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INTERVIEW WITH: MIRIAM MICHAELIS SKOPF
HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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INTERVIEWER: BARBARA BARER
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1 MS. BARER: I am Barbara Barer and it is Sunday April
2 2nd in Oakland, California, and I am interviewing Miriam
3 Michaelis this morning.

4 Miriam, how old are you now?

5 A. I am 60 years old.

6 Q. 60 years old.

7 A. Right.

8 Q. Where were you born?

9 A. I was born in Germany, Dusseldorf 1928.

10 Q. How many children were in your family.

11 A. Two, I had two sisters, older sisters.

12 Q. You are the youngest of three?

13 A. Right.

14 Q. And where--what did your father do?

15 A. My father was a mechanical engineer. He had a
16 machine shop.

17 Q. What was your life like as a child?

18 A. We had a wonderful life. We had a large family,
19 my father--we joined Jewish Center, we grew up in a Jewish
20 community had a lot of friends, a lot of relatives and like
21 anybody else, very normal until this happened.

22 Q. Was this--tell me what happened or as you became
23 aware of something happening?

24 A. I was not aware of anything. One night they
25 broke into the apartment, they broke everything. That was
26 the 9th of November, 1938.

27 Q. You were just living a normal life, going to
28 school? What kind of school did you go to?

1 A. No, at the end we did have to go, we could not go
2 to a normal regular school, we had to go to a Jewish school;
3 you were not allowed. I think that happened 1937, a year
4 before.

5 Q. But you started outgoing to--

6 A. Regular public school, yes.

7 Q. And then how did you get shifted? What happened
8 that you--

9 A. We were just not allowed to go to regular school.
10 We had to go--only Jewish teachers and Jewish children. It
11 was like a synagogue.

12 Q. How did your parents tell you about that?

13 A. I really don't remember too much. I know only I
14 was shifted and I didn't think anything of it at the time.

15 Q. Were most of your friends Jewish?

16 A. Yes, sir.

17 Q. But they went with you?

18 A. Right, right. So there was not--I went to Hebrew
19 school at the time already any way, so it was familiar
20 surroundings.

21 Q. So that didn't seem like such a--

22 A. No, no. That was not such a big transition.

23 Q. So the major impact was November 9?

24 A. 9, right, right.

25 Q. 1938?

26 A. Right.

27 Q. Tell me what happened that night in your family?

28 A. They came into the apartment.

1 Q. Who is they?

2 A. The Nazis came into the apartment and they just
3 broke up everything. That is why they called it
4 Kristallnacht.

5 Q. Had you seen Nazis around before?

6 A. Oh yes, yes. I had seen it before but I was not
7 aware as much at the time. And, you know, it was just such a
8 shock, you didn't even know what was happening.

9 Q. What did you do? What did your family do when
10 they came to your house?

11 A. They just took my father and we went upstairs to
12 hide upstairs some place. There was a big apartment house
13 and there was like small little rooms. All the way on the
14 top floor you went up there and we stayed there until they
15 had left.

16 Q. And what did they do inside your house?

17 A. Completely wrecked everything.

18 Q. So you and your mother and sisters were there?

19 A. Right, right. Right.

20 Q. And when was the last time you saw your father
21 that night?

22 A. That was--I never saw him again until I came to
23 this country.

24 Q. You had no idea?

25 A. No, no. But in the meantime we had to go my--we
26 went to Holland on a children's transport.

27 Q. How soon after Kristallnacht did that happen?

28 A. Within a few weeks, because the Jewish Committee

1 tried to get all the children out of Germany.

2 Q. So you and your sisters?

3 A. No, only my middle sister. My older sister and
4 my mother stayed behind because they tried to finish--sell as
5 much and take as much along as possible. And so in the
6 meantime we went into a children's home in Holland with all
7 Jewish children.

8 Q. How did you get from Germany to Holland?

9 A. By train, we were transport.

10 Q. A train load of children?

11 A. Right, right.

12 Q. From Dusseldorf and other parts of Germany?

13 A. They were from all different parts of Germany.

14 Q. And again were you with your friends?

15 A. No.

16 Q. No?

17 A. No. Everybody was separated, only with my one
18 sister, that is all.

19 Q. And what happened when you got to Holland?

20 A. We came into pretty nice home; very strict but
21 you know so many things happened at the time, you didn't even
22 realize what was happening, you know, so they were pretty
23 nice to us.

24 Q. A Jewish family in Holland?

25 A. No, no. No, that was like a nunnery.

26 Q. Orphanage?

27 A. An institution, that is right.

28 Q. How much older is your sister than you?

1 A. Three years.

2 Q. You were together?

3 A. Right, right, but we had, you know, you always
4 think you are going to see my--our parents but we didn't even
5 know--there was such confusion is the whole thing. We had
6 letters and they called--we had no, we found out in the
7 meantime that my father had gone to Cuba because my, he came
8 out of the concentration camp providing he leaves Germany
9 within five or ten days.

10 Q. How long was he in the concentration camp?

11 A. About a couple of weeks.

12 Q. And you don't know how he got out?

13 A. My mother got him out somehow, but I was in the
14 mean time in Holland already.

15 Q. Was he quite a prominent member of the community
16 in Dusseldorf?

17 A. Yes, he was very active.

18 Q. Did that help him to get out?

19 A. I think my mother had connection moneywise and
20 also she got him out.

21 Q. But she couldn't go with him to Cuba?

22 A. She didn't want to leave us in Holland and my
23 older sister, she could have gone with my father but she just
24 didn't want to, you know, she figured my father should go
25 ahead, settle everything in the meantime and get things ready
26 so we can join him there.

27 Q. How long did you stay in the nunnery in Holland?

28 A. Until May.

1 Q. Did you go to school there or--

2 A. They had some school. We had to learn the
3 language first. They had some school there.

4 Q. Uh-hum?

5 A. But not a regular school. It just was in the
6 place.

7 Q. How many children were there?

8 A. Oh, they must have had maybe a hundred children.

9 Q. All German children?

10 A. Yes, yes, all the same background. As a matter
11 of fact I just ran into somebody the other day after forty
12 years, I was together with her, I found her and she lived in
13 New York about ten blocks away from my house.

14 Q. How did you find her?

15 A. Through--she also tried to find, found out
16 somebody else in Holland through--it's very strange but any
17 way we found each other.

18 Q. And you had been together?

19 A. We were very close together, yes.

20 Q. And you hadn't been in touch in all those years?

21 A. No.

22 Q. Isn't that something.

23 So what happened in May then?

24 A. In May my mother and my older sister who stayed
25 in Germany boarded the Saint Louis and the Saint Louis
26 stopped in Chairbrooks in France and my sister, my middle
27 sister and myself came from Holland by train to join my
28 mother on the boat.

1 Q. And where, what was the destination?

2 A. Cuba.

3 Q. Headed for Cuba?

4 A. Cuba, right.

5 Q. What happened when it got to Cuba?

6 A. We couldn't land.

7 Q. Why?

8 A. There was a propaganda from Germany "A thousand
9 jews on the water and nobody wants them".

10 Q. I don't understand exactly what the propaganda
11 was?

12 A. To show that there are so many Jews, nobody wants
13 the Jews.

14 Q. You mean the Germans were in cahoots with the
15 Cubans not to let--

16 A. Right, right, right.

17 Q. That is what--the Germans weren't the only ones?

18 A. Right, right, right.

19 Q. So where did the boat go from Cuba? Was it a
20 German boat?

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. Captain?

23 A. Everything German.

24 Q. They knew they were going to take you there but
25 they knew they weren't going to land?

26 A. Some how the passengers didn't know.

27 Q. But the crew?

28 A. The crew, right, right.

1 Q. It was a front?

2 A. Right. And then Holland, Belgium.

3 Q. Went back to Holland from Cuba?

4 A. Yes, we went back and then they let 250 people
5 went to France, Belgium, England and Holland, each country
6 took 250 people.

7 Q. Did it ever stop in the United States?

8 A. No.

9 Q. No?

10 A. Wouldn't let--Roosevelt only gave some money, he
11 didn't accept the people--President Roosevelt at the time.

12 Q. But they were asked?

13 A. Yes, but they wouldn't let us in.

14 Q. The United States wouldn't let--

15 A. Would not, just gave a certain amount of money
16 per person, something to start out.

17 Q. How long were you traveling around on the Saint
18 Louis?

19 A. I think was about two, three weeks. I think we
20 were in Cuba about--in the harbor about a week or ten days.

21 Q. And your father was in Cuba?

22 A. He was Cuba, he came--his little boat to our boat
23 but he couldn't come on the boat, we couldn't get off.

24 Q. You saw him?

25 A. Right, right.

26 Q. Oh, the anguish of seeing your family.

27 A. There was a lot of excitement. Some people
28 committed suicide. They didn't want to go back to Germany.

1 Some people jumped over and--because most people knew where
2 they are going to go to, right.

3 Q. Uh-hum?

4 A. So that was very sad situation.

5 Q. So where were you let off?

6 A. Holland.

7 Q. In Holland?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. With your mother and sisters?

10 A. My mother, my two sisters and Holland interred us
11 at the time, because there was already starting and I think
12 it was a few weeks later 19--no, it was 1939, we stayed there
13 for about quite few months.

14 Q. In a camp or what kind of situation?

15 A. It was an intern camp. It was not--we were able
16 to get in and out but we had no place to go so we stayed
17 there more or less. And we just tried, we thought to--had
18 hoped that we could go back. We tried to go to England or
19 some place, but we just couldn't get out. We had no way of
20 getting any place. And then Germany came into Holland and
21 that was the end.

22 Q. What happened?

23 A. They invaded Holland.

24 Q. How did they gather you up? What was the
25 problem? What was the situation?

26 A. They found that there were all Jews there and
27 they used that as a--to send everybody to a concentration
28 camp back to Germany and all the Dutch people, all the Dutch

1 Jews were sent to Westerberg, that was the name of the place.

2 Q. And the German Jews were brought back to Germany?

3 A. Yes, they send from there either to Auschwitz,
4 Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, all these places.

5 Q. So what happened to you?

6 A. You see we stay quite a while because my mother
7 kept saying my husband is American citizen, don't do any--you
8 cannot touch us and this and that. My father got through Red
9 Cross a lot of letters, he knew we were alive. He knew where
10 we were. But he was not citizen, so he couldn't send the
11 papers. But they did send us then to Bergen-Belsen.

12 Q. All four of you?

13 A. All four of us, yes, from Westerberg.

14 Q. Tell me what it was like in Bergen-Belsen?

15 A. Bergen-Belsen, it was just like big wooden
16 buildings and everybody got one bunkbed and you see it
17 happened, you didn't even know what was happening because you
18 were just like a number. They took everything away from you.
19 We some clothing--nothing. We had to work in a factory.

20 Q. What kind of work?

21 A. They had also a lot of silk worms from Italy
22 where we had to take the silk out and then they had a lot of
23 uniforms, we had to cut out the good parts or they had shoes
24 where we had to cut out the good part, all dirty work, you
25 know, very dirty work.

26 Q. You were just a little girl?

27 A. But everybody had to work. Everybody worked.
28 There was nothing else.

1 Q. Were you together with your sisters when you--

2 A. Yes, we were together until I think it was
3 April--it was coming close to the end, we could hear the
4 planes coming already and we were surrounded by the English
5 and the American armies and then they try to ship us away and
6 then they were liberated in Hillis Laben on the way to
7 Auschwitz.

8 Q. What was--what was the life like, the daily, like
9 the daily routine in Bergen-Belsen?

10 A. You got up, you had to grow, they called it
11 uphill. You had to stand in line, they counted you and then
12 they took you to the factories, there were--factories was in
13 the camp.

14 Q. And who were you supervised by?

15 A. By the Germans.

16 Q. The Germans?

17 A. Oh, yes. And then I don't--and then you came
18 back home at night and the next day the same thing. Every
19 day the same thing. You went, you were counted, in the
20 morning you went to the factory, came back at night.

21 Q. How long did you do this work?

22 A. I stayed there about--in Bergen-Belsen about
23 sixteen months until we were liberated.

24 Q. So was there ever any hope or what did you think?

25 A. I was young and you didn't know. You were just
26 like a--you didn't even think. You know you just took day by
27 day.

28 Q. Did your mother ever tell you what it was like

1 for her?

2 A. My mother had passed away in--

3 Q. In Bergen-Belsen?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. What happened?

6 A. Starvation, like everybody else.

7 Q. How old was she?

8 A. My mother was about sixty years old.

9 Q. At the time?

10 A. Yes, right.

11 Q. So were you with her when she was failing or?

12 A. No, no.

13 Q. How were you separated?

14 A. I went to work and she wasn't, that was the end.
15 I came home at night and she wasn't there any more. They
16 took her away.

17 Q. And you don't know where she was?

18 A. No, no.

19 Q. What about--were people going to the gas
20 chambers?

21 A. Not in Bergen-Belsen, right.

22 Q. That was a work camp?

23 A. That is right, that was a work camp.

24 Q. Work camp?

25 A. That was a work camp. They had many different
26 camps, many different ones.

27 Q. So were some people selected to go to one place
28 or the other?

1 A. You had no choice of being a selection, that is
2 what you were told. That is what you do and where you go.

3 Q. They selected what, able bodied people to go to
4 Bergen-Belsen? Were there men there? Women there?

5 A. There, no, it was all--they were different--there
6 were some men, there some women there, children--everything
7 together.

8 Q. Were any children ever born there--

9 A. No.

10 Q. --during that time?

11 A. No, no.

12 Q. Were there ever any like upbeat days or anything
13 good ever happen or any anecdotes of any--it was all one day?

14 A. One day was like the other day. You just went,
15 got up, counted, go to work, come home, go to sleep. Same
16 thing all week over and over again.

17 Q. There were children your age or--

18 A. Some, yes, but you know you just worked. You
19 didn't know--you became like an animal more or less.

20 Q. What about was there any contact with your
21 father?

22 A. No, none whatsoever.

23 Q. You didn't know?

24 A. No, we didn't know anything. He didn't know,
25 nobody knew anything.

26 Q. What about other members of the family like your
27 aunt and uncle and your grandparents?

28 A. A lot of people didn't come out. Then some went

1 before, some went to Shanghai, some went to South America,
2 where ever they were able to go to; was a problem.

3 Some left before, some you know they didn't want to
4 wait. It is very hard. You know my father felt--had small
5 children. It is hard to move, to get up; people will die
6 before us and all this. So a lot of people went to England
7 from Germany and as a matter of fact they have a reunion now
8 in England, also it is fifty years; a lot of children.

9 Q. So it happened pretty fast for you, you were--

10 A. Yes, it goes so fast, you don't even realize what
11 is going on, you know. Also there is the boat, there is the
12 St. Louis, so many things happened.

13 Q. What is your most vivid memory of being on the
14 boat?

15 A. Joining my mother and going to see my father
16 again.

17 Q. The anticipation?

18 A. That is right, coming back to a normal life
19 again, have a family. That is what it amounted to.

20 Q. How do you deal with the feelings?

21 A. You just learn to deal with it.

22 Q. But how?

23 A. You just accept it. You have no choice; right?

24 Q. Right. Like a death in your--

25 A. You just hope there is always better day coming
26 on. And you just learn you have no choice, you have to
27 accept it.

28 Q. Tell me about the planes flying over

1 Bergen-Belsen, what you thought that meant?

2 A. We knew that was coming to an end.

3 Q. Was there any communication like with the outside
4 world?

5 A. None, none.

6 Q. Gossip or--

7 A. A little gossip, yes, but you heard that there is
8 going to be, there was going to be over soon and they are
9 pretty close. We heard shooting. We heard a lot of things
10 going on, but you were so involved with work and work and
11 work and that you don't even know what is going on, you know.

12 Q. Were you ever like treated, you know, very cruelly
13 or beaten up or anything?

14 A. No.

15 Q. Just strict?

16 A. Very strict, you just will follow the rules and
17 regulation and that is about all.

18 Q. Did anybody ever not follow the rules and
19 regulations?

20 A. No.

21 Q. No?

22 A. No. Everybody more or less wanted quiet, you
23 know, just because you knew if you stepped to the side forget
24 it, you know you never heard. You know very well what is
25 going to happen.

26 Q. Did you ever see any incident of that of anyone
27 being punished?

28 A. Not actually you know being pushed and shoved

1 around, yes, but not really severely beaten, that is all.

2 Q. Were there any sexual overtures to the young
3 women?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. Did you have experience like that?

6 A. No, but I heard about it. They did come in at
7 night the Germans and some they will, they brought food and
8 everything else, so they figured, you know.

9 Q. There were favors?

10 A. Right.

11 Q. So tell me about what happened with the
12 liberation and that, recount--

13 A. Yes, we were in the train, the train stopped.

14 Q. You were on the train going from where to where?

15 A. From Bergen-Belsen to Auschwitz.

16 Q. You were on your way to Auschwitz?

17 A. Yes.

18 Q. Do you know why you were going there or why the
19 change?

20 A. We heard that was coming to the end, the war was
21 almost over so they were coming too close to Bergen-Belsen,
22 the British Army or English Army I don't remember which one,
23 but they were coming too close so they wanted us out of the
24 way so we were in the train and somehow who all of a
25 sudden--I remember the Germans, they were taking off their
26 uniforms and running so we knew that is the end because they
27 didn't want to be caught by the British or American Army so
28 they just threw the uniforms away. They left us alone.

1 Q. The train stopped?

2 A. The train stopped, yes, so then we knew that was
3 the end. And then they came, they liberated us.

4 Q. What was--who came?

5 A. The British Army; yes, British army.

6 Q. What did they do with you?

7 A. First--

8 Q. That event?

9 A. There was so much excitement. We just were
10 looking at the Germans the way they ran and they took off
11 their uniforms and ran away and they just ran in their
12 underwear. They just didn't want to be caught.

13 Q. And then the British boarded the train or--

14 A. That is right, they boarded the train. They
15 tried to explain who they were and what had happened. As a
16 matter of fact they just said Roosevelt died yesterday. It
17 was the day after President Roosevelt died and they tried to
18 give us food but first they had to clean us up. We were
19 completely with--all infested you know being in the train for
20 a couple of weeks there without water, anything; hardly
21 anything. So then they put us into some kind of hotel they
22 used and they got all the doctors--

23 Q. Somewhere between Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz?

24 A. I think it was Hillis Laben. It was near--I
25 think near Mactaberg or something, small little town. They
26 brought us thereby trucks and then they got all the
27 facilities. I think they put us into hospital. They cleaned
28 us up, gave us new clothing, examined us. They started us

1 slowly with food.

2 Q. Were you still together with both your sisters?

3 A. Yes, yes. Yes. And then from there we were sent
4 to Holland, back to Holland because we had some property we
5 thought maybe we could find and we didn't know where to go
6 because we did come from Holland.

7 Then we figured we will go back to Holland and the
8 Jewish Committee sent us to different families and we stayed
9 there, very nice people, until we were able to find out if my
10 father was alive, where he was, and we found out through the
11 Red Cross that my father had gone to United States.

12 Q. How did the Red Cross do this? Did you checked
13 in?

14 A. We checked in with the Red Cross. They asked us
15 where we have families, where they went to and somehow they
16 got the information and my father actually knew the war was
17 over, maybe his family is some place, he also checked with
18 the Red Cross and that is--somehow we got in contact and then
19 we came to this country.

20 Q. How did you--the three of you--

21 A. The three of us all together, right, right and
22 then we couldn't get passage right away, we went over Sweden,
23 came to this country and joined my father, it was kind of
24 strange to come to a normal life. It took us really to get
25 use to, right, because my father was used to a regular life,
26 three meals a day, you go to bed at a certain time, you start
27 going to work, you know, but after a while everything went
28 back to normal.

1 Q. Where was he living?

2 A. In New York City.

3 Q. In an apartment by himself?

4 A. Right, right. Right, he got a larger apartment,
5 we joined him then.

6 Q. How did he find out about your mother's death?
7 Do you know?

8 A. Through the Red Cross, everything--the Red Cross
9 was fabulous. They really did a lot.

10 Q. So how old were you when you landed in the United
11 States?

12 A. It must have been what, 17, 18, right. But I
13 made a lot of good friends here in this country and the
14 country was good to us.

15 Q. You went to school when you got here?

16 A. No, I had to go to work.

17 Q. What kind of work?

18 A. I went into millinery making hats, so I met a lot
19 of nice people, nice people to work with; a custom shop on
20 5th Avenue.

21 Q. What did your sisters do?

22 A. My sister became a dressmaker and my other sister
23 she didn't want to work for anybody, she opened up a
24 dressmaker's supply store in the Bronx; material, she sold
25 material. She liked that. I didn't like the idea of having
26 a business, I just wanted to go to work and meet people,
27 friends and all. I didn't want to be tied down.

28 Q. Did your father remarry?

1 A. No.

2 Q. How long did he live?

3 A. He passed away 1965.

4 Q. So, have you talked much about your experiences
5 during the war?

6 A. Yes. Listen, it happened. You know we have to
7 accept it and we got to be grateful to be here; right? The
8 lucky ones are here.

9 Q. What do you think is important for the future
10 generations to know about the kinds of things you
11 experienced?

12 A. To really know what really can happen in life.

13 Q. That you are a well-established family?

14 A. That is right, things can happen and you have to
15 be--

16 Q. Was your family religious?

17 A. Yes. Yes.

18 As a matter of fact my mother would not eat meat or
19 anything in the camp. She wouldn't. And everybody said she
20 should. She refused to eat.

21 Q. How is your religion--religious feeling affected
22 by your experiences?

23 A. I am still religious. I still believe in God and
24 I am grateful and we got to accept it. We have to still
25 appreciate everything every day and still count your
26 blessings.

27 Q. Do you ever have--are you ever haunted by your
28 memories or--

1 A. In the beginning, yes, but not anymore because I
2 have too many good things now happening to me: Family,
3 friends, relatives. So I am still very grateful for
4 everything. I learned to appreciate little things like
5 nature and everything else.

6 Q. What do you think was the worse time for you, the
7 worse period?

8 A. Coming back to normal life.

9 Q. The adjustment, what was it like?

10 A. Three meals a day, taking a shower, having
11 clothes, real clothes. You know things like that, little
12 things.

13 Q. What was hard about it?

14 A. The adjustment to accept it, you know, because
15 you lived for--I don't know, I lived like this for about
16 four, five--four years you know and see flowers, all these
17 things to see again, growing things.

18 Q. Are you close with your sisters now?

19 A. Pretty close, yes.

20 Q. Do you think that the shared experience that you
21 were each impacted the same way or were your lives affected
22 differently?

23 A. Different, different.

24 Q. In what ways?

25 A. I am still very grateful for everything. I
26 think--I don't know how to say it, but some people turn a
27 little bitter. They feel they were short changed in life. I
28 am grateful. I am grateful.

1 Q. What are your sisters like?

2 A. One sister works very hard, she enjoys working.
3 She has a family.

4 And my other sister was still in New York. She enjoys
5 life now. She also lost her husband. She is lucky to meet
6 another man who is very good to her. She married again and
7 she takes it also day by day.

8 Q. When you first married, was your husband also a
9 Holocaust survivor?

10 A. No, he came to this country before the war. I
11 think he came on the last boat from Germany to this country.

12 Q. Were you from the same family?

13 A. No, he came from the south, southern part. I
14 came from the northern part.

15 When I came to this country I met a lot of people from
16 the same background which is great and I still have these
17 friends in New York, all the same background.

18 Somehow you always run into some people.

19 Q. You have that common experience?

20 A. Right.

21 Q. Do you think anyone else can appreciate, you
22 know, no matter how much they read or hear?

23 A. I don't know, it is hard. It's hard to say.

24 Q. What I would like to try and get a feeling for is
25 what you know, what you are left with, what it was like for
26 you personally, like--

27 A. I only think about the good part, that I am here.
28 I have a wonderful family in this country. I just stopped

1 working. I am grateful to do the things now I never was able
2 to do. I do a lot of things. I plan to do a lot of things.
3 Now I want to give my time do things for others, help others.

4 Q. Do you think it affected the way you raised your
5 own children?

6 A. We appreciate--I told my children to appreciate
7 every day, enjoy everything. I am trying to give them
8 certain values and family is very important.

9 Q. Did you ever have a deep down under fear that
10 they might have the same fait?

11 A. Never, no. I don't think about it. You never
12 know. You have to be prepared for everything in life.

13 Q. What about your current husband? Did he
14 have--was he a survivor?

15 A. He--as a matter of fact he was in the same camp,
16 same camp.

17 Q. Right.

18 A. Somehow his parents and my parents and my mother
19 in Cuba were best of friends.

20 Q. What a coincidence.

21 A. I met him at a gathering somehow. He found out,
22 same background; many things very hard, very hard, so
23 happened. I thought--I didn't believe it when I first met
24 him. And then I--because there was a small group of people
25 in Cuba, from all the German Jews, they somehow stayed
26 together.

27 Q. Yes.

28 A. Right. So everybody knew each other but just so

1 happened that my father and his parents were the best of
2 friends.

3 Q. And now you made another major adjustment leaving
4 all your family, friends in New York moving out to
5 California?

6 A. Right, right. But I think I made a very good
7 decision. I am very happy here. I met wonderful people and
8 I think it will be, I made--it was a wise choice.

9 Q. You can always visit your friends?

10 A. Oh, sure, that is no problem. They will come and
11 visit us. We can always do that, that is the least--

12 Q. So, the interesting thing in talking with you is
13 not feeling a lot of pain or bitterness from you.

14 A. (Shakes Head)

15 Q. Do you think it is because you were so young?

16 A. I don't know.

17 Q. You didn't understand or it is your personality
18 how you deal with things?

19 A. I think it is personality, because I know I met a
20 lot of people my age who are very bitter who feel they were
21 short changed, but I have learned one thing and my mother my
22 parents always taught me to be grateful for every little
23 thing and that is my attitude to appreciate everything,
24 enjoy. It is past. It happened. But to be grateful what I
25 have now today.

26 Q. Even though the pain at the time was very real?

27 A. Yes.

28 Q. You are not dwelling on it?

1 A. No.

2 Q. And you think that is good advice for someone
3 else?

4 A. I think so. It happen. It is over. Right, sure
5 you have to remember, you have to be aware of it, but take
6 day by day. Enjoy. We are here, right, to tell.

7 Q. You think it is important that it is told?

8 A. Absolutely, should be told.

9 Q. And what difference do you think it will make?

10 A. To be aware it should never happen again I hope.

11 Q. I hope so too.

12 A. That is the only way to look at it, so you have
13 to work at it, that should not happen.

14 Q. How do you work at it?

15 A. Closeness of people together, to prevent this.

16 Q. You told me before we started recording there had
17 been papers and books and documents?

18 A. Right.

19 Q. Can you tell me what they are?

20 A. Which we are liberated, the American--yes we were
21 liberated by the American Army. They gave identification
22 papers. Then even I have from Westerberg a piece of paper
23 where I took a shower once a week they stamped us, so they
24 were able to go.

25 I have all different passports where it is J, you
26 know, red J that means we are Jewish, and all different
27 papers I have. I like to donate that.

28 Q. Uh-hum. That is real evidence of--

1 A. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. The name of the camp,
2 everything is printed on.

3 Q. And you hung onto those things?

4 A. Somehow, yes. I am usually not attached to
5 things but--

6 Q. You knew it was going to be important?

7 A. Right, right.

8 Q. What kind of books?

9 A. There are just some books were printed in Holland
10 from during the war, after the war, you know, all this
11 happening.

12 Q. Like what kind of information?

13 A. All the information about camp and as a matter of
14 fact they have pictures in from the camps, descriptions,
15 names, all difference. I know there are a lot of books are
16 being written right now; right?

17 Q. You donated it all to the Holocaust?

18 A. Yes, yes. I like to give it to them so just to
19 show that it really happened.

20 Q. Uh-hum.

21 A. Because some people still don't believe it
22 happened, right.

23 Q. What do you think when people come out like that?

24 A. I don't know. Unbelievable. That is all I can
25 say. Right.

26 Q. For you who--you know you can't deny what you--

27 A. Right, right, right. But there are things that
28 we have that didn't happen, but there is enough proof. I am

1 not the only one, right.

2 Q. Right?

3 A. There are many more.

4 Q. Was there any other family that survived the
5 camp, aunts and uncles of your mother or father that you know
6 of?

7 A. No.

8 Q. Or any family in Israel, anyone?

9 A. There is some family, you know, like second
10 cousins or so, but otherwise my mother came from a very big
11 family. There is nobody left. And my father also--there is
12 only some family went to Shanghai, that is the only--and
13 he--now in San Francisco.

14 Q. Have you ever been back to Dusseldorf?

15 A. No.

16 Q. Would you go?

17 A. There is no need for me, there is no need.

18 Right? They threw us out, so why should we go back?

19 Q. Uh-hum.

20 A. So there are other places to visit.

21 Q. Absolutely. Absolutely.

22 Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that
23 you would like to talk about it? Tell me about that. I
24 didn't think to ask.

25 A. I am trying to think. So many things happened,
26 you know, but it is pretty--still in my mind, you know.

27 Q. Well, even a little vignette or one day's events
28 or something that you recall?

1 A. I guess the only thing when we were liberated,
2 how wonderful the American soldiers were, you know, they
3 really was unbelievable experience and one thing when all the
4 German soldiers ran away you see that was an experience. And
5 some time, you know, days, months didn't mean anything at the
6 time.

7 Q. Did you ever talk to the Nazis or--I mean you
8 were there?

9 A. No, no. No.

10 Q. Prisoners?

11 A. You were prisoners and that is it. You just want
12 to be left alone. Some people maybe did, but I had no
13 desire. And I was young, I was involved--

14 Q. You did what you told--

15 A. That is right, that is all you get. Like, you
16 know, you do what you are told and you go and you march and
17 that is it, that is about all you do.

18 Q. Were you ever sick?

19 A. I think we all had yellow jaundice but there was
20 no treatment, you know, you just don't remember. You don't
21 think about those things.

22 Q. You were in good health, the rest?

23 A. Thank God no problem. Thank God. So, but--but
24 somehow you always run into--the amazing part is now that I
25 run into people I haven't seen in forty years. Somehow that
26 is the amazing part.

27 Q. What do you talk about when you meet someone or
28 the friend of yours you haven't seen for forty years? What

1 kinds of things do you focus on?

2 A. What happened in the meantime where they went,
3 how they ended up and what they are doing now and we don't
4 talk too much about the camp actually, more or less what
5 happened afterwards, about the family, how they reestablished
6 themselves. And they are content and happy and sad to be
7 grateful again, that is the bottom line. To be here, to tell
8 the story.

9 Q. So when you say so many things happened--

10 A. Everything happened so fast, you know.

11 Q. Did it seem like a long time? Sixteen months in
12 Bergen-Belsen, that doesn't seem so fast.

13 A. Yes, but so many different things happened.
14 People come, people go. You see this happening, that
15 happening, you know.

16 Q. Did you see people die around you?

17 A. Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

18 Q. Die a natural death?

19 A. Natural, I was--just only natural deaths, just
20 more or less from starvation. That is about it. That is,
21 you know, because there was very little food; just about to
22 survive.

23 Q. What did you eat?

24 A. I think we got a slice of bread and then we
25 always had some kind of soup, water, vegetables, whatever.
26 That is about it. That is what we lived on. That is about
27 all.

28 Sometimes there was little meat or hardly anything,

1 you know, lot of vegetable soup, water and bread; that is
2 about all.

3 Q. And was there any like practice of Judaism in the
4 camps?

5 A. No.

6 Q. Like did you know if it was Passover?

7 A. No, not wantsoever. Every day was a day. No,
8 you didn't think. You knew one thing, you go to work, come
9 home, go to work and that is about it.

10 No, you didn't keep--take notice of anything like
11 that. You didn't know if it was Monday or Friday or
12 Saturday; didn't know. Didn't mean a thing, you know, if it
13 was winter or summer, that is all; little warmer in the
14 summer, wasn't as cold but that is--

15 Q. How do you perpetuate Judaism now or since that
16 time?

17 A. I don't know how to explain it to you, but we
18 just have to be strong; right?

19 Q. You know better than I do.

20 A. You have to be very strong and each experience
21 makes you stronger. You have to remember you are a Jew. You
22 have to work together.

23 See that is what happened too a lot of people, forgot
24 that they were Jews. That is the whole problem too. You
25 cannot forget that you are a Jew.

26 Q. But after you know four, five years of nothing,
27 of not, you know, any Jewish practices or anything, how do
28 you come back to it?

1 A. Oh, you come back, you come back. Very fast.
2 You know who you are, who you were, who your family is.

3 Q. Uh-hum?

4 A. And then my father was a religious man, we came
5 back. We had our holidays and some friends shared together
6 and you just fall right back into it.

7 Q. How did you learn to speak English?

8 A. I went to night school and I know my father used
9 to put on the radio, to listen to talk stations, to hear the
10 sound of it. That is very good. We went to the movies and
11 you learn. We had to learn Dutch when we came to Holland.

12 Q. Right, right.

13 A. So you just learn.

14 Once you are in a country it is easy to pick up. You
15 go to work, you read, you go to school, you know learn a
16 little bit and--

17 Q. Do you feel a particular bonding with your
18 sisters from having been together through this?

19 A. No.

20 Q. No?

21 A. No, no. We were together but we were not that
22 much together in the camp. You know everybody was so, I
23 don't know how to explain it to you, everybody went their
24 way. My sisters worked some place else, I worked some place
25 else. We saw each other, that is.

26 Q. And when you weren't working, like at the end of
27 the day did you just fall into bed?

28 A. That is it, that is all.

1 Q. No leisure time or no--was it--

2 A. Nothing to do.

3 Q. What did you do?

4 A. There is nothing else to do. There was just a
5 barrack with your bed which was like three tiers.

6 Q. Uh-hum.

7 A. You just went to bed, that is all. It is not
8 else. There was no sitting room, no chair. There was
9 nothing.

10 Right?

11 Q. See you either worked or slept?

12 A. That is right. That is all you could do. But
13 you know--but it is what, it is fifty years now, right?

14 Q. Yes. Goes fast?

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. Was there ever any resistance--were you aware of
17 any resistance?

18 A. No. No. But you couldn't--there is nothing you
19 could do any way. Nothing, you know.

20 Q. There were so many like ups and downs, like the
21 hope of getting on a ship and coming across the Atlantic?

22 A. When you get into a situation you just accept it,
23 that is all. There is nothing you can do about it; right?

24 Q. Well, that is what you did. Other people
25 committed suicide.

26 A. Yes, but you know everybody is a different
27 nature. But each situation makes life stronger to accept
28 more and more. You go through it and hope--there is always

1 hope.

2 Q. Well, it is really quite inspiring to listen to
3 you.

4 A. You just have to hope and you have to be strong
5 and keep together; that is all. Work together; the only way.

6 Q. Do you think that there was anything in
7 particular that helped you to survive? Did you think it was
8 the circumstances?

9 A. Oh, family upbringing.

10 Q. How did that help you?

11 A. To be stronger, to accept it. We had a wonderful
12 family life. My parents are very close and maybe that
13 helped, I really don't know. Some people can take it, some
14 are a little stronger than others.

15 Q. Uh-hum.

16 A. So you just, I really don't know--

17 Q. So before we, you know, go off the air so to
18 speak?

19 A. Right.

20 Q. Tell me if there is something you want--else you
21 would like to share but that I didn't pick up?

22 A. All I can say again to be grateful to be in this
23 country, was very good to me, to my family and to have a
24 wonderful family.

25 Q. What would you tell your grandchildren about your
26 experiences?

27 A. What would I tell them? Gee, that's hard. Be
28 careful how you say it, you know, always remember you are a

1 Jew. Don't deny it and work at it.

2 Q. How old are your grandchildren now?

3 A. No, don't have any.

4 Q. Not yet?

5 A. Not yet.

6 Q. Potential?

7 A. Right, right. That is all I can say.

8 And I hope it won't happen again, that is the only
9 way, because you have to learn to--we have to learn to--that
10 this is being prevented somehow. So--but you see when you
11 are in a camp like this, even the 16 months, two years, one
12 year, days just passes, you don't think. You don't think of
13 the time, right?

14 Q. You don't think of the next day?

15 A. You just like let's go.

16 Q. Was the work very, very hard?

17 A. It wasn't that hard but it was very dirty and
18 very monotonous, you know, very boring, you know. You are
19 being watched constantly, so it is, you know, you just keep
20 doing things like a machine.

21 Q. Uh-hum?

22 A. That is what it amounted to.

23 Q. Uh-hum?

24 A. You know you have to do it and you do it and you
25 do it.

26 Q. Were you mostly with children your age?

27 A. No, I was only, no it was all mixed everything,
28 all mixed up. There was no ages children, grown-ups, older

1 younger; they just counted certain amount of people went
2 certain direction, everything was being counted.

3 Q. Did you work at the same job?

4 A. Pretty much yes, yes. That is--

5 Q. And the women were separate from the men?

6 A. You know something, I don't--I don't think that
7 they separated no. First they tried, there was so much
8 confusion there that didn't matter at that point. It has
9 been a long time but I still remember.

10 Q. Yes.

11 A. You know, but you have to make the best out of
12 every situation, it is the only way. Otherwise you can't
13 survive.

14 Q. Well, I thank you for coming and sharing with us
15 and this document is very important?

16 A. It is good that everybody should know what really
17 happened, that is all I can say. It really happened. That
18 is about all I can say, because I am--I am really not the
19 only survivor, there are many more survivors; right?

20 Q. Unless people come forth and tell their personal
21 experience, it is just an anecdote?

22 A. That is true, that is true, but for some people
23 it is hard to talk about. You see some--I know they can't,
24 they tried to avoid it. So you have to everybody accepted
25 different way.

26 Q. Right, right. I know people who have been
27 invited to participate--

28 A. And they can't talk about it, no. No but I am

1 sure there are quite a few more you will be able to find.

2 Q. Uh-hum.

3 A. Once it is, you know--but anyway let's hope it is
4 not going to happen again, that is all.

5 Q. Really, yes.

6 A. Right, that is the only--that is all I can say.
7 Was nice meeting you.

8 Q. Thank you, thank you for doing this.

9 A. Okay, you are welcome.

10 UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Okay, we are starting at the end
11 of the tape, picking up where we stopped.

12 Q. Miriam, I wanted to ask you what it was like when
13 you first left Bergen-Belsen and left Holland and you were
14 transported there. Can you remember your arrival, initial
15 impressions?

16 A. Yes, that was a very startling experience. Train
17 stopped and all of a sudden we looked out and we were
18 surrounded by Germans with the rifle. That gave us one sign
19 it was not very good. We were called out, we had to drop all
20 our belongings and start marching and we knew where we were
21 heading.

22 Q. Where were you heading?

23 A. To the camps. We didn't know really that we were
24 going to a camp like this.

25 Q. Did you know that there were camps where people
26 would be exterminated?

27 A. Oh, yes.

28 Q. Did you know what kind of camp you were--

1 A. We had no idea, but we know it wasn't good. And
2 from that day on you were just like a number.

3 Q. Was it any comfort being with people you had been
4 with or with family or--

5 A. It was such a shocking experience that somehow
6 you forgot everything. You just were wondering what is going
7 to happen, what is going to be tomorrow.

8 Q. What was it like seeing all those soldiers when
9 you got off the--

10 A. Speechless. Everybody was speechless. It was
11 quiet. You could hear a pin drop.

12 Q. Were they like lined up with--

13 A. Surrounded with dogs and rifles.

14 Q. With dogs?

15 A. And rifles.

16 Q. And what did you have to do?

17 A. Just get out of the train, drop all your
18 belongings and start marching towards the camp and we had to
19 march maybe for a couple of hours until we got there.

20 Q. Did you have a number on from being in the camp?

21 A. No, we did not get a number because my father
22 was--my mother had thought that he came to United States and
23 he was American citizen and somehow she insisted that we were
24 citizen but we couldn't prove it, so they thought--they kept
25 us in different places and thought maybe that we could be
26 exchanged for German prisoners but somehow didn't go through
27 and that is why we did not get a number.

28 Q. You asked me when we were off camera what I

1 thought--

2 A. Right.

3 Q. --of concentration--

4 A. Right.

5 Q. What do you think other people think life was
6 like?

7 A. I don't think they can visualize it actually
8 because you were just a number. You just had a barrack where
9 you went to and you had a small little space, your bed,
10 bunkbed and that is it. You went to work, went to sleep,
11 went to work, went to sleep, that is it.

12 Q. And you said they told you when to go to the
13 toilet?

14 A. Yes, right. That is right. You had time when to
15 go to the bathroom which was like holes in the ground and
16 when to wash yourself. You were just programmed. You were
17 just told what to do, whenever.

18 Q. Like a robot?

19 A. Right, that is it. That is about it.

20 Q. Like when you ate, what did you eat out of or
21 were there tables? Where did you eat? Was there a dining
22 hall?

23 A. We didn't have tables, we didn't have a dining
24 hall. You just on your lap.

25 Q. Like out of the tin cup or--

26 A. That is right, we had tin cups. That is about
27 it.

28 Q. Spoons and--

1 A. Yes, I guess, I don't remember really but I must
2 have had a spoon or very little--as little as--just as little
3 as possible.

4 Q. So what do you think that misconception is for
5 people who have never experienced it? When in their minds
6 was it that they--

7 A. I don't think you can visualize that. No way.
8 We didn't have a diningroom like people or chairs or tables,
9 that is it. There was nothing.

10 Q. You lined up for--

11 A. You lined up for your food then maybe you sat on
12 your bed, on your, you know. . .

13 Q. What did you wear?

14 A. We had some clothes but we didn't get uniforms
15 because I maybe had two sets of clothing, that is about it.
16 I don't remember--I didn't have--I was growing. I had some
17 wooden shoes, a few socks, something but--

18 Q. Who did the laundry?

19 A. There was no laundry, you didn't wash it. We had
20 outside some cold running water. We didn't have soap. There
21 was nothing there. That is why it is very hard for anybody
22 to visualize what it was.

23 Q. It is--

24 A. You just lived like a number, that is all like I
25 say again.

26 Q. Did you interact with each other? Did you talk
27 or mingle--

28 A. I guess.

1 Q. Was there any fun, any light moments?

2 A. No. You made fun. Sometimes we tried to burn
3 some of the work which we were supposed to do when the
4 Germans looked away, we put it in the boiler when we had to
5 cut some materials up we didn't want to do, we put it in the
6 fire. But naturally--

7 Q. Were you afraid?

8 A. Sometimes you just had to do something which
9 wasn't supposed to be done, so just to get a little change,
10 you know.

11 Q. How did the guards treat you?

12 A. Distance. I kept my distance.

13 Q. Did you ever look them in the eye?

14 A. No desire. I tried to stay as far as possible
15 from them, distance again.

16 Q. And what do you think the mistake that some
17 people make, survivors who don't want to remember, don't want
18 to talk about it?

19 A. I guess somehow they just can't forget, they feel
20 they were short changed that they had to be the ones who had
21 to go through this experience they said why was it me, I
22 think. And they feel just very bad, very hurt inside.
23 Bitter.

24 Q. I would think it is hard not to be.

25 A. But there is always, you know, we--I am here,
26 like I said I am here with a good life, to be grateful.

27 Q. And the people who survived, how they have--what
28 they have made of their life without any education?

1 A. They did pretty good because if you want
2 something badly enough, you can do it. You can do anything,
3 you just have to make up your mind you want to do it.

4 Q. And I know you told me you were a widow very
5 suddenly with two young children?

6 A. Right.

7 Q. And tell me how you think your past experiences
8 helped you deal with that?

9 A. I think each situation makes you stronger. You
10 just want to do it. You have a family and you can do it and
11 if you do things together that is the bottom line. You work
12 together at it. My children, we all work together. We did
13 things together and made us stronger.

14 Q. But you think you were better equipped to deal
15 with that loss?

16 A. Maybe, maybe. I think so, because I learned to
17 cope, to accept.

18 Q. You said you became very independent?

19 A. You have to, that is right. You have to do
20 things for yourself. You have nobody to turn to, you learn
21 to do it. And if you want to do it, it can be done. You
22 just have to make up your mind.

23 Q. You have to be strong?

24 A. Yes, strong, right. But just the way, whatever
25 you make up your mind you can do it, anybody can do it.

26 Q. Do you think there was ever anything that you, or
27 did you ever think that you promised yourself if you ever got
28 out that you would do with your life or not ever do?

1 A. I think I was too young to think about it really;
2 too young.

3 Q. One day at a time?

4 A. Right, right. I, you know, those days were
5 different, we were 11, 12, 13 years old. You didn't have the
6 experience, the different times. All you wanted is your
7 family. You know that is about you are concerned about.

8 Q. So did it help to have your family--I guess it
9 must have helped in the situation, you knew they were alive?

10 A. Oh, yes. I always hoped that my father
11 will--some day will be back with my father again, you know.
12 I always hope.

13 Q. Uh-hum?

14 A. That is one thing.

15 Q. Does that mean while you and your sisters were
16 there?

17 A. That is right, I had my sisters.

18 And I had my mother you know so that is not going to
19 be forever, we always hoped one of these days the war will be
20 over and we were happy, just waiting for the American planes
21 to come in, that is all we were hoping for. Because even all
22 along we could hear planes coming and we could see that they
23 were not German planes, that something was happening.

24 Q. And then you went to Holland and who did you live
25 with?

26 A. Oh, I lived with some very nice Catholic family,
27 they treated me wonderful. They were very good, felt like I
28 was one of them. They dressed me, they clothed me. We

1 really--until I was able to find where my father was and I
2 went, came to the United States and joined him here.

3 Q. Did you ever have any contact with that family--

4 A. I kept writing but then after a while it was you
5 know they passed away but they were really very good to me,
6 they tried their utmost.

7 Q. And that makes you--

8 A. I really wish some day I can help somebody and
9 got same thing.

10 Q. Under different circumstances of course?

11 A. Right, right. Absolutely. So that is why now I
12 don't work any more, I really like to give time of myself to
13 do something for help people.

14 Q. Very good.

15 Thank you very much.

16 A. It was a pleasure. Thank you.

17 --oo0oo--

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