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Oh. [CLAPPERBOARD CLAPS]

That was good, Jim.

That's why we wear the headset.

This was good. It was just the beginning that we didn't go--

Right--

For an hour without--

Good catch, John.

I didn't hear your questions.

OK.

OK. Let's just--

I'll ask again.

Ask again.

Say right about now.

Now?

Yes.

We're interviewing Sara Gelender for the Holocaust Oral History Project in San Francisco, California. Today is September 23, 1992. I'm Peggy Coster. And the camera person is David Sokolski.

Sara, why don't you start by describing the day the Germans invaded?

This was from the beginning. Wasn't it?

Yeah, I'm going to go into more detail this time.

Oh, I see. OK. So that was September 1939. And Germany invaded Poland. And specifically, I'm talking about Warsaw. Warsaw was attacked by the Germans about in October-- October.

And the Polish resistance, they were kind of sure that they can take it, the aggression, and that they will be able to defend. But this was no comparison to the German power, to the German military power. So Warsaw was bombed-- was about, they say, 500 planes, which were cruising all over Warsaw.

And it was a terrible-- I still remember very vividly the time. And most young man were out of Warsaw because of the German intervention giving them messages by radio-- Polish language-- urging the young men to leave because, otherwise, the Germans are going to be taking them to a labor camp in Germany.

So of course, everybody and my four brothers left also. And so Warsaw was really without any-- there was nobody besides, of course, the military, which was not a match to the German military power. And we were-- in my family specifically, my sister was there with her child. And my sister-in-law, my brother's wife, was also with her child.

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So we were all together and, of course, my father and my mother. And bombing was very intense. And we were actually mostly all in the cellar. All the people from this whole building-- this was a four-story building-- everybody was in the cellar. And it was very frightening. It was intense bombing going on for hours and hours.

And we were sitting, as I mentioned, in the cellar. But we went for some kind-- I don't remember what the reason was that my mother went up. And just after this, we got a shrapnel into our window into our living room-- got a huge hole in the wall. And we had a little bird, my little niece's canary, in the cage because the bird was killed.

And after we decided, we were sitting in the cellar. And we learned that a bomb was found on our roof. And the bomb was from the type which start a fire. So of course, we decided we cannot stay here, because we will be facing a terrible fire. So we decided to leave.

We tried to get out of this building, went out in the street. The sky was completely red. The street was on fire. Wherever you look was just fire, fire. And the sky was red.

And this was September or October-- September was very hot, happened to be very hot there, too. And the heat-- the fire added the intensity of the heat. And we didn't know where to go, because wherever we look, everything was on fire.

So the only way probably where we can save ourselves is going to-- the only where there is no fire is probably at the river, this river in Poland. But this was a very long run to the river. So anyways, we try. We went to the street and ran from one street to another street.

Finally, we decided to go into a house, a building. Poland buildings were different than here. The building where it was entered this-- oh, boy. How do I explain this? It's hard for me to explain-- was actually the stairs, kind of a hall, sort of, this building, a hall.

And we were all, the whole family, with the little kids, we were sitting there on the steps of this-- sitting there and waiting. We were waiting until the night was over for the day, finally. In the morning, the bombing stopped. So we then decided to leave this area there and try to go to my sister's apartment, because ours was on fire.

So we were running through the street. There was no bombing then. And we came to her place. Her place was safe still. And we all were there, the whole family, all of us. She has a small place. And we realized that everything is gone.

Our whole-- we were living in this since I was born in there. You are living for years and years in the same place. And everything was gone with all the belongings, with all this-- with some items which you cannot replace which are-- you cannot replace.

But this was not really-- we didn't consider this anything to worry about it, because the main thing was just to save your life, because this was a war. So everybody was just anxious just to save and not to think about belonging and all the stuff.

And of course, we couldn't stay with my sister because she has a small place. And we were all all of us. So we went to my other sister's place. Her place also was safe. And we were staying there trying-- we decided the house, of course, was gone.

But the cellar still was staying there because-- and we had some fur coats. In Poland, a lot of people have fur coats because the climate was very cold. And it wasn't then this what it is today, which is save the animals and don't wear a fur coat. In those days, we didn't think about these issues.

So anyways, we had my mother's fur coat and my my father's and my two brothers' fur. So we decided we're just going to go there to the cellar and take this. This probably is still in condition that can be used, we think, this one. And we did. We went there, of course. But everything was lost.

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And then it was this shortly after-- and of course, the Polacks decided to give in. And they kind of capitulated. And the Germans took over Warsaw and took over Poland altogether. And right away after start all this restriction. There was 6 o'clock the-- what is it-- this limitation, not a--

Curfew--

Curfew, rather. Yeah. But in the beginning, we didn't know, we didn't expect, and we didn't feel that the Germans are going to be against the point against Jews. We know that they are against the Jews. But we didn't think that it's going to come to this kind of things which took place, which they're going to kill.

But we realized that we have to be-- that the time is getting the tough time for us, is getting hard because the Germans were in Poland. My brothers didn't come back. They crossed the border because Poland was divided between the Germans and the Russians. They crossed the border. They went on the Russian side.

They were there. And a lot of refugees, a lot of people from Warsaw, escaped that went on the Russian side. And I was just left with my parents. And I was young. But I thought my brothers were there. And I said, I don't feel that I wanted to stay also in Warsaw.

So I was kind of anxious to leave. I leave and also try to go to the border, go to the other side, because the life was very-- either way, it was very sad with all the restriction, with the curfew, and with other war. So most of the young people tried to escape, not to stay.

And I went with my brother-in-law. They had a little child. She was maybe three years old. And he went with me. He actually was studying in Germany. He learned perfect German language because he was studying to be an engineer in Weimar, I think, the German university.

So we went together. And we crossed-- which was already try to pretend that you don't look Jewish, that you're not Jewish, because we had to take this streetcar or the bus. And you were afraid, are they going to look at you, the Germans? Some, they can just grab you and throw you out.

So he happened to not look typical Jewish, but I think I look Jewish. So anyways, that was also a whole-- everything was then a problem. Everything was a big-- things like that, it was everything which was about life, about surviving, about everyday things which we never thought of it.

And we went, finally. We got to a little town which was away from the border still and actually a "rinch"-- a "rinch." Like "rinch"? A "rinch"? R-I-N-C-H? "Rinch"?

"Rinch"?

A "rinch," isn't it?

Like a farm?

Like a farm-- a farm. Yeah, like a farm house. That's right. And the owner of this house, the farmer, he's supposed to take the group of people across the border at the right time. And of course, you had to pay him.

And there was quite a number of people there. And we were waiting. Every day was-- every night was not-- the moon was full. There was too much light. So we were staying there about probably for two weeks and waiting for the right time to be able in the night to cross the border.

Finally, we decided this was quite a crossing. This was November, the beginning of November. And it was a big field and was partly frozen. And I was in high-heeled shoes. I never forget this.

And here was a group of people. They were going quite fast because they wanted-- the time was important to make it as

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soon as possible. I kept falling all the time with my high heels. And the ground was partly frozen, was not even. So it was terrible.

And I was always left behind. My brother-in-law was ahead of me. And he kind of called me and say-- I can't. I just was falling. And my knees were all bruised, until I finally made it.

Then we had to take-- I think we had to take a boat to go finally through the border. We came on the other side, which was such a relief to see just the Russian soldiers. But they were afraid, because they were suspicious of some people looking like they crossed the border. So they were sending you back.

Why were they suspicious? They were sending people back?

Back to Poland, because they realized these are people who want to escape. And they're coming here for the refugees. There was such an influx of refugees-- tremendous. They wanted to stop this.

So I was looking like a typical, really, refugee because I was exhausted and my knees. But somehow, we were kind of pretending that we are very much relaxed and quiet. And they let us go to the train and went to the city.

I wanted to go back and ask a few details about what we just covered. One is, could you talk about some of the restrictions? What restrictions did they impose and how quickly--

German?

Yeah.

All the restrictions-- the first thing, right away, all kind of on the radio and printed, showing on the street, print notice about the Jews. And then I don't really recall exactly what was the restriction kind. But I know that if you were staying for-- there were big lines for bread for something.

So if they saw a Jew thing, they just got you out of this line. You're not supposed to be here and you so and so and all these insults. And there was all kinds of tremendous restriction from the Germans right away in the beginning. That's why so many Jews wanted to leave.

But I don't recall. I cannot be specific, really, about that because I really don't remember. It's so many years ago. I just can't remember this. But there were a lot, but still not drastic enough to get all the Jews out.

For example, my two sisters still were staying. They had young kids, so I don't know if they felt that maybe this would be too difficult. My parents were staying, too. And a lot of my friends-- I can't believe it. All my friends were staying.

They're all gone, all young people, my best girlfriends. And none of them-- I don't know why-- because as I said, the Jews never could imagine-- could think that they're going to be put to death, all of them. Nobody expected this.

So that's why people didn't-- still, that's your home. And especially people whose house was not destroyed-- so you're saying, where I'm going to go, what I'm going to do, how I'm going to go there. What will I be there? So they were staying. That's what's so unfortunate, because that's why so many people find that.

Did anybody try to talk you out of going?

Yes. My girlfriend was already on the other side. My best girlfriend was on the other side with her brother. Her brother was sort of my boyfriend. And we were very young. We were 18 or 19 years old.

So of course, having them there and my brothers there-- so of course, I insisted I have to go. I want to go. So my parents didn't want to stop me, after all. So they just-- yeah, my mother gave me her ring, which I exchanged for bread-- and I cannot forgive myself until now-- in Russia, when we were in Russia.

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But they finally decided once that was mine, that definitely I don't want to stay there, so they couldn't stop me. And I left.

What do you remember of the German soldiers? What were their behavior, their attitudes, things they'd do?

Since I was not-- I was a short time in Germany, in Poland then, because after they took over Poland, they were already bosses. You saw on the street many of the German soldiers. And since I was a young girl, some of them were smiling to me kind of, trying to be friendly.

But as I said, in November, I left already. So I was not in this difficult time. So I was not in Poland already, because I left in November.

When they were being smiling and friendly, was that a time when you were wearing the star? Was the star after that?

Oh, no, the star was after. The star was after. Probably in 1940, they already had this for the Jews to put a star, but not when I was there. I was there a short time, as I said, maybe a month. After they take over-- they took over in September or October. And I left in November. So this was just a month, about.

And my best girlfriend who left there-- and unfortunately, they came back to Poland after being there for a few months. The conditions were very difficult on the other side, because all these refugees, we all were trying to get into the same city, the same town. And there were no places where to keep everybody, how to accommodate all this influx of refugees.

So she with her two brothers decided to go back. They went back, and they all perish. None of them survive. I have even in Polish language a letter from her and from my other two friends who wrote to me in Russia when I was already in Siberia.

What did they say in the letters?

Oh, it's a beautiful letter in Polish, dated 1940-- 1940 or '41, even.

Were they able to tell the true conditions?

They said that the conditions are terrible, hard. We have a very hard life, because there was short notice-- shorter letters. And they just dream of being together with me already. And they all think-- one, she even mentioned to me. She says her husband, as usual, he's optimistic that everything's going to be fine.

And everything was-- often, I read this letter from my three best girlfriends. They're all gone, all of them. Not even one survived. So this was this-- not that I was smart.

It turned out that I did the right thing by escaping. But I didn't figure out anything. Mine was just strictly emotional, that there, I had my friends. And I couldn't just face this life here as a very young girl.

With all the restrictions.

With all the restrictions. That's right. Yeah.

Did you see any atrocities on the street by the German soldiers or the Poles towards the Jews?

The Poles were very much working together with the Germans. This was the tragedy.

Talk about that.

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Very much the Polacks-- unfortunately, this is the truth, really. Maybe some Polacks will be not wanting to hear this saying me. But this was the truth, that the Polacks were very much helping, because the Jewish population was about 10%, which was quite a large part of the Polish citizens. 3 and 1/2 million were Jews.

And they were playing the Polacks. They were envying of the Jews who were sometimes prospering. They were envying. They were jealous. And the Jews were second-class citizens, really, absolutely second-class citizens. They were not treated as equal as the Poles.

And the atrocity-- I don't really remember strictly to tell any examples. I cannot mention because I don't remember, really. And as I mentioned to you, I left in this first month. They didn't come so strong in the first month. But eventually, with every month came a little harder and harder and more restriction and more-- and eventually, the ghetto, which was terrible.

But this was '41, probably, '42. And then we were already in Siberia there, because we were 1940-- yeah. 1940, the Russians took us to Siberia 1940, summer. Yeah, I wish I could remember some of the things to be more specific. But I just noticed was a lot of restriction. It was-- let me think.

For any kind of misbehavior, what they call, against the Germans, right away, the Jews were punished. That's what they were saying in this whole written statement. Then if anybody will orally or physically insult any German, they right away take 10 or 15 people from this building. And they're going to shoot. This was right away, this.

So everybody was really-- we know we have to mind your own business and be quiet. And this is amazing, really, now when we think how all the Jews went from every country in Europe without any kind of--

Resistance--

With any kind of resistance. And they all went so calmly, so trustfully, went to these places, went into the trains, because nobody expected it. And maybe in the end, maybe some people did expect, eventually. But a lot just went without any resistance, really.

This was so tragic. This was just-- I don't know. It's incredible. You cannot even apprehend it with your mind, to have a nerve to go to all these countries in Europe and just take innocent people out of their houses and take them to kill.

I know my sister-- just my son-in-law who went with me-- not my son-in-law, my brother-in-law, I meant-- my brother-in-law, who went with me, he went back. And after all the Germans-- very shortly after, the Germans announced that they were taking all the children out, little kids. And they were collecting all these.

And they came to my sister. And she had a little girl. She was maybe three or four years old, maybe four years old. And the child was-- you can imagine how a child was in a terrible fright and a terrible-- so she was crying and screaming.

So anyways, her father said he's going to go with her, because he said he knows how to speak German. So he wanted to go. And they both were killed right away, his little girl together with him. They were right away killed, both.

And my dear sister actually survived. She left the ghetto. And she went on the other side, Aryan side, and pretended that she's not Jewish. She really didn't look very much Jewish.

And she actually survived until the uprising in Warsaw. And then she was killed by a bomb following this. And she was killed. So she survived till 1945. The uprising in Warsaw was just before the end of the war-- so tragically that she died. Yeah.

You said people tried to appear not Jewish and act not Jewish.

Of course.

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How? How would you change your behavior?

My best girlfriend, she colored her hair blonde. She wore a big cross. And she acted very much-- she knows exactly how to-- whatever how you call this. I don't know.

Make the sign of the cross.

That's right. And she made her business to learn all this, kind of, to appear. And she survived with her little girl. She had a girl about five or six years old.

And she survived. She survived the whole war. And she was never in a concentration camp. But she's dead just the same. Her husband was also taken by the Germans and killed. She survived, this girl.

And they survived the war. After, she married a Jewish guy from Germany, a Jewish man. And she got pregnant. And she had this-- and I met with her after I came. This was 1946. And I came back from Russia to Poland.

They sent us back. And I kind of-- I don't know exactly how I find out that she's in the same little town where I was. And we got together. And you can imagine our reunion. She was a wonderful person. And she was advanced pregnancy already. She was maybe eight months, seven or eight months advanced pregnancy.

And we were saying that from now on, we have to keep absolutely to be together, that we cannot part for any reason. We have to be in touch. And then eventually-- because they were leaving. Right away, they were leaving, she with her husband and with her girl.

Anyway, what it was, they left to I don't remember exactly where, probably one of the town-- I don't know now. German? I don't know exactly, because we were in the area which was taken from Germany by Poland. Poland took Schlesian, I think. So they took back from Poland which used to before belong to Poland.

Silesia?

Silesia. Exactly. That's right. Mm-hmm. So she went there. She had her baby there. And they noticed there was a German, I think so. And she was under with drugs. And she got a hemorrhage, my girlfriend. And she died. She lost her life there.

And he was left with a little baby. It was a little boy. So many tragedies. So many tragedies.

How was her husband killed, the person?

He was taken. They just came and took him. They were taking men. They just took him. He was a young man. They just took him and shot him.

Oh, and shot him.

And shot him. Yeah. He was killed.

Was it pretty open that they were doing this?

I don't know exactly if this was open. But I know that he was shot. They took him. And then he was shot, and she was left. And when she left Warsaw, just went on the Aryan side there. And this was the story of her. So anyway, eventually, she also died so unnecessarily.

And your brother-in-law and his daughter, how were they killed?

As I said, the German soldier came to their house, to their place, the apartment, to take the little girl. She was about four

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years old. And she was in a terrible fright with terrible fear. She was screaming and crying like a child will react seeing strange-- especially soldiers looking, too. And so her father said that he's going to go with her.

Were they shot?

And they were both shot. They were both shot, the child and him, right away. That was the news what I got from people who are there living in the same area with my sister.

How did your sister handle that?

I imagine this was terrible. But then in those days, even when-- I imagine so now, that your survival was so important. Everybody wanted to survive. So I imagine that she still wanted to survive, in spite of this terrible-- and they were very-- the first thing my two sisters and my parents, they were terribly worrying about us because, in the beginning, we wrote to them.

And I wrote that there is terribly cold. Of course, it's Siberia. And they know how I was-- you're hot, huh? You wanted to--

No, that's OK.

And they know that I have trouble with my legs. I used to have trouble, especially when it was very cold. So they were so-- I got a letter from my sisters and my parents. How are you doing? How are you standing? How can you withstand this terrible cold, because this was no comparison to the winter in Poland.

So they were so concerned about us. How do you manage? How are you managing there? Themselves, they had terrible life-- hard condition of life. But they were very much-- so that's why I imagine my sister also-- this was, of course, a terrible tragedy to her.

But in this time, you heard this was killed. That was killed, these people. You practically get numb of this, too, because you hear just this one or this disappeared. This disappeared. He was taken. This was taken. So you just get that that's the reality of life now.

That's where we lived now. So then it's just how can I save myself, at least. So I imagine that that was probably it was-- that's how it-- I know even we in Russia, we were not in the danger of life. We were just living in a very difficult condition, under very difficult conditions, which we are not used to it, this terrible cold and the physical work in the forest.

But still, there were parents. And there were children. And they were fighting about a piece of bread between the parents and the children. This is mine. Don't touch this and don't-- it's terrible. It's so strong.

The survival instinct is so tremendous strong, then you are willing to overlook that I love these people. That's what the war brought on us, yeah, the worse and terrible. So my dear, that's how it was. So what would you wanted me to talk now?

Well, I still wanted to ask a couple of questions about life just before the war. People were worried because-- people were worried, weren't they, about Germany invading Poland? And when Czechoslovakia-- was taken--

Was taken over, I understand there were some attempts by the Poles to get some of Czechoslovakia. How did that kind of be reconciled with their own fear of being taken over by Germany, anyway?

Oh, the Polish people, they're really amazing. I don't know if they have any realistic ground to feel so sure that they can withstand the aggression of Germany, because when they will do as the French did, which they called the Paris the "open city." There was no bombing, and Paris survived.

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They should have called this, too. But they thought that they can withstand. And they were prepared to fight. And oh, they were so bullish, really. They were. And that makes us feel good, too.

Or maybe it's the Polack, maybe, that we will be able to-- aggression of the Germans, we will be able to fight it and to remain free people, because they kept on the radio-- of course, we didn't have television-- on the radio. And every time you hear that we were in the news, that we are under the-- what was the guy who was in charge of the armed forces?

That we will call and we will withstand the German aggression and we will fight and we will win. And that kind of made the people feeling kind of better. They thought, maybe we will. Maybe Poland will be free.

And of course, the Germans were very well-prepared for this war. That's no question about it. And then the Poles-- we had a lot of refugees from Germany, a lot of Jewish refugees, because then the year '38, '39. This was a lot already-- the Crystal Night, the famous Crystal Night in Germany and all this already, the severe persecution.

So a lot of German Jews came to Poland. So Poland had a lot of refugees then, too. And Austria-- Czechoslovakia was taken without fight right away. And then--

Do you remember the Poles trying to get some of Czechoslovakia?

I don't remember this. I don't know. They did? I don't remember, even. Then they had a nerve, really, to take advantage of everything. So this, I don't remember. I don't remember this. I know that this taking of Czechoslovakia was very quick. And after was the intervention of this English British guy and trying to keep everybody. It's going to be peace.

We give away Czechoslovakia, but now it's going to be peace. We're going to avoid war. And that's what-- we had to do this, so don't feel bad about it. But the war-- it's peace now. We're going to have peace-- so silly.

And people wanted to believe in it, too. So we said, OK. Let's take Czechoslovakia. Let's have peace. But that was just the beginning. So it wasn't.

Do you remember when Germany expelled the Jews and Poland wouldn't take them in so they were kind of stuck in this little narrow part of land?

Yeah. This, I don't remember so clear. I met quite a few German Jews here who, so desperate, came. And they were in a very difficult, very difficult, really, life crisis. But they had to run away there. And they didn't know how to arrange their future, if they can stay in Poland, they're going to leave.

Everybody was living from day to day, really. There were no plans. You couldn't make any plans because you didn't know what is going to be next. So I don't know, really.

Eventually, what happened, some probably German Jews left also Poland as other refugees. But I'm not very familiar with this type-- with this time. So I cannot talk about that because I don't know much.

When you left for the Russian zone, how long did it take you to get there?

It took us-- as I mentioned, we had to wait about two weeks with those farmers.

No. I mean from Warsaw to the farmers.

Oh, from Warsaw to farmers? We had to take a train, which was very risky and very-- we were so scared. I remember sitting in the train and pretending that not to attract attention to anybody's attention because we were so afraid, because just the Polack can say, oh, she's Jewish. And then the German guy can take you right away and get you out of the train, really.

So we were trying to be so invisible, sort of, that nobody will pay any attention to us. It was very, very, very tense-- very

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tense. And I don't remember. Probably it was not a long ride from this, because this was not right to the border, just to the farmer there. So I don't remember how long was the ride. I don't remember.

And I just remember that we are very scared, terribly frightened. I tried to-- I didn't wear glasses then. And I had a kerchief, kind of and tried to-- although my Polish language was excellent. I spoke very well Polish. And I don't know.

But we were so afraid. We were afraid to breathe, practically, even because they will notice us and get us out of the train. But somehow, we were lucky. And we went to this farm there to the farmers and stopped there. And there, we were waiting quite a number of days for-- yes?

Did the Germans check your papers while on the train?

Pardon?

Did the Germans check your papers while you were on the train?

This, I don't remember, really. We probably had some tickets, probably. But I don't remember. Just kind of I have a blank about this one. No paper-- we didn't have any. We have papers with "Jew." That will be the end of us. No, I don't think so. They were ordinary soldiers, a few.

And they just probably-- we just showed a ticket to someone who was in charge of it. And that's all. This was about all. They didn't ask for papers. This was still the beginning. As I mentioned, this was just the beginning of the German occupation.

How did you spend that two weeks on that farmer's land?

Oh how did we spend? Yeah, this was a long time for us. I think I with my brother-in-law, we were playing some games. I don't remember what games we were playing, because it was so long we were staying there.

And we were sleeping in the area on straw or something. They didn't have beds for anybody. So this was so primitive-- terrible primitive-- these two weeks were But as I said, everything was OK as long as we can go escape from here. So we put up with all this inconvenience. This didn't-- we didn't make an issue out of it.

Did you have enough to eat?

Probably. Yeah, I think so. We had to have some money with us, of course, to buy some from the farmer, because he charged for this also for the taking us across. So he had a fare for it, too. And yeah, we had to buy there food-- probably just mainly not cook anything. I don't think so.

And just waiting every night or maybe tonight, maybe tonight-- we were waiting till the moon will be-- because the nights were so-- and all the stars and the moon were so light. So they were afraid that they can catch us. And then it's going to take us all and right away can send us to concentration camp or kill us right away.

So we were waiting until he decided, now, it's time to go. So let's go. And when he said, let's go, it's go right away. And we were walking in the night, which is dark.

We choose the night dark. So it was very terrible, really. It's terrible, very difficult even for my-- I was a young girl, but still with the high heels-- to cross this big field. There was quite a bit of walk there. Yeah. I remember this was very hard.

Didn't the farmer tell you to wear-- give instructions like what kind of shoes to wear?

We didn't have any instruction. I didn't have any shoes. The first thing, everything what I had was gone with the fire. So I was practically just left what I had on myself. That's all. I didn't have anything to change.

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Then since I wanted to go away-- so my mother went with me to a few stores. There were still stores which remained after and which were not bombed. So we went to buy a few things, because I didn't have anything. And I just have this one pair of shoes, which were these heels.

In Poland, I never wore the flat shoes, anyways. We didn't wear the flat shoes. Even in the winter, we wore sometimes high, but also with heels-- always with heels. You want to be in style, especially when you are young like that. So I didn't have any. And I had to go with the shoes.

I realize after that this was terrible. Now, looking back at it, I don't know how I did it altogether with these high heels. It was just awful.

I finally ended-- we went to Bialystok, the name of the city in the Russian side. Now, I think this belongs to Russia, this part, Belorussia now-- I think so. The White whatever how is it in English--

White Russian?

White-- in Russian, this is the Belorussia. But I don't know how to say this in English.

Belarus.

How?

Belarus.

Oh, yeah, like that. Yeah. So anyways, yeah, I was a picture really of terrible, because my knees. Oh my god.

My four brothers were there, my youngest. Of course, two of my brothers were killed also in concentration camps. And two of my brothers went with me to Siberia. But two, my youngest brother and the oldest brother-- my oldest brother, when the Russians took over this part of Poland, he got a very big-- what is that-- position, very high.

He was very educated. He educated in Paris in Sorbonne. And he spoke fluently French, of course. And the Russians recognized people with education. So the first thing, he was a principal. Then he became a principal from a high school there. And he was very much involved with the Russians.

And he was looking forward to this Communism, really, because in Poland, with his education, he couldn't do anything. With high education what he had, he couldn't make a living. So he was looking to be recognized. He thought the Communist regime for giving him this opportunity, what he was not having in Poland before.

So there, he was recognized. And when the Germans took it over, the city in which he was established, was living, he was killed right away with his wife, with his daughter, and with his wife's sister. They were all killed right away when the Germans took over the city and came.

So this was-- and the youngest brother, my younger brother, was on the other side. But he decided to go back. He went back also to Poland. And he got married and was in Auschwitz. And he was killed in Auschwitz. Yeah. So they, too-- and my two sisters were also. Yeah. But I was with my two brothers together.

And we together went to-- were sent. Although my brothers were very much for me, they wanted me. They said, you don't have to go really with us because we are going now to a part. You don't know how terrible life is going to be there.

And this part-- we were, of course, in the Russian part of Poland, which was life was difficult because we were so-- but we were free people. We could do and live completely free, without any kind of harassment and any kind of imposing on us any kind of restriction.

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But they said, so why don't you go out from the train? And they won't even notice that you are not here. And you remain here. And then you're going to go back to Poland.

Where was here?

Here is beyond the train, going from the Russian city-- from the Poland city, actually, in Russia. This was on the train, which the train had to take us out of Poland, out of this.

This was the train to Siberia.

The train, actually, to Siberia was not one train. It was a lot of-- from Poland to Siberia was a tremendous distance. So there was boat. There were trains.

The way to get there, it took probably three weeks to get to Siberia. This was a long, long stretch of way. But we were on the train going out, leaving this part of-- this city, specifically, leaving the part and going I don't remember where, but going out. And so my brothers thought that I will do better staying there and going back to Poland.

What city?

Bialystok. Bialy-- Galos-- whatever.

Bialystok.

Bialystok. That's the name of the city. But I don't know why I said no, I don't want it. I was just kind of afraid to be alone there.

And here, I felt, anyways, I was with my two brothers. So I decided, no. Otherwise, I will have the same. The same will happen to me what's happened to everybody. So I don't know. This was just-- maybe this was predestined for me to survive.

So I didn't want this. And they said, you know what? And my sister-in-law had a fur coat which was left there in the city there. So she says, you can take the fur coat and sell it so you can have some money, too. And why don't you go out?

We are young. Don't go with us, because we don't know where we're going. Who knows what a horrible life is going to be there? And for some reason-- I don't know what it was-- I said, no, I don't want it. I want to go, too.

And I went with them. And it turned out that we were the ones who did the right thing, really, because we survived. Yeah. So that's the part of the story.

Now, when you left to go across the river to Poland, how did you find this farmer who would kind of take you across?

I don't know this. My brother-in-law somehow found it. So I don't know this. I don't know the details, because the details, they escape my mind. But he found this place that this guy, probably somebody, told him about because a lot of people were leaving.

And he knew about it. And we were destined to go to this place to this farmer. That's what we know. But I don't know exactly the little detail. I don't know exactly how this was, really.

Well, the two weeks that you spend on the farm, on the ranch, did you have to spend it kind out of sight so that the neighbors didn't know you were there? And did everybody know you were there and it was--

I don't remember seeing any neighbors. This was a farm. Mainly, we were just in his place. We were not free to walk around and go-- no, not this. We were just strictly there in his area. They're sitting there.

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And he actually brought the food for us. if we pay him. And you are not free to walk around and go and try to visit. Oh, no, we were strictly there, sitting there.

And that's all about and just sitting and waiting until-- waiting for every night, oh, maybe tonight. Maybe tonight. And that's how it was going out for quite a few days. Mm-hmm.

How many of you were there?

I don't remember exactly, but it was a large group of people. I don't know. Maybe 15.

Any small children?

No, I don't remember any children. I don't remember any children. Some little detail-- I'm surprised I remember this much, really, because you know how I'm going back over 50 years. That's a long time, really.

So yeah, it's a funny thing that I don't remember things what it was last week. I don't remember. And here, I remember vividly things which go back 50 years. It's amazing, really.

But apparently, I don't know what it is. But I do remember. Whatever I tell you is exactly as I remember it was there. And I know this was exactly as I said, really.

From here.

OK. So what town did you go to once you crossed the river.

As I said, Bialystok.

Oh, sorry. I knew that.

Bialystok. Yeah.

Now, did you know anybody there? How did you find out where to go?

We went to where my brothers were. And they found one family, a wonderful family who took them in. Yeah. So they were four, and they took this family-- wonderful people.

They took them in. So when I came-- so I went, of course, to my brothers. So I was there, too. And after my one-- actually, yes, my oldest brother, his wife was with us with his child. But eventually, after-- she was a registered nurse.

But after she also went illegally also through the border to join her husband, so she went. She came to us, too. And then my other brother, his fiancee came also. And we all were there, all of us.

So it was terrible. It was too crowded. And I got sick. I was running a temperature, and they just didn't know. And we had some doctors who were also refugees from the other side.

And they didn't know what is-- in those days, they didn't have antibiotics, though. They didn't know what causes the fever. And I was running a fever for weeks. And they couldn't just figure out.

And the conditions, they were so crowded there. And we had about 10 people or more to make a dinner for all of us. It was a very difficult time-- very difficult.

So eventually, my oldest brother heard that we decided-- because the Russian government offered us citizen if you wanted to accept. And we didn't want it. So we were not talking to each other. He was so angry with us that we refused. We wanted to go back to Germany. So we didn't talk to each other.

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This was the brother that went to the Sorbonne?

Uh-huh, the oldest brother, and because he couldn't understand. They offer you citizen. You can be in a free country. To him, Communism was not the worst form of government.

He rather was pleased with it. So he just saw us as committing the biggest stupidity in our life, this wanting to go back to the Germans. But we said we didn't want to get, because the Russian offered us citizen. And then we could have gone to another place and not necessarily Siberia.

We could go to a place where the life was much easier. But we didn't want it because we are afraid they will never allow us to go back. So we refused definitely. And since we refused, they didn't trust us. So they sent us far away to Siberia, then the place where they sent out the people who are political.

So anyway, so we didn't talk to each other. My brother was very hurt and very angry. This was a horrible atmosphere, with all this in this one room, mostly all of us. And finally, he moved out with his wife, with his little girl and the sister of his wife-- moved to another city where he got to be this principal of a high school. And she was a registered nurse. She was a very qualified nurse, really.

And that was the end of us. That's how we-- we didn't even say goodbye to each other. This was the end of us. It's very tragic. And I was just left. And my youngest brother, as I mentioned, he wanted to go to a university. And after, he decided-- for some reason I don't know-- he went back to his parents, back to Warsaw, to Poland-- was taken to Auschwitz and died in Auschwitz.

So I was just with my two brothers and with my sisters-- one of my brothers, as I mentioned, got married. His fiancee came. So they got married. And we all went together through this long voyage to our destination, which was Siberia and this place there.

Was it possible to have a traditional wedding at that time?

No. The wedding was when we were still in Bialystok. So we made them a little party. But the people who let us in, who took us in, were so friendly and so good-hearted people that they wanted-- they did whatever they could to make our life kind of easy as possible, possible-- wonderful people. They're all gone, of course.

So we had maybe a few better things to eat. And this was the whole party, about. And they went together. Yes. And of course, the other brother of mine was not married. But he got married in Russia and I got married in Russia.

He found his wife in the same place where I got my husband. Yes. She was not from Warsaw.

She's alive, a matter of fact. She's in Israel. She's alive. And my husband's brother is also in Israel. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

How did you get enough food for all these people?

Oh, there? Oh, there was-- oh, don't ask. And I was young. I was very hungry. And I hated this whole thing. Whatever you could, it was not enough to feed a group like that like we were.

And I was very hungry, I remember. It's a funny thing that I remember little things like that. But I remember. And I urged my brother that we should move out, because it was terrible, the cooking. And I was really very-- I was very hungry there. There was not enough food, not enough bread.

We were maybe 10 people together, all young people. And especially at a time when you know the food is scarce, your demand, it's much bigger than normal. When you have a refrigerator full of food, you don't feel ever hunger. But then you really feel how hungry because the food is so limited.

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So it was very difficult, really, a very difficult time. But we realized that if you are just refugees, you were just living from day to day. And there were the Germans. Here, we didn't know what's going to happen. This was such a time of a terrible-- what is the worst word-- of nothing steady, nothing what you can count on it of changes, of goals better from day to day.

It's a very difficult time, really, for all of us. But thanks to our age, we were young. So we could survive, really, because a lot of older people in Russia, they just couldn't survive this lack of food and this climate, the severe climate. So a lot of just older people, they really-- natural death. But they--

How did being young help you survive? Did it mean you could do more? Or exactly how did being young help you survive?

Your real body's stronger. Your body apparently is strong, still, and can withstand better than-- that's how I understand. They didn't know. We had the same-- we were on the same responsibility and the same just as the Russian people. We had to work.

There was nothing different for us. They had to work. We had to work. And we had duration, hard duration, with very little food. And that's what it had to be. Of course, wherever we had any kinds where we can change, we changed our clothing for food and watch.

We had a watch. Oh, they give you a watch in Russia was-- this was the least what we wanted to part with. But we had to part with a watch. Whatever we had, we gave it away for potatoes, flour, just for being able to not to be hungry.

Was there a black market?

Not officially a black market because this was illegal. But of course, this was a black market. But for example, I was working in Russia after-- from this war, they transferred '41 when Germany declared war on Russia. So then they changed, the Russians, towards us, because then the Germans were the enemy. And we were the ones who escaped from the enemy.

So they allowed us to leave this place where we were in forest and go to the city. So we were transferred to the city. Yeah. So that's conditions that were a little bit easy, because I didn't have to work outside. so why did I bring this up? I don't remember.

In Bialystok, did you go to the black market to get food?

Oh. Yeah. In Bialystok was a black market in there. All the Russian soldiers, you can buy them. They have plenty of rubles, but they didn't have anything. They didn't have a watch.

The watch was such a tremendous thing what you can buy. And other things-- especially, actually, watches. People crossing the border, they were bringing watches from Warsaw, which they could get it for a reasonable price and sell them there to some of the Russian highest-rank military man who had money. So they would be-- oh, they were so anxious to get all these goodies.

Mm-hmm.

Do you remember the Russians trading for anything? What I'm thinking of is in two places, I read of Russian soldiers buying nightgowns and wearing them as evening gowns.

Exactly. Oh, yeah, that's right, even mine because I had some pajamas which were nylon. They couldn't believe it. You sleep in this kind of-- they couldn't believe it. They said, we're going to wear this for going out, for going-- or our nightgowns, which were nylon nightgowns.

And they were so impressed. Oh, they were so poor. They didn't know-- the place where we were in a forest, they didn't

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know what is really a Jew, because they never met a Jewish person. And they didn't even know that we are Jewish.

They know that we are refugees from Poland, but they didn't know, really. And they were very friendly people. But they couldn't help us because they didn't have anything, too. So they couldn't help us. And all the men were in the military. And the women had to work hard.

And they were envious. They said, your men are so good. They bring water for you from the well. And they chopped the wood for me for fire. You have such a good man.

Oh my. They were so-- they just wanted-- they just had an eye on our men, really, the Russian women. Some of them were very pretty, very pretty, nice, good-looking girls. But anyways, this was not our problem, really.

But as I said, we kind of-- in spite of this terrible, hard life. My husband, he was sick, as I mentioned previously here, pneumonia. Two or three times, he got pneumonia in Russia from this hard work what he was working here. Yeah, it was a very, very difficult life because we had-- there was no privacy.

We had one room about 30 people in one room-- man, woman, everybody together. And you couldn't-- there were no facilities for people in the night if you have to use-- you didn't have a bathroom or nothing. It was-- now, I'm looking back.

My god, it was so-- one bed was so close to the other bed. And that's how-- and I'm going to work and coming back. And it was a hard life, very hard. But we survived. And that's the main thing, that we did survive. We came back to Poland. We started a new life.

In Bialystok, what was your job?

I didn't work in Bialystok.

The Russians didn't--

No, there was not even-- I don't think that they had all of the ration cards. I don't remember. I think there was a free market, still, because this was just the beginning. I don't remember that the Russian gave us a ration card. This, I don't remember.

But I didn't work. They didn't force you to work. There, you had to work. But then, no. My brothers didn't work. They were just-- what they were doing, they were speculating.

They were buying things in one place and going to another place and selling them on the bazaar. That's what they were doing and making a few dollars. That's what-- the money, of course, was right away ruble, not Polish money.

And that was the-- but how could you find a role? This was impossible even to look, probably, for work. I don't think so. And anyways, no, nobody of us-- my sister-in-law, she was a nurse. She was working. She was working in a hospital.

Yeah. And my brother, oldest brother, was working. But then everybody else was speculating or just doing nothing from day to day until-- we were there till 1940 in June. So we were there quite a few months, from November till the next year, 1940-- from November '39 till 1940, June, which was quite a few months.

We were there in June. They took us-- there was this offer us the citizen. We didn't want it. So they organized the whole thing. And all these refugees were taken out from the cities.

The Polish family of-- the family you lived with in Bialystok, were they Polish or Jewish?

No, they were Jewish. Oh, no. No Polack will take all these Jewish people in. No, a Jewish very wonderful family-- Jewish family, very caring and really wonderful people. There was a daughter and her husband and her father and

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mother. They were themselves maybe five or six people.

And they took a bunch of us in. Yeah, there was-- but there was the time when we didn't know is it a war. Is it after the war? We didn't know what the time was. Our country didn't exist anymore. Poland didn't exist.

This was our motherland, our country. Poland didn't exist. So you just start your life again with a refugee. And you didn't know really what the right thing to do-- go back.

One day, we thought we're going to go back. Then the next day, actually, my two brothers want to go back and I want to go back. We definitely want to go back.

To Warsaw.

Pardon?

To Warsaw.

To Warsaw back. Yeah. But this man who was taking the people back, he took my girlfriend and her two brothers and another group of people. He couldn't take anymore. So he said he's going to come back. Then he's going to take another group. And we were signing up to go with him in another group. Meantime, they were caught.

A few-- my girlfriend with her brothers, kind of they were-- I don't know if you can call this lucky. But they could cross the Polish border. And the others were caught. And they were jailed.

So the guy didn't come back. So we didn't have anybody to take us. So that's what it was. So that's why we decided whatever's going to be-- que sera, sera. That's what we decided. And we decided apparently the right things to do.

Yeah, I'm so heartbroken that more of our people didn't do this, didn't escape. That's so terrible. But nobody in their wildest imagination could picture things which happened-- the concentration camp. Nobody could think of it's going to take place, nobody. Otherwise, the majority will leave. That was the--

You say it took you three weeks to get to Siberia?

Oh, yeah, probably. Yeah. We went by train. The train was also not a passenger train. It was just the-- how is it? The-- how you call the train for--

Freight cars?

Pardon?

Freight cars?

Freight cars. That's right. Yeah.

Did they give you seats or any kind of amenities?

No, there was just-- there were no seats set down for single people. There was just one platform there. And you brought with you-- you brought whatever you had, blanket, whatever you accumulated in Russia and Poland there in the place. So you brought it with you.

So you were just lying like that, because we spent many nights on the train. The train was going. It was not a very fast train. I don't think so. And they were stopping at different places and gave us food for this plan for how many people, the bread-- mostly was just bread. There was no luxury, nothing fancy.

Enough water?

Water and bread, that probably was-- if you give money, when they stop, you could take around and go someplace, if you have enough time to maybe go and buy something and bring. But most of the time, there was not very long station to stay. They try to kind of keep going, because, after all, that was a time really of wartime, kind of.

And anyways, 1940-- no, this was 1941, when the Germans declared war on Russians. So that was already the really tragedy. That was when all these terrible things what happened there. And Germans were proceeding from city to city, taking over, taking over.

They were planning already to be in Moscow. They were going, because the resistance was not very strong in the beginning. So they were really continuing and progressing deeper and deeper into Russia. Yeah. So then this condition for us was very hard, really.

How long were you on the train?

Pardon?

How long were you on this train? Do you remember?

On the train? Because after the train, we took a boat. And I don't know exactly how long, too, is the boat ride because, apparently, to go there, you have to take the boat, too. That's what we did. I remember distinctly where we took the boat.

What conditions on the boat did they give you to live in?

This, I don't remember. The condition of the boat, I don't remember at all. I remember we were on the boat. But the detail about the condition, I can't-- I don't recall this. No, I don't recall. And how long we were on the boat, I don't remember. But after the boat, we went again on the train.

And finally, when we arrive there, there was a little-- all farmland, just farmers. And when they give us there the first food, nobody wanted to eat. And they were laughing. They said, [RUSSIAN], which means, if you don't get used to it, you will die.

They were laughing from us because, oh, that tastes horrible. The fish smells horrible. I still remember we said, oh, they stink, the fish. How can you eat this fish? It's just terrible.

It was just yep, you get used to it. You get used to it. You haven't got anything else. You have to eat. Oh, we were in the beginning kind of still remember the good things-- you don't understand Jewish? No, you don't.

Well, go ahead and say it, though.

No, this is a whole song what we used to sing in Russia about our life in Russia. This was so-- then when the Russians get us with this song, we could get 15 years in jail. There's such a critic of the Communism of their regime, of their government. Oh, it was just terrible. Yeah.

Go ahead and sing it and then translate.

Oh, you don't-- that's good when you understand. It's a very funny song. But you have to-- you don't understand Jewish, either.

[HEBREW]

Huh?

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[HEBREW]

What?

Sing it.

Oh, sing it? Really, you understand?

Yeah.

I wish that you will understand. This will be nice.

And then you sing it in English, too.

[SINGING IN HEBREW]

That means that when I was living in Poland, I used to-- I didn't want to eat oranges from Jaffa, the Israeli oranges. I was so choosy about. But when I came here to Russia, here in Russia, the lice eating me-- the lice, [HEBREW], which is the lice-- and the bedbugs-- is it bedbugs?

Bedbugs.

They're eating me. So I give you back. And that's what-- you may get to-- you go to hell with your country. And maybe I shouldn't even have this on this.

No, that's OK.

Go to hell with your country. We want to go back, back to Poland, back to our land, back home, back home. And we are-- there's a specific in Jewish, [HEBREW]. I don't know how to translate this. And we say, you go to hell with your country. And we want to go back home.

And we were singing like that. When they will hear this, oh, that's terrible disgrace. Yeah, we were so-- we wanted to all go back home, go back home. We were suffering. We were deprived of so many things leaving and such.

And actually, we were missing our families and our place and our country. This was still our country. And we were missing our family and our life there. So we just want to go back.

Back, back-- that's what we are singing in the song. That's good. With somebody understanding Jewish, that's a funny song. But if you don't understand, the translation is losing-- in the translation, you lose the effect of the whole of the song, really.

But I cannot really say anything bad now about Russians because they treat us the same as they treat their own citizens. We have to work. Everybody has to work there. There is not privilege. Maybe they are the privilege. There was the Khrushchev and the other, the gang of these high societies. They still have the high society.

But anyways, you have to work. And we were not used to this kind of work. This was strictly physical work and with so little food, deprived of all this protein-- all vitamins just not a thing, not a thing. I remember vividly, once the Americans were sending-- after Americans were sending to help, the Americans were sending a lot of stuff for the Russians.

Oh, my, my. All this-- the Russian even them, they were sending the Americans to the Russian military. And some of them were selling this on the black market, all kind of stuff, food-- for example, SPAM and other things like that with just cans, whole cans. So you could see there on the black market all this American food.

Anyways, they were sending strictly for these refugees some, because this was a time that the Russians wanted to

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mobilize our men for the military. But after, there was an intervention-- I don't know whose, the Jewish-American Jews maybe-- was an intervention that they were very much against this, because there was such a slaughter of the Jews in Europe.

So they didn't want it-- these people are the refugees-- to mobilize to go, because my brother was mobilized. And we already said goodbye to him. And after, he came back. They sent him back.

But they tried to mobilize our people, our men, to go to the military. But somehow, thanks to some intervention, they were, after, released. And they were not taken anymore.

So the Americans were sending peanut butter. That was such a-- I never ate peanut butter in Poland. We didn't have this in Poland, peanut butter. And that was such a wonderful-- we got a jar. Everybody got a jar of peanut butter from this committee who was organizing the whole thing. And this was food which I never ate.

And in Russia, you're supposed to eat peanut butter with something, with bread, and eat very limited. And I ate the whole jar sitting like that, without bread, without nothing, the whole jar. I got so violently sick after.

I ate the whole jar of peanut butter. Can you believe it? So much fat, so much oil-- and my body was absolutely-- I never ate this kind of thing. I was so violently that for a long time, I couldn't even look at peanut butter, because I always remember how I ate the whole jar of this peanut butter.

But it was so good, I just couldn't stop eating. And I couldn't take it. The hunger was terrible on me, the hunger. I was so impulsive with this. It's affected me in a terrible way.

And it was this argument with my husband, because he could take hunger very well. He kind of portioned his bread, not to eat at once. So he took separate his bread. I took separate my ration. And I ate it right away. So this hunger was terrible, working on mine.

When you lived with all these people in all these different towns, did anybody ever steal somebody else's bread or--

Oh, you had to be very careful. Of course.

How did you take precautions?

How would I take-- because we ate it right away. We didn't have anything extra already. Whatever you got, you always-- you got the bread. You got a pound of bread a day. That's not very much.

The bread was very heavy there. I don't know. So you got this pound of bread. So it was a little piece, so you ate it right away. You never had left over, really.

So that was just the time when we were living in this community with the 30 people, because after 1941, when they allowed us to go to the city, then we were living separately. We were living together with my brothers.

When you and your husband were courting, you were living in this big room with however many people. How did you actually court?

Yeah. How did we court? Oh, boy. It was not very romantic, although with my young age, I was very much a romantic in spite of this whole thing. I mean the beginning, especially, I was kind of romantic inclination, kind of. I still was-- and he was a very good-looking guy. So I kind of had an eye on him right away, really.

But he was-- he didn't pay attention to anything-- to anything, anybody. He was a hard-working man. And he came home. He just wanted to lie in bed. Sometimes, it's wasteful. Sometimes, it wasn't. He was a very serious and one of the best working men.

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The Russians appreciated that he was the [RUSSIAN], which means someone who makes double his dorm. And he was one of them, really. So he was not very romantic, really. No.

But I was-- see, but they were two brothers. And I felt so sorry for them because they were so-- they didn't have any money. They didn't have anything. And I just felt so bad because sometimes they didn't even have money to buy this bread and buy this. Whatever, you had to buy. They don't give you for free.

So they didn't have money. I felt so bad that sometimes I just offered them some rubles because I know they don't-- this was terrible. And that was-- because they were waiting always for this guy, for the cashier, to come and pay them for the work.

But sometimes, the cashier didn't come in time. It was terrible, not like in a democratic system when you have to pay your worker right away. Seriously, sometimes they didn't come. And here, the worker didn't have money to buy food. And this was terrible.

So I don't know. They were such nice young men. I felt so sorry for them.

How come you always had rubles, but they didn't always?

Because my brothers-- I told you this-- they were all speculating back in Bialystok. So they had a few rubles, not to the point that they could spend lavishly. But we were not so left without any kind of-- like they were. They didn't have anything, really.

And we somehow still had-- I don't know. This was all-- I always think about I depend on my brother. I wasn't on my own. I was with them.

But somehow, it was a very hard life, especially the time when we were living in this commune, sort of-- very, very difficult life. And then people were-- and it doesn't have anything to do with cleanliness to having lice-- doesn't have anything to do. You can be very clean, and you get the lice just terrible.

So people had lice. And I had lice. I shook my head, and the lice were falling out. It was terrible. And as I mentioned, some people were perfectly clean. Some people who were dirty didn't have any lice.

So it doesn't have anything to do with cleanliness. They even mention now today-- I heard this on the television-- the school to some of these kids now. So they mention also this. They kind of accentuate it. It doesn't have anything to do with cleanliness.

But somehow, some kids attract. Some people have it. Some people don't. But anyways, that was very, very-- it was a part also of this difficult life there.

What kind of a wedding did you have?

Oh, my wedding. Oh my god. It was nothing. We had to walk to the city hall. There was about-- I walked a 10-miles walk. We were walking, both. And we came to this guy to the city hall to register. And he registered us.

And after, we asked him if he can write for us to get a little bit bread, because we were hungry and we walked so far. He was laughing. He says, if I can write "bread," I will write for myself first, not for you. He says, I cannot write anything.

So we had to walk back. And it was so hard. It was nothing, was no-- my brother registered also with his girl, registered before. And then we registered. And we didn't have any wedding. We didn't have any religious wedding, nothing, just registered there.

After when we were in Germany after the war, we registered, because my son was born in Germany. Then we kind of-- but my sister-in-law was so anxious for me to have a wedding-- a religious wedding, she says. We never had a religious-

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- we never had any wedding.

We just registered. And this piece of paper kept us in a union, a very happy union. He was a wonderful man, wonderful guy, good man. And we had a very good marriage, but a very hard life, of course-- very difficult life, especially from all the suffering, he was not well. He was sick.

But I have the best memory of my marriage. And he's gone already 12 years. He was 62 years old when he died. So that's-- so how far we go? It's already 7:30, almost. So what else would you want to know?

Well, once you were married, how did you get any privacy in this big room with all these people?

That's a good question. Oh, how did you get-- I don't know, really. Somehow, we got.

Did it matter? Did it reach a point where it didn't matter whether you had privacy or not?

Exactly. There were quite a few couples in this. Quite a few couples, there were. And nobody paid attention to you, to them. Everybody did whatever they wanted. And that's about all what it was to it.

We were not discussing. We were not making any rules what is allowed, what is not allowed. Everybody did what they wanted.

Back on the air.

You know how people need to have a little bit of privacy? They just need a little bit of time to just be alone. Was there some way that you were able to do this, even living among this group of people where you always had to be together?

There was very little privacy there. Your privacy was just your bed. That's about the only area which is your private. But after where my husband had to go and live in the forest, then we were not married, really. We were just friends. And he was having his living quarters right in the forest there.

And I was left on the base-- no different, because they didn't consider me such a worker. So they didn't care. So I was left there.

So I used to go to visit him. I used to go to the forest. And this was sometime after work, which was night. And it was so light. It's amazing. There was a lot of snow, everything white.

And I was not afraid to go through the forest and to his place where he was there. I'm looking back, because I said, boy, today, I'm not as brave, because I wanted to see him. So I was walking all the way from my base to his place there in the forest.

But as I mentioned, after '41, we all were leaving this place there and going to the city. We went to the city, which was already private. Then you have your privacy, really. But you still have the same miserable lifestyle. But at least you were not living in a commune, kind of. Yeah.

When did you first hear-- what would the Russians tell you about the war? Did you think you were getting genuine war news?

Very little news, really-- we had some radios. And I don't know. We never spoke to the-- they didn't know more, the Russians, than we, I think so.

And we had through the radios news. And they still were very optimistic, although they were getting a terrible beating in the beginning, really. But they were very optimistic that they're going to eventually that they're going to win.

And there was such admiration for Stalin. Stalin's name is on everybody's song. And everything was Stalin--

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tremendous admiration. He was like God, just like God, Stalin. And well, the life was going on.

But there was such corruption. Everybody was stealing-- terrible corruption. Yeah. People were stealing left and right and tried to sell and help themselves to be able to buy some food. So it was-- in the place where I was to work, you were sewing women's blouses, sort of, making from texture which was knitted.

There were machines we were working. And you are sewing this. You are taking home the work. And then you never brought back. Everybody was trying. And there was not organization. It was so disorganized. Everybody was stealing and just after going, selling this on the market, trading this for something.

It was a very, very hard-- of course, the climate was the same because this was still Siberia. It was just that we had our place. So that was the difference. And the food, you couldn't buy anything for money, really. It was very limited with ration. And the store didn't have any extra food.

Occasionally, something was showing up in a store. There were lanes-- lines, long lines. People were waiting for hours then in this cold weather. And I was staying there, too. And they all were screaming at me. You go home. You're going to freeze, because I was not dressed like they were dressed, so warm.

And I was so anxious also to get this bread. So I was staying in the line for hours and hours finally to get this pound they were selling sometimes. Occasionally, they were selling some sausage, which was such a tremendous novelty and such an attraction.

It was a very, very, very difficult time for the Russian people, really, a very difficult time, because everything was going for the military. So they were deprived, really. The stores were empty, didn't have any food. And the men, they were all mobilized. It was a hard period of time then.

When the war started turning against the Germans, did you believe the reports? Or did you think it was just propaganda?

We kind of didn't question this. We tried to believe. Yeah, this was happy days. '44 was already determining the war already, about 1944. So this was very happy. We heard on the radio. This was wonderful news that the Germans are getting beaten back.

And of course, the Germans were in Stalingrad. They were surrounding Stalingrad for so long. I don't know if they finally took Stalingrad or not. I don't think so. They did take Stalingrad. Yeah.

And then Leningrad, they were occupying-- was surrounded by the Germans for about almost two years, more than a year, a year and a half. And people were eating cats and dogs, even. There were so many people dying because they couldn't bring any food because they were surrounded.

Leningrad was completely surrounded by the Germans. But they didn't get it. They didn't get in. Finally, they were pushed back. So this was a very difficult time, really. And you couldn't complain much on your condition because the whole country was suffering.

So they didn't count, your personal-- didn't count at all. And it was a very hard time, really. I look back. But somehow, I was-- I don't know. I was never sick there, really, in this terrible cold. And somehow, I don't remember ever getting a cold there, which was so unique, really.

And my husband, he was sick quite a few times and very seriously sick, terribly serious sick. Mm-hmm. And that's how the-- and then 1945, the war was-- no, in 1944, they transferred us completely on the south of Russia, really. And that's what is Kharkiv, Ukraine, which is a nice, good part of Russia, really.

Ukraine-- the climate was similar to the climate in Poland. And there already, food was much more available. The men were all-- besides the work, which the work was not very difficult-- the whole bunch of people, the men, they organized. They were going to one bazaar, to another bazaar, buying and selling.

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And every one of us started gaining weight. We ate much better. There were a lot of bazaars, open bazaar selling. You could buy food. You could buy milk, eggs, butter. Somehow, suddenly-- I am talking about Ukraine now, which is different than this north Siberia. So there, the conditions were much improved.

But they finally decided-- in the beginning, I think, of '44, they decided to really transfer the refugees, because there were a lot of people really dying. So the Russians finally-- probably under somebody's intervention, too. So they transferred us, which also was a long, long schlep to Ukraine, a long time. And we're having our own--

[PEGGY SNEEZES]

Bless you.

Excuse me.

Mm. We're having our own just one room for us, separately our room. And this was already different-- much improvement in life, really, from--

When--

Yes?

When did you first hear of the concentration camps?

Oh, we didn't really hear, really, till the end almost. This news were never kind of-- we never heard about it. But really, towards the end, we heard. And still, we were still sure that people survived it. Not everyone is gone.

And when we came back to Poland, we couldn't believe it. And we went to this organization, Jewish, which right away took care, they have a list of people who survived, which was the list. There was nobody from my family on the list. This was back in Poland, when we came back in 1946.

Did you go out of your way to discover the conditions in the camps?

No. No, we didn't. We were in Poland. And this was very hard to the Polacks. When they saw our coming back, they said, oh, so many of you are back? They were so unfriendly to this small group of Jews coming back, very unfriendly.

And I don't know. It didn't occur to us to go. Nobody was talking then about a concentration camp to visit, because it was so fresh. It was just 1946, right away after the war. I don't know. We never heard about it.

Have you ever gone to one of the--

No, I never went. I still wanted to go to Poland, but I don't think so I will ever go, because it's not-- I don't want to go alone. I would like to go with somebody. And I cannot find anybody who will go with me. So even if I ever go with a group, I still would like to have someone-- strictly a friend-- to go with me.

I would like it. I still would like to go to Warsaw, although Warsaw is completely different now than it was before. And I don't know. It still is a little bit the sentiment, because there are such good memories of my family there, of everybody being-- but I don't think so I will ever be able to do it, to go for a visit. I doubt it. It doesn't look like-- unfortunately, doesn't look like.

And when we came back, actually, I was interested to find out. And they told me that one survived, one woman, the name of my maiden name, which was probably married to my brother. And I don't know why. I didn't-- I was not interested to get in touch with this person. And until this day, I don't know anything about it.

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She told me that it was one which was probably married to my younger brother. And they were maybe both taken to Auschwitz. And she survived. And he died in Auschwitz. And I said, what do I care for her? She's not there.

That was so childish, so silly of me. Now, I don't know how I did it. But it was still very much I cannot-- I cannot really myself cannot figure this out, why I didn't show any kind of interest to get in touch with her. She would probably tell me a lot of things.

But I just disregarded this. And I said, I don't want it if nobody from my family is alive. So what do I care? And nobody was alive. That's what it was.

Do you remember the day you first heard about the camps?

No, I don't remember the day-- exactly day, I don't remember. Of course, after we heard. And we took this-- no, my girlfriend whom I told you that she was out of the ghetto and she was on the-- she survived. She told me a lot.

But she was not in any concentration camp. She was out of the ghetto with her daughter. And she did survive.

She pretended she's not Jewish, and she kind of got away with it. She colored her hair blonde. And she did survive, but she also died later. What time it is? It's almost 8:00.

When you were in Russia, were you always aware of the possibility of spies repeating what you said to the--

Absolutely. I was not so much aware. But I was talking a lot about-- they all tell me. My husband always warned me, you better control your-- beware what you talk, because you will end it eventually. And I'd say, why are you talking like that? I would always compare how it was in Poland and how is here.

And we had everything, our bands. We have this and we that you don't have. And he says-- they forced my husband to listen to people who talk against and then to tell them who it is to show.

They were practically forcing him to take a role like that, to listen carefully to all these people and to hear if anyone is against Communism, against Russia. Of course, he never told them anything.

How do you even know?

Yeah. But he was terrible. He was in agony, practically. He's, look at what they wanted me to do. How can I get out of it? They told him that he can be punished if he won't cooperate with them. So this was very serious, really.

How did he get out of it?

I don't know. I don't remember really how he got out. But I know that he was very depressed and very sad. And he says, I don't know. What can I do now? He was very much-- because we all were talking against the Russians, really. We all were talking. So how can he denounce and tell them that I was talking about it?

And every one of us, the feeling of every one of us, was against Russia. I don't know if we were justified or not. But we were because our conditions were so bad. We didn't realize that, actually, the Russians would save our life, really, that we would have to be thankful to them because they gave us the chance to survive. Otherwise, we would be all dead.

But we just were thinking of the good life, what it was back in Poland and the terrible conditions as they are what we are facing now. And to me, this was childish, really. We were all talking, oh, the Russians. That's not good, and this is not good.

And he said he just couldn't hear these things, really. So he was in a very difficult-- and he was very depressed. And he says, how can I get out? They asked him because he was one of the best workers.

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So that's why they felt that, oh, he's the best worker. So he's the right type to ask him to do things like that. And they promised him-- I don't know. But this was a very difficult time, really, for him because, of course, he didn't want to denounce anybody because you denounce, then the person will go to jail.

So he knew what it's going to-- and by telling that he never heard anything, they won't get away from him. So this was a very hard time for him. And he took it very seriously, I remember, very seriously-- just was hard to handle.

And my brother and his wife, they had a child there in Russia, born there. And then they have actually two kids. The second child, their daughter, was born in 1945, just after the war was over. The war was already over, and she was born. And when we left Russia, she was about a few months old, six or seven months old.

Now, she's a grandmother already. She's 46. She's a grandmother. Yeah. She lives in Israel. She's in Israel. Yeah.

And yeah, they have two children. And when we came back to Poland, we left Poland. And my brother decided to stay. He was staying because he has two kids, two little kids. So he kind of-- and we were already so burdened with our life, with facing all this difficulty.

And here, he got-- when he came to Poland, He got an apartment, a place to live. And he got a job. He decided to stay. And he was staying in Poland.

And we all left. We left right away. In 1946, we left. And he was staying. And finally, he left Poland, I think so, in 1960, probably-- went to Israel.

Did he have to escape?

He escaped. Yeah. This was a short time when the Poles allowed Jewish people to leave, a very short time. So he kind of took the family and went to Israel. And he was a bookkeeper. And he was working for the government in Israel in this capacity as a bookkeeper.

When you were in Russia, were you forced to attend political indoctrination meetings?

No. No, I don't remember. I really don't remember. I don't think so we were forced to attend political-- there was not much, because they were so absorbed with the war that I don't think so they paid much attention to the political aspect of it. I don't think so, because then the war was-- the main thing was the war.

I don't remember, anyways. I don't-- maybe this was, but I don't know. If it was, we, of course, were obligated to attend. Yeah. it was, definitely. But I don't remember this. But I'm sure that we had to attend just for that we are solid-- what is the word?

Solid citizens?

Not just solid citizens, no, that we kind of share with them their political-- sort of that we share it, that we are not opposing to it. We have to pretend that we are also feeling the same way. But as I said, really, now looking back, I'm very grateful to the Russians, because they didn't kill us. They allowed us to stay alive. And they helped us to save our life, just a few more to them.

I don't know not too many refugees were there altogether, Jewish refugees in Russia. And after we came to Poland, the Haganah, the Israeli Haganah, was trying to get all Jews out from Poland. They were organizing this illegal-- yeah, they actually wanted the Jews will go to Israel.

But Israel still was not independent. This was 1946, '47. Israel got independent, I think so, in '48-- '48. Yeah. So Israel was still not an independent country. But the Haganah was trying to get all these refugees.

My husband's two brothers went with them. They went, but they couldn't get to Israel. They went on to Cyprus. They

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were on Cyprus in 1947. And when the war broke out, they were-- when they declared independence in '48, they were all allowed to go in.

But then the war broke out right away. And one of his brothers was killed right away in the war. He survived in Russia, survived the whole war, and came there. And he was killed. And his body was-- he was terrible, brutally cut, the body by the Arabs there. And they were all killed.

He was about 26 years old, a young man. And he was right away-- yeah. But we were thinking to go to Israel. But somehow, I don't know. We changed our mind. And we went to Paris from Germany.

After the war, when you were in Poland, what town were you in?

As I said, we were in the time this near Schlesian.

Schlesian?

How you said-- you named this before. You are using an English name for--

Oh, Silesia.

Silesia. That's right. It's near Schlesian when they took it back from the Germans. So this was the part. This was the south of Poland, where they took it.

We went to a small town, a small town where the town was occupied mostly by German families. And they were this expatriation. The Germans were leaving, going to Germany, because it was under Polish now occupation or belonged to the Poland. So they were all leaving.

So we were-- they gave us-- my husband and myself, they gave us a place, one around there. And there was living a woman, a German woman, with a child. And her husband was someplace in Russian front.

Actually the war was over, but her husband was still-- so he maybe was killed altogether. So we had to live together with her. Oh, boy, this was a terrible time.

How did you deal with that?

Just terrible. In one room. Can you believe it, what a time? She was sleeping-- her bed was a double bed or a queen-sized bed. So it was for my husband and myself. She was sleeping on the couch there by. And just her little girl was sleeping in a little, small bed.

And we were all in the same one room. And we hated each other as much as-- I don't know. This was just nothing but hate. She hated us terribly.

And once, she ran out on the street. And she started screaming that my husband wanted to hit her. So she screamed. She was screaming. And I guess the-- but we had so much hate for the Germans that we couldn't control ourselves, really.

And she was very clean, very clean. And this one room was spotless clean, the place, really. And she had a tiny kind of side of this room for the kitchen, a little-- and that's how she managed. And the water was-- in the hall was the faucet and the water in the hall.

And she kept the place so nice, so clean-- just amazing, really. But it was a terrible time until we got rid of her. And she finally left.

And she probably was thinking, boy, Hitler should have killed these Jews who came, these two. Why are they alive still? This was probably her thought. Yeah.

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Did the child have this big hatred also?

The child, I don't know. They didn't-- the mother was angry, so the child was angry. He just noticed the mother was so angry and expressed her anger. So the child right away got the same feeling towards us, too, that she hated us. This was a little girl. Oh, was such a-- asking really too much of us to stay in this one room with her.

And finally, as I said, they organized. The Jews somehow organized. They got a place not far from us where they had this meeting together of the Jewish refugees and talking about leaving Poland and talking about our experience and shared our life together.

This was a good place. Most of the time, we were over there, rather. And even they had some cooking. So you kind of were engaged in some making, preparing something, and spending most of the days just with them. Nobody was working, of course, and just waiting for the time to leave Poland.

And yeah, my husband, when we just came and we found out that nobody survived, he says, Poland's not for us. It's a big cemetery in Poland. And that's not a place for us to build a new life. We are leaving.

And I didn't want to really leave because I wanted to be with my brother. My brother decided to stay. And so I felt, we're going to part now? It's so few of us. So I would rather-- but my husband said, no, we're not staying in Poland.

It's out of question. We cannot stay. I don't want it. I hate the-- I don't like the Polacks. I don't want to stay in Poland. And that's what it's-- and we left with this-- they were organizing.

The Haganah was organizing the train and everything to go to Czechoslovakia and to remain there for a little while in Prague, then to go to Austria. We were staying in the Rothschild home there, staying. It was a mess. There were hundreds and hundreds of refugees. So we were staying there to wait, waiting until we can go farther. Yeah.

Do you recall any pogroms in post-war Poland?

There were pogroms, but we were not there. There were some. There were. There were people who were traveling on the train. And they were taken out from the train. They were terrible. Yeah, practically pogroms again in Poland, really.

Really, Polacks were not very pleased to see these Jewish people coming back. That was very, very unfortunate. But this was the truth.

Of course, I am very glad that I left, no question about. That's not even required to mention. But yeah. I'm just sorry that we spent so many years in Poland. We never thought of going, leaving Poland and going out of Europe-- never occurred to us, really.

You mean before the war.

Before the war. Yeah. This was such-- still, people were living.

How did you deal with it, because there was a lot of pre-war antisemitism, too.

Oh.

And what do you recall about that in--

In Poland?

Mm-hmm.

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There was very, very strong antisemitism. Yeah.

Did you experience any yourself?

My youngest brother was expelled from university because he-- the first thing, the Jewish students have to be standing on the left side. They were not allowed to sit.

So they were standing. And he once made a remark. The professor made a remark against Jews. So my brother said something. He was expelled from the university. And here, his whole education was ruined.

Yeah. So there definitely was. And all the Jews tried to be very, very assimilated, really. We spoke just Polish. And this was not awareness, really. We didn't live a really Jewish life, really.

Was your religion important to you?

Oh, yeah, important to my parents. Yeah, definitely. My parents were observing. And we have all the holidays very much observing. Yeah. The Jews, they were assimilated to a certain degree with language. But the religion still was very important.

We were rather Conservative with religion. We were not even Reform, I don't think so. We had a kosher-- there was kosher home. And every holiday was very much observed and very serious observing-- and going Saturday a day of not working and going to the synagogue. So it's much even more than here, really, than here in America, the Jews.

But we still were-- yeah, a lot of Jewish are, as they say, the people of the book-- always to learn, try to educate the children. My sister graduated from high school. The other one was attending law.

My brother was educated in Paris. He couldn't get to university in Poland, so he went to university in Paris. And he graduated. So the education was very important. And people-- of course, this was very limited on the university. It was very hard for Jews to get into university, because a very limited number of this could.

But in Warsaw, the life of the American-- in life, the Jews in big cities, like in Warsaw-- so the life was better probably than in the small, little towns when it was very poor with poverty. Somehow, in the big city was the life better, really.

We'd probably better stop.

Yeah.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, too. Thank you.

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