: You were the oldest one of the three children. And what was father's name?

GG: Hersch.

NL: Hersch?

GG: Hersch Yitzhaak.

NL: And mother's name?

GG: Bluma. And my maiden name was Fieman.

NL: Fieman, F-I-E-M-A-N?

GG: Yes, we spelled it with a "J" but here you have to spell it with an "I" to make it...

NL: Fieman.

GG: Fieman. F-I-E-M-A-N.

NL: And what was your father's work, his occupation?

GG: We were in business--wood, burning wood for factories and bakeries.

NL: I didn't hear, I'm sorry.

GG: Wood, baking wood, burning wood.

NL: Burning wood...

GG: We were selling for bakeries and factories.

NL: Oh, for heating purposes?

GG: Not so much heating, like industrial.

NL: But for heating to make, to create heat.

GG: Yeah to...

NL: To create heat for the bakers and other industrial or commercial purposes?

GG: Yes.

NL: I've never heard of that.

GG: In Polish it was *drzewo opalowe*.

NL: I see and it was a fairly common occupation?

GG: Yeah.

NL: Jews were permitted to follow it, or did you have to get special permission?

GG: No, it started with my grandfather.

NL: I see.

GG: And my father was with his grandfather and two other brothers. It was like a corporation.

NL: A family business?

GG: Yeah.

NL: And where did they get the wood?

GG: My father was the traveler. He used to go, like to the east part of Poland that was mostly wooded areas...

NL: I see.

GG: And the people that had big estates would sell it to him. But then in 1935, '36, I would say, the Poles said that no one should sell directly to a Jew.

NL: To sell the wood, the lumber...

GG: The lumber.

NL: So did that disturb your father's business or did he have enough business?

GG: It disturbed because there is some that still sold it.

NL: Some Poles.

GG: Some Poles did, but not many.

NL: I see.

GG: And they open like an agency. It was in Polish, *Polska Agencja Drzewo*. It's Polish Agency of Wood.

NL: Of wood?

GG: And we had to buy through the agency and they delivered it to us. We had, like a place what we called wood [unclear] to come with place.

NL: And you had to register this in a non-Jewish name?

GG: No, it remained in our name.

NL: In your name.

GG: But we had to pay a percentage to the agency, so the profits were not already the same as my father would go and buy directly from the men which had the estates.

NL: The agency wasn't...

GG: A Polish agency.
NL: It was a Polish agency, I see.
GG: "P" was Polish [*Polska Agencja*]. A Polish Agency.
NL: So his income then suffered?
GG: Suffered and then we were started picketing.
NL: Picketing?
GG: Done by a Jew.
NL: This is in the middle 30's or a little later?
GG: Yes, it was like '35, '36, by the time I started my high school years.
NL: But up until that time you were fairly comfortable?
GG: Yes.
NL: Say middle class?
GG: Yes, middle class.
NL: And did mother help in the business?
GG: No, my mother never worked.
NL: No, and the children, I suppose, went to school?
GG: We all went to private schools.
NL: To a private school?
GG: Yes.
NL: Now, this was a Polish private school or a Jewish private school?
GG: Jewish private schools.
NL: Jewish private school?
GG: Jewish private schools.
NL: And they were organized by private philanthropists or...
GG: No, it was private.
NL: Private individuals?
GG: Private, we had to pay tuition just like we go here to college and you have to pay tuition quarterly or monthly, whichever way it was but it was completely private. It was not supported by nobody.
NL: And no Jewish organization contributed to the support?
GG: No.
NL: These were run by private individuals, private Jews?
GG: Yes, whoever you pay your tuition it had to support the school.
NL: And was your school a fairly large one?
GG: Yes. In Lodz we had five high schools just for girls.
NL: Five high schools just for girls?
GG: Jewish high schools just for girls.
NL: Wow. Just for girls.
GG: One had the main language as a Hebrew language. The others taught Hebrew as a side language.

NL: I see.

GG: And they were expensive but Lodz was a very big city and it had its share of wealthy Jews, and even you were not wealthy, at that time, you know, parents tried to give its children an education just like you try here.

NL: It's interesting that your parents wanted you, a girl, to have a good education. That wasn't always...

GG: I was a good student.

NL: Yes.

GG: And my father felt when he was in business that he missed his education because he was taught when the Russians were--you know Poland was occupied by the Russians. When Poland became a country, the Polish--he missed the Polish language, and my grandfather was a very fanatical Jew. A very religious--he did not believe in schooling children besides, the *Chumash* and the other...

NL: The *Talmud*.

GG: The *Talmud*, yes.

NL: Yes, but your father was...

GG: But my father was very religious. But he always said, "What's to God is to God and what's to people is to people." And being that I was very good in school, he would say--we had hard times just before the war--he said he would not eat or drink, but he would send me to school. His ambition was I should even go to college because I was good in languages. He said, "When you finish high school we will send you to America," because my mother had two brothers here.

NL: I see.

GG: That I should go and continue and learn languages. He was very much for education. He was a very well read man. Whatever education he had, he taught himself by reading a lot.

NL: So he read in Russian?

GG: Russian and Jewish.

NL: And Hebrew.

GG: And Jewish.

NL: And Yiddish.

GG: Yiddish not Hebrew. He could study the Russian and everything but I don't think he would speak Hebrew well enough to read the books, but Jewish and...

NL: Yiddish, he knew.

GG: …Yiddish.

NL: And so you went to high school until what year?

GG: Until the war broke out.

NL: And what grade was that? What year?

GG: I finished four years of high school.

NL: Four years?

GG: Yes.

NL: And you were then how old?

GG: 16.

NL: 16. So did you get a certificate, Mrs. Golombek?

GG: I got the certificate, but it was left in the ghetto.

NL: So you actually finished high school?

GG: I had two more years.

NL: Oh, it was a six year.

GG: We had six years.

NL: A six year high school, I see. But this was probably easily equivalent of an American high school education? A *Gymnasium*?

GG: A *Gymnasium*, yeah, but usually you had to--we used to call it after four years a little diploma, after six years a big diploma.

NL: I see.

GG: Because the last two years, we did not have the choice like you have here, your majors. This were the majors and you had to take them. But the last two years you could pick the majors in respect you want to major in mathematics, or you want to major in history and languages.

NL: I see, I see.

GG: But the last two years...

NL: You had that choice?

GG: Choice, but not 'til the last two years.

NL: Up until then everything was required.

GG: Yeah.

NL: And so you studied all of the regular subjects plus Hebrew...

GG: Hebrew, English and Latin.

NL: Hebrew, English and Latin. And the language of instruction was?

GG: Polish.

NL: Polish, so you really had mastered four languages?

GG: Yes.

NL: Amazing, and your brothers also went to private schools?

GG: They went to different private schools. They went to school that was teaching the Jewish religion, the *Talmud*, and the...

NL: Regular subjects?

GG: Regular subjects, and this school could give you the diploma too.

NL: It was accredited.

GG: To give a diploma.

NL: And how…?

GG: You see, like I went, the first six years I went to public school because my father felt that I don't have to have a...

NL: Special...

GG: …education, like a boy even though I have a private teacher, but I had always learned Hebrew and Jewish.

NL: When you were younger?

GG: Yeah, at home. We had a *rebbe*.

NL: I see.

GG: Because Jewish and to *daven* it was a daily thing which you had to know.

NL: Yes, it's part of your life.

GG: It was part of your life, religion was part of your life.

NL: So this elementary school was a Polish State school. No?

GG: It was, but we did not go on *Shabbos* to school.

NL: But it was set up by the government?

GG: Yes.

NL: Or by the Jewish *kehillah?*

GG: No, by the government.

NL: But you didn't have to go on Saturdays. You were excused?

GG: Yes.

NL: And then after six years you transferred to a private school.

GG: If you did not go to high school you had to finish seven grades. But if you went to high school, you had enough sixth grade and then you pass an exam and you went into high school, the *Gymnasium*.

NL: And then you went to private school?

GG: I went to the private school.

NL: Now you talked about antisemitism in the middle 30's. Were you aware or was your family aware of considerable antisemitism before that time Mrs. Golombek?

GG: Before that time I really don't remember very much. I was going to school, mostly with Jewish girls.

NL: With Jewish girls.

GG: And as kids, kids really don't know antisemitism. They don't know prejudice, it's not just antisemitism, 'til they outgrow all that and they hear it.

NL: But your parents didn't seem to suffer in their economic or social life. Did they have any Polish friends?

GG: Not Polish friends but we had a Polish maid.

NL: A Polish maid, and she was affectionate and loyal?

GG: She was very good. She was good. She even told me to say all the *brokhes* [blessings]. She always worked for the Jews and she knew all the *brokhes.*

NL: Yes. [unclear].

GG: War broke out and we could not afford anymore a woman and we went into the ghetto. She was willing to come with us.

NL: Oh my, oh my.

GG: Because she raised us.

NL: She was very loyal. Lodz obviously had a very intense Jewish life?

GG: Intense Jewish life. It was I think over 200,000 Jews in Lodz.

NL: Yes, a very large Jewish center.

GG: In the ghetto I think it was more than 100,000. [phone ring]

NL: Let's stop this for a moment. [Machine off then on.]

NL: And so did you have, did your parents have any contact with the *kehillah*, the Jewish community body, or was your father active in it or was his...?

GG: I don't think he was active. He was mostly he was traveling all week. He used to go away Sunday--Sunday night and come home Friday morning because he had to be *Shabbos* home.

NL: I see.

GG: I don't know my mother was active, I really don't know.

NL: Yes, you were busy with your own life.

GG: I don't remember that.

NL: Did you come in contact with any Zionist movement at all in the high school?

GG: No, when I...

NL: No?

GG: When I went to school, I mean...

NL: You concentrated on your studies.

GG: I concentrated on my studies and I had to do my homework and 9:00 you had to be in the home. Because if a teacher saw you after 9:00, they'd raise hell with you in the school the next day.

NL: Is that so?

GG: It was different times.

NL: A very disciplined life.

GG: Life, and so I was not involved in any organizations.

NL: And then in the middle 30's there was perceptible increase in antisemitism and your father's business changed?

GG: Maybe it was before.

NL: But you weren't so aware of it?

GG: I was not aware of it until then because I remember it was hard for them to send me to a private school at that time.

NL: But they did.

GG: But they did, and it was mostly my father's doing.

NL: It's most interesting. And so this way of life continued until the war broke out?

GG: War broke out in 1939.

NL: Did you have any idea from what your parents might have been talking about that Germany would attack Poland?

GG: No, as a matter of fact, every summer we used to go into the country for the summer months. In 1939, when we were coming back, we saw a soldier [unclear].

NL: Polish?

GG: Polish soldiers digging ditches and we saw movement, but we did not know. We heard in 1938 that Hitler invaded Austria. What we were doing--but it was so hard to believe that we really did not know.

NL: What was happening?

GG: And then...

NL: Did you have any relatives in Western Europe?

GG: No.

NL: Or friends who wrote to your parents?

GG: No.

NL: Did your parents hear from--was it your father's brothers who were in America?

GG: My mother's brother.

NL: Your mother's brothers.

GG: Yes, they were in contact.

NL: Up until?

GG: Up to the war?

NL: Up until the time of the war?

GG: War, yes.

NL: Was there any thought on the part of your parents to leave Poland?

GG: My mother could have left Poland but the whole family was there.

NL: She had other brothers and sisters then?

GG: Yes, my mother came from a family of ten. She had four brothers, two are still in Poland, and six sisters.

NL: All in Poland, 8 brothers and sisters still...

GG: In Poland, yes, and each of them had children, and my mother wasn't oldest. She had older brothers and sisters. And they were married and with children and they had already children, and there are not many left.

NL: Were her parents also living at this time, Mrs. Golombek?

GG: No, my mother's parents died when I was very young. I remember them well because when I was young, we lived in my maternal grandfather's, in his building. He owned a building, an apartment building. And then we moved to another house closer to the business that he had. But my grandmother, I remember slightly and I know she died, I think, of a heart attack. And then my grandfather died. But I remember them, because when you live with grandparents, you remember the things they did for you.

NL: And Father also had a large family in Poland?

GG: My father came of children of nine. He had brothers and sisters. There were five brothers and four sisters.

NL: And all of them were in Europe?

GG: One of the brothers left Poland for Israel, before the war--not before the war, before I was born. I never knew him.

NL: And he remained in Israel? In Palestine, Israel?

GG: In Israel--Palestine, at that time, yes.

NL: But the others were in Poland?

GG: Yeah, and my father had like second cousins in Palestine. One was a doctor of philosophy that he was sent to Abyssinia, and he found the *Falashas*[1], the Jews.

NL: Yes.

GG: And I remember distinctly the picture he sent of the colored, dark Jews.

NL: My, my, one of the pioneers in that whole investigation.

GG: Yes.

NL: And so, with the war of course, your life changed drastically. Can you tell me what some of the changes were?

GG: First of all, in the end of 1939, in the winter of 1939, I think mostly it was in December, we had to leave our home and we went to the ghetto. I had an aunt that lived where the ghetto was supposed to be. There were not available apartments, so we lived, like three, four families, with my aunt. And then we got one room.

NL: And, excuse me, were all of the Jews in Lodz forced into the ghetto?

GG: Yes.

NL: That winter, the winter of '39?

GG: Between December '39 and April 1940, by the time of Passover 1940, we're all locked in in the ghetto.

NL: This was a small area of Lodz?

GG: Small area and there were a lot of Polish people living there so they were evacuated to different places to give the place for us.

NL: So it became an all-Jewish ghetto?

GG: It was an all-Jewish ghetto with barbed wire and...

NL: Barbed wire.

GG: It was not with electricity like the concentration camp, but it was wired around and let's say in the middle of the street has the trolley-car, so we had, like bridges to go over or we had gates which the Germans stood at the gates which we had to cross the street because we were surrounded by the Poles from Lodz.

NL: The Poles also were guards at the gates?

GG: I don't know the Poles, mostly Germans.

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[1]A sect of Jews found in Ethiopia. The term *Falasha*, meaning strangers in Amharic, is now considered derogatory. They are now called Beta Israel and most of the community has since emigrated to Israel.

NL: Most Germans. And was Father still allowed to go out to work in the early period?

GG: No. Right away, as the Germans came they took our place, our home, all the wood that we had, all the stock we had, we have lost everything. We didn't have nothing. They would not let us operate the business.

NL: And this was true for all the Jews who had...

GG: As far as I know.

NL: …businesses?

GG: I did not look Jewish at all. I had blue eyes, blond long hair and I spoke a perfect Polish. So he had some business that people owed him money, he would send me to collect the money, because he was afraid to work because the Germans were catching men for work and he was afraid.

NL: And you could leave the ghetto...?

GG: It was not in the ghetto, as long as we were in the city.

NL: But after, you couldn't leave?

GG: No, after we went into the ghetto, we could not leave the ghetto. I smuggled a couple times out, because when we left our home we could not take nothing with us. And when we got that room, there was no furniture. So, I--it was wintertime, so I put something over my star of David--we had to wear the yellow star of David--covered it up and went to the apartment. We had, still had the keys.

NL: You still had the keys?

GG: And I *shlept* [carried] a chair and I *shlept* something else.

NL: How did you smuggle those things back?

GG: You could go in but you could not go out because there is still movement that the Poles were going in and out.

NL: So you didn't have any trouble coming back?

GG: Coming in I did not have no trouble. But after April 1940 it was closed. Completely closed.

NL: It was closed. Now, could Father do any work secretly and make some money or was he subject to a labor unit and...?

GG: Then in the ghetto he started to work, he was working different places.

NL: What sort of things?

GG: We had like communal guest kitchens where you used to cook. So he was a watchman; then they started to take the wooden houses apart, being that we dealt with wood before the war, so he had the protection that he stood on guard where the wood from the buildings that were taken apart, it should not be robbed.

NL: I see. This was organized under the *Judenrat*?

GG: The *Judenrat*?

NL: Was Rumkowski already the Chairman?

GG: Rumkowski. Yes.

NL: So he earned a little money that way? Or rations?

GG: We got rations and [unclear]. The ghetto was run like a country. We had our money, our police, our fire department. Everything was run like a country.

NL: And, so Father worked for the *Judenrat*.

GG: Yes.

NL: And was paid by the *Judenrat*.

GG: Yes.

NL: Would you say most Jews worked in the system?

GG: And then the Germans opened factories in the ghetto.

NL: And so…

GG: And a child from ten years old--the first year it was going, whoever had money could live who did not it was just, he just did not.

NL: Just used up his savings.

GG: His savings.

NL: Yes.

GG: And then when they opened the factory…

NL: When the Germans…

GG: Opened the factories, they opened all kinds of factories. So we worked for the Germans.

NL: What sorts of factories? Can you tell me Mrs. Golombek?

GG: I personally worked in a corset factory. Corset and bra factory for the Germans.

NL: And they produced for home consumption?

GG: Yes. It used to be shipped to Germany. Like I know we were very badly hit when the war started. Because, as I said, when my father used to buy the wood, the lumber, we had to pay. But when he went delivering we were paid out weekly or monthly by the people. So when the war broke out all we had was lumber and we had money in people's hands.

GG: But we were left with nothing.

NL: And you couldn't collect that.

GG: And we couldn't collect because if it was a Jewish bakery, they stopped baking. Sometimes from the beginning maybe, they baked a little, so they would give me a donation of *challah*, or rye bread. That way to pay up. And when we came to--well, my mother had like jewelry, so she was selling it out that we could live.

NL: She was able to conceal it on her clothing, to sew it into some of her clothing?

GG: And she was selling it. She sold even her silver candelabra that she had.

NL: Into her clothing?

GG: No, when we went into the ghetto we did not you know have to conceal.

NL: You did not have to turn that over? You could bring it.

GG: But in the ghetto they were demanding that you were not supposed to have jewelry, but it was going on and people were able to sell.

NL: You were able to save some of it and then use it, of course, to buy food.

GG: Then my father got very sick. And my father died 1942 from starvation. He just swelled up and filled up with water and the last of his words were, "*Sh'ma Yisroel hut mir ubergelebt Hitler*?" That's how he died.

NL: So there wasn't enough food for you, for the family? And Rumkowski couldn't provide it, obviously.

GG: Not that Rumkowski could not provide it, if he--he was not interested in providing food.

NL: I want to hear your interpretation of Rumkowski. He's such a controversial figure. From the perspective of your family, how was he...?

GG: Rumkowski was a head of a...

NL: Let's stop for a moment. So, we were speaking about Rumkowski, Mrs. Golombek.

GG: And he belonged to a synagogue that was like a reform synagogue, here you would call it. And I had an aunt, my mother's sister and her husband was--they were very wealthy; they were the wealthiest from the family. They were selling the wood for houses [unclear]--like, lumber for building houses, and they left Lodz and they went to Warsaw. But being they knew Rumkowski from the beginning, we could write letters out of the ghetto. So my uncle wrote Rumkowski to help us out, so he gave my father the job at the kitchens.

NL: I see.

GG: But it was not a food kitchen that we could eat. It was just, like you know in Europe when you wash laundry, you cook, you boiled it, and that was...

NL: He provided the heat for the laundry, actually, the cooking of the laundry. And how long was he able to hold that job?

GG: He lived just two years in the ghetto. He died in June 1942.

NL: So, how did Rumkowski strike you, then? What sort of impression did he make?

GG: As a man, he got the power and he took advantage of his power. He married a young woman, which was a lawyer, but he would never accomplish if it would not be the war.

Tape one, side two:

[Long pause before this side starts.]

NL: He married her in the ghetto.

GG: In the ghetto, yes.

NL: So she became dependent on him for survival.

GG: And a lot of people that really did not matter at all before the war and did not have positions, got positions.

NL: Because of their contact with him?

GG: Their contact with him or other people.

NL: What did he do before the war, do you know?

GG: Rumkowski?

NL: Yes.

GG: He was a supervisor in an orphanage.

NL: I see, and he had no children of his own, I believe.

GG: I don't think so, and it was like his cabinet.

NL: The *Judenrat?*

GG: The *Judenrat*. They lived very well.

NL: They did?

GG: They had summer homes.

NL: Summer homes?

GG: Yes, because there was a part from the Lodz ghetto that was called Marisin.

NL: How is that spelled?

GG: M-A-R-I-S-I-N, I don't...

NL: M-A-R-I-S

GG: I-N.

NL: I-N, and this was like a suburb?

GG: Yeah, that the Poles lived...

NL: And Rumkowski could go there?

GG: No, the Poles left that part.

NL: I see.

GG: They had ground that could be worked on and the ground belonged to the *Judenrat* and we used to work on the grounds to raise potatoes.

NL: I see.

GG: At that time I went to, a-like, it was like a *kibbutz*.

NL: Is that so?

GG: In the ghetto, they started from organizations and the group got together.

NL: This was '41 or so?

GG: It must have been after my father died.

NL: ’42.

GG: Because my father would never let me go. Even my mother was against it, because the boys going there and girls. It was not this liberal world that it is today.

NL: So it was after ’42.

GG: But after I went, she was glad I went because I had what to eat.

NL: You grew food there.

GG: We grew food there and we used to get food from the *Judenrat*. So whatever we have as surplus we could take home some.

NL: Was this organized by the Zionist movement, do you suppose?

GG: Yes, it was a Zionist...

NL: A Zionist group.

GG: And maybe my father did live, because I know every Friday, I was running home because I made the point to be home for Friday and Saturday. I used to come early to help my mother to wash the floor and get ready for *Shabbos*.

NL: You still observed *Shabbat*?

GG: Me and my father smuggled in the Torah into the ghetto.

NL: The Torah. And you had the candlesticks.

GG: Yes, because we had our own Torah in one of the synagogues that my father donated.

NL: I see.

GG: And when the war broke out, he took the Torah into our house. And I remember one day the Germans came to look for things in our house. Because, in the neighborhood we are not, not the rich people but fairly well off.

NL: Comfortable.

GG: Comfortable. And he saw a lot of linen, a lot of things. He said, “What for?” My mother said, “I have a growing daughter, she’ll marry.” So we started to save ahead of time. But he never noticed the Torah. And the first thing when we had to leave our home, my father took, because I was the oldest, and I was close with my father, and I was always strong and healthy, so he said, “Genia, at night...” We could just walk at 5 o’clock, but winter it gets dark early. “We take a sled and we put the Torah, and we take it into the ghetto.” And then as long as my father lived, every Friday and Saturday we were *davening* in my house. And let me tell you, when my father died, and he died of starvation, and when he went Friday night to *shul,* he never came home by himself. He always made sure he brought somebody from the synagogue to eat. In our house, everyday somebody else ate.

NL: But he starved?

GG: And he starved and when he died and my mother said, “I want to light the candles.” I said, “If you want to light the candles, you light them and you pray to your God, because there is no God if my father could have died of starvation.”

NL: He shared every little bit he had?

GG: Yes, we share. Even in the ghetto, we did not have much, but if a poor person came to the door and asked for a donation, if we had two cents or two *groschen*, she'd get a *groschen*. I was raised in a home where charity was the most important thing.

NL: Yes, the *mitzvah*. What could you bring home from the *kibbutz*, Mrs. Golombek? Like vegetables?

GG: Like potatoes, or bread, if we had too much. Sometimes we were to work the fields for the *Judenrat*. There were apples growing, so I brought apples.

NL: And how long did you work there?

GG: Not long, because then I had to go to work the factory. It must have been between '41 and '42, because in a year when we went into the ghetto, the schools opened for a while, so my father said as long as schools are open my children will go to school and I work day and night.

NL: So you went to school?

GG: I went to school, but instead of English they taught us German.

NL: Was that a decision by Rumkowski or by your teachers?

GG: That was a decision from the Germans, not to teach English.

NL: So these were not secret schools?

GG: No, they were not secret schools.

NL: They were legal.

GG: Legal. Maybe a year from 1940 to '41 and then I think in '41, I think it was that we went to, like *kibbutzim*. We called it in Polish *dzilky*.

NL: How would you spell that?

GG: D-Z-I-L-K-Y. And everybody, like it was a house, and naturally the boys and girls did not sleep together, but parents were against it because we were all young.

NL: It was not conventional. Yes. But you came home every day?

GG: No, I...

NL: You slept in the *kibbutz* building. I see.

GG: Yes, but I remember distinctly that Friday, like 12 o'clock, I ran home because we had to prepare for *Shabbos.*

NL: About how many children, how many youngsters were there in this *kibbutz* do you suppose? A few dozen?

GG: It was a few of them from different organizations.

NL: I see. So yours was not...

GG: It was just a group of friends that got together. They could do it as long as they worked on the *Judenrat* fields. Because that all belonged to the Poles that worked for the city government, but they were relocated when they made the ghetto there.

NL: So this was all part of the *Judenrat* labor system?

GG: Yes.

NL: And did Mother have to work, Mrs. Golombek.

GG: My mother did not work until my father died.

NL: She stayed home.

GG: And my father died in '42. I don't remember her working; maybe she did. But I remember distinctly she went in 1942--cause we had like a factory that cut wood, we had a factory that--leather factories, straw factories...

NL: All run by...?

GG: Run by Jews, but it was a product made for Germany and it was shipped to Germany.

NL: And Mother worked in one of those?

GG: My mother worked one and my two brothers worked, too.

NL: Also in such factories?

GG: Yes.

NL: And when you left the *kibbutz*, you went into the corset factory?

GG: I went in as a student, because I didn't know much about it, so they taught me how to run a machine. But then one of my cousins--she worked longer than--she still lives--she's in Israel. She was like my sister.

NL: She was in the same area with you?

GG: Yes, in the ghetto, and we were always very close.

NL: Same factory too?

GG: So she took me into the factory and I was working as a presser.

NL: Oh, after you worked as an operator you worked with her as a presser?

GG: A presser, because that was a better job because it was considered a...

NL: Privileged job?

GG: Job, because you got extra rations for it.

NL: I see, and the rations came from the *Judenrat*?

GG: Supplied by the Germans.

NL: Supplied by the Germans.

[Another voice and response by NL unclear. Machine off and then on.]

GG: But I know that this working on the fields was while my father was still living, because when he died, I was working already.

NL: In one of the factories?

GG: Yeah. As a matter of fact, the same day that he died, I had to go and try out for a presser. I was the youngest one, and because of my cousin, because everybody wanted to do something that got an extra ration, extra food.

NL: There was a great competition for jobs.

GG: And I came from the cemetery when my father died and my uncle came in and he said, "I know how you feel, but you better go and try out because they working." And I came and I ironed out one bra. And my supervisor said, "You will do it, but now, go home." We did not sit *shivah* [Jewish mourning period].

NL: A Jewish supervisor?

GG: The supervisors were all Jewish in the factories.

NL: So at least--but you couldn't sit *shivah*, of course, you had to go back to work the next day?

GG: Yes. And...

NL: What were you hearing about what was happening to Jews in other parts of Poland, Mrs. Golombek? Did you get any news at all?

GG: There were going around rumors that near Lodz there was a city Kolo, K-O-L-O, and they were burning Jews there but nobody believed it.

NL: People didn't believe. These were rumors?

GG: Rumors. Then people were coming into the ghetto, because like the German Jews came into the Lodz ghetto. There were Jews coming from all around the cities from Lodz.

NL: Constantly?

GG: Constantly coming in.

NL: And what were they telling you?

GG: About the way they were taking them away, but nobody knew exactly what was happening.

NL: You did hear the word "deportation" but you...

GG: "Deportation," but we didn't know where.

NL: And "evacuation," but you didn't know?

GG: No.

NL: What was the situation of the German Jews? I suppose you didn't have much contact with them?

GG: The German Jews came into the Lodz ghetto. They did not stay long. They came with things, they tried to sell or buy something.

NL: They did come with some possession?

GG: Yeah, but not everybody would buy from them, and they were right away deported.[2]

NL: They were deported?

GG: Deported from the ghetto.

NL: From the ghetto. I see.

GG: Then one time they said, "Next to the ghetto they imported some gypsies," and they took our doctors because we had hospitals in the ghetto, and the doctors, naturally nurses, but it's a gypsy place. But as we heard there were also Jews but we don't know from what part because nobody was left from there.

NL: And you heard that they perished?

GG: They perished. And in 1942, it was like in August, the Germans wanted all the kids from under ten years. Naturally, no mother wanted to give children away.

[2]This is not quite correct as many stayed for months.

NL: This was the first deportation from Lodz?

GG: There were little deportations, but from older people.

NL: There were...

GG: Before they were taking people, yeah. There were people coming, there were people going.

NL: And they called these "resettlements" or "evacuations?"

GG: We did not know where they sent them.

NL: So mostly older people at first?

GG: Not older, but people that they didn't want. Like not all the German Jews that came into the ghetto were older.

NL: I see.

GG: Let's see, my mother's sister came from a little city near Lodz, Vomlask [phonetic]. They took away her husband, right away there. She came with two children, small children. And one child they took right away from her.

NL: Her child?

GG: Yes, and she came in [unclear].

NL: So there wasn't any pattern?

GG: No, we never knew when and what.

NL: Who drew up the lists, do you know?

GG: The Germans, demanded a hundred, so Rumkowski would give two hundred. To be on a good side [unclear].

NL: He did exceed the quota sometimes?

GG: Yes.

NL: And he provided the Jews? He picked them?

GG: Yes. Like let's say in a factory, he wanted from a factory people. He usually started with the single people.

NL: This was Rumkowski's decision?

GG: I really don't know if it was his or whoever it was.

NL: The *Judenrat.* But the single people--why do you suppose that?

GG: Because they did not have families and maybe he did not want to take families yet.

NL: I see.

GG: I don't know. Maybe it was a reasonable gesture like, in here, you take somebody into the army you first take a single person, then a married person.

NL: I understand.

GG: I can't blame him for everything that happened.

NL: He was under terrible pressures, obviously.

GG: But there was another one. I can't remember his name. He tried to help out.

NL: In the *Judenrat*?

GG: Yes. But he went against Rumkowski.

NL: He went against Rumkowski?

GG: Gertner, I think his name was Gertner, and he was working with the Jewish police.

NL: And the police were not altogether with Rumkowski then? Were there some elements against him?

GG: Whenever somebody is a big whig he has people against him and, no matter, in normal times or not normal times.

NL: So Gertner worked with some elements in the Jewish police, and what was their hope or their strategy?

GG: They had to keep order in the ghetto.

NL: Order?

GG: Sure.

NL: And in what way could they oppose Rumkowski or resist him?

GG: Like, if it came a big transfer of potatoes, he said, "Give it out to the people." He said, "No, we are all--keep them because if we give them right away out they will eat and they will starve." You know, I remember came a shipment of butter.

NL: Butter?

GG: Because the Red Cross was sending in things but we did not get them.

NL: I never heard this. Red Cross was sending into the ghetto?

GG: There were coming things from the Red Cross, yes.

NL: To Jews in the ghetto?

GG: To the ghetto, for the Jews, but we did not get them.

NL: What year was this? '42? As late as '42?

GG: Yes.

NL: That's remarkable. And what happened to this shipment?

GG: Mostly, Germans took it.

NL: I see.

GG: If it came to the Jews, so it was not done the way it should be because in the *Judenrat*, got more than the next person.

NL: They were the privileged.

GG: In 1942, in August, I got sick because there was an epidemic of typhoid fever and a lot of people died. And that was the same time that the Germans demanded the children from--'til ten years old. Because from ten years old, that they worked already. Naturally nobody wanted to give their children.

NL: Of course.

GG: So they said that the police, the fire department and whoever works for the *Judenrat* doesn't give children, so everybody was...

NL: Trying to get a job?

GG: Not trying to get a job, we were resisting them.

NL: Oh, I see.

GG: Why every mother is the same mother no matter what job they hold. So the Germans couldn't--the Jews could not do it by themselves to take the children that way.

NL: And the police didn't want to cooperate?

GG: Some did, some didn't. But mostly they did not because people who were hiding children in the attics. If he was a decent person he made believe he doesn't see a children. It depends from a person. And when they started to closing up streets, the Germans, with the Jewish ones, and they go from house to house...

NL: Searching?

GG: Searching for children. And when they were searching for children they did not take just children. They took ones who were sick, who were old, who were lame. At that time, I was very sick so we hid in an attic in an empty house in the ghetto, not far away from the house where we lived in.

NL: You and other young boys and girls?

GG: Me and my mother...

NL: Oh.

GG: …with my two brothers, because my brothers were younger than I was. And other people.

NL: Other people.

GG: Other people.

NL: This was in an attic?

GG: Yeah, in 1942 in September.

NL: And how long did you stay there?

GG: The whole day as long as the streets was searched.

NL: The roundups.

GG: Yes, and after it ended--all in the day we heard hollering and shooting, and I was so sick that I did not even know what's going on. All the time I want to go back to my own bed.

NL: You had terrible fever, of course?

GG: Yeah. And that's the same night I got a hemorrhage. I start hemorrhaging. If one is supposed to live I suppose he lives through it, because when I got sick--I'm jumping from one thing to another.

NL: That's all right.

GG: When I got sick my mother was working, my brothers were working, and the doctor from the factory--we used to call it the resort--came to see me because my mother could not afford a private doctor. He said, "You're staying here by yourself. There's nobody to take care of you. I'll do you a favor. I won't write down what's wrong with you, this way your family won't be quarantined, they will be able to go out.

NL: To work.

GG: Because if you went out to work you got at least a soup. I was always afraid of hospitals, worse than of death itself. But I saw that, after my father died, my mother start swelling up, too. Usually, it was the pattern, if one person got sick in a family, in order to save him, you were selling some of your rations to buy medicine. Meantime, the rest of the family was getting sick and dying with the person that initially got sick. So, I figured, I will go to the hospital. But my mother was not home. So I went--I called a neighbor and said, "My brother is standing in the cooperation to get some bread, on the line." I said, "Call him back because I have a letter to go to the hospital." That was my middle brother. I always used to fight with him because we were two completely different types. I adored my youngest one, but with him I did not get along. I said, "Look, I have to go to the hospital but you know a brother is still a brother, and a sister is still a sister." He said, "As long as mother is here, you have nothing to say where you go. You wait until mother comes, and then you see what we do." And my mother came. I said, "I want to go to the hospital." She said, "Why?" I said, "You're starting to swell up, I'm sick, nobody is here to take care of me. I'll be better off in the hospital. You can't afford even a doctor. At least I'll get the medicines." She said, "If you want to do it, do it." So my brother went to the Health Department because, as I told you, we had a little government, to get an approval for the hospital. On the way back he had to go to the hospital, they should send in the ambulance. By the time he went it was 5 o'clock, to the hospital. They said, "It's a shame because the last ambulance left already. We'll come for her tomorrow morning." The same night, the Germans took out all the people from all the hospitals.

NL: Oh my, oh, my, just emptied the hospitals.

GG: Just emptied the hospitals. And that's what I say. No matter what I may believe and not believe, I keep up here the tradition and light the candles, but destiny, I think, rules your life.

NL: Oh my. Was there a hospital to go back to the next day?

GG: No, there was nothing. Just empty.

NL: Evacuated.

GG: Evacuated. And you know, naturally, where they took all the sick people.

NL: So what did you do?

GG: So, then the Germans start--that's when I was so sick when the Germans start come from house to house, and then when I got the hemorrhage I was lucky because in our house lived a nurse and there was a doctor that came and gave me intravenous.

NL: Some medication?

GG: Yeah. And the doctor started coming to see me out of pity for my mother, because it was six weeks after my father's death that I was on my deathbed. And I always felt when I was very sick, that my father was sitting at my feet.

NL: His spirit was there watching. It probably helped you to survive.

GG: And then this doctor got sick himself and so he sent another one. And I was so sick that I got pneumonia. And from the pneumonia I could not hear or see anymore. They thought it damaged my brains.

NL: Oh, my.

GG: But I pulled though it and the doctor said that it's one of the miracles. I had a very good life before but I must have a very good...

NL: Constitution.

GG: And I must have eaten very well before that I could live through it, almost without the medicine, because all I could have later is a little bit of sweet water when we did not even have sugar. Or a little bit oatmeal, so at that time my aunt came from Lask so she brought some oatmeal so we had to put it through a sieve that I could just drink the water because I was eight weeks...

NL: Eight weeks sick.

GG: Eight weeks sick. I got out of bed I could not even walk on my own strength. I could not put one foot in front of the other. And my brother, the one that I fought the most, he was watching over me like a mother or a father would. And told everybody, "Here Genia's dying and nobody's helping her." So that's what I say, you think that you hate a brother or you fight, but still when it's your own flesh and blood, it's your own flesh and blood. And nobody can tell me like, "You see, oh, you have very good friends, she's like a sister, or like a brother." She's not your sister and she's not your brother because it's says just like, but not your own. No matter how good it is.

NL: So were you able to go back to work then, Mrs. Golombek?

GG: Yes, after a number of weeks I went back to work.

NL: In one of the German-organized factories?

GG: Yes, factory. And we even had like places that they sent us to recover.

NL: Rumkowski set those up, too?

GG: Rumkowski and from the Germans. We got a week and were able to eat...

NL: So you were able to go to such a place?

GG: Yes, for a week.

NL: And was it in the ghetto?

GG: Everything was in the ghetto. And they fed you the best food.

NL: Good heavens.

GG: And I recovered.

NL: Extraordinary. And then you went back to work...

GG: To work and I worked in 1945, in May.

NL: 'Til May of '45?

GG: No, 1944.

NL: No, in May of '44.

GG: In 1944, in May, my middle brother decided he doesn't want to work in the ghetto anymore. You could register for work, volunteer.

NL: Outside?

GG: Yeah, but he wants to be sent away. He doesn't want to be in the ghetto.

NL: He also was in the factory?

GG: Yes, he was in the same factor that my mother worked. So he went and we got letters from him.

NL: Where was he?

GG: 60 miles away from Lodz ghetto, they were working I don't know how you say [unclear in Polish], it's like coal you know...

NL: Coal mines?

GG: It's not coal, the soft stuff.

NL: Soft coal?

GG: Yes

NL: Bituminous coal?

GG: It's like...

NL: Peat. Used as a fuel.

GG: Yes.

NL: We say peat, P-E-A-T. He was digging in the peat bogs?

GG: Yeah, and that's where he worked.

NL: In some part of Poland?

GG: 60 miles away from the Lodz ghetto.

NL: He stayed there?

GG: He stayed 'til the Lodz ghetto closed, because in August 1944, we had to leave.

NL: Excuse me, now, your younger brother remained in the Lodz ghetto?

GG: Yeah, he was still with us all the time.

NL: All the time in a factory?

GG: Yeah.

NL: And, the ghetto was being diminished all the time with transports...

GG: At that time it started to diminish because Biebow, he was the commander of the ghetto, the German commander.

NL: Biebow, yes.

GG: He had a speech, "*Liebe, Juden, meine fraynt*. The Russians are coming and we want to save you from the Russians. You can take your belongings, you'll be sent according to the factories which you work with. We're sending the machines out after you and we'll set up another place for you to work. Take your pots, your linens, your bed clothes." And we foolishly believed it.

NL: You did.

Tape two, side one:

NL: You believed…

GG: We believed Biebow[3] because Rumkowski or nobody could really influence your mind--what you can believe, what you can't believe. We did not know about the Austrians.[4]

NL: You didn't know...

GG: No, because from about 1942, I think, there was no mail coming in, no mail coming out. We were completely closed in.

NL: No escapees who returned to the ghetto?

GG: No.

NL: Were there any rumors of Auschwitz?

GG: No, not to my knowledge. I know that one day we got up and it was like in the middle of the ghetto we had [unclear]. It was a market. Five people were hanging there. They said they wanted to smuggle something in or out. There were incidents, but people were afraid. Then, it's a shame to say, that we between our Jews in the ghetto had people that worked with the *Kriminal-polizei*.

NL: The German Criminal Police. They hoped to save their skins that way?

GG: Skins, yes. They did not save their skin, because they knew too much the Germans should save them. And if the Germans would not save them the Jews would kill them. But not anybody--we will call them the *Kripo*[5]--and they had their headquarters right in the ghetto, on a street. And nobody wanted to cross that street. If you had to go by that street, you made sure you did not go on the side with the *Kripo,* where the building was, cause anybody that walked in there did not come out alive. And that was all Jewish doing. Somebody would say they had diamonds hidden. Somebody was say they had American money, somebody said they had jewelry, silver...

NL: These were informers?

GG: Informers, just plain informers.

NL: And so in August...

GG: Maybe I'm not here in judge somebody.

NL: But it's a fact.

GG: It's a fact. And maybe because people wanted to live, they did it. As I said, I don't sit here in judgment of nobody, and it's hard to judge somebody in somebody else's condition, somebody else's shoes. Because you don't know what you would do in his shoes.

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[3]Hans Biebow, Chief of the Ghetto Administration in Lodz.

[4]It is not clear what is implied here. During the fall and winter of 1941-42, about 20,000 Jews from Austria, Germany and Prague were deported to the Lodz Ghetto. Some of those from Austria may have been transported to Auschwitz, in Mrs. Golombek's reference.

[5]Kripo - Criminal police.

NL: These people volunteered their services, they weren't ordered to...

GG: No they were not ordered; they volunteered.

NL: They volunteered their services to survive.

GG: Volunteer to save their own skin. Maybe to--sometimes like in America here somebody went and made a hold-up because he needed money to save a child or a wife or a mother. So you don't know under what circumstances, what pressed them, or they were just plain hungry. They thought this way they would survive the war. Because we really did not think that we would go out of it alive. Even in the ghetto.

NL: Even when you were working and eating fairly well...

GG: No, in the ghetto we were starving.

NL: In the ghetto you never ate well?

GG: We never ate well in the ghetto.

NL: And so you didn't...

GG: People were dying like flies.

NL: Everyday?

GG: Everyday. There were facts that people eat with somebody that died. They were holding the dead person for another week to get an extra ration for them. Because when the person died you have to turn in his ration card.

NL: Ration card...

GG: So we...

NL: You didn't really expect to survive the war?

GG: We did not, no, we did not.

NL: And did you hear anything about the advance of the Russians in '44?

GG: No. We did not, specially. Maybe the other people did, I don't know.

NL: But your immediate family...

GG: Like, maybe we would talk about assassination of Hitler, but people were afraid to talk because there were informants. Even somebody knew something he would not say nothing.

NL: Out of fear.

GG: Out of fear.

NL: And when this false promise from Biebow came in August of '44 did Rumkowski address the ghetto too?

GG: I don't remember Rumkowski addressing the ghetto.

NL: But it was Biebow?

GG: I remember Biebow.

NL: And so how many people, how many Jews were left about at this time, do you suppose?

GG: Usually, in the ghetto, were between sixty and eighty thousand people.

NL: And there were that many in August of '44.

GG: Maybe less.

NL: Less, but still quite a lot.

GG: A lot, and every day they were going, transferred out. And we went like a family of twelve. My mother, my youngest brother, my aunt, her daughter which I was in Auschwitz with, in Birkenau, but Mengele took her away because she was...

NL: And, so instead of going to resettlement, you all went to Auschwitz.

GG: And I remember when we traveled, like through the night and we came to Birkenau. At that time, I did not know what's Birkenau or it's Auschwitz, and we looked like through the little window and one of my aunts said, "*Kinder, mir sonnen arangekumen a in a lager*[6]*."* But we did not know what it is. And we went out of the cattle cars.

NL: You traveled a whole day?

GG: I think we traveled all night, because we arrived in Auschwitz early in the morning, about 5 o'clock in the morning, in August.

NL: That was August of '44.

GG: August, exactly August the 13th, and that's why to this day I hate the number 13. And we saw people. They were kneeling, dirty. They were in torn clothes. So we did not believe it they are taking us like this. That's not a place for us, this must be crazy people. Right away they started to separate us.

NL: Right at the station?

GG: Yes.

NL: So you arrived at this hell and you began to be separated...

GG: Yes, and we right away [unclear] get away, trains, get off the trains, people in stripes. I did not know if Jews or not Jews, I don't know who it is.

NL: In striped pajamas?

GG: Pajamas, striped suits. And as I tell you, we were twelve people, so I was left with my cousin.

NL: In one group?

GG: In one group. They took away my mother, her mother, my aunt, and, naturally, the men went in a separate part.

NL: And your brothers went with mother?

GG: My older brother was not with us.

NL: It's just one brother?

GG: The youngest. So, first, he was sent with a man. In 1944, he was eleven years--twelve years old. But three years of a ghetto and malnutritionment showed on him. So he was not husky, he was not thick so they sent him back to my mother. He was the happiest child because he was with my mother. But he did not know where he would go with my mother.

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[6]*Lager* - (Ger.) camp.

NL: But none of them knew, I presume?

GG: Nobody knew.

NL: No one knew.

GG: And I went with my cousin, and I remember it was all day long, even it was August, but August in Poland was still warm [unclear].

NL: The barracks?

GG: No outside, waiting to go into the barracks.

NL: Just sat there.

GG: Sat there and we were asking for water. So they brought like--we were sitting in lines--a pot, it was passed the line, one pot for the whole line. Every line got a pot. Then at night we were already in the barracks. In Birkenau were wooden barracks. They were not built like from...

NL: Stones.

GG: Stones. But in the middle was like a chimney, red tile, like bricks, red bricks, and the head of a block, she was working, she was dressed nice...

NL: She was a Jew?

GG: She was Jewish. I think she was a Czech Jew or Hungarian but I think she was Czech. And she started to talk to us: "You arrived in the camp, but life doesn't matter. You are not a person anymore, but you are a number. If it exists one number more or less does not count." And we were just sitting, and you could not believe. I really had a feel that I am in hell and the devil is speaking. And I still, and we still didn't know, I can't talk for everybody but I myself did not know about the crematoriums yet. But we were sitting like ten rows, five in each other, between each other's legs. If one moved, everybody else had to move. [unclear] barracks [unclear]. And a woman was sitting and she said, "You know, they are burning people here. And they killing people here." We could not believe it. I remember how--I was not long maybe two days when a cousin looked us up. He was in Auschwitz, also in Birkenau, from 1943, I think, and when he heard that the Lodz--he was from Piotokow--he's in Israel now. That the Lodz transfers are coming, so he came looking for family Fieman because his mother was a Fieman from home, her maiden name. She was my father's sister. So he came to look for the family, so he found me and my cousin. So I start asking him, "Is it true?" He said, "No, don't believe everything."

NL: He wanted to protect you?

GG: Yeah, and then right away, he got pull already, he knew this one and he knew that one, so he got us into work to *Unterkumft* that we should work.

NL: *Unterkumft*?

GG: *Unterkumft*. It was a German word. It was like a...

NL: Underground?

GG: No. It was a place that you worked with pots, that you were selecting things that came into the...

UI: The name of the commander...

GG: Yeah, the name of the commander that you were working with.

NL: Is that a classification or rank...

GG: Classification.

NL: I see.

GG: And I remember they had linen coming in, so you segregated the linen...

NL: Sorted it.

GG: Sorted the pots and all different things.

NL: And he arranged to get you a job?

GG: A job so we wouldn't go through the selections.

NL: Oh. He had a protected job himself, apparently.

GG: He was a carpenter.

NL: Carpenter?

GG: Yes. And he was paying off to be able to go into different places.

NL: I see.

GG: So he protected us.

NL: And your cousin worked in the same job?

GG: Yes, she was with me.

NL: And where, did you work in an enclosed place?

GG: Yeah, it was an enclosed building, yes.

NL: And you still lived in the barracks?

GG: But that was-- we lived there already in a different barrack between just Hungarians. We were ten Polish girls between all Hungarians.

NL: And they were doing the same work as you?

GG: Not all of them, but it was a working...

NL: A working unit.

GG: …department--unit.

NL: And what kind of food were you getting?

GG: The same food that everybody else. It was not any different but being that we worked there, we met men that came in from different commandos and they had more to eat so they got the soup. We had soup left over and my cousin used to bring my food, us food. If he could not come in, he sent us somebody. But my cousin was very sick, and she was an only child before the war, and she was very spoiled so she couldn't take it and Mengele took her away. Twice I was in front of Mengele.

NL: He came right into the factory, came right into the working place?

GG: One time he came, no, one time he came into the barracks when we went at night to sleep. And we were ten Polish girls and Lodz girls so we asked [unclear] because if we felt, if you want to go we want to go in Polish just because there was not big love between, it's a shame to say--between a German Jew or a Polish Jew and a

Hungarian Jew and a Polish Jew. They were all kinds of frictions. Even we are all Jews, but everybody was looking at everybody else with different eyes.

NL: Yes, yes.

GG: So at that time, Mengele [unclear] and they let us pass. We did not go [unclear]. Then they started to close up Birkenau--some parts of the camp. And we were sent from one side of the camp to the other.

NL: This was in ’45 already?

GG: ’44.

NL: Still ’44.

GG: October ’44. And we had to strip. That time we had to strip. And my cousin was sick, so she said she would go first because I did not look that bad, and maybe he won’t see the difference that she’s so frail. But he took her anyway. And at that time if he would not send her away--before she could have been helped, because my cousin had a lot of pull. But once she was taken away, I went and I could not do nothing for her because she’s already...

NL: You tried.

GG: I tried. And then I tried to get in touch with my cousin because he always used to say, “Try to stay in Birkenau. As long as I am here I can help you. Wherever you go someplace else, you’re not going to find nobody.” Eventually he told me--I told him, “How come if you could find us, if the whole family came, can’t you find them?” Finally, he said, because he was there from ’43, he said, “And they burn people. It’s all true what you heard.”

NL: So then you knew.

GG: So I knew. And then I had with my brother, came the middle brother came into Auschwitz too.

NL: The one who was working on the peat bogs?

GG: Yes.

NL: He was also deported.

GG: Yes, because when they were closing up the ghetto, they were closing that place out, too, because it was very close, 60 kilometers.

NL: Yes.

GG: So he was sent to the ghetto, but he did not find no family anymore because we had all gone. So he came into Auschwitz because some of my girlfriends saw him, and they said he looked very good, and that’s the last I heard of him.

NL: And he was also sent to the gas chambers?

GG: Who knows?

NL: You don’t know for sure?

GG: I don’t know nothing for sure. I don’t know.

NL: And so you were in Auschwitz, in Birkenau until...

GG: Until October ’44 and then I was sent to Lensing.

NL: Lensing?

GG: Yes.

NL: L-E-N-S-I-N-G?

GG: Z-I-N-G.

NL: Lenzing? Where is that?

GG: That's like 40 kilometers from Linz.

NL: From…?

GG: Linz, Austria.

NL: Oh, from Linz.

GG: It was near Linz.

NL: And you went with the other Polish girls?

GG: No. We were ten Polish girls, but the rest was all Hungarian.

NL: And the whole group went to Austria?

GG: Yeah, because it happened that we heard that it's a good transfer, because a lot of the girls that had positions went with that transfer.

NL: I see, and was it better?

GG: Yes, when we came to there--this camp belonged to Mauthausen because it was a small camp. We arrived at 500 girls, just. And everybody got his own bed.

NL: Bed?

GG: Bunk.

NL: Bunk, yes.

GG: Bunk bed, this was a bunk bed, you know three-layer bunk, but at least your own. Because in Birkenau we slept five together, five this way and five this way so it was ten on a bunk. And we got blankets and we had water that we could go and wash.

NL: How do you account for the fact that the conditions were so much better? Was it because of the commander, was he a more humane person?

GG: He was humane.

NL: Was it a *Wehrmacht* camp?

GG: No it was a [unclear] but it was an older man.

NL: An older man.

GG: An older man and when we arrived he asked us we should work right because we belong to Mauthausen and if we produce, we will get food. And comparing to Birkenau, what we went through, it was like heaven. Because you did not...

NL: You weren't treated like an animal?

GG: We were, there were some women, some men that says that they were very bad. But the conditions in itself, themselves were not as bad.

NL: You could hope to survive.

GG: Yeah.

NL: And what sort of work did you do?

GG: There was a factory. It was called in German *Zellwolle* [artificial wool]. They used to make--it looked like cotton. And this…

NL: Do you want to stop?

GG: No. We used to put bags like you know, big bulk and it was to send to Lodz because Lodz was a textile city and from this they used to make thread.

NL: Thread. So the Germans were still in Lodz and...

GG: Yes, it was sent to Litzmannstadt [Lodz].

NL: Yes.

GG: Because we saw on the package, Litzmannstadt.

NL: So you worked in this factory.

GG: Factory. Then we worked, we made bomb shelters. We worked...

NL: Underground.

GG: Underground in the mountains. And we made the shelters not for ourselves but for the Germans.

NL: They were already preparing for what? Their surrender?

GG: This was already in ’45 because in ’44 we worked in that factory. In winter, I remember, and you used to have to walk. An Austrian walk and we worked in the wooden shoes and the snow would stick to it and you fell over but you had to walk in fives. Some, mostly of them, were very--we were animals, and they treated us like animals. And the women were worse than the men.

NL: The women guards?

GG: Yes, they were all SS. There were a couple, two, that were so nice that when we were liberated we wanted to save them with us.

NL: One was the old man you mentioned?

GG: And the old man when...

NL: The head of the camp?

GG: The head of the camp. When he knew when the war was ending, that the SS was leaving us, he came and he told us just like that, “The war is ending, you have a future, but I don’t know what’s going to become of me.”

NL: And who was the other human being there? You said there were two...

GG: There was two SS women that used to help us. They used to go to the children in the factory that we worked. Like, if it was very cold, “Let work ten, and let ten warm up.” We used to go in the kitchen to find we should get a little bit more to eat, because don’t forget when we came, we got free blankets, that’s two to a person, but as the Russians and the Americans were coming closer, they did not have much either.

NL: The Germans.

GG: So they took from us, they took our blankets, less food they got, less food we got. So we started to suffer like, too. And the lice.

NL: The lice?

GG: Even there was water but you could not help it.

NL: You couldn't get washed properly?

GG: Because when we came here we even got toothbrushes. And...

NL: My, my. So you were there until the Russians came?

GG: Americans.

NL: Americans liberated this camp?

GG: Americans--May 5, 1945. And we heard that there was an attempt to assassinate Hitler, but we could not talk. Like between us, there was an older Hungarian woman, she converted to Christianity. And she used to spy on us. As a matter of fact, when the SS left us, she left with them, she was afraid to stay with us.

NL: Oh my, she couldn't have done this out of conviction, she did it perhaps...

GG: She did it to be on the good side of Germans, because she was--I don't think she was an older woman, because to us at that time when I was twenty a woman of fifty was an older woman.

NL: Of course. She converted in the camp?

GG: No, she converted in Germany.

NL: After the war?

GG: Before the war, I suppose. She came in as a convert.

NL: Oh, she came in as a convert, I see. And she left with the Germans?

GG: She left, because they asked who wants to leave with them. And after the SS left came the *Wehrmacht*. These were older men and we were waiting, we knew that we were going to be liberated.

NL: Excuse me, how much before May did you already know that the tide of war was turning and that you would be liberated? Was it a week or a month or a few days?

GG: We did not hope at all.

NL: You still didn't hope?

GG: No, because we were grown weaker.

NL: In the last few months?

GG: And the conditions changed. We, let's say, we had--we saw the American planes. Because they told us--they ran into the shelters and we were staying like outside. We heard the Russians--we heard their planes coming because they were coming in three shifts. The Americans, the Russians, and the English, each one. One came night, one came day and one came afternoon.

NL: But you still felt quite hopeless yourself?

GG: Because we were very broken morally. And once a person is broken morally, you can do with a person whatever you want.

NL: But still you worked?

GG: We had to work and like when we worked in the factory, there was a Polish woman from Lodz. I never denied that I'm Jewish, but she never asked me because before we went into the ghetto, I used to go to buy bread for the house, being I

was the oldest. As I told you, I didn't even look Jewish. Nobody believed that I'm Jewish and--but I did not ever go in the neighborhood that we lived because the Poles would point me out as a *Jude*. So I used to go in the neighborhood where the Polish bakers were. So I had to go when it was dark and stay in line. A German stopped me in the main post office. I was [unclear]. "Where are you going?" I said, "For bread," in German, I did not speak German so I spoke Jewish. So he asked me, "*Was bist Du?"* I said, "*Jude*." He could not believe it. "*Jude*?" That I actually admitted that I'm Jewish. He gave me a loaf of bread.

NL: He did?

GG: He did. And once I stood in there for butter and a German came and he thought I'm German. He asked me what I am. Because it was a line. If you were a *Volksdeutsche*, you went into another line, and if you were a Pole you had to stay in line. A Jew did not even count. He came to me and said, "*Was bist Du*? "*Jude*." "No?" I said, "Yeah, *Jude*." "*Bleib stehen* [Stay here.]." Because he just could not believe. I remember they used to catch people to work before we went into the ghetto. One day I went to my aunt for bread because they lived in a more Polish neighborhood than we did and the German caught me for work. And I had to clean up a toilet. And I came home crying. My mother said, "What happened?" I said, "I was caught for work." To me, he was, you know, maybe I was a snob at that time. I was a high school girl and he's telling me to clean toilets. So my mother was scared that she did not know what he did to me. Maybe he raped me, maybe he did something to me. I said, "Ma, he did not do nothing to me. He just told me to clean a toilet and here's somebody from [unclear] a *dorf,* you know what I mean? And that was my dignity.

NL: Of course.

GG: The same when I was in Austrian camp. There were two Russians that worked with us, like with the bulldozers, when we were in the shelters. They put in dirt and we went out with wheelbarrows. The younger one wanted to help us, but the older one would not. And he was a Russian [unclear] and he had big ideas. And one day he spit on me, "*Du Jude."* And I came back to the camp crying. But work did not hurt me because I volunteered for work.

NL: But you were spat upon.

GG: Because I was spat as a *Jude*.

NL: So humiliating.

GG: The humiliation was for me more than hard work because when we came to Austria right from the beginning we did not have work. But if you want you could volunteer to go and to clean the German barracks. The SS barracks. I volunteered to work. I am a person that likes to work. I rather work than sit and go hungry. And it's for my dignity, I earn my living.

NL: So this Russian spat on you?

GG: Yes.

NL: Was he in some position of authority, Mrs. Golombek?

GG: No, he was a working, but there was a camp near us. But they were not a concentration camp but...

NL: Prisoners of war?

GG: Not exact. Just prisoners. Let's say they were Poles there, Italians, there were Greeks. Their conditions were different. They had to work but they were more free than we were. So there was a Polish woman from Lodz and she lived not far away where we used to live in Lodz. And she tried to give me something. She was with her husband there. But one time a German woman saw that I am getting something. I got beaten up for it.

Tape two, side two:

NL: This is side two of tape two of an interview with Mrs. Genia Golombek, G-O-L-O-M-B-E-K. We were speaking about the Russian--the Polish woman.

GG: She wanted to. They were like--even a German in a sense. There were some that wanted but they were afraid.

NL: They were afraid?

GG: When we were working for the bomb shelters in the mountains, there was a Frenchman, an engineer, that was supposed--we were digging from two sides of the mountain, and the shelter was supposed to meet inside the mountain. He worked that way that the shelter should never end, meet.

NL: So that you would keep working until the end of the war?

GG: Yes.

NL: He was not Jewish.

GG: He wasn't Jewish and he hated the Germans and he always tried to help us, but he was afraid. There was one German from Luxemburg that was drafted the last days--maybe day of war. He tried to help us. He once even said if he carries a white sheet with him, if he sees the German, he's going to pull it out. They were afraid. You could count them on your fingers, because in every--no matter how much I hated them but there was maybe few that were good.

NL: But in the last days at Lenzing...

GG: At Lenzing, they wanted to kill us.

NL: Before the camp was liberated.

GG: Liberated. They poisoned our food.

NL: Oh, my dear.

GG: We used to take from the same kitchen--it was three kilometers to go for the soups, for the food. Just the food. So, and we used to take from the kitchen that the Russians worked. So when the girls came, six girls only, they said, "Don't take the soup unless it's from the German SS kitchen, because this food is poison. They don't want you alive.

NL: And these were non-Jewish girls who brought the food, or Jewish...

GG: No, our own girls because...

NL: And how did they know this?

GG: Because a Russian...

NL: Told them?

GG: Told them.

NL: So you had nothing to eat?

GG: We were worried about the six girls because, even after the SS left, they were hiding, so they were still shooting. Even when we were left in the camp already, alone, we were not going out because they were still hiding.

NL: You were afraid?

GG: We were afraid.

NL: You'd be shot?

GG: We didn't have no identifications either.

NL: Nothing?

GG: Nothing. So we are told to stay put and we would get some papers, or something.

NL: And what about the older man who had been somewhat decent, did you see him at all? He left?

GG: The SS left, the SS left.

NL: Disappeared.

GG: The SS left. And they were all taken to camp, by the Americans; whoever they caught.

NL: So how long were you left alone in the camp, would you say? How long did you have to go without eating?

GG: They came the next morning--the morning--they came and then the Americans came.

NL: The Americans came.

GG: But we were worried because we did not know what happened to the six girls.

NL: They went back to the kitchen?

GG: Yes.

NL: And did they survive?

GG: Yes.

NL: They did.

GG: Yes, as a matter of fact now in Israel I met quite a few girls.

NL: From that unit?

GG: From the camp that we were together.

NL: Lenzing.

GG: And while we talk, where you were? What were you doing? We were all liberated, but after so many years you don't recognize somebody.

NL: So the Americans came May the...

GG: 5th.

NL: The 5th, and how many Jewish girls were left in Lenzing?

GG: In January 1945, 60 more girls came that were sent from Auschwitz into our camp.

NL: So you had altogether...

GG: Like 560. Two were sent away. One was a Lodz woman. She went crazy in the camp so she was sent to Mauthausen. And one a Czechish woman. Czech woman.

NL: And the others survived?

GG: The others survived.

NL: Amazing.

GG: We survived.

NL: And what happened when the Americans came in? Were they shocked? Or had they already liberated other camps?

GG: I don't know. We tried, you know, they gave us food and some of the food was not good to us, but I remember I was very sick.

NL: You ate perhaps too much?

GG: I ate too much. I was hungry. As a matter of fact they wanted to take me as an interpreter, because I spoke English, but I got so sick that I couldn't even...

NL: So were you treated? Did they establish hospitals, clinics there?

GG: They had doctors, yes.

NL: They brought doctors.

GG: Then we were relocated from our camp we were to Kammerscheffling, it was called.

NL: In Germany or Austria?

GG: Austria. That was all Austria.

NL: Kammer...

GG: I did not know how to spell it. It used to be the SS barracks and the conditions were better, which Americans took care, make sure...

NL: They established hospitals and...

GG: And food.

NL: And kitchens and recuperative facilities?

GG: Yes. Yes.

NL: And how long were you there?

GG: That was--I think it was September or October. I went to Naples because the Joint[7] was giving out packages, helping out.

NL: September?

GG: No, wait a minute. No, we left right away, in June, we went to Italy. We went to Italy.

NL: June of '45?

GG: In June, end of June. We did not stay long.

NL: You didn't stay long?

GG: No, I did not want to go back to Poland.

NL: You didn't, you already knew...

GG: I did not have no desire to go back to Poland. I regret it now.

NL: Do you?

[7]Joint Distribution Committee.

GG: The only reason that I never went to my father's grave.

NL: Maybe you'll go some day.

GG: And it bothers me. Because I'm the only survivor. And he never had a stone put on.

NL: Is he in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw?

GG: In Lodz.

NL: In Lodz.

GG: But I don't know if I could find the grave now.

NL: Why don't you write to someone there?

GG: I was talking to people. They said, "They ruin the stones, they break them, there's nobody to take care of them." Even if there were stones there are not anymore.

NL: Still, there's a change going on in Poland, and maybe there would be a more sympathetic response now.

GG: I don't have too much faith in them, because when we were now in England, I met two Poles, and they ask, "What do you speak?" and I said, "We speak Italian, he doesn't speak English, but he speaks Polish too." So we started speaking Polish and there was a young boy of 19, and the way he talked: "There's so many Jews and they spoil our politics..."

NL: In Poland.

GG: That's what he was saying to me in England.

NL: Oh, my dear.

GG: So I really--the only reason if I would go ever back to Poland is to see my father's grave and go to Auschwitz and say *kaddish.* But I have no desire anyway. I don't think I could be able go into the house where we lived.

NL: It's too painful. Too painful. Are there any Jews left in Lodz now at all?

GG: I think there is a community in Lodz.

NL: Maybe you could write to the president of the *kehillah?*

GG: They are all [unclear].

NL: Yes, I think there are 7,000 altogether in all of Poland.

GG: So, this young boy tells me...

NL: There are too many Jews.

GG: Too many Jews. There are so many Jews. It was in a hotel, I did not want to start an argument because it's a hopeless case and there is always more people against us than for us.

NL: As it always was, as it ever was. So if I could just take another minute, Mrs. Golombek. You left for Italy and did you go to Naples then?

GG: We traveled from like, from Linz, to Salzburg, Innsbruck, through whole Italy, and then we settled from IRO. You know what's IRO? International Refugee Organization. [unclear] where UNRRA was, and was the Joint, and was the H.I.A.S, in

Santa Maria di Leuca [in Lecce province]. I was in Cinecitta. Finally we wind up in that camp.

NL: In Naples?

GG: No, in Santa Maria, it was in the boot, all the way down South.

NL: In the boot, way south, I see. That was for Jewish survivors or...

GG: Yeah, mostly Jewish survivors.

NL: Mostly Jewish survivors. And that was under American...

GG: Yeah, the Joint or IRO, an organizational camp.

NL: Organizational camp, I see. Were there many Jews there?

GG: Oh, yes.

NL: I never heard of this. It's Santa Maria di Leuca [in Lecce province].

GG: Yeah, Lecce, Santa Maria.

NL: Lecce Santa Maria. And you stayed there how long?

GG: Not long, because then they were saying that the Joint gives packages to people in Naples. So we went to Naples to get extra food because we did not have nothing.

NL: You didn't have enough in Italy?

GG: In the camp they cooked and it was fat, it was--and we wanted to get something else. And while I was there I met my husband[8] and I started to work for the Americans, in Caserte, near Naples. And I met him...

NL: Did you get any medical treatment during this time? No?

GG: I am...

NL: You're strong.

GG: I recuperate very fast.

NL: After all you went through, it's extraordinary.

GG: Even now, I have a very strong constitution. I just don't let anything bother me.

NL: That's probably it. Before we end, are there any things you would like to say, since younger people, students, and children of another generation would be listening to these accounts, any messages for them, Mrs. Golombek?

GG: They should never forget they are Jews. They don't have to be religious. Their nationality counts more than their religion. Maybe I'm wrong, because it has to be a Supreme Being, something that rules your life, but I don't know what to call it. But to me, I'm not as religious, I don't keep a kosher kitchen. I observe the holidays out of tradition, but I always remember I'm Jewish and I would like for that--for just being Jewish. And not let it happen again. Never. No human being should be able to deprive somebody of his belief and to strip him from his humanity.

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[8]Met her husband, Sam Golombek. See also his oral history testimony. They emigrated to the United States in 1950.

NL: Thank you very much.