

Mother wasn't there. She ran after my brother. And when we got to the place-- and I also want to say this. They had it planned so well because as we were walking, we walked to the showers. But the other people walked to the gas chamber. There was music playing in the back. And I didn't see the musicians. But I saw, going, they had flowerbeds on the side, trees. You would never think that the back of these trees, they're gassing my family there. You couldn't believe it. But that's what it was. The gas chambers were in the back of these trees.

And we finally got where they took us. They took us, actually, to take showers. And they told us to get undressed. And they shaved our heads. And these Germans were running around, the monsters were running around there. Excuse me. They were running around there. And they smiled and have a good time. And it took a long time until they were finished with us because they shaved our heads, and they gave us a shower, and then they gave us a striped dress in a ball, a reddish ball, and clogs for the feet, clogs.

Clogs.

The wooden--

Wooden shoes.

Yeah. And finally, it was already past 12 o'clock, maybe 2:00, 3 o'clock because there were a lot of girls to deal with. And they took us to a barrack. I wish I could show it too. Here. These are the barracks.

The bunks?

The bunks-- the bunks where we slept. And we went up on the third bunk. We couldn't sleep. We couldn't sleep. So I looked out, and the bunks were made out of wood or something. But there was a crack. And I see people were hanging like this on the electric wires. But I didn't know that they were electric wires. So I say to my sister, listen, Sylvia, this is not a farm. Why would these people hang on these wires? But they didn't take people off until there was plenty. And then--

So they had been electrocuted.

They were electrocuted. They wanted to run away. And matter of fact, I have one picture here, how he is trying. And he got caught. But the ones that I saw, they were hanging on. They weren't. Then a crew came after a while. And they took them off with a pitchfork. Because if they would touch them, they would also be electrocuted.

Well, my sister says, OK. It's going to be daylight. We'll see where we are. But they didn't let us out. They brought in that coffee. It looked like coffee, but it wasn't coffee. And they gave us a slice of bread. And they put us back into the barrack. And that's where we were, in that barrack. They didn't put us to work in Auschwitz because they were trying to collect a group to send to Germany to work in a ammunition factory. And that's where I wound up working.

Several weeks later, right?

Weeks.

Weeks, yeah.

Not too long. And that's what it was. So we already saw that the wires are electric wires. And they don't give you-- and at night, we got some soup. And the soup was made out of the peel. The Germans didn't have that much food themselves-- not that I feel sorry for them. But occasionally, there was a potato, occasionally. But we could know that it's made out of potatoes, potato peel, we found.

And then they got us together, maybe 2,000 girls. They took us to the train. And when they put us in the train and when they closed the doors, all of a sudden, we hear bombs falling. They were so close. And we were very happy. We never

thought, oh, OK, the bomb will fall on this train because we left family yet in the back. And we said, they're going-- they won't come to Auschwitz.

So from there, Helen, they sent you to a slave labor camp.

Yes, in Germany.

Tell us what you were made to do at the slave labor camp.

OK. There was a machine that was turning round and round. And I had to take one of those empty shells and put it there in the middle. And then I had to pull down handles. And yellow Sprengstoff, it was very hot.

It's a form of gunpowder that you put in there.

Yeah, I would say gunpowder. But they called it Sprengstoff. And I used to get burned because I had to pick up that whole shell, a heavy shell. I couldn't do it with my hands. So I had to pick it up with my whole body and put it in that wagon. Well, it wasn't an easy thing because I was breathing in the poison. And we had a night shift and a day shift. So the day shift was a little better because they opened up the doors. And at night, they were afraid it's going to be bombed. So they closed everything, the windows, and so there was no ventilation at all.

And it was very toxic. I mean, it affected the color of your skin and everything, right?

Oh, everything-- my eyes were reddish. My little bit of hair was orangey. People were just fainting out of the poison. Well, that was going on. And one day, I felt that I will not be able to make it to this factory. So what I said to myself, I don't know how to kill myself. I'm just not going to go out to Zahlappell. I'll drink a little bit more. And I'm just going to lay there.

And my sister was looking for me. And I wasn't there. And she came in. And she knew where I was. And she found me. And she grabbed me and started shaking me. I thought she went crazy. And I want to die. So that's the end. And then she cried. And I cried. And she was bribing me. And she was giving me a piece of bread.

And I'll give you a piece of bread, just please, hold on because we promised these people that went to the gas chamber. They thought the world didn't know. I think the world knew. It's just the victims didn't know. Because this really never happened, they should bring children and girls. We cried a little bit and cried. But then she pulled me out because I don't know what they would have done with me. I really don't. But I feel they would have done away with me. But that's what I wanted to be, I wanted to die.

But Sylvia was insisting--

Yes.

--that you stay with her and--

Yeah.

--go forward.

And we stayed for the Zahlappell. And she was holding my back, I should stand up straight. And I didn't have the energy.

For the roll call, she's holding you up out.

She says, stand up straight because they were going around yet. Whoever didn't stay straight or whoever looked sickly-- well, I looked sickly. But they would take him out and take him to the gas chamber. So she was trying so bad to stay.

Says, remember, we promised that we'll tell the world? And we have to live this truth so we can tell the world. She always-- I think if she wouldn't be there, I-- probably, I would done away with me because I couldn't take the pain. I couldn't take the cold. I couldn't take the hunger. I just didn't have enough strength to try to live it through. And she had the strength because she promised that she needs to tell this to the world.

So Sylvia was able to help keep you going.

She kept me going. And she did give me a piece of bread. But then after a while, I didn't want to take it because I was afraid she's going to die. And then I don't want to live. I don't want to live. And that was going on in that factory. And one day, they bombed it, as I already said it.

And they took us to Bergen-Belsen. Well, we knew nothing about Bergen-Belsen because we didn't have any information. They didn't tell us where they're taking us. But it didn't matter. But when we got in with a pickup truck, I ran-- it was already light when civilians came to open the doors and take us. Because they said, we no longer are needed there. So we got into the pickup truck. And I think maybe 400-500 girls remained alive from that factory. I really don't know. But they all fitted into a pickup truck.

But far, far fewer, then, went to the camp.

2,000 girls.

2,000 girls.

So we're going, we're going. And all of a sudden, I see Bergen-Belsen, figured, OK, we'll see. But when the guy opened up the door to this barrack-- well, I don't know how to describe it, except when I think of hell, it couldn't-- hell couldn't be as bad as this. Looked like-- people were delirious, people were dead. It smelled horrible.

And we didn't have where to sit down. So I sit there. They were sitting. They were laying dead people near the wall. So my sister says, let's move the dead people so we will have where to sit. And we were waiting for our death. We didn't-- the lice, you could see the big lice running around. And then we saw the lice going to the dead people and eating them. And then they came and ate us. But there were so many, it was impossible to hide from them. It was just-- there they are. We were waiting to die, really.

Helen, what you've been through at Auschwitz, and then at the slave labor camp, and then to describe Bergen-Belsen as worse than hell after what you've been through is just so, so hard to even imagine what that must have been like for you.

It was hell.

It was hell. So tell us what happened to you at Bergen-Belsen then.

Oh, yeah.

Because you think you're there now to just die.

Yes.

Right?

Oh, definitely.

OK.

Well, my sister got sick before me. And then not too long, the English came in. So there was a lady near the door. And it also had a crack. So she saw that there are tanks coming in. And they don't look like the monsters. And she says, you

know, I think somebody came to liberate us. My sister already wasn't feeling good. And she says, well, they came a little too late for me. And she was right. And well, the soldiers opened up the door. And they didn't know what this is.

The soldiers, the British soldiers opened the door?

The British soldier, yeah. And they didn't know what it is. So they called Eisenhower. He was at that time in Europe. And where Eisenhower goes, the photographers go and writers go. And they took pictures. And that's how we have these pictures today. And they took my sister away too. So I said, they'll bring her back tomorrow. Tomorrow came and she didn't come back.

So I says, well, I still had the energy to go. But so I go and go. And I see a mountain there. And I saw the mountain was moving. But I still knew that a mountain doesn't move. And I got a little closer, I saw, they weren't burying people anymore. They saw lice and insects were running. There were so many that if you weren't feeling good and you were a little bit away, it looked like the mountain is moving. But this is what it was. I remember just that. And then I don't remember nothing. I happened to--

I want to be sure that you tell us about Freddie.

Oh, my god. I didn't think I have that much time.

We'll make the time. I think people will want to hear this about Freddie.

What happened was when I went to look for my sister, I was looking at all the corpses. And people were still sort of-- and I looked down. And I saw a monster were pulling-- was pulling a corpse by his ankles, pulling him. And I said, ooh, that looks like Freddie, my cousin. I says, Freddie. I yelled at him. He opened his eyes. So that monster got scared that he's still alive. And he did. He ran-- he went away to get another corpse.

And I don't know what happened because then I myself fell on the ground there. And I was out. So evidently, I don't remember that either. They made makeshift hospitals. And they were putting these people in there, hoping that they're surviving. A lot of them died. But some of them survived. And they took me to this makeshift hospital. I don't know how long I was there.

But one day-- I would imagine a few weeks because I had typhus. They didn't have no medication there-- whoever got better. I was there. And then all of a sudden, I opened my eyes. And I see a lot of white sheets. And from what I remember was a lot of corpses. And so I thought, for a second, I was in heaven-- white-- white sheets. But I couldn't stay up. So I closed my eyes again.

And a few days later, I had enough energy to lift my head up through my elbows. And I was looking for my sister's face, maybe she's in heaven too. I couldn't see no faces. I didn't see her. Well, then I just fell back and cried terribly. And the nurse came over to me. And she says, don't cry. Why are you crying? You're feeling better. But I already saw I'm getting better. I could lift my head up.

So I said, please, nurse, let me die. My life is not worth fighting for. And I had a sister, I remember. And she died here. I remember that she came to Bergen-Belsen. And I cry, and I cry. And she said what was her-- what was your sister's name? I tell her, Sylvia Lebowitz. So they went around looking for a Sylvia Lebowitz.

I really thought she died, but she didn't die. She was in another makeshift hospital. So she came and told me, listen, your sister is still alive. I looked at her, I said to myself, if this woman is lying to me, it would be awful. I didn't believe her. And I don't know, it was maybe a few days or a few weeks. I don't remember.

Of course.

They brought her back because she was too sick, and I was too sick to be moved around. And she-- yeah. And I told her, I saw Freddie. She says to me, ah, you must have been sick.

You were hallucinating.

Hallucinating it was Freddie. I remember, he had-- he looked like Freddie, but he had long ears. And I didn't know whether he survived. I didn't know. I'm hallucinating. So we were still sick. And we were there in the hospital in Bergen-Belsen. Then the Swedish Red Cross took out 600 girls and took him to Sweden. And I was there between-- with my sister.

You went together, you and Sylvia--

To Sweden.

--to Sweden. Yes. And then we were sick. And I looked like a skeleton. She looked like a skeleton. So they kept us two months in a place where they were feeding us real good-- a sanitarium. I don't know they know what a sanitarium is. Do you know what a sanitarium? And we felt better. And then they sent my sister to work in Gothenburg. And me, they sent to [INAUDIBLE] in a school. And that's how we got liberated.

That was in April 1945, when the British came in to Bergen-Belsen. And then you went to Sweden and recuperated. And I remember when we first met, you talked a lot about the kindness of the Swedes and getting you through that very, very, very difficult time. Now, let's come back to Freddie.

Freddie was alive. And he didn't know what happened to him, just like I didn't know how it happened to him. So I think that I did see Freddie. That's the Freddie.

That's the Freddie.

And they sent him to Sweden too. And that's-- took a good ending because it must have been Freddie. He survived. Maybe if I wouldn't scream, that monster would have put him on the hill there.

The hill, right.

I don't know.

And then after that, I think you told me, Freddie, then, was stuck to you like glue from that point forward.

That's another problem.

Yes. So his name was Milbauer. And our name was Lebowitz. So we didn't want to separate. So he says, he's Lebowitz. So he's Lebowitz. So then my sister found us in the papers. I had a sister here in the United States. And so she sent us papers. And Freddie had an uncle here. In the meantime, he's Lebowitz. His uncle is Milbauer.

So he can't find the name.

So it's sad, but he had to stay in Sweden until he got himself to Milbauer. And then that uncle sent him papers. And they let him come to the United States.

Helen, tell us about coming to the United States. So you reached your sister. And she was able to do the affidavits and things you needed to get to the United States. It wasn't so easy to find her, though, as I remember right. You told me about-- you said, you have a sister somewhere in a place called "Brookleen."

"Brookleen."

In "Brookleen." And they didn't know what you were saying. Yeah.

Well, they didn't want to know who I have in Europe because, at that time, I didn't have anybody in Europe anymore. So she-- and I remember Brooklyn. So I says, we have a sister someplace in "Brookleen." So they have to find a "Brookleen." So they figured out it's Brooklyn. And they put a name.

I think they said, is it Brookline, where? They figured it out.

They figured it out. And they put us in the papers. And my sister found us in the papers. It's just that they said we were in Sweden. So she didn't think it was us because we are Czechoslovakia. She called the Swedish Red Cross. And they said, yeah, we have two kids, two girls from Czechoslovakia. But they're sick. So that's when she sent us out an affidavit right away. And at that time, they were trying to get families together. And then she sent us papers four months later. I-- four months later, we were in the United States.

Yeah, early 1946, right.

Something like it. Yeah.

You're not even 18 years old yet.

No.

Yeah. So what was it like to come to the United States and start entirely new in every way?

Well, we cried every time, all the time. If I saw a child, I said to my sister, he's not Jewish, you see. I had these hang-ups. I didn't want flowers because I saw them die. I was really sick mentally. As human beings react, I was different. And if I saw an old man, I didn't think that he was Jewish. But after my sister sent us-- she wasn't rich. She sent us to a psychiatrist. But when your heart is broken in a million pieces, you don't heal it in one day. So we cried. I cried.

And yet, you still managed to find work and start a career.

That's another story.

That is a great story. We probably don't have time for that. But that's one of my favorite all time stories. Give us a hint.

Well, as I said, my sister didn't have much money. Of course, I didn't have any money. So my brother-in-law would buy us a token to go into New York to look for work. And me with the ski pants and that long sweater--

Clothes from Sweden, right, heavy woolens.

Yeah. And I thought I looked beautiful because it was warm. And she couldn't buy us clothes. I know. She already had two children. She lived in one bedroom. And it was tough. But still, I was happy. I was with my sister. And my sisters were happy together. We-- she had a sandwich bed. And we slept on that. And then in the morning, when we got up, we put it together so the kids have where to play.

So I go to New York, look for a job. I wasn't trained for anything. And everybody says, so what do you do? I says, well, I'll do anything you want to, just give me a job. Well, they looked at me, I looked awful. I had red hair, bushy red hair. And nobody has a job for me. I was really discouraged.

So one day, my brother-in-law says, there is a big factory with fur, fur coats. It was very stylish at that time fur coats. So I come in, go into the office. I told them who I was. I would like a job. And the man that interviewed me, I think he really would have given me a job. But I wasn't trained for anything. So he says, honey, I don't have a job for you.

But my brother-in-law explained what a big place it is. So there was a door. And I said to myself, I'm going to open the door and see who's there. And I opened the door, I see a lot of people working there. And I look and look. And I saw a man. He had a black hat on. He was standing near a window. And I walk over to him. And I told him, I'm a Holocaust

survivor. And I have a sister. But I need a job badly.

And he listened, listened. And then he says, wait here a minute. I says, OK, I'll wait a minute. I have no place to go anyway. So I waited. And this old man is gone to a man that just told me he has no job. He looks at me. And he probably said, what is she doing here? I just told her--

There's no job.

--no job. But that old man wouldn't let go. Well, in the end, I found out, that was his son.