

It worked very, very well. Obviously, my mother and my sister, and I'm sure the other parents and adults, and the other children's families were not thrilled with our undertaking. But they couldn't stop us. They were going to work every day. And we were left to ourselves. And so we did use the tunnel a number of times.

I especially remember one incident where-- before I must again go back. Before we moved in-- moved in-- before we were herded into the ghetto, after my father was taken away, and we were still in our own house, my mother in her infinite wisdom, decided to get together all her jewelry. Now mind you, we were not rich. Mine was an educator's family. But whatever jewelry, whatever little money my mother had, she gathered it together and she divided it into three. And she sewed it into our clothing.

I had a jacket and my mother said, now, I'll put whatever is your part into that jacket. I'll sew it in. Don't ever leave it. Always have it with you. And she said this was for a rainy day. And so my sister, and I, and my mother had some jewelry in our clothing. One time, when mother and sister were at work, and it was my turn to go out of the ghetto via the camouflaged tunnel, I did manage to buy two eggs for a gold and ruby ring, my mother's obviously.

And I was coming back. I was trying to reach the camouflaged opening on the outside. But I was caught before I reached the opening. And there was this Ukrainian guard. He searched me and I remember I was wearing a dress with two puff sleeves. And that's where I put my eggs, one in each sleeve. He found the eggs. He broken them through on the sidewalk and rubbed my face in them. And then he yelled at me to go back where I belonged, and never to come out again.

He was one of the rare kind-hearted guards. He gave me back my life. My bloody face healed, and I had my life. And a few days later, one of my friends went outside and did buy a half a loaf of bread. She was caught and shot right there. And the Germans wouldn't even allow us to bury her. She had to be on display on the hill in the ghetto for a number of days as an example of what not to do.

Charlene, there's so much more for you to talk about, and I want to be sure that we get to the rest of it. And so before we move, though, to the next ghetto that you went into, do tell us about the experience when your sister got sick and you took her place.

One time, my sister became ill. And if she didn't report for work, she would not get her food ration. And food was very, very critical for us, obviously. I was 4 and 1/2 years younger than my sister. But I tried to persuade my wonderful mother to allow me to take my sister's place, and so that we would get the ration, the food ration. It took a long time, and I was rather good, maybe, I should have been a lawyer or something. But I did manage to persuade my mother to allow me to take my sister's place the next morning.

And so when we got up early in the morning, we shared our meager meal. My sister was too ill to even get out of bed. And mother and I walked out, and she went into her group where mostly she was digging ditches and fixing roads. And she showed me where the group of the older girls was congregating, and that's where my sister usually was with these older girls. The girls took me in, protected me, and we all marched to the warehouse which was-- it was an old warehouse on the outside of the ghetto, where my sister and the older girls had a rather good job. They were knitting articles of clothing for the German soldiers on the front.

And so the girls, the older girls, showed me where my sister was sitting. And I took my place there. And picked up the two knitting needles, and started knitting. I don't recall exactly. But it was something simple like a scarf or something. Ordinarily, that would be fine because most of the time this warehouse was guarded by Ukrainian guards. And they didn't pay particular attention to individuals as long as you were sitting and knitting, and you were there, that was fine.

But as my luck would have it, on that day, a group of Germans came for inspection, or who knows what. Just my luck. And this group of Germans burst in to the warehouse and spread out among the people who worked there. One German, in particular, zeroed in on me. He stood behind me and watched me for a while and then started cursing in German and yelling Schneller! Schneller! Meaning faster, faster.

And the more he yelled at me, the slower I was knitting. And finally, he became very angry with me. He jumped in front of my face, was spitting, and cursing, and yelling, and he pulled the two needles out of my hands and stuck one of them in my right forefinger. I passed out, and there were no medications, no doctors in the ghetto. And I developed an infection, and consequently I did lose the tip of my right finger, right forefinger.

But the saddest thing, I didn't get the food ration that night. And actually, they told me I was fortunate that this German didn't kill me. This is just one example of what was going on in the ghetto. I know we are limited by time. But there were episodes of brutality and sadism by the Germans and by the Ukrainians that made no sense, and really didn't give them any benefit of any-- getting something. It was just for them to see us suffer. And this was just one example.

Charlene, several times you've mentioned that you didn't get a ration, which meant that since you were a child and not working, that your mom and your sister had to take their small rations and then share with you.

That's right.

So every day, you were eating less than even the meager ration that you would have gotten individually had you had a ration. You were then forcibly soon at some point, forcibly moved to yet another ghetto. And that's very, very critical to the rest of your story.

Yes. Well, what was happening, sometimes I'm asked, how did you play as children in the ghetto? Well, our main play was dreaming of what we would like to eat when the war was over. But anyway, this was going on in the ghetto, in the main ghetto. But by spring, the population in the ghetto dwindled considerably because many people died of starvation, or were taken away in the roundups that occurred every week, at least once a week, where people were grabbed before, or after, or during work, and never heard from again.

And so the Germans decided we had too much space. And so they herded us into a smaller ghetto, which was actually in a part of the town even more in greater disrepair than the first ghetto was. Now this ghetto was also enclosed by high wooden fences that were finished off with barbed wire. But there was one very important thing. This ghetto was bordering a river in our town that this river divided our town from a neighboring village.

And we were, again, assigned a new space to live. And luckily for us, my mother, sister, and I were assigned to a house right on the river. Now that side was not guarded, and there was no fence. You can't put a fence in a river. And at that time, again, it was very, very difficult, even more difficult than in the first ghetto. But at that point, rumors started circulating that the ghetto would be liquidated that summer.

And again, when I use the term liquidation, I am using this word because this is the way the Germans referred to the fact that they wanted and would kill, murder, all the Jews, liquidate. Well, these rumors started, and I'm sure that most of the adults realized that in order to survive, you needed a hiding place.

Now, my mother worked digging ditches and fixing roads on the outside of the ghetto. And she still had some contacts. And so she desperately started looking for someone to hide us, the three of us. She wasn't able to locate one place. But she was fortunate enough to locate two places, two farmers, one farmer was willing to hide one person, and the other farmer was willing to hide two people.

And now, my poor mother had to divide our small family. And that was a very difficult task, I am sure. But in her infinite wisdom, she decided that my sister who was 4 and 1/2, almost 5 years older than I, would go to the single place when the time was right. And mother and I would go to the other farmer's place when it was needed, when we needed to leave the ghetto.

One day, I got up early in the morning. And we ate our meager breakfast. And I had to say goodbye to my terrific big sister because she was going straight from work to the place that mother secured for her. And we promised each other that we would keep in touch while in hiding. How? I have no idea. But that was mother's job.

That evening, when mother came home from work, we didn't hear anything. It was quiet. And so we assumed that

everything went as planned and that my sister was secure in her hiding place. Two days later, my mother came home from work and there was an awful lot of activity in the ghetto. There were more Germans, and more Ukrainians, and there was a feeling of doom already. And so my mother decided that was the time for us to leave and go into hiding.

And so we ate our meager dinner. Mother told me to put on my best clothes and shoes, and also to take an extra set of clothing with me. She packed a small bundle for herself and one for me. She kept giving me all sorts of directions, how to get to the farmer's place. But I knew where the farmer lived, because we used to buy dairy products from him before the war. And also one of his daughters attended the same school as I did before the war.

It was rather scary. As I held onto mother's hand, and we stepped out into the darkness of a still night, soon we were in the river. Suddenly, shots rang out. They were sporadic, but we couldn't move because it was quiet in between [AUDIO OUT] giving us away. And so we stayed in the river. Early that morning, other people also came into the river. That was the only opening and that was the only way one could escape from the ghetto, because the other three sides were guarded and watched by guards 24 hours a day.

At that time, the sporadic shots were more regular at this point. They were no more sporadic and we could hear the guards yelling, come out, Jew. We can see you and many Jews did that they came up with their arms raised high above their heads. Mother kept me still, and said, stay put. Stay put.

Charlene, just to interrupt for a quick second. The river banks, you had rushes and things like that, so it wasn't completely exposed.

That's right.

OK.

But I was in the water up to my neck. And what was very difficult is to stand up, you couldn't sit down. You couldn't bend down, because I would drown. And unfortunately, this was going on for a number of days. We heard cries, babies crying, and we heard screams coming from the ghetto. And we saw fire and smoke. And the yells kept continuing. And in Ukrainian, it was [NON-ENGLISH] meaning I can see you. Come out.

And most of the people did come out. But we didn't. I kept dozing off. And it was very difficult to sleep standing up. But leaning on the bulrushes, that was the only way I could do that. And I remember at one point, my mother gave me some soggy bread, and it tasted awful. But she insisted I had to eat it to keep strong.

And then one day, and this was for several days like this, and one day I dozed off, and lost track of time. And when I woke up, my mother was gone. I became numb with fear. And I don't think I moved for the rest of that day. And by that evening, all became quiet. I felt that my mother probably couldn't wake me up, and she made her way to the farmer by herself.

And so I had to make my way to the farmer's place, which was on the other side of the river. And so I crossed the river and walked most of that night, and finally ended up at the farmer's place. And when I showed up the farmer wouldn't even invite me to the house. And he greeted me as if I were a stranger, and not-- he wasn't very happy to see me.

I asked him if my mother was there. And he said, no. He hadn't seen her. And I said well, please, let me wait just until mother would show up. And he just shrugged his shoulders, and said, no. I cannot allow you to do that. I'll allow you to stay the day, and then you must go or else I'll report you to the authorities. And I looked at him really in bewilderment because we knew this guy, and he did promise my mother that he would hide us. But he didn't want to have anything to do with that.

Ironically, he was wearing his dirty coveralls. And there I saw my father's pocket watch and chain hanging from his pocket. That evening, he didn't even come out. I was in the barn. And his wife came and gave me some bread and an apple. And told me to leave. And this was really the beginning of my odyssey. I was completely confused, and scared, and really in terror. I have never been alone before. And I didn't know what to do.

But even then, I felt, well, I guess my mother must have escaped into the forests that are bound in that area of Poland. And I'll find her in the forests. And I felt somehow that I disappointed her, and I let her down by falling asleep and not waking up when she probably tried to wake me to go to the farmer's place or to the forests.

And so I started searching for her in the forests that abound nearby. Only what looked very near, you look at a forest, and it looks like it's right nearby. But really it isn't, and I walked the whole night, that first horrible evening, night. And I finally ended up in a forest. This forest was very, very bare. It didn't have much underbrush. And I tried to make some sense out of my situation. But it was beyond me.

You're not quite 13 years of age yet. You're still 12.

That's right. But I felt that I have to go from forest to forest until I find my mother. Maybe deep in my mind and my brain, I realized that I will never find her. But I could not allow myself to think that. And so I started going from forest to forest, searching for my mother.

One incident, again, right in the beginning, is kept indelible in my mind, because it involved others. Before I describe this incident, I want to say that the very first few weeks, I met other stragglers who were in the same predicament as I. And they escaped from their ghettos when their ghettos were being liquidated. You see, Hitler had his plan, and he was going systematically in that area from ghetto to ghetto, trying to wipe out, eradicate the Jews.

One time, I ended up at the edge of a forest, and this forest also had very little underbrush. But there at the edge of the forest, there were six other people. They were sitting in a circle, and they were talking among themselves. I couldn't believe my eyes. But I listened carefully, and I understood that they were speaking in Jewish, in Yiddish. And so I joined them. And we were trying to compare places where to get food, where to hide, if they found other survivors.

And as we were having this sad conversation, there was a group of youngsters from a village who spotted us, and they knew. Someone asked me when I was relating this story, how did they know you were Jewish? Well, we were unkempt. We were dirty. We didn't look like we washed. And that's the way they recognized that we were Jews.

And these kids saw us and they yelled Jews, with glee. And ran back to the village. You see, there was a small remuneration, a small monetary reward for reporting a Jew. And so we had to hide. There was nowhere to hide in that forest because there was no underbrush. It was harvest time, and there were huge haystacks around. And we all hid in one haystack.

Why we all hid in that one haystack, I cannot explain. But we did. And when the farmers, when the villagers and the kids returned, it didn't take long for them to zero in on the one haystack. They came with pitchforks. And made a game of it. They were joking and laughing among themselves, and hitting the haystack with the pitchforks. By the end of their amusing games, I was the only one left alive.

I waited until it became quiet, and made my way out of the haystack. And to my horror, I saw six of the mutilated bodies of my companions earlier that day. They were completely undressed, and their shoes were removed. And the little baby-- there was a little baby with her mother. The little baby was put on the mother's chest.

Charlene, you spent-- and there's just unfortunately not enough time to really spend a lot on this. And you then spent the next two years alone in those forests, somehow getting the minimal amount of nourishment. How did you manage that?

Well. I was young and I felt enormous guilt for not waking up, I guess, when my mother disappeared. And I still felt that I must find my mother, and I must stay well. But there were times when I was giving up. There were times when I lost my faith. There were times when I was near death. But against all these obstacles, somehow I did survive. And I cheated death. It was always one step behind me.

You occasionally were able to get food from farmhouses, from root cellars.

No. No, I could not get anything from farmhouses, because the dogs were my enemy, as much as the humans were. It's an amazing thing, because the animals in the forests were with me. And they treated me like one of their own. And they never harmed me. As a matter of fact, they lent me their warmth, and they protected me.

But the dogs in the villages were my real enemy. They never ceased to announce my presence by barking loudly, and at times by biting ferociously. I could never get into a barn where I was not announced by the dogs. But I did somehow persevere. And in the last year, I began to eat insects, worms, and the like. Because I wanted to stay alive.

It was difficult. But somehow I persevered. And I want to tell you that hunger and thirst are terrible. And being afraid of humans is horrific. But being all alone and not hearing another human voice was just as painful, and it is something that I don't know--