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Nesse Godin interview, 2/13/95

SWB: Nesse, I think that a good place to start would be at the point in the death march when you ended up in the barn, so if you could just take me into that part.

NESSE GODIN: As I mentioned to you before, after the death march, we were round up in a place with the name of Zhinof. We pushed in into a barn, I do not know how many of us were left dead on the road. We may have been about 600 when we arrived there. But for the three weeks that we were there, there were more dead bodies in the hold that they dug than people in the barn. I tell you, it was just a terrible terrible sight. Uh, it came a point at that time when I really prayed to be one of the dead. But that real was different. March 10, 1945, we were liberated by the Russian army. Actually, the people were taking, the Russians were taking over that area, and they found us there.

SWB: Describe to me some of the things that happened in that barn, before they came.

NESSE GODIN: Before we were liberated, or that particular day?

SWB: Before you were liberated leading up to that

particular day.

NESSE GODIN: When we came in actually to the barn, they, the Nazis ordered 50 women out, they gave them shovels, they told them to dig two giant holes. We thought that we were being lined up and shot, as in previous, that's what happened. But the Nazis had different plans for us. One

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hole served as a bathroom, they put some sticks on. And the other hole served as a grave. Every morning, the dead were ordered to be taken out, they were had to be under as naked, because the clothing could be recycled, but the people were dumped into the hole. Food was given to us very little. You see the Germans did not get at that point allocation food for us for the prisoners. It was up to the village to supply some food for us. People just died from hunger, typhoid, dysentery. I tell you, the mountain of bodies outside were dead, but the people inside looked dead also. If we were just living zombies, skeletons covered with skin. And that particular day, before the Russians found us, in the morning, when um, the men that were in charge to take

out the dead, took the bodies out, came back into the barn and said to us, no guards. Some of the women said, let's run to the village. Now you know we couldn't even walk, we were so sick. Somebody else says, there is SS men hiding behind the barn. The minute we start to walk, they're going to shoot us. But we didn't know that we were, that there were no more guards, they ran away. All day long we sat in that barn not knowing that our guards are run away. At night we heard the sound of boots. Now you know for us survivors, the sound of boots we shiver. And then we heard the Russian language, and there was the Russian army and the soldiers were telling us that they took over the area. They can not stay with us, but in the next day or so, their backup units will come, the medics and they will help us. Now that night, I tell you, I cried. I remember I cried. And you know, 50 years almost, from March 10 till now, and I still don't know why I cried. Did I cry because I felt sorry for me? Did I cry for my family that was so brutally killed? You know it was just something that people said, you must have been very happy when you were liberated. But

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I remember that sadness in my heart not knowing, not having a home where to go to, not having a family.

SWB: So that night they did basically nothing for you except tell you you were free.

NESSE GODIN: Uh, well, uh, some soldiers gave us a bite of bread and they said to us we are afraid to give you food, if we give you too much, you may get very sick. So, don't run to the village, don't eat too much, we are going to come with the medics and tell you exactly. Now many people right after liberation died because they ate a whole slice of bread. Our stomachs were so shrunken. We couldn't digest any more, too much food. So they really, that's all they did that night.

SWB: Did you talk with the other girls, or you just cried or... do you remember what other people did.

NESSE GODIN: There were different different reactions. Some people jumped for joy, some people applauded, I heard applause to the Russians. The people that knew how to speak Russian had a little conversation trying to find out if other places were liberated. Don't forget, I was from thirteen to seventeen, from the age of thirteen to seventeen ghetto, concentration camp, labor camp, death march. I wasn't really educated enough to understand what was happening.

SWB: Now describe to me your physical condition. What did you look like?

NESSE GODIN: I tell you what I looked like. I weighed at

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liberation sixty-nine pounds. I'm not a very short lady. I don't know how tall I was at that time, how much I grew during the war, when uh, I am five four and a half now. Can you imagine sixty-nine pounds? My face was swollen because I was beaten up severely on the death march. My hands had frostbite, my toes were black from frost, I had one dress, a blanket that was wrapped around my body. Between the blanket and the dress, my ba- body was wrapped around with straw. Somehow we found straw on the ground and we tried to insulate ourselves with it. Uh, let me tell you how I saw myself a few days after liberation. I have not seen myself in a mirror for almost two years. A few days after we were free, the Russians carried us, bodily actually to the village, put us in little houses, until the makeshift hospital was made. And as I was laying in one of those houses on a straw sack, I saw a door with a window pane.

And I thought I'm free, let me look outside, how the free world looks. But as I looked through that little window pane, I saw a reflection. A reflection of the most horrible that anyone can imagine. A skeleton covered with skin, with big blue eyes. And as I turned to look whose reflection I saw, I realized that was my reflection. This is how I looked.

SWB: Where did you think that you would go in those first few days.

NESSE GODIN: A few days later, I was taken to that makeshift hospital that was set up in the little village of Crenof. I was there with typhoid, dysentery, uh, treatment for my uh toes, my scar on my face, my wound at that time. I was there for six weeks. I was there the longest. Then, the people that were in charge of that hospital called me in

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that little room that they called an office, and they said to me, now you can leave. And I looked at them and I said, where do I go? I don't have anyone to call. I don't have a

home, I don't have a country, I don't have a family. So the person at the desk looked at the women in back of me and they asked her, where are you from. She said from Lithuania. So I- they assigned me to be her ward, because I was seventeen, I was underage, I became this woman's ward. Stranger, I never met her before. She was very kind. And that's how we started out on a journey, supposedly to go back to Lithuania. You could not buy a ticket and travel wherever you wanted. You have to go where the trains were going to. Trains are traveling east and west, Russian armies were uh traveling, they were uh, uh taking all kinds of machinery from Germany towards Russia. And we had those freight trains.

SWB: Wait, we have to put another roll on.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Okay, let's back up and tell me how the trains were going and how you...

NESSE GODIN: Okay so I wound up with this lady that, whose ward I was. And we had to hop different trains because there was no way that you could buy a ticket or go directly to anywhere we planning to go. Trains were going east and west and north, and those were trains that the Russian armies were moving from one side to the other. Also freight

trains that machinery was taken from Germany to Russia. So

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we hopped those trains, we were, they allowed us to do so, and we ran from one place to another. We wound up in the city of Loge, Poland. By that time it was May already. I remember well because I was still on one of those trains when the war stopped. So I know it was May. When we arrived in the small uh area in that area of Loge, that shelter that they had, there were already help set up. You know we human beings are really wonderful people. There was the Red Cross, Christian relief, the highest helping, uh, giving us a little food, telling us where we can go uh for to sleep over. In that large room, I remember there were big posters around, where you were supposed to sign in and let people know where you're from in case somebody from your family comes to the place, they should know if you're there.

SWB: What did you find.

NESSE GODIN: Okay. One day, I, as I looked at that poster and it said Lithuania, I signed my name somewhere on the

bottom of that poster. All night I was wondering, I said who is going to bend down and read it on the bottom of the poster. Now you can see I was seventeen but not too wise. So the next morning I was very anxious to get back to that shelter and to sign my name up high so where people could see it on eye level. And I was writing my name, Nesse Galbring, that was my maiden name. A lady was standing next to me and asked me, she said which Galbring are you from Chelay, I don't remember you. You see we had a Galbring, a Shoemaker, a d- uh a Tailor and my parents had a dairy store. They sold butter and milk. And I told her I said I'm Galbring from the dairy business. Oh, she said, Nesse, that's you, you look so bad. And when I looked at that women I recognized her. She was a strong lady before the

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war, but mentally she was not quite there. And the next thing out of that woman's mouth was oh, I was with your mother in the camp. I said, how can that be. My mom was separated from me in the concentration camp. She said, yes, they took a little bit stronger women to another camp and she's right now in a little shelter in this-and-this small

village near the border of Poland and Germany. When I heard that, I couldn't believe the women because she wasn't mentally stable. But still I thought maybe it is true. So, I go to my lady whose ward I am, I said, he- her name was Hanna, I said Hanna, we have to go back, back to the German border. She said, your crazy child, who goes back, everybody goes forward. I said but, somebody told me that my mom is alive and she is there in that village. She said, I am not going with you. She took out the piece of paper that she's in charge of me, she tore it to pieces, she said, now go to the desk, tell them you're eighteen years old, they'll give you another document, and if you want to go, go. So, everybody's traveling east and traveling west. Arrived in that little village, I found the shelter, I walked in, and there were ladies from my home town that I recognized, and after they asked me who I was because they could not recognize me, they said, oh Nesse, your mom heard that you were alive and you were in Loge, she went to look for you. Can you imagine, she went one way, I came the other. Took me about two or three weeks, I really don't remember, to get back in Loge, where I was reunited with my mom.

SWB: Tell me about the moments of getting reunited.

NESSE GODIN: I tell you exactly how it was because I'll never ever forget that. When I came to Loge, the second

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time, that is looking already for my mom, there was already an organized committee at that train station. There were women that came and actually bodily showed you where the shelter was. And there was a red-headed woman from my hometown, standing there at the train, and when she saw me she said, Nesse, I'm gonna take you to your mother. I said, how do you know me? She said yes, we heard that you were here and you went to look for her and we thought y-she would-you would come back. She took me up two flights or three flights of stairs, I don't remember anymore. Here, I could hardly move my feet because they were frozen. I don't know how I walked up those stairs. She knocked on the door, she said Mrs. Galbring, I brought you your daughter. And the woman left. And what I remember, the door opening up, and there was no lights, I don't know why, maybe it was still, uh bombed there, it was a candle burning, and there was my mother. She looked frail, but she looked the same. She, from the age of 45 to 46, she didn't change really. But she did not recognize me. My head was still shaved, my face was still swollen, wrapped around with rags, and at that point I still had very terrible clothes on. Some Russian soldier gave me an old coat. I had a pair of men's

shoes on and I just remember her saying okay, take off your coat. And here is my mother, I was so anxious to hug her, and after I took off all that junk from me, she said I did not recognize you my child. And needless to say, we were very lucky. So few found mothers and found children, I was really very lucky.

SWB: Now I want to go back and ask you specific things about getting liberated and getting disinfected, did they give you a toothbrush, tell me about things like that.

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NESSE GODIN: Okay, I'll tell you... I have a little bit of a problem with the word liberation. Um, you know we are grateful to every soldier that came in, whether it was French or English or Russian or a wonderful American soldiers that came in and talked to us like human beings. But really did anybody send armies to liberate us? They found us there. Whether it was in the American zone or the French, they found us in those camps. Now in my particular, as I told you, the first units went through, they really

gave us crumbs of bread I remember just and saying, ah we don't have ourselves, and we don't want to give you too much so you don't get sick. Now as I told you before, the next day, the few that were a little bit healthier had walked to the village. I really cannot, don't know whether it was a mile or a mile and a half. It was not, it, we could see the village, it was within walking distance. I personally could not walk. A Russian soldier carried me on his arms and brought me to that little house. After being in that little house for two days, where we were given a little bit of food, they stopped in every house and gave a little bit of soup a few times a day. Then that makeshift hospital was created. I remember they brought me in to the hospital. I remember them shaving my hair, all over my body. I remember a burning sensation of DDT or some other kind of disinfectant. And then I didn't remember anything else for three days. I was unconscious. When I woke up, I remember the Russian doctor asking me my name, my age, where I'm from, and holding my hands, and giving me hope that I'm free, that I'll be okay, that they'll take care of me. I don't remember any toothbrushes, I don't remember any luxuries at all in that little hospital.

SWB: Okay we're about to run out....

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[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: Just a couple of other questions. Did you run into a teacher from your hometown right after liberation.

NESSE GODIN: Yes I did.

SWB: Tell me about that.

NESSE GODIN: In the barn, in the barn, there was, very close to me there was a woman that I thought looked very familiar. And after talking to her, I realized that she was one of my teachers, cause we didn't recognize each other. So, somehow, we got a little bit closer, because that was the only person that I could relate to that I felt like it was my family. So when the Russian soldier carried me, she said to him, please, I, don't separate us, that's all we have each other. So he brought her in that same house that I was, she was put on the same straw sack, you know, not the mattress, we didn't have mattresses, it was like a sack of straw. And she was laying there, and I remember there were women in that room cooking water, or doing something some

little bit stronger ladies, Jewish ladies. And one day I remember them j- I s-, I begged them I say, give me a little bit of water to give to my, my friend here. They said, she's dead, what do you need water for her. And I didn't realize that the last person that I thought I had was dead. I remember them taking her out to be buried and I couldn't even walk out to be there.

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SWB: And in the hospital was there a hunger strike.

NESSE GODIN: No there was no hunger strike for anybody. I see you really learned a lot about me. [laughs] There was no hunger strike for anybody, but there was a hunger strike for me. Uh, after I was getting better really, and one day I thought, I don't have anybody. My last friend is dead, that teacher. Now what do I need to live for. It's really no use for me to continue. So I thought if I would continue not to eat, maybe I would die and be with all my dear people that are not here no more. But somebody in the next bed told on me, and then they started to watch me and make sure

that I'm eating. I see you learned quite a bit about me.

SWB: Okay, now, tell me how you and your mother came to go to Feldafing.

NESSE GODIN: Uh, how did we come to go to Feldafing. We decided that there was no purpose for us to go back to Lithuania. Lithuania was a already Communist country, so we hung around in the city of Loge, thinking in case somebody else of the family will survive or somebody that we know, people started about talking about Palestine or that time how it was called it was not Israel yet. And by the later part of May or beginning of June, men started to come that were liberated in Dachau. And uh I remember a young man coming with a whole list, saying that they send out, w- I don't know how many, half a dozen, uh, men to go and see if any of the families are alive, they should try to reunite somehow. On that list was my brother's name, Hreskel Galpering, who was liberated in Dachau. He sent word that in case any of the family is there, that young men will meet any of the family, they should tell them that we should try

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to get to the American zone. Now before I continue let me tell you. When we were brought to the concentration camp the last words that we were sent to each other, was in case we survived that hell, our meeting point should be back home in Lithuania. So each of us had that idea in case somebody else comes back we should go to Lithuania. But that's why my brother also remembered it and made sure that in case someone of the family is alive, we should try to go. Now in tha- if you look through history at that time, you will see it really was not too difficult to go over border, walk across the border, especially for survivors. We, they could tell we are survivors. Somehow a group of people we, uh, somebody said that the best way to get over to the American zone would be through Berlin. Because in Berlin, they had the Russian zone, the French zone, the English zone, the American zone. Now uh I remembered riding on a truck and walking by foot. We wound up in one of the zones, I think, I don't really remember anymore whether it was the English zone or the French zone, and we just walked over to the American zone. And there we registered and um, if you had family, they helped you to get reunited. And when we told them that we heard that my brother is in Feldafing, ah, they actually brought us there. So, we wound up in uh, uh, October of 1945, we arrived in Feldafing. Took a long time for us to get there. You can see from sometime in June till October. So it wasn't a easy thing, you know, you went from one place to another, you had to wait for documents, for papers, for.. In the time from June till October, I met my

husband-to-be. And he joined us and before we actually arrived in Feldafing, Jack and I were married.

SWB: In 1945. So tell me a little about that.

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NESSE GODIN: Well this is always, especially children in the school when I talk to them about my experiences, they ask me how did you meet your husband. And I always tell them sincerely, in those days, you needed each other. My husband is a survivor of the holocaust. He doesn't even have a distant cousin. Um, there was a long story behind it how I met him. He was a friend of a friend of my, one of my uncles by marriage on my father's side. And when we found these people in the city of Loge, I mean we, my mom, and I found this uncle and his friend, we became a little bit like a family unit. And that's who we traveled with from Loge to the American zone. Um, at one point, I remember in Loge, my mother saying to me, uh, Nessele, that's an endearing word for your name Nesse, Nessele, you know we are two women alone. I think it would be a good idea if one of us would

get married. Now my mom was 46 years old, and I thought in my heart, why would she want to get married? She has me. I was angry. But the next thing out of my mother's mouth was, my child, I had a wonderful husband, I don't think I will marry again, but I think you should marry, look here is a few guys, they are all very nice. Choose one and get married, we'll have a man that will help us and take care of us. So honestly, I just looked at Jack and I thought he was cute, and I, many times I ask him, I say Jack, who proposed, how did we decide to get married. Um, I don't remember kissing him before we got married. I don't remember us being in love before we got married. We needed each other. But let me tell you, we are married a long time. We are very much in love now.

SWB: Okay. We have a little bit left on this roll. Just tell me what Feldafing is. I don't know anything about it.

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NESSE GODIN: Okay. What I remember of Feldafing. When I came to Feldafing I was curious, it looked a beautiful place

with villas, with a golf course, with tennis courts, with some barracks down the town, and I was told at that time that this was a resort place for SS men to come and enjoy themselves and have a good time. It was a small little town, the town itself was maybe ten blocks long. A small town, small European town, very pretty, very nice, and as you went down to the area where we called the DP camp was, ah you still saw those beautiful villas, you saw the beautiful trees, the beautiful area. But you have to understand, I- we were not given a villa. In that villa, ten families had to live.

SWB: Okay, we've got to reload.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

NESSE GODIN:to be good human beings, what, what if you don't love each other or hate each other or abuse each other, what can happen. And many times I don't say those things. But God forbid if I am in the audience, and some person that just wants to discredit me or discredit the Holocaust, and when I get angry, they hear the worst of the worst. And sometime[?] I said I never said that. How come all of a sudden I say that. And then I realize that I protect myself by not even saying that.

[SYNC MARK #4]

SWB: So we were back at Feldafing and you were describing

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the DP camps.

NESSE GODIN: Yeah. So, what I started to say, those villas were beautiful, but you have to understand if we were assigned a place in the villa that meant that ten families instead of one lived in that pretty house. Uh, for instance, my brother was there already with his wife to be, or she was his wife already actually maybe. And they had one room. Now when we came, my mom and my husband and I, we were just given two beds in the kitchen. And the kitchen was used by the rest of the ten families. So it was, yes, the place looked beautiful. But we were still crammed into small places. We still, ris- had to go down to the main kitchen to get the food, cause at the beginning they did not give you, for each family separate ration. You still had to go to the main kitchen with your little coupon to get your food. You also received a coupon for a pair of shoes, let's say. You went to that special place where they assigned you

that you can get a coat, or if you needed a dress, or if you needed something else. So, yes we were free, but we were still in like organized living.

SWB: What else about the conditions, were there other things that were similar to how your life had been before.

NESSE GODIN: Well, it- it- every thing is in comparison. Naturally you, when you start to compare to the concentration camp or the ghetto or the labor camp, this was heaven. But if you compare to normal lifestyle, this was still a camp. You still had a curfew, you were not allowed to go to the little town after a certain time. That, at the beginning. Later as time went on, I was in Feldafing five years. So later on was different. We ahead- some of the

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people had already little jobs in the little town, some people worked within the camp, some people uh went to school, so things changed, but at the beginning it was very organized living. We still were told we're not allowed to go uh out, we were not allowed to. And then we didn't have

money to go, let's say if somebody wanted to take a ride to Munich. Unless they assigned you a ticket to go for a certain purpose, like if I had to go with my face to the doctor in Munich, I had the ticket to go. But at the beginning, we couldn't go wherever we wanted. We were displaced persons, that's what our document said.

SWB: So you sort of had no rights.

NESSE GODIN: Well, I don't want to say no rights, but very limited rights. Very limited rights.

SWB: Did Ben-Gurion come while you were at Feldafing?

NESSE GODIN: Yes, I remember. I remember it well. Cause after we were there a year or so, the, within the camp, the Jewish community organized a little bit. There was the president of the camp, people were in charge of cultural affairs, they started to have, some people started to come uh that were in hiding or in the Russian occupied areas, and they had some little children, schools were organized and uh, different organizations, uh-uh, Zionist organizations. And I remember Ben-Gurion w- coming to the camp and speaking about uh you know, Palestine and about uh what's going to be, and I remember people going, going to legal immigration, leaving the camp and going there. But I remember Ben-Gurion with his hair standing out on both sides and giving us hope and I'll never forget that.

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SWB: Did they decorate Feldafing when he was coming?

NESSE GODIN: Oh yes, we we tried, I don't even know how we got maybe somehow with the help of the UNRHA, uh, is a- you know blue and white flags and uh, and a little, as much as we could decorate it, and uh p- well there was like a little parade and everybody coming. There was a big area it was called was the Turen Halle. Turen Halle means the sports arena. Which was a big, a big uh building. And that's where we met that time.

SWB: In, in this time, especially back in 1945, before you even got to Feldafing, were you afraid traveling...

NESSE GODIN: We were very much afraid because we heard already that so many people that went back even, not just afraid in Germany, we were afraid in Poland, we heard that people went back to their hometowns, and uh, people that lived in their homes or had their businesses, killed them. So we felt like we were really not welcome nowhere yet. Now

when we got to Germany, especially when we got to Feldafing, I had a very hard time, I tell you the truth. At that time we were just free. But you were in the midst of a people that you were wondering which of them killed your father, which of them killed your uncle, your grandmother, your grandfather. It was very difficult. Very difficult. You uh were suspicious, you were scared.

SWB: Did you want to get out.

NESSE GODIN: Every one of us dreamed to be able to leave those camps as soon as possible. I don't know if I

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mentioned to you. As soon as we arrived in Feldafing, we wrote a letter, to my aunt, to Washington D.C., my mom's sister. We remembered her address, she lived in Washington D.C., they had a tiny little grocery store on Sherman and Euclid streets, Washington, D.C. That's all you had to write, south market, Sherman and Euclid, no zip code in those days. My aunt received that letter. She went right away to the State Department, she found friends and family

that would sponsor us, make sure that we wouldn't be a burden to the United States government. But because of the quota system, in those days we had the quota system, sa- I'm saying it carefully because at one time somebody wrote down, Nesse didn't come to the United States because of a quarter. Quota system in those days. I was from Lithuania, it was a small quote. We had to wait five years. Five years. To be let in. We had to go through medical examination. We had to be checked and checked and checked. Until we were let go.

SWB: Tell me more about life in Feldafig and the organizations and...

NESSE GODIN: After the first year, I would say, maybe year and a half, um, you get accustomed to your way of life actually. People started to have children. I myself, my oldest daughter and my son were born in Feldafig in 1947, I became a mom. I was not quite nineteen years old. And then you saw those beautiful children and uh people started to have a little more hope. You know when you see children you know there is a future, you know tha- something else coming. And uh everyone was waiting. It was a time of waiting. But we uh, people um, really joined the Zionist organizations with the hope of um, having a uh, a fr-, our own land. I

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remember when Israel was declared a country. We were in
Feldafing. The celebrations, the ecstasy just to know that
there is a, in case we want there is a place that will take
us.

SWB: Okay, let's cut for a minute.

[CUT]

[SYNC TAKE 5]

NESSE GODIN: Uh we were very much afraid of the MP's,
because, you know when you are used to being afraid of the
military, you really did not know yet, am I supposed to go
here, am I m- not supposed to go here. Even when we were
free to go in the little town and we saw military police, we
were scared. We thought that they're going to do something
to us, they're going to tell us don't go here, don't go
there, don't do this. You know, when you live through such
a traumatic time as the Holocaust, and you know that this
people, them, SS and Gestapo and people in uniform
mistreated you, sometime you make mistake and even this
police was being kind to you, you were afraid. I tell you
the truth. I'm still afraid of military. I really am.

Sometime I think, oh, here goes a policeman, here goes a guard.

SWB: Now we have to get room tone.

[END]

Working transcript: not spell checked or verified for accuracy.