

--an experience by itself.

[INAUDIBLE]

The train.

The train ride-- you know, I don't want to interrupt, but it wasn't until I became a mother that the whole thing of my mother sending us away and all that, did I realize what it must have meant for her. Not until then. It never-- it just occurred to us.

Had you ever been away from home?

No.

Can you say that--

Not day camp. Are you asking me [INAUDIBLE]? Well, no. My sister and I were never away from home by ourselves. We used to go-- for summer, we used to go to a place where my mother-- but we went with my mother and housekeeper for the summer. But never by ourselves. No, there was no such thing as a sleep-away camp. [LAUGHS] So no, we will never away. It's so strange. It's so unreal now, when I think back to it.

Did you have any fun at all? Did you have a boyfriend or anyone that you were--

No. I must say-- I've said that I was a child and then I was an adult. I never was a teenager. Because all of a sudden you grew up. You became an adult. So before that, we were very-- you know, over here, I see 14, 15-year-old boys and girls, especially now, they're already very mature. We were very immature 15, 16-year-olds.

I mean, we had friends-- boys and girls in [PLACE NAME]. We used to have all kinds of activities and all that. But I never had a boyfriend, no. Not until I came to the United States, and neither did my sister. No. No, we were never teenagers.

Did your mother visit you while you were in Vilna?

My mother came to visit us a couple of times while the border was open. And it wasn't so bad for her because she felt she was still in contact with us. But then, I'd say after about two or three months, they closed the borders. And that's when she really realized that she couldn't stay alone there. And I guess having the house didn't mean-- and besides, they took over the house anyway at that time. They moved in. And she just couldn't be by herself anymore, and the housekeeper.

So she decided to smuggle across the border. So she packed up a few things, like some of the few things that I've shown you. And there were people who were smuggling you across the border for money at certain points. And she traveled to that point. She took with her just what she could carry with her, on her back or with her hands, in her arms.

And she paid one of the persons-- I don't recall how much money, but it was a lot of money. And they tried to smuggle these-- take people across the border during the night. They knew exactly when the sentries were changing and all that. And lo and behold, they were almost caught. So they had to run back to the farm house and wait till they had another opportunity.

In the meantime, it was sort of like in the fall or early winter, and it turned very cold and rainy. And my mother took sick. She got pneumonia so that she couldn't try again. And she was at the person's house for about a couple of weeks until she got better. And then they tried again and they were successful. And she joined us.

We were living in that communal [INAUDIBLE] But she couldn't join us there because that was just for single people

for [PLACE NAME]. So she got herself a little room in Vilna. And she stayed there. And we used to go. That's how we used to spend a lot of time too. We used to go to my mother's room and spend with her. You know, walk or-- a lot of times, also, she said that there was a shortage of food. So you had to stand on line for everything that there was-- bread, anything that they might have. So used to spend a lot of time standing on line to get some food.

Now, when she came and visited you and left, what were those comings and goings or the partings like?

Tough, tough. Very bad. Because each time--

Could you start it as a complete thought?

Yes. Well, my mother used to come to visit us. Her coming was, of course, wonderful. And she used to bring us some food, some goodies, because she was still able to get there. But then when she had to go, each time was like the last time. That we wouldn't see her again. So it was very rough.

And that's what I think made it-- even, I think, before they closed the border she was thinking of just not going back one day. But she never got to do that. And she did it the hard way. And one day she just packed up and left the house. She left. The housekeeper was a much an older woman. She couldn't do it. She was a distant relative of ours who came to live with my mother when my father passed away. And she stayed on. So and she--

Did she survive?

She did not survive. She did not survive. She was left living in our home. The Russians let her stay there. But then our town was-- then the war broke out between the Russians and the Germans, when the wars they were fighting. So our town was changing hands constantly. Germans, Russians. And during one of the German occupations, she was killed-- the housekeeper.

Do you have a picture of her?

I don't have-- I had a picture of her sort of in a little window, and I can't remember where I had it.

Let's go back to--

I was going to keep that out. I have her picture. It's a lovely house.

Let's go back to the rumors on how you were going to get out of Vilna. Did you realize-- did you have the sense that you really needed to get out once the Russians came into Vilna?

We had a sense that-- when the Russians came in to Vilna, and how they occupied Vilna was-- back, when they came back again-- was when they had left Vilna and they gave it back to Lithuania, they left a garrison of troops. And what was happening during that period, there used to be some incidents, like a Russian soldier was beaten up or one or two incidents where they were killed. And it used to be publicized a lot in the papers.

And then one time that I think a couple of soldiers were killed, and they found it as an excuse to come back into the city and reoccupy it. So when they came in to Vilna was a very memorable day. That was the day Menachem Begin, the former prime minister of Israel, who was with us in our group. Because they fled the Germans. They won in Warsaw. So they fled, he and his wife and a number of other people. And they were with all of us. We lived in the same [INAUDIBLE]

So one--

Could you start with when the Russians came back in? He made a speech, right?

Yes. Well, when the Russians came back into Vilna, it was a day when he was making a speech.

We don't know who "he" is.

Oh, I see.

Say, "one of our group."

Our leader, Menachem Begin, who was the leader of--

Start again.

Yes, OK. When the Russians marched into Vilna again, it was on the day that our leader, Menachem Begin, former prime minister of Israel, was making a speech. And it was a speech all about how we're going to get to Israel one day, and now we're going to build the land and free the Jews. And a very nationalistic and Zionist speech. And he was a fantastic speaker. Very fiery.

And all of a sudden-- there must have been like about 500 people or more in the hall. And someone got on the stage and handed him a note. And he read the note. Put the note in his pocket. And all of a sudden, he became even more fiery, more enthusiastic. And he is speaking. And he ended his speech, and he asked us to stand up and sing "Hatikvah." "Hatikvah" is the national anthem, the Jewish national anthem. And we all looked at each other. What's going on here?

We got up. We sang the anthem. And he asked us to leave. And when we got out, there were the Russian tanks rolling through the streets of Vilna. And the note that was given to him was to get out of there because they felt that they were going to arrest him immediately. But they did not arrest him immediately. They arrested him a few months later. Actually, arrested him on the day we left for the United States, in August. This must have happened-- this is sometime like in March, the occupation.

Great. Let's go back to the rumors, and you would go here and go there. And then finally you heard about the Japanese and the whole Sugihara story.

Yes. Well, the whole existence while we were in Vilna was trying to get out, trying to get somewhere. My sister and I were luckier than most people was because we did get in touch with our families in the United States. And the families here, aunts and uncles, were working very hard to try in all different ways to help us. They sent us a little money. They were not very rich people, but they tried to help.

And as I said, they got in touch [INAUDIBLE]. And they found that our papers were in Germany. And also they found out that if we could get a visa to get to Japan, they might be able to arrange for the affidavits to be sent to Japan. But there was no way to us to get visas to Japan. We didn't know about Mr. Sugihara or anything. So as I was saying before, I believe that they were all--

I'm sorry. We don't know that you said that before.

Oh, didn't say that.

This is all brand new. Think of the audience hearing it for the very first time.

First time, right. Get me a drink, OK?

OK, any time.

Well, while we were in Vilna, of course, we spent a lot of our time trying to find ways how to get out. And there were rumors all over the place about that you could get a visa to go to one country or the other-- Curacao or Japan. But we-- No, I'm sorry. That's the wrong way.

That's OK.

There were rumors going around that you could go to different places. And when we went, they were just a dead end. And then we heard a rumor that there was this Japanese diplomat in Kovno giving out rumors to go to Japan.

I'm sorry. You said "rumors going to Japan."

Rumor?

You said rumors going to Japan instead of visas.

Oh, visas! OK. All right, shall we start again?

Yeah.

OK.

Let's start with the new angle. Why don't you just tell me how did you hear about Sugihara visas?

Hold on one second. Just give me one second.

Oh, yeah? Yeah, we get that. Gee.

OK.

And then we heard a rumor that there was a Japanese diplomat giving out visas to go to Japan. And my sister and I decided to go to Kovno and try to get one. Because we felt if we get to Japan, we might be able to get affidavits sent to Japan and get an American visa.

So we went to one of the offices. Got a permit to go to Kovno. And we took the train. And we got there, to the Japanese consulate, and there were lines around the block, other people were there. We waited there all day long and we couldn't get in.

But we had to take the train back because we couldn't stay overnight. We went back. And then a couple of days later, we tried again, the same thing. And that time, we took an earlier train to get there. And we-- it was the same thing again. We couldn't get in. A few days later, we tried again.

And each time, we had to get a different permit. We couldn't go on the same permit. The permits were also expensive. We didn't have too much money. The last time we went, the third time that we went, it was getting very close to a crucial date. Because our family from New York wired us that they could get tickets for us on the Trans-Siberian Railroad for a certain date if we could get the visa.

And it was getting very close to that date. And if we didn't get the visa, we couldn't get on it. So my sister and I got up even earlier. And we got there, we stood on line. And each time, people used to go-- the building that the embassy-- it was just a house, actually. It was sort of a ground floor, and then his office was upstairs. So people used to line up and then come, and you lined up on the stairs until you were able to get into his office. And each time a person went into the office, the door would open and then there would be a push. You know, people would try to get in.

And we were standing on line. And it was like about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon. And we were getting pretty close. We were at the bottom of the steps. But the office was closing at 5:00 or 5:30. And we saw that it was getting too close, that we will probably not be able to get in.

So at one point where the door opened, I grabbed my sister's hand and we just ran up the stairs. And we tried to get in. And of course, we tried to cross the line. So they pushed us down and we were right back in the bottom of the steps.

And then a few more times people went in and out. And we were coming up maybe two or three steps. But still, we felt we were not going to make it that day.

Finally, we took the courage again and we ran up those stairs. And I just put my foot right in the door, as they say. And I was holding on to my sister. And we got in to the room. And we were the last people who got the visa that day. So--

Can you tell me, so you start with getting into the room. Start with how did you get into the room. It has to be shorter though because it's much too long.

That's right. How did we--

So you pushed your way into the room. And then tell me about your interactions with--

--with Dr. [PERSONAL NAME] and Mr. Sugihara. OK. And there is-- I don't realize, but I am trying to tell you sort of everything that happened. And I don't realize that it's too long.

Yeah, we need like 30 second answers.

Oh, OK. Well, I'm usually not a big talker. Shall we go? When my sister and I got into the room, we were breathless and we were scared stiff. Because at that time we were really very scared of all kinds of authorities. And then we got in.

And there was a man, Japanese man, sitting at a desk right in the middle, facing us. And there were two other tables, one on the right, one on the left. And one was Japanese and one was and not Japanese. And later on, I found out that the man who was also a Sugihara survivor, he was a translator. And he asked us--

I'm going to need-- it's going to have to be really short. You got in. You were breathless. You were scared. Sugihara, even though you didn't have an end destination--

Yes. He looked at us. He was very sympathetic.

Great, but let's-- and then you got the visas.

Yes. And he just asked us our name.

OK. Can you tell me that story in 30 seconds?

30 seconds. He looked very sympathetic.

So start with you got into the room, you were breathless. You pushed your way--

--way into the room.

Now, you have to start from--

You have to start after I stop talking.

We've never heard the story before.

Right. And give us a big breath.

We pushed ourselves-- my sister and I pushed ourselves into the room with Mr. Sugihara. He asked us our name. He asked us where our parents were. We told him my father was not living, my mother has no papers. And he looked very sympathetic and he just stamped, gave us a visa right there on the spot.

And how did you react?

We got very hysterical. My sister and I got hysterical, started to cry and started to say thank you, thank you in Polish. And he just raised his hand like saying it's OK. And that's it. And we went out of the room. And we were still-- got out of the room hysterical, crying. And crying, that's all. We were just hugging each other and crying. And that was that.

That's great.

Yeah, that is great.

Did you-- were there any pictures taken of you that day?

Yes. I have two pictures that my sister and I were going back to Vilna and our training was not due for a couple of hours. So there was a little park there. So we sat in the park. We walked around. And you know, it was just so happy. We were just so happy.

And there was a photographer walking around. And he asks if he wants to take our picture, our pictures taken. And we said if we pay him in advance, he'll send us the pictures. So whenever we had a few-- I don't know, whatever the money was. And we paid him. And we never thought we'd get those pictures. But we did get them. So I have two pictures of that, my sister and myself on that day. It was August 12, 1940.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, OK. Can you just describe the line again?

What did it feel like in that line? Was their anger or was their anxiety?

Anxiety.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

The line-- well, the first day, of course, there was--

When you got to the Japanese embassy?

When we got to the Japanese embassy, the lines were around the corner, way around. And there were families and single people, but very few-- I think my sister and I were just about the only teenagers that were alone. And people were just anxious, anxiety, very quiet. Also, just standing in line and exchanging stories with this one experience and that one experience. But mostly I would describe it as very stressful, a lot of anxiety and worry. Am I going to get up to the top?

Did you ever think you were going to get a visa? Were there times when you thought--

No, I wasn't. I mean, I think we would have tried again and again. I don't know. We wouldn't have given up, that's for sure. Because we had the potentials of getting an American visa if we got that visa. But when we got that visa and our passport, and I don't know if you-- we had no visa to go anywhere. And I don't know if this is the right time?

Start again, though. Start again saying that you had no end visa.

When we got the Japanese visa to go to Japan, we had no end visa. We were hoping to get it. And that's why when we got to [PLACE NAME] we were detained, my sister and I, because some official noticed that there was no, we had no visa. And he said to us, where's your visa to go anywhere? And I says, oh, we're going to get one. It's waiting for us in Tokyo.

So he wasn't taking our word for it and he tried to get in touch with the American embassy. But it happened to be some

sort of a holiday. I believe it might have been-- well, we were there sometimes in September. Maybe Labor Day or I don't remember exactly what sort of American holiday and the embassy was closed. So he couldn't get through to them. So they detained us in the police station, upstairs. The police station was on the ground floor. We were upstairs. They treated us very nicely. But they, I guess you'd call it arrested us.

And then they got in touch with the Jewish community in Kobe. And two men came the following day, I think two days later. And they prevailed upon them to release us. They said they would take care of us. And they did. They took us to Kobe. They went with us.

And they put us up for a few days there. And then after that, they took us to Tokyo. Two men went with us. And they found us a place where to stay. And got us in touch with the American embassy. Showed us where it is.

I mean, here we were in Japan. We did not speak the language. Japan was a frightful experience. We were really frightened all the time.

How come?

I don't know. It was so strange. We've never seen other people. We've never seen Japanese people. And we were very frightened there. We were afraid to go anywhere. We used to spend most of our days at the American embassy. It was not far from our little hotel that we stayed. We felt sort of safer there. And we were two girls-- my sister and I and two other women and two men who were traveling to their wives.

Let's go back to--

We're going to reload tape.

We're going to reload.