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OK, any time.

I'm Sandra Bendayan, here with Nelly Cesana. We're going to do part 2 of your interview. And today is the 3rd of December, 1993. And we're doing the interview again for the San Francisco Holocaust Oral History Project. John Grant is our producer.

And where we left off basically was you were about to start your new life. You and your mother were traveling to Germany under assumed Polish names. And I believe you left off speaking of your train ride. You were going toward Berlin.

Right. And I did describe I believe what happened at the railway station because we spent about 24 hours there. And so I did mention it last time.

Mm, hmm.

And the train ride, it was a long ride, but basically uneventful except for that one time. I don't know if I mentioned that another passenger, who was traveling with the same group, sat across from us and he questioned my mother. Why didn't I say a prayer when the train took off? And of course, I didn't know what he was talking about. And so my mother said, well, she's such a stubborn kid. And she says, Nelly, do that. So anyway, he witnessed this that it was OK, yeah.

And we arrived in Germany. I can't remember daytime, nighttime. I don't remember. All I know is that we were taken to someplace with a whole group of people, mostly young people, men and women, not children. And we were-- it looked like some huge farm, all fields and long paddocks. And we were fed there and then shown in the barracks where we would sleep.

And basically, there's very, very long barracks. And there were cots, one next to the other one. And everybody slept on the cots.

Men and women together.

Yes, everything-- yeah. And there were mostly men, I would say. And the next morning, very early, it was dark outside. Everybody got up. And we were picked up on a truck and taken out in the fields, where everybody was given a sack, all the adults, not me. And they were to clear the fields of the rocks.

And so it was a huge field. And I could barely see the end of it. And people would line up. Everybody would walk in a straight line and pick the rocks and put them in a sack and carry it and empty it on the other side and then walk back another line and do the same thing. And they did that all day long.

And then in the evening, we were taken back to the barracks, fed. And everybody was exhausted and just went to sleep. We didn't stay there very long. I think maybe a week or so.

And then somebody-- I guess they were not too happy with my mother's performance. She had difficulty carrying this rocks and so on. She was not used to such a hard labor. And so a German family came to interview my mother. And they spoke to her in German and she spoke perfect German. So they were pleased with that.

And they said that they are land owners. They have a farm. And they feel that she would be more suited to work for them. And so they asked her how she felt about it. And she said she really-- it didn't matter, would be fine. And they said that they have farm animals and that she would be tending to the animals and so on.

I should have said that they introduced themselves as husband and wife, Mr. And Mrs. Meirau, Charlotte and-- Mr. Meirau. I don't remember his-- Gustav Meirau, yeah.

In this barrack situation, how did you spend your day as a child?

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I just followed my mother. Wherever she went that, that's it. I could not be left alone there. So I had to go every day with her into the field. I basically walked behind everybody back and forth all day long.

So I think my mother was happy that she would get away from there. It was unbearable. And the Mr. and Mrs. Meirau came with a very nice, big, black car. And they seemed they seemed like very rich people, very well dressed. Well, they put us in a car and drove off with us. And we drove to a small village, a small, yeah, I would say village, called Ketzin. And it was next to a big river called Havel, Ketzin on the Havel.

It was not far from Berlin. I can't remember how long we traveled. But it must have been a few hours.

The Meiraus were very affluent people. They had the house in Berlin. And on in that small village, they owned different-- a few properties. They lived in one. And then there was another one that was unoccupied, a little-- a beautiful house on the river with huge gardens. And besides that, they had fields, where they have been growing fruits and vegetables and farm animals. They had farm animals.

And they also had huge warehouses in that village. And there were all kinds of things being stored there that were shipped from Berlin. And once in a while, truckloads would come. And they would unload sack fulls of almonds and raisins and-- well, basically, that's what we could see, almonds and raisins, because some sack would have little tears in them and things would fall out. And so we ended up picking those up, yeah.

This is how they were making their living?

I don't know what-- they were retired. They were older people. They were retired. They had one son. His name was Hans And I know that he was in the air force. And when we arrived, he was on a leave from the air force because he was wounded. Hans was married, had a young wife and a baby. And I believe they lived in Berlin. But they came at that time to stay with their parents in Ketzin.

About when is this?

This was in 1943, maybe April, March, April.

And did you know if there were food shortages in Germany itself at this time?

Well, when we came there, they explained to my mother that she would get food. She would have coupons. Yeah. And the Germans also had coupons. They were food shortages, not for people like the Meiraus because they owned so much. But for average people, I think there was.

And so my mother received coupons for bread and for sugar and for the basic grocery items. But, of course, fruits and vegetables were all around us. And we were not invited to help ourselves. But that didn't matter. And then there was fresh milk from the goats and eggs, chicken eggs and turkey and geese eggs, and-- yeah, so.

It was a beautiful place. My memories of that place were like a magical place. To me, it was I have never seen a place like that. I have never seen such trees and the beautiful roses growing. Mrs. Meirau love to garden. And every time, a horse would ride by, she would run and pick up the horse droppings and put it under her roses. So she had beautiful roses growing.

And the fruits, I never knew that things like that existed in the world. I remember peaches, huge, wonderful, sweet peaches, and pears and apples, and all kinds of berries, strawberries. And the vegetables, Brussels sprouts, I remember fields as long as the eye could see of Brussels sprouts and potatoes.

And, of course, there was the river that was winding around the whole village. And there were many-- most of the houses were situated on the riverbank.

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This is your dream come true from the ghetto?

I mean, this is something that I never knew. I didn't know a world like that. It was to me like if I was transformed to a different galaxy. It was just magical. I was interested in everything. I was just didn't know what to look at first, yeah.

And I felt wonderful. My imagination started developing. And I had a lot of free time because I didn't go to school. I was not allowed to go to school. So I was just fascinated by the nature and by the river.

And there was fish in the river. And there were clams in the sand. And there were all kinds of animals. There were rabbits, wild rabbits. And there were otters in the river.

Did you go fishing?

Well, I didn't go fishing. No, I didn't know how to fish. And I didn't know about fishing. But I spent a lot of time in the water. I loved the water.

And Mrs. Meirau was afraid that since I didn't know how to swim, you know, I was in danger of drowning. So one day she suggested-- she told me that she was going to take me on the river. And she's going to teach me how to swim. And she took me out in her boat.

And everyone had the rowing boat. But, of course, the Meiraus had about two yachts right there in front of their property. They were beautiful, teak, shining teak, with sleeping quarters and kitchen, like most modern, like nowadays, you would think.

And so anyway, she took her row boat. And she took me in the middle of the river. And she tied the rope around my waist line. She told me to jump in the water. And she explained me how to move my arms and legs.

And I just was a natural. I took naturally to it. And I immediately knew how to swim. I became an excellent swimmer from that time on. And I was spending a lot of time in the water.

Now, my mother sometimes would work on one field. And sometimes, they would take a raft and horses across the river to another side to some other field. So I would swim across and go see my mother and swim back and swim forward.

And I was very adventurous also since I had all that free time. I would steal a boat once in a while, a rowboat, and go on a ride by myself and explore and check things out. And I got in all kinds of trouble.

Like what?

Well, sometimes when they couldn't find the-- I always brought the boat back. But I would get-- there were all kind of-- there was all kinds of vegetation growing in there. And there were wild ducks. And I was curious. I would get inside. And sometimes I would have a hard time getting the boat out, you know.

But I remember I was so interested in the nature. And there were beautiful meadows there that were covered with flowers. I've never seen flowers before. And so my first instinct was to run and pick flowers. I love to pick flowers.

And sometimes turned out it was a marsh. It was water. And I didn't expect it. So I would be knee deep in water. But somehow I always got out of the trouble. And that's how I spent my time.

I made some friends. Occasionally, I would find some German kids. And I learned how to speak German very, very fast. And after a short time, I spoke perfectly, just like the natives. And they said that I had a real Berliner accent, just like the kids over there.

Had you learn to do any writing or reading by this time?

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No, not in Ketzin. My mother was busy from early in the morning until late at night. She didn't have any books or anything. We didn't have a clock. We didn't have a watch. I don't even know how to tell time, nothing whatsoever.

And I was very interested-- I really wanted to go to school because I saw the German kids going to school every day. And so-- but I was not allowed to go to school. And I was busy all the time, but by myself, always by myself.

The other German kids, I guess parents didn't want them to mix with me too much. There was one family, some very wild kids, that a grandmother was raising. I don't know the mother-- there were a few boys. And they were known as troublemaker.

And so I did make friends with them. And I did get in all kinds of trouble. I mean, they-- for instance, there was some older, retired gentleman that lived with the housekeeper. He was some fund, which is he had a title, yeah, and very stuck up, and the German aristocracy. So the kids told me to pick up the droppings from a goat and put it in an envelope and put it in his mail box, [LAUGHTER] things like that we used to do.

And, of course, everything-- and, of course, most of the things they were doing. But they would blame everything on me. And then they would come and complain to my mother, your daughter did this and your daughter did that. And so I didn't spend that much time with these kids anymore.

But then I was exploring other places. On the river, there were also big steamboats. And these were people that were living on the steamboats. And they were regularly traveling between Berlin and that village. And I don't know exactly what they were transporting. But they were moving some things, bringing, I think, from Berlin maybe to store in the warehouses.

And so I would run there. And some of them were families with children. And so I would make friends with the children. And they invited me up on a boat.

And the boats were right by on the banks of the river. And there would be just a wooden plank to run up the boat, up and down the boat. And so I knew my way around there. And I made friends. I would go here and there.

And one family-- and they saw that I didn't have any clothes there. My mother would, since she was working, she would receive clothes also by coupons, like working boots and pair of pants, like men's working clothes and a jacket. And since I wasn't working I didn't get any clothes. So I was really wearing things that were torn and old.

And they saw that I needed something. So they told me that if I wanted to have a new dress, they could arrange it for me. And, of course, I got very excited. I wanted to have a new dress. They said if I would bring some vegetables from the farm where my mother was working on some potatoes, they would exchange it for a dress.

And so that was terribly exciting to me. And I told my mother about it. And she says, OK, we will do it. One night we will go there.

Well, I came home and I said tonight is the night we have to go because they're leaving tomorrow. And this happened to be a very dark night. It was a cold night. And there was a alert for air raid alerts, all the lights were out.

And my mother said, I cannot do it tonight. I can't see outside. It's too dark. And I'm afraid.

And I said, I'll show you the way. I know how to get there. We have to go. And I was crying and I was stubborn. And my mom got upset. She says, OK, we will go.

So we went carrying some potatoes. And when we got to the boat, my mother said, Nelly, I can't see where I'm going at all. I feel blind. I said, well, I will hold the potatoes. And you just follow me, just stay right behind me.

And we were climbing on that plank. And suddenly, I hear, pow. My mother fell in the water in her heavy winter clothes and boots. And she didn't know how to swim at all. And it was windy and cold. And I started screaming, mama.

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It was very high. That was really high.

And the Germans, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. By the time they came out with the ring-- the--

Lifesaver.

Lifesaver, right, yeah. And it took a few minutes. And my mother made her way out. She-- I don't know, she said that it felt like her coat from the wind became like a balloon and kind of lifted her up. And she was able-- she was kicking and fighting and trying to get to the ground. And she made her way out. But my poor mother, she almost got pneumonia. And she was in a shock.

Did you get the dress?

I got the dress. I got the dress. And I had the dress until the war ended still, until we went back to Poland. I still had that dress. It was a navy dress with light blue checkers. And I loved the dress.

But my mother suffered a lot because of that she was in a shock. And the next day, I think she felt sick. And Mrs. Meirau, the landlady, heard something about it, that we went there and my mother fell in the water. She didn't question her what we were doing there, why we went there. And she just brought her some liquor to drink so she would warm up and wouldn't be so cold. But she was very nice about that. She didn't question why we went there.

Do you think she had some suspicions that--

She might have, yeah. Yeah, she--

Was she was protecting you?

Well, she never told us help yourself to something. But she knew that my mother was taking whatever we needed and whatever she wanted. Like from the warehouse, she would bring the raisins that fell on the floor when they asked her to sweep. So she would pick it up and put it in her pocket, and the almonds. And then she would bake some cookies.

And Mrs. Meirau would come by. And she would say, oh, it smells so wonderful. And my mother would offer her. And she enjoyed it very much. But she never asked. So it was OK. Everything was OK. I mean--

But there was trouble. We had difficulty. My mother was not the only worker that Frau Meirau had. There was a Polish name named Anton, a young Polish name-- a young Polish man. And he was already there when we came.

And he was a troublemaker. He liked to drink. And every time he got drunk, there was some kind of trouble. He would beat up my mother. He would try to beat me up. And he started yelling at my mother. He thought that my mother was Christian and that she had me with a Jew, that I was a Jewish kid. So he was always yelling at my mother, how did you get this Jewish bastard? And so my mother was terrified of him.

He just would come and beat her up?

Well, he would find some kind of excuses. We all lived-- OK, I should have explained our living arrangements. We were living in the same building where the farm animals were, the goats and the chickens and the chicken coops and so on. And it was right on the edge of all the gardens and the fields where my mother was working. And there was a little tiny lake for the Ducks.

And we had one room in that building. It was a square, maybe 8 by 8 room, tiny room with one window, small window, cement floors, cement walls, very crude. And there was a wooden, rickety table with two chairs underneath the window. It was just rough wood and a little bed with straw mattress and pillow filled with straw and a couple of blankets. And there was a sink in the room.

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And there was a wood burning stove. So my mother cooked the meals on that stove. And she heated the room with that stove. And we would wash in the sink and sleep in that little bed together.

The ceiling was leaking many times in wintertime. And my mother was begging, please, have it fixed. And she would say, yes, my son Hans will fix it. And he never fixed it.

And so Anton was living on the other side of the building. He had another little room like that. And since we were Polish and so my mother tried to be nice to him. If she baked something or she cooked something, she shared it with him. And he was generous in that way too if he made something.

But he would become violent once in a while when he had some-- and he would get vodka from some place in the village. There were other Polish people there. We didn't have any contacts with them. But we knew that there were other Polish workers. There was a sugar factory. And Anton had contact with them.

And he would exchange some-- he would bring them all kinds of things from the farm. And they would give him sugar. And he would make some vodka. And you would exchange it with them. And that went on back and forth.

Well, but life, you know, life went on. And he was doing the heavy work. And my mother was more doing planting and weeding. And she was also digging.

And Mrs. Meirau would come by and speak. She developed a nice relationship with my mother. She enjoyed very much talking to my mother. She could talk politics to her. And she would tell her what she read in the papers and what she heard on the phone-- on the radio lately. And she was a little worrisome. She would say, doesn't look so good. And maybe the Russians will come here. And she was very, very worried about that, that the Russians would occupy them.

Did you feel like she was a staunch Nazi?

No. No, I don't think so. She-- no. She never made any speeches about that. No.

And so she was a little bit lonely. Her son was not very nice to her. And her husband was cheating on her. There was a single woman living there, like was across from where we were living. She was a German lady and middle aged, I guess, maybe 20 years younger than Mr. Meirau was.

And she was single, and she lived on that little land by herself, a nice house and a garden. And her garden was bordering with Mr. Meirau's garden. They shared the fence.

So Mrs. Meirau needed someone to talk to. And she would come by. She would never ask my mother, well, let's sit down or something. While my mother was working and digging, she would stand and talk to her.

But that lady, Mrs. Zemmler was nice. Sometimes she would invite us for dinner, my mother and me. And she would cook her vegetable soup. And she would set a beautiful table with a white linen and napkins. And it was nothing fancy, just a soup maybe. But she was so nice. And it felt so good.

And my mother felt that-- she didn't know anything for sure because everybody was afraid to confide. But my mother had a feeling that she was married to a Jewish man.

A feeling?

She had a feeling. Well, she was talking that she was divorced or separated, or they took her husband away or something. And she, of course, couldn't go into details. So my mother thought that she had a Jewish husband. And she was left alone there.

But anyway, Mr. Meirau was very nice to her. And he would visit her on occasion. And my mother saw that many times he would put little packages underneath the fence for her, little gifts, yeah, so.

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Did your mother have any other pleasures in her life at that point?

No. Not really, absolutely nothing. Her only pleasure was when she received the letters from my brother in Poland. She lived for those letters. From week to week, she just waited for the mailman.

And I think what she enjoyed is to feed me. And she fed me very well. And in the morning before she went to work, she would make four eggs or something, goat milk. And so it didn't take very long, and I filled up very nicely. And she took just very good care of me.

But she worked. She was never around. We basically saw each other in the morning. And then sometimes for lunch I would drop in and then at night when she came home and she was finished with her work and she was doing a little laundry and cooking a little something. And so time was just flying by.

And I was just roaming around that whole place. I was everywhere. And I knew everything what was going on.

And there was another teenage girl that was nice to me. And she took me once on a ride on a bike. I sat on the bike behind her. And on the way back we stopped someplace and she bought me an ice cream. And that was such a treat. I have never eaten ice cream before. And so it was very nice. She was very sweet. This was one time she invited me on that ride with her.

This was very different for you and your mother, having spent all day every day together all those years in the ghetto.

Yeah.

Never separated for a minute.

Never. But once we settled in that village, I didn't feel so-- I was attached, of course, to my mother. But I didn't feel I had to be with her every minute. I felt independent enough just to roam around on my own because I was so interested in everything. There was so much to do for me-- the river, the gardens and the frogs and the otters. I mean there was a lot to do for me. And I would--

It was lonely. Many times I felt lonely. I wanted company of children. But they discouraged it. They didn't want the German children to be playing with me. So I occupied myself.

You made a reference before that you lived a lot in a dream world when you were a small child. And can you talk about that?

You mean earlier?

I had the impression you meant--

Yes--

More in the ghetto, but maybe in the village too.

After we left the ghetto, when--

After--

Yes, after. Everything-- I feel that this was my only childhood. And it was those 2 and 1/2 years that we spent in Germany that I was a child then. And suddenly, it was such an interesting world all around me. But I had to find the answers all by myself. Everything I had to explore by myself and find answers and draw my own conclusions and find my own way.

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So it was lonely. But it was very stimulating. And I think that I really grew mentally very much during that period, even though I didn't read. But I found that stimulation all around me in the nature.

I was struck by the beauty of a sunset, for instance. It was like going to a museum when you live in a city. I saw it all in nature. And in the wintertime, when the snow fell and when the river froze, you could ice skate on the river. And when the sun set, it was so different. Sometimes the sunsets I would enjoy watching that.

And I couldn't understand what that was. What is the moon? What is the sun, that big ball in the sky? And the beautiful trees on the horizon, it was just picture beautiful, perfect. And--

You had the freedom to enjoy it now.

Yes. Yeah. Yes, right. And I would go skating on the ice. And sometimes, I get in trouble because the ice would crack. Some places maybe was not thick enough. But I was not afraid I had no fear. I had no fear.

And I think my mother worried about me a little bit because once in a while there would be some German military on motorcycles coming by. And there was a big excitement in the village. The kids would run after them. And I would run after them too, like the rest of them, and ask them questions and talk to them. And my mother was terrified, you know. But I didn't have that fear.

You weren't afraid of being found out as Jewish anymore?

Well, I didn't think about that anymore. I just blocked it out of my mind. I didn't think about it whatsoever because nobody-- I didn't feel-- I didn't feel really in danger. There was nobody that looked suspicious at me. And I had no fear.

Had you completely absorbed your new name?

No, actually, right away almost from the beginning, at the beginning they called me Stacia, a little bit. But then my mother went back and called me by my name. And so if anybody questioned, she says, oh, yeah, that's her other name, or nickname. And we are used. And if I called my mother-- I called her mother. And so if anybody questioned that, she would say, well, I was raising her since she was so young. So she calls me mother. So everything sort of was like normal.

The only not normal thing was that I was an outsider. And I could not be like everybody else.

You mean--

I mean, I couldn't be like the other children. My life was different. I could not-- we were outsiders. My mother had to wear a P on her clothing every time she went outside or if she went shopping. And she didn't like to wear that. So sometimes she wouldn't.

And there was a policeman that knew us already. He would ride the bike back and forth. And he would see my mother. And he would say, Antonia, P, P, P. And she said, oh, yeah, I forgot. I will. I will. I'm sorry. Next time. And so--

Did you wear the yellow star when you were in Poland?

No. No. I don't know, we were not in that part of the ghetto, I guess, where they wore the-- I don't think we did. I don't think we did wear that star.

So in a way, it was a miracle that you landed at the Meirau place.

Yeah. Meiraus. Yeah.

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Meiraus.

It was-- yeah--

And you were in touch with your brother?

Excuse me.

You were in touch with your brother?

Yes, he would write letters to my mother. And certain things he would write in codes so that she would be informed. For instance, he made her understand that there were no Jews left in Warsaw. There were not just left in Poland. And she would share everything with me.

My mother, when we got together at night to eat and before we went to sleep, she would talk to me like to an adult. And she would share all her thoughts and her feelings and her worries. And I would absorb. I would listen to everything. And I understood her. I understood my mother, yeah.

And I guess that was a relief for her. She just needed-- she needed to express herself. And I had an understanding, I understood that.

So I had almost a dual personality, I would say. On one hand, I was a kid and I was so absorbed in everything, in the nature around there, and enjoyed my freedom so much. But, on the other hand, when I was around my mother, I knew who we were. And I knew that. But I blocked it out. I listened to my mother. And then I would just file it away and never bring anything up.

You didn't have the need to speak like she did?

No.

And you never spoke, of course to anybody--

Never. I never mentioned a word to anybody about anything. All I would talk about is playing games and playing ball and riding on a car. And I does like kids, you know. With the other children, I was a kid. I was like them, yeah. Climb a tree and get in all kinds of trouble.

Did your interest in nature follow through in the rest of your life?

All my life.

To be a comfort to you?

Oh, yes, all my life. I loved nature all my life, yeah, animals and, yeah, the trees and the flowers and-- yeah, I loved it. And--

What happened with Anton?

Yes, Anton, many times, was not nice to me. And my mother really was very worried about him. But she, of course, never complained and anything. And he kept on his contacts and he told my mother about this people that work in the sugar factory. And he told my mother also that there were Russian prisoners-- there was a camp someplace. We didn't know what they were.

But he knew everything. He knew all these things. He would go to all these places where he was not supposed to be. And he would, I guess, barter with the Russian prisoners too, vodka and so on, food. And he would tell my mother that

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one day he came and he brought a gold coin. He said he got it from one of the prisoners for food and for what kind.

Well, one day around noontime, my mother was working in the garden. Two plainclothes policemen came to the area where I was with the Meiraus, Mr. And Mrs. Meirau. And these two men with raincoats, and they were the Gestapo. And they looked for Anton.

And so they called him. They brought him from the fields. And these two men started questioning him and beating him at the same time, right in front of all of us. They beat him so much. They were kicking him. And he was bleeding from his eyes, from his mouth. And they were kicking him and took him away with them.

And when they took him away, my mother spoke to Mrs. Meirau. And she says, Mrs. Meirau said, it's not my fault. I didn't ask them. But he got in trouble. He was stealing. And other people complained about him, other Germans. And she says the Gestapo took him away.

And she says, she told my mother, I'm sorry, I wouldn't do that to him. And since that time, we never saw him again. He never came back. We never hear from him again.

Do you think he had maybe a sexual interest in your mother too?

Oh, I'm sure that when he was drunk he had that on his mind. And she was afraid of him, yeah. We would lock our door so he couldn't come in. And he would get violent and bang on the door. And the door had only a little chain, you know. And, yeah, we were-- a part of us, we were afraid of him. But he hit my mother a few times.

But she was relieved when he was taken away. We felt safer. She was not so much afraid of the violence from him as of his mouth. She was afraid that he would blubber out something, Jews. And that word be a disaster for us because nobody suspected anything. Nobody knew anything. He was the only one.

And that's why my mother never wanted any contact with anybody, any Polish people or anyone. And we didn't. We were all by ourselves. And this was our salvation. So when they took Anton away, you know, it was our salvation too. We felt safer.

Why would he suspect you of being Jewish, do you think?

Because I asked my mother. And she said that at the time when I spoke Polish, I spoke a little bit with the Yiddish accent that I picked up in the ghetto from the-- I picked it up in a ghetto. And my mother didn't speak that way. So he noticed something. He sensed it.

I remember you saying that your family didn't practice any Orthodox Jewry. Did your mother have any spiritual point of view? Or--

I remember in Germany, she would tell me sometimes, oh, you know, it's such and such a holiday today, something like that. I don't remember what holiday. She would mention a Jewish holiday.

And I was too young to remember the holidays that we used to celebrate before the war. I didn't remember any of that. And, of course, in the ghetto, there was nothing ever. And so when we were in Germany, she said-- or something, Yom Kippur. Maybe she said, today's Yom Kippur, I think. And I didn't understand.

Do you think she believed in God?

I don't know. But she was not an atheist. She was not. But I think she believed in God, yeah. Yeah. Let's see--

Did you continue to hear from your brother regularly?

Yes, he would write letters regularly. And she lived for those letters, my mother. I think the greatest pleasure that she

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had was in the evening, we sat down and she would read the letters to me. And she would read them over and over and analyze every word. And she would explain to me. And I think he thought this and I think maybe like that. And maybe this is what he meant here. I mean we could sit for hours. And she would talk about it and almost memorized the letters, yeah.

Of course, you always had to read between the lines anyway?

Right. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. He would never write anything openly. And, no, never, it was all sort of between the lines, yeah. And he would never write anything about his activities or how he was living or nothing like that.

So she really didn't know about his life. It was all-- he would write that he bought a motorcycle. And he would send pictures of himself, beautiful pictures. And I remember all-- I guess he enjoyed taking pictures. And he would have pictures with a cigarette smoking and on a motorcycle and in boots. And he was only 16, 17 years old.

So anyway, one day, my mother went to the mailbox to pick up the letter. And it didn't look like a letter from my brother. It was addressed to her. But it had a different handwriting on it. And it was addressed to my mother.

And she-- I saw her face. She was getting pale and shaky. And she opened the letter. And it was written by a friend of my brother, named Arthur. And he wrote to my mother, Dear Mrs. So-and-so. My name is Arthur. I'm very, very sad to let you know that your son and my dear friend was killed in action.

And he wrote the date, which was November 11 and that he had a funeral with a priest organized by his friends and where he was buried at the Warsaw cemetery. And he said that he knows, he understands the pain that she's going through. And he is begging her not to be devastated and that he promised and committed himself to his friend, to my brother, that he would take care of us. He promised him.

He explained in the letter that my brother confided in him, saying that he has a mother and a sister. And if anything was to happen, he promised him he would take care of us. And he said that my brother left a little money and all his belongings, his pictures, his personal belongings. And he said, if she wants, he would send it to us.

And if she has any other wishes, can he send us anything else? Like does she want a black dress, he suggested for my mother. And maybe I need something. And he suggested a book for me. So I can learn how to read.

And my mother from that moment on was a different person. She cried day and night. She almost lost her vision. For a while, she was not able to see anything. And she was very suicidal. She wanted to die all the time. And she was going to drown herself in the river.

And I begged her. And we both cried. And I begged her, please, don't kill yourself. I am afraid to be alone. I need you.

And she said, but who is going to take care of me? I counted on my son. I have nobody else left in the world. I cannot live by myself and manage. And so I promised that I would take care of her.

How did you cope with all that? You were a child yourself.

I don't know. I just did. When it's necessary, you find a way. You find the strength.

And so from that time on, I was very worried about my mother. She was just-- I knew she wanted to die. She didn't want to live. And she said she couldn't go on with life.

But my brother's friend kept on writing to us and further warm letters. And he sent a package. And he sent all my brother's pictures that he had. And I guess my brother liked to write also-- I didn't know about that-- because he had a lot of notations and from Polish literature, poems, and notes that he used to write to himself. And I have a handwritten note from him with a date on where he says-- he expresses his feeling that dear God, I hope you will take care of the two dearest persons in the world that I have left.

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But he wrote in such a beautiful and sensitive way. And then he used to, I guess, copy from a very famous Polish literary work by Adam Mickiewicz, Pan Taduesz. It's a very known book. And he would write those poems and all kinds of little things. And we kept it. And it was so precious to us, everything. And he sent some kind of a book for me to learn how to write. But--

Is this still 1943?

This was 1943, yeah.

November of '43.

This was-- we left Poland in March. And my brother was killed in November '43.

Was your mother required to work during this terrible time for her?

Yes, she did. Yeah, she had to because the chickens had to be fed and the goats had to be milked and work had to go on. There was nobody else to do her work that she did. So she would work. And she would cry. She would just work and cry.

Did Mrs. Meirau noticed this?

She knew. Yeah, she told them. Well, because-- yeah, she told her son was killed in Poland. And so, yeah, she knew it.

You know I think, we should stop for a minute here and to go down--

OK.

Ten seconds now. OK, any time.

So you were talking about how you were making it through after you learned of your brother's death.

Right. That was a very difficult time for us because my mother cried just every day, day and night. But eventually, you know, I think she came to terms with it and because life goes on and-- but she was really grieving, not only during that time, but for almost the rest of her life really, yeah.

And Arthur would write letters to my mother. And one day she received a letter from him. And in the letter he says, I am in Germany. I'm not too far away. I was captured in Warsaw. And they send me-- I'm in prison in this and this area and very difficult condition. Could you please help me? I need--

And he ask her for certain things like long johns and razor blades and some food and some things. So my mother ran frantically to some people that she knew she could exchange potatoes and other vegetables from the garden for a pair of long johns and for some shaving equipment and some butter or margarine or some things like that and products.

And she sent a couple times a package to him. And he was very grateful. And he wrote her back. And then one day we never received any news from him anymore. And none of her letters would be answered. Was he a Polish Christian?

Well, no, we don't know for sure. But my mother, after thinking about it for years and analyzing the whole situation, she understood that he was also a Jewish man. And he was much older than my brother.

But they were in the same situation. And they were in the underground. They were two Jews. And they confided in each other. And they said if anything happens to me, you take care of my family. And because when she corresponded to him, he had different names also. Sometimes he was Arthur [? Koznietny ?] and another time another last name. And he would change his names and so on.

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And so later on he explained too. My mother had questions, how did he die. And apparently, he in action, he was with a group of his fellow Poles that were in the underground. And they were all with weapons and going to do some job against the Germans. And they were on the cable car. And the German police was checking documents and checking for weapons. And they started a shoot out. And he was wounded and killed in the street and left there until his friends picked him up.

So we had another loss. We lost-- because my mother already was comforted by the idea that she will have an adopted son. And she was looking forward to meeting with him. And we lost him. And she was convinced, she was sure that he was killed, that he was killed in prison.

Yeah, because after the war, he would have shown up. He would have visited my brother's grave. He would have left some notes because we have checked on that. And there was no sign from him anywhere.

Did you ever get to meet him?

No, we never met him. We never met him. And I just have a picture of him with my brother together when they were in the underground. I have a picture of the two of them together, yeah.

Did you ever know what his real family name was?

No. We didn't know anything else about him. No. No. He arranged for my brother's burial. And, of course, it was the funeral with the priest because all the other people from the underground attended. And he arranged for the headstone. And he wrote the beautiful poem to my brother.

And he says in the poem, you served your fatherland. And you-- it sounds just beautiful in Polish. It's difficult to translate. But basically, you served your fatherland, your motherland. And you expired like a candle, quietly and unknown. But you will remain in my heart forever. Your friend, Arthur. Yeah.

That is lovely. How soon after did you find out that Arthur might be dead?

It didn't take very long, yeah. We didn't get too many letters from him. We corresponded-- my mother corresponded for, I don't know, just a few times, maybe a month or two months. And then he was captured. So it must have been also around '43, maybe at the end of that year, yeah.

Was your mother expected to go to church also?

Oh, no, we never went to church in Germany. No. No. I don't know-- as a matter of fact, I don't know what-- I don't think there were Catholic churches there. I think they're Lutheran, Lutheran. No, we never went to church. Nobody-- this was just for the Germans.

And somebody once invited me. I cannot remember who it was. But somebody took me to church with them. This was the first time in my life I was in a church.

And I remember we sat almost in the front row. And there were very tall candles. That's what I remember-- very, very tall candles and all the icons and pictures. And that was my only time.

And I remember one holiday, Easter holiday. Of course, I was really not familiar with any holiday, not Jewish and not Catholic. And we didn't participate in their holidays either.

But this was in Easter because they had a Easter hunt I know. And Frau Meirau had told me that if I will go and look around in a certain area, she says you find something specially brought in for you, a special gift for you. And what I found was an orange.

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And this was such an exciting thing. I have never seen an orange in my life. And this must have been very expensive at that time. So this was a gift for me. One time only that I received that orange from her. Because all those years, 2 and 1/2 years that we were there, she has never given me or my mother anything.

And she was nice to us. She was not mean. But she has never given anything, never extended herself in any way. And she knew about all the needs that we had, that I didn't have the clothes and I didn't have the shoes.

But she helped my mother to find the source. -- she would tell her go to this such and such an agency to the town next to us, where we-- the shopping was down in the next town, called Ketzin, which was like five, six miles away. We would walk to the-- there were a few grocery stores there. And there was a bakery. And so she said it was a social, like a social service office. And she told her you go there and you tell her you need some clothes for your daughter because she doesn't get anything on coupons.

So we went one time. And we walked in. We entered through the door. And it was a huge, very long room. At the very end of that room was a table. And a woman stood behind the table and behind her on the wall was a gigantic portrait of Hitler, Adolf Hitler.

And the moment we entered the door, she lifted her hand, and she said, Heil Hitler. And my mother said, Guten Tag. And we walked that long way all to that table. And she asked us, what do you want? My mother wore a P.

And she told her this is my daughter. And she does not have any clothes to wear. Everything is in shreds. And she needs a pair of shoes, and she needs a sweater or something. So she has given this to me a pair of ski-like, ski boots that were lacing up, I remember. And they were kind of tight. But I wore them anyway. Yeah, so that was our trip.

Do you have any memory of the interaction with the local Germans?

Well, I was not invited to anybody's house. I don't remember being-- and nobody invited me into their house, except that one time or twice, maybe that my mother and I went to Frau Zemmler, who made that wonderful soup for us. And we would occasionally be in Mrs. Meirau's house, but not for an invitation. She would call my mother to help her darn socks for her husband, do the darning, and do some wash for her by hand in a sink.

Or she would do a lot of preserves. She had a room full of jars that looked like toys almost. They were so beautiful. They had strawberries, red strawberries, and syrup. And she would work with preparing this and that. And she wanted my mother to help her. So I would be around my mother. But she never said, here, take this job for yourself. Never, ever.

And what about the other household and farm help? Were they Germans or Poles?

She had other people that worked for her. But they were really not involved with us. I think she had like a manager that was overlooking the warehouses. His name was Hesse. He was an older man. And I remember very clearly he was not very tall, and he always wore a hat. And he wore--

And he had a pipe in his mouth forever. That pipe never came out of his mouth. And it would hang on the side of his mouth right here and would come down like that. It was like that kind of shape. And his teeth were yellow. And the mouth was always that way.

And he was mean. He was mean to my mother. Every time there was some heavy labor to be done, they called my mother. Let's say if they brought something to be unloaded in the warehouses, they would call her to help or to sweep.

And one time she was on top of the truck helping to unload things. And she talked to somebody, to a truck driver. I don't know who, a driver or somebody. And he came by and he slapped her face so hard that she was bleeding from her mouth. He says she should work and not talk.

He was terribly mean. He hated my mother. He hated me. He hated us because we were foreigners. He was real-- he

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must have been a Nazi. He was just a mean German, yeah.

So and otherwise we had no contact really with other people. We lived-- we were just-- nobody had any business with us. And we were not involved with anybody. And it was to our benefit probably. It was better that way, yeah.

Did you have any sense of the politics and how the war was going?

No. We really didn't know anything what was going on. We didn't have a radio, no newspapers. The only news my mother was receiving was through Mrs. Meirau. My mother would work in the garden, and she would come and stand across the fence. And she would say, well, I read the paper, and, you know, this is going on and that is going on. And my mother said, really.

And one day, she came and she told my mother look what I have here. I have Jewish soap. She gave my mother-- she showed my mother a bar of soap. And she told her, Juden Seife, which means Jewish soap. I don't know what my mother's reaction was there then.

And I think she said, really? But she thought about it all the time. In her mind, I think, she knew what was going on. She understood.

I didn't. I didn't understand. But in the evening when she came home, she told me. She showed me Juden Seife. And I knew it must have been something terrible, but I didn't ask. I knew and I sensed that it was something very painful to her.

But I didn't ask, what does it mean? What is it? But she was very disturbed, very disturbed by it.

And she would get all kinds of clues from her. She would hear about things. And she talked about it like nothing. Look, I bought a new pair of shoes, you know, as a matter of fact.

So would you assume that Mrs. Meirau knew what was happening to the Jews? That she could speak of the soap that way.

I would say so, yeah. I think they were aware that there were some terrible things going on. But they didn't really want to know. They shut their eyes. They didn't want to see. They didn't want to know. But they knew that there was something terrible going on, because-- yes.

I was just going to ask you, if either you or your mother ever felt like you ran into any other Jews.

Never. Never. And we didn't. My mother would have known. She would have known. She had such a sense. She would have known, yeah.

One time only-- and this was already after the war, immediately after when the Russian army came and we started to mingle with the Russian soldiers. And my mother spoke perfect Russian. And there was one soldier that she felt he was Jewish.

He was telling her where he is from and this and that. But he didn't confide. And she didn't confide. Even then, after the war, she had no trust, no confidence in anybody. It was just too dangerous to confide in anyone to say that you are a Jew. No. We were Polish.

So for those whole 2 and 1/2 years, you stayed just by yourself--

Oh, yes. Yeah. Yeah, there was nobody. Nobody came to us. That little-- except, Mrs. Meirau would come and say something smells good. Like one time, my mother made a turkey. We were craving when they wouldn't get any meat or anything.

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And so my mother was creative. She knew how to manage. She was very resourceful. And, you know, so we had always the eggs, which was wonderful, and the soups that my mother made. But once you have this, you crave other things too.

No, she would slaughter a pig. And she would keep barrels of meat curing in her house, Mrs. Meirau. They would slaughter some animal. And they would cure the-- I guess they didn't have refrigeration there. So everything was curing with salt, barrels, wooden barrels in the house. And she never offered to take a piece of meat or something. But my mother would steal once in a while.

And then on the farm, once in a while, a chicken would run away. I guess they had to count every day at the end of the day. So the coops were filled with the same number.

But one day, a turkey was missing. And Mrs. Meirau and my mother and everybody running all over and looking for the turkey. Couldn't find it, you know. It was gone.

And then I think a few days later when she accepted the turkey was gone, the turkey showed up. So my mother took care of it. And she made a wonderful turkey soup. And, you know, it was smelling good. And Mrs. Meirau would come and she would say, oh, how wonderful, it smells so good. And my mother always offered her something. And she enjoyed it very much.

No my mother would-- she was-- I don't know, when I think back now about the tiny little wood burning stove, how she baked all kinds of baked goods that in the best bakery you couldn't find. I remember she baked little things, dough. She made dough filled with cheese because she made her own cheese from the goat milk, and raisins and some almonds and a little sugar. And it was perfect. Little things like that, they were wonderful, yeah. And so that's how we managed.

Did anyone ever take Anton's place?

No, they didn't bring anybody else. No. My mother took basically care of everything. There were no other workers. She really did everything herself, yeah.

How was her health?

Never went to a doctor. Well, none of us ever went to a doctor. If we had a cold or something, you just didn't pay attention until it went away.

[BOTH TALKING]

No medicine. No medicine. I remember, she took me once to the dentist. I had an abscessed on a tooth. And I had to have a tooth pulled. That was the only time. But, no.

Did you have any problems, like nightmares or fears from your days in the ghetto?

No.

No?

No.

Your mother either?

I don't know about my mother. But I was so worn out with my excitement during the day that I just slept like a log. I would fell on that mattress, straw mattress. And I would just sleep.

Sometimes we were just cold, very cold. But we would cuddle up together. And my mother said that I was a blanket. I would put one leg on top of her, and I would warm her.

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But she suffered a lot. She would cry sometimes in the middle of the night. She couldn't sleep on this straw. Her ear would hurt. She would get up and her face would hurt and her ear on the straw pillow. That was hard, very hard.

But nothing bothered me. No, I was tough. Yeah. Every day, getting up ready for another day, I don't remember ever complaining of being bored or unhappy or nothing. I was just-- I went after my business. And my mother was busy with her work. And it was OK, yeah. We had to live that way. And I accepted it.

When did you first sense that the war was going badly for Germany?

Yes, this is something I wanted to talk about. As the time was going by, and Mrs. Meirau was telling, you know, it was getting closer. And they had that terrible fear of the Russians. And I guess they were in all over plastering the papers and posters and painting the Russians as monsters.

And if the Russians come in, they would say they would kill all of us. They would rape every woman. And they would hang every child. Especially children they like to murder. That's the propaganda that was going around. And she was confiding in my mother that she is so worried that sometimes they think they would rather commit suicide than face the Russians before the Russians came.

And then, of course, we started seeing the air raids. They were all flying on the sky across our village to Berlin, to bomb Berlin. And those were the happiest time for my mother.

All the Germans were running into the bomb shelters. And we would stand outside and look at the sky and jump from joy. And my mother-- at night, the sky would be lit up like a Christmas tree, just absolutely beautiful with all the colors. And we could hear the explosions, and hundreds and thousands of airplanes.

And once in a while, they would drop leaflets and written, typed, in Polish and Russian. And they would say, don't worry, the war is near. We are coming. Soon you will all be liberated.

Around when was this?

Maybe '44.

Sometime in '44.

I don't know. Yeah, I think maybe '44.

Now I want to stop for a minute. John wants to hear about your liberation.

OK. OK.

John? We're going to talk about liberation.

OK.

So you were talking about being in Germany. And here, you're beginning to see the Russians--

Well, the tension was building. And Mrs. Meirau and Mr. Meirau would come very often now, visit my mother. And her son Hans would come too. And they would say, Antonia, we were good to you, weren't we? You don't have any complaints against us? My mother said, no, no. And he says, and I'm going to fix that leaking roof. And he did, Hans, because they knew the Russians were very close.

So he went up and he fixed the leaking roof. And they gave us more blankets and some more clothes for my mother. And they were really afraid. And my mother assured them, don't worry, I have no complaints.

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And other people would come by. And, Antonia, you would never say anything bad about us? And my mother assured all of them, I have-- nobody was bad, and I have-- don't worried. She made everybody feel good.

Well, finally, the beautiful day came, 1945. It must have been, I guess, April, one beautiful day. It just-- army truck pulled into the village. And we run out in the street, my mother and I, and other people. I guess the Germans knew. We didn't know they were already here.

And my mother saw a Russian soldier. He stepped out of the truck. It was a short man in a Russian uniform. And he was from one of this Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, one of the Stans. He had oriental eyes and started speaking Russian. And my mother, I speak Russian, I speak Russian.

Right away they surrounded us and speaking Russian, saying, we are your friends. We liberated you. And tell me, who are these people? And tell me first thing, did anybody harm you? And my mother said, nobody harmed us.

And, well, so they came to the place where we lived and looked around. And then they went away. And pretty soon, the whole village was full of Russian soldiers, everybody.

But I should have mentioned before, shortly before that, my mother knew that the end of the war was coming because we heard that there were German soldiers retreating. And they were-- we could see them on the main road. So we would go out on the main thoroughfare to some other town. And we saw full of soldiers walking and wounded and on crutches and running away. Everybody was running away. So we knew that, you know, this is the end.

What feelings did you have seeing the soldiers retreat?

Well, my mother was-- she-- I don't know. There were mixed feelings. We knew that the end-- she would tell me, Nelly, this is the end of the war, this is the end of the war. And we were excited.

But they were mixed feelings. There was such a turmoil and such uncertainty. We didn't know what would happen to us. Where would we go? What would we do?

And so it was just-- the best way I can describe is turmoil. It's not that my mother laughed and jumped from joy, it's the end. Not a feeling like that. No.

She was happy to see the Russians. And she never, never complained to any of them that this one hit me or something, absolutely nothing. And she became the Russian translator for any officer or anybody that needed to communicate with the Russians and the Germans.

So they basically came by the hundreds. The Russian soldiers occupied the whole village. They ran into the houses, and they were looting. They were looting. They were looking for watches and for guitars, yeah. The Russian soldiers love to play the balalaikas, you know, play a guitar.

And it was exciting and commotion. Homes were abandoned. People ran away, empty homes. And there was looting everywhere. There were bombed factories outside the town. And people were looting everything, everything imaginable.

Well, it was just such an excitement. I would go-- I remember I came home with a doll. I picked up a beautiful doll some place, a porcelain doll. I never had a doll in my life. This was the first one. So I showed to my mother I found the doll.

You were only 10 then, right?

I was not-- this was April, and I would be 10 in September, 9 and a half, yes. And so we stayed around there and just enjoying that whole commotion. And we were given all kinds of things by the Russians.

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Now one day, a Russian came to my mother and says, how come your daughter wears such shabby clothes? Why is she dressed like that? So she says, well, she didn't get any clothes from-- I didn't have money to buy, and she wouldn't get any coupons.

So he took a truck. He went to Berlin. He looked at the factory. And he brought to my mother hundreds of meters of fabrics, bolts, like you see in the fabric store. He says, here are fabrics, take it to a seamstress, make dresses for you and for her.

So she did with it. It was basically the same fabric. I remember a navy fabric with little tiny red dots. And so my mother had dresses made out of this fabric for her, a few dresses, and a few for me.

And then they would ask us, what do we need? What do we want? They were willing to give us anything, to supply us with anything.

And we didn't need any-- we didn't want anything really. We had the food. Money, they didn't have because they would-- we knew they were going and looting and then bringing it to us. And my mother was still afraid of the Germans. She didn't want to cause any hard feelings or anybody taking revenge on us. So she tried very, very hard to keep a low profile, not to antagonize anybody, and to be helpful to the Russians.

But yet, at the same time, she knew we had to live for a while with the Germans still. And she was just afraid. And so we just kept trying to keep to ourselves. But it was impossible because this was-- the command post was our room, you know.

All the officers would come there. They would bring the vodka there. They would go out on expedition and fishing. They would throw a few grenades in the river and bring huge fish like that just-- and the Germans would cry, they're destroying us. They're ruining everything.

They would bring the fish to my mother. Cook this. Fix this. And drink with us. And we are your friends. It was just a celebration.

And I was the little sweetheart there. Everybody loved me. One guy came with a bottle of perfume like that. He says you like perfume? Here. He gave me a bottle of perfume. I never knew what-- smelled so good. I put it all over me. And it was just a crazy time.

And somebody sent me a Russian-- soldiers asked me to go someplace where they couldn't enter. And they asked me to climb the fence and to check something out for them. So I did. I was like a cat out, climbed the fence. And on top of that fence, it was barbed wire.

And my hand got cut. And I wounded my hand. I have a big scar here on my hand. And so they felt so terrible. They ran, and they brought bandages and iodine. And they didn't know what to do for me, you know.

And I never cried. It was a very deep cut. But they took care of me and. They didn't know what to do for us. They were so-- they wanted so much-- and there was nothing really that they could do.

Well, things have eventually quieted down in the village. The Russians were satisfied. They raped all the German women, all the young women and old women. And--

What about you and your mother?

No. They had respect for my mother. No, there were plenty of German women, yeah. But when they got drunk, the same thing like with that Polish man, when Anton-- we were-- I didn't understand it. I didn't know anything about that. I didn't know about sex at all.

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And my mother was just very careful always. She never drank. They wanted her to drink with them. And so she pretended she did. But she would spill. She would take a sip and spill the rest, just pretend she would drink.

They like to party very much. And later, when my mother really didn't become one of them party with them, they would invite Germans to party with them. They would go into somebody's house, invite a few neighbors, and put food-- bring food on the table and vodka. And everybody had a wonderful time and drink with them and sing songs and so on.

But things have eventually quieted down. And they didn't remain in the village. I don't know, they had some command post nearby. But they left. And we would--

Did you ever tell them you were Jewish?

Never. My mother never confided in anybody. She didn't trust them. She told me, some of them are worse than Germans. They hate the Jews more than the Germans did. She did not confide in anybody.

And she would tell me, you know, this Russian, I think he's Jewish I think because of the conversations that they had. But she wouldn't confide in him either, anybody, no one, and not in the Germans. I mean she would never say that word, that we are Jewish to anybody.

When things have quieted down, we didn't know what to do with ourselves. Where are we going to go? What to do?

And so my mother was talking to this Mrs. Meirau. And she said, my mother said, yeah, I want to go back to Poland. I want to see if there is anybody left alive. How can I go?

There was no transportation. Everything, all railways and everything was demolished. It's terribly difficult. We didn't know how to get out of there.

So she suggested, Mrs. Meirau, why don't you go through the Red Cross? Go back to Poland. Leave your daughter here. I'll take care of her. And she says, later, you can come back for her, or I'll send her.

So every suggestion, my mother would come home and she would discuss with me. And she would think about it. And she says, no, I couldn't do that. I cannot leave you here.

And I started crying. And I'm begging my mother, don't leave me. I don't want to be by myself. And I started having nightmares at that time. I saw when my nightmares my mother leaving.

And on that farm where we lived at the entrance to the farm, there was a huge tree, a gigantic tree. And in the dream, I saw myself being tied to that tree and my mother was going away. And I begged her, don't leave me. I don't want to be by myself. I'm afraid. Don't leave me.

Anyway, she said, no, I would never leave you here. She would-- Mrs. Meirau would make a slave out of you. She would keep you as a slave. I could never leave. We will go together.

So we decided we would go first to Berlin, make our way to Berlin, and find the Red Cross there and through the Red Cross try to find a way to go back to Poland. So I don't know how we got to Berlin. But I remember being there.

I remember a town that was totally demolished. Everything was in ruins. And we stayed in a little place with some other people or some other woman. And she spoke German, half German and half Polish. We didn't know who she was.

And there was hunger. And there was-- just terrible. And we stayed there for a few days. And I guess my mother found out that there was a military, a Russian military train that would be going to Warsaw. And we could travel with them.

So that's what we did. We took-- the only belongings we had is the things that my brother sent, all his belongings. And my mother said, look, I'm going to put it's in a special bag, and you carry it on your shoulder-- all my brother's pictures,

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his letters, and his writings, and so on. She says, I'm afraid the Russians might think it's money, and they might want to steal it. So never part with it. You keep it. And when you sleep, you put it under your head.

And so that's all I had, that bag that I carried across my shoulder. And my mother carried a package with a few boxes of sardines that came from a burned factory and the few, couple dresses that we. Had and we were heading for Warsaw.

And all the soldiers on the train, and this was like a cattle train. And they were hauling also coals and soldiers. And every so often, they would stop in the middle of nowhere.

And they would jump off the train. And I remember how they were eating, how they were preparing their food. It looked like C-rations, those colored green cans. They would open a can and light a little fire underneath and heat something inside. And a few of them would gather around the fire. And that's how they ate.

Well, we traveled. And it was very tiring. Just everybody dropped on the floor on the train. I fell asleep. And when I woke up my bag was gone. It was gone.

And I told my mother. And she became frantic. And she made a big of-- where is my bag? And she, every soldier, she shook him. Did you take? Did you take? These were pictures of my son. He was killed in a war. There's no money there. Please, give it back to me. Who took it? Who took it?

And they got very upset with her. And they said, you accuse us of being thieves? We liberated you. We are your liberators. Thanks to us are alive. And you accuse us of being thieves? We will throw you down right now off the train if you don't apologize.

So she saw we were in trouble. And she says, no, I'm not accusing you. But maybe somebody took it by mistake. They said-- and she cried and she begged pictures of my son.

Well, nobody admitted to anything. And she apologized. And somebody took it. And they looked, there was no money in there. They threw it out.

And so this was another terrible loss. Every picture, every letter, everything that belonged to my brother was gone. It was just devastating. We didn't have anything to remind us of our family, of the past, not a picture of ourselves, not a picture of my brother, of anybody.

Well, luckily, when we arrived to Poland, I think that my mother found a couple little negatives in a book or in something else that she kept. And so we developed some of these negatives.

Well, finally we arrived to Warsaw and stepped off the train. And my mother looked around. And Warsaw was totally destroyed, demolished. There was nothing recognizable. There was not one building that was intact, none, none whatsoever.

You could see half buildings, half the walls standing, bricks falling. And people lived like that. And one wall would stand, and there a little apartment right next to that wall. And we walked around the streets and walked. My mother was crying and crying.

She says, I cannot recognize any street. I cannot see a Jewish face. She says all the people I see are non-Jewish. She's telling me all these things. What am I going to do? Nelly, we are the only Jews left alive. There are no Jews alive. There no Jewish people left anymore.

So we walked and walked until the night. And we went to the Red Cross. And we slept there one night.

The next day my mother told me she would leave me there. And she would go out and she would search, look for a Jewish face, look for a Jewish human being, if anybody is alive. And again, she went out in the streets. And for about two or three days, she would walk the streets. And she didn't see anybody.

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And she was at the end of-- we didn't know what to do with our life. There was no place to live. There was no food. There was no place to sleep or to wash or-- well, she would sell a can of sardines. And that would give her some money that we could buy some food with that and eat.

Well, one day she went out and, again, walking the streets and looking. And she broke down and started crying terribly in the street. And a policeman came by and he asked, her why are you crying so much? And so she broke down.

And she said, I will tell you the truth. I can't hold it anymore. I'm Jewish. I survived the war with my daughter. And I walked the streets for so many days I don't see one Jewish person. Didn't anybody survive? Am I the only one? Is there anybody left? What am I going to do with myself?

So he told her, yes, there are some other survivors. Don't be desperate. And he told her where to go, that there was a little office set up. And all the survivors were coming by there and registering their names and getting information, what to do and where to go, and so on.

So that's what we did. We went there to that office. And we registered. And my mother looked through the different lists of names.

And she recognized one name of a girlfriend from high school. She was a physician. And she just recognized her name. But she didn't know where she was. And there was nobody.

So she sat with these counselors there and asked them, what can we do? Where should we go? There is no place to live in Warsaw. It was all demolished. People lived in ruins. They were living in ruins.

So they told her that there is a town in Poland in Silesia, that region called Silesia, which used to be occupied land by the Germans. And Poland took it back after that second war. And he says that little town near Breslau. And that town is called-- all these towns have German and Polish name. Breslau was in German. Wroclaw was the Polish name. And he says the other town is Reichenbach. And in Polish is called DzierzoniÃ³w. And all the survivors that come to Warsaw, we recommend that they go down there.

There's a whole Jewish community setting up. They have a synagogue. And you will meet other Jewish people there. And so they said travel is almost impossible. You will not be able to make it on your own with your daughter. So we will find somebody that goes, a man that travels the same way, and we will ask him to help you on your trip

Well, the next day they introduced my mother to this gentleman, a Mr. Haberman, who was engaged. He was in his 30s, I guess. And he was engaged to a younger lady. And he was picking her up on the way to that town where he set up some business for himself, a workshop. And he was going to live there.

So we traveled with him. And he picked up his young bride. Natalie, who became-- we became very close friends. And we traveled. And we made our way-- it was a very long trip to that town. And he had already an apartment. We arrived, and we had a little place to stay with him there.

And the next day, this man comes by who was his partner in the business. This was a business of metal, metal business. They were manufacturing engines and metal parts and so on. He, Mr. Haberman, was the-- he was the expert in this type of work.

And his partner, Leon Tenenbaum, was the financial manager. Well, his partner was a man about my mother's age who was a survivor from many concentration camps, Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen, Birkenau. He was in all of them. And when the war ended, he was in Auschwitz.

And so he became friends with my mother. And he was immediately attracted to my mother because-- especially because of me. He was hungry to have a child, to see a child, because most of the survivors were younger people. My mother was then, I guess, in her 40s. And most people were in their 20s. And there were no children around. So he was

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attracted to us.

He himself lost his wife and his two children in Auschwitz, a boy, a girl. Marie, she was 12. And boy, Szymek, was 14.

And they started living together, and they got married. I objected very much to this marriage. I didn't want another father. I insisted of having my own father.

But he was very loving and very caring and very devoted to me and my mother. And he was a wonderful father to me. For almost 50 years, for 45 years the marriage lasted.

I was asking, I know your mother always told you all her thoughts.

Yes. She always-- she talked to me like if I was her sister. She confided to me with everything. She discussed things with me. And I would just listen to her. And, yeah, we would just discuss, like two grownups.

Did she ever talk to you about what her feelings were, her expectations for liberation before the war ended?

She was just hoping she would meet somebody alive from the family. That's what she was hoping for. She had no idea what she would do with her life, what would happen to us. She was in a very, very difficult situation and how she made it and how she survived everything.

Now that I think back, I mean, I was a child, you know. But as a grownup and with a young child, she didn't know. She was confused. She had no idea. She had absolutely no idea what would happen to us. She feared the future very much.

She felt that she had no skills that she could support herself because she never worked before. And she wouldn't want to work like she did in Germany on a farm. She grew up and lived all her life in the city and was a city girl who was used to go to the opera and to the theater and coffee shops. And she was not a farm girl.

So she had no clue and no idea how we would survive. She just wanted to link up with somebody. She felt so alone. And so-- it's very difficult to describe that feeling of being totally alone in the whole wide world, that there is nobody else who can link up with. That was a terrible feeling. And that's what I think my mother was so afraid of, this loneliness.

So I think that after the war, the moment we found the Jewish person, anybody, friendships were formed. And the friendships became like family. And in that town, there were quite a few of Jewish people.

A lot of them came back from Russia, two of them that I knew that came back from Russia. And they had children. And they became my friends. My best girlfriend, they survived the war in Russia. And she was about two years older than me. And they had a boy about eight years old.

And the other family also came back from Russia. And that girl also about my age, only daughter. I think we were the only Jewish kids around in that town. The rest of the people that survived were the concentration camp survivors. And they were people in their 20s and 30s.

Did you ever find any other relatives? You knew your brother was dead. Were you certain about your father?

Yes, my mother found-- I don't know through whom, but she found out that my cousin, my mother's nephew, her oldest sister's son survived. And he was living in Lodz. He was in the Polish army. He was an officer. I don't through whom.

And he married after the war. He married a Polish woman. And he had a little baby. We met with him. He came to see us, and we came to see him also in Lodz.

My mother was totally devastated that he married a Polish woman because he was raised in such a Jewish family and the best education and very Jewish oriented. And my mother felt that there are so few of us. And it's like losing another

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generation because he married a Polish woman. He kept his Polish name, which he had during the war, and basically lived a life of a Polish-- he didn't come back to Judaism. And that hurt her very much.

And what hurt her even more is that the child that he had reminded her so much of her sister. It was the same face of her sister, she said. So it was very, very painful. And she asked him, how come, couldn't you wait and marry Jewish? He says, I didn't think there were any Jewish women alive anymore. So he was the only one.

Then we found out about another cousin that survived in Poland, my cousin. And that was from my father's side. And she survived also as an Aryan. And my cousin lived in the United States for many years. I met her when I came to the United States. That's the first time when I met her.

She was about 18 years older than me. And I loved her dearly. And she passed away two years ago. She was like a mother to me.

And then another cousin from my father's side is from a second father, two Cousins who live in Israel now.

Did you feel that, for yourself, you were able to build a life after liberation the way you wanted to?

Myself personally? No. No. I had a terrible time adjusting. Life in Poland for me was very difficult. I came back to Poland. Now I spoke perfect German and my Polish was not so good anymore. And I didn't speak like the Polish kids.

And they were no Jewish kids. And I felt very much an outsider. They made sure that I was an outsider because I was Jewish. Antisemitism was rampant in Poland, even after the war.

And I suffered a lot. Kids would tease me. They would involve me in discussions about religion, about Jesus, the Jews killed Jesus and--

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