

[LAUGHS] So from May until October--

Yes, I got advice from the authorities, American authorities, that I'm free to travel. They should give me assistance. But I mean, by that time, people were-- the roads were full of refugees, people from concentration camps, DPs, and refugees from the East. So it was like traffic going every direction.

So from Mannheim, I went-- I knew that I have to get from Munich, and from Munich to Czechoslovakia, and from Czechoslovakia to Poland. It was the way to go. So I traveled-- I mean we traveled bags. Sometimes we would stay two or three people together, then would join up with other people, people which already knew how to go around and so on. It was just very disorganized, but--

You got around.

Oh, yeah, I mean it was no problem because the Americans were there. So whatever something happened, I would just go over to the Americans. And they would give me food, or they would give me a place to sleep, or take care of me. It was no problem.

So at that point in time, everybody was doing what you were doing--

Oh, yeah, a lot of people are doing the same thing--

They're all looking to try to reunite with their family.

That's right. The search started for the family for survivors. And I knew that I have to go to Poland. My sister refused to go. She said, Alexander knows where we are. He has to come here. And I said, you're crazy. He won't. I'm going. I don't care what you're doing.

So you left your sister.

And I left my sister. We had an argument. And I said, I'm going. And--

How long did it--

I was able to get-- well, I left end of May. It took me a few weeks, maybe not that long, maybe two weeks. Slowly, I made my way to Munich. From Munich, I went through Furth. It's on the Czech border. From the Furth, I went to Pilsen. From Pilsen I went to Prague. From Prague, I went to Szczecin, which is on the-- it's a frontier town between Poland and Czechoslovakia. I mean I hope my geography is still good, but I mean I'm trying to retrace the trip.

And from there I went to a little town on the Polish-- frontier town on the border, called Dzierzice, where people were coming from Germany, from Austria, refugees coming back to Poland. And they had there-- I mean it was sort of like a transit camp. And we had to wait until we be processed to get through the border from Czechoslovakia to Poland.

How did they process you?

Well, they set up a table. And they were asking your name or where you're going and so on. And of course, they asked for volunteers because there were so many people, they couldn't manage. So I volunteered since I couldn't find a train. And I figured out this way maybe I'll meet somebody, somebody would come in I might just recognize someone.

So I was sitting there for a few days and taking the names, their history, and so on. And every refugee was coming back to Poland was getting a free pass, sort of like a pink slip, saying his name and destination, wherever he wants to go. That means I would fill in the destination put a stamp, that he can travel free. People had no money. So they can get on a train and travel wherever he wants to go. If he was going to Warsaw or Gdansk, whatever.

When I was there, of course, I did not say who I was. I did not feel safe, especially I heard so many ugly remarks about the Jews. Look how many are left. Look at that scum. Hitler didn't kill them all.

Where did you hear that?

Oh.

In the cities.

No, no, in that transit camp when the Jews were coming back.

Right there?

Yes. And so--

Who said that?

Poles when they saw Jews coming back, whatever, a few of them. And they just couldn't cope. They said, they still coming back know. We didn't get rid-- Hitler didn't get rid of all of them.

So I left in disgust. I stole a whole pad with the stamps and everything so I knew in case I have to go around Poland, I should have enough to fill in my name and go wherever I have to go, whatever city.

So you just took--

I was a street smart kid.

That's for sure.

Yeah, I was 19. Nothing scared me anymore. I felt I survived now. I'm not afraid anymore.

So I had a whole bunch of those passes. And I put in my name, Irena Krystyna Podbielska, going to Warsaw. I got to Warsaw. And I only knew the address where my sister-in-law used to live, where my brother was in hiding.

But Warsaw was, of course, a ruin. That was horrible. And it was a miracle. That was the only house on that street which was not destroyed, [POLISH] 6. I still remember. It was an absolutely, it was like a miracle-- the only house.

And I walked in there. And I knew the apartment number. I started to bang on the door. I felt my brother would be there. And a woman came out said, who are you? I said, I'm looking for the family here. And she just crossed himself. She said, who are you? I said, well, my sister-in-law. She said, which one are you, Anna or Krystyna. I said, I'm Krystyna.

She said, Jesus Lord, your brother is alive. Your sister-in-law is alive. The baby is alive. And they are all in Gdansk. And they left that house for you in case one of you comes, you should have a place where to stay. And she gave me the key. And I slept there in their apartment.

Now, how do I make my way to Gdansk. It was hard. First I crossed the bridge to Praga, which is the southern-- the east part of Warsaw, like the South Shore here.

How did you do all that? By--

Across the street? Across the bridge?

Yeah.

Well, there were not really bridges. There was a sort of-- the army put those pontoons, I think they call them, sort of like a-- and I went to Praga. And I found Czerniakowski. I wanted to find those people which helped me. I found Mr. Czerniakowski. He was terrified of Russian because he was a Polish officer.

So I went with him to the Jewish committee in Praga. Told me there was a Jewish committee. And I made a statement about his behavior and what he did for me and everything. His wife and daughter were somewhere near the German border. They were both-- I mean, Leshka finished medicine by that time. And Mrs. Czerniakowska was a medical doctor. And they were working in a hospital. But I never met them. I could not find them.

So Mr. Czerniakowski had a statement. And I also left a note that I survived, that in case somebody comes-- because that's how our people were doing. We're leaving notes wherever there was a chance that somebody might come.

Where would they leave notes? With the--

With the committee. There was a committee of people which survived in Warsaw, Jewish people. They have a committee. And they were just taking down the details that this one, they survived. And they were hanging up list every day. Some people did find each other there in those committees.

So you could walk into--

Oh, yes.

--this place and just see names and then--

That's right.

--spot a relative that way.

That's right. Leave my name and say where I'm going and so on. But I knew my brother was alive, and I even knew where he was.

Where was he?

In Gdansk. And I had the address.

You had the address.

I had the address because that woman said my brother was here not long ago. And he was asking in case I'll come or one of my sister will come, please. So he kept the apartment for us. And he knew that one day we will show up. He believed that we survive.

So it took me three or four days to get to Gdansk through different cattle trains, and so on. I got into Gdansk. And I went to that apartment. And I knocked at the door. Nobody was there.

And there were kids playing on the street. And I said, do you know where those people are? Oh, Christopher went with his parents for a walk. That's little baby, that's my nephew, Christopher. His mommy and daddy took him for a walk. He was already almost a year old. Yeah, over a year old.

And I said, how can I get to the apartment? They said, well, why don't you climb the window. That's all it took. So I went to the garden. I climbed-- it was like on a mezzanine. I got into the apartment.

And I went to the kitchen. The kettle was too warm. So that means they just left. I was just so desperate when I realized that I just missed them by a few minutes probably. I mean you could see-- I could feel that-- I touched the kettle and it was still warm on the stove.

And I was so tired. And I just lay down on the sofa. And I fell asleep. And a couple of hours later, I heard screaming. My brother came in, and they found me on the sofa asleep. [LAUGHTER] That's how I found him.

And then he told me you survived. My aunt survived, my two cousins, and who did not survive. We were talking a few days, a few nights. And he begged me to stay and that I could study. And I said, no, it's just one big cemetery and I will not stay. I came to take you out of here.

And he said, no, we can't. Irene is pregnant with a second baby. And we'll go to Sweden. And he was dreaming that he will build another Poland, socialist Poland, and he can stay with the family and a new life. And I said, no, I'm not staying. The same-- I was stubborn as usual.

So it was clear to you that you had to leave?

I could not-- I just couldn't sleep. I had nightmares. I hated everybody. And I just couldn't stay.

Did you know where you wanted to go at that point?

No, I just wanted to leave Europe. I knew that being in Germany somehow I'll be able to get out somehow. Leave Europe, that's all I wanted, the farther, the better, not to stay in Europe, and definitely not in Poland.

And my brother couldn't understand it. He was very hurt. But--

So he had other plans for you?

He had other plans. I should study and start to live normally and study and have a profession, or whatever.

Did he want your sister to be in on those plans as well?

Well, my sister married a fellow from Belgium. And she decided she's not coming back.

At what point did that happen?

She met him during the war. And she stayed with him. So she was not going at all. She was not going back. She said, we have to leave that country. I will not go back. She never did.

But I found my brother. And I didn't listen to him. I was there for six weeks in Poland. And then I had to find a way out.

And I went again, illegally, through that green border, through Bricha, by the time that-- there was a Jewish underground organization which was taking people out. So it was still Palestine at that time. And I joined a group through Krakow, Katowice, again through Prague.

And I got stuck in Prague because I couldn't get out. The Russians arrested us. They took us off the train. And they sent us back. So we went back. I mean it was going back and forth.

Were you headed for Palestine at the time?

Yes, that was my first feeling that that's where I wanted to go. But, of course--

What had you heard about it? Or what had you at that point-- did you know what was going on? Or--

No, I just--

You just wanted leave--

Remember-- no, no, because my mother told me that if I survived the war, we have family there. And that address was carved in my memory. That we have relatives there, remember if you survive. And she gave me that address. [NON-ENGLISH]. And I just knew that that's where I should go.

So that was something I felt I have to do for my mother. Because she was a Zionist, she was very-- she was Hashomer Hatzair. That was her dream. So I felt-- no, I didn't have any special feelings. I just wanted to go there because my mother felt that this is home.

So what happened? You and--

And I got out with Bricha. I got stuck in Prague. And later, we went-- by the time I was with another group and we decided, there were some German people, Germans, which are coming back, which were running away from Poland and Czechoslovakia back to Germany. So we joined them and we pretend that we are deaf and dumb, and we couldn't talk, just to get through the border, which we did.

And the train was going to-- no, the train was going to Austria, I believe. It was going to Austria. And so near Munich, when they slow down, we just jump, jump off the train. We're in Germany. And from there I made my way back from Munich, Mannheim, to Mannheim, to my sister. And--

You told your sister that--

Oh, everything.

Everything?

Yes, of course. Yes. And then I started to travel again. We already had more addresses and more contacts where Jewish camps are.

Why did you continue to travel at that point?

I still wanted to find-- maybe I'll find somebody.

Who are you looking for?

For my Cousins.

Was it sort of a desperate feeling? Like you have to keep on--

Oh, yeah--

--going on and on--

I'm still going on. I didn't stop till today. Sometimes it pays off. Wherever I travel, I open a telephone book and check names and follow up every clue there is. And in rare occasions, it pays off. I just want to know where my-- just I can't stop. It's like a compulsion. I can't even now, after this day.

I found some relatives only two years ago. I had a reunion in Paris. So it never stopped. The pain is still there. Life goes on. So it's not as sharp. But the pain of losing people and not knowing what happened to them, it's with me. So I just can't help myself. So I--

You parted it from your sister then at that--

No, I was with my sister until they opened a DP camp not too far from Mannheim. I decided--

Where exactly was that?

Bensheim. That's between Darmstadt and Heidelberg on the Burgstrasse, yeah.

Can you describe that DP camp at all? Do you remember what it was like the first time you went there?

Well, it was a large camp. There were a few thousand people. Most of them were refugees from Russia, which came back because Russia declared amnesty. And Jews were able to leave Russia in '46. So all those people didn't-- they had no place where to stay in Poland.

I mean they were killing them after the war. There were a lot of pogroms and killings after the war. And they just wanted to get out. So there were some little kids, which were born in Russia, families.

And the only thing was UNRRA and Joint organized DP camps, displaced person camps. So they were there, mostly old schools, German schools or-- mostly barracks, soldier barracks or schools. And--

How many people were there?

In that camp where I was? A few thousand. There were a few blocks. And--

Did you have enough food? Or--

Oh, yes. We had enough food. We had our offices. I mean it was run by the UNRRA. But-- we had concerts. We had schools. We had nurse service. We had hospital. And then I went and I became a nurse.

There?

Yes, I am a nurse by profession.

That's where you studied?

Yeah, I studied in Hanau near Frankfurt in a German hospital where they sent a few girls from my camp. I decided to get a profession. And--

So you decided while you were in camp--

Yes, yes.

--to become a nurse.

That's right. I worked in a nursery at the beginning. I loved kids. And then I decided to get a profession, and I felt nursing was for me. So I went-- there were a few of us, had classes. And I became a nurse.

Had you thought about that at all before, during the-- while you--

I didn't think of anything. I just acted. I wanted to survive. I mean think of what?

I mean, nowadays you think when people plan their careers and think about it ahead of time--

Oh, no, no, no, my career was planned for me before the war. My father wanted I should take over his practice. So he wanted me to be a lawyer. So I don't think I had much to say. That probably what would happen.

No, so I-- But I don't know, it just became such normal thing that I should be a nurse. And I worked in camp as a nurse

later.

How long were you in the camp?

Till December '48 when I emigrated to Canada as a nurse.

Can you tell--

But I didn't work as a nurse. I couldn't find a job. So like every other immigrant, I was domestic and work in a factory. It's an old story. Every immigrant went through the same thing. And I met my husband in '53. And we got married.

Can you talk a little bit about what it was like as you were leaving the camp and how you made a decision where to go and just a little about that?

I just wanted to get out of Europe. So I applied to the States, to Canada, to Australia, whatever comes first. And Canada came first. I was able to as-- I was single. And they were taking single people. End of '48 before that I mean Canada was closed to Jewish immigration at all. It was a very--

So that was the first place that accepted you--

Yes.

So you decided--

Oh, yeah.

And when-- did you come to Montreal?

Yeah, I came to Montreal.

What was that like leaving and coming, just that whole journey? And what were you thinking and feeling? I mean, after going through all these experiences.

A new start. A new start. But of course, you can't--

Your hopes and dreams, what were you imagining back then? Do you remember at all?

My dreams were to get my family out of Europe. I was able to bring my sister here two years later. My brother only defected in '59. My brother was a journalist after the war. And the government sent him to cover the Olympic games, to Melbourne in Australia in '56.

While he was, there he came here to see me. That's the first time I saw my brother after the war, since '45, in '56, when he came from Melbourne. And we planned his escape that time. And I cannot talk about details because too many people are involved. But he defected in '59 with his family. His youngest child was a year old, went to Australia.

So somehow we got out of there. I mean, my sister died in '81. My brother died in '81. But he's survived by children, grandchildren. And I'm very close with him. And they are Australians. And I visit them a few times. And so I somehow I feel that it's a new lifetime. It's a different lifetime completely. It's behind me.

Could you talk-- I just want to go back just for a moment to what it was like when you first came to Canada, what the conditions were like for you.

Very bad. Very bad.

Can you talk--

There were no-- there were no-- I mean--

Who helped you?

No one did. No one did. I was a domestic.

You got here and you had to--

I got from the Red Cross. I got \$5 and a slap on my back, you'll be OK. And that's all.

That was it.

That was that.

And you said you went to work in a factory.

I worked as a domestic, as a maid, for about six months. And then I went to work in a factory. And slowly I built myself up.

I couldn't work as a nurse. They wouldn't take me. I didn't have-- I didn't speak English or French. And I wasn't a union member.

How was life in Canada then? How did you find it?

I did work as a nurse for a few months as a nurse's aide, only in the beginning. But then they said, well, it's just-- it was very hard.

It was hard.

It was very hard. I was too proud to-- I would never go on welfare no matter what. I would starve. There were days that I only ate peanut butter or a doughnut and a coffee because I was saving money to bring my family over or send them money. But I would just never go for any help. That just never happened and never would.

What were some of the more difficult aspects of adjusting to life here? And what were some of the easier--

Well, I don't forget, I was 22 years old when I came here. I was a young girl. I was not an immigrant. I was a refugee. I was grateful. I still cry when I hear a Canadian hymn.

Really?

Oh, yes. Very sentimental. And when I go to the parliament, I just-- my kids are making fun because I just-- I get tears in my eyes.

Did you immediately feel like this is your new country and this is yours? And how long did it take to adjust and really feel like you're Canadian?

First time I went back to Poland in 1974. That was very therapeutic. Because before that, Europe was my country-- I mean, Europe and Poland, even though I wouldn't live there. But I would say back home, OK.

And when I went in '74 for the first time and I just-- no, '73, excuse me, '73. And I heard myself saying, when I was in Poland or in Hungary or whatever I was traveling through Europe with my husband, I would say back home. And I realized Montreal was home. This is my home.



It hit your for the first time?

My children-- first time. My children are Canadian born. They were born in freedom. They are Canadians. And this is home. That's all.

Are most of your friends that you have today Holocaust survivors?

Yes. Yes, they are.

Do you talk to them about the past?

We try not to. But no matter we talk about fashion, we talk about movies, we talk about everything else, and it comes back to the same thing-- the war and the atrocities. I don't know how it comes around.

So you talk freely about it all?

We try not to compare experiences. We try not to talk-- how did you survive? What did you do? We try not to. And yet it comes-- somehow it just comes back.

I feel better with them. I feel more secure. I think they understand me better. And I have more compassion to-- no matter how they behave, how they come across to other people, somehow I always forgive them.

Did other people ask you, knowing that you're a survivor, do they ask you--

The hardest time--

--about your experiences--

Because I never spoke about it until I'm talking to you and to Yehudi. I--

So you would only talk--

Try forget--

--to your friends that were survivors.

No.

You never ever talked to anyone--

No, no. We just didn't talk about it. We tried to-- it was sort of like a conspiracy of silence. We didn't talk about what happened. We didn't want the children should know, they should suffer. But we couldn't. They were getting mixed signals.

I don't think that my children really know my real story until today, until they will see the tape, and they really have the whole picture. Because they probably were getting little pieces of the puzzle. That's all.

You felt like you wanted to protect them from it.

Protect them. And I don't think I did a good job because I had night when I started to yell and scream and dream and have the nightmares. They hear what happens. And they-- so they realize when they got older.

At the beginning, I'm sure they were very scared and confused when I would cry at night and my husband would bring

me back and show children are here. Nothing happened to them. See, they're here. They're here. And it must have been very tough on them.

And I tried to forget. I did. My husband was also a survivor. But his way of coping was to deny everything, like nothing happened. He survived in Russia. But he lost his mother and his sister and his brother.

I don't think he really knows how they died, how they were killed. He didn't want to know. I guess he just wanted to keep their memories in a different form.

I know because I just-- I do know. I spoke to some of his relatives. So I could never talk to him about it. But he was very supportive when I would cry at night. And he was able to calm me down. He was my best friend.

It must have been very difficult for you all this time not really--

Yeah. So I could never can talk to him about it, only if something happened. Or once I remember, it was in a department store. I mean, I never, never knew what could trigger my attack of hysteria or hallucination. I would call it I would hallucinate.

Smell didn't think would trigger it. I remember once I was in a department store. And I don't know, it was some mobile Christmas decorations. And I looked up and I was suddenly I felt I was swimming in a sea of swastikas. And I just freaked out, and I fainted.

I couldn't tell anybody. I covered my eye-- they took me there. You know, I said, I don't feel well. I didn't tell them. I couldn't tell I thought I was going crazy. I called my husband, and he took me home.

And at night later in the evening, he went back with me. Of course, I told him what happened. And he said, yes, I understand that you could visualize something like that. They were turning around and turning to swastikas. But I couldn't tell anybody. You know, I felt I was going crazy.

And the worse times where when my daughter was born because all the nightmares or the nightmares that whatever happened to me was happening to her. And that was the toughest thing. Having children helped me heal somehow. But yet--

And when I see an old German on the street my age or older, automatically I visualize him. And I try to guess what type of military unit he was in. I see a uniform--

Triggers that.

Triggers. And of course, the most traumatic thing was the Eichmann trial. And then the Zundel trial. So I just can't escape. I try, but I can't. I just have to learn to live with the pain.

Are there any other thoughts or anything that you would like to express or add about this? What are your feelings? Or just where you're at right now?

I don't know. I don't know. I just-- I never thought I'd be able to sit here and talk about those things. Never thought about it. I never had the courage to do it.

And then I saw other people coming out and saying. And then a few times I heard when people say about people like me, you actually are endangered species. Because after you are gone, there'll nobody else. There will be no one left really to tell the real story.

And my children really wanted to do it. Ma, you have to You just have to do it. And maybe because it's 50 years now, '39, '89. I feel like everything is coming full circle, that I have to do it. That maybe my time is running out. That's why I decided to talk because I kept that inside like a guilty secret for all the years.

I would never talk to Gentiles about it because I would feel that maybe that it's just morbid curiosity, and they won't believe me. I just didn't feel good about it. And Canadian Jews couldn't cope. So they just didn't want to hear it.

Even at the beginning when you--

At the beginning, the hardest time.

You couldn't tell anybody--

No, because they didn't want to hear it. Maybe they felt guilty that they were-- I mean, I do feel guilty myself. And I'm trying to justify my life by finding some meaning in it, you know. But I guess that's what my daughter calls the-- I have a hopeless survivor syndrome.

But it's true. Make me I suppose-- when I look at the 50 years, it's like a potpourri of horror and success, success that I retain my humanity, that I'm a human being, that I have children, which are very human, have compassion. And maybe they will understand what happened. Maybe they will remember my sister, my brother, Janka, and the people, which touched my life. So that's basically what it is.

Go ahead. I'm here. I'm-- ask me.

I'm with you.

You can ask me.

I just really want to thank you because for myself, it's really made a difference in my life sitting with you and following your story. And I don't have parents that experienced the Holocaust. And I really appreciated that you were able to--

I was just-- I was just caught in a history. I mean I realize now that I should not feel guilty-- excuse me, could I have a napkin or something. I shouldn't-- but I just feel that there are so many beautiful people which never had a chance to live. And so I had to make something out of my life. Just had to.

I must have been doing something right. My kids are very human, very compassionate. It's not what they do in life. It's how they do it. And that's important to me.

So I guess I got a chance in life. And I-- and maybe I'm here to-- because when I think of Janka, she comes lately so much to my mind, that little Janka, when I look at all those brutal people, that narrow minded. And then I think of that little Janka, and the policeman, and a few other people, which--

And I can't stand when people try to tell me how many Jews they saved. I get so angry inside. I just feel that the real heroes are dead or they are silent. They don't brag about. And I just turn away. I just don't even answer.

But I was able to find my friend, Irena Podbielska. I think I told you I found it after 35 years, thanks to my daughter.

Maybe you could just tell--

The story, hear the story of our friendship. And it was published in a Viewpoint in Montreal. My real name, Renata Skotnicka. And a lady in Toronto read it. She wrote a letter to the editor asking to get in touch with the author, with my daughter.

And she wrote a beautiful letter, giving me certain clues about the Skotnicka family, a lady who is 82 years old, brought up in-- born in England. And I realized those are my relatives. And she gave me so many clues and gave me courage to activate my search for my family.

And it paid off, one clue after another. And I was able to find one cousin in Paris. And when I found her-- I mean our grandfathers were brothers, which is pretty close. And when I found her, I found another five members of the family which survived because they study abroad. One was in Milano during the war. And they were all-- and they all survived.

One is now in Denmark. One is in Bremen, got out of Russia, Riga, only nine years ago. One is in Paris. One is in Italy. And one is in Tel Aviv. And we had a reunion two years ago. So they keeping in touch now, sort of like.

You have family then--

Yes, well, I have family. I have my children. But my children will have family too. Of course, they never knew their grandparents.

I had a large family. I had a big, big, big family. Once I was in Australia with my brother, and we started to count how many people we lost. We stop at 50. My brother just broke down. He couldn't do it anymore.

But now my son and myself and my cousin Barbara from Paris, we're working on a family tree. And we're tracing up to six generations already. It will be a real project.

I'm just wondering if you have any other afterthoughts before--

I don't know--

We end.

I don't know. I don't know what to say. And--

How do you feel after doing this--

I feel relieved that I said it. It's the first time that, as I said, my children when they watch the tape, maybe they'll know me better. They will-- they'll think of their family, which they never met. Maybe they come to life to them the way they-- in front of my eyes.

And I know it's important for the Congress, as an oral history, as a document. It has to be done. So I'm doing it

Thank you very, very much. I really appreciate you're being.