

We're waiting to get to the right speed, although we're recording now. Judith, I'll let you know when you're ready. It will be about 10 seconds. OK.

Today is Friday, June 2, 1995. I'm Judith Antelman with the Holocaust Oral History Project in San Francisco. And I'm interviewing Deborah Sessler and producing with John Grant. Deborah, I'd like to start by asking some background questions about your childhood. If you can tell me when and where you were born.

I was born in Amsterdam, Holland, the Netherlands or Holland, March 6, 1926.

And what was your full name at birth?

Deborah van, V-A-N, Praag, P-R-A-A-G.

And your parents' names.

My parents' name. My mother's name was Rozetta. I'll have to spell that for you. R-O-Z-E-T-T-A. Zeehandelaar, Z-E-E-H-A-N-D-E-L-A-A-R. And my father's name was Marcus, M-A-R-C-U-S, and then Van Praag, V-A-N P-R-A-A-G.

And your siblings, their names?

I have one sister. Her name is shall I say Beppy. B-E-P-P-Y. And you need a maiden name or her married name or not yet? No, no, OK.

And what were your parents' occupations?

My dad was in sales. And unfortunately, well, before my mother died, they had a grocery store in Amsterdam. You know, one of those neighborhood grocery stores. And when my mother died when my sister was two years old and I was four years old, my dad tried to carry it on by himself besides taking care of us too but couldn't do it and sold the store and then he went into sales. My mom died when we were very young.

What did she die of?

We don't know. Those days they didn't tell you. They didn't tell you. They kept those things very secretive. Many times have I asked my aunt who has passed away now also, who did survive the underground when she was underground in Haarlem. Asked her many times what my mom died of and she wouldn't tell me. So we have a feeling, my sister and I, it was either they always told us it was an obstruction in the bowels.

But we have a feeling it might been birth that they didn't want to talk about it. So we really don't know. But my sister and I were planning to go to Europe next year and we're definitely trying to find out. We're going to find out what she passed away from, because my kids are very interested in that also for background.

So then here was your father. He was taking care of the two of you alone and running the store. Then he went into sales. What kind of sales?

He was in electrical equipment. He did a lot of business with Czechoslovakia. At that time, Holland did a lot of business in electrical equipment like light fixtures and bulbs and stuff like that. He and my uncle, they worked together. Oh, he worked for my uncle. I don't know exactly how. But that's the way he made his living.

And when he was working during the day and you and your sister were young, who took care of you?

As soon as he sold the store, my aunt, a sister of my mother, took care of Bep. And I was, in other words, that was the first split they did with us. Beppy went to my aunt and I went to my grandparents.

And how old were you?

I was four. Bep was two. That was shortly after my mother died. Well, I said he tried to carry on with the business, couldn't do it, and I don't think he had-- he was young. My dad was-- he was born in 1900 and I was born in '26. So he must have been-- no. Yeah, four years more. 30. 30. So he was quite young and she was 31 when she died. She was a year older than my dad. So the relatives stepped in and Bep went to my aunt and I went to my grandparents.

And I became a very spoiled little girl being raised by grandparents. And I was there for four years and my sister was also for four years at my grandparents and Beppy was at my aunt's for four years. And then my grandmother passed away. I don't know of what. I think it was asthma. They don't talk. They didn't talk about those things. So she passed away. And then they figured, well, they don't know what to do with us anymore. They got us back together and put us in an orphanage where we had a very good upbringing. And we went to fabulous schools, private schools. It was actually it was an orphanage. Not that both parents had died. My father had to pay for it. It was somewhere like a--

Boarding school.

Somewhere not quite a boarding school but in between.

Was it in Amsterdam?

Yeah, in Amsterdam. And I told you I have two books with me so you can see the place and how we dressed. And we had a wonderful, wonderful childhood. No doubt about it. Beautiful childhood. Beautiful education. Well taken care of. Never were we abused or hit or anything like that. It was a wonderful, wonderful-- they called it a weeshuis, which is an orphanage. But like I said, a certain percentage did come from the parents who did work.

When you were at your grandmother's and your sister was at your aunt's, were both of those homes in Amsterdam? Were you close by to each other?

Yeah.

So you saw each other?

Very seldom. Very seldom.

What was that like for you?

I don't know. I really don't know. I don't think I paid too much attention to it. I think we were too young. Four and two, we were too young. I really don't recall. So now and then we saw them at family reunions and stuff like that but very seldom. Not too often.

So are your earliest childhood memories of when you and your sister went to the orphanage? And you were eight then and Bep was six?

Right, right.

Was your family religious?

Yeah.

So you said [CROSS TALK] prayers?

Very religious. Well, now some of our family were and some were not. And the strangest thing was that one of my father's brother married a Christian lady, a non-Jewish woman, and was literally sent out of Amsterdam and lived in Haarlem, which is about I would say 30 kilometers out of Amsterdam. And they were never-- I never knew that that

uncle existed. Those are the days they used to do that. They just pushed them out of Amsterdam and he lived in Haarlem.

And then after the war, really I got to know the guy, after the war was over. But he's passed on too. But he was married to a non-Jewish woman. Had three children. And I never knew the man existed. But yeah, my grandparents were quite religious. Not Orthodox religious, but Jewish. I mean, the holidays were observed. The Shabbos was observed and so on.

So can you talk about that, if you remember any of the way Shabbos was observed?

Very quiet. Very quiet. I don't even think they went to synagogue. Was just the candles were being lit on Friday night. And that was still with my grandma. But my mother I don't remember. But at my grandma's house, yeah, the Shabbos was observed. And I think my grandfather either he fasted on Yom Kippur. But not over religious, but they were religious people. My father lived in the Jewish neighborhood, which is this all about, the Jewish neighborhood. And so was that orphanage was also in the Jewish neighborhood in Amsterdam.

Was there a particular name for the neighborhood?

Yeah.

Do you remember?

It's called the Jodenhoek, the Jewish corner. Jodenhoek. That's the book. Oh, I mustn't show it yet. No, not yet.

And so was the orphanage mixed Jewish and non-Jewish children?

No.

It was just Jewish?

Jewish children.

So did they follow the holidays there?

Wow and how. Yeah.

Can you talk about that?

Well, we were very religious. I mean, the most important thing was learning the religion. We went to a religious Jewish school outside the orphanage. And they paid very heavily money for that. So there must have had plenty of money. They had a lot of people who sponsored this too. And in fact, there is a picture in the book from that school there also we see in there.

And that was your emphasis were mostly on religion. You learned of course your math and your English and your history or your geography. But religion was twice a day. At least two hours a day you had religion. And I could read Hebrew. I still do. I don't speak it, but I read it. I know sometimes what I'm reading. So I knew the alphabet.

And of course, all the observances, which are wonderful memories, the Shabbos and Pesach and Yom Kippur when you had to fast. And when you became a little bit older, you could fast all day. And that was, of course, a big thing. That now you were with the big girls that you could fast all day. So the holy days, the religion was very, very, what can I say, emphasized on. Yeah. We were really very good Jewish people.

If my father would come on Saturday and pick us up, because Saturday and Sundays we had free time. And when you were underage, you couldn't go alone. So then he came in the beginning and came and picked us up. And if he had

money in his pocket or no hat on, I wouldn't go out with him. Yeah, because you're not supposed to have your hat-- you had to have a hat on, especially on Shabbos. And if I could hear change in his pocket, we wouldn't go out with him. We told him that you can't do that on Shabbos. It's true.

So we were very religious. Went to school every day. Went to synagogue every Saturday morning. Sat upstairs, there's a picture in the book too, sat upstairs and behind the curtain. Didn't know what's going on downstairs. No idea. We just heard him sing and daven and, you know, pray. And we sat there all day Yom Kippur. If you could fast all day, you sat all day in shul, you know. They were religious and it was wonderful. I think that is what gave us, I hate to say this, but it gave us our strength. It gave us our strength.

What was the age group? How was it?

Well, I don't think they took them under six. It was from six years old to 18. By 18, well, you got very good schooling. You could choose at 14 years old what school you would like to go to. Would you like to go to a high school or would you like to go to learn? And I went to it's called the [DUTCH] school-- economic, home economics. Would I like to go to a home economics schools. And I said yes. And I was there for two and a half years.

And I still got a diploma from that because I wrote after the war and I asked him to send me. And I went there for two years I think it was. And so the education was very good. At 18 if you had a job, if you had work, they let you go. They gave you clothes and they gave you some money and they told you go on your own now and go work and find your own apartment or something. But you had to have a job, otherwise they didn't let you go. So that was from six to 18.

So it was different classes. It was just like school, I guess. First grade, second. Was it divided into classes of the age groups?

Yeah. Oh yes. I believe the public schools, we had three public schools or two public schools. And one where my sister and I went to was the Jewish, a private Jewish school, like a Catholic school, a private Jewish school. The age is between six and 12 was the elementary school.

And this was all in that orphanage?

No. No, we walked every day one mile going to school, one mile coming home for lunch, one mile going back to school, one mile go back for lunch.

So the orphanage was home.

Home.

And then--

Schools were outside. The only thing they taught us was religion. When you came out of school at 4 o'clock, an hour religion at the orphanage. And then 6 o'clock praying. And then you always before you sat down, you said your prayers. When you finished, you said your prayers. So religion was the most important thing for them.

How was the sleeping arrangements set up?

We had one, two-- we had three dormitories. And they were really divided by age. I would say the between 14 and 18 slept in the real big, huge dormitory. They are approximately, I would say, half of the girls slept, about maybe approximately 50. And then we had the middle dormitory, where we slept from 8 to 14. And then we had the smaller one where the little kids were sleeping. Some still didn't have the control during the night and stuff like that. So that was called the small dormitory. So we had a small dormitory, middle dormitory, and a dormitory, and large dormitory. And so it was divided in three.

So I guess there were times where you and Beppy were in the same dormitory depending on ages?

Yeah. In the middle one, we were together. I don't think that Bep was in the-- you'll have to ask her. I don't know Bep was in the big one. But in the middle one, we were together, yes. Yeah. But actually this is it now. When we came to this orphanage, Bep and I came back together after four years again. You see, we really had to get used to each other, because I was a very spoiled girl. And she was not because my aunt had two other kids. You see?

So she was the third one who came into that family and I was the only one of my grandparents. And I had all the most beautiful toys and that was all sent with me to the orphanage. And nobody could play with that. I wasn't used to having siblings, you see. So Beppy would touch it. I would hit her. And I was very nasty to her. But then, of course, you grow together again. You know how that goes. Yeah.

What were the, I guess the people taking care of you in the orphanage, what did you call them?

Miss. Miss Kahn was one. Miss Blum. Mrs. Blum. She had been married before. I think her husband died. Mrs. Blum. Mrs. Kahn. Miss Ruth. And the director was Miss Frank, F-R-A-N-K. That was the director.

How did these women treat you?

Very good. Strict, but they had to with 110 children in there. You've got to have a discipline. But very good.

Was it all girls?

Yeah. We also had about half a mile away from ours also in the Jewish corner then what they call the Jodenhoek, was the boy's Israelitisch. It was called the [DUTCH]. Oh God, I'm sorry, I can't think of it. But it's [DUTCH] house. And the boys were about a half a mile away from us.

Were there ever-- were there any religious activities that you did together with the boys? Did you ever see the boys?

Yes, we did. Yes. Especially on Sunday afternoons. We used to have people come out to play music for us, piano or violin and stuff like that. Or some people came and did ballet. And then they used to invite some of the boys into the girls, into our home then. So yes, we did. We did see each other, the boys and the girls. But we never had a chance to be alone, of course. Never. Always supervised. Yeah.

Do you remember how the food tasted?

Awful. I don't think I ever ate. I don't think I ever ate. That's why I think I was never hungry in the camp. I don't know. But I never ate because the food was really bad. Really bad. I can give you exactly the menu what we had. We had on Monday we had beans and rice. That was the little brown beans and rice. And on Tuesday we had rice with apricots. That was our main meal. And on Wednesday we had vegetables and potatoes mashed together. And then you got a piece of meat with it. Well, our school was always late because we came from a long distance the school we were from. So by the time we got there, sometimes there was nothing left.

And we always had a hot meal in the afternoon at 12 o'clock. So we had breakfast, which was pretty good. We had a piece of bread and some butter. And we had when I just mentioned at 12 o'clock all those warm dishes. Then at night time, we usually had another sandwich or an egg or a piece of fish or not very good. But anyway. And then on Thursday, we had, I don't know what you call it, barley. Barley with prunes. Yeah. Our main meal. Barley is--

Oh, barley.

Barley. And they boiled it and they put prunes in it. Oh, it was awful. Absolutely awful. And on Friday night we had our main meal not fried for Shabbos. We had usually a bowl of vegetable soup and a little piece of chicken with maybe a potato, a little bit vegetable. But not fabulous. Never dessert. No desserts. Nope, no dessert.

Your parents or your-- my father used to bring grapefruits and oranges to us because he didn't believe in sweets and

candies because he lost his teeth when he was a very young man. And he was very much fond to have grapefruits and oranges and apples. And those in the morning that dealt, you sat on a long table. You sat in your same seats. We had very long oblong tables. And when my grapefruit was given to me, I had to share it with the whole table.

So all I got from my grapefruit was one slice. But to this day my sister and I share everything we have. Because this is from your childhood. You never could sit by yourself and eat your own grapefruit. You had to peel it, put it on a plate, and pass the plate around. Yeah.

That must've been difficult for you in the beginning.

In the beginning it was, because yeah. Yes. Because everything was mine always. And here all of a sudden, I had to share so. And sharing, of course, is very important.

What were the other children like? Did you have good friends there? Was it a nice congenial atmosphere?

Wonderful, wonderful friends. One still lives in Los Angeles, whom I'm still friendly with. And the, well, the rest is gone. But I had some wonderful friends. We had some good times. Your most precious time, of course, was your free time on Saturdays and Sundays when you could go out and see your parents or your relatives. You couldn't go tram or in a car or in a bus. You had to walk on Shabbos because you couldn't ride.

But on Sunday you could take a trip or you could take a bus. So those were wonderful things because it was your freedom. It was wonderful. And that is the only way they punished you. If you were naughty, you had to take Shabbos, you had to stay in. I tell you what, out of the 52 Shabboses we had, I think 48 I had to stay home. I was so naughty.

You were a bad girl. Let me hear about some things that you did.

Oh, the things I did. Oh.

What were you doing there?

Well, I think I was sometimes rebelling. Rebelling or I was the leader of terrible things which you probably did to one of the people who took care of us. So we used to joke with them and do funny things. Maybe put something on the seat, like a kid does to a teacher. And of course, if they found out whose idea it was, and it was mine, I was punished. I was punished a lot of times on Saturdays. And all you could do is read a book. Couldn't do anything else because you couldn't knit. That is work. So all you could do is read a book. And yeah, it was terrible.

But the kids were wonderful. On Friday night after the dinner had been served, Friday night you got your peanuts and a piece of chocolate and it was then a little bit of a social affair after because it was Shabbos. But each child got a little bag of peanuts and a piece of chocolate and a little bit of an orange and stuff like that. Well, you either were punished Friday night that you didn't get that you had to go to bed or you were punished on Shabbos on your free time. So those were the most precious things to you.

I'll tell you, many Friday nights I had to go to bed. But then on Saturday morning under my pillow, all the kids had gathered peanuts and chocolate and it was all under my pillow. They saved it for me. So that's the way we-- I don't think we ever had fights there. Everybody took care of each other and loved each other. And we had good times together. Yeah, very nice. Like I said, I had a very good childhood.

So this didn't deter you, the fact that you were going to lose out on going out on Shabbos or on Sundays?

Well, but disappointing. You saw those kids going and then you figured, oh, I'll never do that again. I'll never be naughty. Or even if you spoke back to them. Let's say if Kahn said something to me and I spoke back to her not in a polite or nice way, I was punished. You see? I think I was rebelling a lot because of my being so young with my grandparents. I was so spoiled. I rebelled a lot again. I was very outspoken. To this day I am very outspoken. I was already as a child and all that got me into trouble. Or they could hear me. I said it especially very loud. So they could

hear me. You see. And then I was punished again. It was things like not really bad things, but little things would annoy them.

Were there times that your father came to see you and Beppy and you couldn't go out? Did he ever give you a lecture or did he ever talk to you about it?

No, he was never called in. Some of the parents were called in that some of the kids were really bad. But no, he was never called in. I mean, no. I mean, if I couldn't go out and he picked my sister up, he just went with her. They really didn't interfere with-- they left it all up to the people who managed that orphanage. They had a lot of sponsors who had once a month meetings there. And they talked about a lot of things and they gave a lot of money. We had a lot of people from banks who were sponsors from department stores, people with a lot of money.

And they gave a lot of money to the orphanage besides what they took in from the parents. From the parents, they didn't take in too much money. It was only a certain percentage of what they made. So that's the way the orphanage existed and was very-- we had everything. We never went hungry. Or maybe I was hungry but I didn't realize it. We always had clean clothes. We had showers. We had bathrooms. We brushed our teeth early morning, late at night. It was very well organized.

Who provided the clothes?

The orphanage. We had uniforms.

Uniforms. Can you describe what they looked like?

Uniforms? Yeah. Uniforms were in the winter they were I think navy blue dresses we wore to school. No, that was on Shabbos. I think we have some in here. You don't want to see it now, but this-- can I show it now? See, this is something we brought to school. It was like a cotton dress with a color. It was very plain, with a little belt. Those were the school clothes. In the summer, we had different school clothes than in the winter. In the winter was a little bit warmer.

Can you point to yourself?

That's me.

OK. That's little Deborah Sessler.

Yeah, that's me.

And how old were you there?

Oh, probably 10, 11 years old, somewhere in that area. Yeah. Well, anyway we'll go back that later. And in the winter, we had little warmer clothes on. It was always very plain. There was in the orphanage itself was an atelier, a dress. No, no, no. Where they sew.

Did they sew the clothing?

Yeah, they sewed the clothes. Yeah, somebody was in charge there and that's where they made all the clothes. And if we got new dresses, you had to go up there and try your clothes on to see if they fit you. So they measured you and then they made your clothes. We had clothes for inside the orphanage. We had clothes to go to school. We had them for Shabbos we had a dress. And then for the seasons, we had different materials because, of course, the material in the winter was much too warm for the summer. But you had a wardrobe. Yes, so we had to go. Black wool socks on all the way up to here. And then black high leather shoes with laces. What they wear now those kids. Every time my sister and I see them, we say, my God, we were in style 60 years ago. So that's what they wear now.

But we had black. The reason is we had navy blue and black was because we were orphans. They dressed us in dark

clothes. And finally, I think when I was about 15, 16 years old in the summer, we finally got nice cotton little checked cloth with short sleeves. They finally started getting over that, that we didn't have to wear black all the time or navy blue.

So the only thing is we got once a week we got clean underwear. Once a week we got clean dresses for school on Monday morning. We went with a clean dress to school. So it wasn't like we do here with the kids every day fresh clothes. Oh no. No, once a week. Your socks, your underwear, and your clothes. We had a coat in the winter, of course.

And the orphanage was always nice and warm with the exception of the dormitories. They didn't have too much heat in there. They wanted fresh air for sleeping. The hygiene was beautiful and taken care of. It wasn't a hospital. It was just a room where they had beds for in case you were ill. You were taken care of.

We had one of those ladies who took care of us, took care of this particular room where the kids were sick. It was called a [NON-ENGLISH], an ill room. And the kids were being nursed there and stayed in bed and taken care of. So no complaints about that at all. No complaints.

What about did you have a winter or a summer break? Vacation?

No. Yeah, from the schools. But then you always had things to do in the orphanage. You either had to knit washcloths or you had to darn socks or you had to help clean bathrooms and halls and stuff like that. Everybody either school or no school, you had a duty in the morning to do. You had to either help cut the bread and butter the bread or you had to clean the bathrooms or you had to clean the toilets. Everybody who was over 14 years old had a duty, a little job to do before they had breakfast. And then they could come down for breakfast.

Did you resent doing that?

Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Especially if you had toilet duty before you had your breakfast. Yeah, I resented that very much. And I think a lot of people did. So very often I didn't do it and I got punished for it. You see, things like that. They would say, who is in charge of upstairs bathrooms? And I said, it was my turn. They were not done today. You're punished for Saturday or Friday night you go to bed early. You see. Yeah.

Was there ever times that you missed your father or missed growing up at home?

Yeah. In the beginning I missed, I think, I missed my grandparents very much. Because they had a maid. They were very well-to-do. And they had a maid and she was very nice. And her name was Marie. Never forget her. And loved me. Took care of me. And that was all gone. All my love, what I personally always got from my grandparents and from her was gone.

And you got love in that orphanage but not a personal love. You got care. You could talk to the people and you could ask for an appointment to go and see the headmistress and stuff like that. And they listened to you and they gave you advice. But it wasn't from throwing your arms around you and saying, you know what, we still love you. That we never heard. That we never heard. I'm a very affectionate person. And I think my sister is also. But sometimes I can be very cold too. And I think that probably has to do with the upbringing.

I'd like to talk more about your grandparents' house since we sort of brushed over it. It sounds like those were great memories. Do you have any memories that stand out?

Of my Grandparents? Yeah. Not of my grandmother as much, because my grandfather lived quite a bit longer than my grandmother did. He was an, how can I say it, a very elegant man. Always immaculate dressed with his vest and he had a big gold chain with his little watch in there. And big mustache and always a walking stick and very proper.

Distinguished.

Very elegant, very distinguished man. I remember him. We used to go and visit him sometimes on Saturdays and



Sundays. He lived in-- he sold his house after my grandmother died and lived in an apartment. And unfortunately, he was taken away from there also. I never knew what happened to him. He was sent into a camp. So I don't know. But I had some very wonderful memories of my grandfather. He was a wonderful man. Nice guy. Yeah. And then the grandparents of my father, I don't think we were that close with. We saw them maybe once in a while. But we were not close with those people at all.

Did you have talks with your grandfather, walks? What did you do when you spent time with him?

Walk. We walked a lot. We sat on a bench in a park and he would sit there and tell a story. Not to my sister as much as what he did to me. But I can still see him standing here right in front of me. Very good looking man. Tall. Very distinguished. Nice guy.

And what did he do? How did he earn his living?

My grandfather owned a kosher slaughterhouse in Amsterdam. And then one of his grandsons who came back from being hidden by the non-Jewish people, he married their daughter after the war. The people who hid him on a farm, he married the daughter after the war. And he took over then the-- it's called an abattoir. It's a slaughterhouse, a kosher slaughterhouse in Amsterdam. And that used to be my grandfather's.

Did he take you there?

No, never saw it.

Did you want to see it?

No, I don't think so. No, I don't think so. Not really. No.

Did you spend much time in Amsterdam in the city with your grandparents? Did they ever take you?

No. No, no, no. I mean, years and years ago there was children should be seen, not being heard. So they didn't sit like I sit in my-- God bless you. God bless you.

Thank you.

Your sneeze is the truth, you see.

Thank you. I like that.

If I see my granddaughter, I can have a whole conversation with her. And she thinks that I am a playmate and that my sisters are playmates. Well, those are relationships we didn't have years ago. You were very respectful to your grandparents. And if you came and visited, you sat like that. I mean, you didn't speak unless you were spoken to. That's the way you were raised. So really conversations with my grandparents, no. I can't remember. I can't remember.

But you were comfortable in their home?

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Very, very happy I was there. Yeah.

Do you remember what your grandmother looked like?

No. I really don't know. I was four years-- no, I was eight then. I should have remembered. No, I really don't. I can see my grandfather but not my grandma. No, I can't remember that.

During those four years, do you remember their friends coming over? Were there a lot of people in your grandparents' house for holidays?

No, I don't think so.

And during the holidays, did you see your father or your sister or your aunt? Did the family get together?

No, usually on birthdays, birthdays were very, very highly celebrated in Europe, our birthdays. So usually on birthdays in the afternoon you used to see your-- they used to come in for coffee and little pastries and stuff like that and cake. That's when we saw them mostly is on birthday parties and stuff like that, not on the holidays. No, we didn't. Not for Hanukkah, for instance, either.

So your birthday was a big celebration?

Still is. We celebrate highly. I'm going to take my sister for her birthday three days to Carmel. You see, we make big celebrations. We thank the good Lord we're a year older.

Do you remember any of your childhood birthdays, any of those celebrations that stands out?

No, I really can't. No, I can't remember them in the orphanage either. I know that they were celebrated, but not what we do now and what we do for our kids and our grandchildren here. No, no, no. Like Hanukkah in an orphanage, you make a wish what you would like as a present for Hanukkah. You could pick one. They gave you dolls, pens, books that you could choose from. And you got at Hanukkah one present.

Different from your grandparents.

Yeah.

Did your grandparents give you eight gifts or more or less?

Yes, yes, yes, I think they did. Every night of Hanukkah you got not big huge gifts, but I mean, you got a package to open or you got a little gift. We didn't have fancy wrap then. But oh yes, for eight days, my grandparents, yes. I don't know about my sister with my aunt. But with my grandparents, I got eight little gifts for the eight days of Hanukkah.

When you and your sister were reunited at the orphanage four years later, did your sister ever say she was jealous or anything like that?

No. No, no. Well, it wasn't just only my sister and me again, you see. You were with so many children. You were always in groups. You were always-- we played basketball and we played all kinds of games in the yard and stuff like that. So I really was never with my sister.

And first of all, my sister was two years younger and that was a big age difference then at eight and at six. You see? So I had all the girls in my age, eight and nine years old, and my sister had the six and seven years old. So she was, and I can show you a picture later on in the book, that was the teacher's pet from the director of the orphanage. Beppy was her favorite. Beppy could do nothing wrong.

And you could do everything wrong.

I did everything wrong. It was awful.

[LAUGHS]

You were seven in 1933 when Hitler came to power. And you were living at your grandparents at seven?

Do you recall any of the speeches or any conversation? So no effect on you.

No. Wasn't even spoken about at my grandparents. Those things were not even talked about. No idea. No idea. No. Actually it really started hitting us in 1937 when all of a sudden our orphanage took on German children, Jewish German children. And we were told that the situation in Germany is very bad and that they did very nasty things to the Jewish people in Germany and that we had to observe the-- we had to take in those I think about 30 or 40 Jewish children from Germany.

And that was our luck because we learned from those children a little bit of German. And you'll find out later on why that was so important to us. So they were there for about I would say-- they started coming in '37 and we were taken to the camp in '42. So they were about four or five years. And they spoke German in the beginning, nothing but. So we picked up quite a bit of German.

Is it a little similar, German and Dutch?

Well, it is and yet it isn't. I mean, like for instance, I can understand German, but I speak very, very little. But I can understand it. It's similar but not really. Not really.

So in '37 then was your first exposure that there was something happening now in the world. Do you recall as an 11-year-old girl any of your thoughts or if you were afraid or what you were feeling?

No. They kept everything away from us. They kept everything away from us. We were not told a thing. We never heard Hitler's speeches. And we had radio, but we could only listen to radio a certain time at nighttime. We never heard the speeches. But we did see, of course, things. We saw, for instance, in the-- well, that was in 1937. Oh, that came late. No, we did not.

And were you ever informed in 1938 of Hitler's annexation of Austria or his taking of the Sudetenland? Were you told any of that?

No. All we found out that they had burned synagogues.

Kristallnacht.

Yeah. They burned synagogues. They took Jewish people out of their homes and that they were taking them to work camps. And that they were destroying the homes and the businesses and so on. And everybody said that could never happen to us. Could never happen to Holland. That was Germany, you see. That could never happen. We were a neutral country. Holland was a neutral country. Could never happen to us. So no, really they did not-- like I said, those things were not talked about.

You were protecting. When you heard the news, though, about the Jews taken out of their homes and the burning, did this conjure up any images in your 11-year-old, 12-year-old?

No. No, be terrible, you know. Like when I say to Julia, you know, he broke his leg. Huh. And then she walks away. Same idea. Same idea. It's, oh, well, that's fine. It really didn't sink into you.

Was there any talk about it in school in '37, '38? Do you remember?

No.

Did Amsterdam still look the same?

Absolutely. Fine. Everything was going the normal way. Was just, well, let's face it. Like when we hear things what's going on in Bosnia in Israel. You are not there. You say, oh, terrible. But you are not there. And then you think, it can never happen to us. When my husband passed away, I spoke at high schools. And many of the questions from those kids were, could it ever happen here in the United States? And it can and it is. Sure. It's scary. So there you are. But at 11, 12 years old, I had no idea that it could happen to us.

Were you then told of the war? September 1, 1939, did they tell you that Hitler attacked Poland? Was there any news about that?

No. No, we did not hear that either. The only time that we really got aware of it was 1940-- was it '40 came into Holland? Yeah. That we could hear the planes go over. And then we knew we were in a war. We knew we were in a war. The war had started because we could hear the planes go over. And as a matter of fact, we could even hear the difference of the planes, the German planes the way they sounded and the English planes when they came over. So we can hear the difference in the planes. So the Dutch planes go over, we could hear the sounds. There were different sounds of engines.

Do you remember the different sounds, or if you could describe in words?

I think the German engine of the plane was a much louder, stronger sound than what the English planes were. They were very light but probably they flew a lot higher. I don't know. But we could hear the difference, yeah. So that's when we really finally realized Holland is in a war.

And that was '40?

That was 1940. Yeah. May. I think it was May '40. Yeah.

Yeah, so you were 14?

Yeah, I was 14. Yeah, I just turned 14.

What then was going through your mind? Were you excited? Were you scared?

Yeah, scared. I think we were scared. Yeah, we were scared. Because then we found out we could hear on the radio and so on that the Germans were fighting and people were getting killed and stuff like that. Yes, it was frightening. We also had in the orphanage a shelter. A shelter had been built for in case of bombardments that we had to go to the shelter. And we all had an emergency kit which each person had to get and go into the shelter with. And they rehearsed that way before the war was over. So they had a feeling that something was coming. So we had rehearsals in that. And a couple of times we had to go down there and sit there and wait.

In Holland also when the Germans came over with the planes, the sirens would go off. And the sirens were a different one when they was dangerous and when it was over. The other siren when it was over, they left and I couldn't tell you the difference. But there were two different ways of sirens. And then we could come out of the shelter. And then the bombardments were over and then they told you it was safe to come out of there.

Was the orphanage on the outskirts of Amsterdam or were you pretty much--

No, no, right smack in the city of Amsterdam. Yeah. In the Jewish quarter, yeah. Right in the middle of Amsterdam.

What were all of the girls talking about in the bomb shelter? Or what was the conversation now? Were you talking among each other about your fears or anxieties? Do you remember?

I don't recall. I don't know. I really don't know. I don't recall. No, I really don't recall about that. I mean, we were frightened that we had to go into those shelters. But no, I don't think we talked about it.

What about in school during this time after the Germans invaded Holland? Was there then talk about what was happening? Did you have questions?

No, at 14 I was in that school, the [NON-ENGLISH] school where I learned about the home economy.

Home ec.

Home ec. And that was not only Jewish children. Those were from all over. Girls, It was for girls only. And No, that wasn't talked about it either there.

Did the non-Jewish girls or other teachers treat you differently?

No.

So there was no anti-Semitism?

No. No, never felt it in Holland, really. Never felt anti-Semitism. Never.

During these bombings, I guess after May '40, did the headmistress ever gather all the girls together and talk to you and tell you what's happening?

No. Unless I don't remember. But I don't think so. I don't recall.

What about your father? When you saw him, did you sense any sort of fear or anxiety?

No.

So everything seemed normal?

Absolutely normal. I mean, it was a tremendous shock what happened to Holland. It was just unbelievable. Because Holland was a neutral country. It was like Switzerland. It was like Sweden. They didn't want a part of nobody. They just want to be left alone. So no idea.

So what happened? The bombing started.

Yeah, we could hear the bombs fall. So then it's a matter of fact. Because what they were after were the harbors. Rotterdam, for instance, was completely flat. But they also were after the harbor in Amsterdam, and that wasn't very far from us. So you could really hear that. And you could hear the planes go over and the shooting, the guns to try to get the planes down. You could really hear that. So that was kind of frightening. That was scary. And of course, we all comforted each other.

But the women who took care of us, they never talked about it. They just let everything-- they probably talked a lot at night. I mean, they had meetings. But with us, they never said. They didn't want to get fear into us, I assume. We were kept very innocent. Very innocent. And it's amazing what kids at 11 and 12 years old know now which I had no idea when I was 11, 12 years old.

It's a different world.

It is. It is. We were kept, like I said, we were kept in the background. I mean, you could speak up when you were spoken to. And it's a different world. Like exactly what you said.

Did you see the planes?

No. No, once that siren goes off, you're down in the cellar. No.

Were there ever times that you had to remain in the cellar for long periods of time, for an hour?

Yeah, about hour. Hour, hour and a half. Oh yes. But they gave you emergency kits. And there were some crackers in there and some chocolate and little things you could nibble on. And you just sat there and waited. Not very much you

can do. But at least you were safe. Those were all done so in case the roof would fall down that the kids were all safe there. And they took good care of us.

So can you recall the events and what happened the rest of the year in 1940 leading up to your--

Leading up to 1942 you mean?

Yeah, those two years.

Those two years. Yeah. Well, what I can recall is that like I told you, my dad used to pick us up on Saturday and used to take us to our relatives, up to his house. And they used to spoil us, give us all things we didn't get in the orphanage. I used to love butter. To this day I just love butter. But I stay off it now because it's not good for my figure.

But one of my aunts knew I loved butter. So the minute we came up, she had big dishes of butter standing there and I just used to inhale it. I just love butter. Put a little sugar on it. We didn't get that in the orphanage. We got nothing but margarine. And I always told my sister that. We got through the camp of our discipline and of the terrible food they gave us, because we never had good tasting food. It was awful. So my dad used to pick us up.

One day then I assume that was in maybe in the early '40s. He picked us up and we went to see one of my aunts in Amsterdam. I have to take a Kleenex. Can I do this?

Of course. You can do anything.

Thank you. We also have more if you need one.

Oh, beg your pardon. I didn't see it. And he picked us up and he brought us home. And we saw a lot of Germans marching through the street. SS with the SS bands on. And we saw a lot of men sitting in a square kneeling down. And we thought, what's going on? And it was [DUTCH], a square. And we just passed it up and my dad took us back to the orphanage. They never approached him.

My dad was a very tall man and didn't look Jewish at all. So they didn't approach him. And then he let us off and then he went home. But later on, we found out that they rounded up all those Jewish men from their homes and put them there kneeling on the ground. And wherever they took them, I don't know. But that's the way they took the Jewish people out of the houses. And that was the beginning.

What year? What month?

Oh, that I don't recall. I could tell you the year probably. It was probably '41, '42, somewhere in that area. '41. It already started. That's the way it started. Then Jews were not allowed in swimming pools no more. Then Jews were not allowed go to school. Couldn't go to school no more.

Then in 1942, I believe, those terrible boards came up where it said on those boards Jewish quarters. And they told non-Jewish people not to walk through there. So the businesses didn't do any business. And they threw rocks through the windows of the Jewish butchers and bakers. And that's when it really all started. And that's when we started realizing that it had happened to us too.

That was about the beginning, '42?

That was the beginning of '42 that my daddy was taken away from his home too.

What happened? Or do you recall when you found that out? What happened?

Yeah. Well, I think one of my relatives came over to the orphanage and told them that they had taken my daddy away to a work camp. And indeed in the beginning of 1940, '41, there were indeed work camps in Holland itself. And I think my

dad had been in there for about a half a year. And they gave him a couple of days off that he could come and see us. And he came to see us.

And I told him, I said, daddy, why don't you do something? Flee somewhere. Go somewhere. Don't go back there. He had to report to come back there. Oh no, he wouldn't hear of it. They told me I have to come back and I'm going to go back. And we begged with him to flee. But he wouldn't do it. So he went back and I don't know where he was killed. I don't know. I think it's Bergen-Belsen. We're going to find that out too once we get back to Haarlem. Because I have no idea where it took him. That was in 1942.

So he obeyed?

He obeyed. They told him to come back to the camp at a certain time to report and he did it. But they did give him a couple of days freedom. So why he didn't flee or why he go underground or do something. I don't know. He went right back.

Do you recall him-- did he seem different to you when you saw him on those days he had off after the work camp?

Well, he told me that he had to work very hard. I don't know what they were doing. But he told me he worked very hard and that's why they gave him a few days off. So that's why. But they told him that he had to come back after two days and to report again and he wouldn't hear of it. At that time already we wore the Jewish stars.

In the orphanage?

Oh yeah. Oh yes. On all our clothes we had to sew those on.

How did that begin? Do you recall? Was there a meeting? Did the headmistress gather there?

Yeah, yeah. They just told us that they had orders from the German-- or actually the Germans went through the Jewish-- I don't think it's the Jewish Federation, but some Jewish organization. It's in the book. I have to read up on that. Sorry, I should have read it before I was-- anyway, they went through a Jewish organization. And the Jewish organization is the one who gave all the words out what was going to happen.

You see? The same way the Germans, they did the same way in the camps. They themselves never did it. It was somebody else who did it for them. They did the same in Haarlem. So they got word that we got Jewish stars and they showed us to them. And we had to sew those on our uniforms, on our Shabbos uniforms. And whenever we went out of the house, we had to wear our star.

How did this make you feel?

Awful. That was awful. To this day, to this day I try to hide my number because I want nobody to know that I'm Jewish. Because I had to walk with this thing that-- I'll tell you all later when we came out of the camp, my sister and I. But this was really terrible. This was degrading. It was degrading. And then our clothes were washed every week. We had to take them off and then sew them back on again. So no, that wasn't very pleasant to walk around with. Well, we only wore those for a year and then we were taken away.

So that year in the orphanage, can you talk about that? Were people's moods, their morale lowered? Do you recall what the people who took care of you were like, if there was a change?

Well, no, there wasn't really a change. We were just hoping that it wouldn't happen. You see, we were very optimistic that nothing would happen to us. And we were so, well, how can I say that? We had so much respect for people who took care, to the organization that we relied on them. We trusted them. You see? So when they said everything will be all right, we trusted them. We trusted. We said, we're fine if they say so. So you didn't even talk about it anymore, because they gave you input and you trusted them. You trusted authority. And that helped us also in the camp. You trusted the authority and you listened to them. And that's what we had in that orphanage.

What about when you went back to the city or when you went-- you said you went with your father and you saw these Jewish men kneeling. What other scenes like that did you see? How had the city changed?

Well, like I said, the city changed when we walked around there. We saw these horrible poles with all corners with Jewish quarters on there. And we had a lot of students who used to come underneath there and bow their heads. Those were the students from the universities and stuff. They were not supposed to come in there, but they did that just out of protest. But we saw the windows being broken. You saw people going out of business. The baker went out of business. The butcher went out of business. You saw all those stores being gone. The whole neighborhood went down. I mean, you definitely at that time you saw a difference. And you started getting a little bit more frightened.

Did you?

Yes. Yes.

Did you ever see people, Jews, being beaten by Germans?

No.

Were there those the long banners with the swastika? Did you ever see those hanging on buildings?

Oh yes. Oh yes. And I have to take the beating back. Yes, we did. I did see them beat when they took us out of the-- when they finally got us and got us out of the orphanage and into the trucks. Yeah, they were beating us. Oh yeah, definitely then. Yeah, yeah. I did see that. Yeah. And oh sure, the swastikas we saw. Sure. But not in the Jewish quarters they were not hanging. They were not hanging the Jewish quarter. Once you got out of the Jewish quarters, you saw them on buildings, on buildings that just taken over.

What did you think of that?

Awful. Because you knew it wasn't Holland anymore. You knew it wasn't Holland anymore. It was-- well, we were under the Nazis. And we knew that that was not going to be very easy but no idea that we would go take them to concentration camps. We always were told in case they take us we go to work camp. They want you to work for them in factories. And that was the understanding when I got on the train that I was going to a factory to work for them.

So this is 1942 before you were taken. How often were you able to go out of the orphanage? You said that your father took you and then at one point--

No, my father wasn't there anymore. So we could go by ourselves. And by that time, I was 16 years old. And they already had a little bit of trust in me. I was old enough to do things. And well, I didn't see anything different in the quarters, really, than what I just told you about the neighborhood going down and people being frightened. People didn't even come out of their houses no more. People were scared because they not only did it during the day. Then they started doing it at nighttime. There was a curfew. And no more lights on in the house by, let's say, 7 o'clock. And then they just knocked on the door and pulled you out of there.

Did you ever see families being taken out of their homes?

No, no. We had no freedom. That is one thing we did not have in the orphanage. We just couldn't walk out of the door and come back in again. No way. No way. Only at designated times could we get out of there. That was our school, which in 1941 you couldn't even go to no more. None of the kids could go out, so they all gave us classes in the orphanage. To school, to synagogue, and your free time on Saturdays and Sundays. Those were the only times you could go in and then they told you what time to come back in again.

When was the last time you saw your father? Do you recall?



The time when he came back from that camp.

That was the beginning of '42?

Well, yeah, it must have been the beginning of '42, because we were taken away in '43. So it must have been a year before that, yeah.

And when you found out that he was taken away, your aunt came to the orphanage and told you that they took him to a work camp? Or what did she tell you?

Yeah, that the Germans had knocked on their door and asked if Marcus Van Praag lived there. And he lived in the Jewish quarters. And he lived with an aunt of mine. He rented a room there or something like that. And they got him and they took him out of the house and they took him to that work camp.

And she said, well, all they told him was that he was-- that his number was up or whatever and that he has to come to the work camp. So that's where he went. And then when he came back those two days is the last time I saw him. Never saw him again after that. So I don't know what happened. He was sent to a concentration camp. Who knows? But we'll find out. We'll go to the Red Cross in Holland and find out all the details.

Well, how did you feel when you realized the next time you weren't going to see your father? Were you angry, sad?

No, I don't remember. I probably was. I probably was. But I don't remember. It's a long time ago.

So then you say your aunt, would she come and see you then?

No, not really. But at that time, I was old enough that we could go and visit our relatives. I could walk with my sister. I was old enough that the two of us could go out. And we used to visit my aunt in the Sarphatistraat and in the [DUTCH]. And we had all kinds of aunts and uncles. They were all still there. And we used to go visit them for a couple of hours and then you walk back home. So I really don't know if at that time I was thinking of my father or not. I don't know. I couldn't tell you. Maybe I did unconsciously, but I don't remember.

So then it became pretty bad. Pretty bad. And you could feel the tension in the home itself. You could feel the tension coming in there. There was a beautiful story in the book here in Dutch, unfortunately, that the Germans were very scared of contagious diseases. Always have been. And one of the girls came down with roodvonk. Now, what is roodvonk in-- it's very contagious. Your skin peels. It's not German measles. Not measles. Oh wow. I can't even think of the word. Could it be scarlet fever?

Maybe.

And here I am on camera. I don't even know what it is. Anyway, it was a contagious illness. And one of the girls was sent to the hospital. And my sister had it too. She was sent also to the hospital. And when the Germans found out that we had that contagious disease in the home, they never knocked on our doors no more and bothered us no more because they wanted to.

And in this particular book, there's a story in here when we were [INAUDIBLE]. And one of the women who took care of us wrote in there that several times they came to ask. They wanted all the girls from 16 to 18 years old first. But she always got them to go because of that roodvonk, that contagious disease we had. And that went on for about eight months that she could push them back not to come into the home because we all had that contagious disease still.

And then finally in November of 1942, this I got from the book. I didn't even know that. In November 1942, there was no more contagious sickness there. And the Germans found out and there's nothing they could do anymore. And in January 1943 is when they one morning stormed into the orphanage and said, everybody out of here. So then they took 110 girls into trucks and they took us all out of that orphanage.

That was January?

January 1943.

Can you talk about that day in as much detail as you remember?

Yeah, I can.

So you woke up that day.

Yeah. And then can I have a bite to eat? But not while I'm on camera, right? No.

Do you want to stop?

Well, if I eat I don't want to do it on camera. Do you mind? Would you like a bite of mine?

No, no, no, it's fine. Let me get John to stop the camera.

OK.

That's my sandwich. Pretty good. I'm talking to myself. Would you like a bite?

No thank you. I can't find him.

Oh, I'll eat. That's OK.

Is that OK?

If you don't mind.

I don't mind. That's fine.

Guess what? My thing fell in the-- she only brought me one. Oh wow. No, I can't do that on camera.

[LAUGHS]

Oh, that's all right. Not to worry.

OK.

I'll tell you what happened, yeah. Maybe he'll come in the meanwhile.

All right, so the day, January 1943. That day, you woke up in the morning. All the details that you can remember.

Well, there was a lot of screaming going on in the halls. And we were asleep. It was early in the morning. And there was a lot of screaming going on. And everybody was yelling. Or the ones who took care of, please, everybody up, everybody out, everybody dressed. The Germans are here. We have to go. So we had to get dressed real fast. And we had to go downstairs in the hall and wait there. And the Germans were yelling in German, of course. And schnell, schnell, schnell-- that's always the word, schnell. And the ones who took care of us were yelling at us. And we all got ready and then we were pushed into trucks.

Well, I fled over the fence to a neighbor's backyard. Yeah, I did. I climbed on the fence. Yeah. I climbed on the fence. I climbed a high fence. It was very high fence. But climbed over and I ran into a neighbor's backyard. And my sister wouldn't come. And I begged her to come with me. She wouldn't come.

And the Germans didn't see you?

No, didn't see me go over, no. And I yelled at Beppy in the yard. I said, Bep, come on, come on. Let's go. Let's go. Let's get out of here. Come on. Let's go. No, she wouldn't come with me. So I went over there and I was sitting in the neighbor's sitting room there and I said, I have to go back because my sister won't come. She's not coming. So I came back over the fence and that's when they saw me. And that's when they started hitting, see. Yeah. Me and other people, because a lot of them had fled. And they all came back too. Some of them didn't come back.

So what did they do to you?

They just told us to go back. They didn't do much to us. They just gave me a good smack and then told me to go into the hall where all the other kids were waiting. And my sister wouldn't come and flee with me. She wouldn't go. So they put us in trucks.

We're recording, but the tape's not at the right speed. I'll let you know. Should in 10 seconds. OK.

OK, Deborah, so the Germans came and they were taking all of you onto the trucks. What did the trucks look like? Do you remember?

Army trucks with curtains in the back. And so they just pushed you on there. And I don't know how many go in the truck, but you could sit on the side benches there and then in the middle they put them on the floor. So cattle. They just put you on those things. And then--

Was it closed?

Yeah, it was closed in. It was closed. And it was like curtains in the back. And we did not have at that time guards sitting with us. They were just driving us to an area. And I really don't know where that was. But it was a train standing there and a passengers train. And they told us all to go and sit in there. And we waited there in that train. And there were a few Germans with their guns walking up and down and up and down.

And some of the girls were called off. Their relatives just came over there I guess and got them off. I don't know exactly how that happened. But some of them got off and some relatives brought us food. One of my aunt came. Not an aunt. She had somebody bring it to us, a basket of food and stuff like that. And we just sat there all day long.

Now, we were always wondering if they just left us there, the Germans, for us to escape. I wish I would have known the answer to that. Because there was hardly any guards there. And nobody told us what to do, just sit in the train. And it was a passenger train, not a freight train. It was a passenger train.

But we were always under the understanding-- later on we thought. And I thought, well, maybe they put all those girls in there and thought, well, it's up to you. Maybe you want to escape or not. And I'm sure some did, because not all 110 came with us to Westerbork, which was a-- they called it Durchgangslager in the German language. It's a camp where they kept you until your number was called up to go on a transport to the camps.

It was the waiting camp. Yeah, I know Westerbork was-- it was a stopover.

A stopover before you were put on onto the trains. So go on.

No, I wanted to ask you. The truck ride to the train. Do you remember time wise how long that ride was?

Not long. Maybe 10, 15 minutes, no more than that.

So the train station was--

In Amsterdam. Oh, absolutely. Yeah, because my aunt who lived in Amsterdam sent somebody with some food. And we felt so important because wow, you were sitting in a train and somebody is bringing us all that food. And there was a little note in there from Tante Celine. That was from my aunt. And we felt very good about that. Somebody taking care of us at least. But no idea what was going to happen to us afterwards. But I still to this day, I wonder if they put us there with all those kids, no supervision in the train, just a couple of guards walking outside the train, that they would let us. It was up to you to go or to stay there.

What were your thoughts at the time sitting in the train with these girls? Were you scared?

Oh, I stayed. I was scared. I was scared.

Did you have thoughts of leaving and escaping?

Oh, I had thought of escaping early in the morning. I had it all the time on my mind. But my sister wouldn't leave and I wouldn't go without her. You see how close we had grown already together in those years? And she wouldn't come with me. That was always on my mind. Always. So I just sat there and we waited until night. I think they got us in there maybe 10 o'clock in the morning. And by 6 o'clock we left. The train left.

So you sat there the whole time?

Yeah.

Were you allowed to go off to go to the bathroom?

There were bathrooms on the train, I think. I don't know. I don't really remember that. I'm sure there was.

And it was a passenger train.

It was a passenger train, so I'm sure there were. So this was not a freight train. This was a passenger train. And then do you have any more questions about that? And otherwise I'll go on. Want me to go on?

What were the children doing? Was there any crying or screaming? Or did it seem like it was hectic or was everyone pretty calm sitting and just waiting?

Well, I would say most of the people were calm. Didn't know what was going to happen to them. We were scared. You didn't know if you were going to get killed or what they were going to do to you. They're taking you from your home. You're sitting in a train. You didn't know what-- so it wasn't panicky at all, but I think people were scared.

Did you see other people outside of the train along the platforms? Were there Germans? Were there regular civilians?

No, it wasn't even in a station. It was a secluded area. I would say there was a lot of dirt around it as well. There were railroad tracks. But I don't think there were any platforms or anything like that. It was just in a secluded area but not very far, not far out of Amsterdam, because the ride wasn't more than 10 or 15 minutes. So the atmosphere was people were nervous and anxious and didn't know what to do and if they should leave the train or not. I mean, same with me. I mean, I was ready to run again. But my sister wouldn't come with me. I didn't want to go by myself.

So then what happened?

Then the train left and we went to Westerbork. And we were put into barracks. And the following morning, every Tuesday transports left on Tuesday morning. And I don't know what they've even got in there. But the next day, I think somebody came into the, I don't know what day it was, came into the barracks and called up the names of the people who would go on on the next Tuesday transport. And my sister and my name were not on it. Now, our headmistress, Miss Frank was her name, she was in the same barrack where we were in. And her name was not called either.

So when it came Tuesday, that transport left. You had to stay in your barracks. You could not see the train leave. You have to stay in your barracks. That was all us, you see. And my sister and I about an hour later, we were called up and we had to come to an office. And there was a girl sitting typing. And she said Bertha and Deborah Van Praag. And we said yes. And they said, well, you didn't go on this transport because you can both wait for your father to come and until he gets here, and then the three of you will go to the camp together.

And then I spoke up and I said, well, I'm sorry, but my daddy already was taken away a year ago and I don't know where he is. Oh, she said, he's already sent to a camp? That was all in Dutch. And I said yes, he has. And she said, well, in that case, she said, you can count on next Tuesday on the transport to the work camp. And I said, oh, OK, and then we left.

Well, we were sent that following Tuesday with the headmistress, who had, by the way, diabetes. And she gave herself two injections a day of insulin. And we were sent on this transport with Miss Frank, her name was, on the train. And then we were still not in a freight train yet. In a passengers train. We were still, I think it was the last passengers train that came out of Westerbork. And that was January '43.

What was Westerbork like? When you got there, what was the first thing you saw? What were the surroundings?

Barracks. Barracks. Nice little plants and flowers in between the barracks. Neat, clean. You saw Jewish people walking around with the star. And you saw Germans walking around with the SS bands around them. And it wasn't a frightened situation there. In fact, it was a very calm situation.

So it wasn't screaming?

No, no, no. No beatings. No, no, no. Nothing. And I don't know what happened at the stations, because every Tuesday morning, everybody was ordered to stay in the barracks. You could not see what was going on. I'm sure there was a lot of screaming and yelling going on in those trains, but we didn't hear or see that. You see?

So how did you spend that week? What did you do?

Well, you could walk around. And I think just sit and wait. I mean, there wasn't very much to do. You didn't work. You just walked around and you visited people.

Do you recall your thoughts at that time?

No.

What did the inside of barracks look like?

Neat bunkers on top of each other. I think we were on the lower one there. And then there was a middle one and a top one.

And how many slept in one bed?

Oh, I don't remember. Let's see now. I think they all had one bed. I don't recall. I don't recall. I know we had one to sleep, because one of my friends slept on top of me.

And was it wood bed with straw or what did you sleep on? What was it made of? Do you remember? Was it a mattress?

I think they were mattresses there. I think. I'm not sure. But I think they were mattresses there.

Did you have pillows a blankets?

Yeah. But it was perfectly normal there. Everything was-- you know what that camp originally was, that Westerbork?

That's where the first German people from Germany were put into. See? Like when you deliver escapees from Germany, they were put into that Westerbork there. That's really what it was. So it was a very normal atmosphere there, I would say. And people, all they kept on telling you, you were sent to work. You're going to camp. You're going to go to places where they want you to work to work for the Germans.

And that's what-- nobody knew that they were sent to concentration camps. Nobody had no idea. No idea. So would you have known that, of course, that would have been a complete different atmosphere there. But you didn't know that. You were going to be sent because you were going to work for the Germans. That's all. In a factory like Philips and all those factories what they took over. You were going to go there.

Were there toilets and showers in Westerbork?

Yeah, I think there were. Yeah. There were.

What about food, water?

We got fed by three times a week, beg your pardon, three times a day. And there was water. Yeah. We all had a bag which was already packed for us from the orphanage. I mean, we had the emergency lockers. And it was already packed with clean underwear and things. You have a towel in there and piece of soap in there and your toothpaste and a toothbrush. That was all ready for you. So we had all that with us. But there was plenty of water there. And I don't think we went short of food.

Do you remember how the food tasted? Was it was step up from the orphanage?

Oh, I don't remember. Not to kids now, but to children in those days, food was so unimportant. You didn't really spend a lot emphasis on food. I really don't know. It probably was a little bit better than the orphanage. Yeah.

So then you spent your days doing?

Nothing. Walking around. Nothing. Seeing in other barracks if you knew other people and stuff like that, because there were a lot of people in there. A lot of barracks and a lot of people. And then the ones who did all the work were Jewish people again. All the Jewish people, they put the people on the train, they counted the people. They sat in the offices. They cooked. They did all the gardening in there. And it was all done by Dutch Jewish people and Germans who were also caught.

So there wasn't much of a feeling of threat or danger there? I'm getting that sense.

No. Definitely not. No.

So you were there for how long before you were called into the office?

Oh, well, I don't know how many days before that. But I know that transport left on Tuesday and that same day we were called into the office because they were already working on the next transport for the next Tuesday. And they told us that we could wait for my dad. And I told him that my dad wasn't-- maybe it was lucky. Maybe it was unlucky that I told them that. I really don't know. So maybe that was my lucky time when I spoke up that I came out of that camp, because I was put on transport the following Tuesday.

And so then what happened the day that you were put on the transport?

They called you up from the barracks and then you had to walk down to the station. You took all your belongings with you.

In the morning?

In the morning. Yeah. You took all your belongings with you, whatever you had, your coat and your bag. And I think we had knapsacks. And then they told you to go and sit in the train and we sat with Miss Frank, because she was our headmistress.

And your sister?

My sister and I. Sometimes I have to-- just have to get my thoughts together. Yeah, yeah. So because she was-- she had diabetes. And couldn't give herself injections because they took the insulin away from her. So she was in quite misery all that ride what we took to Sobibor. And that was quite a long ride, because they stopped somewhere and then they put other trains on to it. And I think it was over a day traveling.

And she was riding in misery because, like I said, she didn't get her insulin, you see. And diabetes people have to eat quite frequently little portions because for the sugar in the system. And she was quite ill on the train. So that always stays with me. Because after all, to us she was like a mother to us. She was a good woman. She loved my sister. I can show you a picture of her. It was with Bep being there.

We can--

Do it later? OK.

Yes. I'll do a close up.

OK, fine. And so then I think it was a good day by train. And then we arrived to Sobibor. And that's when it all started.

Sobibor. This train was a regular passenger train you said?

Yes. We were on the last passenger train. It wasn't a freight train yet. We sat with windows. And I think Frank sat here and Bep and I sat opposite her. So we still had a regular train.

Was any food given to you during that ride?

No. No food or drink at all.

What about toilet? Were you allowed to go walk to the bathroom?

I think you could. Yeah. I think you could. But you already had, of course, all the German guards on board with you. You see? So the authority was already there. They were already standing watching over you. Yeah.

Was the train filled with all other Jews?

Yeah, filled, filled, filled. All seats were taken.

Did you sleep at all during that ride?

Well, the way you sleep in a train like so. And she fell asleep too, Miss Frank. And well, she was quite ill, of course, and didn't feel good. And we dozed off, Bep and I, and then we got to Sobibor.

So about a day?

I think it was at least a day.

On that train ride, do you recall your feelings, your thoughts, if you were afraid of what you and Bep talked about?

No, didn't talk. Just scared. Just scared. Terribly scared. Didn't know what was happening to us. They take you out of

your home, out of your environment, they put you in a train. You don't know. You see on those soldiers, which is a frightening sight. All those SS with their bands around their arms and their guns on their backs.

And you wonder what you've done wrong. So because you're not of their race, you were punished. And you wonder. You've been such a good religious person. Listen to what everything they told you and who to admire and who to have respect for and so on. And yet look for this being done to you. So all those things go through your mind.

During your childhood adolescence, right before you were taken to Sobibor, did you have a strong belief in God?

Yeah. I did. I still do. And I did in the camp too. I don't think my sister did, but I did. Yeah. A very strong belief. And I still do. I'm not a very religious person. I still do what my relatives. We always meet at Pesach. I have Pesach at my house. We celebrate Hanukkah together. We call each other at Rosh Hashanah to wish each other a happy New Year. But that's about it. I don't go to synagogue.

But I'm a good person except I do not want to be in any extreme no more. I'm against anything what is in the extreme. And that's what we were in when we were youngsters, when we were kids. And I just don't want anything to do with it. I don't like any clubs, any organizations. I just don't want to be with them anymore, with that anymore.

So you arrived at Sobibor with Beppy and Miss Frank. And what was the first thing you remember when the train stopped?

Yelling and screaming, the SS. Heraus, heraus. Come on. Schnell, schnell, heraus. And we had a lot of older people on that transport. And we had an old home and a lot of the-- the old home in Amsterdam. And a lot of from those old home were on this particular transport. And they could not get up that fast and they just threw them out of the train. They just threw them onto the platform. And there were trolleys, how can I say it, on rails. Trolleys on rails. And they just threw those people in there who couldn't walk or couldn't. Just like pieces of wood.

And well, we helped Miss Frank coming out of the train. And then they told us-- it was terrible. I'll never forget that. It was a terrible sight. And then they put us into a big square and we all had to stand there. Everything is appell, on appell with the Germans. And we stood in a big square. And then when the trains were all empty, everybody was standing there. And then they asked for 30 girls who could wash and sew and clean barracks and stuff like that. Clean, wash, and sew. 30 girls they needed.

Now, this was in Germany. See, they asked that in German, not in Dutch, in German. And here I come back to that now. That little bit of German what we learned in that orphanage in our home came in handy. So I said to my sister, we don't volunteer for nothing. Don't say anything. We don't do it. And we stood with Miss Frank. And so here comes one of those officers. He comes walking up to me and he says, can you clean and sew and whatever? If I could do that. And I said, I didn't answer. And she said to me, answer them, answer them, Miss Frank. So I said yes sir, I can, in German. He did this to me. Go stay with those 30 girls. Go over there and stay with those 30 women. So I said, I don't want to go because I'm with my mother. And he said, how old is your mother? And I said 65. And he said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

And he told me to go with my sister to go and stay over there. And we were one of not many who came out of Sobibor. Very few. So my sister and I, we came out of Sobibor. And it's from the German who did this to me. Yeah. So Miss Frank was killed in Sobibor. It wasn't really a camp. This was just gas chambers. We didn't know that. So we came out of there and they put us on that same train. And we waited there. You have some questions, I assume.

About Sobibor. When he told you and your sister then to go and stand on the side, you said bye to Miss Frank or she was still standing?

She was still standing there. And then she said to me, you heard what he said in Dutch. She spoke German. You heard what he said. And I said, well, I want to stay with you. And she said, you heard what he said. That's the authority again, you see. He said you and Bep should stay over there. So go over there. So that's when we went. That was the last I saw of her. See, that was the end.



And then what happened? Details in Sobibor. When you went to stand on the side, did some other German put you in the barrack? What happened after that?

We just stood there until they had 30 or 40 girls. I don't know if it was 30 or 40 girls. I really can't recall. But a certain amount of women they wanted out there. And then they marched us off into the train again. You see, they took those-- yeah, immediately. As soon as they had those 40, whatever, 30 or 40 people, they marched.

And there was some men too, but men were, you see, we were separated from the men. So when we came on board, when we came on the train, there were men on the train already. So the men and the women were separated. So the men they must have asked some men too, because there were some men on the train. And then they took us and they marched us to the train.

What did Sobibor look like? Was it a whole-- you mentioned the big square. Was it dirt? Was it cement?

It think it was dirt. Dirt.

Would you remember if there were trees or grass or flowers?

No.

Did it look dismal?

Yes.

Did you see any barracks, what they looked like?

No, didn't see no barracks. All I saw is all I can recall is when the train came into the station, I saw those horrible lorries. They're called a lorry? On rails. And they just piled the people who couldn't walk. They just piled them on top of each other. And then they, I don't know what they did with those people. I really don't know. I didn't pay attention. I was so involved with Miss Frank.

And I think the people-- we stood there for quite a while on that either it was a square or wherever we stood at whenever they were yelling that they needed all those people. There was nothing there. We didn't see anything. It was just bare, as I recall. Maybe my sister remembers more. I don't know.

So you didn't see gas chambers? You didn't see?

No, I did not see. No. No, I did not. No.

So do you recall how long you were standing? Was it five hours?

Oh, I would say it was about four or five hours altogether. Yeah, four or five hours. And then we all the other people stayed behind while they took us to the train again, you see. And indeed, they put us on the train. No food, no drink, no nothing. And nothing to eat, nothing to drink yet.

And you're on the passenger train?

Yeah, still on the same train we came in.

And it was over a day now without food or drink.

Mm-hmm.

Were there any women SS Nazis running around and--

Oh yes, there were women SS too. Yeah.

The one who dealt with you was a man?

Man. The one who walked over to us.

Right. And he winked.

And he winked and he said you go over there.

Do you recall if there were any German shepherds or any dogs? Sometimes they were.

Not there. I didn't see any dogs there. Of course, we saw a lot of dogs in Lublin. Yeah.

Anything else about Sobibor you can recall?

Not really. Not really. Except that I was terribly frightened with what I had seen and what I'd heard. The screaming and yelling and the people moaning because they were just thrown on top of each other. Just like dirt. I think they treat the earth better than what they did those people. That never goes out of your mind. They were human beings. They were just thrown on top of each other. And it was very painful, very painful. So that is really all I remember from Sobibor.

Do you remember if there were any babies? Did you see?

I didn't see no babies on this transport, no. No.

There were a lot of people I guess when you got off? A lot of hectic?

Yeah. The screaming and yelling. And well, screaming and yelling mostly was done by the Germans, of course, because all they keep on yelling is macht, macht schnell, schnell, schnell, heraus, heraus. That's all they scream. And then of course, the people who were hurting. They were moaning and groaning and yelling. They didn't know what was happening to them. And then they took, well, not in Sobibor, but they took whatever you came with. The first thing you had to do is dump it all on-- dump it away, just throw it away.

So that's all I can recall. I know that Miss Frank was very ill because she hadn't eaten for a whole day, had no insulin. So I don't even know if she made it to the gas chamber, to tell you the truth. The woman was so sick. So that was Sobibor.

OK. And then what happened?

Then they took us on the train and we rode quite a while, because I remember it became very dark. And oh, I think about a night. Probably it was a night. The whole night we drove with that train. And we came to Lublin. And Lublin, of course, is the capital of Poland.

The train ride, how long what's that like when you were sitting with your sister?

I would say the same as when we went. There was very little spoken. People didn't speak much. There wasn't very much being said, because I think mostly everybody was scared to death. They didn't know what was happening to them. If you know what is happening to you, you can at least talk about it. But nobody knew what was happening. It was unbelievable.

Was this train also, all the seats were packed, filled with Jews for transport?

Yeah. No, no, no. This train was quite kind of empty going back to Lublin. It was kind of empty because it was packed

coming in and then they only had a few men in there and those few women. So it was very empty. And with that train, they transferred us to Lublin.

And they still didn't give you anything to eat on this train? So you're going on two days.

No.

How long is the train ride?

I think during the night, the whole night.

Did you sleep at all, do you recall?

I'm sure I did. I'm sure we did. Yeah, I'm sure we did. Because by that time we were exhausted. But who knows? Maybe we didn't because you didn't know what was going to happen.

And this was still January '43.

Yeah. January '43. Just had happened, we had a few days a week before that we had taken away from our home. So it was still in January. Yeah.

So you rode through the night to go to Lublin. And what happened?

Well it came there. We arrived at the station there. And that same yelling and screaming and coming out of the train and macht schnell and heraus and poking you with their guns and stuff like that to get out of there. And we arrived in-- now, Lublin had two camps, I understand. One was, was it Treblinka? No.

No, that was--

It had a concentration camp and a work camp. And they first put us into the work camp, into the concentration camp. That's where we arrived. And they throw us into one of the barracks and they told us to go to sleep. I couldn't sleep. And they didn't feed us. They didn't give us nothing to eat, nothing to drink.

And the following morning-- no. We arrived there, beg your pardon, we arrived there and we had to undress. And they gave us clothes to put on. Dirty clothes. Take our own clothes off and they gave us some secondhand clothes to put on. And you had to take all your jewelry off, what you had on. And they said after you've worked in the camp, you get that all back. And they put it in little envelopes, my word of honor, and I had a little gold ring from what my grandparents had given me around my finger. They took that off and put it, that's all the jewelry I had, and they put it in a little brown bag with my name on it. And they told me I would get it back as soon as the camp, as soon as the work in the camp was done. That's what I told you.

So that's what you gave them. And then they took all your backpack away. They took your clothes away. And they gave you then the secondhand clothes to put on, whatever they had in from the camp. You don't know whose clothes there were. But that's what you had to put on. And then they told you to wait in that barrack. And then the following morning, they came in and they took us to the labor camp in Lublin. And that was the worst. That camp was the worst. That was the labor camp.

When you got there, what was your first sight when the train stopped? What did you see when you got off and what happened? How did you get from there to barracks? You walked?

I don't remember. I don't know. I probably walked. I don't remember.

When you got off, was there also dogs with the screaming and the beating?

No. Not yet. Not yet. Still the guards were screaming and yelling. heraus. And we had to get out of there. And schnell, schnell, schnell. Quick, quick, quick, quick. Everything had to go quick. And like I said, they had you stand in line and they took all your jewelry. They took all your belongings. You had to undress. They gave you some clothes to wear and some shoes with hardly any soles on them. And they took your jewelry and then they-- and you walked to a barrack.

And did you have a shower or shave? Did they shave you?

No.

What did the barrack look like?

As I recall, there wasn't very much in there. Not much to sleep on. I think we just all sat around. We didn't know what was going to happen to us. Those were the girls. I don't know what happened to the men, because the men and the women are always separated. So I really don't know. I don't know. I don't remember what it looked like. I think it was kind of bare.

And were you with the 40 girls at Sobibor?

Yeah.

You were there overnight and so you could sleep.

Well, I don't know if we slept, but we were there overnight. And then the next morning they came in, the Germans, and by truck they transferred us to the work camp, to Lublin itself.

And what was the truck ride like to Lublin?

I don't know. That I don't remember.

And this was all 40 girls?

All the 40 girls. Yeah. Just the girls. Other women. We had some women too. I think Bep and I were the youngest. Bep was only 14.

And so they took you by truck. And what was that, 15 minutes? Do you remember how--

Oh no. Yeah, about 10 to 15 minutes. Not much longer than that. Yeah.

And did you know you were in Poland? Did you know you were in Lublin?

Yeah. Yeah, because when we came in it said Lublin. It said Lublin. So we knew we were in Poland. We knew we were in Lublin.

I wanted to ask you back when you were in Sobibor when you arrived, did you know you were in Poland?

No. I didn't even know what Sobibor was. I had no idea it was Sobibor. But later on I looked it up on the map. But I had no idea that Sobibor was in Poland. That's on the border of Russia and Poland, isn't it? Yeah, no, we had no idea. But Lublin we knew because of the school, the capitals of countries and stuff like that. So we knew we were in Poland definitely.

Do you recall your thoughts on that short truck ride? What did you think what's going to happen? Are they taking us to kill us?

Thinking they were going to kill us. We had no idea that we had just come out of the gas chambers there. No idea. Later

on we found out. Because that's where the gas chambers were. You see. And we had no idea that we had been there. And they didn't give us a shower there. We just got clothes and took all our jewelry and that's it. So we had no idea that we had been there until we arrived, of course, in the work camp in Lublin. And they told us then what all those chimneys were. And then we realized that we had been there.

The Germans told you?

No, the people. A lot of Polish people were in Lublin. And they told us those chimneys were from the gas chambers in the other camp. And that's where we had been. So that's when we realized that, well, we were not going to work for the Germans. We didn't even realize that we were in a concentration camp until later on. But there were a lot of Czechoslovakians, a lot of Polish people there. I don't think there were many western Jews there. So we had a hard time in Lublin. Lublin was bad.

Let's talk about that. So you arrived by truck at the work camp.

Yeah.

What did you first see?

Barracks. Lots of barracks. The same idea really but Westerbork was all in rows. All those barracks, lots of them. That's about it. Dirt roads with no cement. All dirt roads. All that gravel. Not gravel, but dirt. Always dusty. So people walking and the dust blew up and stuff like that. So well, at that time, you knew you were in a camp but no idea that you were in a concentration camp. Yeah. But Lublin had a lot of barracks.

And what happened when you got there?

Well, they assigned us to the barrack. And Bep and I were still together. And I think the barracks were four things up. Four. One, two, three, four.

Four bunks?

Yeah. And that was straw. That was no mattresses. That was all straw and no blankets and no pillows. I mean, that was just climbed up at night. I mean you, just laid yourself down and those were the barracks there. That was not like-- for Westerbork was luxury compared to what we had there. Yeah.