

It's very yellow and very faded.

OK.

We're OK.

All right. I'll Xerox it and mail it to you.

That would be wonderful. OK. I want to ask you. So you wrote with a-- and how did you get your little pen?

Some people, some women of ours working in the fields, and they got together with the Gentile people. They did many things which wasn't allowed to do. And they did it, and somehow to get like a little piece of paper, or a pen, or a needle, or minor things. Some people did it. They gave.

And then after you wrote that poem, did you share it with anybody or did you keep it to yourself? Did you share it with your friend or--

Yeah.

Sonia?

Mm-hmm.

And did you read it to a group of women?

I have two friends, Sonias one in Los Angeles and one, I was with her all the time also.

What's the name of the other friend? The name of the other friend? Sonya and--

Sonia Adelson and Sonia Epstein.

Oh, they're both Sonias.

Yeah. Uh-huh.

And so you shared it with your friends.

Uh-huh.

Did you share it with a group bigger than that?

Yeah.

Can you tell me about-- did that happen in the evening, how you shared it?

Oh, we-- we shared it in the evening when we were together in the barracks. I also-- we used to get-- I became a cosmetician. We took a beet-- the beets, the red beets. And I took a little piece of margarine, and we made like a cream to put on rouge. [LAUGHS] Do you believe it? [LAUGHS]

So when would you do that, in the evening?

Oh, yeah.

And did you wear the rouge to work? [LAUGHS] Was there any other things you did to keep up your morale, like making some rouge or--

No. No.

Lipstick?

We didn't have any lipstick. And at the time, we were young. It wasn't so necessary for the lipstick because the whole appearance didn't look so good. We were dirty, full of lice, full of dirt.

But you were [INAUDIBLE].

Because one woman took some water, and she washed herself instead of drinking. And she got beaten up by this guard terribly. Mm-hmm. We were like animals, just like animals. Even the mentality becomes different. The same intelligent person who used to be, became completely a different one.

I'm surprised that I am still alive. I'm 78 years old. And I think I have some of my faculties. I cannot see too well. I cannot hear well and some other things, but I'm still functioning. And memory is pretty good. I have a pretty good memory. It's still working well.

Some more questions?

When you woke up, and your friend told you that the Germans were gone and the camp was empty, there were no guards--

There.

--what thoughts did you have?

He asked, the day of liberation, when your friend went outside of the tent and noticed that there was no guards, he wants to-- the question is, what thoughts went through your mind at that moment?

I don't think because the people were so excited. And we didn't believe that it is true, that it can happen to us, that we are the survivors. And we didn't know what it is in front of us, what it will happen and how the future will really work. But we knew that we are alive and we are free.

What the difficulties in life will come, nobody can foresee. Even the good things we don't foresee. So we take a step at a time. And we just went. We became stronger. We-- we walked better in the freezing snow. We didn't feel.

I wrote the liberation, and this what I wrote in this part of-- because we felt that we are alive. We survived. And we have to be strong to start a new life.

Is that it for your question? Denise?

Yes. I had some questions too, Rachel. Stutthof was an extermination camp, right?

Which one?

Stutthof.

Stutthof? Yeah.

Was that an extermination camp?

It had a crematorium. It wasn't as big as the other camps, but it had all the necessities for killing there.

It sounds like it was mostly women and children there. Is that true?

Not too many children.

But mostly women?

Women only.

So who-- if there were no men, did the women work in the crematoriums?

No, no, no, no. We didn't work at all. This-- this concentration camp, we didn't work because this was like a preparation for the future for the other camps, labor camps. So this was only a stop-off and prepare us for the rest of the time. Yeah.

So did the-- go ahead. Sorry.

So we were there. They gave us our showers. They changed our clothes, like the prisoner's clothes, the striped. [SIGHS] We had to count. We counted every day.

We got our meals, no matter what it was, for the daily existence. At night we slept there. And then it was time for us to ship out. And this what they did. So we didn't do any work at all over there, just waiting. And this wasn't so easy either because the uncertainty, the unknown, what it will happen and where they will-- because when they sent us to these showers, we knew.

We heard about the gas showers. And we thought this will be. But we came out through the other side, naked. The men were standing there, the Gestapo. And they were with sticks in their hand, and they hit us. And then they gave us a bundle of these striped clothes.

Are there other images that are with you from that particular camp, things that are stuck in your head that you can't ever--

Of course. How can you forget it, this. I don't even have to write it down. This is always like fresh. Each and every word which I told you-- maybe I left out something yet, but this is-- I can tell it over and over again because this is the way it was. Some detail's probably missing yet, you know.

And this is in your mind. You can never forget it-- never.

At the moment that you were being told that you're going to have to take showers, and you already had heard the rumors from previous experience--

Yeah. Yeah.

--did anybody try to escape or commit suicide or anything before they went into the shower?

In the ghetto-- in the shower you cannot commit--

No, but before, when you were being told--

Oh. In the ghetto, a couple of people-- one jumped into a well. You know? And maybe two or three cases of suicide, but nobody-- because everybody had strong hopes no matter what, that they cannot destroy a nation. And they can destroy some, and everybody thought maybe I will be the one who will survive. You know? So and this is the way it went-- not too many suicides-- very hard to believe.

I think the German people committed more suicide than the rest of the European Jews.

You mean German-Jews?

The German Jews, yeah. Mm-hmm. Because they were more disappointed probably. They thought they are German first and Jews second. And Hitler made even third and fourth and fifth generation, where there was a Jew, just bring it out to the surface and count him as a Jew and punish him as a Jew, the way he wanted. Yeah.

So they were really more disappointed. It was their Fatherland. This what they called. And they didn't like too much the East European Jews. The Ostjuden, they used to call. You know? So they had reason just to be more disappointed.

[LAUGHS]

Do of any-- did you come-- meet, in your experiences in the different camps and the ghetto, any German-Jews that--

No. But here in America I have some friends, German-Jews. Some of them came just as the war started. Some came as the war was approaching. And some of them were in concentration camps too. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

When you were in the ghetto-- and you said you got very ill at one point-- was there any kind of medical care at all?

Yeah.

There was? So, you were taken there?

We had a clinic, and it was attended by Jewish physicians, yeah, Jewish surgeon and a woman doctor and another one. Mm-hmm.

So you were made well by them? By resting? By--

They--

Took care of you.

--took care of. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

What was that illness that you were sick with?

I had a mastectomy at the age of 31. It wasn't necessary.

It was experimental?

I don't know. I cannot tell you. Through the Jewish doctor.

It wasn't cancer or anything?

We didn't have any X-rays or any facilities anyway. But I had a friend, a nurse, and she assisted. And she said it wasn't necessary. And I had to go that way. I was sick for months and months. And then when I came to the concentration camp, I was so sore, and I was so sick. When people met me after the war, they-- you survived? And I said, yes.

And I lived to be at this age and have a beautiful daughter-in-law. She's very good, good person. Mm-hmm. She cries easily. I cannot cry. [LAUGHS] I cannot cry.

One more question-- the officer, what was his name? The officer that helped you so much, do you remember his name?

[? Marshack. ?]

Was he the one that was imprisoned?

No, I didn't know. He was in-- he lived in Israel after he was-- I don't know how-- if his time was up or he escaped or whatever it happened. He was in Israel, and he remarried I understand. And he wrote a book. I have to ask my friend if he's still alive.

Did you have any more poems or songs or anything that you made up along about your experiences?

I wrote only my liberation, the way how it went because each one was liberated different. Each experience was different.

Do you have anymore questions [INAUDIBLE]?

Just very simply, your mother's name and your father's name?

My father's name was Wolf Stern. My mother's name was Goldie Stern, maiden name Rache.

So your maiden name is Stern?

My name maiden is Stern. Yeah.

OK.

Stern in English is different than Stern in Yiddish or German-- Star. Stern is a star. [NON-ENGLISH].

[NON-ENGLISH] Did you do it any more questions? Denise, did you have any more questions?

No, I guess not.

I told you, in two hours, which I went through years of suffering. And it seems so easy to give it away, all the accumulation for so many years of suffering. You write it down in a book, and you make a little note out of it, and that's it. This is a person's life, put together in a few pages.

Do you have anything else you'd like to say, Rachel? Do you have any other comments you'd like to make or memories or-- you want to share?

No, I think this is-- do you need more? You took it from day one through till today. Life in America is also different from each and other survivor. Some struggled very difficult, made a living. Some of them became very famous and very rich. And this is the way it goes in a normal life too. You know. [SIGHS]

But the experience, each one has different experiences. You must know because you interview quite many. How many people did you interview in your time of interviews?

I haven't kept count. [LAUGHS]

Did you count?

Well, the center has probably interviewed over 700.

Yeah.

So--

How many survivors are all together? Do you have an account of it from the war?

Oh, from the war.

Is there a statistic? Yeah?

Yeah, there are statistics. [INAUDIBLE]

I read in a trivia that all the Jews all over the world, all together, are about 14 and 1/2 million.

Yeah, that's the number of Jews there are today in the world. So if there's nothing more that anybody would like to ask or add, I want to thank you so much--

Thank you.

--for sharing your story with us. And just thank you very much.

I don't know if it revived my life, or it made me sadder to go through all the emotional-- I would say it's easier to tell after it happened. But still, it's very emotional, very heavy. There are very few people who survived and has a child a survivor.

That's very unusual.

Because most of the survivors made their new life after the war. And if they have a married life with new children, which they must be in their 40s after the war, which I am mother and son survivor, which my son is a miracle survivor. Thank you so much.

You could see the numbers?

Yeah. Yeah.

OK. So, tell us about this little medal now.

This was the number which we all were numbered. You know, like prisoners don't have a name. They have only numbers.

Uh-huh.

And this was my number. And we carried this on a piece of white cloth here or on the sleeve. And then, when we were liberated and we met in Berlin with a few friends, we decided that the number should be remained forever. We should remember. And we made a little charm.

This was our first gem. We had some. And we put it on a chain to wear it. So this is it. This is 45 years old.

Well, the number on it is Z3-- Z3082 or S3082. And on the back it says Stutthof.

Stutthof, yeah.

Stutthof. Did you add the name Stutthof to it?

No, no. We made everything. Yeah.

And the number, S38-- S3082, is that-- did you carry that number? Was that your number throughout all the camps? Is that what they referred to you-- called you in roll call and everything?

Yeah. Yeah.

And then when you were in Berlin, a bunch of you--

Then we decided we'd--

The two Sonias?

Yeah. We did it into a charm. And this is it. I don't wear it, but I keep it.

How many people made charms? How many of your friends?

Oh, we were a group about 20.

Did they all make charms with the number and the name of the camps they were in?

Mm-hmm.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

Do you remember how that number was assigned to you, back in Stutthof, the day you remember?

When we came into the camp, this-- what we were given. We had to wear it.

After the showers [INTERPOSING VOICES]

In the ghetto, we wore Star of David, yellow, front and back. And in the concentration camp, they put just a piece of cloth with a number.

Is there any other questions, [INAUDIBLE]? [INAUDIBLE] ask questions.

Sure.

Sure.

Why is it so important for you and your friends to remember the experience? Why didn't you just want to forget the experience and move on with your lives? Why was it important to have this charm as a remembrance?

I don't look at this every day, but it is there. And this is part of my past somehow. I don't dwell on it, and I don't-- but sometimes, because we were numbered. You know, in normal life we go by name. And this life we went through, was only a number.

So it was a bond that the 20 of you had as a remembrance of what you all went through?

No, that's all. it just lays among my possessions.

At the time, when you were making these medallions, what was the conversation?

Nothing. It's only to remember what number we were there, like I remember my name. I was called by my name, and I'm-- everybody knows me, Rachel Gordon. This was my name in the concentration camp. This was my name actually.

And did you put it on a Jewish star for the double meaning, for the yellow star that you wore in the ghetto and the Jewish star you now wear with pride?

No. This I knew what number. I was. The number was how many of our group. This is 8-- 8--

3082.

3,802, yeah.

With a Z, a S, a Nazi-shaped S.

It's not really important, but--

[LAUGHTER]

But we did it then. As we were liberated, we had certain ideas. You know? We didn't think of it to forget our past. But this was part of it. And we thought it's a clever idea of doing it.

Did you ever wear it?

No. I cannot even see it.

[LAUGHTER]

So this is the way it goes. Yeah, it's maybe silly to people. But to me, it is part of the past, which wasn't a good past. But it is-- this reminds me I was there, and I was a number. Now I am a human being. Even I'm old, but I'm still a human being with a name-- with two names. And this is the way normal life goes, but this wasn't a normal time.

I don't know if many-- because most of the people from Auschwitz, they have the numbers tattooed. You know, inscribed. And I have the number here. Does it sound normal?

Of course.

To keep onto it?

And pass it on.

I don't--

Pass it on. It's just like an act of humanity.

But I keep it in my jewelry box all the time.

Maybe your family could frame it.

I didn't know she had it.

Well, this is a very, very important thing.

Did you have anybody with something like this with their numbers?

Not a medal.

I'm trying to remember. Not a medal.

Some people show us their tattoos.



The tattoos.

Oh, that. No. So we didn't get-- we, our hair wasn't shaved, and the tattoos weren't on.

Was your hair cut at all?

Hmm?

Was it cut short, or just you were able to keep your long hair?

No. No. But when we came into this concentration camp, in Dachau, we met-- they brought out a group of women from Hungary, and they looked wild. And the guard was hitting them with a stick. They should run like cattle, you know. And they came barefoot.

And they had dresses not the same color we had. They had brown and gray stripes. And their hair was shaved. And their faces, their eyes looked awful. And the guard said to us, you see? Those are your people, and you will look that way too.

This is in Stutthof?

In Stutthof. Yeah-huh.

The Hungarian women had been there longer?

Yeah.

Did your friends, the two Sonias, did they make something like this?

Mm-hmm.

Maybe we should get them. [INAUDIBLE]

Was anybody in Stutthof cremated or killed while you were there during your six weeks?

I don't think so, not from our group. There must be many because we found the stacks of their glasses and the stacks of their shoes, like a haystack, very-- and those were things of people who were in the crematorium.

There was a gas chamber in this camp?

The crematorium, yeah.

And then there was a crematorium for the bodies? So you saw all the evidence of it when you were there.

That's right.

But for some reason, your group was chosen--

The people who were brought in before, you know-- so--

So you think the families of the Hungarian women were families you don't know.

I don't --

Did you speak to any of these Hungarian women? Any communication?

No, we weren't allowed. They were separated, different barracks. We had a guard in this Stutthof, in this area. He was from Poland, Polish. And you know, Helen Taub asked me, do you remember the man who beat us up and who was so mean? And I said, yes. His name was Max.

Oh, she said, I forgot. Yeah.

And was he a Polish--

He was a Polish--

Christian?

--Christian guard. Yeah. They put him because they know he will do a good job.

Was he an anti-semite?

Yeah. Uh-huh.

Were there any women guards at any point in any of these camps?

No. We had-- actually, we had women, our own Jewish women. Some of them were assigned to be the eldest and to keep--

The order?

--keep us intact.

They were kapos?

Kapos, that's right.

Were they fair?

They got the job, and they were privileged. They had more privileges. Because everybody-- everyone is going out just to make their own life a little safer, or better, or whatever. And they don't care if it's your relatives, or if it's your friends, or whatever it is. But the kapos go down in history not with very good names. You know.

Rachel, what would you like to tell the world with that-- with your medallion? What would you like to tell them with that?

Just keep it for keepsake. That's what I-- I don't look at this every day, or I don't-- I keep it around. I go through once in a while this and this. This is what I was.

It could have been done and made to anything else, just the number. So we thought this looked more like it is more valuable, that it looks like something you can wear it.

OK?

OK.