

OK, you can start.

You display such life and spirit in your response to your history during the Holocaust. And I'd like to know what sustained you? What spirit sustained you through the war years? Was there any joy? Was there only fear? What was your state of mind?

My state of mind, survival. I wanted to survive. But I didn't plan anything. And it's amazing. When I think about it, I was just pushed like a figure on a chess desk, on a chess board. I really can't explain it because I have to believe in miracles. Because this is absolutely incomprehensible that without premeditation or any plan, it just drove like a movie. It just kept rolling. And what is amazing about my survival is that I was in so much trouble.

And I thought, this is it and it cannot go on. And this is where it will end. And for some reason there was always a remedy. What caused it, how it did develop, and how it took precedence, I really cannot tell, because it wasn't mine. And maybe I'm talking nonsense or maybe, but I'm not a very religious person. I think that religion is made by men. But there is definitely a higher power that governs us all. Because this is just as I said. It's not to be comprehended with the physical mind or a scientific mind, because it was without premeditation.

I didn't have money. I ran away with 500 zloty with a small baby, three years. And it's like somebody was pushing me. And I'm not that smart. I'm not that educated. I'm not that intelligent. But for some reason, I don't know, the last minute something developed or something told me to do just that. And that's the whole story. I cannot tell you anything else. No matter what you ask me, darling. I would like to be very precise and tell you everything, but I just can't tell myself that this is me, you see. When I think about it, it's like it would happen to a different person. But it actually really happened to me. And there was always a way out. And I wonder if I ever die, because I don't know. But I know I'm going to die someday.

Were there any times of laughter or relief in some way? Song or?

I was singing to the children. I was singing to the children. There was very little laughter. Very, very. You can see this is taken 1945, the picture of Mietek. And you said seven, but he wasn't seven. That was taken in 1945 after the liberation at six. Couldn't be seven.

Yeah. It was taken in Breslau. I have another picture. He is with me. And I am in the picture. Of course, I'm an entirely different woman. It's about, I don't know, 50 years. It's close to 50 anyway. And I don't know. It's just for everything there seemed to be an answer that when I was in a jam or when I really was confronted with many things.

For an example, I was asked a religious question with the Ten Commandments and I answered and I didn't know if I say the right thing or the wrong thing, but I said them. And I can compare that when I came to the United States and I didn't know a word of English.

So we went to a bakery, my son and I, and I wanted a bread. So I said that-- I knew bread. And then not brot. Instead I said, I want the bread. Would you please sell me bread. Or sometimes I say I will a bread. And that's German.

[SPEAKING GERMAN]

Bread. That's what I knew. Bread. But [GERMAN], it wasn't even German, because you usually say [SPEAKING GERMAN] or something. And I just said and we went out and I got the bread. And we left the bakery and my son said, you don't say I will. You say I want to. I want to was wrong too. So here you are.

See, I can laugh now about it, but it wasn't easy start everything anew in the United States. Wasn't easy in Germany. But somehow I survived many, many critical moments. I saw that I cannot, in Germany I cannot live from that what the Joint together with the international refugee organization gives. It was not enough. And beside it, I don't want to say it, but it is true that whoever was in the committee in that government of the DP, they were stealing. You see?

For three years, I didn't get any from the Joint. I was smoking. I was a bad smoker. And I didn't receive any cigarettes. See? And the Joint gave cigarettes, gave out cigarettes and many other things.

But I for some reason-- and the worst part, I always used to dress my child nicely and cleanly. And I myself, even if I had two dresses the whole war, they managed to be clean and ironed and washed. And I don't know. Maybe it's in my blood or maybe it goes down from generation to generation through generations. And I am not any special tribe. I'm just Israel, tribe of Israel. And I don't know. I don't know. Maybe that just my father was a great chance taker.

My mother was a beautiful woman that I didn't even know until [? Askara. ?] Maybe I mentioned it to you. I was in Israel and we all went to [? Askara. ?] You know what Askara is. It's a memorial of that, in that ghetto, in that, you know. --

And I went and there were many people from that town and neighboring towns, from Jedizejew and from Wodzislaw. And there was an old, old man present and he saw properly all the same people every year. And he came up to me and he said in Yiddish, and who are you? And I was with my brothers, with Aaron and with Karl, Rena didn't go. And Shmuel.

And I said, I'm Mikhael in Yiddish, I answered I'm Mikhael Melman's daughter from-- I was born in Wodzislaw. And he said in Symenon. He didn't say not say Sym -- but [INAUDIBLE]. [PERSONAL NAME] daughter you are not. I said, yes, that was my mother. He said, do you know what mother you had? I said, I know she was a very fine, saintly woman. You don't know what your mother was, he said. She and Aunt Hinda of yours, Hindle. He said similar Hindle, young like in Jewish small town.

And she and Dr. Moshe [PERSONAL NAME] wife, that was the sister-in-law, my father's sister, she opened, both those ladies opened a school for poor children, Jewish children in Wodzislaw That's what your mother was. See? She was very charitable. I know that from [INAUDIBLE], because Wodzislaw I hardly remember. I don't remember anything. And Aron doesn't remember her and he's younger than I. But I remember sitting in [INAUDIBLE]. That's what I remember Aron.

So I told him and I'm very proud of my mother, but she was, as I said, a saintly woman. And she helped a great deal. If someone bought a child from the neighbors who was sick, she helped out. Sent me Fridays to poor people, with the challah and with soup or fish and wrapped up in nice little white tablecloths and I carried that. Sometimes I wanted to and sometimes I didn't, but I went.

I know that she-- and my oldest brother that I said, Moishe we called him Monek before the war and after the war. During the war, we called him Martin because it was safer. And he was engaged when he was 17 and the girl was 14. And I only know one thing. I don't remember those things. She was from a very wealthy home, but her father died prematurely from typhoid. If I was born yet, I don't know if I was already around, because I don't remember those things. But I only know they became very poor.

They were engaged and my parents married them. That I remember because they put me in a beautiful carriage with a bouquet of flowers and they sent me to meet her halfway or something with the flowers. And when she was sitting during the wedding on a throne that I remember too, I had a crinoline dress and I was sitting on a little stool at her feet. That I remember, you see.

And we had already the new house, because my parents when they bought the farm, that also was the initiative of my mother. After World War I, they were very, very poor. They didn't have for petroleum. There was no electricity. And they were hungry. And my mother said never again will my children go hungry.

And she wanted a piece of land, because she came from a farmer's family. Large farmers. Her grandfather, I know that she used to tell a story more from life than from books. She sang beautifully. She sang beautifully. I still remember her song. It's an amazing thing that she sang a Polish song. [INAUDIBLE] some religious-- it was a beautiful song I sometimes sing it.

Can you sing it for us?

If I can remember right now. No, it doesn't come. I remember [INAUDIBLE].

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

The three ghosts watch over her. And she was a little gypsy sitting with the child on the Elbe River. And she doesn't have anybody, only the three holy ghost are watching over her. My mother sang that song. I remember.

Well, she spoke a beautiful Polish. She spoke German. She spoke French. My grandfather educated the kids, wanted to have educated kids. Educated kids. Yeah. My father hardly spoke any Polish. He spoke Polish but very badly. Yiddish. He davened.

My grandfather came from Hungary. Neumann, my father's father. Yeah. Ruven. See, Ruven is named after that grandfather. And my son was named after Moshe, the doctor. You see? Yeah.

My aunt came. He died from a heart attack. [PERSONAL NAME] How did he become a doctor? It's very, very hard. It was very hard to become a doctor in Poland.

He was taken by the Russians when he was seven years old. Something, there was mama-- I remember that mama said [NON-ENGLISH], but I don't know how to translate it. No. Oh God.

As the prisoners in Lebanon, the American prisoners. They let them out now. He was taken as somebody like that. And he was seven years old. They used to do that with Jewish children. And as it happened, a doctor adopted him.

And he was practicing and he was so in love with that child. He loved him so much that he sent them off to study to become a medicine man. But he knew that he is Jewish. And he came back to Poland to marry a Jewish girl. And they went back to Russia. But my aunt-- and he married my father's sister.

And they went back to Russia and she didn't want to stay in Russia. They came back to Poland and he practiced until that Jew, that man that asked me if I know who my mother was, what kind of a woman my mother was.

So that man told me, said until Moshe, the doctor hangs out his shingles that he can practice what it took. It was a great struggle. Yeah. And when the Poles took over Poland, I don't when they take it [INAUDIBLE] they took over Poland.

But when they took over Poland, they cooked up a story that so many Jews were supporting the Russians or they were spies and they arrested Moshe the doctor, my father, the rabbi, about 12 people.

And my Karl was a child at that time and took him and they locked them up like in a prison, a primitive prison. And at that time, he was little. He took an ax and wanted to knock down the door from the prison and get them out.

But they took him to trial to Pilsudski, to General Pilsudski. There were pogroms in that town where my parents lived. And they said that the blood was running in the gutters.

What town was this?

Wodzislaw It was 10 kilometers from [INAUDIBLE]. Yeah. I'm only so sorry, because I am a member of the Hadassah and they sent every month little magazines. And there was the shul, the temple from that Worzislaw.

Why didn't I keep it? I threw it out. I couldn't look at it, you see. I threw it out. I should have kept that magazine. I cannot forgive myself. m I was born in that town. But I hardly remember it. And my grandfather, Ruven Neumann, he had a factory of the upper parts of shoes and boots and so on. And in front he had workers, my mother used to say. And in the front, he used to sell everything for the shoemakers. Leather and soles and so on and so on.

A Hungarian Jew. Maybe I have the dark hair from [INAUDIBLE]. My mother had an olive face. I have a ruddy face. Yeah. Joseph. I resemble Joseph. And I resemble [INAUDIBLE] a little bit. But Karl I don't resemble.

I have [? Anja ?] too. I have a picture that's also blown up in Israel, in Jerusalem. A girlfriend of hers had that. And so my nephew brought it up. [INAUDIBLE] That's some pictures. I have some. Some are better, some are not so good. But I'll bring him again if you want me to.

Yes, I do. I think this is it.

They dragged him out to the railroad tracks and they cut off a half of his beard. He didn't have a big beard, but he had a beard. And they cut it off and they made him work on the railroad tracks. And he wasn't that religious.

His mother was severely religious. She always used to with me, that I washed my undies on Saturday and they went to bed. And my little cuffs, and my collars, my white collars from the uniforms when I went to school. And I washed my hair on Saturdays.

And she was very mad. But I had to go to school, to the school. I had to go on Sunday because I went to the Jewish school. And I used to go to the gymnasium in Kielce. I used to travel. And I didn't have [? linen, ?] and I didn't want the maids. There were two maids in the house. I didn't even allow them to polish my shoes. No. I did my own shoes.

And then I went to the Catholic school, I used to sing in the choir. And my sister beat me up once. She beat the hell out of me.

[LAUGHS]

She was much older. She was like the whole house around her.

Why did she do that?

Because I should be home and I need errands to do for the house. You see? And she was reigning over the whole house and my house. My father came home from the fields. And I remember him. I see him like right now in a black alpaca jacket and pants and those headsets wear now. How do you call it?

Those hats. [INAUDIBLE] With the visors, the little hats. He wore that. And he came with his cane and it came in. And she kept me there on that [INAUDIBLE] and was beating me and he just grabbed her and let her have it. And she was grown up too. She was much older than I.

And my mother didn't say anything. My aunt was there. My youngest aunt. My youngest aunt Chaya. She hanged herself during the war. Yeah. She committed suicide. Two in the family committed suicide.

My father's sister that hired the youngest one and an uncle that wasn't a blood relative. He was married to a sister of my father's. The youngest. The youngest of the four youngest. Sarah. And he committed-- and he was such a religious man. My mother never could understand why he committed suicide. That this is the greatest sin in the world.

But our family doctor said to me after I returned, because I asked him for poison. I asked him for-- my sister had some kind of infection and he came into the ghetto. He was Russian, [PERSONAL NAME]

And he used-- I grew up with him. Every time he see me, not for medical reasons, but if he saw me, he used to say-- I remember I once ran out and I had a very beautiful dress, a beige linen dress and a little bolero.

And we had sweet peas and I liked to put flowers right here. And I ran out and here is doctor [PERSONAL NAME] He didn't know how to say miss in Polish. So Pani. So Pani is miss. Mrs. He called me Mrs. But I was a girl, a young girl. It was vacation time. Miss Esther. All the time much more beautiful all the time. Every time I see you, you are more beautiful.

My aunt that left the two children in the fields, she said, you just look like spring [INAUDIBLE]. We never had any compliments in the house. My mother wouldn't say, oh, you look beautiful and that or this is very becoming. No. No, no.

She just behind. And there is a clash between the sisters-in-law. They came to visit. They're sitting on the veranda and talking. And I heard my Esther is this, is so beautiful, this is so beautiful. And always standing up for me.

They said I buy too much expensive things like shoes I bought for 45 zloty and their daughters were for six or for eight. But my mother, she buys one pair, but it will last five years. They're like summer shoes.

I bought Czech imported, Czech shoes. Very good. Yeah, well. What can you do? That's it. That's all in the past. And I don't know if you bring up those things what does it amount to. I don't know.

I have good memories. We were singing all the time. All the brothers, my sister was singing and I was singing beautifully. When my husband, my second husband went to Israel and he stayed with my brother. So my brother, is she still singing?

But when I went to Israel, I was still singing. And we had a Seder at my nephew's and there was the whole family. And the three of us started to sing songs that we sang before. My Karl and Aron and I. We started to sing. That was the last time I sang. Because I came home and I had to have surgery on my vocal cords. I talk too much.

And so you can't sing for us now?

I can sing some.

Will you sing something for us now?

Oh really? Is that on?

Please?

Does it matter? It shouldn't matter. That shouldn't matter.

I'm ashamed.

No.

I'm very bashful.

It would-- it would mean a great deal if we could hear you sing something that you remember that means a great deal.

From Poland? In Polish?

It would mean a great deal, yeah.

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

That's a long song, but I just gave you a little.

It's beautiful. That was beautiful.

I used to sing. You don't know. I used to sing on stage.

That's amazing.

Not professionally. I used to sing. My brother Joseph was the president of the Zionist organization. And he used to put plays together. Yeah. I was singing. I was singing the yahrzeit of Herzl. I used to sing solo. I used to sing. I used to sing very nice. But now I have one piece of vocal chord removed. Yeah. I came home from Israel and I got hoarse.

And I called the doctor, couldn't do anything, Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] It's a friend of mine, a very good doctor. And I had to stop talking for two weeks. And I still stopped and it didn't help. And so he sent me away for two weeks to Calistoga. Didn't help.

I didn't speak. I answered the phone. I taped the phone. And so he said, you don't have any cancer or anything, but it's a nodule and it has to be removed because I don't want to leave it.

And for some reason or other, he thought that I will have to have terrible therapy. And I didn't have to. I spoke. See, I'm speaking. I am singing, but and sometimes I sing with the rabbi. But with Karl I sing. And with Mietek I sometimes used to sing. Mietek had -- That was my blessing that I could sing for the children.