

You read my story and you know--

Yes, we did.

--what to ask me?

OK, we're ready to go.

Today is March 29, 2011. This is the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, and my name is Joanne Rudoff.

My name is Nelly Grussgott.

And what was it when you were born?

I was born in Berlin May 9, 1930.

Tell me about your parents, and your home, and your school.

My mother came as an immigrant from Czechoslovakia because of the poverty that she experienced in her hometown, and she worked-- she was a single girl, and she worked very hard. And she started with rags. It's almost like from rags to riches, and she established a textile business.

And she was very religious, and in Germany at the time she couldn't find a religious man like she. So finally-- she was 24-- oh, no. That's my phone.

That's OK.

I should have shut it off.

You know what? Let's shut it off right now, OK?

Sorry about that.

That's OK. I should have remembered to tell you. Great, thank you.

OK. So it was hard for her to find a suitable husband, so to speak. So five years later, when she was already 29, she met my father, who had just come from Hungary, and he was teaching bar mitzvah. And he came to Germany for the same reasons.

And by that time, my mother already had established a business. They knew each other-- there was a matchmaker, and that's how they met for two weeks. And that was-- and they married, and that was--

It was a shidduch?

What?

It was a shidduch.

It was a shidduch. It was a shidduch. He was frum, and it was right for my mother. But she took him into the business, and they worked together. And they established a nice textile business.

And it was a good life in 1927 or '28, and I was born in 1930. And, well, they say-- my mother did have a stillbirth

before me. She had a son. But she was always a very optimistic type of lady, and she was thanking God. In later years, she used to say to me that she gave a kiddush after every year Sukkos when she gave birth, she gave a kiddush because God spared her life.

So she looked at it this way, not losing a son but God spared her life because she almost died with a baby. And as I said, two years later, I was born, and by that time, because of the poverty in Czechoslovakia, my mother had already money to send home. And her brother and her sisters came to live in Berlin.

And I was a kind of a novelty, the only baby. And they fawned over me, and I remember a lot of attention and a lot of love.

Did you all live in the same area?

In the same area, yes. Not only that-- my mother had a single sister, too, and she lived with-- she lived in-- she worked in my mother's business, and she lived with us. And my mother was very much into the business, but my aunt, my mother's younger sister-- she was more domesticated, and she stayed home with me.

What was her name?

So she was like a second mother, and I remember her so well.

What was her name?

Her name-- her given name was Pearl, but we called her Pepi, Tante Pepi.

Tante Pepi.

And she was able to-- my mother was not very good at disciplining me at the time, but I was afraid of her. She was a good disciplinarian. So that--

Do remember Shabbos in your home?

Oh, yes, we were strictly observant. And my father had a beautiful voice, and he used to sing. And for Passover, we had a lot of guests all the time. And I remember that I had a little cup, a little wine cup with a gold rim, and I still have it. It's to drink kiddush, and they had a special cup for me. So that much I remember.

And sometimes-- my father-- my mother had established the business, but my father was more of a scholar-student. And sometimes my mother would say, go on vacation. She had her brothers and sisters helping her, and what I-- I don't know why he went on vacation, but I remember that I went with him. And I remember that time in the hotel.

Where did you go?

I wasn't-- I must have been four years old, four, but it's just like kind of a vague memory. It sticks in my mind. He used to take me places, to museums. My mother was business-oriented, religion and business. Yeah.

Now, you told me you used to visit your grandparents.

When I was five years old, my mother they took me to see both sets of grandparents, and it was interesting. You asked me before if I speak Czechoslovakian, but when I got there, I was-- the story goes-- they tell me that when I met little girls there to play with I said, oh, my goodness, they are so dumb. They can't even speak German.

So they used to make fun of me, and I made that remark in German. Yeah. I don't know. Do you want me to say it in German? [SPEAKING GERMAN] Because I thought that was the only language that exists.

And so I remember my grandmother, my grandfather. Yes, that was a very -- yes. And then my mother-- I went with her to visit my father's parents in Hungary. That was-- yeah, that's all I knew of my grandparents.

So that was in 1935.

1935.

And when you went back to Berlin, what was it like for you in Berlin?

Well, I was beginning school, so I went to a religious school. It was called Adass Yisroel. And I had a lot of friends there. I even remember a friend that I had there. Years later, I tried to contact her, but she didn't remember me anymore. She had had a nervous breakdown, she said, and she has no memory of her experiences, yeah.

But first, before I went to school, I went to kindergarten, yeah. And-- was that also a Jewish school?

All Jewish, all Jewish, yes.

Did you have any contact with non-Jews at all?

No, not at that time, no. My mother did. My mother had customers. They were all non-Jewish, very polite, very nice. They really-- she allowed them credit when they bought, and then she used to go to them and collect what they owed her. And they were always prompt, courteous.

And then, one day, she went to collect-- this was years later-- when she-- these were the nicest customers, she said. When she came to collect, they said, Mrs. Friedman, Frau Friedman, you better leave here very quickly. My husband is a Nazi. She ran for her life. Overnight they became Nazis, it seemed. She always tells that story.

Did you know that as a child?

If I felt it?

Did you know that as a child?

Yes. Oh, you mean the threat, the--

Yes.

Absolutely, yes, because when I learned to read, wherever I went there were signs, "Juden Verboten," "Jews Forbidden." And we were afraid to walk in the streets, and there were-- yeah, it was--

What did your parents tell you about the situation?

They didn't have to tell me anything. I felt it. It was in the air. Yeah.

Did you hear that--

Well, one year went to the Jewish school, and then that school had to be shut down. It was no longer-- and I went to another school. I don't know. It was a government school. I think it was-- it may have been-- but it was just for-- because it was in a Jewish neighborhood. That's why. There were only Jewish children there.

And as we came out of the school, they were throwing-- the youth were waiting there, and they were throwing stones at us. It was dangerous. And after that, we couldn't even go to school anymore. Yeah.

And what did your parents tell you about that?

They were afraid-- they didn't talk about it. We didn't talk about it. Yeah, it's just-- but when that had happened, my father had left already for Germany. But before he-- one day, very-- one day, I came home, and he was in the kitchen, had a pair of new glasses. I remember that. He looked a little different. And my mother announced he was leaving for America. Yeah.

Do you know when that was about?

1938. That was 1938, yeah. I have one picture with my father. It was taken in 1937. I was playing in the park, and when I saw him approach, I was so happy. I ran to him. And he had a friend with him who took a picture of us, and years later, I came back with my son to the same spot and took a picture. I found that place.

But you couldn't sit on any of the benches in the park. On the bench it said "Jews Forbidden," couldn't go to the movies anymore. I remember I used to go with my mother to the-- even my mother was very religious, but she liked to have a good time and go to the movies.

I remember going to see Shirley Temple. I enjoyed that. She's my generation. It was-- I thought Shirley Temple was in German. It was-- I didn't know it was a dubbed-- it was dubbed. But I enjoyed all the Shirley Temple but couldn't go to the movies anymore already. It started very gradually. Everything was very gradual.

But my father was able to leave for America because he had a brother and sister living in America, and he came to as a visitor. He came. So he left in 1938, yeah.

And what did they tell you about why he was leaving?

Oh, they didn't have to tell me. See, I don't remember any words spoken with my mother or father or anything. I just knew the events of what took place, and what happened, and yeah. So that was a very sad day for me, very sad time just to have him leave, yeah.

And eventually, my aunts and uncles-- they all left for Czechoslovakia. And my aunt-- my aunt-- as I said before, she was single, and she was my disciplinarian. And so she did get married in 1935, and I remember the wedding. I was in a nice pink outfit, pink dress.

And I slept by the super. I know my mother sent me down to the-- this was 1935. That I remember. And they called my father-- my father's name was Yitzhak. That's his Hebrew name. But his nickname was Itzhik, and somehow the super must have heard my mother call my father Itzhik, and it seemed to them that was the name to make fun of.

And they kept asking me-- they had company, the super. I remember this. And they kept asking me, tell us, what is your father's name. And I said, Itzhik, and they broke into hysterical laughter. And I know that's something I felt that-- and they had me repeat.

And here they-- and this was 1935, and they were supposed to be friends of ours, yeah. Because-- I had to sleep by the super because the bedrooms were taken apart because my aunt got married in our house.

And then she had a baby, and I was already six. I mean she had a baby a year. I was six years-- six years old at the time, and I felt I had a sister. And I loved her so much. When she was six months old, they left for Czechoslovakia to get away from Hitler.

And my other-- my mother's brother and other sister also-- they all went to Czechoslovakia subsequently. They didn't survive. Yeah.

So when your father left, did your mother continue the business?

Yes, yes.

She was able to do that?

In 1937? Well, not really. Little-- when I think about it, I don't know how we had money. I guess until 193-- in 1939, we were evicted from our-- it was the 1st of September when the war broke out, Germany declared war on-- they marched into Poland, and we were just-- we left with the furniture, everything.

We went to live in an apartment with five other families, and I was sleeping-- and they had a bed-- a crib for me. I slept in the crib in the middle room. And food was very severely rationed. I was-- didn't have too much to-- especially meat or chicken. That was a rare-- that was-- yeah.

And we lived-- my mother and I, we lived with a-- with someone who rented us a room in another neighborhood.

Now, prior to that, you said you went to first a Jewish school then a state school?

Yeah.

And then you had to stop going to school?

Oh, yes.

And what was--

I didn't go to school anymore.

And what did you do during the day?

Sat and looked out the window, not much.

And your mother was working?

I guess she was somehow. She probably went to customers, and went to their homes, and sold them things. I just kind of block that out because in between, Kristallnacht happened.

Can you tell me about that? What did you experience?

Oh, that was-- the Kristallnacht was before we moved to this apartment.

Right.

I have to go back a little bit.

It's OK.

What happened-- I was on my way to school, and I saw all the stores. The windows were broken, shattered, and it was such an eerie feeling. We went-- I went home. I went home again, and a lot of-- all the-- my mother's friends, the men, were hiding in my apartment, in our apartment. Under the bed they crept because they were looking for men to deport them, and they maybe stay two or three days.

And I saw from across the-- they didn't come to my apartment because they knew that my father wasn't there, and they didn't bother the women and children yet. But from-- I saw across the street they were throwing out furniture, linen from windows, shattering-- going into people's homes, throwing everything out the window. It was very frightening, that Kristallnacht. That took place in 1938, yeah, so it seems that we moved in 1939.

Now, did you ever go back to school after Kristallnacht?

I don't think so. No, no, I don't-- no. I don't think so, no. I was very short-- a very short time in the state school because, as I said, they were throwing stones at us. It was dangerous, couldn't-- yeah.

Now, were you hearing from your father during this period of time?

I suppose. From America?

Yes.

Yeah, he wrote to my mother, I'm sure. Yeah, he wrote, especially-- he was very busy arranging for us to come to America. So he got us affidavits, and he got it from Horowitz Margareten. That's a matzoh factory. And they are related to us, so he was very pleased because these were wealthy sponsors who would supposedly support us. So he felt that we had a very good-- had a very good chance of getting us out from Germany. That was the goal, that we should come to America.

Yeah. Yeah, he was in America one year, and I think, as the story goes-- I was a child. I was not privy to all the information or things that were going on. But as I understand it, he wrote my mother that he was coming back to get us to come back with him. He had these wonderful affidavits, he thought.

So he was going to Belgium. Belgium was neutral at the time. So my mother wrote to him and told him, don't come back. Go anywhere, but don't come back. But he got the letter. It was too late. He was already on the boat coming back. Yeah.

So he went-- so he came back to Belgium, yeah. And he realized he had made a great mistake, yeah. And he was renting a room, and then he said that-- oh, God, it's very hard.

That's OK.

Yeah. He thought that my mother and I would join him in Belgium and, together, we would leave for America again. that's what he thought when he was in America, but it didn't happen that way. What I was going to say?

So we went-- we stayed there in Belgium, and they went-- my mother went-- my mother and father went to the consel, and the consel said to my mother-- told them, because my mother was Czechoslovakian-born, she's already on a list to come to America. But my father was born in Hungary, and his-- it would be much harder for him. So he should stay in Belgium.

And if my mother and I will come to America, my mother will-- being that we would be in America, we would be able to arrange for him the visa so that he could come to America. But it was very--

Now, did you know that? Did you know that at the time?

While we were--

Yes.

Well, first, I wanted to tell you that I internalized-- when my father came back to Belgium, he was very depressed, but I, as a child, thought, well, maybe he doesn't love me as much anymore because he didn't show the enthusiasm that I expected. So I don't think-- I mean, afterwards, I realized he was depressed, yeah.

Now, what was it like for you leaving Berlin to go to Belgium?

Oh, well, it was a different culture. I saw a lot of people, a lot of kids, riding on bicycles. There was a lot of bike-riding,

and I was just thinking, oh, if I could ever ride a bike like that, it would be nice.

What city were you in?

Antwerp, yeah, for a week. But we were there only one week. That's all. And then the consul advised my mother to go back to Berlin, Germany because we were already on a waiting list. And from there, we would be able to leave Berlin, Germany-- if we stayed with my father in Belgium, there would be no chance for either my mother or my father to leave Belgium, but because my mother was already almost ready to be granted the visa, she was-- we were told that would be the best. And it happened that way.

And, now, she went to the American consulate who told her that? Where? In Belgium?

Yes.

Yes, yes. This was the advice she was given. I don't know how I-- I know all the-- well, she spoke about it in later years, I guess, because as a child I don't know if I was aware of exactly what was happening. We went back to Germany, and that was in 1939.

My father was already a year in America, and he really enjoyed the freedom. And he was by his brothers and sisters, and he was thinking, well, this is-- he'll save us. He really was very worried about us.

Do you remember what your parents told you then about going back to Berlin?

I don't know. I don't remember much of any conversations. It's just-- they were talking to each other.

And you just went.

I guess I knew what was going on. I mean, I don't think I discussed much with my mother what was happening in Belgium or-- it was just--

And did you-- how did you get from Berlin?

I was already nine years old.

Right. And do you remember the trip from--

The trains? On the train?

Mm-hm.

Oh, yeah. I remember the boat coming to America. That was an experience.

All right. So you took a train back to Berlin.

Took a train back to Berlin.

Then were you able to stay in that same apartment with the other people?

Yes. It was just a week, yes. And then the war-- yeah, the war was already on, right, between England. Shortly thereafter, the consul called my mother. The visa was granted. But my mother had registered me for the Kindertransport in the meantime, and my mother was supposed to go as a maid to England, something like that, because nothing was happening for a while. But then, the last minute, they called us. And that was in 1940.

What month?

January. We arrived February.

And what was that like for you?

Arriving?

Knowing that you were leaving.

Oh, unbelievable, yes, because I felt such empathy for the people I left behind because I already had established-- the people that we were living with in that apartment-- we had a relationship. And I knew, as a-- nobody had to tell me that they would not make it, that they would all die. And I knew about that we were safe.

It was unbelievable, yeah. I felt very sorry for everyone that I left behind, that was left behind. And they didn't make it. They didn't. All those people where I lived with-- I have photographs of them, too. Yeah.

So the thing is, it was a nine-day trip, and we went to Italy, Genoa.

Again on a train?

On a train. And from there, we took the last boat out. It was called the Conte di-- I remember-- I don't know how I remember these-- Conte di Savoia. That was the boat. And it was a nine-day trip.

And it was in January, and there was a storm. And I can't forget. I thought I would be dying. I was so seasick. My mother couldn't get me to get off the bed, but--

Were there other Jews on the ship?

I think so, yes, yes, a lot, yes. I don't know. I don't know, all kinds of people. I was on the trip, I stayed in the cabin on the bed. My mother was afraid I wouldn't make it because I was very seasick. But the minute we landed on the boat, landed, I was fine.

And you remember that landing?

Oh, yeah, oh, very much, very much. My uncles-- my father's brother and my father's brother-in-law came to pick us up, but they didn't know what we looked like. And it was an Ellis Island and had no idea-- so many people arriving, and my mother didn't know what they looked like and how are we going to find them. But we knew they would be coming to pick us up.

So my mother-- and I started running away, I remember, a little bit. I was getting a little-- I don't know, just couldn't stay in one place anymore, was running another direction. And my mother started calling Nelly, Nelly. And when they heard the name "Nelly," they came walking over. Are you so-and-so?

And they took me to-- yeah, they took us to my aunt's apartment, my father's sister, yeah, yeah.

And did you speak any English?

No, not one word. And everything here was a culture shock. But it was-- I felt safe, yeah. But I missed my father.

And did your aunts and uncles speak German?

They spoke-- no, no, they didn't. They spoke Yiddish. I guess I understood from the German. And she was-- my aunt was cooking Friday for Shabbat, and it was lunch. And she wanted she wanted to give me some chicken soup, and I said, oh, no, no, no, no.

So she said, why not? Why not? I said, I want to save it for tonight. They always-- they remembered that years later because I didn't think I could have soup twice.

I told you that the food was very severely rationed, so we could just have a little soup on a Friday night. Yeah. So now she says, you're here in America. We have plenty of soup. You can have it. You'll have it now. You'll have tonight. Yeah. So it was, yeah, all kinds of things.

I'll take some water. I don't know why I'm so hoarse.

You've been talking a lot. So this was in January of 1940?

No, we arrived--

In February.

--February 1, February 1. My mother and I always kind of celebrated that anniversary, when we arrived.

And you stayed--

Shortly-- no, we stayed a little bit by my aunt because she had a tiny apartment. And my mother felt she was crowded as it is, so we went to the HIAS. She was not a wealthy woman, so we went to the HIAS, stayed there a week.

That wasn't such a-- it was a wonderful experience, being an American in the HIAS, but it was-- the HIAS was very crowded. We slept on cots on the floor. And it was just a week or two.

And then my mother-- she found somewhere where she could rent a room. We were living with someone in America. And I went to school, and they didn't know what to do with-- in those days, there weren't many refugees. I was like an oddity, and they didn't know what to do with a refugee.

I couldn't speak a word of English. I think I was in the third grade-- they put-- in the third grade they put me. I was already almost 10 years old and couldn't speak English. So they got me back into the first grade. So it was a little embarrassing, but before I knew it, I was back in the third grade, and the fourth grade, and it wasn't long. But I was known in the beginning as The Refugee.

And afterwards-- after we lived in that rented room, it didn't work out that well either. It was difficult. My mother started peddling. My mother was peddling when-- that's how she started to make a living. Somebody lent her some money, and my-- and we were able to move into an apartment on Delancey Street-- I don't know if you're familiar with the Lower East Side-- on Delancey Street, under the bridge, a cold-water flat.

And, yeah, my mother worked very hard, and she went to Washington very frequently, yeah, because she wanted to get the visa for my father. And she went to the senators, and to interviews, and it just-- they didn't-- they replied negatively.

As a child, you came in February of 1940. Were you aware of events in May, when Germany invaded Belgium?

Oh, yeah. You mean when I was in--

In the United States.

--in the United States? Yes, yes. Yes, because my father was deported to Marseille, to France. They rounded up all the Jewish men, women, and deported them to France. So--

And did that at the time?

I knew there was a war raging in Europe. Maybe I didn't know the exact details, yeah, but-- but I wanted to say something. Yeah. Coming back to what you said--

So you're going to school, and you know that there's a war in Europe that's now impacting your father because Germany invaded Belgium.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, he-- oh, gosh. He went to the-- he wrote my mother. He went to the consul. He was very happy he thought he was getting the visa. And then they-- I don't know if you want me to read you this, the letter that he wrote to my mother.

Sure.

"My dearest Yeti--" that's what he called her.

And what's the date on the letter?

September 24, 1942. [SPEAKING GERMAN], not only "dear" but "dear precious Yeti, dear precious Nelly, Rosh Hashanah I received a notice from the consul that I should come to see him, and I was under the impression that I would be getting the visa. But I was informed by the secretary that I'm not getting the visa, and I almost felt that I had to faint.

He said to me they can't find the [SPEAKING GERMAN] in Washington, they can't find the papers in Washington. The cold sweat came over me, and they asked me to sit down and to relax." In 15 minutes, they couldn't get him to revive-- they couldn't revive him. He felt so faint because he was so terribly disappointed.

"And he told me it was not a grant-- it will not-- it's not granted to me now. And I asked, why not? I'm not a spy. Am I a spy? Why don't they grant me the visa? I have the best papers.

And he replied he's not responsible-- the consul replied, I don't know why. And that I--" the consul advised that he should write or send a telegram to-- I have to translate this exactly as I'm reading this to you. [SPEAKING GERMAN]

"And it must be because I'm Hungarian." And the reason that they gave him is that because he's a Hungarian-- America declared war on Hungary, and he's now considered a Hungarian alien.

But this was before the war.

1942.

Oh, '42. I'm sorry.

He is writing from Marseilles.

And the letter was able to be gotten through?

Yes. And then in subsequent letters he writes that-- he writes, "Why am I not getting any letters from you? You used to write to me so steadily. What happened? I can't believe that you wouldn't write."

He didn't know the letters were censored and not sent to him. And he said, "I'm suffering, and I don't hear from you that you're alive or any," things like that. It was just-- he was in agony.

Now, were the letters going through a neutral country? Or you don't know.

The letters came from Marseilles.

From Marseilles. OK.

I don't know if they were not--

If that was occupied--

France--

--at that point by Italy--

I thought-- yeah, but they came.

It's just curious.

And he complains that he has rheumatism, he has no shoes, he has no underwear, and it's cold. And that was the beginning, only the beginning what he was-- subsequently what happened to him because after the war, I didn't know-- we just knew he was gone because anyone who survived came forward, made contact.

We didn't hear from him, and we assumed he perished in Auschwitz. But years later, the Red Cross-- I have all the papers here. The Red Cross sent a letter that they have access to files that the Germans kept and which were now available, and they found out about the-- what happened to a lot of the victims of the Holocaust.

And we learned that he went to a death camp in Sobibor because the Red Cross contacted us and showed us the papers. Yeah.

Do you remember receiving those letters?

These letters?

Yes.

My mother received them.

Did she share them with you? Did she share them with you?

Maybe. I don't know. I found these letters after. Maybe she did or she didn't. I always wanted to know. I remember I always wanted to know if my father wrote to me separately. And I just felt, what did he write to me?

And sometimes he would add a little-- but not always, yeah. But I don't think she shared this with-- the fact that he was in agony and so severely depressed and that he fainted, it was hard for him. Yeah.

And I-- when I was in America, every night I would cry. I would miss him so much, and I would always daven that I would see him again. We were hoping. But I knew-- by the time the war was ending, I didn't-- there wasn't much hope left. Yeah.

I was aware somehow that it must have been very vicious there, that things-- I kind of felt that-- I had that-- when he didn't contact us or my aunt and uncle, I used to think every once in a while, well, maybe he lost his memory, and maybe-- that was wishful thinking-- and maybe sometime he'll-- maybe we'll get-- but for the longest time-- since 1995-- I really didn't know.

When you don't know, you always think that maybe he's alive somewhere. But the Red Cross settled that question. That was--

So you didn't get those documents to 1995 from the Red Cross?

Yeah, I did.

In 1995.

In 1995. And then somehow the newspaper-- the local newspapers got a hold of my story that I finally-- I was one of the first ones to contact the Red Cross to find out what really-- how my father-- what happened to my father. And the Red Cross wanted to advertise that other people should come forth and try to find the whereabouts of their relatives.

So they had-- they printed a little picture of me and my father and wrote my story in the local newspapers. I have a copy of it with me.

Was your mother still alive at that time?

Oh, yes, my mother lived-- yes, yes. She lived until she was 91 years old, yeah. She was always very hard-working, courageous. My mother, afterwards-- we were living in this cold-water flat, and it cost \$11 a month.

It was cold in the winter. And I was 15. I was 15 years old It was already after the war. And my mother had a male friend from the same town where she came from. She remembered him. And he was married to a relative of my mother's, and they were all very close when they were living in Czechoslovakia.

But he remained here without his family, in America here, also for economic reasons. So his family was left behind, and they perished because it was too late to get them out. For religious reasons, he never had them even-- he was from Czechoslovakia, and it was too late.

And he remained single, and he approached my mother, the two of them. So they got married, so he was my stepfather. But the way my mother said it to me, when she was about-- before she agreed to marry him, she said to me-- I can't forget it. She, said Nelly, when you get married-- you're going to get older, and you'll eventually get married-- can I come and live with you, be with you?

I said-- I was thinking about it, and I don't know how I answered this. But I said, it depends what my husband will want, my future husband. Yeah. I don't know how I said that because I meant to say, of course you'll live with me. But I said, I don't know. I didn't know where this was coming from.

And then she said to me, you will get eventually have your own life. You will get married. And I can have-- I will have-- can have a life. Your father is-- so I said, oh, Mommy, will we have steam now?

Because I guess the conditions were not that great. We lived seven years in a-- where the bathtub is in the kitchen and the toilet in the hall. And it was-- and my friends wouldn't come visit me in the winter, things like that, yeah.

So it was-- so my mother remarried, but I was never happy with-- I was never happy with him. I kept comparing him to my father, and it was difficult. He didn't understand me. I didn't understand him.

He lost his family. But we came to terms much later on, and we had a good relationship. But in the beginning, it was very hard, very hard.

Where was he from?

He was also from Czechoslovakia, the same town my mother was from.

Oh, right.

Yes, I mentioned it. But through him I met my husband, yes. My husband was a sole survivor from the Holocaust. He was in hiding. And he decided he'll come-- this was, of course, after the war, in 1947. I was 17.

And he decided he's coming to visit his uncle. He was-- my stepfather was his uncle through his first wife. The first wife was my husband's mother's sister. It's a little complicated.

But he had no other relative. My husband had no one left anymore from his mother's side. So he was coming here as a visitor, and he came straight into my house.

And he was also from Czechoslovakia?

He was also from Czechoslovakia. He and my mother later on had much in common. They talked for hours about the town, and the friends, and the relatives.

What was the name of the town?

Bardejov, Bardejov, yeah, Czechoslovakia.

So how old were you when you married?

18. Yeah. See, he stayed. He came to visit. Different than my father, he was a visitor, but he stayed. And I had my aunt and uncle. They survived, and they were living upstairs on the third from us. And I went to stay in their apartment while he was staying in my--

Yeah. This was an aunt and uncle from Czechoslovakia?

Yes, my mother's brother. One of them survived. One-- my mother was one of nine, and two brothers survived. And all my-- the aunt who was like my second mother-- she subsequently had two children, and she went back to Czechoslovakia. They were all killed, my mother's younger sister. I have some photos of my mother's siblings. They all perished. Yeah.

So maybe this would be a good time for us to stop.

Yeah.

And then we're going to set up the easel.

Oh, OK.

So you can show the documents and photographs and talk about it.

They stopped now?

We'll stop now.

OK, we're ready.

OK, why don't we start with this picture? How's that, Dan?

Too much glare. Turn the whole thing.

Is that better?

Turn it towards me. Let's see if that helps.

Like that?

A little more. A little more. OK, now back the other way, the other way. Back, back, back, back. Keep going, going, going, going, going going, going, going, going. Keep going. Keep going. Unfortunately, it's going to be at an angle.

Here?

Yeah, that's-- yeah.

OK. Would you tell us about this picture?

This picture was taken just before we left Berlin, and my mother left it for a friend of ours to remember us. And they were saved. They went to Argentina.

And years later, he came to visit America. It was like a special reunion. And he had this photograph. I hadn't had-- I didn't have it. And he said-- he gave it to me, and it's very meaningful for me.

So this was in 19--

This was--

--39, '40?

1939, '40, just before we left we left.

You left in January, you said--

We left in '40.

In January.

Probably end of '39.

I can even see the glare from here, Dan.

Yeah.

Yes. This was the picture in the park. I was playing across the street in the park when my father came along with his friend, and I was so happy. And you could see he was so proud of me. I was so proud of him. We took a picture.

So this was about--

It's the only picture that I have my father and I.

So this is about 1937?

This is 1937, before he left for America. Yeah, it's interesting. That was really the most interesting.

This is in 1971, April 1971. We went back. We went to-- Germany invited us to come back, and I wanted-- whatever had happened to me in Germany as a child, my good memories, my kindergarten, the park I played with-- it was so vague, like it happened to someone else, not-- it was just in my mind.

But to go back, and to be there, and to actually experience-- see it again, it brought back like a reality to me. This really did-- I was really there in this-- and I had a little bit of a childhood.

So I kept going back to-- there was an opportunity to do a lot of sightseeing because the German government, as a-- how do you say? Wiedergutmachung. They tried to-- but they were very-- they were OK in trying to make us happy, trying-- they said they could never make amends for what happened to us, but OK.

Nice, OK, but I wanted to do my own thing. I didn't-- I kept going back. I made my son come back three times to my house where I was born and lived and to the school, to the Jewish school that I went to.

And remarkably, I remember all the names of the streets. I told him, we're coming to this corner now. Now we're coming to this street. I don't know how that came back to me like that. It was pretty amazing.

And this--

He was amazed also.

And this picture?

It's the same picture as the photograph where I'm standing with my father. I found the spot. It was very easy for me. I found the spot, and at the exact same spot, across the street from the park, I'm standing there with my son now from 1937 to 1971. I'm not very good at math. It's about 69 year, something. 60 years? I'm back there with my son.

And my son was named after my father. His name is Yitzhak also, yeah. And he got the idea-- the reason I took him from the other children is because he was instrumental in getting me to go there. He started the ball rolling. He wrote to the German government that--

Do you know then-- in the park, where I remember-- the first signs were on the benches in the park, "Jews Forbidden." I kept sitting on that bench, getting up, sitting, getting up, and kept-- I just sat there, and I said, I'm sitting on the bench. And I had that feeling.

OK, let's get this-- I don't know if this is going to stay. Let me take the paper clip off.

Just hold that corner right there.

Yeah. These are the copies from the letters that my father wrote while he was-- he was in a concentration camp, but I guess he was able to smuggle out these letters to my mother, advising her what to do and yearning to be-- in each letter, yearning to be with his dearest, precious, wonderful family, to be reunited. He had that hope.

But every once-- as a matter of fact, when I told you in this letter they had to revive him and he had the feeling that he would never see us-- he had that feeling he would never see us again. But he said he kind of got a hold of himself, and afterwards he said, well, the war is not going to last forever. And maybe we will get-- he had to kind of-- it was a source of comfort for him to--

And this was written from France?

From France, yeah. And I missed him so much that finally I wrote a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt. Yeah, that's the letter. Because my mother was-- I was sleeping over by my friends, and my mother went to Washington for weeks at a time in order to get an interview with one of these congressmen, senators. And they assured her, yeah, they're going to work on it, and then I always got a reply, well-- should I read this letter?

Sure.

Oh, yeah?

And it's dated?

I wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt imploring her that she is a kind-- I heard she does so many good deeds for humanitarian reasons, and I wrote her that I have a father, and we would like to be reunited, he needs a visa, whatever. I don't remember. I remember I started the letter, "I am a girl, 12 years old." This was written in 1942.

And on November 2, 1942, I received a reply. "My dear Nelly, I have your recent letter addressed to Mrs. Roosevelt concerning the visa case of your father, Mr. [? Ignatz ?] Friedman, on which an unfavorable conclusion was reached after consideration by the Review Committee, the Board of Appeals." Can you imagine?

"Under the regulations adopted by the various agencies represented in the review procedure, a case may not be reconsidered by the Board of Appeals until after the lapse of a period of six months--" after all that was happening. People were dying by the-- "from the date of the-- after the lapse of a period of six months from the date of the previous disapproval. Under these regulations, it will be possible for the case of your father to be presented at any time after February 24, 1943." By that time he was already in Majdanek.

So they told my mother to be patient. They told me to be patient and wait. "You are assured that if the case is taken up with the department at that time, action therein will be expedited as much as possible and any additional facts, when made available, will be taken into consideration. Sincerely yours, HK Travis." And he signed it, "Chief Visa Division."

And all the other letters, the replies from the result of my mother's stay in Washington-- the same thing, each one of them. Wait six months, everything disapproved, signed Secretary of Interdepartmental Visa Review Committee, the case of [? Ignatz ?] Friedman. Yeah.

Then you had to submit B or C IRS forms to the attorneys of such person, made it very complicated. You know when they wrote my mother a favorable letter that something-- when he was already gone. Yeah.

So how many-- I got quite a-- I have all these letters as proof-- they're really important documents-- to show how indifferent they were to the Holocaust. And I don't know. I think people did know what was happening in Europe at the time, killings and things like that. They just didn't care.

Oh, you want me to show?

Yes, absolutely.

Oh, well, this is my family now. Yeah, it's wonderful. Yeah.

If you could just face that towards the camera.

Put it here?

Yeah, that's fine.

Well, I have four children, two girls and two boys, and they were married and have children. And now I have 15 grandchildren and about to have 11 or 12 great-grandchildren.

And when was this picture taken?

This picture was taken in 1998.

OK.

Yes. My daughter was-- my daughter, who lives in Israel-- my youngest daughter, Dina, who lives who lives in Israel, had an opportunity to come here with her children. And that was the first time that all my family at the time was together, could be together. So we decided on a family picture.

The great-grandchildren weren't here yet, but it was an opportunity. And I don't know when we'll ever have that chance again, when all the cousins-- maybe if my son, who lives in Chicago now, and my daughter and her married sons will come to Israel or-- we can all take another family picture again. My husband has, unfortunately, passed away, but my husband was still alive.

And we went to the park, and when I-- this is a copy. When we had the picture-- I have a huge picture in my house because it's the only one that I have of the family-- all my family together. So when I had it framed, the person in the frame-- who was framing it said, oh, this is a boys' school?

Of course, my daughter has seven sons and one daughter. The last one was the daughter. And my oldest daughter, [? Rivki, ?] she has three sons, and only my son in Chicago has two daughters and two sons. So my daughter in Israel had another girl, so that was seven sons and one girl. I call them Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And so that makes it 12 grandsons and three granddaughters.

All right. That's a beautiful family. Kinehora.

Thank you. Yeah.

OK, now if you'll tell us about this.

Oh, and this was 1995. The Red Cross was-- I don't know. I received a letter from the Red Cross that they are now-- they have access to files that the Germans kept. And for a long time I did not contact them because I thought, how would they even know?

But then somehow I did-- I thought it over. I did send for the application. And I was so surprised that someone called me about maybe six months later and said they would like to come see me in person. And they said that because of the-- well, you said it's not so meticulous, accurate, but in this case, it is accurate, that they found-- they found a records of what exactly happened to my father, that he was deported to Majdanek and ultimately taken to a death camp in Sobibor.

And you have his name on a list here?

This is the list of the convoy in which he was deported.

In this convoy-- it was under Eichmann. Eichmann was the commander. And I believe there were 1,000 people who were in his convoy, maybe over 1,000. Six were able to escape.

There's his name right there.

Yeah.

And this was the convoy 63 from Drancy, it says.

Yeah. I think only six were able to escape. Three were ultimately caught, and three made it, and one is still alive in Israel.

Have it, Dan?

So really until you received this letter you--

I used to think every once in a while, maybe he has amnesia, and he lost it, and that's why he didn't contact-- I always used to say, maybe he's still alive. I wasn't-- but realistically, I knew in my mind that he went to Auschwitz because after the war, it seemed that everyone was talking about Auschwitz. And we didn't-- it was like we didn't know anything. Like he kind of just vanished.

And here's the--

And until then I really didn't know.

Here's the page. It just documents that he was--

I was still a child. But now I can observe his *yahrzeit*. I know approximately-- I think, exactly when-- because they told me when he was deported and when they were gassed. So I used to keep his *yahrzeit*, a date out of-- out of the hat, so to speak. But now I keep it-- it was just a week ago, in March. Yeah.

So I have a idea of-- and I know the year. But that's it. I know for certain.

If there's--

Yeah.

If there's anything that you forgot to tell us or that we didn't discuss that you think you'd like to add, this would--

Yeah, I had some traumatic experiences while in Berlin. This was after my father was already in America, when the hatred for Jews was really in the open. And in the neighborhood, they knew who was Jewish, and I was known as a Jewish child.

And I'm walking in the street, and one of the neighborhood hoodlums comes from the back of me and slaps me in the face, gave me a real hard slap. I guess I was only-- I was barely nine years old.

And I just kept on walking. And then I turned around, and I see he's coming after me with a stick. He's looking for a stick, and he's coming-- but I was nearing a corner, and I ran right around the corner up in the house, up the five steps, shaking.

When I think about it, I'm still shaken-up. And this was like morning, and I stayed there until late at night. Meantime, my mother was-- I was afraid to come down.

This wasn't your house?

No, I just ran into a building as I-- I just had reached-- I don't know. I was just so lucky. I don't know what he would have done with me. And so-- well, anyway, my mother was frantic. She sent out looking for me. It wasn't like me not to come home. But I ventured out as it became dark, and I told her. So that's just one of the memories besides the *Kristallnacht*.

And then there was another-- I have another traumatic memory. I was sitting in a haircut salon, and this man was cutting my hair. And we got into a conversation, and I even-- and it was-- the bad times were-- and I even said, my father's not here or something. I was talking. I think I was afraid to say he's an American. I don't remember the conversation.

But he assumed I wasn't Jewish, and he was very nice. And then I said, [SPEAKING GERMAN], I'm Jewish, as the-- well, when he heard that, he practically cut me bald. He was cutting my hair, started to molest me a little bit. I was-- and it was terrible. The minute he heard I was Jewish-- yeah. He could do it. They felt that now we can-- we're free to do with whatever we can.

And another incident-- I was riding a tricycle. I had a tricycle, and another little kid came along and wanted it. And they took it away from me. There's no one-- no police that-- it wasn't mine anymore, these little things. Now, that I remember when I was quite very young. Yeah.

But the things like that-- you can imagine. That was just the beginning with the antisemitism.

Oh, I forgot to tell you the most important story that was-- oh, I don't know how I skipped that. When we were living with a family that we moved in, there were three other families living there together. And I think it was Rosh Hashanah morning. It was a holiday. And I was sleeping in this crib in the-- I didn't have a real bed.

But it was a thoroughfare, the apartment, like a railroad apartment, and 6 o'clock in the morning, the Nazis marched in. And there were two men in their underwear, the Jewish men from the family. They took them out. They marched in, these Nazis, at gunpoint told them, out, out, and through my room, at gunpoint, in their underwear, marched them out.

I was so frightened to see that. There must have been two-- and these were my mother's good friends. I can't really-- I don't know how I could have-- I must've just repressed that in my mind.

Two days later, my mother's crying. My mother and her friend-- they're sobbing like anything, terrible. They thought I didn't know. I don't know. I overheard the conversation. They sent back the ashes from these men that they took at gunpoint. They wrote them a letter, and here were the ashes.

You said if I knew about it. No one had to tell me. These things were just-- I knew it. Even my mother finally told me. She wouldn't have told me. Just from overhearing their crying like that-- but that's what they were doing.

And I remember thinking, oh, my father's in America, because they didn't harm the women and children, not yet, while I was there. They were taking the men off the streets and sending them to concentration camp. But this was so horrible.

I guess I didn't mention it earlier because it's too painful. That was something. Yeah. I know. I was so young, and this is so many years later. And it just sticks in my mind.

And considering what the people afterwards went through, I can't imagine. My story is perhaps not as horrible, but it's still-- for me, it left something that you can't forget.

Saying this was my child-- you can't impart that to young children today. They can't even imagine. And that's why, when we came to America-- living the way we did and hoping that my father would still be alive, we felt so fortunate.

It didn't matter that I didn't have steam that much and my mother was struggling. We were free. We were-- yeah. I always feel to this day-- it's like we came out of a fire unscathed. But not whole, yeah.

And it is-- it is unheard of that my father was already in America. He was one year in America, and he was enjoying the sunshine, too, in the summer because he suffered from rheumatism. And he said he feels healthy again somehow, and summers at the beach-- it was like a healing process.

And then he went back in 1939. He thought Belgium-- he went to Belgium because Belgium was neutral at the time. But-- I don't know-- he must have been there six months, and Hitler overran Belgium. It was unbelievable. Yeah.

It's an upside down world.

Well, I thank you very, very much for coming and sharing this with us today.

Well, OK, I think it's important, right?

Well, we appreciate it.

To have to have been in America in 1939 and to go back-- and if not for my father, my mother and I would not be alive. He felt-- he missed us so badly-- it's something that-- it's hard to believe, right? Yeah.

Well, thank you again for coming.

Yeah. I'm glad.

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