

We were-- you were staying at the farm under the name of Christina, Aryan papers, so to speak.

Yes.

Polish, non-Jewish ID.

Yes.

You're taken out by the forester.

Yeah.

Your hoodlum friends comes with you.

Yeah. There were a lot of Jews on the same cart. The peasant which brought us there-- we were sitting on a cart.

And it's on that cart that all of you are being transported.

Yeah, to the police station in Radzymin or Wolomin, between one or--

Which would be what, a few kilometers away?

it was like two stations. Radzymin was closer to Warsaw. Wolomin was a bit further, but it was between one station. The other was a difference about 10 kilometers.

So you had to go a number of kilometers, and in the middle of that, you're in a forest now?

Yeah.

You're passing on the cart through a forest on your way to the police station.

Yes. That was already--

And there's a struggle, you said?

Yeah.

Even at that point, you thought, this is it, it's finished, right?

Oh, yes.

I mean like definitely.

We're resigned already.

Why does the forester attack you with the knife?

He didn't. There was a-- there was a--

A struggle.

--a struggle because the other was-- probably they were trying to maybe overpower him because he was the only one. There were so full of themselves. They thought that Jews don't fight. They just won't resist. I don't know where the other

Jews were from. Maybe they were hiding, and maybe they were just as desperate and decided, that-- finished.

So who attacked the forester?

The other people which were also the Jews which were with me.

They attacked the forester?

Yeah. And he just pulled out a knife, and that's what happened.

And your friends said to you, run for it.

Run for it, yeah. I didn't even feel that he jabbed me in the neck.

Was it a serious wound or--

Yes. Well, another inch-- it was a very ugly scar for many years. I have a whole wardrobe of scarves and a necklace, but I guess now it's so many years. But I still have on my passport a scar on the neck. It was--

[INAUDIBLE]

And it wouldn't be, but there was no penicillin or anything. And I just-- it was winter, and I had my coat and a shawl. So later, I realized it was blood. I was running through the forest, and I just pulled tightly a scarf around my neck.

Which was probably your-- saved you because it's--

Yeah, but I mean, it infected. But the wound became infected.

At least you didn't bleed from--

And I knew that I cannot go to the station because they'll be alerted, so I walked away from the station in a different direction, I figure out. They'll probably think I'm running to Warsaw, a big city. And I got there in the morning, and the first train came in. And it was winter, and I just put my coat around. And I got into Warsaw. And everybody was half-frozen, and I got into Warsaw.

You took a train into Warsaw?

Yeah, took a train.

Did you have money on you?

No, no.

No, just took the train.

No, I just decided, if something-- I'll jump off or whatever. I just-- I didn't think at that time what will happen. I just--

You got into Warsaw's main station.

Yeah, got into Warsaw, and I made my way to my sister's house, where I knew she was. And so when I found out that Janka was already dead-- you see, Janka went with my sister to a place called Ludzsk. No, not Ludzsk, Lukow, Sorry, Lukow, to a ghetto to save-- where I had some cousins there and they had a child. Because my sister became a courier to the ghetto. She was taking out kids, her and Janka.

She wasn't just smuggling food?

Oh, no. She later became a courier, became a courier. I didn't know about it. And they kept it from me in case they would torture me or something. The less I know, the safer it's for all of them. So I didn't know those things. But she later told me that she went with Janka to Lukow.

She was outside the ghetto, and Janka came to get the child. And she was shot together with the child, so she died there in the ghetto. So we lost Janka.

And I said, I'm going back.

To the ghetto?

I'm going back to ghetto.

And we're now--

And I went back to ghetto.

We're now about--

I said, I just want to die there, and that's it.

What about your sister?

I gave up. What's that?

Your sister?

No, my sister stayed there. She said, I have to support Alek and support you. I'll stay out and maybe somehow-- and I went back.

Went back in.

It was easy to go back because you joined a group of people which were going back. They didn't count how many came back. They were just-- I went back.

And you said you figured, if you're going to die, you want to die in the ghetto? Is that--

That's right. I have no place where to go, and I just-- I had no place where to go.

You were tired of running and hiding.

I couldn't run anymore.

And now we're like, what, December, January?

The stress was too much. December. It was December.

'42 still?

Yeah. I went to ghetto. I found my brother. My brother was already-- there were no private homes. They were sort of like in a group-- in a apartment. They were working. My brother was working.

It was a shop. It was [NON-ENGLISH] shop. They were making uniforms for the Germans, knapsacks, I believe, and uniforms. I still remember that address, Nowolipki 74. I still remember. And they were sort of like in-- like special quarters for those people which had right. They were just getting their food. They had-- they were just slaves, slaves, and they had no private homes or anything.

But of course, there were so many empty apartments in the ghetto. People were taken out, taken away. So I became another one of the--

Slave laborers.

No, no, no, no. No, the wild kids which are roaming the ghetto which--

Again.

--had-- hiding in ruins and scavenging.

Again.

Yeah. And my brother knew where I was, mostly in empty apartments where they already cleaned them out and everything. And he would bring me some food. There were more kids like me, young people like me, hiding. By that time, they already had bunkers. They were building bunkers preparing for the resistance.

And I was there. In January, my wound healed. On January the 18th, that was the first skirmish in the ghetto and first resistance. I didn't know that my brother was in the underground. He never opened his mouth.

But he only said, you're getting out again. Now you're healed. You're going out. I said, no, no. And he said, you are like a stone around my neck. I'll die because of you, practically brutally threw me out. And he said, somebody is coming to get you.

And I said-- I was struggling with him. I said, I'm not going. And he practically pushed me. And there were a group of people going through sewers, and he-- so I went to the sewers.

Did you think you would see him again?

No, not at all, no, no. So I went through the sewers. It was horrible, just horrible.

Can you describe it at all?

Well, I had some money. I remember he cut from a tablecloth somewhere-- at that time, there were so many people taken away, so they were easy to find money, some-- at that time, money was no problem already. He gave me a lot of money. And he, from a tablecloth-- it's like a oilcloth. They had no plastic at that time, so that oilcloth on my neck. They made like a pouch for me because in the sewer everything would be wet, money.

And so I had my documents. And so it was slimy. The water was practically to my chest. It was dark. There were rats. There were floating bodies.

How many people in the group were going?

Oh I don't remember. There were maybe 10, 12. And there was a man who-- he looked very Aryan. He must have been Jewish. I don't know. But he looked like somebody who goes back and forth. He was the leader. He was taking us out.

And then at one point we had to wait, and they took us out. They practically-- it was very hard to stay-- keep your balance because everything-- the walls and everything was full of slime, and feces, and everything.

And then there is sort of like a iron ladder going up, and somebody open up the cover from that manhole. And that was Mr. Golombek's brother-in-law, Janek. I mean, apparently it was already arranged that I'll get out through that place.

I remember that I got into Muranowski Square, and I don't remember where I got out. By that time, I just--

When you came up above the ground, you didn't know where you were.

I was half-dead in slime and everything. And they took me to their house, and they washed me up.

How long did that take, that whole--

We must've been there the whole night. We got out in the-- it was dark. It was like dawn when we got out. It was dawn, you know. It was dawn.

You came up somewhere in the middle of a street, or sidewalk, or--

Yeah, but it was a very long road because it was not in the middle of Warsaw. It was a little bit further. It was close to some factories or airport. I don't know. But it was not downtown Warsaw, no, no. They probably took some labyrinth route where they felt it would be secure.

But I know that there were people waiting there, and I got out. And I went again to Golombek's house. And again Leshka came, took me for a few days. And then my sister took care of me. I stayed with her. She said, whatever happens, we'll be together.

So she told that woman, that old woman, that I have a cousin from the country and I'm hiding because they were taking kids to work, Polish kids to work. But at the time, I was tough. I spoke like a real sewer kid, like from a sewer. Every second word "fuck," and "shit," and everything else.

So that was not suspicious that I didn't go out because she felt like, a young kid, and they'll take her to work. So she's staying indoor. By then, I was helping her doing the laundry, so I earned my keep.

And then April uprising, April 19. It was Passover. I was there.

Did you hear about it?

Everybody knew about it. It was like-- people were coming like to a circus, looking when the Jews were burning. It was like entertainment. We're entertainment for the Poles.

You mean when they set fire to the Warsaw Ghetto?

Well, no, it started April 19. Hitler's birthday was April the 20th. I guess maybe they wanted to give him a Judenrein Warsaw. And that was-- I just-- my sister said, Alek will die there. I mean, he's involved. I never thought I would see him alive.

So at that point, you found out more about your brother.

Yes. She told me later that he was involved. She said, if by some miracle he survived, he knows where to go. We have a contact in underground, and if he survived, he knows where to go. But I wouldn't even think about it.

And I was drawn to it. I was going there like everybody else. It was Easter Sunday. People were coming from church and standing there, watching. People burned alive. And we were not completely near the ghetto. I wasn't anything special. I was standing there because everybody else was there around, kids and adults. And some people were praying, and some were jeering. I was just numb.

Do you remember any of the things people were saying around you?

Of course I remember. Of course I remember. One man said that they're stinking up the city, polluting, because he got smoke in his eyes. And for a minute I saw some humanity. I saw tears, and I thought he was-- that he was crying. But I realized--

He wasn't crying--

No, he wasn't crying.

--for the Jews.

No. There were-- there was an old woman crying. Yes, she was crying and praying, crossing herself, crying desperately on her knees. She didn't care what anybody-- and she said, today, then tomorrow ask.

Were there are many more like that?

I didn't see it. I saw one. I zeroed on her. I just looked at her.

Others were taken--

Well--

Was there compassion for the Jews is what I'm asking since you were in a very--

Admiration. Hey, wow, they are fighting back. But nobody lift a finger to help. Maybe a few people did. Sure, wow, look at them. Wow, wow. That's-- I'm sure there were some Poles involved, but of course, the manhunt became even more intense because more people were trying to escape. So it was absolutely impossible to be in Warsaw.

And beginning of May, while I was standing there every day-- and each time I saw somebody burning, and they were shooting just at them.

The Germans were.

And the Poles were counting.

So they weren't all that sympathetic to the Jews.

Well, people helped me to survive. I remember Czerniakowski's family. I remember Golombeks. I remember Janka.

So there's nothing much you can say about that.

No. That's right. And all of a sudden, I heard-- and I had an address, Leshka's address. I knew if something happens-- my sister said, whatever something-- get in touch with Leshka, whatever.

Golombek's daughter?

No. Czerniakowski's daughter.

Czerniakowski's daughter.

Yeah. And while I was standing there watching, all of a sudden, I heard somebody say, run away. They rounding up people. They catching people to work. And I made a split-second decision. I said, where are they? He said, run that way because they're here.

And so I run there, they should catch me. I realize that now I have a chance to get out of Warsaw. If they'll catch me as a Pole, I have a chance to survive. So I let them catch me to work.

And they put me on a truck like a Pole to work to Germany, and I don't know what happened to me. I just decided, maybe for my brother's sake, I just have to survive and tell what happened.

And I got a will to live that time. That was the first time I decided, I'm going to survive. I have to. I just have to survive. And I have to free my sister because otherwise we both die. And my sister was talking about committing suicide if Alek-- if she'll find out that Alek is dead.

And they took us to a transit place on Skaryszewska Street, where they were taking out the Poles. We were there a few days, and even there they caught some Jews and denounced them.

And one slut zeroed on me. She said, I think she's a Jew, she's a Jewess-- she said that-- Jewish. And at that time-- I don't know. Just all my hate and everything what I went through, I just started to call her every filthy name in the book, and I beat the shit out of her. Don't you call me a fucking Jew. You're probably a Jew yourself. Oh, yes.

I said, if-- I turned the tables on her. I said, if I'll go, at least one of them will go with me. And I started yell. She's a bloody Jew, that one. I turned the tables. Now she had to-- yeah. Oh, don't forget. I had a good training, being in those slums with all those animals, and I knew how to behave already, how to become one of them. And I became even more vicious than-- I learned from them.

And she had a tough time to defend herself and prove that she wasn't, and my reputation followed me to Germany. They said, don't start up with that bitch. She's a tough slut from Warsaw. That was me. That reputation followed me, which was good because there were 2,000 Poles together with me.

We went to Mannheim. We went to Mannheim. It was a long train ride.

Into the lion's den in a way.

Yes. I remember my father used to say that the safest place in the lion's den. I don't. Just something triggered in me. Because, you see, I realized that the Germans would never recognize me. So I said, if I get out of there, maybe I'll work somewhere on a farm. They would be not-- I knew through all that misery I was never recognized by a German. To them, a Jew was only somebody who was obviously a Jew by a mannerism, by anything, or somebody who they would point out to you as a Jew.

But to Poles, I was a Jew no matter what my mannerism was. And the worst thing was, when I was passing, not to react when they were talking about atrocities which they witnessed, or they were happy about it, just telling like stories. That was the worst thing.

What kind of things would you hear?

Horrible things.

In Mannheim?

No, no. I'm talking Warsaw, when I was pretending I was a Pole, horrible things. I just can't even repeat it.

The worst, I think-- the closest I came to break down-- to breaking down was-- I never told that story to anyone. And there were women, professional smugglers, sitting on a train, and they were experts in catching Jews because that would turn away the attention from them, that they were smuggling. So they were pointing out, there's a Jew there hiding. So they could smuggle easier.

And there were those witches sitting there, and one of them said, oh, shit, a fucking Jew screw me. And the other one said, how did he do it? Well, I bought a corpse, and there was nothing on it, not even a gold tooth, absolutely nothing. Apparently, they were scavenging and buying corpses, hoping that they'll find some hidden jewelry or something on them. It was nothing, just lice.

And the other witch said-- started to laugh, said, well, why don't you get a young woman? You know where they hide their gold. I didn't react. Just didn't react. I guess that was the closest I think I ever came.

So when I went to Germany, my reputation as a tough cookie from Warsaw followed me, and there were 2,000 Poles there. And they took us to Mannheim, Daimler-Benz. Mercedes-Benz was the owner. There was a big-- that's why maybe I never will get into Mercedes even now.

And we're working there, but as soon as we got off the train-- don't forget. I was a Pole. I was Polish at that time. Some people came, and they were picking certain workers. I don't know. They bribed the manpower people and so on. And they picked me. It was a fat, big butcher, a real typical German, heavy-set, a real-- was a butcher in the outskirts of Mannheim, and he took me to work.

I don't know. He probably gave me some salamis or something. And so I wasn't working in that factory. It was beautiful because they took me-- he took me to his house. I didn't know where they're taking me, but it was outskirts of Mannheim, beautiful little home. He had his meat shop there, and in the back, he had a Schlachthaus, a slaughterhouse. And I was a cleaning lady there. They gave me food.

Treat you respectfully?

Well, what do you call respectfully? I wasn't eating together with them. They would ration their food, but it was enough. They wanted I should be strong and healthy, so they gave me enough food to eat. And I was cleaning there and working, cleaning the house and then helping in the slaughterhouse when they were killing the pigs. You had to mix the blood and so on, help them to make the salamis.

And I worked there for maybe two months. But I became friendly with some kids from Warsaw, and there was one boy who had tuberculosis. They caught him there. So some of my friends said, look, you have so much food, why don't you bring some to us?

So I risked my neck because I was stealing food, but I had to-- I had to establish myself with a group of my peers. And they caught me. But I just had a slice of bread with some salami in my bag when I had my day off. And they took me back to manpower, to Mannheim.

They fired you, as it were.

Well, sort of, yeah. Yeah. But my reputation was already established, so I'm one of them. And they took me to work, and I already was able to write a letter to my-- to Leshka where I am, that I'm alive. And I got a letter that my brother is alive, that he escaped from ghetto and he's in hiding. My sister wouldn't tell me where, but he's safe. Alek escaped. I found out in Germany that Alek was alive.

And I went to work to a factory where they were making cleansing powder, like Ajax or Comet. It was a very tough job, but the conditions were good. The women which were running the factory-- it used to be a German Jewish factory before. The owners went to England, and those two women which were managing before became sort of like a-- sort of in charge, in trust. They became trustees of that factory, very decent, beautiful German women, absolutely the best, especially one of them, Paula Duplesse.

And they were treating us like human beings. I don't know what they would do with me if they knew I was Jewish, probably nothing. They were very decent.

We were living in barracks. There were about seven or eight of us, all tough women from Warsaw. And I worked very



hard. It was a very tough job. I had to unload sacks of soda and lime, whatever they use for mix, those chemical compounds to mix to make those--

--cleansing power.

Yeah, cleansing powder. We were right on the River Rhine in the industrial part, right on the-- and there were like-- the boats were coming, from Holland some of them, and we were unloading from the train. They were like a--

The flat boats.

Flat boats, and they we were unloading-- I think it's called a piggy bank, or something, the back-- straight to the factory. We're unloading sacks with soda. It's very hard. I don't know, maybe 50 pounds or something. So I had to-- we had to unload from the train, bring it to the factory on a little cart.

And then I was mixing-- it was like a big stove, huge, probably the size of the platform with steps, and I had to go up the steps, put this soda in, mix it with some liquid soap, and with some ammoniac-- and then put a coal-- not coal, put the wood in it and mix it. That whole thing had to cook.

And meanwhile-- yeah.

And after it cooled off, we had to-- I had to unload it and bring it barrels to another part of the factory, and there we-- we were making-- sort of closing them in those little containers. My eyebrows, my eyelashes-- everything was gone because there was so much--

Ammonia.

--ammonia and everything there. So they were giving me, as a matter of fact, a glass of milk a day just to keep me going, and I was wearing sort of like a jumpsuit. It was all burnt from the ammoniac and everything, and I was wearing a little mask. And they were giving us food.

And you were not afraid of being found out a Jew anymore?

Oh, by that time, I was the toughest one of them all. They were afraid of me. But of course I could never relax. And then I had to-- but of course-- I mean I wasn't afraid-- of course I was afraid. I never could relax for a second because they would betray me. There was no question about it.

And then I got a letter from my sister that she's trying to make her way into Mannheim. Now, what she did-- she volunteered to work, and if you volunteered in war that you have some friends, so they would let you go to the city you wanted. And she said, I want to go to Mannheim.

She came to Mannheim, and she was working in a restaurant as a dishwasher, was washing the dishes. So we sort of became friends there like I met her, and nobody knew we even knew each other. We had different names because-- in case one of us, at least, should survive.

And she was working there. She was giving me some leftovers, food, and everything. And then Mannheim became one of the most destroyed cities in Germany because we had another danger. The Americans were bombing during the day, they English at night, or vice versa.

We're now after Normandy. We're like after-- we're into '44 already?

No, no, no. That was in '43, '43. Oh, yeah. '43, there were bombing. Mannheim started to-- I think they destroyed about 85% of Mannheim. It started around the time I came. A few weeks later, they started to bomb.

We're still in '43.

'43. And my sister came, and in one of those bombings the place where she was collapsed, and she was buried alive. After they-- when there was all cleared, I ran there, and we knew that the whole downtown-- I was in the industrial park. She was downtown in that restaurant.

And we got her alive, a few other people.

You got her out.

We got her out. They were buried alive, but in a bunker. There was-- nothing happened to her. It's just that they were under all that ruins. So I went to my boss that thinks, and I said, I have a good friend. She works in a restaurant. She lost her job. She said, sure, we need people to work.

So as a matter of fact, she went herself to that manpower and gave them some soap, or whatever to get some workers. And she had the name, and I got my sister. And she was with me together. We stayed--

How long did she stay there?

Until the end.

At that same factory?

Yeah.

That same--

Oh, yeah, next-- we slept next to each other, and again she saved my life. Nobody knew-- we sort of became friends there, not too close, not too close.

How did she save your life?

I was a very tough kid during the day, but nights were very bad, and apparently-- she told me that I'm mumbling and talking at night, and that could have been a giveaway.

So she sort of started to yell at me, pretend, what's the matter with you? Shut your mouth. You're mumbling and talking at night. You don't let people sleep. Why don't you just put some-- over your mouth or something, let us sleep, which I did. Or she kept herself awake, and she would just kick me, wake me up. And I developed insomnia since then because of that-- it was like a defense mechanism, I suppose.

You couldn't allow yourself to relax enough to--

To relax and sleep because that was a giveaway. So she watched me all the time sort of like-- so sometimes I would just fall asleep in the factory. She would cover for me so I could--

And you worked in that factory all the way until liberation?

Until the liberation together with my sister. Yeah. And I relaxed only-- Oh, yes, and of course, I had to build some relationship that I have some family in Poland. You couldn't just be-- people were getting letters and everything.

So I wrote a letter to Leshka. She understood. She was very bright. And I said, look-- and we had a name for my brother, Marion. Sort of it was like a code name. Well, Marion doesn't love me anymore. He doesn't write to me. He forgot me.

And I made up a story that I have a fiancée. Once you have a fiancée, then they would leave you alone. You know what

I mean. Everybody else was fooling around, but they were-- Poles were very romantic. I could have been a tough bitch, but since I had a fiancée, they would respect my behavior because I drank with the best of them and everything. And so my brother would write me love letters, just beautiful love letters.

And it actually-- so the family was reunited--

In a way, yes.

--that way. And the postal system worked perfectly also during the war?

Yes. He was-- my sister was in touch with a woman who was in the underground who also worked for a German, Arbeitsamt. He spoke German. And when my brother escaped from ghetto, he killed a German. He escaped one of the-- I think six weeks after the ghetto uprising collapsed-- I wasn't there. I wasn't--

He was hiding in a pile excrement, and the German didn't want to dirty his boots.

In a pile of what?

Feces and shit. And when he ran out, he was covered with the whole thing. And people would just run away from him. And he got into that safe house, and that lady said-- my sister paid her before, and she agreed to keep him for a few days.

She wasn't doing it for money. But she was very poor, and she was helping her own family with that money. So it wasn't like she was doing it for money, really. And she fell in love with my brother, and she decided to keep him.

And my brother stayed with her. He married her. That's my sister-in-law. She's dead now. And in Poland, they had-- in apartments, they had sort of like big coal stoves. So my brother made like an empty-- sort of made a big hole, and he would climb through the top. There was like a metal plate. So in case-- she would go to work, and he couldn't even move during the day.

That's really--

In case something-- but nothing happened. But then she got pregnant, so they had to establish another relationship, that she married and her husband is somewhere, works somewhere else and comes home for the weekend.

And during the day, while she was away, he was like hiding in--

Hiding, and in the evening and only for the weekend he would come home, for the weekend.

And you stayed till the very end of the war in Mannheim?

I had a close call in '44.

I think we're-- what we're going to do, since we have to have a break now, is we're going to leave it there, and we'll pick that up the next time with the close call in Mannheim, and then up to the end of the war, and take it from there on till your eventual-- to the liberation.

Today?

No, not today.

No, no.

The next time, until the liberation, and then from the liberation, about how you-- by what year you got finally to

Canada?

December '48.

December '48. So we'll leave it here for now. Is there anything you want to say? OK. Good. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

Is that right?

--30.

So can you tell me about the close call that happened to you in 1944?

Yeah. I lost contact with my brother. That was after the Polish uprising in Warsaw, the general uprising. I didn't know he was alive, what happened to him. But I knew-- the news of German military disasters were coming through, so I knew that the city where I was supposed to be born-- I mean on my false documents-- were already in Russian hands. So I felt more relaxed, that whatever happens-- they won't be able to trace my documents.

And one day, someone came from the Gestapo, and they called Krystyna Podbielska, you come with me. And they brought an interpreter. But they were very polite to me, so I didn't panic. I said, well, maybe just coincidence, maybe something wrong. But nobody said the word "Jude" like Jew, so I just said, I have to keep calm and find out what happens.

I came to their office, and they were very polite to me. There were a few people there. And they started to ask me everything about my background, my father's name, my mother's name, my grandparents, everything in a very nice, fatherly way. So I sort of-- I said, through the interpreter-- I pretended I understand more than I did.

And all of a sudden, one of them came with a measuring tape and started to measure my profile, went from here to here, from here to here. I mean, fiction cannot compete with life. It's still insane, the whole situation.

And I heard them saying that, yeah, she has a very intelligent look about her, and so on. Never the word "Jew" came. And then one of them asked me, are you Polish? I said, yes, I'm very Polish, very, very Polish. And they said, you sure you don't have German blood? I said, no. Well, how can you be so sure?

And I came up with a-- I don't know what happened. I said, because my grandmother's name was Szmit, and she was Polish. And one of them said, oh, [SPEAKING GERMAN], and [SPEAKING GERMAN] means sort of like, in a loose translation, that's it, that's exactly. See? Now we found the reason.

And since it was my mother's favorite saying, I knew what it meant. And they let me go. I could never figure out what happened. Then, about 35 years later, when I found my friend, Irena Podbielska, the real Podbielska-- and I told her that story, and she said, as a matter of fact, in Berlin, there is a metro station called [NON-ENGLISH], and there is a square called [NON-ENGLISH].

And it could have been that-- and so they wanted to know who that Podbielska was. Apparently, he was a minister in Bismarck government, so it had to be some German nobility. And apparently, one of those people in the Gestapo probably came across her name Krystyna Podbielska. He ran up Krystyna Podbielska. Maybe he-- maybe he was related, or maybe he used to live in Berlin or in that neighborhood. And they decided to find out if maybe I'm one of the lost ones from [NON-ENGLISH] family.

That's the only explanation. I still don't have any-- but the funny thing was when they were measuring my forehead and my profile and trying to figure out that I'm too intelligent-looking for a Pole, that I have to have some German blood.

Of course, again my reputation was spoiled because when I came back-- so they said, she's not Polish. She has German

blood. Rumors got around. So I felt even more secure because as long as they could not prove where I was born-- Russians were there. I knew that I-- by that time, I knew every nuance about religion, about Polish mentality, and unless they would torture me, they would not be able to find out who I really was.

And of course my worries were about my brother, what happened. Did he survive the Warsaw Uprising? We knew that there was a wholesale slaughtering in Warsaw. Warsaw did not exist. And he could have been caught with his wife and the child.

And then, all of a sudden, I got a letter from a German male nurse from the field lazarette, Fraulein Krystyna, telling me that my relatives are well. They survived Warsaw, and they are in a transit camp near Warsaw. It was a human being. And so I knew that my brother survived Warsaw.

How were you able to get mail then? Was it opened or--

Well, I was not Jewish. I was Polish, and we had some contacts. I mean, we were not marked for the final solution, so there were certain freedom. We were treated like-- they call us lumpenvolk, which is riffraff, but we're allowed to live and have certain privileges. So there was certain freedom.

And I was not in a-- I was in a labor-- I was working in a factory, but I was not behind barbed wire or in a labor camp. It was a completely different situation. But I still could not relax because there were so many Polish people with me, and there always was a moment that I could-- I could not lose guard or anything. I could not relax even with my friends, which-- I developed some friendships with--

As a matter of fact, one of the girls I worked with-- she was very nice, Polish girl from a very tough neighborhood in Warsaw. Well, she was a product of her environment, and we were very good friends, very good friends. But of course I would never tell her who I was. I would not jeopardize my sister's life because nobody knew that we even-- that we are related or we knew each other before. My sister, Anna, was with me. But there was a genuine friendship--

As far as that could go.

--yes, with Stasha. And she was from a very tough neighborhood. Her father was a petty crook in Warsaw and so on. And after the war, of course, I decided to pass until I really felt that it was safe to come out of the closet, which-- why? And I told her who I was, and she got hysterical. She practically killed me. She called me every dirty word in the dictionary, every obscenity.

How could you betray me? Why did you cheat me? And I said, nothing changed. It just my name changed. I'm the same person. But she just could not understand it.

Did she reject you?

Oh, yes.

Totally?

Absolutely, yeah. She called me everything there was under the sun, that I betrayed her, that I betrayed the friendship. Well, she was too dense to understand that nothing changed. As I said, nothing changed, just my name. She could not understand it. Well, it was her loss. That was the end of the friendship.

And she wasn't a bad person, but that was that mental block. They could not understand that we are just as human as they are. And she just threw away the friendship, and we were pretty good friends. She covered for me when we were working. I covered for her. We're working next to each other.

It was over. Now she found out that I was Jewish. She couldn't cope.

So how much longer were you there?

In 1945, in March, the Americans were very close to Mannheim. We knew the end was close, and the situation was very chaotic. There were all kinds of rumors that they're going to take us all in a concentration camp, and blow it up together with us, and so on. But I knew that I have a chance to survive. I felt that there was--

But of course, my moods fluctuated between despair and hope because I was hoping that I would survive, but I was desperate because the bombs were falling day and night. And so many people who were killed at the end. They were caught in the crossfire. They were caught in bombing. And it was a very desperate situation.

And March 25, actually, Americans came to Mannheim. It was a very hard situation because a few times Americans were near Strasbourg. Then they went back. And it could have happened that if I would expose myself, who I was-- and then the Germans would take away Mannheim again. They would recapture the city. And so that was dangerous. We could not relax to the last minute.

So the last few days we knew that it was close. The Americans were across the River Rhine. We were just across from Ludwigshafen, which is-- when I was working in the industrial park in Mannheim, it was just across from IG Farben industry, that famous Farben industry where they were making the Zyklon B. So they were bombing non-stop.

And the last few weeks-- well, the company where I worked was bombed completely. The barracks were burned. So we had no place where to go.

What did you do?

Well, nothing. I was like everybody else. People were refugees, and Germans became refugees. There were-- the roads were full of-- it was like a feeling of déjà vu, saw the same thing before, except that those refugees and people on the road were Germans with their families running from bombing and being homeless.

So nobody paid attention. I just took off my P because I had a badge P, and that's it. And nobody even checked my documents, or nobody worried about me anymore. And I-- my sister, myself, and a few more people decided to wait for the Americans, not to run, but wait for the Americans. Because a lot of people ran to Heidelberg-- it was about 20 kilometers from Mannheim-- wait in the mountains there. We decided to wait it out there. It was closer.

And we'd been hiding just on the river. It was like a huge-- I don't know how to describe it. It's like a huge pipe, cement pipe, sort of like a sewer system, right on the river, right on the river bank, going to the river. And 10, 15 people could be there. We could not stand up, but we could sit or lay down. And we're right on the embankment.

So we're there for a few days, and it was quiet, very quiet. And then one day, one morning, we just heard some approaching tanks. You could hear the-- in that stillness tanks. And we heard some voices, and there were no Germans. Some of them-- they said they're Americans or English. We still were afraid to get out, wait another few hours. And then we got out with some-- a rag, with a white rag.

With a white rag?

With a white flag.

Flag.

But they were made up of some rag. We had some--

Just to wave.

Just the wave that we are surrendering.

Did you panic towards the end? Were you thinking--

No, because when we saw the tanks, we looked out, we saw five-pointed stars on the tanks. We knew they were Americans. We heard the BBC before, and we just knew that it was finished. Germany was collapsing. It was end of March.

Do you remember that moment very clearly?

Yeah, but it was an anticlimax because we could not tell them who we are. And they were still going-- the four of us-- the war was not finished. So they were still going further. But--

So what did you do at that point?

The first few days, it was free-for-all.

Where did you go with--

Oh, we just-- we didn't go anywhere. We're just roaming the streets, trying to find something to eat or where to stay. It was March. Mannheim wasn't too cold. It was Southern Germany. And there were no fighting. It was peace and quiet, so we were-- and so of course Germans became very nice to us. It was an insurance policy to be nice to us. So the last few months we sort of were pampered by certain people which we worked with.

Did people take you into their homes?

Oh, they had no homes.

They had no homes?

Mannheim was really bombed, so they were in the same boat. A lot of people were homeless and were sitting in shelters, in shelters where they-- and there were a lot of Russians with us together, not officers, not soldiers, but Russian civilians which were taken prisoner. They were working at the industrial park.

And they organized themselves very quickly. They started to loot, and to kill, and to rape. And the Americans just looked away first few days.

Why?

Because they saw the concentration camps. They were traumatized. They saw what was happening, and they just-- that's what it was. First few days, they just looked away, and they let us do whatever we want.

And then came that breaking point with me. During the war, that's what kept me going. I dreamed of revenge. I dreamed-- I had such fantasies, what I would do with them, put them in cages. Just name it, all kinds of cruelties I could do to them.

And there was a very rather brutal luftschutz. Luftschutz is a man who was taking care of shelters during the bombing, like a watchman. He was very brutal. He always-- he never let us go into a bunker when they were bombing, and a lot of people got killed.

I just got a little piece of shrapnel in my leg, which I removed in Montreal. But one of my friend's, Polish friends, lost her arm because they could not hide. They were bombings. And the Russian promised revenge, and they just did.

They grabbed that man, and they invited everybody. And they hanged him up upside down. That whole thing was atrocious. And I witnessed as many atrocities. Some of them were so blood-curdling.

I can never forget when a soldier in Warsaw kicked a little child into a sewer because why should he waste a bullet on that child? And I never reacted. And there I was standing and looking at that horrifying scene, that man hanging there, and I started to throw up. I got physically sick.

And my friend, Stasha, turned to me. She said, stop acting like a fucking Jew. So I guess that was the end of my dream of revenge. I decided I'm not a killer. I just couldn't. I was empty. I started to feel emotional pain. I just wanted to find my brother, and that's all, just wanted to get away.

What was your relationship like at that point with your sister?

Oh, we were very close. Mind you, my sister always worried. She said, what will happen to you? You talk like a kid from a gutter, and you won't be able to function in normal circumstances. You won't be able to eat at the table. Every second word you swear you. It's horrifying.

And yet I changed. I didn't swear. Something happened to me. I just snapped. I snapped first time when I-- I think I mentioned before, when I beat-- when I beat up that girl which tried to denounce me in the transit camp in Warsaw, that became the turning point. I promised my brother I'd survive, and I just--

I don't know if it was my last chance. I felt it was the last card I played by turning the table on her and called her Jewish scum, and they took her away. I don't know what they did to her and if she got-- how she got out of it. And I really don't care. If she did, she would probably never denounce anyone in her life.

And that was my turning point. I didn't feel fear. I just felt hate and anger. And in '45, I just-- there was no more reason to be the same vulgar, arrogant, brazen girl I was, and I just started, slowly, slowly, to change. Mind you, I was still passing. I was afraid. And there were no Jews. I thought maybe I'll be the last in the world.

But then when the Americans came-- and I heard some of them speaking German, and I recognized that it wasn't a German. They were Jewish. They were trying to speak German. So I went over to one of them, and I said, Jude, Jude? And he looked at me like, who are you? And I said, me, too. Me Jude.

And he just looked at me, and he brought me and my sister to an American base in Mannheim. There was an American chaplain, Jewish chaplain there, a clergyman, which-- and they brought us to Friday services. So that was-- since then, we told them who we were, and they asked many questions and so on.

We told them everything what happened. By that time, there were a lot of people which-- they already liberated the concentration camp, so they knew that there are some people who survived, and we got in touch--

What was that like for you just to have that first exposure with an American that was Jewish?

I felt safe. They pampered me. They were all wonderful people, not only the American Jews, the Blacks, the Puerto Ricans, everyone. They were just the most beautiful human beings. They treated us like sisters. There were never any violence, any hint of anything else except care. They were giving us everything, food. I mean happiness was food.

They shot--

And I would start to hoard food under my-- well, actually, what they did-- after a while, they decided to take care of us, and they requested, in brackets, "requested," a German apartment. Somebody told him-- the Germans were very friendly at that time and very submissive. And they gave us an apartment after some concentration camp guard who escaped, so his apartment was free. And we got the apartment and everything.

It was quite an experience to sleep in a bed with a bed sheet. And then we hired a German lady. We knew him from the neighborhood. She was rather decent, and she had no place where to go. She was-- and she was cooking for us, so she could eat also.



And what were you doing during that time?

Oh, we were getting-- we were getting food, everything, from the Americans. They were really coming, and bringing us oranges, and everything, things which we never have seen for six years, and blankets. And then they started to-- UNRRA and Joint started to compile a list of refugees. And they were sending it around the world, and it became like a network.

And then when I realized that there were camps, survivor camps, I said, I have to find my-- whoever I can find. So we sort of joined-- we started to travel in packs.

So you left. You left.

Well, no, no. My base was Mannheim. My base was Mannheim. My sister was there. My base was Mannheim, but I decided to travel all across the state-- not states, Germany, and see whom I can find because--

Where did you go first?

Oh, I went across-- from Mannheim, I went as far as Munich, wherever I knew there were some Jewish communities, some survivors, or some camps. But actually, I asked one of my Russian friends he should get me a bicycle, so he did. I couldn't travel too far with a bike.

So I had a carton of American cigarettes and my bike, and I traded the German for a motorcycle. So they couldn't get fuel, so they were happy to give it to me. So I'd travel on my motorcycle. Sometimes I would travel on a Jeep or army trucks. I felt very safe. Nothing happened to me.

How long did you do that for?

First, I went-- almost a year. But before that, I went to Poland to find my brother in '45, end of May. When there was-- the war was-- when the German-- May the 8th, when Germany capitulated, I decided that I have to go back to Poland and find my brother. It was-- it's not like you go. You just-- it was quite a trip.

So I got a letter from a