

OK. One thing I wanted to ask you was, what do you remember as your first personal memory? I know you said that some of the information has been given to you by your family, but can you remember what your first personal memory is?

Well, I think that situation that I was telling about my mother's robe, seeing my mother's corduroy, navy-blue robe and the accounting book.

When you had arrived in Russia.

Yes. Those two things are very vivid in my mind. And then the time when they told me my mother was dead, and I didn't understand what that meant. And I said she's going to come. She's going to be here. She will. She's going to get up. I didn't know what that meant. She's going to wake up. And I just couldn't believe that she would not.

Then I guess she remained buried in Russia.

Mm-hm.

And when you got back to Poland, was it immediately that your family put your age ahead two years?

Well, I don't know if they had done it in the orphanage or if they had done it-- I don't when they did it. All I know is that that's how it was, and I don't know if I was aware of it until maybe when I came to this country. That's what-- it was that way. And by then it didn't really make any difference because that just as well gave me two years to catch up on English.

You said your family was looking to see if they could find any relatives. Did they find anybody that had survived?

Well, they found my aunts and their husbands, my aunt, Molly, and her husband and my aunt, Rachel, and her husband. And I think by then they already had two kids, my aunt, Rachel. And they found-- my uncle, Harry, came somehow back. Actually, I think they didn't know where my uncle, Harry, was for a while, and we got together with him in Germany.

Your family, your father and the rest of the family, had decided to leave Poland. Did they know where they wanted to go?

Well, at that time one of the options was the United States, and another option was Palestine.

Were they Zionists, by any chance?

My aunt was a Zionist, and she wanted to go to Israel, Palestine at that time. But my father and my uncle, Moshe, weren't as ardent about it. They would later on follow my uncle, Harry, who went to Israel. That was my younger uncle who was in the Polish army.

And when they came back to your town in Poland, were they able to retrieve any of their personal goods, or their homes, or anything?

I think my uncle, Moshe-- that's one of the things that he did when he was running around the country looking for us. He also wanted to see if he could retrieve something, and there was nothing to retrieve. Everything had burned down, and there was nothing left. And there was no compensation. There was no compensation.

Do you have any sense of how the townspeople and the neighbors received them when they came back?

No.

So they wanted to emigrate.

Well, see, only my uncle, Moshe, went back. Nobody else went back.

Where was the rest of the thing family?

They were in Slonsk.

A different town?

Yeah, up north.

Why did they go to that town? Do you know?

I think it was closer to the border.

The Russian border?

No, closer to, I guess-- towards the west.

To the German border.

To the German border, to the Austrian border. We ended up in Czechoslovakia.

You went-- so you went to Czechoslovakia.

Yeah, first we took a train and went to Czechoslovakia, and that was at night. And somehow we had smuggled out-- they paid whoever it was to let us stay over in a barn overnight. We spent the night in the barn, and in the middle of the night we smuggled across the border from Poland to Czechoslovakia.

And I remember we had a can of lard that we put money in. We had dollar bills. I don't know how much we had, a roll of dollars, of money in dollars, in that can of lard.

So you were obviously traveling without papers.

We probably had papers of some sort, but we did not have papers to be officially--

And no visa or whatever to try to--

No, it was probably just unofficial-- some kind of forged paper or whatever that said we could go. So we went to Czechoslovakia, and the first thing I remember in Czechoslovakia-- we were in-- we were in a-- we stayed in barracks in some kind of a concentration camp. I don't know which one it was, but it was a concentration camp--

Near Prague?

--that stayed in. Yeah.

Maybe Theresienstadt?

Could be.

Did you have some organization you were working with, or how did you know what to do and where to go?

Yeah, there was a Jewish organization probably that was assisting us. And we were in these barracks, and the first thing

I remember was we got a big container of peanut butter. And that was the first time we ever had peanut butter.

And I couldn't get enough of it. I thought it was the best food there ever was, and it was just so good.

Yes, food became very, very important.

Food was important.

And how long were you there?

I think we were probably there for about six weeks.

Is this 1946 maybe?

This is '46, probably.

In the spring, summer?

Yes. I would say the end of the summer. I would say the end of the summer because then we ended up going to Austria, and we were in Austria for a certain amount of time. And what I remember coming to Austria, and we were-- all of a sudden, the train stopped in front of this big mountain. And it was huge, and I had never seen a mountain like this. It was really adventurous to see a big mountain.

And what was your ultimate destination? Where was your family going to go?

Well, we were going to go to Germany. That was the way they were taking us, back to-- to go to Germany. And the Germans were very subdued by then, and they had apparently-- the Jewish committee had set up displaced persons camps throughout Austria and Germany.

And we ended up in a place called Breslau. Actually, before Breslau we were in a tent city, and that was quite interesting--

What was that like?

--being in a tent city. Well, there were like hundreds of-- there were like a thousand tents all lined up in a row, and there was a main kitchen, a big tent. And I was sent to get the food and got to be friendly with one of the cooks. So he always gave me more.

So we had this aluminum milk jug, and we had a couple of other dishes, in the morning for the oatmeal and the milk and for the afternoon, for the soup and whatever else. And I would get in line, and he would see me line. He would say, [NON-ENGLISH], come on here. He would get me in front and give me some extras.

Did you have enough to eat there?

I guess not because he had to give me extra. People were just living what they could get.

Were you going to school or doing anything during the day?

No, there was nothing to do. We were just-- we just walked around, made friends. That was the thing to do, just try to talk to people and be friendly. And sometimes we would go to town. It was a very long journey, and we would get-- we would bring that aluminum container, and we would bring beer back for the older folks. And we had a few sips on the way. The black beer was very good.

Well, that's about all I can remember about tent city, except there were some problems. Sometimes people mistook--

they would go into the wrong tent, and somebody would think that somebody wants to steal something. They would hit them over the head. There were stories like these going on.

So did every family have their own tent?

No, you shared the tent with-- the tents were big. You would share the tent with about three or four families.

So it was all open tent space in the middle?

Yeah.

And everybody would sleep in the tent?

Yeah, there would be cots along on both sides.

What about bathroom facilities?

Well, I guess you'd have to go out to go to the bathroom, and that was the problem where somebody would come back from the bathroom and get into the wrong tent.

And was there any work for the older folks?

No, there wasn't any work unless you got in somewhere on one of the delegations of, you know, running the place, if you could get that. But mostly they took people who were very literate and people who knew how to run things and at a different level, I guess.

But my aunt once went to-- I don't to-- the nearest town, and there was-- I think it was the Jewish committee that would have-- there would be a rumor that somebody would-- that there would be some clothes available if you want. So you'd get in line and wait, and my aunt came back with a blanket, and a coat, and a couple of other things. And it was just like prized possessions, like she had won the lottery.

Even though you were young, had you by this time heard what had been happening to the Jews in Europe, the concentration camps, and murders, and--

No. No. Well, I knew-- actually, when I was at the Mizrachi kibbutz, there were a lot of kids who had lost their parents in the Holocaust, so that was my first contact with knowing that there were atrocities and the children had lost their parents.

So the children spoke to you of their experiences?

Mm-hm. But I don't think I could understand what they were really saying. I just knew they'd lost their parents in the war. And I felt I lost my mother in the war, too, but I didn't understand the difference exactly of what it was like and what they went through.

Did you have any feelings about being in Germany, any negative feelings or fearful feelings?

Well, not really. I didn't. I didn't because, see, we were-- when we were in a displaced persons camps we were isolated from the Germans. The schools we attended were Hebrew schools that were in the-- I mean in the displaced persons camps. And we were really isolated from Germans per se.

The only time we would come in contact with them-- like we lived the first-- after we left tent city we went to this place in Breslau, which was a military-- we stayed in a military-- originally it was military barracks. In fact, the American army was on the other side of the-- they had divided the camp into two.

The American army was on one side, and we occupied the other side. And that was the first time I saw a Black man, and I thought it was a chocolate man. It just looked like a chocolate man. And I was just amazed that people came looking like-- that there were people who looked like that. It was just really fascinating to me.

Can you remember any other aspects of that camp? You lived in the barracks. Would that mean lots of people sleeping in one room?

Well, actually, we had one room. By then we were eight of us. My grandmother came to live with us, my father's mother. And we had one room all to ourselves. We had a stove, and we had a table and some chairs. And then we had-- the sleeping quarters was in the back. So we had one big room.

And what about bathroom facilities there?

There was a hall-- in the hallway there was a bathroom, a common facility for showers and bathrooms. And it was the first time I ever saw somebody brushing their teeth. And I said, my God, why do you brush your teeth? They'll get dirty after you eat. It just seemed like such a useless thing to do.

How was your health by then? Had your ear aches cleared up?

Well, what happened was that, first of all, I had been holding my head to one side, like this, and it had been just the way I got used to it. And nobody really straightened me out on that while I was in the orphanage. I just got used to being like that.

So my aunt took me to the doctor, and they operated. And I had to-- I had to shave my head-- my hair off again. When I came from the orphanage I had no hair, and then we had to shave my hair.

Why did you have no hair from the orphanage?

Because they would shave your hair for lice. So I had finally grown some hair, and they wanted to shave it off. And I said, no, no, I won't let you do it. So I didn't let them shave it off.

And they had to put a cast on for six weeks, so for six weeks I couldn't wash my hair. And I was itching like crazy. So I had a little hole in the top, and my aunt-- one night one day I was just so irritable, so she put a little bit of kerosene in. And it burned so bad. It was hurting so bad and burning. I cried myself to sleep. And when I woke up there was no more itching, and it felt good.

But anyway, then the cast came off, and that healed up. And then the next step was getting my ears taken care of. So I was in the hospital-- that was my first year in school, and I spent a lot of time in the hospital that first year between the separation, and getting my ears cleared up took quite a while.

About how long were you in Germany?

We were in Germany from '4-- I guess '46, middle of '46 until '51.

That's a long time. And you were waiting for what?

Well, originally we were waiting to go to Israel. I guess after '48 everybody wanted to go to Israel. There was a place to go. And we just were getting set up. We were going to-- my family was going to get some kind of a factory set up in Israel, vulcanization of some-- retreading tires of some kind. That was their plan. But the money that they had they lost in one of their deals.

In Germany?

Yeah. My uncle was doing deals. Both my uncles and my dad-- they were handling-- they were in the black market with

cigarettes, and chocolate, and whatever commodities were available, and they were dealing, I guess, with the United States Army. I can't think who else had all these goodies. But somebody tipped them off, and they had a warehouse of stuff. And it was taken.

But what did they do then?

What?

What did they do then after the warehouse business?

Well, they lost a lot of money, and then that plan fell through. And then they were-- didn't know what else to do. And my uncle, Harry, decided he was going to go to the United States, and my aunt, Molly, had relatives in the United States.

My grandmother wanted to go to Israel. My aunt, Rachel, wanted to go to Israel. So we were all divided about where to go. And the kids-- all of us wanted to go to Israel because we were studying Hebrew, and we didn't know any English. And we wanted to go to Israel.

And we were-- in school we were really taught all about Zionism and all about Israel, about the history, the culture, and we wanted to go to Israel. But my father and my uncle wanted to-- they thought it would be better for us to go to the United States.

In what way did they think?

Economically they felt it would be better, that we had more opportunities there-- here. And so meanwhile, the McCarthy era was during that time, and we had set up to go to the United States. And then they-- because we had been in Russia, they accused us of being communist, so they said, you can't go.

So we were trying to get to go to Australia, and we were waiting for a boat to come. The last one had left, and we were going to take the next one. But then they lifted the embargo on us coming to the United States, so we ended up going to the United States.

Where did you go to?

My uncle lived in Chicago, so we went to Chicago.

And you had to learn another language?

Yeah, right.

So you enrolled in school?

Yeah, yeah.

Did you have your own apartment in Chicago?

Yeah. We lived in a apartment, all seven of us. We were all together. We were always together. And my uncle had a job in a blouse factory, and my father got a job in a plastic-- making plastic-like disks for records and all sorts of other plastic things. And they both worked.

And my aunt was taking care of the house and staying with us, and we seemed to get along pretty well. And then my uncle, Harry-- he had learned how to make cabinets during the war, so he got into furniture.

He wasn't living with you.

He was living in Chicago. No, he was living-- him and his wife were living in-- they were subleasing a room in an apartment with some people.

What about your grandmother?

My grandmother went to Israel.

She did go to Israel?

Yes, she went to Israel, and she was there. We seemed to be going along pretty well, and then my uncle, Harry, asked my father to join him in the business. And so he did, and he wasn't getting along very well with my uncle, Moshe.

Your father or your uncle, Harry?

No, my uncle, Harry. They had different, whatever, disagreements. And my uncle, Moshe, became very difficult to be-- he became unreasonable, and he was beginning to be unreasonable before we came to the United States. He was always suspicious. And for a while he was-- it looked like he was doing things, but he was just taking the train to Munich, and coming back, and really not doing anything.

And we didn't suspect anything for a while. But he was just-- he had just gotten very scared, and he started suspecting all sorts of things. He started suspecting people on the bus, that somebody was following him, that somebody thought he was a KGB agent or whatever. And he would get off the bus and see if that person would get off when he got off.

He got very paranoid, and it got worse and worse to the point where he lost his job. And then my father and my uncle, Moshe, got into a business, and my uncle, Harry, went to Kansas City where my aunt, Molly, was. And he started a business in Kansas City, and my father, and my uncle, and the two boys, my brother and my cousin, Mel, helped out. And they were running this business.

We were making seats and backs for chairs. It was wholesale, and they were selling the seats and backs to the retail companies. And my uncle and my father didn't agree on some things, and my father ended up going to Kansas City with my uncle, Harry, and leaving my uncle behind.

And what about you?

Well, we went with my father.

You and your brother--

Yeah.

--both left for Kansas City with your father?

Yes, yes.

Did your father ever think to remarry?

Well, he didn't really. He really felt that if he would marry somebody they would marry him for his money. They would just want to get something out of him. And he wasn't going to let anybody do that to him, and he just didn't consider it for a long time.

And then we were in Kansas City. It was really hard for me to move because I had a lot of friends in Chicago, and I hated to lose them and start all over. Most of my friends in Chicago were girls pretty much like me who had gone through similar experiences.

And when I came to Kansas City I couldn't find-- I just had to find friends who were just friends, and there was-- we lost that. I lost that. But I didn't lose contact with these friends. I've always been in touch with them. To this day we keep in touch.

I keep in touch with my friend, Toby, who came on the same boat as I did to the United States, and my friend, Rene, who was my first friend here, and my friend, Hannah and Golda. We keep in touch.

So again that was a hard move for you.

Yeah.

Who was keeping the house? Who was doing-- was there anybody to-- nobody to be mother anymore.

Well, when we moved-- well, actually, what happened was a year before we went to Kansas City my father and my uncle, Moshe, got into a disagreement, and we moved-- my father, and my brother, and I moved away from them.

Actually, we moved to another neighborhood. That neighborhood had gotten disintegrated. The west side of Chicago was disintegrated, so we moved, and we separated. My aunt went to another place, and I became sort of the housekeeper and did the cooking and the cleaning.

Was it hard for you to leave--

My aunt? Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was. But we didn't live that far away. We still kept in touch, and we talked on the phone a lot. And it was like less than a 10-block walk. We didn't live that far away. We still kept in touch and kept close.

But then when I moved to Kansas City that was hard, but my aunt, Franya, Uncle Harry's wife, lived there, lived in-- you know. So we moved in with them, and we lived with them for, I'd say, about eight months. And she was very nice.

She was a Holocaust survivor. She had been in the Lodz ghetto, and she had been in Theresienstadt, I think, and had gone through a lot. She lost her family. She lost her husband, and her child, and her mother, and her father in the concentration camps. And she ended up being the only one, except for a brother in Australia, so eventually they went to Australia to be near her brother.

And then we stayed in Kansas City. And one summer I went back to New York, and met some of my old friends from Europe there, and started nursing school there, and spent two years in New York. And then my brother had gotten married, and he went to Israel. He met a woman there, and they got married. So my mother came back to Kansas City, and I came back to Kansas City.

You said you couldn't complete your nursing because of your hearing?

Yes, yeah. I got a terrible ear infection, and the doctor-- the board of the nursing school decided-- it was a three-to-four vote that my hearing wasn't good enough for nursing. And I was shattered at the time. It was very difficult to take, but I picked up the pieces and went on.

What did you do after that?

Well, I just did office work for a while, and then I came back to Kansas City, and went back to school, and finished junior college, where I was living at home, and then decided to come out to California.

You came by yourself?

Mm-hm.

Where did you go?

I didn't know-- I didn't know anybody. Well, I started San Francisco, and I liked San Francisco an awful lot. And I went to LA. I didn't like LA. And when I first came, I moved into the Emanu-El Residence Club. It was the Jewish residence club for girls. And I lived there for about three and a half years. It was very nice.

What kind of work were you doing to support yourself?

I was just doing bookkeeping, and I was going to school part-time.

And what did you do for fun?

Well, I just did a lot of-- I did folk dancing, and made friends, and just--

Oh, by this time were you going out with young men?

Yeah.

Did you get married yourself?

Yeah, I guess so. I was.