United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Charlene Schiff
January 29, 2003
RG-50.549.02*0068

PREFACE

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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: -- 29th, 2003. We're at the Holocaust Museum annex at L'Enfant plaza. My name is Neenah Ellis. This is tape one, side one. Charlene, you did your oral history interview 10 years ago, almost exactly 10 years ago.

Answer: Wow.

Q: March '93.

A: Really? Almost 10 years ago.

Q: March '93. And I just listened to it again. It was a remarkable experience as a listener, to hear it. But I want to start, because this is a post-Holocaust interview, at the end of that experience when you were by yourself in the forest. You'd been wandering for a couple years, maybe?

A: A couple -- three winters and two years.

Q: Three winters, yeah. And you were liberated, as you say --

A: At [indecipherable] by --

Q: -- by some Russian soldiers --

A: -- soldiers.

Q: -- who found you.

A: Well, yeah, they were pushing they -- at that time they were pushing the Germans back and as it happened -- I don't know, it was I guess, an entire battalion, I'm not sure. But Russian soldiers, Soviet Union soldiers were marching through the forest where I was dying, actually. I -- usually when I was in the forest, I would dig a little grave and cover it, camouflage it as much as I could and stay there as long as hunger and cold would allow me to stay in one place. At that point I was very ill, I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me. And I was in my own filth, surrounded by my own filth, and I -- I think I was dying. I don't really recall one time, I think, that I wasn't actually aware of it, and yet I must have been aware. When they literally stepped on me, it was dark, at night and all of a sudden I felt -- I mean, in -- in the forest there are always a lot of noises, so I didn't hear them coming. But all of a sudden I felt something on my chest, and it was, I guess, one of the soldiers. And they realized it was something alive. And to their credit and my luck, they did clean me up and put me in a tent in a -- a military hospital and dragged me with them until we came to the city of Luck, L-u-c-k, which is in the area where I come from. And there they found a -- a regular hospital and they left me there. And apparently -- I never saw the note, but apparently there was a note saying -- and I'm paraphrasing, but it was something like,

this is a child of the forests. Treat her gently, with great care. And that note was pinned to me, to my -- whatever I was wearing. All --

Q: How old were you at this time?

A: In that time -- I -- it was in 1944, so how old was I? 19 -- I guess it was --

Q: You were born in ’29?

A: Yeah, December ’29, and that was --

Q: So you were 14 - 15?

A: -- 14 -- 14 years old, or so, yeah.

Q: Yeah. Do you remember them carry -- they must have carried you. Do you remember any of that?

A: No, I --

Q: Do you remember them speaking with you?

A: No, all I remember is someone kept saying yebishka, yebishka and that means in Russian, l-little girl, little girl. But I did not speak. I don’t remember speaking. I kept throwing up, and I was very, very ill. And -- but I vaguely remember it. And then when I did get into the hospital -- yeah, I don’t think they carried me. I think they had like a -- horses with wagons. And I don’t really know, maybe they did carry me, but they did have that. And then they would have tents in forest --

Q: Camps, they had camps, mm-hm.

A: Camps, yes, uh-huh.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And they treated me very well. And later on, after the war we went to Russia because I went back to my hometown, which is another story, which I'll tell you about.

Q: You told some of that in the first interview.

A: Did I?

Q: About going back, mm-hm, you did.

A: Where they tried to --

Q: And when you went to the town and then tried to take your son.

A: Yeah, did I tell about that?

Q: Yeah, you did, yeah.

A: Well, anyway, but I tried to find out who were -- what kind of a te -- who were the -- the soldiers, especially the two soldiers who first found me, and were so -- gave me back my life. And I couldn't get names or anything. I know one thing, that I still had a gold coin, and I th -- the coins and all the jewelry that my mother sewed in, I don't know if I told that in my first interview --

Q: Yes, you did, how she put them into your clothes.

A: Yes, but a -- I lost the coat and all that. And so then I had like a rope, a -- a real heavy rope that I wore on my neck. And that and my little penknife I had with me and the gold -- gold coins and whatever else, and jewelry. And I still had one coin and I gave it to them, to the two soldiers. I -- I do remember that, that was it. But other than that, there was no real thank you or anything, for giving me back my life. But when I ended up in the hospital at Luck, that's where they nursed me back to, I guess, reasonable health. I did not speak for a long, long time, and I do remember that -- how I regained my speech. I was on a ward. At that time, I mean, there were no private rooms, or if there were I wasn't in one. And I was just in my cot, whatever, in clean sheets, it was wonderful. And -- but I did not speak. And then all of a sudden there was an attendant. It was not a doctor and it was not a nurse, but a young woman. And she was sort of humming while she was doing things and all of a sudden she started singing a song that my mother used to sing to me. And, I mean it just gave me chills and I started talking. That, you know, brought back my speech. And it was a very, you know, emotional day at that time. But when I was nursed back to health, I found there was one other survivor from my hometown. And it seemed that most of the survivors -- the war was not over yet in 1944, but for us, for all intents and purposes, the war was over. And so everybody who survived tried to gather in a larger town. And Luck, or Lvov, which

now is called Lviv were the two big cities and all the little shtetls were in between. And Horochow, my town, was also in between. So a lot of people gathered in Luck, and that's where I was, in that hospital. And I came out of the hospital, I found a lot of -- not a lot, but survivors. And I did meet the other survivor from my hometown. They say that there are more people who survived, but these were people who my father and other people in Horochow helped escape before the war started and who eventually ended up in what was then Palestine.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And as a matter of fact, when we went, my husband and I went to Israel a number of years ago, I can't remember when, the st -- these were old students of my father's and they gathered together and they had an evening dedicated to the memory of my father.

Q: Wow.

A: And that was very -- it was very -- it made me feel very good.

Q: Yeah.

A: But coming back to Luck.

Q: Before we go, can you put this on the table, cause I can hear it pretty si -- loudly. Yeah, that's fine.

A: Sorry.

Q: That's okay. So you -- you went to this meeting, people were gathering, survivors were gathering and you met this one survivor who was from your town, somebody that you knew before?

A: Well, she was -- she used to be a st -- a part time student of my father's.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And -- because my father taught at the university in Lvov, but he also taught in Horochow. There were several different schools there and there was a gymnasium. A gymnasium is a -- not a gymnasium here, like here, but it is the next step after high school. Sort of an in-between school. But anyway, I did know her family. She was actually married before the war and had a baby, but she lost her entire family, and she survived by herself. And the two of us decided to go back to my hometown, and -- to our hometown and to find out maybe some other people or our loved ones survived. And so we set out. Transportation was very difficult in those days.

Q: How far was it?

A: Well, it wa -- by car now, it would be an hour and a half, that's all. And at that time there was no car -- there were no cars available. Trains were going maybe once a week or so, so you had to hitchhike, and -- with the soldiers, with the military or with farmers in trucks, or just wagons with horses. It took us two days to get back to our -- our

hometown. And there we were not greeted very warmly. The people in our hometown -- and this was going on all over eastern Poland, I don't know about other countries, but in eastern Po -- what used to be eastern Poland, the populace was very greedy and they did get everything. All our possessions, all our material possessions ended up in their hands because when we were ordered to go into the ghetto, we could only take with us what we could carry, nothing else. And so everything else went to the neighbors and whoever got ahold of it, or -- I don't know how the Germans and the Ukrainians at that time directed and disposed of all the material goods. And then there were homes, houses. And they felt, I'm sure, the local populace, that whoever survived [indecipherable] will come and say now, I want my house back, I want my -- all my furniture back. I want my linens, my silver, my -- all sorts of stuff. And that probably -- and besides, there was still, and still is, there's great anti-Semitism in that area. And they resented our surviving and that made us feel very, very hurt. And it seemed at that point that there was a movement that -- you know how rumors start and all, and there was a movement in our -- our -- our direction for everyone to gather in Germany. Why in Germany?

Q: Let me ask you one question before --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- we go to Germany. Do you remember any -- I know it's a long time ago, but do you remember any specific encounters with people in your hometown when you went back that first time?

A: Yeah.

Q: And did you go to your house?

A: Yes.

Q: And you must have seen neighbors or people that you knew quite well --

A: Yes, yes --

Q: -- cause it had -- was only a few years --

A: -- yes, yes.

Q: -- that you were away.

A: Yes.

Q: So do you remember anything [indecipherable]

A: Yeah, the first thing I would say th -- and I mean, oh, you're Professor Perlmutter's daughter. I said yes. And, you know, and I would ask of some -- because o-of school, people who went -- I mean, kids who went to school with me, you know. And I said where is such and such, you know, Marusha Trikoska who was right -- living near us and all. And couldn't find anyone that went to school with me, or the younger people,

but the older people kept saying, oh, you are so -- my -- my dear, dear girl, you know. If only we knew what was happening, what was going on, we would have helped. Well, how could they not have known? And I mean they were right there, we were surrounded by our neighbors before we went into the ghetto and I-I mean especially in the very beginning, the Germans when they first came in, they had lists with names whom to take. And when my father was -- when they came after my father and that was right in the very beginning after they burned the synagogues and all that, and my father tried to escape through the back door, there were two Ukrainians right there, who we knew, and they wouldn't let him -- they wouldn't even let him say goodbye to us. So they knew. But that was their response; if only we knew, we would have helped. And that's -- that -- that -- I heard that all over in my neighborhood. The house, I did not go into my house.

Q: Somebody had taken it over?

A: Oh yes --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- somebody was living there. And I --

Q: It was a nice house.

A: It was a very nice house, and as a matter of fact, I mean there were still several rooms, I think two rooms that were never finished because my father had hoped that we would go to the United States and he, just at that point he didn't want to put -- we weren't rich, I mean he was an educator. And -- but the thing was that he didn't want to put any more money into the house, and he left two rooms or so unfinished, and they were still unfinished at the end of war, or when we came, you know, to -- to see. My friend, the other survivor, lived actually on the outskirts of Horochow, and it was a little village, almost like a suburb and the name of it was Skamelka. And she went back there, and she didn't find anyone very receptive, very happy about her survival. She was actually hidden by a farmer throughout the entire war. So she had one friend. What is so very puzzling to me -- it's not puzzling, it's just very disappointing to this day. I've gotten rid of the hate and the anger because it was destroying me personally, but I feel a great disappointment by the fact or from the fact that our neighbors and our town, where we co-existed in a very nice way, my father and mother and other Jewish leaders were working hand in hand with the Gentile population for the good of the entire community. And I'm not just saying that, but it's such a puzzlement to me that friends and neighbors who lived in -- in harmony, all of a sudden, overnight could turn into enemies, and not one of them helped. And I know it was dangerous to help, but when

my mother was digging ditches outside from -- you know, in the ghetto and she was trying to trade something for food, not one of our neighbors would give her anything. Strangers would, but not our neighbors. Why? Why such hate? I-I -- I cannot understand it. And I don't know -- now I was thinking maybe it's envy. It was envy because they worked hard, most of them were poor peasants, you know, and they never accomplished anything in their lives. They never became educated, they didn't stress education. And they were always working and they were poor peasants in the beginning and they were poor peasants at the end. And maybe that's why, I don't know. But anyway, we did realize that we were not welcome in Horochow and other people who went back to the neighboring villages and shtetls had the same reception as we did, and so we set out to go to Germany at --

Q: And did you find out anything about your parents or your sister in that visit?

A: Well, at that time I only fou -- I found I didn't -- nobody knew anything about my mother, but in retrospect I'm sure that she was probably killed by a bullet or so and drowned in the -- in the --

Q: River.

A: -- river. But -- they wouldn't tell me who, but my -- my sister was denounced. And there again is a long story and I don't know if I mentioned this in my oral story that I,

you know, gave with Dr. Ringelheim, but my sister was actually a musical prodigy, and she played the piano and she also played the violin extra, extra beautifully. As a matter of fact, at one time -- and that was way before the war started, my father bought a very well known, a very -- a name -- I can't remember. It was not a Stradivarius, but a very good violin for my sister because she was exceptionally -- an exceptional artist. And she played in recitals and she would have gone far because it was her love of her life. And when we went to the ghetto, I know my -- I can't remember what I said in my story, but I don't know if I even emphasized that, but my mother kept telling us to take only, I mean, just clothing and only the dearest things that we wanted to have with us. She took all the pictures. We don't have any pictures, my mother did take them and of course we lost them. But my sister did not listen to my mother, and whatever she took I don't know, but she also took her violin to the ghetto. Actually, she should have given it to the Germans because they wanted all musical instruments and all, but she wouldn't part with that violin. And what she did, she was wearing a loose dress, and she took the violin and the what do you call, the bow out of the --

Q: Case?

A: -- case, and she didn't take the case. But she took them and she tied it with something, you know, but she would not part with it. And when my mother found a

place for her with a farmer, and it was time for her to go there, she went right from work. I don't recall exactly how, but she took her violin with her. And I was told two versions, I'm not -- I'm not sure which is right. One that the -- the farmer who agreed with my mother to hide my sister -- one person, my sister, that he denounced her because he wanted the violin. And the other one was that she was denounced by someone else and she was paraded naked through the main street and then they murdered her. I don't know which is the right story, but that's what I was told by my neighbors when we came back to learn the fate of the rest of our families, and --

Q: So you found that out --

A: Yes.

Q: -- that --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- first time you went home?

A: But they wouldn't give me names. Nobody would give me names of the -- I didn't even know the name of the farmer who was hiding, or was supposed to hide my sister. I didn't know that. And I don't know if I was too stupid, I just didn't know.

Q: Right.

A: And -- but I did know the name of the guy, the farmer who was supposed to hide my mother and me, and actually I did know and I don't know if I said it in my other story, but we used to buy dairy products from that --

Q: Yes, you told that --

A: Did I say that?

Q: -- yes, and then you went there after you lost your mother --

A: Yes, I did.

Q: -- and he had your father's gold watch.

A: Yes, yeah, did I say that?

Q: Yeah. And he would only let you stay overnight.

A: One day.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, one day and then when it got dark --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- out I went. And I asked if he was still alive when I went back and they said, oh yeah, h-he was still alive. And -- but I never, when we went back, I mean, we only had an hour and a ha -- two hours they told me, and we couldn't go, but God willing, before I die -- I don't know if he's still alive, but I'm sure some of his -- you know, sons and

daughters are probably still there, and I do want to face. I want to meet them face to face and talk to them.

Q: So you went then, you and this other --

A: Sonia.

Q: Sonia, went to Germany?

A: Yes.

Q: You heard that there was going to be a meeting there, a gathering.

A: Gathering.

Q: A gathering.

A: That everyone who survived was gathered there. Why? Because there -- we were safer there, because it was -- they had the American --

Q: Sector, mm-hm.

A: -- sector. Then they had the French and the British and the Russian. And of course we wanted to go to the American sector. And we -- our journey was also an experience. Again, there was no transportation. We didn't have I.D.s, we didn't have anything, we were just, you know, stragglers. But we went by groups and we had to travel illegally. I didn't have any money or anything, but other people did have some, and we went in -- in groups. And so we ended up going from Luck to Kraków, which is the southern part

of Poland. And then from Kraków we made our way to Bratislava, which was at that time Czechoslovakia, and from there -- and people along the way, as long as it wasn't the militia, you know, were very kind. They would give us bread, and sometimes they would even bring some like hot soup or so to feed us. And from Bratislava we ended up in Vienna, where the reception wasn't very good. And then from Vienna we finally ended up in Munich. And in Munich, or right around the area of Munich, we were put in what they called DP camps, Displaced Person's camps. Now these camps were actually under the auspices, the people who formed and organized these camps, it was the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Agency. Gee, I got it out right. And they were the main people who organized these camps. It was the first experience, the first camp -- I can't remember where it was, it wasn't actually outside of Munich. I think I ended up someplace -- Salzheim, Salzheim, I think in Austria, that was my first camp. And there -- and you know, at that point everybody sort of went their own way. I lost my -- Sonia, I -- I -- you know, she ended up someplace else. But the first experience in the camp was very traumatic. We were still filthy, we had lice. We really needed a disinfection. And the way it was given to us was rather primitively. I remember we had to undress, and it du -- didn't matter if there were man, women. It was one corner there with maybe a sheet hanging in between. You had to strip completely and then they put a

hose on you. And the hose had white -- it looked like white powder. And that powder, I can still smell it. I feel it in my body. That powder was an anti what do you call it, disinfective --

Q: Sometimes they used DDT.

A: Maybe that --

Q: Sometimes they did, yeah.

A: -- it smelled like sulfur and like rotten eggs, and they kept spraying -- and I'm not exaggerating, for maybe two hours. And it seems by the time you were finished -- my hair was chopped anyway because I had so many lice and all, everybody was filthy. But they kept spraying without mercy. And I kept saying enough, enough, you know, in Yiddish or in Polish. They didn't pay any attention to you. And by the -- after your -- you were finished with that powder that penetrated every pore of your body, then they made you go and take a shower. And of course the shower was pretty cold. But it was good --

Q: To get clean.

A: -- to get clean. And I mean, we still weren't really clean and I think a week later they would line us up again and spray maybe for half an hour. And they did this several times. So by the time we came to Munich, or the ti -- by the time I came to Munich, I

was pretty decent. I mean, I -- I didn't have any lice crawling around my body and I -- I had some kind of -- they gave me a dress, and a pants -- no, I don't remember, but an outfit.

Q: And you were feeling better physically?

A: Not really.

Q: No.

A: No, no --

Q: You were --

A: -- I felt very --

Q: What was your physical condition?

A: My physical condition wasn't bad. Emotionally all of us were very distraught and very disappointed. I was very confused and I still had hopes that I would find my mother. Because they said in Horochow, nobody knew about my mother. And I couldn't face the reality and the fact that she vanished and she perished right there when I was there. I still to this day, I don't know, but it seems I'm -- I'm getting away from it, but when I walk on a street and I see someone with the build of my father or mother, they were both very tall -- though look at me, I'm a shrimp. But my father was over six foot, about six four or so, very, very tall. And my mother was very tall, almost six foot

tall. And when I see people, you know, walking from the back and it reminds me of their build, I have to rush up and look back and see, because I still think maybe it's them. Anyway, when we came to Munich and we --

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is tape one, side two, Charlene Schiff. Okay, you new -- came to Munich.

A: When I came to Munich we w-were -- at that point we were assigned to some DP camps, and there was one DP camp a little bit outside of Munich by the name of Fernwald. That's one of the big DP camps and one of the ones that I spent a lot of time in. I came there and I was assigned a space to live. A bunk, a bed, a very narrow bed, and a little like a foot locker, like a locker, and that was mine. I was given a cake of soap, the first time I think in five years. In the other camps where I was disinfected and all, they didn't have that. It was very, very, very primitive. But in Fernwald it was sort of a little more luxurious. I did get a toothbrush for the first time in five years. I got some toothpaste and as I said a -- a cake of soap, and a little rag that was my towel. And food was still rationed three times a day. It was adequate, but I was still very hungry most of the time, in the beginning. But at that time, I knew my m -- I remembered my

grandmother's address in the United States. Because all my young life I think the conversations between my parents and me were always centering around the f -- the fact, when we get to America. And anyway, I -- my grandmother's address was 231 Echo Place, Bronx 57, New York. And I wrote a letter to my grandmother and told her that I was alive and I'm looking for my parents and my sister, but I --

Q: This was your father's mother?

A: Yes, yeah. And she was a widow when she emigrated to America. I -- it didn't take very -- I mean, it wasn't right away, but I did get an answer shortly.

Q: What was her name?

A: Her name was Hana, Hana Perlmutter. And I saw pictures of her -- I mean, I knew her from pictures, because I don't know if she emigrated before I was born or after. Time before is sort of hazy to me.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I don't think I ever met her actually, in person. But I did receive an answer and I don't know who wrote it, but one of the sisters, apparently, one of my aunts wrote it. And I was informed that my grandma died during the war. Ostensibly later they told me of a broken heart because her one and only son never joined her, my father. But anyway, the sisters, the aunts got together and sent me papers and affidavits which

testified to the fact that I would not become a burden to the government and so I should be allowed to emigrate right away. And oh, when I got these papers I didn't know what -- because it was all in English and I had to, you know, go to someone who spoke it, who understood English and they, you know, translate it all to me. And I -- I was so happy, and I went to the consulate. And I can't remember, I think I had to go to Bremen, I'm not quite sure where. And there my enthusiasm and my hope were extinguished right away. Oh, that's not enough, you have to have other papers, and we have so many people who are -- who need to go before you. And we'll let you know, don't call us, we'll call you or su -- or something to that effect. So I went back to the DP camp very, very disappointed. And at that point I really didn't know what to do. I started a correspondence with my family in the United States and they kept sending new papers, and you know, thinking they need this and that. And every time I'd go to -- to Bremen, which cost, at that point cost a lot of money to go, and then I would come back with nothing accomplished. At that time I'm still -- I mean, kept looking, and I don't know if -- if anyone else was telling you this, but wherever we went, we would always have a big board or some kind of a wall, and everybody would leave little notes, paper notes, say, do you know such and such? I am from there and you know, and my name is such and such. If you have ever heard of someone, you know, please let me

know and give an address. Cause phones were not as, you know, a-available as they are here. But write here and -- and let me know. And a lot of people did get some connections from these information walls as it were -- were ba -- as it were. I did not get any information from my family, or from anyone else in my town. I know at the museum they keep saying that there were more than two survivors, but again --

Q: From your town?

A: Yes, but these people who survived, were not actually from Horochow. They were from different villages and all, because the only one who survived with me was this Sonia, which has died last year, actually.

Q: She made it to the States?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Oh, oh.

A: Oh yeah, she made it to the States. She remarried and she had two wonderful children, very accomplished. One is a -- a radiologist in California, and the daughter also has a very important job in the San Francisco area. Sonia actually, and her husband, they lived in Duluth, Minnesota because she had some family there, and that's where they started their new life. And she would have been another sh -- you know, wonderful designer because she had golden hands. I remember the first thing she made

in Luck before we left, she made me an outfit from an old military blanket. And that's what I was wearing until we came to the DP camps.

Q: When you were in that camp near Munich, far --

A: Fernwald, Fernwald.

Q: Fernwald, and going back and forth and trying to get to America, what did you do? What -- what -- wa -- how did you spend your time? Did you have friends? Did you have a boyfriend?

A: Well, yes -- no.

Q: Lot of people -- lot of people hooked up right away --

A: Yes, yes.

Q: -- and got married immediately --

A: I did -- yes --

Q: -- in those camps.

A: -- no, I did not. And I -- I -- I felt if I didn't have family in the United States, I would have probably gone to Israel. And I did get invi -- it wasn't Israel, it was Palestine at that time. I got involved with the Betar, B-e-t-a-r, it's the -- they were vini -- revisionist group and they had like a kibbutz in Fernwald. And I went there in the very beginning and I met very nice young people. Men, women and -- I mean, girls and boys. But after

they figured out -- and I -- I guess I told them, I wasn't going to pretend, that actually I was hoping to go to the United States, I couldn't be there any longer. And so I found a place -- or, they f -- assigned me another place to live. But when my efforts to join my family in -- in the United States were coming to nothing, I decided that perhaps -- I only had a third grade education -- I decided maybe I could go to school and emigrate on a student visa. And at that time I felt that -- I don't know why, but there was a DP camp by the name Benzheim and that was between Darmstadt and Frankfurt, and very close to Heidelberg. And I'm not sure, but I think my father had a lot of, you know, doctorates, and one of them, I think, was from Heidelberg. And I went to Heidelberg and I spoke German at that -- you know, so I asked them if they would take me on as a student. And they sort of looked me up and down, and where are your papers, you know, from school? And I said I have none. And they were very helpful. They gave me a tutor and they took all sorts of crazy tests. And because, I guess, I was a Jewish survivor, they accepted me. I stayed there for over a year, and thought that I would go -- emigrate on a student visa. But by that time my papers started taking on importance and I eventually ended up going on the papers that my family provided for me. But it took three years after the war before I ended up in the United States. There's one other thing that I would like to mention, and I do mention it all, you know, when I speak to schools,

and -- which I've been doing since 1985, and we'll get back to that. I -- it was very difficult for me to comprehend and to understand that even after the war, there were pogroms in Poland. Not just eastern Poland, but all over Poland. Now, the eastern part of Poland, after the war ended, became the property of the Soviet Union. So Poland was actually divided. And the Poland that I knew from before the war was no more. It was -- a third of it was chunked off to the Soviet regime. And what was going on all over Poland were pogroms, after the war. And the local populace was so resentful of our surviving that to them the only solution of getting rid of us is to kill us. And I don't know if you've ever heard of Kielce. Kielce is someplace -- my geography is not that good, but I think it's in central Poland. And Kielce was a big town, a big city and had a lot of Jews before the war. On the fourth of July, 1946, the local populace got together and murdered 42 Jewish survivors. And that was one of the most infamous pogroms. I think they mention it on the second floor in the museum, when they talk about DP camps and all. Kielce, one of the most infamous pogroms. And that was devastating to hear when we were in the DP camps, about these happenings. And this was going on all over the place in Poland. So when anybody says that now there are no Jews in Poland, and consequently there can't be any anti-Semitism, it ain't so. It's not so, and I would like to -- I wanted to make that point.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: Now back to my --

Q: Yeah.

A: I wa --

Q: So you -- you -- your paperwork came through --

A: Yes.

Q: -- eventually.

A: Eventually.

Q: And you were in -- studying near Heidelberg?

A: In Heidelberg.

Q: In Heidelberg.

A: Yeah, in the University of Heidelberg. But actually, what I was doing, I was not getting grades there. I was what do you call it, a -- what do you call when you go -- you take courses, but you're not graded?

Q: I don't know monitoring classes? I don't know.

A: Well, I mean, I -- I -- I was not -- I -- there's a special word and I can't --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- think of it now. But I mean, I -- at that point it was, you know, i-it -- I mean it -- my thought was good in the beginning but it didn't work out anyway, because I just left and -- and I went and I ca -- I mean, I did receive the word that it's -- you know, my time has come.

Q: Right.

A: And I ca -- arrived, I was -- I arrived on the Marine Flasher. That's the boat's name and there is a picture of the boat -- of the ship, you can call it boat, in the museum on the second floor.

Q: Oh.

A: I mean, it's not ba -- I'm not on the p -- in the picture, but that's the ship that I arrived in th --

Q: Where did you leave from?

A: From Bremen, Bremerhaven, yeah.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I was sick as a dog all during our journey.

Q: Seasick.

A: Seasick, oh, and I mean I -- I couldn't even keep Coke down, they ga -- nothing, it was terrible. And I'm still not a very good motion traveler, but I arrived in the United

States, June 25th, 1948, in New York. And my aunt from Columbus came to pick me up and --

Q: Can I ask you about that experience of come -- did you come in on boat during the day? Did you see New York?

A: I was so sick.

Q: You don't remember.

A: I didn't --

Q: Yeah.

A: I don't remember anything. I don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty.

Q: Mm.

A: No-Nothing, I was too sick, no. And as a matter of fact, I've ha -- I remember when I came and most of the people were being picked up in the what do you call -- the Port of ath -- of authority. And there were two young people, cause my -- my aunt had to come from Columbus to New York to go -- she had to go to her sister, one of the sisters and there -- from there she was going to go to the port of authority, or whatever you call it. But she was late. Trai -- she came by train and the train was late, or something. So the people who met me at the port was a young couple, I don't know who they were. And it was an engaged couple, another cousin Rosalie from New York, from another ci

-- another sister's daughter and her fiancé. And the fiancé, Stanley, who eventu -- I mean, married her, he recognized me because I sent them a picture of me from the DP camps. And they were looking and looking and I didn't know for whom to look and he recognized me from the picture and they picked me up and took me to my Aunt Belka's place, which was also it the Bronx someplace. And there was my aunt from Columbus. And I want to describe to you that moment because that is something I'll take to my grave. When I -- when I met -- I mean my -- my cousin Rosalie from New York who came to pick me up and Stanley, her boyfriend at th -- her fiancé. They were nice young people and they tried to talk Yiddish and it was just not very successful. And then I came to my Aunt Belka, who lived near where my grandmother lived, and -- used to live. And there was this apartment, a very small apartment. And there, when I came in, there was my aunt from Columbus, Aunt Bertha -- Brocha. And I've never in my life seen such a wa -- vision of beauty. She was very petite -- all my father's sisters are short or were short and that's the way I am. But she was blonde, she was petite. She had -- her hair was beautifully coiffed and she was wearing a green, a silk green dress. It was in the summer, obviously. She made that dress. She made all her clothes and some of mine, too. And her daughter, Rosalie's. Sh -- the dress had a V neck, with a double collar in green and the bodice was very tightly fitting and then it was a flared skirt with

piping and the we -- the west -- the waist and short sleeves, and she was wearing high heels and silk stockings, and she wore make-up. And she had blue eyes and her skin was like -- like peaches. She was beautiful. I've never seen anybody -- she was -- she looked a little bit like Zsa Zsa Gabor, only she was prettier. She was really was a beauti -- a stunning beauty. And she started to speaking to me in Yiddish, and she gave me a hug, and I'll never forget that. She was so good to me.

Q: You must have just felt so relieved and so --

A: Well, no, I didn't feel -- I felt awed --

Q: Awed.

A: -- by her. Yeah, I felt such, oh, there was such a beauty. And she's my aunt, you know? And sh-she was really so beautiful that before learning of her goodness and of her wonderful qualities otherwise, I was just awed by her physical beauty. Everyone was always awed by her physical beauty. She was an -- I should have brought a picture, because I do have pictures of her. She was probably the most beautiful creature I have ever met. I don't see movie stars who are as beautiful as she is. And she was also very smart. And she was a very special woman. And she was very good to me. She was wise and she tried her best to give me the love that I needed at that time. But her heart was also broken at that time, because she had lost her husband very shortly before I came to

the United States, and she had a younger -- a young daughter, two years younger than I, but the same birthday, the same month and same day. And then she had two married sons. The first thing they did after getting acquainted with my Aunt Brocha and my Aunt Belka, who was also a very good looking woman with dark hair and dark eyes and dark complected, but also very nice and tried --

Q: They were sisters?

A: Yes, yes. And sh-she -- th-they both -- everyone tried to be very nice to me, but what they did at first, and that hurt so much, I came, and before I came to the States, I did receive several care packages. They said they -- they sent an awful lot of them to me personally. I only got about three or four in all the years. Someone else was helping themselves to my packages. But in the packages there were cigarettes. And cigarettes were a very desire -- desired commodity. I would sa -- I wasn't doing any black market there, I guess I was. I would sell the cigarettes, I didn't smoke. And with the money I got myself outfitted to go to America. So I had leather boots up to my knees, and I had a little herringbone coat. And I had, I can't remember what kind of dress, and I had another dress in a little suitcase. My hair that time was long, and the fashion was to have ringlets. And I didn't wear any make-up or anything. What was I, 17 or so?

Q: 17 - 18?

A: But they took me into the bathroom and the first thing they did, without asking me or anything, they took off my coat, they took off my boots, they say a young girl doesn't wear that here. And they chopped off my hair.

Q: Hm. Why? You don't know. What do you think?

A: I don't know.

Q: Fashion? They wanted you to look American?

A: I wasn't asked.

Q: Yeah.

A: And all of a sudden I felt like a plucked chicken.

Q: Yeah, I bet.

A: And then I went on the train. I don't remember if it was the same day or the next day, I went on a train with my Aunt Bertha, Brocha, to go to Columbus. And that's where my new life started. When I came in, I mean she was so -- she -- she was really a ver -- an extraordinary person. And the first thing -- she was already living in a small apartment. They got rid of the house where things happened, and where she lost her husband, whom I never met, my Uncle Lieber, Leonard. But she lived in a small apartment -- well, it wasn't really small. There was a living room and a small dining

room and kitchen on one floor and then upstairs there were two bedrooms and a bath. And one bathroom was Rosalie's, one bedroom was Rosalie's, my cousin --

Q: Your cousin?

A: -- yes. Who's also -- she looks a little bit like her mom. She's blonde, blue-eyed and very pretty. And Rosalie had one bedroom and then my Aunt Brocha and I had the other bedroom, where there were two single beds. The first months were very difficult for everyone concerned, for many reasons. My aunt experienced a very tragic loss of her husband and she also lost her business that had to be built up from scratch. And then all of a sudden, I come in, in addition to her problems and -- financial and personal ones. And I myself needed love and I guess peaceful surroundings. And unfortunately that couldn't happen because of the circumstances. It was very difficult for everyone.

Q: She was working every day?

A: Yes, oh yes.

Q: So she would leave in the morning?

A: Well, she would leave and after a little while, I would go to work with her and I became sort of a cashier.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I mean, that's about the only thing I could do because I didn't speak the language.

Q: Right.

A: And I mean, numbers, you know, taking the payments, at that time, you know, people always -- not always, but they -- there were no credit cards, they had -- you bought something, you paid a down payment and then you made so many payments, you know, for a year or whatever. And I would do that in the -- in the store, in the office.

Q: [indecipherable]. Mm-hm.

A: And so we would go. And also in the very beginning, my aunt did an admirable deed. She threw me into school.

Q: Right away?

A: Right away. And I -- I didn't speak -- I spoke many other languages, but I didn't speak any English. And I cannot understand why I didn't start learning English while I was waiting to go, you know, to emigrate, but I didn't. And I came, as I said, I think the 25th of June, and after the Fourth of July holiday, I was attending night classes at Columbus Central High. And there again I was like a wild animal, because I didn't speak a word of English. And -- but you know, it was the best thing that happened to me. And I attended these classes until September and by then I went to Ohio State. And

by that time I spoke some English and again, they were very helpful. They gave me a tutor, for no money.

Q: Wow.

A: And I entered Ohio State with a third grade education.

Q: Wow.

A: It was the best thing for me, but I worked in the daytime and I attended school at night. And life was very difficult for my aunt, for me, for Rosalie, for the rest of the family.

Q: Tell me about how many aunts and cousins and what kind of -- what was the size of this family you were moving into? I mean --

A: Okay.

Q: -- were they a close family? Did they spend time together, and you know, what kind of --

A: Well --

Q: -- if you want to talk about that.

A: Well --

Q: But I'm just trying to get a sense of --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- here you are, you don't know anybody.

A: That's right. And I mean --

Q: And what were you -- what kind of world were you coming in to?

A: Well, it was like I was coming from Mars. And part of it was my fault. But I had so much pain and so much hurt. I needed caressing and I needed love and understanding. And they, my family, in return needed some guidance too. How to treat me, and -- you know, ho-how to react to me. And it didn't come freely on either side. In retrospect, it must have been terribly difficult for them, but it was also extremely difficult for me.

Q: Were you in -- now that you've had these years to look back, what was your behavior like? Were you angry, were you short with people? Were you --

A: No, I kept it all --

Q: -- what were you like, do you think?

A: -- within me, and when -- on the way to school, I would cry. When I was alone I would cry and I wasn't alone, I didn't have any privacy, none whatsoever. But that was out of my -- I -- I -- there was nothing I could do about that. And my aunt was so good and so caring --

Q: I'm sorry, we're going to have to change tapes. Hold that thought.

End of Tape One, Side B

Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is tape two, side one, Charlene Schiff. Okay, your aunt was very caring.

A: Yeah, she was so caring and she was so full of love, and yet she was so hurt herself. I didn't know -- didn't know how to comfort her, and it f -- it almost felt that I should comfort her, and it was sort of a mutual thing, but then there was my cousin Rosalie. She was hurt because I was taking away part of her mother's love, which was hers. And then all of a sudden she had to share it with a stranger, and I was a stranger in every way.

Q: And she had lost her father, too.

A: And she had just lost her father and she was a very -- she was the only chi -- girl in that family, so her father both, and her mother adored her. And she was sort of lost, too. She needed comforting. And my poor aunt was torn. And it was very, very difficult. But to answer your question about the family, as it happened, the four other sisters of my father all lived in New York. And all of -- all the f -- the four sisters were married and each one had children. I became closest with Aunt Belka's daughter, she had only one daughter, Rosalie also -- popular name in my family -- and her fiancé, Stanley. And they -- eventually they -- they did marry, I think the same year. I became close with them because they were the ones who first greeted me when I first came here. Then

there was -- there was Aunt Belka, then there was Aunt Anya -- Anna, actually. She had two children, Toby and Jeff. And then there was Aunt Ida, and she had three children, another Rosalie, Henry and Joe. So how many do we have now? Ida, Anya -- Anna -- Ida, Anna, Belka --

Q: Bertha.

A: Bertha. I'm missing one. Be five. Sarah. Aunt Sarah was the oldest of my father's sisters and she had two children, Joe and Millie. Millie is still alive. Millie must be now about 80 years old or so. She is the daughter of the oldest aunt. But I was not very close with them because they were all in New York and they did not exchange frequent visits to Columbus. So basically the family would get together for different occasions like weddings, or Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, which I never knew about because this was a new happening for me, a new experience in the United States. But I was closest with my Aunt Bertha with whom I lived, who opened her home and heart to me and gave me unconditional love. Unconditional love. And her children, she had three children. She had two sons, Marty, the oldest and Bobby. Bobby is now in L.A.. He became an engineer and migrated, I think, a year or so after I came to the States. Marty married and stayed in business with my aunt. And Rosalie was still a teenager. So I became -- and then there was -- also, there were some other relatives in Columbus. There was an

Aunt Dora, and these were -- most of them were related to my Uncle Lieber. And they were very social, and I mean that's the way the family conducted itself. I mean, there were many parties and things like that.

Q: So they kept you in their --

A: In -- yeah, but I --

Q: -- in their [indecipherable]

A: -- in the beginning I had no social life. Couldn't speak English, and Rosalie was younger than I, and she had her own group. And usually when she and her childr -- her -- her friends would come, I'd go to the basement. There was a basement in the apartment. It was difficult. It was very difficult. My studies were progressing, I did quite well. I wanted so badly to become Americanized. And I was attending school and I did very well there, and I was still, you know, working at the store part-time. And my aunt tried her best to be my friend and to be my -- my healer, in a way. But it was difficult. And then there was once -- and a -- I -- my social life was not very active, but I started -- I wasn't dating, but I saw this young man, and at that time I was very, very naïve, I didn't know anything. And I was meeting him there after school or so -- or before, because I was going in the evening. And now it comes out, I think, the only reason he dated me, he was majoring in Russian.

Q: He wanted to speak with you?

A: And for me to help him in Russian.

Q: Oh [inaudible]

A: And so that -- there was no romantic in -- you know, involvement. But there was once a party, and the party was an Ohio State party, you know. I-I was -- I did belong to Hillel, but that was not from Hillel, was just a party, and a lot of the kids who came to the party, also there were some alumni who came. And my husband had cousins in Columbus, twins. They were dentists.

Q: Your future husband.

A: My future husband.

Q: Right, okay.

A: Yeah, th -- he had cousins and they were twins and they were both dentists and they were both alumni of Ohio State. As a matter of fact, they were my family's dentists. But they came to that party because they were alumni of Ohio State, and at that time my f -- my future husband visited them, and they brought him along. And that's the way I met my husband. I was playing hard to get. My husband is older than I am, but if I would line up a million men right now, I couldn't have picked a better husband.

Q: When you were at that party and you were introduced to him by someone, right?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Did you hit it off right away --

A: No.

Q: -- or did he see something --

A: He did, he kept pursuing me and calling me and I played hard to get.

Q: For how long?

A: About three, four months. He was from New York and he came from a family, very nice family, he has one sister, and he had parents, obviously. He was in the military, he enlisted in the military when second World War started. And when the war ended, he got out. And he was sort of at loose ends, he didn't know what to do with himself. He didn't have a college education, so he started going to school and trying to see what he can do with himself. He had some kind of a job at that time in New York, but I don't know why, but he came to visit, and look around, maybe he was going to go to Ohio State or whatever. And he came to visit his cousins and it was, as they say in French [indecipherable], I guess. But once we started dating, and our first date was around Thanksgiving, we knew -- I knew that this is what I wanted and I needed. And he has been blind since then, and doesn't see any of my faults, and I'm forever grateful. He is the best thing that could have happened to me at any time, but especially then.

Q: His name?

A: Ed. But his actual name is Erwin, E-r-w-i-n, which I don't particularly like, because when I say Erwin, I think of Erwin Rommel, the German general. So everyone calls him Ed. His -- his mother was German, she came from Germany. And her parents are his -- my husband's grandfather, Grandpa Harkavy was a cigar manufacturer for the Kaiser in Germany. And they both, Baubi and Zedi Harkavy they come from the famous Harkavys who -- some of these relatives were writing -- have written a prayer book, you know, for -- you know, for services and all. But he -- Zedi Harkavy had a -- as I said, a f -- a ma -- manufactured cigars for the Kaiser. And when I was introduced to Baubi and Zedi, and my husb -- my future husband said, you know, that I came from Europe and I was a Holocaust survivor, I don't think that they realized or wanted to believe that anything could have happened in their beloved Germany.

Q: Pardon me, but were they Jewish?

A: Yes.

Q: They were Jewish.

A: Oh yes.

Q: And when did they come to the U.S.?

A: I'm not quite sure. A long time ago.

Q: Well before the war?

A: Oh yes, yes, yes.

Q: Okay.

A: But my -- my mother-in-law, may she rest in peace, had one sister and her parents, but she -- they still spoke German occasionally with her sister. And that was difficult for me, too.

Q: Yeah, I bet.

A: Yeah.

Q: But you were in Columbus?

A: Yes.

Q: And they were in New York.

A: Yes.

Q: So you weren't seeing them on a regular basis.

A: No, I wasn't, and -- but that -- by the time we decide -- not by the time, actually we thought -- we didn't set a date for the marriage, for getting married, but as it happened, my husband was -- my future husband was in the reserves at that time, and he didn't know if he was going to go back to school. He didn't know what he really wanted. But we decided to get married and we didn't set a date. And then the -- I think -- I don't

recall exactly, but I think the problem started with Korea, and he knew he was going to get called back because he was in the reserves. And so we did decide to get married. The date of our wedding was set not by me. My mother-in-law and father-in-law and my husband's grandparents on both sides, I think -- I know at least on one side, were married April 15th. And it was decided that E-Ed and I would get married April 15th. I did not have anything to contribute to that. The wedding was supposed to have been in Columbus, Ohio, my aunt was going to do that. But, at the last minute it -- the wedding took place in New York. My mother-in-law decided that Grandpa and Grandma Harkavy couldn't travel, and the wedding had to be in New York. We got married --

Q: Was your aunt able to come from Columbus?

A: Oh yes, oh yes, yes, she came and some of the family. The aunts, my father's sisters came. The wedding was in Franklin square in the s -- what is it, community center or something. And the rabbi who married us, I didn't know him from beans, he was my mother-in-law's rabbi. My husband -- at that time my husband to be didn't have much to say about that either and we got married, and that was wonderful.

Q: Was this April after you met in November?

A: Yeah.

Q: So, like six months later.

A: Yes, yes. We would have waited longer, but with the war -- it was, I guess, the Korea incident at that time. Well, sure enough, we were married April 15th, I'm not going to say what year, I'll tell you later on. And May 12th my husband was called back onto active duty. He knew he was going to be called back. And his first assignment was Germany. And that did not sit very well with me and I guess I must have been a feminist way, way back, because even then I said, I'm not going. And so I -- at that time also my studies were interrupted because I had -- I-I wanted -- I said I'm going to join you, you go. I mean, he had to go. But I'll join you when I become an American citizen. Not that I wanted to go back to Germany anyway. And so I had to wait a year, but it was easier and shorter to go to New York to become a -- a citizen than in Columbus for some reason, I don't understand why. So I went and stayed with my in-laws until I beca -- and I -- I got a job at a candy store, a chocolate store, you know, while I was waiting. And my f -- my father-in-law, may he rest in peace, was a wonderful person. He accepted -- accepted me when my husband -- my future husband introduced me. He used to call me toots. And he said, toots, welcome to the family. And a -- a -- what -- yeah, if he -- if -- if, you know, Ed decided, and what he decides is good enough for me and gave me a big bear hug and he was a doll. He lived til 103. Oh, he was a f -- a wonderful person, I loved him. He was such a wonderful person. Did

everything wrong and yet he lived til 103. He -- when he would come he would give me his orders. He liked steak and he liked a schnapps at night and he liked coffee, but actually it wasn't coffee and it wasn't half and half. It was heavy cream, about three quarters of the cup and then a little bit of coffee. And the steak, h-he said, don't trim the fat, because that's the best part. But he lived til 103.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah. A wonderful man. But anyway, I stayed with my in-laws and became an American citizen and then I went to join my husband in Germany. This time when I came back to Germany as an American citizen, it was a lot different than living in DP camps. We went with my hu --

Q: Can I ask you a question before we go back to Germany?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Just what was it like in New York, and maybe even in Ohio? Did you know other survivors and -- and how are you generally regarded or considered?

A: I was regarded as a -- like in a zoo, what do you call it, when there's something strange or different. I was not regarded as a -- a regular human being. That's --

Q: You felt like an outsider all the time.

A: Always, yes. Oh yes, I have. And yes, I --

Q: In New York too?

A: Oh, well first of all, they lived on the island, they lived in Franklin square, my in-laws, and I --

Q: I don't know where that is.

A: It's --

Q: The island meaning?

A: The island meaning Long Island.

Q: Long Island, okay.

A: Yeah. I do -- I don't know in New York really, myself. That's where they lived and all I knew, in the morning I would go into -- I think it was Hampstead or West Hampstead, to go to work. Lufts, it was called, it was a -- like a -- like Bartons or so, it was chocolates, you know. And I would go to work and then I would go back at night. I didn't go to school then or anything. Just waiting and studying for my exam, you know, to become a citizen. It's pretty -- it was pretty -- not difficult, but it was a lot. You had to learn history and -- you know. But, you know, I passed and everything was fine. So I didn't have any social life at that time either. And by that time I was married and I couldn't care less, you know? I would write to my husband and -- almost daily and so did he. And when the time came, when I became an American citizen, I went back to

Germany to join my husband. Now this is probably -- I don't know how to express it, but becoming a wife of an officer -- o-o-of an ar -- of a -- of a military person, was the most important, wonderful thing that could have happened to me when I came to the United States. Why? Because all of a sudden I was part of a group. I finally belonged. I was a wife of a military person. And the military wives and all, accept you unconditionally, without reservations, without questions, you are one of them, and they take care of you. And I did not experience anything like this until I married my husband, and until -- I mean, he wi -- became part of the military. And of course at that time it was also, ah, a nice Jewish guy, what is he doing in the military, you know? But at that point, and that's also like -- almost like a Domino effect, my husband went to Germany and he was to serve there three years and then he would be out again, because he was in the reserves. But in order, since I didn't go with him, so it was a year or so before I became a citizen, an American citizen and was going to join him, so by that time he only had two years or so. And the military isn't stupid. They said, well, if you -- if you want to bring your wife over, you have to sign up for three more years. Yeah. Or something like that, I mean I'm -- I'm not quite sure. But anyway, so my husband had to sign up for another three years to serve in order to bring me to Germany. We -- we got some housing and all, and --

Q: Where were you in Germany?

A: We were in -- outside of Munich. Ramersdorf, it's -- it's -- it was a post outside of Munich. And that -- at that time, you know, I became part of the military and we had meetings and I mean, there were so many things to do and you had to entertain and I didn't know how to boil water. And there's one thing my mother-in-law did that I really, at the time, like everything else, I didn't appreciate, but she did a very nice thing. For the first Hanukkah after we got married, my mother-in-law gave me a cookbook and rightly so, cause I didn't know, as I say, how to boil water. She was a magnificent hostess. She -- and there was a large family, they -- my father-in-law was one of 12, and my mother-in-law had a small family, but they lived again -- also, after they moved from Franklin square, they moved to a very fancy place on the island with property on the water, right on the water and she entertained beautifully, and she -- people would come and visit like, you know, Sunday morning, she'd say why -- why don't you stay for dinner. And, you know, by the time she'd look around she'd have 25 people for dinner. And she would just do it as, you know, talking to you or me. And I couldn't do anything like that. But anyway, she gave me this book and I was offended, but I really needed it because I didn't know how to cook and how to entertain. But when we did go to Germany, there were many obligations, you know, I had to entertain and -- and we

did get together, there was a lot of social activity, and I was part of a group. And even though I hated being in Germany, and I mean, there were many instances where I never let on that I spoke German. And so many -- once my husband's sister came to visit and we went in, she wanted to buy some gifts. And there's this fashionable -- they still wear them, they call them lederhosen, you know, the short -- she wanted to buy some. We went into a shop and this salesgirl, you know, was yelling back, and she says, these are Ammies, you know, Americans. How much do I -- you know, what kind of price do I quote them? And they yelled back, telling them, you know, how much to ask, cause things were not marked. And then in my purest holk-deutsch I answered that if the price is different for the Ammies, we are not buying here. And we walked out, you know. That gave me great satisfaction. And I mean, there were many instances, you know, there that they didn't like the Americans even though we, you know, with the Marshall plan and everything, we did so much for the Germans, they still resent -- that's probably why they resented us. And you would go and you would see signs, Ammie go home, you know. And that was in the 50's, but that's the way it was. But anyway, I was almo -- I mean, I was -- I was becoming a different person, and it was very good for me. And so my husband signed up for three more years and by that time we came home and we ended up in several places, I can't remember where. I should remember. But anyway,

we finally did have a son. And that was also after very difficult circumstances and this -- I call him my miracle baby, we only have one son. And our lives changed and it was wonderful. My husband was traveling quite a bit and many times he had to go on duty without me, obviously. And so I had to learn, you know, how to do things for myself and all. But life was good.

Q: What year was your son born?

A: He was born in 1956, so --

Q: And you were in the States then?

A: When he was born, yes. I had a very difficult pregnancy. And I remember the doctor who took care of me in the military. He was born at Fort Lee, Virginia and no matter where he was going to school since then, he was always referred to as the boy from the south. But the doctor who took care of me, the obstetrician was getting out of the service, and he promised me that he'll stay on, even a -- you know, if I don't deliver on the date that, you know, he was -- actually had to get out like a week before my scheduled delivery and he said he would stay on to see me through because I had a difficult pregnancy, and he did. And he said that the child would be born on September 22nd and he was born on September 22nd. But I went to the hospital three times before, you know? And I remember my husband was so excited that when th-the child finally

arrived and he was coming to the hospital, he had a box of cigars, you know, to hand out, he spilled them all over the place. But those were very good years. And then came Vietnam. And -- yeah?

Q: Your husband was still in the military?

A: Well, after the three years that he signed up, then he came back and he didn't have a college education or anything and he decided to stay on. So he signed up for another three years. And by that time it was already nine years or so, so he stayed on and he got his education too. He worked at night and got his undergraduate degree and then later on he got graduate degree, all while he was in the military. By that time he decided to make the military a career cause he s -- put in too much time into the military. And he -- actually he rose -- he became a full colonel, you know, later on. But -- and that --

Q: Let me -- we're almost out o -- on this side, let me turn this over before --

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

A: Is it on now?

Q: Yes. This is tape two, side two, interview with Charlene Schiff. It's the late 50's now, your husband has decided to make the military a full career.

A: Yes, bec --

Q: And your son is a small --

A: Boy.

Q: -- small boy.

A: Yeah.

Q: And you're where -- living where?

A: We were living -- in '56 we were living at -- living at Fort Lee, Virginia, which is just about I don't know how many miles outside -- south of Richmond, Virginia. And our son was born with some kind of a -- can I close this [inaudible]

Q: Sure, just -- just start over.

A: Well, our son was only three months old when my husband got or-orders -- received orders to go to Japan.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And the entire family was outraged. You're going to take a little baby to Japan, in the wilderness? Well anyway, we did go to Japan. Our son was only three months old. When he was born there was something a little bit -- that needed a doctor's opinion and care. And I don't know if you've ever heard of a famous doctor from Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, he became the Surgeon General. Can't remember his name, it's terrible. But he's a famous doctor and he became the Surgeon

General and now he's a -- an activist. He had a little beard, he's usually in the news. Isn't it terrible, I can't remember his name.

Q: Koop?

A: Koop. Dr. Koop, yeah. Dr. Koop was recommended to us, I mean, that we should see Dr. Koop with this little problem. And Dr. Koop, to see Dr. Koop you had to wait six to eight months to see him at that time, he was so busy. And we were at Fort Lee. Well somehow, through a friend of a friend, Dr. Koop saw us right away, because we were going to go to --

Q: Japan.

A: -- Japan. And usually, I don't know how much he o -- he charged, but being that my husband was military, and an officer, a young officer -- I mean, a junior officer, he charged us only 10 dollars to see our son. And he gave us the prognosis and he told us what to do and thank God everything turned out better than perfect.

Q: Before we go to Japan, let me ask you sort of in a summary kind of way --

A: Mm-hm?

Q: -- you've been in now -- in the States almost 10 years.

A: Yeah.

Q: Just about 10 years. You've bi --

A: Not quite, yeah.

Q: Not quite 10 years, but you're married, you have a child, you've been overseas, you --

A: Yeah.

Q: How -- an-and you said in the beginning when you first started talking about your husband how understanding he was, how comforting he was to you at such a difficult time, but those first 10 years, how do you exp -- how -- h-how was it that he was able to understand, do you think, what you needed and what you had to --

A: Because --

Q: Could he understand what you had been through?

A: Yes.

Q: And did you find it easy to talk to him --

A: Yes, yes --

Q: -- and tell him what --

A: -- yes.

Q: He knew everything --

A: Yes, yes --

Q: -- about what had happened to you?

A: -- everything --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- everything. As a matter of fact, before we became engaged, I -- we ha -- we s -- we had -- we sat up a whole night and I told him, and I said, do you still want me? And, you know, he -- he is just a very -- again, I was so lucky. He's a very special person, he has a big heart, and he -- he should have been probably a psychiatrist, I guess, because first of all he is very, very sharp, and he -- he has the understanding and he knows how to approach you and how to make you feel good about yourself. And there isn't a day t-til today that he doesn't tell me 10 times that he loves me and I am the most beautiful creature in the whole world. I said, I just hope he continues being blind for the rest of his life. And even when he was so ill -- you know, he was very ill and I don't want to go into it, but even when he was so ill, his main concern was not to be a burden to me. So, I mean he -- somehow he has the right combination of making me feel like I'm the Queen of Sheba. I mean, I-I'm -- I'm really something, I'm important and he understands what I went through, or he -- if he doesn't understand 100 percent, he tells me with his love and with his actions that he does. And he makes me -- I -- I -- I can tell him anything and everything. And he is soft and wonderful. And yet, as a soldier and all, he was hard and he was decisive and -- and he was mean when he had to be mean,

but he has never been mean to me. And I'm a very difficult person to live with, maybe part of it because of what I went through, but I -- I am difficult, and I know it. And sometimes I would start an argument, and the most frustrating thing is, he never answers. He doesn't want to argue. He doesn't want to have an argument. And a -- it's sometimes exasperating to me, but he doesn't want to argue with me. He says he had enough arguments. And, you know, so he -- he just -- he's just a very special person. And a -- a -- I've been just very, very fortunate. And I think he got most of all this from his father.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Cause his father was a very gentle person, a very loving person, a very caring person. He was one of 12. I don't know how many ended up here in the United States and all, but most of them, not all of them, have done extremely well financially. Not my father-in-law. He was actually a builder, you know. But money and my father-in-law just didn't go hand in hand. It always went away from him. I mean, he made a living, but nothing extraordinary. And yet, during the war he had a big garden and after work and all he would come -- he was always a hard worker, and he would, you know, grow all these wonderful vegetables and everything. And on Sundays the whole family, the real rich ones, you know, who could afford anything and everything would come and

load their cars with all the garden vegetables and fruits that my father-in-law worked on. And they wouldn't even say thank you. So --

Q: Were you and your husband religious? Did you --

A: Yes. There again, when I -- when the war ended, I was angry and disappointed and hateful and I lost my faith. I always say I've had one-sided di -- a one-sided dialog with God, cause he never answered. And I felt almost abandoned by God. Our background -- I -- I don't know what I said in my oral history before, but I think I probably said that we weren't kosher.

Q: You did mention that.

A: I did. I think we were kosher, but -- at home, but when we would go out, I think -- or, you know, there weren't that many restaurants, but in -- in Lvov, I mean was a big city, my father would allow us to have a sandwich with chicken, and I know it wasn't kosher, you know, so I -- you know, we were religious at home, but not as Orthodox as most other people. My father never wore a yarmulke un-unless he went to shul. So when -- now I was sort of at loose ends, I think, and when I came to Columbus, there were the rituals; Friday night, and my aunt would go to shul on Saturday -- not every Saturday -- and the holidays were observed, you know, with traditional food and

traditional whatever else there was. But when I married my husband we had a tradition -- a tradition -- we had a -- a religious mar --

Q: Service [indecipherable]

A: -- wedding, yeah. And we always belonged -- in the military we always belonged to the chapel, to the Jewish chapel. And again, it wasn't something that my husband would, you know, use the what do you call them, the Tefillin, you know, he wouldn't do that. But we preserved the traditional way of observance, I suppose. And then something happened in 1985. I don't know, am I ready for that? Not yet.

Q: Well, we're jumping ahead a little bit, but --

A: Yeah, so --

Q: -- if you think it's relevant here, it's [indecipherable]

A: Well, i-it's relevant to th -- because that's when I regained my faith --

Q: Oh right, right.

A: -- completely, yeah. But I started regaining my faith when my son was born. And also, it was very important to both of us that our son get a very thorough Jewish education. That was very important to us. And it started with the birth of our son, yeah.

Q: Mm-hm. Well, we'll come back to that later.

A: Okay.

Q: Because I think it -- it'll be interesting to talk about in -- in relation to your decision to speak out, too, in those times.

A: Yeah, i-it's all sort of --

Q: Mm-hm. Let's -- yeah. So let's go sort of chronologically --

A: So where are we now?

Q: We're -- you're going to Japan.

A: Yeah. Well, we're going to Japan.

Q: Yeah.

A: And again, I know my daughter-in-law, God bless her, sh-she's a nurse -- my -- my husband -- my husb -- my son is a doctor, so who else would he marry? A nurse. But -- because it takes a special person to understand a doctor, you know. But anyway, she -- when she sometimes hears about -- listens to our conversations now she says, I could never be a military wife. And I can see that, you know, but for me, again, I think I said it before, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. But I had to learn -- well, I didn't have to, because I was used to it, but you have to take the bitter with the sweet. Going to Japan was an -- an occasion for us very exciting, but the whole, the entire family, mine and my husband's was very much against it. I mean, they voiced their opinion. You're taking a little babela, a little baby to the wilderness, you know. Well

anyway, we set out to go to Japan. We had to go to the state of Washington, I don't know where we left from, someplace there. It was a military place and that's where we went. And what happens usually w -- in the military, and especially when you have a child, when you go overseas -- at that time we didn't have much in -- as far as furniture and all, but we had a little bit of stuff. And so when the packers came to pack us -- they call it hold luggage, hold baggage and regular baggage. The hold baggage is supposed to come right after you arrive in the new country, cause that's the stuff that you cannot do without. So what could I not do without? I needed a crib, I needed diapers, and in those days you had diaper that you had to wash, and all the things that I needed for my son, right, and a few things for us. And -- and that's the way it -- so that was our hold luggage and the rest was going to come later. When we -- well, first of all, we boarded -- is that what you call it, boarded a-a -- the ship, and right away the military has their own way. So, it was in the winter time when we went, and my husband was called to duty on the ship, to be with the troops, downst -- down there in the -- in the deep whatever you call it.

Q: In the hold, yeah.

A: In the hold, yeah. And Stephen, our son, and I, the three month old baby and I were someplace else upstair -- up in a little cabin, a very small cabin. The weather was so bad

that they had to tie the mil -- th-the little thing that they had for my son -- it wasn't really a crib, but some kind of a thing because it was going back and forth. And me, I got sick, you know, again. And my s -- my husband was down with the troops, so we had no care except for the people who, you know, care for you, th-the waiters or whatever you call them. And this was a military ship, so we had some nurses and all. By the time we got to Japan, I mean, I couldn't wait to see the ground, to feel the ground, you know, under my feet. And as a -- as we came, my husband at that time was already a specialist in petroleum, you know, all the oils and all the petroleum for the cars and for the airplanes. And at that time he was in charge of the petroleum for all Japan. And we came in, there was no housing for us. Usually there is, but there wasn't. They needed him right away. And we were assigned a house on a depot, the only house there. So there I come with my little boy in a house with no other houses around. And I was assigned a little Japanese girl to help me, like a little maid. Lovely young lady. She didn't speak English and I didn't speak Japanese. And the water had to be boiled and we had to put Clorox in it because it wasn't safe in those days. And our hold baggage didn't come. So it was a very hard first year. And my husband when he -- we finally arrived in Japan, he was called t -- mine -- to -- to be in charge of a big petroleum lab which was near Yakuska. We -- I was in Yokohama, he was in Yakuska, and then there

was a little island by itself and that's where the big lab was, and my husband had to go there. So for the first year I hardly saw him. And the thing that really scared me, I mean you learn and you do, you know, what you have to do, and the baby was being cleaned and all with water that we had to boil and we had to put Clorox in. And my little helper would come every day and we sort of, you know, communicated. And she had to go and buy me diapers in a Japanese place, and we had to get a crib from somewhere. And somehow we, you know, managed. But the funny thing was, she has never eaten white bread. [coughs]. Excuse me. She was used to a diet of rice. [coughs]. And -- sorry.

Q: It's okay.

A: And when she came to me, I mean, once a month I could write out an order and the commissary would deliver it to me. When -- you know, because my husband wasn't around. We didn't have a car or anything. So when she was introduced to white bread, I was using a loaf of bread almost daily because she just loved the white bread, which you know, was fine. And she was very anxious to come and work with me because of the white bread. Nothing else appealed to her as much as white bread. But anyway, Formikasan was her name. Very lovely young girl. We wanted to bring her back with us when our time was to come home from Japan. But to show you -- and there I'm mixing apples and oranges, but to show you what a custom they have in these countries,

in Japan, for instance, she was one, I think of six, but she was the oldest daughter, the oldest child in the family, and she wouldn't go with -- I mean, we told her, if you come with us to America, you'll have a better life, you know, you'll go out and do, you know, what you want to do. She -- by that time she learned English a little bit, and she wanted to go to America badly, but she, being the eldest in the family, sh -- it was her assignment, her task to take care of her parents. So she couldn't -- unless we would take her parents, and of course we couldn't do that. Now, coming back to Japan. For the first year, was very difficult, but our son thrived and he gained weight, and it -- you know, for me it was a full time -- full time and a half of -- of, you know, taking care of him, and without my husband's help and in a strange country without knowing the language and the customs. There was one thing that occurred at that time that is -- I think I should mention. I was introduced to something called typhoon. They have typhoons and this is like a hurricane, I-I think on a grander scale, cause you know, Japan is like an island. And anyway, we had this typhoon and I mean, you have to prepare yourself and all -- everything was closed and all. And I was still in that one house on the depot, there were no other houses. But the military, they would call me, and some of the wives would come, you know, and lend a helping hand. And there again you go, I did not feel very abandoned. But the typhoon was very, very difficult because there was no -- there is no

-- there are no basements in that area, and this is the area of Yokohama. And the house was a not a very, I guess, sturdy house. But we lived through it, was about three or four days, but in the middle of the typhoon, I did get a -- I had a telephone. I did get a telephone call from one of my compatriots who lived already in the American section, which we later did get housing and we joined. And she called me to let me know that my husband was killed in the typhoon. He was on a boat because his lab was on a little island off Yakoska. Yakoska is a port, and we always used to make fun that everything was classified, but you go to Yakoska because you know, it is a -- a -- what do you call it, port city, and on all the bars and all it says, welcome the Enterprise. In other words, Enterprise the ship is arriving. It was supposed to be classified, but they na -- knew it all. Well anyway, this friend called me to say that my husband was killed. He drown -- his little boat that he was going from the lab, he was trying to come back home, and then the boat capsized and he drowned. And for about two days I didn't know any different cause the typhoon was still raging. And of course, thank God, it was a mistake.

Q: Oh my God.

A: It happened twice actually, in -- in Japan, you know. But --

Q: Wow.

A: -- so anyway, but finally we did get housing on the -- they called it Nagishi Heights, and we moved there. It was a very nice house. Very interestingly, the house bordered a -- it was an enclosed area where mo -- not mostly, where all the American military and their wives lived. And the house was a substantial house, but it bordered a Japanese cemetery. And every day you'd go to the living room window, look out and you would see from the fences and all, eyes staring at you, and that was -- these were the Japanese people, they were just curious. At -- in the cem -- at the cemetery, looking into our windows. But it was a very interesting experience being in Japan.

Q: Let me ask you a question about that. Was there any sense of irony for you to be in Japan as an American, as the conqueror of Japan --

A: Yes.

Q: -- when you had been a Holocaust survivor, and on the --

A: You're very perceptive.

Q: -- receiving end --

A: Yes.

Q: -- of that experience.

A: Yeah, yes.

Q: What was that -- it must have been --

A: Was a good feeling. It was of -- I cannot describe it, but I was -- and I am, I guess, I -- I was a very good military wife, and I tried to do everything by the book. And just to give you an example even then, I mean, I felt empowered. I did. But of course there was always the worry about your husband, you know, and I mean he had to fly out to different countries and all and I -- and that's the army, the military life is that there are many separations. But the one thing I remember -- and I mean, we were told you have to give so many cocktail parties and all that. And I remember my first party when we moved to Nagishi Heights. It was to be a part -- I can't remember what our holiday was or whatever. And I said, oh yes, I'll give a party. At that time I've learned how to cook and how to serve the right things, but I liked to have the wives also. Because the Japanese businessmen, and this -- these were mostly the people who had all these oil factories -- I mean, not the factories, what do you call it?

Q: Refineries.

A: The refineries. And I mean he -- th-these are the -- the highfalutin people in Japan.

Q: Very wealthy families.

A: Yes, very wealthy families. And I said, I will not invite them unless I get permission to invite the wives. And this was unheard of in Japan because their system is where the wife goes three steps behind, even today. And I mean, I felt I had my rights, and I felt

empowered to do that. And I said, I'm an American and in our society, the man come with their spouses. And they allowed me to do that. And I -- I -- I would say that I probably established the first of -- I guess, way of including the wives. Because when we went to the Japanese affairs, there were never any wives. There were Geisha girls, who were assigned to entertain the men and the women, because we were invited. And I mean, we would have a Geisha, and I mean she would -- I mean, it was clean fun, but very sexist. I mean, in the sense that the wife is subservient and the Geisha is supposed to amuse me, you know, with some stupid things. It was very -- I'm sorry. No, but th-the set-up was that the wife did not count. And the Americans -- they had to suffer and they had to invite the Americans -- they didn't have to, but they did. And they were sort of tolerated. That's the way I felt with the Japanese. But when I invited the wives, the spouses of these business people, I'll tell you, every one of them came. They were dressed in their most beautiful kimonos, th-their outfits, their national, you know, outfits are magnificent. Each one brought an exquisite gift. And they were so thankful. And from then on, any time I entertained, wives were always included, and they knew it. And other women took the lead from my lead, and they started doing the same thing. And I felt very empowered, very good about what I accomplished there. And the wives were elegant and lovely and dainty and very, very grateful. And th -- we've kept in

touch with quite a few of them, because to them it was just an -- a wonderful treat. We were invited once to the -- to Emperor Hirohito's birthday party, and that was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

Q: In Tokyo?

A: Yeah, to -- Yokohama and T-Tokyo is not very far from Yokohama. And I have made a policy -- or I mean, I don't know if it's because of my experiences but when we go overseas or when we go anyplace, a lot of Americans live in an American ghetto. They live in their assigned housing. They go and exchange parties or play bridge, you know, which, you know, we don't, for many reasons. But they stick to their own. And I feel that's wrong. When you go someplace and -- where you're assigned, you are a representative, you're an ambassador of your country to the country that you are visiting, because that's all you're doing, you're vi -- you are a visitor, and you should show your best side. And we have tried to absorb the culture, to go to Kabuki, to go to the museums, to mingle with the -- with the Japanese. And I felt that it was, in a way your mind doesn't become stagnant and you acquire an awful lot of knowledge, and you enjoyed a -- a -- you know, just -- as well. So there are many, many, you know, positive things that come from living oversi -- overseas, but you have to be willing to give of yourself and to represent your country in the best way possible.

Q: Do you think that your desire to mingle with local people was also s -- driven in part by your experience as a survivor, where you were ghettoized, and you had suffered the consequences of that kind of thinking before, and so you were feeling some insistence on people of different cultures --

A: Of di -- maybe so, I never --

Q: -- mingling -- it wasn't conscious then.

A: Yeah, I don't think it was conscious, but you have a very good point, and boy are you perceptive. Yeah, I -- I am sure that had some -- I've always been surround -- I wanted to surround myself with people. Now, as my -- you know, as I'm getting older, in the golden years, I enjoy solitude. I am never bored with myself, I don't have enough time to myself. But in those days, yes, it was wonderful to be surrounded by people and especially of a different culture and to learn. And I mean, I knew the background, I knew the history and it's always, you know, maybe I didn't know as much, but I knew, I mean they -- they were the perpetrators and they were very cruel and th-then I learned about the Shanghai Jews, who survived in Shanghai.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But the psyche of a Japanese is --

End of Tape Two, Side B

Beginning Tape Three, Side A

A: -- about Japan.

Q: [indecipherable] about Japan. This is tape three, side one, of Charlene Schiff. You were talking about the psyche of the Japanese.

A: They -- they're very inscrutable, is there such a word? You never know what they really think. They always have a smile on their face, and they would say yes, they -- they hate to say no. It's like yes, we have no bananas. And it's true. But we have made some wonderful friendships there. My husband had a very loyal crew. He needed to depend a lot on the Japanese because -- and this was all classified stuff, with the testing of all the jet fuels and all. And he had a very responsible job there. And we've made many friends among the military. And as a matter of fact, that's where I first took up Chinese cooking. I -- Chinese, and that's Japan. What was happening, there were two Benedictine sisters in Tokyo, and they were stranded during the war. They came from China, they were working in China, Americans. And they were stranded in Japan with no income, no way of making a livelihood. And so they opened a school for the military, for the -- all the military in -- in the area, and started teaching Chinese cooking. And these schools became so famous that all the embassy people, you know, wanted to -- it wa -- it took about a year or so to go through the course. I had to wait a

full year to be able to f -- you know, to enroll. And they came out with a little booklet of -- well, a little cookbook where they adapted the Chinese recipes to American consumption. And they were so much fun and it was a fantastic experience. For a whole year I took this cooking course. And they -- they -- we corresponded until they passed on. But it was very well known in the embassy and all, all the wives were just waiting, you know, to attend this. Then I also took cor -- courses in flower arranging. I tried to, you know, get more culture, what have you.

Q: Ikebana.

A: Ikebana, that's right. And I was learning, and that I took for three years. And I passed, now I have a Japanese professional name, and I became an instructor, and don't ask me to arrange two flowers now, cause I don't know how. But I mean, the lines and all, it's very, very precise, and very exact. And I attended these classes for three years and I came back home and that all of a sudden -- I did know that you don't need a dozen roses to make an arrangements, can make it -- an arrangement, you can make it with one rose. And I enjoyed that very much. We attended kabuki and we traveled quite a bit. It was a good time, yes.

Q: What were the years that you were in Japan?

A: It was '56 when my son was born, til '60.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Yeah.

Q: And then -- let me ask you one thing about Japan. Was your being a survivor an issue in any way with anyone? With you, or with any of the other Americans that you knew --

A: No.

Q: -- or with the Japanese? And was that okay --

A: The Japanese couldn't -- wouldn't know, no.

Q: And was that okay with you, was it --

A: Yes.

Q: -- [indecipherable] knew --

A: No, actually, when I married my husband it seems like I went into a different world, and I had no connection with survivors, not at all. And I mean, I didn't know anyone. I -- I did keep in touch with my friend Sonya in Duluth and -- and of course with my family in Columbus and New York. But no, I had no connection with any other survivors. And you know what? That was good --

Q: You think?

A: -- at that time, yes. I needed that. I -- when I married my husband I felt that -- and I mean when I came here, I wanted to become Americanized overnight. And that desire didn't leave me and when I met my husband and when we married, I wanted him to be proud of me and not to be referred as the greener. And you know what a greener means? A greener means the -- the -- when you're green means your -- you're a -- a stranger.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And they always say the greener couzina. The couzina's like a cousin. And in Yiddish it's the greener couzina, it means the -- the stranger who doesn't know how to pick up a fork, you know. I -- I wanted to become Americanized and I didn't feel that until I became Mrs. Erwin H. Schiff. And I-I don't know, but in Japan I don't think -- if anyone was aware of it, they didn't question it, they didn't treat me any differently. I was one -- we did make friendship a lo -- a lot of friends. We met friends in Japan and we have one couple, the husband just died in -- suddenly. But we've been friends since Japan and they are Jewish. He was a lawyer and he had open heart surgery. The surgery was a success, then he got an infection, you know, what do you call it, that horrible thing, and he died. And -- and his wife and my husband and I are still dear friends and we keep in touch almost on a daily basis. She lives part-time here and part-time in

Newport, Rhode Island. But -- and we met in Japan. So we were active there in the chapel, in the Jewish chapel and we had several Bar Mitzvahs and all that took place there. So -- but nobody ever made an issue of where I come from. I was -- what was he at that time, I think a major -- Major Schiff's wife, Charlene.

Q: Well, military is --

A: Militar --

Q: -- an equalizer.

A: That's right, the great equalizer. And I mean, sometimes you wonder how things happen. I mean, a Jewish boy, they kept saying, a Jewish boy going th-the military, making a career out of it? It's unheard of. And -- and coming ba -- well no, we haven't reached Vietnam yet, have we?

Q: No [indecipherable]

A: Not yet. But yes, it was the great equalizer for me, and it was the best thing that could have happened to me. My daughter-in-law, as I said, said she could have never been a military wife. But I mean, the hardship that come -- th-that -- the hardships that come with -- with being in the military are many. And I mean, the moving around -- our son was in 17 different schools before he attended high school.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah, he -- didn't hurt him one bit. He entered he -- he -- his -- he went to Princeton. Then, you know, he went to medical school. Did medical school in three years, then trained in har -- at Harvard for his specialty, urology for seven years. And now, you know, is in private practice, and teaches part time in Brown. And when he got out from Harvard he was in -- at Yale as a -- on the staff and faculty of the medical school. So it didn't hurt him, not at all. But you mix the bitter with the sweet, and it's an experience. And it takes a special person to be a good army -- a m -- a military wife. And in the early years it seemed that the wife doesn't have much to say. You go where the husband has to si -- to -- to go. And that is still true. But yet, you can leave your mark. You can do things that you want to do. When I established this precedent, I mean, it wasn't happening until then that the wives, the Japanese wives were invited to cocktail parties and all. It was a fantastic achievement and I'm still proud of it.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So, you know, there are pros and cons and --

Q: Yeah.

A: -- for me it was good.

Q: Yeah. So you came back to this -- did you come stateside in 1960 --

A: Yeah, we came back to the States --

Q: -- and this is -- you -- you had --

A: -- yeah. 1961.

Q: -- all this is -- you mentioned the era of Vietnam.

A: Yeah, well Ed, at that time I think he was assigned to Fort Lee again. No, I think he was assigned not -- yes -- no, to the Pentagon. But at the Pentagon he was only, I think, a year. And then we went to Fort Lee again. And then -- I can't remember exactly what year -- we were active at Fort Lee, that's the quartermaster headquarters. And my husband was still with petroleum and all, but he was at Fort Lee, you know, assigned permanently to Fort Lee, Virginia, but he spent an awful lot of time at the pentagon. So again I -- he'd go for two weeks and come back maybe for three days. And so it was, you know, that I was there for my s -- for our son. We were very much involved there, at Fort Lee with the Jewish chapel. And that's where we met a very wonderful man, Rabbi Elster. Rabbi Elster was serving the military, his -- what was it, two or three years, and then was going to get out and be a rabbi in the civilian world. We became fast friends, Rabbi Elster and Shulamit Elster, and now they have three married kids. But our friendship started at Fort Lee. My husband was at Fort Lee and then he got orders for Vietnam. I think it was 1964, and between Fort Lee and -- and the Pentagon, you know, and some other places that he would go like for six weeks and come back.

When he was assigned to Vietnam the first time, in 1965, was the beginning of our involvement. Well, the military involvement. I think they had advisors and all earlier. But in 1965 my husband was called on to go to Vietnam. He was very much against our involvement in Vietnam, and when he got -- but he was in the military and they ordered him, so he went. He expressed his, I guess his views to the higher ups, and he wasn't the only one, because he said, this is a kind of war that we cannot win, because we are trained to conduct a -- a re -- what do you call it, a -- a regular war, and these people are not terrorists, but they are guerillas and they were fighting the war in Vietnam from the underground. They had th -- we went to Vietnam just five years ago, and I saw these tunnels and all. They were fighting everything from the underground. And my husband and several -- and other people, the younger, the younger officers said this is ki -- the kind of war it cannot be won. But of course, they didn't listen to them. But, when my husband got orders to Vietnam, I decided in my infinite wisdom -- I'm being sarcastic -- to go to Columbus, to stay in Columbus. Why? Because I had family there, my aunt was still there. I -- so I rented an apartment near where she lived, and enrolled my son, at that time I think he was in third grade, and he had his cousins there, you know. I say cousins, but they were my cousins, but he counted them as his cousins. And we lived the year that my husband was in Vietnam in Columbus, Ohio. Was a miserable year.

Why? Everybody that I knew and everybody who knew me was always asking, what is your husband doing in Vietnam? Why didn't he go to Canada?

Q: Oh.

A: Because some of these people went to Canada. And I even got into a fight at an airpor -- at the airport. And there were some young people picketing, you know, and protesting the war. And at that time I felt my husband is there, I didn't know the situation, but his country, right or wrong. And he's serving his country, he's there. And I didn't like the way they propr -- they were protesting and screaming, you know, and cursing and all, and I slapped one guy in the face. I almost ended up in jail. But that was my experience you know, in -- in Columbus. It was not a good experience. And after that, when my husband came back -- and that -- that first year was also very -- I did get a call that my husband was killed and that was -- he was assigned again with petroleum. All the oils and the jet fuels and all for -- for the entire area. And at that time he -- the headquarters were in Saigon and they were -- there was a big inter -- there was a -- a -- a big explosion, it was all over the news, and in a great hotel -- I forgot the name of the hotel, and a lot of Americans lost their lives. As it was, my husband had a meeting at that ho -- in that hotel with some generals and all, I don't know what it was, and he wrote me daily, and -- that first year that he was in Vietnam. And he told me he was

going to be, you know, in Saint Regis, I think, hotel on Tuesday of whatever. That -- the letters would go about a week or so, and that Tuesday when he was supposed to be there, they had a big ex -- they bombed the -- the guerillas, the hotel and -- and you know, there were a lot of casualties. And I called the Red Cross to find out what was happening, and they -- that's why I'll never give another penny to the Red Cross -- and they called me back that my husband was killed. And as it happened, my husband was in the hotel and left five minutes before the explosion. So, you know, lucky for me and for him. When he came back from Vietnam he was smoking something like two packs of cigarettes a day. He was, I think, bone -- skin and bone and his hands were shaking. He -- he was a mess. Very -- I mean, physically very frail. He was a young man at that time. And it wa -- it was very sad to watch. And then when he came, with the reception he got in Columbus was just absolutely dem-demoralizing. His next orders were to work with the chiefs of staff and the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. And so he ended up working in the Pentagon, and we bought our first and only modest house in Springfield, Virginia, which is a suburb here. And that was the first time that our Stephen, our son, went to the same school two years in a row. And he worked in -- in the Pentagon. I never saw him because most of the time the hours were miserable. But he kept on saying that, you know, he and other young -- they called them the young

Turks -- kept saying that Vietnam is something we should never have gotten involved in. Well, lo and behold, in 1969 he got orders to go back to Vietnam to the same petroleum job. But this time he was going to Play Ku, which is the mountainous area. And he -- this time he had his own chopper and he had to supply the fuels not just for Vietnam, but for the entire area of all the countries around, a very big job. And he had to -- actually had to build the pipes and all that go. And there again, he spent a -- a year, that was -- had many close calls. Once the -- the chopper that he was in -- he had a pilot, he didn't pilot it himself, but it was -- there was an explosion. All the buttons on his shirt were ripped off and he came out with a s -- without a scratch. And there were several -- and then, I mean, he worked so hard. And it wa -- and then they had to go into Cambodia, which was a classified thing, I wasn't supposed to know about it, and all that. Finally, thank God, he came back. He came back and he was assigned -- and again, he had several very big arguments with his superiors. He, and other young men, officers. And they were, of course they weren't listened to. And he ended up again at the Pentagon. And at that time they promised him a star. He was going to become a general if he would give up his ideas about Vietnam. He couldn't do that. And that's when he retired. In a way as a protest, you know. And then he went to work, you know, different places and all. And at that time, after he retired, we decided to make our home

here, to stay where we -- we still had the little house, and our son was a big man on campus in high school here. And he went to work for a -- an association, my husband. And at that time, in 1983, I think we had the first Holocaust survivors meeting here in Washington, and I attended it. Meanwhile, and then at -- this is again not correct chronologically, before my husband went for the second time to Vietnam, we belonged to Fort Belvoir, which is a military group here, and there was a Jewish chapel and a chaplain. We did get a call from our old friend, Rabbi Elster, who said that he was coming to take over the pulpit at Agudas Achim in Alexandria. And of course, when we heard that, we joined Agudas Achim and we are still members today. But Rabbi Elster's not there any more. But at that time we refreshed -- I mean, we -- we -- we were such good friends to begin with, it was wonderful to be again with them, with the Elsters, and he became our rabbi. And we belonged to Agudas Achim and we still belong to Fort Belvoir.

Q: Before we get to the 1983 meeting, let me ask you a question and a half.

A: Yeah?

Q: Your son was in high school --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- around in the 70's when your husband left the military and you were living --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- in this area, and stabilized.

A: Yes

Q: [indecipherable] stable, more stable. You were looking around [indecipherable]

A: Yeah, yes. The first time in the same place for more than a year or two.

Q: And you had this long friendship with this rabbi --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- who later becomes, I know, instrumental in your own decision to --

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: -- become active. But I want to know if -- h-how -- I don't even know how to ask it. Your hap -- your being a survivor, was this something that you had ex -- talked to your son about up until that time? Did he know, and how did you tell him, and was that -- or was it an issue? Di -- was it difficult to tell him, was it a -- a sensitive --

A: No. It was an issue for the simple reason that I was very ill from the time he was very little. And I had many physical problems and I -- but a --

Q: Relating to your experience --

A: Probably everything related, you know, I have ulcers, I had other very serious progre -- problems. And that was one reason that he wanted to become a doctor from the time

he was four years of age, cause mommy was always sick. And mommy was sick -- and I mean, even in spite of her being sick, she always did everything and nobody really knew that much, but I had an awful lot of sickness. But -- so that was not much of a problem. He knew. And I don't know how much he comprehended when he was very young, but he always, when -- when my husband went to Vietnam the first time, he says, I'm going to be the man of the family, I'll take care of Mommy. And he did. He -- he was a wonderful boy from the very beginning. We never had any problems with him. He never smoked, he never drank, he never -- he was never on drugs, he was always just a straight arrow. And the thing -- it must have been very difficult on him. I -- his father was a wonderful father and is a wonderful, very even tempered and all. I was the explosive one. I was the one who demanded -- demanded more than perfection, because -- in retrospect, I didn't realize then, but in retrospect I think I tried to live my youth through my son.

Q: Which had been robbed from you.

A: Yes. But he had to be more perfect than perfect. He had to have straight A's, and he had to take all advanced courses, and he had to be the big man on campus. And he didn't live up to one -- he wa -- he never had straight A's even in high school, but yet, he was the one -- the only one who was accepted at sprin -- to Princeton. He -- he was a

wonderful student, but he was so busy with other things too, that he just didn't get straight A's. I think he had two B's or so. But the valedictorian from the high school didn't get into Princeton, but Stephen did. Has a wonderful personality and he -- he did everything beautifully. He -- he would make a wonderful lawyer, he would make a wonderful politician. He is just good with people, because he was always with people and he always had to face new friends because we moved so much. And it did -- it did come and I mean it di -- it was good for him. And he is very cosmopolitan, he's very sophisticated, and he feels good and felt good about himself. I instilled on him that there is nothing he cannot do. I told him, you are better than anybody else, and I was a little bit too demanding. So he knew all the things; as time progressed I would tell him stories, and he was very -- hi-his -- the way he received it was very adult like, very adult like. And he was, I guess, used to being sort of the head of the family when my husband wasn't there. So he said, don't worry, Mommy, I'll take care of you, I'll take care of you. And he did. He was very good and he was -- we had an awful -- even though when I -- the second time when my husband was in Vietnam, I already lived here in Springfield in our little house. And there were a lot of nasty things that were going on. I would get phone calls in the middle of the night, your husband is in Vietnam, we know you're alone, you know. And I would call the police and they would

say I have to -- they cannot do anything unless they are there. We installed a -- what do you call it, a --

Q: Security --

A: -- a security thing and they tried to break in twice. And Stephen was always just with a -- you know, a -- a bat in his hand, you know, he was going to take care of. So he was very mature for his age and nothing surprised him any more. And he's also -- he's a little bit like his father, he's a wonderful son and I think he's a wonderful husband and a wonderful father. Of course, I'm being prejudiced at this point, but he really is a very good person. He -- he is a -- a urologic surgeon and he lives now in provident -- outside Providence, Rhode, Island, and it's a very poor state and there are many people that he treats pro bono, because they don't have insurance, what is he gonna do? And -- but anyway, he --

Q: We finished this side.

A: Okay.

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is tape three, side two of Charlene Schiff.

A: Actually, what I didn't say before, I said I didn't have any contact with survivors. I did keep in touch with one survivor who -- whom I met in a DP ca -- in the Benzheim DP camp, and I still keep in touch with her, off and on. She survived with her mother, and we kept in touch off and on. Now, I did see her last year, and I don't know if I should even say it, but all of a sudden I look at her -- her mother died since and she has remar -- she married and she just lost her husband, she has three children. She was a wonderful girl and we were very like, you know, real friends. And now when I came -- they live in flor -- she lives in Florida, I found I have nothing in common with her except the fact that we were in the DP camp together, in the same DP camp. And I don't know if this is a strange occurrence but all of a sudden -- interestingly enough, when we were in DP camps we didn't discuss our pasts. Most of us did not discuss our past. I didn't even know -- I knew that she survived, I think, in Russia, i-in the Soviet Union, she was not in, you know, in -- in Hitler's -- under Hitler's regime. But when I met her last year, we had nothing in common. How can that happen? And, I mean, it was nice to see her and all, but nothing in common. But -- do we go back to what, to '83?

Q: Well, we were talking ab -- you were saying about -- I had asked you about your son and how much he knew and how -- what -- you know, what -- how you transferred all of that --

A: To him. Well --

Q: -- history, and -- and was it important -- obviously it was important to you to --

A: Yes, yes.

Q: -- that he knew. I mean, that's not always the case, I th --

A: Yes, and he was interested.

Q: Yeah.

A: He was very interested, and he -- he a-again, he is a very sweet boy and -- and was a sweet boy and he gave me his love and his caring and was very demonst -- it -- it was demonstrated in a very obvious way, and that was very nice. And he -- he d -- I think -- I don't know if he understood everything, but it was given to him -- I -- I gave it to him gradually. And it wasn't shocking to him, and he -- because he -- he says, well, that's why you've been so ill. And it made a lot of sense to him. And then in 90 -- 1992, I think, I can't remember and I shouldn't jump ahead, but just to make a point, we had one of our annual gatherings, the child survivors. We consider ourselves a separate group, not all survivors, but the child survivors. And we, for the first time we organized

a -- we had a second generation panel, and my son came. At that time he was already married. And he was the leader of the second generation. And everyone in that second generation, and th-that's another story, tried to blame the parents for their short -- for their shortcomings or for their not realizing their dreams or so, because their parents were survivors. And Stephen said that he and I got along and he accepted me the way I was because I am his mother. But he didn't blame the Holocaust for my what do you call it? Peculiarities or for my idiosyncrasies. I was his mother, and as his mother he loved me the way I am. And that was his main argument, that it didn't have anything to do with being a survivor. He accepted me the way I was. He didn't blame it on the Holocaust or on my being a survivor, why I had temper tantrums, why I yelled at him, why I wanted him to be better than perfect. He felt that's the way I am and that's what I wanted from him. And I don't know, but maybe it was good. Was a very healthy, it seems to me, attitude. And now he's very interested. He doesn't have much time to be involved with second generation, but like two months from now or I think this early spring, I'm being invited by my grandsons class to speak about my experiences, and he'll introduce me. And that is a day that I can't wait for. And my grandson does not know much. He does, but he is now 11 and when Stephen was 11 he knew a lot more. My grandson knows when I come, or when I went t -- he was younger, and even now

he says, Nana, would you sing me these songs that are not in English? Lullabies or so. And you know -- and he knows a little bit, the older one, but not as much as my son did.

Q: Hm. That's interesting. It's all --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- it's always interesting to me how people choose to tell the next generation.

A: Yeah.

Q: When they do it, how they do it.

A: Yeah.

Q: It's always different with every person. But it sounds like for you, you never questioned that you should.

A: No, no.

Q: All along. It was never choice, you just --

A: Never questioned, only had one [indecipherable] all basket -- all eggs in one basket, and he needed to know.

Q: Yeah.

A: He -- and when he was very young, he says how come everybody has two sets of grandparents and I only have one? You know. And that's the way it started, you know, but I tried to make it not so that he would have nightmares, you know, and make it

more palatable, I don't know. And it was a way of life, that's the way -- just like his father was a military man, and there were no questions, that's they way it was.

Q: And -- and one more question before we get to 1983 and take a little break. It seems like from what you're saying that from the time you came to the U.S. in the late 40's, until this period after your husband came back from Vietnam, you had so many travels, so many different experiences, so much -- you know, in raising a son. But it sounds like between the lines that yo -- in a way, that you have healed.

A: Well --

Q: Part of you has -- is found a place, found a life --

A: -- come -- yes, yes.

Q: -- and made a happy and safe place for yourself.

A: Well, and I'll tell you, I have never been nosh -- they o -- this -- in schools I get many questions -- I mean, many schools are -- are -- are you being seen by a psychiatrist, did you have what do you call it? When you go through years of --

Q: Therapy.

A: -- therapy. I've never seen a psychiatrist, I've never gone through therapy. I think my healing came from my family, from my husband and my son. And my aunt. No matter what, may she rest in peace, she was an angel. I really miss her so much. She --

she and I understood each other finally, and I -- I don't know if I appreciated her as much when I first came to this country as she deserved to be appreciated, but I loved her with all my heart, and she deserved that love.

Q: Isn't it amazing how one person can make a difference in a life?

A: Oh yes, yes. Mm-hm.

Q: Yeah.

A: When I came here, I mean, my mother was a teacher by profession, but she wasn't teaching. I don't remember her ever teaching. She did an awful lot of philanthropic things in our town and as a matter of fact, she organized camps for poor children, Jewish children and Gentile chil -- children. And I mean not she alone, but she was always the head of it. And so she wasn't, you know, sitting at home and all, but we always had a lot of quality time, and I didn't learn how to cook and all, who would ever think? But my mother set a beautiful table, and we always had a lot of people, was an open house, people were coming and going. And she -- and I always -- I remember like for Passover or so, I mean, there was crystal and there was silver, and the linen tablecloths and china. And I've always missed that, and I remember even in the forest, I would sort of daydream, gosh, when I grow up, Momma will come and show me how to set a pretty table. And then when I came to the States, to the United States, my aunt, I

don't know what it was, but she set a beautiful table, even though that her heart was crying within her, but the holidays, Thanksgiving and Passover, the little time that we spent that I was there, she set a beautiful table with linens and crystal and I told her, that reminds me of home.

Q: Mm.

A: And to me even now -- we live in an apartment and usually it's all right, now it's a mess, but I don't entertain any more, nobody does. But nothing gives me greater pleasure than to set a pretty table. And it somehow brings me closer to my past. And my daughter-in-law, I mean, they entertain quite a bit, and she does -- she sets a table magnificently. And that endears her to me greatly. And it means a lot. I don't know, maybe because it brings memories of my past. But I have come -- I don't know, I've not made peace, because I still have nightmares and awful things, but I think I've -- I have probably healed, cause I couldn't have survived if tha -- if I hadn't. And I -- I -- my attitude, I have a good attitude, because I've been very lucky, I have a good man. And I just hope he'll be here forever for me, selfishly. And I have a good son, we have two wonderful gray -- grandchildren. And only health permitting, you know. My husband is on a three months schedule and every three months when he goes back, my

heart skips a beat. But life goes on and you have to smile and put on a happy face and be happy, even if it's pretending.

Q: Let's take a break now and get something to eat. [tape break]. Here we are, we're back from a break. We were going to talk now about your decision in the early 80's to speak out. You mentioned before we took a break that there was a survivor's conference or a gathering of some sort that you went to?

A: Yeah, yes.

Q: Why don't you tell me about that?

A: Well, yeah it was -- I think it was in 1983, and at that time my husband was out of the military, he had a new career, our son was in school, and -- already in college, I guess. And I was settled. In other words, we didn't have to move again like in a year or so. And all of a su -- not all of a sudden, but I was thinking it was time to try and reach out and get in touch with some -- to get a relationship with some other survivors, because I did not have it, traveling around, you know, all over the world, you know, being in the military.

Q: And did you feel the need for it, or --

A: Yes. I felt -- no, I felt the need for -- I -- I didn't feel the need for it, but I felt it was time. It was time because I had no relationship with anyone -- with survivors, per se,

and the only one was my girlfriend from Benzheim DP, with whom I corresponded, and she came, as a matter of fact, to visit us once with her family, in Springfield, when we still lived in Springfield. She did get married, like you were mentioning, in -- at the DP camp, in Benzheim. She married a -- a middle -- an older -- mostly it used to be, you know, older men. She married a very nice, very fine fellow, and he had a brother, and af -- the brother had also a family and they all -- they all emigrated to America together. And my friend's -- Rya is her name -- Rya's mother was still alive. And all of them ended up in the United States, I think about a year before I did. How they were able to do that, I don't know, but sh-she was the only one I kept in touch with. And at that time it wasn't that I felt the need for it, I just felt it was time to get in touch in with other survivors. Maybe it was a need, I don't know, but I felt it was time because I was in one place and I wasn't going to go overseas again. And so when the time came, as it was, there was going to be, I think the first gathering of survivors in Washington, D.C., and I think it was 1983, and I attended it. It was not quite a week, but it was more than one day, I don't recall exactly. And there I met many new people, and some whom I have known from the DP camps, and it was nice to be together. It was a rather emotional and solemn gathering. And most of the people that I knew have settled and have also started their own lives and were successful in becoming Americanized. After that meeting,

which was several days, it lasted several days, I remember one thing very distinctly, I met -- forgot his first name, Rosenzaft is his name, he is the -- the was at that time, I think, the first second generation activist. And he made a very emotional and very memorable speech at that meeting, and he was telling us -- he was -- he was born in Bergen-Belsen, where his parents ended up at the end of the war. And when they said, I was born in Bergen-Belsen, people said, oh in a deep -- in a concentration camp? No, at that time it was a DP camp. But he was born in that camp, and he became very active and he still is. I forgot his first name, but you know, that I remember from that meeting. And after that meeting, things were quiet, but it's sort of like -- it gave me a little seed in my mind. I knew I had to do something, I didn't know what, and I didn't know what I was ready to do. At that point we did belong to Agudas Achim and our friend Shelly Elster the rabbi, was still with us. And I went to him and I said, I want to do something to honor the memory of all the ones, the millions who perished in the Holocaust. And he looked at me and right away he says, why don't you become a Bat Mitzvah? You know what a Bat Mitzvah is, I mean, here. I said, oh, but I don't know. And Hebrew, I don't know any prayers. I mean, you know, I-I was really an ignoramus when it came to, you know, Hebrew reading, and chanting and all that. He says, I'll teach you. That was, I think, in January. In April that day -- that year, 1985, was Yom HaShoah, the you

know, observance. And they started observing -- at that time they did already observe it at the rotunda, you know, in the Capitol. But our synagogue usually had sort of a religious school, you know, commemoration or something, not as elaborate and all, but just to commemorate. And I said well, I don't know, but if I -- I don't think I could learn by April, you know, all the chanting and all the Haftorah and everything. Cause I didn't know any of the blessings in Hebrew, nothing. Didn't even know how to read. And he says, I'll teach you, and he proceeded to teach me. And by April, to make it -- it was very difficult and it took an awful lot of time, and my husband said he could recite some of the prayers in his sleep because he heard me repeating them so many times. And came f -- when -- when April came, I don't remember what day, I think it was also the 25th or something, 21st or 25th, I was ready for my -- for becoming a Bat Mitzvah. And I learned all the chanting and all this in the three months. And that was very -- a very nice accomplishment. I invited the entire congregation and actually some of my relatives from Columbus, Ohio and New York, and some of them came. And they said later, they said, yeah we came because we felt sorry for you and we didn't want you to fall on your face without family around. Well, I didn't fall on my face. I astounded them all because I did the whole thing. Usually kids, you know, learn from very beginning and then it takes them a year or so. And I chanted it all and did a good job, if

I must say so myself. And after that we did attend synagogue pretty regularly, maybe not every Saturday or -- but around that time when I was preparing for my Bat Mitzvah, I did. I wrote a poem for that occasion and I made -- and my remarks were centered around the theme that this is Yom HaShoah and I'd like -- this is my way of honoring all the millions who perished during the Holocaust. And it was -- I felt very good about it. Well, at this time my wonderful rabbi was preparing kids for their confirmation class -- I mean for their graduation, they have Hebrew school and then, you know, religious school and then the people -- the students who want to go on after their bat mit -- Bar and Bat Mitzvah when -- they call them to confirmation class. And he says, you must go and speak to my kids in confirmation class. And I looked at him, I said, Shelly, I cannot do that. I -- my English isn't good. I -- I -- I don't have my story, you know, in -- in my head. He says, I don't care. And that was a Sunday morning when he has a class. He dragged me in and he says, I'll give you questions and you answer. And that was my first presentation, against my will. I was petrified, and I mean, I -- I was not a public speaker, not that I am now, but I -- I -- it was very difficult and it was really, I mean, he pushed me and I was angry with him that he did. But it was a wonderful beginning. Not a wonderful, but a beginning of something that I realized I had to do. And what I realized at that time -- I mean then, the next Sunday he had another class, and he says,

well you keep on, you've done great and you'll do even better. You must -- and you know, the first time when I made this presentation, when I finished, I got sick to my stomach, you know, went and threw up. But little by little, it was easier as time went on, and then I realized that this is what I have to do. I have to bear witness, I have to share my experiences, especially with young people. And Rabbi Elster gave me the push in the right direction, and because of him I started doing this. And it grew from that one, first confirmation class.

Q: In that first class, did -- do you have a memory of the -- how the young people responded, and --

A: They were -- they were stunned, because at that time there weren't many people that went into details and all. And I have one instance, the -- and this is something that people remember because it is so, I think, unusual. I have an instance where there were seven of us ended up in a haystack, in a huge haystack. And I think that -- and my whole presentation, centered around that fact. And -- and I mean there were seven of us, and onl -- and I'm the only one who survived. And after the presentation, the -- all these kids, or most of them, came around to give me a hug and to ask questions. And it felt good. It wasn't a catharsis, but it felt as if this is what I have to do now. My travels were over with, I wasn't the military wife any more, and I had to do something else,

and -- and that was the thing I had to do. And this is the way it evolved and the strange or interesting thing is, as the years go by, it seems that a -- of course now I'm with the Speakers' Bureau of the Holocaust Museum, and a lot of my gigs -- my si -- my presentations come through the museum, but I also have an awful lot of them that are by word of mouth, that people heard me, or they -- somebody said something, and they call me. And I go back there maybe once a year for five or six or seven years, and lately now, from the museum, I've been sent all throughout the country to speak. And like two years ago I was the guest speaker at the -- in Utah at Salt Lake City at the governor's mansion, what do you call it, at the governor's invitation and I made the keynote speech for Yom HaShoah. I've been to a number of places, and military places, and I have now -- I have s -- a schedule all the way until, I think June, with many, you know, si -- some -- I think I'm going to Iowa and I'm going to -- just came back from South Dakota and Kentucky. And the reception -- as the years go by -- the reception's always been very cordial, but it seems that the students now, especially in high schools and middle schools, the students are much more knowledgeable because the teachers offer so much more information. And that happens in turn because the museum and other places, I'm sure, too, offer so many wonderful courses that inform the teachers how to re -- how to teach the Holocaust.

Q: I remember -- excuse me -- in your oral history interview you mentioned you had been doing this for 10 years already in 1995.

A: Since 1985, yeah.

Q: You -- you mentioned an early experience you had at a school where a parent --

A: Y-yeah, oh, well --

Q: -- questioned --

A: -- yeah, I had two instances --

Q: -- questioned your story.

A: -- I had two instances, negative instances in all the -- in all my experience --

Q: Right.

A: -- you know, time that I've been speaking. One was the one you referred to and it was at the Children's Capital Museum, before the Holocaust Museum was built. And at that time, I don't know if you were here, and are you familiar with it, they had one section, and I th -- I think they called it -- they didn't call it Daniel's story, but it was, in essence, the composite of a young boy who lives through the horrors in Germany. And it was -- bu -- I mean, Daniel's story is that composite boy. And what -- I don't know i -- under whose auspice -- auspices this was, but they would bring students, young students, and I think some of them were, you know, still from elementary school. They

would bring them to that children's museum, and they would let them go through the rooms and familiarize themselves with the story of this boy, Daniel. And then when they finished listening to the description and going through the rooms, they -- each one would receive a tile, and they had to register their impressions with painting a statement. And -- you know, they gave them paint and -- and the tiles. And this one time there were two kids in that group, from two different classes, but the same school. And of course they always had chaperones, and this father, this one man, came over to me. I happened tha -- usually he -- when they had these presentations of Daniel's story, they tried to get a survivor to finish off. After the kids went through the story of Daniel, they would have a survivor speak about his or her own experiences, and that sort of finished off the program. Well, it was my turn, because I participated in it, to speak that day and I got up, wherever it was, and there were all these kids, you know, sitting and listening to my story. And I made it very simple, because it -- these were young kids. But after I was finished this guy comes over, and there were several parents, obviously, you know, with the kids and they were always very nice and asked meaningful questions. But this time this guy comes over and looks at me and first of all he says, now what's your na -- hey, you, you know, what's your name? Usually I say, Charlene Schiff. To him I said Mrs. Schiff, you know. Already I sensed something wrong. And

he says, you know, Mrs. Schiff, come, come, all this is a figment of your imagination. Just like that. I wa -- I -- I was speechless for a minute, cause I di -- I -- I mean, I was completely taken by, you know, surprise. And I said, how dare you say something like this to me? And I said, do you think anybody would come up to bare one's soul just to make up a story? He said well, there was no Holocaust, and things like that. That was my one exper -- and am -- I -- and I asked -- I said, well if you don't believe that there was a Holocaust, why did you bring your two children -- not one, but two, two children, to this museum, to the Children's museum. He says, well, they -- they needed -- tha-that was a -- an outing, or whatever he called it, and a field trip and they needed a chaperone and I wasn't working that day, so I said I'll go. Or in other words, he didn't even realize what they were going to see or hear. And that was one instance. And the other one was in a school. And that was in a middle school in this area --

End of Tape Three, Side B

Beginning Tape Four, Side A

Q: This is Charlene Schiff, tape four, side one. Can you start again? It happened here, in a local school.

A: Yes, in a -- a middle school, and usually what I try to do if it's possible, I encourage the teachers to get several classed together so, you know, I can speak to more than one class. And usually they honor my request if it's possible. In this school they did use the auditorium and there were about 500 kids or so, yeah. The whole middle school. And after my presentation I always ask to have a Q and A and the kids started raising their hands with questions. And in the middle of this all, or you know, a few minutes after the questioning started, this one kid gets up and most of them were wearing very nice clothes, school clothes, you know, jeans and all. This kid had a hat, what do you call it, a -- with the visor in the back. I don't know what you call it, but anyway, he looked like he was sort of a troublemaker. Tall, good-looking kid, dark. And he says, Miss Schiff, how many Jews were mur -- were killed? How many Jews did you say were killed? I said, I didn't say. I don't ever like to take -- to say, you know, numbers, cause I -- you know, I'll say 6,000, they say no, it was only 6001, or whatever. I don't give number -- I said I -- I didn't say. But how many would you say were killed? And I said, well, there were six million Jews and five million others. And I said, even one being killed was too

many. And he sort of took off his head and started scratching his -- took off his hat and started scratching his head and hair. He said, well six million, maybe it was a few too many. Just like that. And I -- he was looking to see that people will start laughing. It was dead silence. I said, as far as I'm concerned, even one was too many. And are you satisfied now that you made your joke? Just like that. And he says, it's not a joke. And I said yes, it is a joke. And he was standing there. And after I said, you know, tha -- you -- you finished with your joke or whatever, and even one is too many, the whole audience got up and started applauding and I got a standing ovation. And at that time he walked out. And then I found out he is -- he was from a Muslim f -- you know, household and his father was a Muslim and he came -- he would come to school always with very contradictory statements and all. I wish the teachers had warned me. I don't know what I would had done differently, but nobody did until after it happened. And those two instances were my only instances where it was unpleasant and traumatic, very traumatic. But other than that, I never had that kind of an experience. And as time progresses, which is again very, t-to me, of great interest, the interest in the Holocaust, and you know, history per se, you know, about World War II, the interest by young people increases every year. I don't know what to blame it on, or what to give cr -- credit, and especially now, after September 11th, it -- it is really amazing, and a -- I just

came back from Kentucky, that's my most recent gig, and I was amazed. I spoke there in a high school and a middle school, two different schools, and the reception couldn't have been more cordial. It was -- it happened it was my birthday, and I n -- I ne -- I don't know how they found out, but I guess from the internet, or whatever, and --

Q: Watch your scarf there.

A: -- both schools had great big signs outside when I came in, happy birthday, Mrs. Schiff, happy birthday, Charlene. They baked me a cake, they sang "Happy Birthday", all 500 of them. And i-it was in -- and the questions, if I had the time, if I didn't have to catch a plane, I could have stayed there another day, they were so eager to learn more, and I had to promise them they would send me the questions and I'll answer writing. It'll never happen, you know. But it -- it -- and this is occurring everywhere. So I -- I -- it's not a catharsis for me, but I feel I'm doing the right thing at the right time. This is my time to bear witness as long as I can stand up on my own two feet, and as long as I can still speak somewhat coherently and remember what transpired. I think it's very important for -- especially for the young people to know, and once we're gone, it will be -- it's wonderful that we have the museum, and it's wonderful that that legacy is there, and the museum stands there as a warning that people shouldn't tamper with human rights. But it's still not the same as when I -- a live person stands there and tells

you what happened to him or her. And that's why I was -- I'm doing it, and it turns out it's almost -- not quite, but almost a full time job, yeah.

Q: Why do you say it's not a catharsis for you?

A: Because every day when I tell my story, I remember -- and now it's getting hazy, but I remember new details, and it's as if reliving everything that happened all over again. It's not a catharsis, no way. Many times I -- I -- I went with David Klevin the other day to a school and I -- usually they allot me -- allow me to speak an hour, maybe two at the most. And there, I think I was there 9:15, didn't get out until one o'clock, because the kids had so many questions and they had the time from other subjects, they allowed them to stay, you know, and que -- question me. And when I got home, you know what I did? Went to bed. I was emotionally drained and that happens a lot. So it is not a catharsis, but it feels that -- it feels that I have to do it. And that's why I'm doing it. I am a -- in our group, like the -- the group of child survivors, I preach whenever I go. Now, I can't even attend there the monthly -- we have monthly meetings, cause I'm so busy. And a lot o-of my presentations are on Sundays, too. I've had two or three churches. Yesterday was an exception, wasn't a Sunday, but usually it's Sunday evening when I speak to the adults, you know, in -- in the churches. And like yesterday, you know, I'm so glad it didn't snow or rain, but their social hall, there was -- people

were standing, there was no room in the seats to -- to accommodate everyone. And that makes me feel good, but a catharsis it is not. Absolutely not, no.

Q: Tell me about your decision to become involved with the museum.

A: Well, since I've been speaking, you know, since 1985 and all, when the museum was built, and I remember that opening day, it was an April day, it was raining, it was cold and windy. It was just like everyone else felt, you know, in their hearts. That's the way the weather was reflecting it. And our son came down to be with us and to witness it, too. And then I said, well gosh, I mean, the museum is here, let me see what I can do there. I don't think it was right when they opened, but a little later. And then came -- John Minnick joined, and he is the director of the Speakers' Bureau. And I filled out some papers, and somebody said well, why don't you go and become a -- work in the archives or start translating, you know, that's a very interesting thing, you know, I could translate in several languages. And then, I don't know if I'm proficient any more, but at that time I thought, well, I'd rather be with people. I want to do something where I'm not going to be by myself. And that seemed -- you know, I was doing that anyway, I said well, maybe I should go an-and join the Speakers' Bureau. And the way it's -- it fell into place, I don't know if it was organized, I shouldn't -- it's not for me to criticize, but right now there are about 20 of us. There are 64 survivors who work, who volunteer

at the museum, 20 or so are with the Speakers' Bureau, and maybe I'd better not say it. You know what I'm -- was going to say.

Q: [indecipherable]

A: But just -- I think a few of us work more than others, for good reasons. And the thing is when I go to my meetings, the children's -- the -- the child survivors meetings, I always have arguments with the rest of my friends and they all have become friends -- maybe not all, but some have become very close friends, and I say, why don't you go out to speak? We need a good mouthpiece. And very few are interested in doing that.

Q: Well, this is what I wanted to ask you about next.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: What -- how do you understand that, that --

A: I don't. Well, I do and I don't. I mean, I started out, and I'm not a speaker, but I feel now that I -- I write out my remarks, mostly, because of being so sick when -- early on in my life. Sometimes I start speaking and I'm at a loss for a word. I cannot remember it. But when I have it written out, I'm much more comfortable. And I have several -- I have about -- every time I change a little bit and I have about 20 different formats. One is 20 pages, one is 40 pages, you know, things like that. Large letters, you know, so I can read. But some people don't know how to speak. I didn't either, but I felt a

compulsion, that I -- a duty that I had to do it and so I learned. Some of these people have selfish motives. They don't want to be remind -- reminded of their experiences, and they don't want to have anything to do with it. I remember one meeting we attended -- every year we have international meetings, that people from all over Israel and from Europe come to these meetings. And every month we have our own meetings. Once we had an international meeting, and I met two brothers from Connecticut, two brothers who survived the Holocaust. One brother talks about it all the time -- not all the time, but I mean, he is facing reality and his past. The other guy is -- he -- it's the first time he introduced him cause that was the first time he ever came to a meeting, that was an international meeting. And he has never spoken about his experiences. He's married to an American woman who doesn't know his past. I mean, I don't see how you can live with a person and not tell her your story. But anyway, he doesn't want to face it. You know, he doesn't want to go through again what he what -- what he lived through once. So, I don't know, I don't know how to explain it.

Q: Hm. How -- how is your -- how -- the [indecipherable] this group of child survivors, how is that group, other than the age difference, how is their view of the Holocaust and their -- as a group, their work in -- in talking about the Holocaust, how do you think it's different from other survivor groups?

A: Well, it's very different, to this day. And that's another ongoing, friendly discussion that we have. Our group -- first of all, most of the members in our group are qui --

Q: What is the name of your group, by the way?

A: Child Survivors of the Holocaust.

Q: And is it a local kind of [indecipherable]

A: Well, it's not just the lo -- it's -- it-it's a -- we have, I think, about 30 or 45 different groups in the United States, in England, in -- all over the place. And it's stupid, then no -- again I'm using the word I shouldn't, but it is, in a way childish to refer to ourselves, child survivor -- survivors. Most of the people who survived were children. Very few adults did survive. But now none of us is a child, but we still refer to ourselves as child survivors. The difference in these groups -- I don't know if you're familiar with Nessie Godin in th-the museum? Who doesn't know Nessie? Her group -- I say her, she is the co-chairman of the group, is survivors and friends. Their policy was from the beginning to open their -- I mean, they accept anyone who is interested in the cause of the Holocaust, or in -- in the theme, Holocaust, is welcome. Our group, to this day, is -- I would call it almost like a hypochondriac cause, or case. They feel, most of them do, God forbid anybody should join who is not a Holocaust survivor. They'll steal our secrets? What will they do to us? But they feel that they don't want anyone but just the

child survivors. When I first joined, it was a very strange situation. I came in with Ed, and they -- you know, I said, my name is Charlene Schiff, I'm a child survi -- who is that? I said, my husband. Is he a survivor? No. Out you go. They wouldn't allow him to stay, so I got up and I was going to go. And I mean, eventually, after some debate and all, they magnanimously allowed my husband to come to the meetings. Now, this situation has sort of evolved. Now spouses, if they are not survivors, are allowed to come. But it's sort of a real closed group. They don't want to have any kind of relationship with anybody else. And basically, until very recently, this group was a support group, let's face it.

Q: Mm. Mm-hm.

A: And there's some people who, 50 plus years later, still need that support.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: There are many people who burst out in tears when they talk about their family that maybe one member perished and the rest of them are alive. Their -- I mean, I -- I ha -- don't have any tears any more since -- since I came to this country. I -- I don't know how to cry any more. I don't. But when I speak, I divorce myself from my old self, cause otherwise I couldn't do it. But these people are not strong enough, a lot of them, and they still need a lot of emotional support and they don't want anyone else to know

about their struggle and about their emotional weaknesses. So that's the way I would explain it.

Q: What do you mean though, Charlene, when you say you don't have any tears any more, you don't cry any more? You're very emotional --

A: Yes.

Q: -- when you talk about -- at least on this tape --

A: I am, but I -- I -- I don't -- I can't cry easily and the thing wh-when -- when -- I cried when my friend's husband died. We said good-bye to him a mon -- a month -- an hour before he died, we were in his room. For that I cried. But when I think that my sister, who went to her death with her beloved -- I can't cry.

Q: You mean you won't let yourself. Because you said when you came -- when you first came to Columbus, you cried every night --

A: Yes. Yeah.

Q: -- by yourself and -- but I -- I'm just trying to --

A: I was even considering --

Q: -- what you say --

A: -- I was considering going back to the DP camps.

Q: Really? You were so lonely?

A: I -- it wasn't loneliness, it was just confusion and chaos and not knowing what's ahead. I shouldn't have said that. But --

Q: Does -- does this ability that you have or have learned, to speak in public, do you think it's part of what gives you strength?

A: I think so. I hate it when people tell me, oh you're tough, you can do anything. I am not tough. It's just that life has dealt me a very difficult hand, and I learned how to cope with it, and how to deal with it, partly because of my wonderful help from my husband and my son. But I am not tough, and it's -- and I'm not hard, but that's the way people judge me. I don't like it at all, but I've heard it a lot, and I'm sure they mean it as a compliment.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: But it's not.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And I -- I don't know how to explain it, but I -- even, you know, after I got married and things where -- were, you know, great, an-and there was -- you know, there were [indecipherable] and there was -- there were times when it was very difficult and all, but this is something that happens in everyone's life. And in a way I do understand my son's philosophy and his approach to things, and he's -- he accepts me as I am, and he

doesn't blame it on the Holocaust. That's -- maybe I would have been this way without the Holocaust, who knows? Pushy and very aggressive and very demanding where -- where my son, you know, was involved. And now I realize that it was very probably wrong, but in spite of it all, it turned out okay. So --

Q: You mentioned September 11th.

A: Yeah.

Q: And talking in -- to groups of people after that. There have been so many times in the past 20 years when there have been world events that I would think could be very upsetting to you. Things like the war in the former Yugoslavia and the massacres in Rwanda, and the fighting in Chechnya, you know.

A: Yes. Well --

Q: Every time a minority of people is su-subjugated --

A: Was fighting for independence and for freedom. Everywhere there is a fight for freedom, it churns within me. But the reason I brought up September 11th, September 11th is unique in my mind for one reason only. It was the first time that here in America we were touched on our soil. And I think September 11th is very unfortunately important because we Americans were touched where it hurts us most. It seems that until September 11th, all the other horrible, horrible situations in Rwanda, where the

United Nations promised help, and I went to hear General -- I'm terrible with names -- Diddio. The general who was in charge of the Rwanda, you know, contingent, and he was promised by the United Nations to get all the help he needed, and when he got to Rwanda, all he saw is death and destruction and massacre and not any help from the United Nations. And consequently he resigned his post and became a drunk for awhile. I mean, now he wrote a book and he speaks about this situation. That churns within me and it makes me sick, physically ill. All this, Bosnia and all that. But to the American psyche, I think one of the most important thing, do anything, but don't come to my beloved America, to my soil, on my soil. Don't do anything on my soil. And sin the -- since the Civil War and all, all the wars were fought outside of the United States. And September 11th, sadly, touched us right here. And that's why it's so important to the Americans. That's the way I figure. I also have seen something here that I was missing all these years. We went to Israel, can't remember when, in the 80's, and the first thing that struck me was the fantastic pride and patriotism that the people have. Maybe they're not as observant, you know, religiously, but when they wore that uni -- wore th- the uniform of the military, they did it with pride, wearing it and holding their heads up high. Here in America, when there is a war, God forbid, the military is regarded as one of us. When there is no war, the military are second rate citizens. The military is sort of

an underclass, and it's been that way ever since I came here and I -- and I was a military and still am a miri -- military wife and I'm very proud of it. Since September 11th, you see stickers, I'm proud to be an American. You see the flag on cars and I think it did awake our patriotism and our pride in being an American. And it didn't do that when Chechnya started, when Bosnia started, when Uganda started, when -- when all these other terrible, you know, wars started su -- on a different soil, not on American soil. And this is why I think it's different. I might be -- I'm probably very wrong, but this is my explanation. And that's why, until now, am -- most places, I always when I start my remarks, since September 11th, I start with the horrible tragedy of September 11th, and I compare it. And I -- I do say it has no comparison to the Holocaust, but it is also driven by evil, by -- by people who hate, blind hate, and by people who have no regards for human life. And this is one thing that we must fight for. And I -- I have my four evil eyes, and I say even now, 55 years after the Holocaust, we must all fight the four evil eyes. The evil of indifference, the evil of injustice, the evil of intolerance and the evil of ignorance, four eyes. And the kids always write it down.

Q: I'm going to jump around a little bit.

A: Okay.

Q: You mentioned that you traveled to Israel.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: What was that like for you to be there?

A: That was very, very emotional. The reason it was emotional, first of all, we've made friends while here, with -- usually we try to find out who is here from Israel, and we became very good friends with the military attachés and the ambassadors and all, and they would stay here three years and then go back to Israel. So we've had several and the last one, poor guy, he now has Parkinson's. But Hadassah and Jakov Granat and he was the military attaché here in Washington. Can't remember the years, it's terrible. But anyway, when we were visiting Israel, we got in touch with the Granats and we had a wonderful time visiting them. And then I did get in touch with some people with whom I was -- I wasn't in the same DP camp, but they were in a neighboring, there were so many of them. And there was one guy there who was my father's student. And he ended up he didn't make it to Palestine, he ended up being caught and he ended up in the Polish army when the war started, and so he had a story of his own. But when he came out after the war, he s -- found out that I was alive and he came to say hello. And through me he met this other girl, who was in a different DP camp and they fell in love and they got married. So we visited with them.

Q: Let me turn the tape over now. Hold that thought.

End of Tape Four, Side A

Beginning Tape Four, Side B

Q: This is Charlene Schiff, tape four, side two.

A: My God.

Q: You visited with them.

A: Yes, I visited with them, and he gathered together other students and people who knew my parents. Mostly my father's former students, and they had -- I think I mentioned it before, they had a -- an evening where they paid tribute to my father -- my parents, but mostly my father, and reminisced and -- and told me s-stories that I didn't know about my dad. And it was very, very emotional, but also very nice, because they actually knew my parents and it's something very, very dear to me. So, and then we went sightseeing and we -- we didn't stay there long enough. We never did go to the southern part, to Eilat, but we had a private guide because I couldn't walk very well, so we ha-had a car and a private guide. And this guide turned out to be a retired military in the mili -- in -- in the -- in the Israeli military. And so he and my husband hit it off very well. It was a very nice visit in Israel. I came home much stronger after that visit, it was good for me. It was beautiful to see Israel, but you know, it's amazing, not specifically in Israel, in Israel and in the United States, when I get off a plane, to this day, I feel like

getting on my knees and kissing the ground. Because the United States, no matter how we criticize it and all, it's still the best -- best country in the world to live in, with our democracy and our freedoms and we should cherish them. And so many times, most of us take it all for granted. And Israel is to me a 20th century miracle. When you drive through you see the desert and then all of a sudden there -- there are trees and there is water, and there are beautiful flowers, and there are fish, you know, and it -- it -- it's just a miracle, a mirage. And that again, I mean, is worth of getting down on your knees and kissing the ground. And that's the way I feel about the two countries.

Q: Mm-hm. This current round of violence in the middle -- in -- in -- in that part of the world must be hard. It must be hard.

A: It's very difficult. And you know, all this violence, all over now, Chechnya is -- is an unresolved situation, and I mean Bosnia -- I don't think -- it's sort of, I think, quiet right now and all. But there is so much hate, for hundreds of years, and I don't think it's really resolved a hundred percent, never will be. And all the other places of unrest, and especially, especially Israel, it is something that is very, very sad. And I know I feel very frustrated. I'm not a politician, I'm not a political science major. I don't know how you resolve something like that, and especially now with Iraq, you know, and -- and hanging sort of like will it, or will it not? What's going to happen if it does and if it

doesn't? It's very difficult and I think -- I know we have some friends who never had any children, and one couple regrets it -- by choice. And the other couple keeps repeating, even to this day, we're glad we don't have children. We don't want to have to leave our children in such a terrible world, where peace is at que -- in question every day. And I don't know, I -- I'm very glad that I have a child, and I have, hopefully, continuity. But it is a question to ponder. What are we leaving our children with, when we cannot guarantee them freedom, and freedom is what everyone until now has paid such a dear price for.

Q: You said in the -- in your oral history interview, you said a number of times though, that you feel hope. You do feel hope for humankind.

A: Well I -- yes, I do, I still do, in spite of it all, because if I didn't, I couldn't go -- I never speak to the school kids, especially school kids, and adults too, without injecting some hope in my remarks. I know nobody can live without hope. You might as well give up. And I know in my -- in -- in my darkest hours, no matter how I came to achieve it, if I tried, you know, to -- to just talk myself into it, but I always felt that I must have hope, and I have hope now. And I think, I mean, it's no comparison, but when my husband got so ill, I prayed to God and at that time I said, God, I -- I don't care what you do, please give me hope that he's going to go on and he's going to live.

And I remember a very beautiful thing happened. There was a Catholic priest -- they have a priest and a rabbi and all at the Walter Reed Hospital, and this priest just start -- just happened to pass when I was sitting there, and I mean, I wasn't crying, but I was sitting in the corner waiting for some results. And I was -- I looked very sad, and I think I was waiting for our son to come and I -- he says -- what -- what's bothering you, my child? And I told him. And he says, I'll pray for him he'll be all right. Yeah. And that Christmas we went over and we gave him a nice donation. He was there for -- he's gone now, he's gone someplace else. But a Catholic priest, you know, had so much compassion. That gives me hope, because there is something good in every human being. And I also have another philosophy. You know how women get together and they start gossiping and all, and I don't like to gossip. But I always say, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything. Say only when you have something nice to say, otherwise don't. And if you feel, you know, anger and all, try to concentrate and try to find something nice about that person. And sometimes it's very difficult to do that, yeah.

Q: I remember in your first interview you ta -- describing how hopeful your mother led you to believe --

A: Oh.

Q: -- that she was, whether or not she really was.

A: I never saw her cry.

Q: She was very strong.

A: But -- but sh -- you know, she turned gray overnight when they took my father away.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. I should go over that and refresh some of what I said and some what I didn't say.

Q: Oh.

A: But she -- she was -- and she wasn't the only one. It seems that most of the nourishment -- nourish -- nurturing befell to the women, because most of the men were gone right away. And this was his -- Hitler's plan, you know, take away the leaders and everything will fall apart. And that's what happened. But the women came through gloriously. And I know my mother kept spinning tales that -- I mean, now they are laughable I am sure, but everything that she -- that came out of her lips always ended with hope. When they took my father away, both of us cried, my sister and I. And she gathered us -- she -- she hugged us, she didn't say anything. And later she was making plans, what kind of a party we'll have when Papa would come home. And, I mean, she always invited people, even in the ghetto, when she saw a little urchin, a little boy, or --

or a little girl by themselves, and there were lots of them, she says come and we'll eat something. And she was a genius at making soup, and she'd add more water and whatever, I don't know, but everything she made, because we were hungry too, tasted so good. And it was always shared with so much good feelings. It wasn't just oh gosh, we don't have anything for tomorrow, you know, but well, we'll have something tomorrow too. Enjoy it, and eat, you know. And it -- it was -- she gave us so much -- she gave me so much strength. And I wish I could be one-tenth of the person that she was. And sh-she was strong, and she was very wise, and she wasn't the only one. They -- she and a group of women organized a school for a -- for the kids who didn't work, too young to work. And there again, we could have lied about our age had we known ahead of time, but we didn't. But this too was such a wonderful gesture, to -- to be with the kids. And -- and they were tired and beat, you know, from the work that they did all day, and yet they would come with smiles on their faces and sing happy songs for us, just to keep us occupied and to give us something to do. Yes, my mother was a very special woman, but she wasn't the only one. I think ordinary people -- and my mother was not ordinary, she was extraordinary, but I think even ordinary people were made extraordinary by their circumstances in the ghetto. And I mean, what befell us, you know, when the Germans came in, that people who were ordinary became heroes. And

that happened everywhere. That's another thing that I, nowadays feel very strongly about it, and I keep learning much more, is the fact that there was so much resistance, and there was so much -- there were uprisings, you know, all over the place. Sobibor, Auschwitz, and of course, Warsaw. But I was reading someplace just recently that there was resistance in 105 different ghettos. And I think probably it will come up that it -- it was more than 105 ghettos. Cause my mother's school, that's resistance. The -- our kids getting together, about 20 of us, building a tunnel. Tunnel, it wasn't really a tunnel, but it was a tunnel. That's resistance. And these kind of forms of resistance took place almost in every little ghetto. And that is something that when we consider that there was practically no help from the outside, and even in -- in the Warsaw ghetto, how difficult it was to obtain weapons, and you know, how very -- even for money -- I mean, people would, on the outside, would promise you weapons, and then you would come and you'd find empty shells or you know, corroded things that didn't work. And when you think, that in spite of all of this, we were able to raise our voice, we should walk now with our heads high, too. And I often say I'm very proud to be who I am. I wouldn't change it for the world. And I am proud of being a Jew. And I am proud of having to sur-survive -- of having survived. But until recently, I had enormous guilt.

Now my guilt I'm trying to rationalize and chase it away. Why should I feel guilty? But I have felt great guilt.

Q: Ten years ago you said you felt imprisoned --

A: Guilt?

Q: -- imprisoned by your memories, in your guilt --

A: Oh, I'm still imprisoned by my memories, but I don't feel guilt any more. Maybe not -- I still feel a little bit, but not that much.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I felt enormous guilt for surviving. Why me? A nobody like me when people who had so much to contribute to human kind were just blown away like flies. Why me? So that's why I feel very strongly that I must do what I can in my own small way. I'm not Elie Wiesel, whom I met a number of times and just recently had an occasion to be at this table at a luncheon, which was very interesting. But in my own way, I have to contribute what I can, and this is my contribution.

Q: Mm-hm. Let's -- I need -- I need to take a break for a sec -- [tape break] -- 10 years ago, you were still looking for answers about what happened to your father and mother. And has there been, in the 10 years --

A: Any resolution.

Q: -- any more information?

A: Well, you know, I went back to my hometown and that was a disaster. As I said, my sister apparently was shot then and there, I don't know what day, or -- but, during the liquidation. My father, at first they told me he was -- he pa -- I guess the people in my town -- excuse me, that he went to Dachau, the concentration -- Dachau concentration camp. And when I was in the DP camp, and later when my husband and I were stationed in Munich -- excuse me -- we went to Dachau to search all the papers. Didn't find anything. And then, when I went in 1988 to my hometown, I was told that the 300 leaders were led from our hometown to the outside of the town to a -- one of the forests, there are lots of forests around. I don't know if they kept them one day or two or three. They made them dig a mass grave and then they shot them there and then. I don't know which is the true story. I did not see the grave. I hope before I die I will go back to my hometown and have answers to some of these burning questions. Maybe not all of them, but some. If there is a grave, I feel that's probably where he lost his life. I -- and if it's so, I -- my aim is to put some plaques, memorial plaques where the ghetto was, which is now a leveled space, and I hope someone will show me the mass grave, and I could put some memorial plaque there.

Q: Do you have reason to believe that people there know where it is?

A: Oh yes, they do. They told us they do, but we had no time to go there --

Q: Oh.

A: -- because I was given a limit of two hours to be there. And the town was completely leveled. My house is still there, which again doesn't look like my house, but it was a very traumatic return to my hometown. Nothing was the way I remembered it and most of the houses were gone and I don't know, but my -- our theory is that there must have been some kind of a experiment which turned sour. I'm not saying it was Chernobyl or anything, but -- I don't know what it was, but something occurred in that little town of mine that leveled everything and there is nothing there now. When we went in '88, my husband tried to comfort me cause I was so upset with all this. He says, well, you don't see anything, let's go and show me where the river is where you were hiding with your mama. And I try -- I said, I -- I s -- I was so disoriented, and I asked the people there, where's the river? No more river, they diverted the river, too. So, I mean, everything was so traumatic and so puzzling, to this day I don't know if any of the facts or if anything they said is the truth, but I have to believe someone. But there is, they told me, a mass grave outside of the city.

Q: Mm.

A: Yeah. I should have gone through my statements from oral history, so I wouldn't have probably repeated myself.

Q: That's okay, that -- that's okay. I -- I don't have any other questions. Is there anything else that you feel like I missed, or you'd want to go back over, and --

A: No, I think you were very much in detail and I think I've talked too much --

Q: No, you haven't.

A: -- and I don't know if I made sense, but --

Q: Yeah, it's very clear --

A: -- I just gave you my feelings.

Q: -- it's very clear.

A: And I tried to be clear, but sometimes it gets sort of convoluted.

Q: No, it's great. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you Neenah, so much, for your very nice feeling that you give me, of confidence, and for being so perceptive. Several times you told me things that I didn't know how to express and you expressed them for me.

Q: Oh good.

A: And I'm very grateful for that.

Q: Good. This is the end now of the interview with Charlene Schiff on January 29th, 2003. This is tape four, side B, the end of it.

End of Tape Four, Side B

Conclusion of Interview