

RG-50.751*0002
Oral history interview with Gertie Skalsky
Interview conducted by telephone.

Gertie Skalsky. This is Sydney, Australia, June 7, 1994

Mrs. Skalsky was a young girl in the concentration camps.

DP: Mrs. Skalsky, what city did you come from, where were you born?

GS: I was born in [inaudible], which is a town in Czechoslovakia on the German border, very close to Dresden. And the town had quite a big Jewish community. I don't know what it is like in America, but the whole city had maybe 60,000, 50,000 in terms of population, 60,000, maybe there were 10,000 Jewish families. And I just grew up there. But in this raising Nazis was in the 30's. I had already observed persecution of course in 1932 and 1933. I started school - I was in a Jewish day school which was housed in a non-Jewish building. So there were only like rented out two classrooms and we had two composite classes there. And first I went to public school, it was I think 1935 and there were already all those Germans living there, all wanting back to Germany and [inaudible] Reich, they were screaming in line and all those negotiations there with England whether part of Austria should be annexed to Germany. And it looked like it would be so we packed our suitcase and left that town. And lived somewhere in private until we found a little flat in Prague because a lot of people left like us. Those people who lived inside in Czechoslovakia in [inaudible] other towns. They were still at home, but we left already on September '38. And Mr. Chamberlain and all these political things - the Germans annexed the Sudeten on September '38. So after everything started with the fall of the Jews till March '39, when we were all occupied by the German army and all racial laws started to apply like in Germany the Nuremberg Laws. And they expelled Jews from schools and putting the star on our clothes and restriction on not walking on the street after eight o'clock at night, and not in the [inaudible] and not in the park and similar like the apartheid was now

in South Africa. And so then we had to bring our jewelry and valuable items and they started to register us. And with the registration we already felt something is going to happen to us. I think in the early 40's they transported already 5,000 people to the east. To the east there was Poland, so that the first transports were going to Lodz.

DP: When was this?

GS: I think it was early '41. And after there was nothing for a few months, and in November, 1941 they called up, I think, I don't know whether it was 500 or 800 young men, going to Theresienstadt. Do you saw this maybe in the museums? Do you know anything about it, Theresienstadt and what it was: a garrisontown with no more population, and the Czech army was there in big stone barracks, I think five of those barracks. After the occupation of Germany, we didn't need the Czech army. So they had to be moved out, and the Czech population had to be moved out too and they brought the Jews in. And I think Hitler wanted to have this as an example of how he is treating the Jews for the Red Cross and for political reasons and promised those fighters who were in the First World War to be somewhere secure, so he is going to resettle them there. So at first they thought they are going to move, and it was not such. A lot of the Czech population that lived there we couldn't go out. We lived there under curfew; we had to have a pass to go out whenever we had to work. Anyhow, they prepared those young men, prepared in those barracks, those bunks and whatever was necessary for fit to put some people in. And when it was prepared, the first transport started to go in December '41. And they called those people who were registered, town after town. We got transport numbers, and usually 1,000 people at a time moved into the ghetto, and we were called ghetto, with its own autonomy. There were all services provided.

DP: I have to ask you, I have to tell you, do you know that you are being recorded, do I have your permission? Please answer. Hello. Okay, do I have your permission to record this?

GS: I don't know what is the legal thing, I know Olga Horub. You know her from the museum?

DP: Yes. I have your name from Olga Horub from the museum and I am writing...

GS: I tell this to people every day.

DP: Okay, do I have your permission to use your testimony in a book I am writing?

GS: I wrote a book myself for my children.

DP: Do you have the book?

GS: I wrote the book, I wrote and typed what I am telling you now, roughly the same or similar things, I wrote for my children. It is typed and photocopied it, maybe 99 pages for the book. I have six grandchildren, I wanted them to know what was during the war. I talked about it first and then wanted to write it.

DP: Would we have your permission to use it in a book?

GS: [inaudible]

DP: Uh-huh.

GS: You don't have to name me there.

DP: If you don't want us to name you, we won't name you.

GS: [inaudible]

DP: No, we would just call you Mrs. S, would you prefer that? We would just call you Mrs. S. Would you prefer that? Would we have your permission to write your testimony in this book? Okay, just calling you Mrs. S, we won't, okay we have your permission and you know you are being taped. Okay, okay, I am going to have to ask you to go on from when you were arrested, is that okay? Do you have time to do this?

GS: We had I think paper bandages from somewhere, I don't know where it came from, certainly it was too little. I think people did it tearing up sheets and make bandages out of that. Because people had those ulcers of the legs, just older people with [inaudible] as you know how badly this is healing. Well we had people who worked in the kitchen and they cut themselves and they had to be dressed, young people.

You had other infections, I remember we had this black ointment, ichthium was told what we put in and some warm on it [inaudible]. People didn't have Vitamins, therefore everything was more infected than anywhere else and had to be cut because we had no antibiotics to give them like now they don't help anyhow anymore as they say. And medication, I remember a boy, a friend of mine, was as old as I am, he died from endocarditis, [inaudible] called today, maybe wouldn't exist anymore, this is an inflammation of the layer inside the heart and he had septicemia and he had in the morning and in the evening the shivers and he died in my arms. I had in one night, I had in one room ten deaths which had to be wheeled out on a wheel barrow. At that time in the ghetto, they had still no more burial, they buried the people in coffin, but it was after a while there were so many that they had to build a crematorium and burn them because there was no room to bury thousands of people who came through the ghetto, 140,000 people and only 17,000 survived. So from Holland, from Denmark.

DP: You were telling me about blood transfusions. How did they do blood transfusion?

GS: Blood transfusions, you had two people with two syringes in their hands, they were boiled, they were sterilized, and the one pulled out of your vein the blood, handed the full blood to the other doctor, he put it in the vein, then the needle was in the vein sticking and the empty syringe came back to him and he pulled out another one so you exchanged the syringes from one to the other. It was no drip set or something what you have now, it was from one person to the other. There was no AIDS symptoms and whatever, it was a question of life, and he survived. It was then my father-in-law and he died after the war in '76, he survived Theresienstadt. If he wouldn't have got my blood, maybe he wouldn't. I never got anything for it, I think what I got was maybe taken from the children, maybe one glass of milk. We haven't seen for three years was milk; it was only for the little children, what we got on ration cards and I got a glass of milk after I gave them blood, I remember. I was sick myself quite often. I got a high fever for 24 hours and after it was gone and no one knew what it was. Every 4-5 weeks I got a high fever one

day and it was gone the next day. Who knows what it was.

DP: How did you get medications, you told me about medications.

GS: I asked the doctor who worked there in Germany and they said they got their medications from the liquidated surgeries, the doctor brought this with them, or from the nursing home or there were from Vienna and in those big cities there were Jewish hospitals so when it was liquidated, so they brought in some of those trollies with them and he meant an operating table, or some of those things were in the hospital already. So they brought those medications and those doctors in the pharmacy there, maybe with the help of a pharmacist, they assembled those drugs so someone had ten tablets of that, and the other ten tablets of it they put enough, enough that one patient can be treated. Certainly they put it to the young people, not to the old people if it was a question of survival. Only because some wore a flower I think for the typhoid people because the Germans were afraid it would spread to them, the typhoid fever, I think out the thought that they will get it to is what they were afraid of. There were infectious disease too, scarlet fever, and there were only beds. We couldn't do anything. I can't remember seeing that there were maybe a dozen trained nurses. I think it was not the profession in the past which Jewish girl used to do, I think that they did everything else but not nursing. So I worked only - there was one from Vienna, she was a nurse and she would tell me what to do, and this I did not knowing whether it is right or not. I can't remember that I would ever take a blood pressure to people so maybe the hospital only had one machine. Just the minimum, like in war time I suppose, in the field. I saw yesterday on this D-day they had already on this patient drips up the Normandy which we didn't have.

DP: Can you describe the clinics at all? Can you describe the infirmary or the clinic?

GS: The clinic. There was one room in that hospital, one room which had a cupboard and a table and you brought the people in one after the other and just did what was possible to do. If you need a dressing and you had it, you put it on. If you had a sore throat, they just had to coat it so you didn't have it. Maybe

you had some aspirins or something.

DP: How many were there in Theresienstadt?

GS: People?

DP: How many clinics were there in Theresienstadt?

GS: Each of those big barracks housed 2,000 people, they had one, what you called, one sick-bay, like the army used to have. One sick bay with ten or twelve beds and whoever was sick came into the bunk there. If someone needed to be treated, so they left there them in the bunk. It was on thosside we treated whatever was possible. That's why we had the sick. The old people died so much because there was no treatment for them. Malnutrition, you had to see these conditions beyond comparison from not having vitamins and not having enough meat. There were diseases which you normally don't see, so women lost their periods. I think 95% of women didn't menstruate for years. Just as well, we wouldn't have anything to use for hygiene. We were very lucky to have a possibility to heat some water and wash ourselves in a wash basin with warm water, otherwise, it is would be specially for the military. They have these big troughs with, I don't know how many taps with cold water so we had to wash ourselves with cold water from our center. But still was this maybe the best ghetto from all other - that we were called ghetto. And Red Cross came to inspect. In June, '43 they painted up one street, put up an orchestra, they had children singing, they performed, they made up ghetto money printed, they made up a shop where they put clothing for they took off people who went to Auschwitz or who died. We couldn't buy anything and they did it this in one street. The Red Cross car came, didn't look to the right and didn't look to the left. They thought, oh, this is quite alright here and they left. But in April, '45 when they came again when already the Allies came and they liberated those camps. In, I think, April '45 they renamed that ghetto into a concentration camp. Up to then it was called a ghetto but they renamed it, it was as bad as a concentration camp.

DP: Did you go to Auschwitz?

GS: Yes, I went with my mother and my sister on the 23rd of October, '44. We were lucky enough because my mother was a very tall, good looking woman. The Mengele or whoever was there to select these people, 2,000 of us, asked her how old she was and she said 41 and shoved to one side, the right side and my sister and myself, we walked behind her. We were in a group of 200 people selected for going to work. We were shaved, everything was taken from us. We got one of those outfits - I don't know whether it was the striped one, I can't remember, because I was very upset there, I wouldn't have anything in my mouth for these 8-10 days and I wanted to go to the electric fryer, my sister who was younger said if you want to go, you go, I want to live and I think when a train was available they put us back on the train, 200 of us were selected, and went to Germany, in an ammunition factory. We worked there in 12 hour shifts, some people outside. In the beginning of April, when the war was already going to the end, they came and appeared to be moved and the extermination camp we were going to Mauthausen. We got told to go and they loaded us again on an old cattle truck and you couldn't get through anywhere. We were pulled on the truck backwards and forwards and eventually we were over the border Czech, and we ended up in Theresienstadt again because it was geographically the closest camp. It was already maybe one week before the war finished. That was it. And there were thousands of other people from other camps coming on a death march and came to Theresienstadt and were quite sick, they were taken to Sweden and they were taken all over, to states to be treated and still thousands died after the war, after liberation, they were so sick that nothing helped.

DP: Did you work as kind of a nurse there after, you know, after you went back to Theresienstadt?

GS: No, no, no we were there only, I think we came on the 5th or something and on the 8th was the finished now, we were only bathed and not even that, shower. When the Russian tanks rolled over, we went on those Russian tanks to Prague. And after I took up the nursing school, after the war, I started in

September, '45 and took up nursing then. I am now retired but I worked here 19 years as a nurse, I was registered [inaudible]. We came from Czechoslovakia only 1969, after the Russian invasion, I lived there under communism for 21 years, already [inaudible] for 12 years.

DP: Can you tell me anymore about your nursing experiences in Theresienstadt?

GS: I don't think I can remember, let me think of anything more. I know only that we didn't have the medication and we couldn't treat the patient what they had so they just died. Escape from pain, we didn't have anything to give them, only little. I don't know how they got, I think they must have put some medication in school through the Germans, as they had even in Auschwitz some so they must have got some, so I think you had to decide whether you give a tablet to young person because old they had a chance to survive.

DP: What about obstetrical cases, who delivered babies?

GS: Babies?

DP: There were some babies born.

GS: I can't remember any born, but I think there was maybe one or two. I know one was born in a concentration camp in Germany three months before the war finished and he is a cardiologist in Melborn I heard. They wrapped it in the rags. Any of those inmates in the camp gave the mother half of their portions to have the food that she develop milk and she brought the child home to Prague, a three month old baby. I don't know, I read a book where a woman delivered a baby in Auschwitz and killed it with an injection because the Mengele lets her find the breasts, whether she was developing milk or not and he was looking for the baby and the baby was gone. She slipped out somewhere and she survived and lives in Israel and has got two other children. So all these things have...

DP: No, I just want your nursing experiences.

GS: I couldn't tell because I was actually not the nurse; I was only the helper. I was washing the people, I made

them comfortable as they could, maybe I gave them some either cold water in a cold water bottle or hot water in a hot water bottle when it was desired. You see, some diseases didn't appear there, the diabetics were not sick there because with not much food, the sugar got less. I can't tell you what I did. I know I had an apron over me from plastic, see through plastic or whatever it was, "bilroe?" we called it. And I was there every day from 7 until, I don't know, till 3 and from 1 till 10 and from 10 till morning on those shifts and I can't remember what normal here you go and normal go and take the blood pressure, we took some pressures. There were some thermometers. The food came and the patient couldn't eat so we fed them with the spoon and we come the next day and ten were gone because they died.

DP: What about physicians, were there German doctors or Jewish doctors?

GS: They were all Jewish doctors of course. Physicians came over from Holland and from Germany and from Austria and from Czechoslovakia, there were hundreds of them.

DP: Were they allowed to work as doctors?

GS: Ya, they worked as doctors because today you had a thousand doctors and the next transport five hundred left away and there were so many doctors around there. Those who were left behind, had to work double. So there was in each transport there were some doctors in it going to Auschwitz. It was a frequent turnover of people; they worked pretty hard. In September '43, in one month they sent 5,000 people away, out of this 5,000 people there may be a few hundred doctors maybe. It was very hard to feel. They were good doctors, university professors. I remember there was one surgeon from Prague and a non professor and she wanted always, I don't know, he had an ulcer on his foot, he was an older man already and he only wanted from me the dressing, that I what I put on made it as clean as it could be. To put it as he always waited for me that I put the dressing on his leg.

DP: Why is that? Why did he only want you?

GS: He liked me but he trusted me that what I put on will be clean and it was lasting. I was the only girl

there, they were all medical students otherwise working there.

DP: And what medication did you put on the wound to clean it?

GS: I can't remember, Iodine and some ointment, it was yellow-orange colored ointment, I don't know, I never saw this after the war. What you had may be already old, might be already expired. That would be put on, whatever was there that it doesn't stick to it.

DP: Did you ever hear of the medication called Eleudron? I don't know, one of the people was telling me she gave Eleudron.

GS: Eludron? This is a medication?

DP: Yes.

GS: I never heard about it. Maybe I was not even allowed to give it because I was not a nurse. Maybe the doctors gave this out. I can't remember that [inaudible]. I can't even remember if there was a medication cupboard, there was maybe only like on the wall what was left from the, maybe they brought in some left from the Czech army, what was left behind. I think even prisoners they had some medication because they had some even in Auschwitz, they had Morphine, so some they had but how it was distributed and where they got it from, I don't know.

DP: In Auschwitz, was Morphine in Birkenau in the women's barracks or just in the men's?

GS: I don't know, I was in Auschwitz only a few days. I know this only from books. I know what that woman I told you who had a baby in Auschwitz, her friend was a doctor in that Krankenbau, the sick bay, and she said, look, you can kill the baby but not me as a doctor. So she gave her a syringe of some sort, I think a baby eight days old or five days old wouldn't need very much to give to be killed because they didn't have any milk, there was nothing for the child to get because Mengele came and looked at the baby, I don't know, what else was [inaudible] but usually, I don't know, there must only be single things. If someone got pregnant in there, I think they had the abortion done in Theresienstadt because to move into - to have

a baby there with the uncertainty.

DP: I know you are in a hurry and I don't want to keep you, is there anything else that you think is important that you.

GS: I was sick after this. I was there 2½ years.

DP: In Theresienstadt?

GS: And the other half year was in a slave labor camp sent from Auschwitz.

DP: Where?

GS: It was in Germany.

DP: What was it called?

GS: Oederan. It was not even a factory; it was a little town where there was a factory, maybe they had the ammunition factories hidden.

DP: How do you spell it?

GS: O-e-d-e-r-a-n. There were only a few hundred women of us.

DP: Did you work as a nurse there?

GS: No, no, no, no, no.... I made bullets on the machine in two shifts.

END OF TAPE