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Nesse Godin interview, 2/13/95

SWB: Nesse, I think that a good place to start would be at

the point in the death march when you ended up in the barn,

so if you could just take me into that part.

NESSE GODIN: As I mentioned to you before, after the death

march, we were round up in a place with the name of Zhinof.

We pushed in into a barn, I do not know how many of us were

left dead on the road. We may have been about 600 when we

arrived there. But for the three weeks that we were there,

there were more dead bodies in the hold that they dug than

people in the barn. I tell you, it was just a terrible

terrible sight. Uh, it came a point at that time when I

really prayed to be one of the dead. But that real was

different. March 10, 1945, we were liberated by the Russian

army. Actually, the people were taking, the Russians were

taking over that area, and they found us there.

SWB: Describe to me some of the things that happened in

that barn, before they came.

NESSE GODIN: Before we were liberated, or that particular

day?

SWB: Before you were liberated leading up to that

particular day.

NESSE GODIN: When we came in actually to the barn, they,

the Nazis ordered 50 women out, they gave them shovels, they

told them to dig two giant holes. We thought that we were

being lined up and shot, as in previous, that's what

happened. But the Nazis had different plans for us. One

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hole served as a bathroom, they put some sticks on. And the

other hole served as a grave. Every morning, the dead were

ordered to be taken out, they were had to be under as naked,

because the clothing could be recycled, but the people were

dumped into the hole. Food was given to us very little.

You see the Germans did not get at that point allocation

food for us for the prisoners. It was up to the village to

supply some food for us. People just died from hunger,

typhoid, dysentery. I tell you, the mountain of bodies

outside were dead, but the people inside looked dead also.

If we were just living zombies, skeletons covered with skin.

And that particular day, before the Russians found us, in

the morning, when um, the men that were in charge to take

out the dead, took the bodies out, came back into the barn

and said to us, no guards. Some of the women said, let's

run to the village. Now you know we couldn't even walk, we

were so sick. Somebody else says, there is SS men hiding

behind the barn. The minute we start to walk, they're going

to shoot us. But we didn't know that we were, that there

were no more guards, they ran away. All day long we sat in

that barn not knowing that our guards are run away. At

night we heard the sound of boots. Now you know for us

survivors, the sound of boots we shiver. And then we heard

the Russian language, and there was the Russian army and the

soldiers were telling us that they took over the area. They

can not stay with us, but in the next day or so, their

backup units will come, the medics and they will help us.

Now that night, I tell you, I cried. I remember I cried.

And you know, 50 years almost, from March 10 till now, and I

still don't know why I cried. Did I cry because I felt

sorry for me? Did I cry for my family that was so brutally

killed? You know it was just something that people said,

you must have been very happy when you were liberated. But

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I remember that sadness in my heart not knowing, not having

a home where to go to, not having a family.

SWB: So that night they did basically nothing for you

except tell you you were free.

NESSE GODIN: Uh, well, uh, some soldiers gave us a bite of

bread and they said to us we are afraid to give you food, if

we give you too much, you may get very sick. So, don't run

to the village, don't eat too much, we are going to come

with the medics and tell you exactly. Now many people right

after liberation died because they ate a whole slice of

bread. Our stomachs were so shrunken. We couldn't digest

any more, too much food. So they really, that's all they

did that night.

SWB: Did you talk with the other girls, or you just cried

or... do you remember what other people did.

NESSE GODIN: There were different different reactions.

Some people jumped for joy, some people applauded, I heard

applause to the Russians. The people that knew how to speak

Russian had a little conversation trying to find out if

other places were liberated. Don't forget, I was from

thirteen to seventeen, from the age of thirteen to seventeen

ghetto, concentration camp, labor camp, death march. I

wasn't really educated enough to understand what was

happening.

SWB: Now describe to me your physical condition. What did

you look like?

NESSE GODIN: I tell you what I looked like. I weighed at

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liberation sixty-nine pounds. I'm not a very short lady. I

don't know how tall I was at that time, how much I grew

during the war, when uh, I am five four and a half now. Can

you imagine sixty-nine pounds? My face was swollen because

I was beaten up severely on the death march. My hands had

frostbite, my toes were black from frost, I had one dress, a

blanket that was wrapped around my body. Between the

blanket and the dress, my ba- body was wrapped around with

straw. Somehow we found straw on the ground and we tried to

insulate ourselves with it. Uh, let me tell you how I saw

myself a few days after liberation. I have not seen myself

in a mirror for almost two years. A few days after we were

free, the Russians carried us, bodily actually to the

village, put us in little houses, until the makeshift

hospital was made. And as I was laying in one of those

houses on a straw sack, I saw a door with a window pane.

And I thought I'm free, let me look outside, how the free

world looks. But as I looked through that little window

pane, I saw a reflection. A reflection of the most horrible

that anyone can imagine. A skeleton covered with skin, with

big blue eyes. And as I turned to look whose reflection I

saw, I realized that was my reflection. This is how I

looked.

SWB: Where did you think that you would go in those first

few days.

NESSE GODIN: A few days later, I was taken to that

makeshift hospital that was set up in the little village of

Crenof. I was there with typhoid, dysentery, uh, treatment

for my uh toes, my scar on my face, my wound at that time.

I was there for six weeks. I was there the longest. Then,

the people that were in charge of that hospital called me in

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that little room that they called an office, and they said

to me, now you can leave. And I looked at them and I said,

where do I go? I don't have anyone to call. I don't have a

home, I don't have a country, I don't have a family. So the

person at the desk looked at the women in back of me and

they asked her, where are you from. She said from

Lithuania. So I- they assigned me to be her ward, because I

was seventeen, I was underage, I became this woman's ward.

Stranger, I never met her before. She was very kind. And

that's how we started out on a journey, supposedly to go

back to Lithuania. You could not buy a ticket and travel

wherever you wanted. You have to go where the trains were

going to. Trains are traveling east and west, Russian

armies were uh traveling, they were uh, uh taking all kinds

of machinery from Germany towards Russia. And we had those

freight trains.

SWB: Wait, we have to put another roll on.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Okay, let's back up and tell me how the trains were

going and how you...

NESSE GODIN: Okay so I wound up with this lady that, whose

ward I was. And we had to hop different trains because

there was no way that you could buy a ticket or go directly

to anywhere we planning to go. Trains were going east and

west and north, and those were trains that the Russian

armies were moving from one side to the other. Also freight

trains that machinery was taken from Germany to Russia. So

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we hopped those trains, we were, they allowed us to do so,

and we ran from one place to another. We wound up in the

city of Loge, Poland. By that time it was May already. I

remember well because I was still on one of those trains

when the war stopped. So I know it was May. When we

arrived in the small uh area in that area of Loge, that

shelter that they had, there were already help set up. You

know we human beings are really wonderful people. There was

the Red Cross, Christian relief, the highest helping, uh,

giving us a little food, telling us where we can go uh for

to sleep over. In that large room, I remember there were

big posters around, where you were supposed to sign in and

let people know where you're from in case somebody from your

family comes to the place, they should know if you're there.

SWB: What did you find.

NESSE GODIN: Okay. One day, I, as I looked at that poster

and it said Lithuania, I signed my name somewhere on the

bottom of that poster. All night I was wondering, I said

who is going to bend down and read it on the bottom of the

poster. Now you can see I was seventeen but not too wise.

So the next morning I was very anxious to get back to that

shelter and to sign my name up high so where people could

see it on eye level. And I was writing my name, Nesse

Galbring, that was my maiden name. A lady was standing next

to me and asked me, she said which Galbring are you from

Chelay, I don't remember you. You see we had a Galbring, a

Shoemaker, a d- uh a Tailor and my parents had a dairy

store. They sold butter and milk. And I told her I said

I'm Galbring from the dairy business. Oh, she said, Nesse,

that's you, you look so bad. And when I looked at that

women I recognized her. She was a strong lady before the

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war, but mentally she was not quite there. And the next

thing out of that woman's mouth was oh, I was with your

mother in the camp. I said, how can that be. My mom was

separated from me in the concentration camp. She said, yes,

they took a little bit stronger women to another camp and

she's right now in a little shelter in this-and-this small

village near the border of Poland and Germany. When I heard

that, I couldn't believe the women because she wasn't

mentally stable. But still I thought maybe it is true. So,

I go to my lady whose ward I am, I said, he- her name was

Hanna, I said Hanna, we have to go back, back to the German

border. She said, your crazy child, who goes back,

everybody goes forward. I said but, somebody told me that

my mom is alive and she is there in that village. She said,

I am not going with you. She took out the piece of paper

that she's in charge of me, she tore it to pieces, she said,

now go to the desk, tell them you're eighteen years old,

they'll give you another document, and if you want to go,

go. So, everybody's traveling east and traveling west.

Arrived in that little village, I found the shelter, I

walked in, and there were ladies from my home town that I

recognized, and after they asked me who I was because they

could not recognize me, they said, oh Nesse, your mom heard

that you were alive and you were in Loge, she went to look

for you. Can you imagine, she went one way, I came the

other. Took me about two or three weeks, I really don't

remember, to get back in Loge, where I was reunited with my

mom.

SWB: Tell me about the moments of getting reunited.

NESSE GODIN: I tell you exactly how it was because I'll

never ever forget that. When I came to Loge, the second

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time, that is looking already for my mom, there was already

an organized committee at that train station. There were

women that came and actually bodily showed you where the

shelter was. And there was a red-headed woman from my

hometown, standing there at the train, and when she saw me

she said, Nesse, I'm gonna take you to your mother. I said,

how do you know me? She said yes, we heard that you were

here and you went to look for her and we thought y-she

would-you would come back. She took me up two flights or

three flights of stairs, I don't remember anymore. Here, I

could hardly move my feet because they were frozen. I don't

know how I walked up those stairs. She knocked on the door,

she said Mrs. Galbring, I brought you your daughter. And

the woman left. And what I remember, the door opening up,

and there was no lights, I don't know why, maybe it was

still, uh bombed there, it was a candle burning, and there

was my mother. She looked frail, but she looked the same.

She, from the age of 45 to 46, she didn't change really.

But she did not recognize me. My head was still shaved, my

face was still swollen, wrapped around with rags, and at

that point I still had very terrible clothes on. Some

Russian soldier gave me an old coat. I had a pair of men's

shoes on and I just remember her saying okay, take off your

coat. And here is my mother, I was so anxious to hug her,

and after I took off all that junk from me, she said I did

not recognize you my child. And needless to say, we were

very lucky. So few found mothers and found children, I was

really very lucky.

SWB: Now I want to go back and ask you specific things

about getting liberated and getting disinfected, did they

give you a toothbrush, tell me about things like that.

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NESSE GODIN: Okay, I'll tell you... I have a little bit of

a problem with the word liberation. Um, you know we are

grateful to every soldier that came in, whether it was

French or English or Russian or a wonderful American

soldiers that came in and talked to us like human beings.

But really did anybody send armies to liberate us? They

found us there. Whether it was in the American zone or the

French, they found us in those camps. Now in my particular,

as I told you, the first units went through, they really

gave us crumbs of bread I remember just and saying, ah we

don't have ourselves, and we don't want to give you too much

so you don't get sick. Now as I told you before, the next

day, the few that were a little bit healthier had walked to

the village. I really cannot, don't know whether it was a

mile or a mile and a half. It was not, it, we could see the

village, it was within walking distance. I personally could

not walk. A Russian soldier carried me on his arms and

brought me to that little house. After being in that little

house for two days, where we were given a little bit of

food, they stopped in every house and gave a little bit of

soup a few times a day. Then that makeshift hospital was

created. I remember they brought me in to the hospital. I

remember them shaving my hair, all over my body. I remember

a burning sensation of DDT or some other kind of

disinfectant. And then I didn't remember anything else for

three days. I was unconscious. When I woke up, I remember

the Russian doctor asking me my name, my age, where I'm

from, and holding my hands, and giving me hope that I'm

free, that I'll be okay, that they'll take care of me. I

don't remember any toothbrushes, I don't remember any

luxuries at all in that little hospital.

SWB: Okay we're about to run out....

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[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: Just a couple of other questions. Did you run into a

teacher from your hometown right after liberation.

NESSE GODIN: Yes I did.

SWB: Tell me about that.

NESSE GODIN: In the barn, in the barn, there was, very

close to me there was a woman that I thought looked very

familiar. And after talking to her, I realized that she was

one of my teachers, cause we didn't recognize each other.

So, somehow, we got a little bit closer, because that was

the only person that I could relate to that I felt like it

was my family. So when the Russian soldier carried me, she

said to him, please, I, don't separate us, that's all we

have each other. So he brought her in that same house that

I was, she was put on the same straw sack, you know, not the

mattress, we didn't have mattresses, it was like a sack of

straw. And she was laying there, and I remember there were

women in that room cooking water, or doing something some

little bit stronger ladies, Jewish ladies. And one day I

remember them j- I s-, I begged them I say, give me a little

bit of water to give to my, my friend here. They said,

she's dead, what do you need water for her. And I didn't

realize that the last person that I thought I had was dead.

I remember them taking her out to be buried and I couldn't

even walk out to be there.

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SWB: And in the hospital was there a hunger strike.

NESSE GODIN: No there was no hunger strike for anybody. I

see you really learned a lot about me. [laughs] There was

no hunger strike for anybody, but there was a hunger strike

for me. Uh, after I was getting better really, and one day

I thought, I don't have anybody. My last friend is dead,

that teacher. Now what do I need to live for. It's really

no use for me to continue. So I thought if I would continue

not to eat, maybe I would die and be with all my dear people

that are not here no more. But somebody in the next bed

told on me, and then they started to watch me and make sure

that I'm eating. I see you learned quite a bit about me.

SWB: Okay, now, tell me how you and your mother came to go

to Feldafing.

NESSE GODIN: Uh, how did we come to go to Feldafing. We

decided that there was no purpose for us to go back to

Lithuania. Lithuania was a already Communist country, so we

hung around in the city of Loge, thinking in case somebody

else of the family will survive or somebody that we know,

people started about talking about Palestine or that time

how it was called it was not Israel yet. And by the later

part of May or beginning of June, men started to come that

were liberated in Dachau. And uh I remember a young man

coming with a whole list, saying that they send out, w- I

don't know how many, half a dozen, uh, men to go and see if

any of the families are alive, they should try to reunite

somehow. On that list was my brother's name, Hreskel

Galpering, who was liberated in Dachau. He sent word that

in case any of the family is there, that young men will meet

any of the family, they should tell them that we should try

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to get to the American zone. Now before I continue let me

tell you. When we were brought to the concentration camp

the last words that we were sent to each other, was in case

we survived that hell, our meeting point should be back home

in Lithuania. So each of us had that idea in case somebody

else comes back we should go to Lithuania. But that's why

my brother also remembered it and made sure that in case

someone of the family is alive, we should try to go. Now in

tha- if you look through history at that time, you will see

it really was not too difficult to go over border, walk

across the border, especially for survivors. We, they could

tell we are survivors. Somehow a group of people we, uh,

somebody said that the best way to get over to the American

zone would be through Berlin. Because in Berlin, they had

the Russian zone, the French zone, the English zone, the

American zone. Now uh I remembered riding on a truck and

walking by foot. We wound up in one of the zones, I think,

I don't really remember anymore whether it was the English

zone or the French zone, and we just walked over to the

American zone. And there we registered and um, if you had

family, they helped you to get reunited. And when we told

them that we heard that my brother is in Feldafing, ah, they

actually brought us there. So, we wound up in uh, uh,

October of 1945, we arrived in Feldafing. Took a long time

for us to get there. You can see from sometime in June till

October. So it wasn't a easy thing, you know, you went from

one place to another, you had to wait for documents, for

papers, for.. In the time from June till October, I met my

husband-to-be. And he joined us and before we actually

arrived in Feldafing, Jack and I were married.

SWB: In 1945. So tell me a little about that.

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NESSE GODIN: Well this is always, especially children in

the school when I talk to them about my experiences, they

ask me how did you meet your husband. And I always tell

them sincerely, in those days, you needed each other. My

husband is a survivor of the holocaust. He doesn't even

have a distant cousin. Um, there was a long story behind it

how I met him. He was a friend of a friend of my, one of my

uncles by marriage on my father's side. And when we found

these people in the city of Loge, I mean we, my mom, and I

found this uncle and his friend, we became a little bit like

a family unit. And that's who we traveled with from Loge to

the American zone. Um, at one point, I remember in Loge, my

mother saying to me, uh, Nessele, that's an endearing word

for your name Nesse, Nessele, you know we are two women

alone. I think it would be a good idea if one of us would

get married. Now my mom was 46 years old, and I thought in

my heart, why would she want to get married? She has me. I

was angry. But the next thing out of my mother's mouth was,

my child, I had a wonderful husband, I don't think I will

marry again, but I think you should marry, look here is a

few guys, they are all very nice. Choose one and get

married, we'll have a man that will help us and take care of

us. So honestly, I just looked at Jack and I thought he was

cute, and I, many times I ask him, I say Jack, who proposed,

how did we decide to get married. Um, I don't remember

kissing him before we got married. I don't remember us

being in love before we got married. We needed each other.

But let me tell you, we are married a long time. We are

very much in love now.

SWB: Okay. We have a little bit left on this roll. Just

tell me what Feldafing is. I don't know anything about it.

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NESSE GODIN: Okay. What I remember of Feldafing. When I

came to Feldafing I was curious, it looked a beautiful place

with villas, with a golf course, with tennis courts, with

some barracks down the town, and I was told at that time

that this was a resort place for SS men to come and enjoy

themselves and have a good time. It was a small little

town, the town itself was maybe ten blocks long. A small

town, small European town, very pretty, very nice, and as

you went down to the area where we called the DP camp was,

ah you still saw those beautiful villas, you saw the

beautiful trees, the beautiful area. But you have to

understand, I- we were not given a villa. In that villa,

ten families had to live.

SWB: Okay, we've got to reload.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

NESSE GODIN: ....to be good human beings, what, what if you

don't love each other or hate each other or abuse each

other, what can happen. And many times I don't say those

things. But God forbid if I am in the audience, and some

person that just wants to discredit me or discredit the

Holocaust, and when I get angry, they hear the worst of the

worst. And sometime[?] I said I never said that. How come

all of a sudden I say that. And then I realize that I

protect myself by not even saying that.

[SYNC MARK #4]

SWB: So we were back at Feldafing and you were describing

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the DP camps.

NESSE GODIN: Yeah. So, what I started to say, those villas

were beautiful, but you have to understand if we were

assigned a place in the villa that meant that ten families

instead of one lived in that pretty house. Uh, for

instance, my brother was there already with his wife to be,

or she was his wife already actually maybe. And they had

one room. Now when we came, my mom and my husband and I, we

were just given two beds in the kitchen. And the kitchen

was used by the rest of the ten families. So it was, yes,

the place looked beautiful. But we were still crammed into

small places. We still, ris- had to go down to the main

kitchen to get the food, cause at the beginning they did not

give you, for each family separate ration. You still had to

go to the main kitchen with your little coupon to get your

food. You also received a coupon for a pair of shoes, let's

say. You went to that special place where they assigned you

that you can get a coat, or if you needed a dress, or if you

needed something else. So, yes we were free, but we were

still in like organized living.

SWB: What else about the conditions, were there other

things that were similar to how your life had been before.

NESSE GODIN: Well, it- it- every thing is in comparison.

Naturally you, when you start to compare to the

concentration camp or the ghetto or the labor camp, this was

heaven. But if you compare to normal lifestyle, this was

still a camp. You still had a curfew, you were not allowed

to go to the little town after a certain time. That, at the

beginning. Later as time went on, I was in Feldafing five

years. So later on was different. We alread- some of the

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people had already little jobs in the little town, some

people worked within the camp, some people uh went to

school, so things changed, but at the beginning it was very

organized living. We still were told we're not allowed to

go uh out, we were not allowed to. And then we didn't have

money to go, let's say if somebody wanted to take a ride to

Munich. Unless they assigned you a ticket to go for a

certain purpose, like if I had to go with my face to the

doctor in Munich, I had the ticket to go. But at the

beginning, we couldn't go wherever we wanted. We were

displaced persons, that's what our document said.

SWB: So you sort of had no rights.

NESSE GODIN: Well, I don't want to say no rights, but very

limited rights. Very limited rights.

SWB: Did Ben-Gurion come while you were at Feldafing?

NESSE GODIN: Yes, I remember. I remember it well. Cause

after we were there a year or so, the, within the camp, the

Jewish community organized a little bit. There was the

president of the camp, people were in charge of cultural

affairs, they started to have, some people started to come

uh that were in hiding or in the Russian occupied areas, and

they had some little children, schools were organized and

uh, different organizations, uh-uh, Zionist organizations.

And I remember Ben-Gurion w- coming to the camp and speaking

about uh you know, Palestine and about uh what's going to

be, and I remember people going, going to legal immigration,

leaving the camp and going there. But I remember Ben-Gurion

with his hair standing out on both sides and giving us hope

and I'll never forget that.

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SWB: Did they decorate Feldafing when he was coming?

NESSE GODIN: Oh yes, we we tried, I don't even know how we

got maybe somehow with the help of the UNRHA, uh, is a- you

know blue and white flags and uh, and a little, as much as

we could decorate it, and uh p- well there was like a little

parade and everybody coming. There was a big area it was

called was the Turen Halle. Turen Halle means the sports

arena. Which was a big, a big uh building. And that's

where we met that time.

SWB: In, in this time, especially back in 1945, before you

even got to Feldafing, were you afraid traveling...

NESSE GODIN: We were very much afraid because we heard

already that so many people that went back even, not just

afraid in Germany, we were afraid in Poland, we heard that

people went back to their hometowns, and uh, people that

lived in their homes or had their businesses, killed them.

So we felt like we were really not welcome nowhere yet. Now

when we got to Germany, especially when we got to Feldafing,

I had a very hard time, I tell you the truth. At that time

we were just free. But you were in the midst of a people

that you were wondering which of them killed your father,

which of them killed your uncle, your grandmother, your

grandfather. It was very difficult. Very difficult. You

uh were suspicious, you were scared.

SWB: Did you want to get out.

NESSE GODIN: Every one of us dreamed to be able to leave

those camps as soon as possible. I don't know if I

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mentioned to you. As soon as we arrived in Feldafing, we

wrote a letter, to my aunt, to Washington D.C., my mom's

sister. We remembered her address, she lived in Washington

D.C., they had a tiny little grocery store on Sherman and

Euclid streets, Washington, D.C. That's all you had to

write, south market, Sherman and Euclid, no zip code in

those days. My aunt received that letter. She went right

away to the State Department, she found friends and family

that would sponsor us, make sure that we wouldn't be a

burden to the United States government. But because of the

quota system, in those days we had the quota system, sa- I'm

saying it carefully because at one time somebody wrote down,

Nesse didn't come to the United States because of a quarter.

Quota system in those days. I was from Lithuania, it was a

small quote. We had to wait five years. Five years. To be

let in. We had to go through medical examination. We had

to be checked and checked and checked. Until we were let

go.

SWB: Tell me more about life in Feldafing and the

organizations and...

NESSE GODIN: After the first year, I would say, maybe year

and a half, um, you get accustomed to your way of life

actually. People started to have children. I myself, my

oldest daughter and my son were born in Feldafing in 1947, I

became a mom. I was not quite nineteen years old. And then

you saw those beautiful children and uh people started to

have a little more hope. You know when you see children you

know there is a future, you know tha- something else coming.

And uh everyone was waiting. It was a time of waiting. But

we uh, people um, really joined the Zionist organizations

with the hope of um, having a uh, a fr-, our own land. I

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remember when Israel was declared a country. We were in

Feldafing. The celebrations, the ecstasy just to know that

there is a, in case we want there is a place that will take

us.

SWB: Okay, let's cut for a minute.

[CUT]

[SYNC TAKE 5]

NESSE GODIN: Uh we were very much afraid of the MP's,

because, you know when you are used to being afraid of the

military, you really did not know yet, am I supposed to go

here, am I m- not supposed to go here. Even when we were

free to go in the little town and we saw military police, we

were scared. We thought that they're going to do something

to us, they're going to tell us don't go here, don't go

there, don't do this. You know, when you live through such

a traumatic time as the Holocaust, and you know that this

people, them, SS and Gestapo and people in uniform

mistreated you, sometime you make mistake and even this

police was being kind to you, you were afraid. I tell you

the truth. I'm still afraid of military. I really am.

Sometime I think, oh, here goes a policeman, here goes a

guard.

SWB: Now we have to get room tone.

[END]

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