Ilse Marcus, January 3, 1978

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born in Breslau in June, 1914

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your education in Breslau?

A: I started out in a Lyceum, a private school and you know this was just changes.

Before everybody had to have three or four years public school. Just at this time it was changed and I started out right way in private school. My parents were very happy. You see even so we never had a colored problem and all this but my parents were very happy I was right away with a better class of pupils together. This was an all gentile school. I was one Jewish girl among 600 girls – the only Jewish girl. And my father put me there - there were schools where there were more Jewish girls because Breslau was the third largest Jewish community in Germany – so there were schools where there were a lot of Jewish girls. But my father put me there – that’s where you will get the right discipline. That was the most disciplined school and that was the best school – it was where all the noblesse of Breslau went. I really got from there the best background and this was the only school which was allowed later on to take the own exam for – I mean went to school thirteen years – that means here you had three years of college right?

Q: You were able to make you abitur?

A: Yes. Abitur.

Q: Did you continue after you made your abitur?

A: I couldn’t because of Hitler.

Q: You mentioned you were the only Jewish girl. I guess you had mostly gentile friends when you were in school. What was the relationship like between them and you during the school years?

A: Very good. Very good. And you know, for instance, my parents had a kosher home and Rosh Hashahah and Yom Kippur, I took off and whenever we went on an outing with the school, all my teachers knew I was only allowed to eat dairy. And you know the funny part was as I was alone, we had a female director who was from the noblesse too, she insisted I had to have religious lessons there which was very boring for me. I was one girl with the teacher alone. I mean it was so boring you have no idea.

Q: How did you get your Jewish education?

A: I had history in the morning like the others – I had my own teacher who came special for me and twice in the afternoon, I went to Hebrew lessons for years.

Q: Did you belong to a congregation in Breslau?

A: Yes, sure I belonged to a congregation but for instance like you have here – my parents always tried to get me involved into Jewish community activities because in the morning I was always with gentiles and I never like it. They tried with me to put me into this Jewish class – and you see that’s how I am until nowadays – I don’t like to know, Tuesday I’m going here, Wednesday, I’m going there. I even don’t have any steady bridge, I don’t like this.

Q: Was the congregation which you belonged to orthodox or liberal?

A: Liberal.

Q: Were you orthodox at home?

A: No. You could call it conservative. I had an orthodox husband.

Q: What did your father do for a living?

A: He had a small department store – everything clothing everything but shoes.

Q: When you were in school, what did you hope to become?

A: I wanted to study medicine but I wasn’t allowed. I made my abitur and I could have gone to study outside Germany but at this time parents didn’t send a girl by herself. I wanted so much to go to England but my father wouldn’t let me go.

Q: How old were you when you made your abitur?

A: I stated – you could start school with six. I was a very sickly girl – after three months they sent me home, I got sick and then I had to start next year again so I was always the oldest in the class – I was almost 19.

Q: So you were born in 1914 and 19 would be 1933. And then you were not allowed into medical school anymore. Were you at all active in any cultural or political organizations?

A: I wanted to but my father wouldn’t let me – to go to a political organization – I was always interested in politics but my father wouldn’t have let me.

Q: What would you have joined if you were able.

A You called it social democrats.

Q: Did a lot of your friends belong to the social democrats?

A: No, not so many. You see in school these gentile girls, this wasn’t their class- noblesse wasn’t social democrats. They would have belonged to a different group.

Q: How did Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 affect you?

A: I mean it didn’t affect me too much because I left school. But you see before already, here was already a tense situation. At least half of my class belonged to the Hitler organization so they kept away from me – I mean socially we didn’t get together anymore. They would have been in danger even more than I was. So there was already a certain tension. But my brother, he suffered terribly. You see my brother was four and a half years younger and he went to an all – in Germany you had all female, all girls schools and all boys school – so he went to an all boys school and every morning when he went in, the boys came in full uniform and whenever he came in, they threatened him they will throw him out of the window and they will do that and that. The director was very nice but my brother was afraid to go to school and my father wanted very much he should at least finish school. He promised him heaven on earth, try to finish school but finally he just couldn’t go anymore. I mean his life was threatened and them my brother went to Berlin – my father sent him to Berlin – to learn to be a gardener.

Q: Under Zionist or Reichsvertretung supervision?

A: This was it. This was a school to prepare people for emigration. Because we were thinking at this time to go to Israel to go here to go there. I mean in 1933 you didn’t really thing yet.

Q: I was going to ask you when this was.

A: We started thinking – look, I got married in 1935. We started thinking in 1937, 38 and it was very late already and let’s say when most of the people wanted to emigrate, all countries closed their doors.

Q: You mentioned in 1933 you had finished school and that many of the girls were already members of the BDM or other Hitler groups, how did their attitudes toward you change.

A: I mean socially we didn’t get together anymore. As long as we were at school, it was fairly well but I mean for instance, history was changes as Hitler wanted to see it. Then they didn’t have to do their homework anymore. The excuse was good enough. We had to go to a meeting. The whole school system was changed. As little as our director liked it, and she was very liberal in her attitude and she didn’t like the whole thing but everybody was powerless.

Q: How did you feel as a young girl being excluded by all your former friends.

A: It wasn’t easy but I mean I learned form my parents, that’s how it is. And you have to consider one thing, we German Jews were always used to a certain anti-Semitism which we just took it as it was – we accepted it. I mean you had plenty here in America – you know that you had what disgusted me very much when I came here. You had in fact more anti-Semitism in America than we ever had before Hitler.

Q: When your brother was going to school and finding it difficult, do you remember your parents ever discussing emigration.

A: My mother was a very proud person and she wanted – we wish we would have – she wanted to pack up right away. She said I do not accept to be a second class citizen, let’s pack up as long as we can. And you know what until 1936 you would emigrate with all your money, with everything and my father said one doesn’t throw things so fast – it will not be forever. And you know the funny part was, it was in the beginning in 1935, 36 and a gentile person came to my father in the business and said I would suggest and you may believe me, sell your business and leave the country. I might know more. He was willing to buy the business and at this time you could have sold the business at the price you wanted but my father didn’t want to. He didn’t believe it would last. My mother wanted to leave in 1933.

Q: Did you ever see signs Juden Unerwuenscht?

A: You now my parents got married in 1912 and in 1937, there was the Olympiad in Germany and my parents had their 25th wedding anniversary and I was married already and they didn’t want to celebrate in Germany and they spent their wedding anniversary in Czechoslovakia. At this time, we had at the windows mogen dovids.

Q: On Jewish stores.

A: They were marked, nobody should come in. I think I still have a picture. I will look later.

Q: How was your father’s business affected?

A: You know what, this was the unfortunate thing – that since 1933 business did not let up. If it would have, maybe my father would have changed his mind. It did not let up. It got better. And people didn’t – I mean it didn’t disturb them – they came anyway.

Q: Was most of his trade gentile.

A: All gentile.

Q: You mentioned that you got married in 1935, what did your husband do.

A: He was an economist but he was in his parents business. But you see his father died. We got married in December, 1935 and his father died in March – let’s say indirectly affected by Hitler. It so happened, that’s only how I heard it, he was on the phone with somebody and he mentioned somebody – at this time you had a feeling you are, not free even to talk on the phone what you want – it might be overheard. And he talked with somebody evidently against Hitler and the call was interrupted. And from there on he felt terribly, he was not himself anymore and he died in march 1935 and his wife, my mother-in-law, she definitely did not – I mean she was part of it that we all didn’t emigrate. She wouldn’t have left Germany. She wants to be buried where her husband is. As we were a close knit family, one wouldn’t have gone without the other.

Q: How did you husband feel about the growing Nazi threat.

A: We all were, we young people were not independent thinkers unfortunately. What the parents did, we did. And you know, as a young person, you don’t take tings so seriously. At this time, nothing bothered me too much and as my father was of the opinion and I always was used to doing what my parents say, my father was used to – he always said I mean that cannot be for long.

Q: Were you ever stopped from going to the theaters or the movies or otherwise participating in?

A: Yes. In general you didn’t go anywhere because you had everywhere no Jews allowed, no Jews. Then you didn’t go. They started Jewish theater, the Kulturbund.

Q: Did you go to that frequently?

A: Oh sure.

Q: What was the felling like, you had grown up in a very mixed atmosphere, what was the feeling like not to be able to go to all the things that you knew.

A: I guess if it would have bothered me a lot, I would have gotten more involved probably and have been more on my mother’s side – maybe we would have gotten out in time.

Q: When did you decide that you were going to leave.

A: Look we started let’s say 1937. And then where, where are you going, right. Imean 1937 for America you needed a quota or you needed a sponsor because America was – you see let’s say for instance, I’m not a good American, I will never be because you see, I feel when I needed them, they were not there. Even for our ship there was no room. But afterwards, all the Hungarians whoever came in and now the Vietnamese, there’s plenty of room. But for 900 Jews, there was no room. I mean I have my American citizenship and I am American. I’m not proud and I don’t have any feeling for the country. I am here – my family is here. Otherwise, I have no feelings for the country.

Q: In 1937, did you have any family in America who might give you a visa.

A: No, I didn’t.

Q: What choices did you have.

A: Okay, there was a chance you could go to Brazil if you had a certain amount of money and you had to become Catholic. This is no tragedy. People became Catholic and other there, they were Jews. I mean what goes on in your inside, it’s a different story. But there was still something – I don’t remember quite – I’m pretty sure my husband didn’t like the idea – as an orthodox Jew even as a formality he wouldn’t have done it. Then we were thinking of going to Israel – to Palestine at that time. To go to Palestine at this time was not easy anymore either. I think there were limitations to that. Before we decided to go anywhere, there was the pogrom – Kristallnacht.

Q: What happened to your family on Kristallnacht.

A: It started in the middle of the night when my father knocked on our bedroom – it’s a pogrom. I’m sure I couldn’t grasp the idea right away because we were – my parents lived right on top of the store and everything was broken and they took out whatever they could and then the glass was broken from the apartment from my parents – not from ours because ours was the rear – that’s why my parents could come in. Then in the morning they started to get the men and put them in the police headquarters first. The minute it got daylight, my father, my husband and my brother left the house and they took the tramway. My uncle, he had a house for himself at the other end of Breslau and they went over there to hid over there because the phones where all out. There was no phone and you couldn’t talk to anybody. So they went over there and when they came over there, my uncle was arrested already so they wouldn’t come again so they could very well hide there. And then my mother left because in the meantime, and I remember I stayed alone with my dog. I had a German shepherd and I stayed at home and then there.

Q: Where did your mother go?

A: She went over to my uncle’s house also and I stayed alone. And then there was a knock at the door and an SS man came. But at this time you still had a feeling they didn’t do anything to women – they only got the men. And my dog was very vicious and he said to me take the dog away. And I said oh no, that dog is for my protection. What do you want. If there are any men. I said there are no men and I didn’t take the dog away – the dog was right with me and then he left. At this time, a woman could still have a big mouth because they were not after the women, they were only after the men. And then my cousin came over to look after me by car and left the car there and she took me and the dog over there – we left the house. But before I went over there I went to my mother in law to look what was going on over there so she told be before my husband went over there, he walked – I could never understand how he could do it, he looked very Jewish, he was dark, he walked to his mother and he came to his mother’s house and his brother was still there. At he same time when he was still there, an DD came to get his brother. But I want to tell you how the Germans just did what they were told. He did not have an arrest warrant for my husband. He just took my brother-in-law and my husband stayed there. And them my husband left his mother and he went over to my uncle’s house. And then when I came to my mother-in-law, she told me all this and from there on I stayed with my mother-in-law, she shouldn’t be alone. I slept with her and stayed with her. And every morning she came to me and she said Ilse, can’t we do something for Fred, can’t we do something for Fred. Because she knew my husband was hidden over there. I said you know what, I will go out – maybe one can here something. And I went to the police headquarters – the police headquarter was on the first floor and the SS was on top. I went to the police headquarter and I talked to them and they said look, we can’t do a thing. Usually the police was know for being more left. They said look, we can’t do a thing – our hands are tied. And then I walked around outside a little and then I saw a lot of women there together and I mixed among them and then I heard that somebody said if somebody had a ticket to emigrate, they will let them out. And my brother-in-law you see, my brother-in-law and my husband, they were both in their father’s business – my husband was on the inside and my brother-in-law was the salesman so he was out and he heard more so he came home one day to his mother and he said mother, everybody is buying tickets to Cuba. So my mother-in-law said buy too. So he bought five tickets for all of us to go to Cuba and he had them at home.

Q: Who did the five tickets include?

A: Now let me figure out. My mother-in-law, my parents, my brother, me, my husband and himself –seven right. So he came home with the tickets but he didn’t do anything. In the meantime from the police headquarters they took everybody to Buckenwald. So I heard this and I came home to my mother-in-law and I said you know I think Fred bought the tickets to Cuba. She said yes and I said let me have the tickets and maybe I can do something. So she gave me the tickets and I had a Photostat and I went to the SS. I went there and I said my brother-in-law is in Buchenwald – this is the ticket to Cuba. I want him out. There were so many women sitting there at the Gestapo, I remember I met my aunt there, she was there for my uncle because they had an affidavit for the United States. Everybody was sitting there and they were not unpolite so I gave them the ticket with the name of my brother-in-law and I came home to my mother-in-law and she was very happy about it. And it took a few days and we didn’t here a thing and one night, we were sitting and the phone was ringing and my brother-in-law was on the phone – Mother, I am in Breslau. I am here. I am coming home. And this was typical my mother-in-law. You know what she did? She figured out he must be very dirty. Right away she started to let the water run in the bathroom. She figured the first thing he will come – I’ll send him to the bathroom. He came home, he looked –you know, they took off all the hair and he never got out of his suit. He looked worse than the dirtiest beggar. He didn’t say a word and we sent him right to the bathroom and we were waiting anxiously when he came out. When he came out, you know what, they were so intimidated - they were told not to say a word. We were pressing him so hard – we wanted to know. I am not allowed to say anything and I wouldn’t tell you anything. Now my brother-in-law, he was full of pep and the next day he had to go to the police headquarter every day. We were sitting, my mother-in-law and I, we were sitting at the window and waiting until he came back. Every day he had to go and he had to tell them when he is leaving the country.

Q: When he bought those tickets, were they landing permits and ship tickets?

A: They were legitimate tickets. You know that was while Batista was there – so they were regular tickets. That’s why I will tell you, you cannot fight fate, you can stand on your head. If my husband would have been with my brother-in-law in Buchenwald instead of being hidden, we all would have been anxious to go, right? Now, in the meantime, my brother-in-law, he had to leave. He did a very foolish thing – he was very peppy and he was a young person. You know what he did – a very harmless thing – but as a Jew he wasn’t allowed to do it. He went on the tram somewhere and the terrible crime he committed – he jumped off the tram while the tram was still moving and the Gestapo caught him and he said if you’re not out by tonight, you will be back in Buchenwald. This was the terrible crime he committed – he jumped off the tramway. So he couldn’t wait any longer – somebody took him over the border to Holland and there he stayed until his ship left for Cuba. Now we could all have left with the same ship – we all had the same permit to go to Cuba. But in the meantime, my parents didn’t sell their store yet – we figured we could go with the next ship. My mother and I, we insisted that all the men should go with my brother-in-law and she and I would finish up all the things that have to be done. Because we knew we were not in danger, we knew the men were in danger. No, my father wouldn’t go without my mother. My mother-in-law said you go where your husband is, don’t send your husband alone. She meant well. And my brother wouldn’t have gone alone with my brother-in-law without the rest of us. So we all stayed and the next ship was the St. Louis.

Q: Now, it seems they all came back home a few days after Kristallnacht . . .

A: You see, the minute the first came back from Buchenwald, all the other men came out from hiding.

Q: At that point, what did your father do about his business?

A: I’ll tell you what happened. We had to sell, I mean we never opened the business anymore after the Kristallnacht, my mother and I – none of our men ever went to the business again – we tried to straighten out everything and a gentile came and he said he wants to buy. I mean, the price you got at this time was as good as nothing. So we sold it and we straightened out and we managed with him however we could but I was a young person and I was full of hate and I would do anything to work against him so what I did with my mother together – we prevented him to open the business before Christmas when there is the main business going on. He wanted to work longer – we said oh no. We come in at 9 o’clock and we go home a 5 o’clock. We don’t have to work longer. We closed the business – the next day we came in again at 9 o’clock and we worked both very slow and he couldn’t open at Christmas time. He opened after Christmas when business was very slow. In Germany, January and February are absolutely dead months. I mean much money we didn’t get anyway – why should he open the business before Christmas.

Q: Did you think at that point that you could take anymore than 10 RM with you?

A: No. in the meantime we knew. We knew we couldn’t but you see let’s say we took furniture with us and we packed big lifts so you could pack things – valuable things in there. Money you couldn’t – the money what you had in the bank and so on – this was all on “spercondo” (closed accounts). The money you had, you bought things. My mother had a lot of black market money she tried to save. My parents accountant always complained to my father – your wife is taking too much money. So my father said I can’t do a thing about it. So my mother really tried to save a lot of money. And you know, that’s interesting, my parents took along, otherwise they wouldn’t have taken – they took the kitchen furniture along which was a very old piece of furniture and my brother was very handy and one night he built into - and he built a lot of things, valuables, in there. But you will see you cannot fight fate. After he finished everything and I mean nobody could have seen anything, everything was closed but he got nightmares and he was so afraid and he got so hysterical that my father said, look, the whole thing isn’t work it. You want to take it out, take it out. Then we will be without the whole thing. But finally it stayed in and then people came and they paced everything in the lift and I mean nobody looked and you know my uncle and aunt, they did a very smart thing. They packed a lift too.

Q: They were going to the U.S.?

A: Yes. They left right after the Kristallnacht because at this time they were there too and they packed everything. And my aunt prepared a big dinner – a banquet – for those people who – the inspectors – they were sitting there with my cousin who was a young girl and dining and wining and in the meantime they packed everything in nobody looked, understand and they probably gave them some money too and they had a good time. That’s how it worked. We packed everything in too. We were unfortunately on the St. Louis.

Q: Who went on the St. Louis – all six of you?

A: Five. My mother-in-law never left Germany. She was deported later on to Lublin to Poland.

Q: And your brother-in-law who had gone to Holland? Was he waiting there for you?

A: No. my brother-in-law went one ship – he landed in Cuba. He landed in Cuba and you know what – an we were sitting with the St. Louis five weeks on the ocean if you remember, know about it. We were in Cuba too – we were sitting there for eight days in the harbor of Havana and my brother-in-law came by ship, by ferry boat. You know what, he had for the money he had, nebish for that little money, he had already furnished for us an apartment and prepared everything and my mother-in-law - that he only told me later – had sent a telegram Welcome in Cuba which my brother-in-law never showed us. He said I knew you wouldn’t land. As the situation was, I knew you wouldn’t land.

Q: The five of you left Breslau and went to Hamburg to board the boat?

A: Yes. It sailed on the 13th of May, 1939 with the blessing of Rabbi Carlebach. It helped a lot.

Q: How did your parents feel . . .

A: You know what – when you are young I mean emigration didn’t frighten me. My father on the ship when we left he said this is the end.

Q: ON the day your parents left Breslau, how did they react?

A: You see, my mother was never as you would say the German patriot – my mother never was. You see for instance, I remember when my mother told me from the first world war. Now my mother was a child of five children – three brothers and two sisters. Now the eldest brother was already in the army. Then the second one was taken and the youngest one came home from school and they drove him crazy in school – they said everybody had to go voluntarily – that was already towards the end. So he came home full of pep – I am going to volunteer so my mother said – at that time she was the oldest. She said you must be out of your mind. You have no time until they get you? I just want to show you my mother was never the big patriot.

Q: And your father?

A: Not too much but let’s say as the head of the family, he felt he had an obligation to provide and he has the responsibility – that’s why my mother wanted to leave in 1933 and my father was always afraid of my mother because my mother was very outspoken. He saw her already taken by the Gestapo before anything happened. But my mother was very outspoken – she didn’t take anything. My mother probably didn’t feel to bad but my father said on the ship this is the end.

Q: Did you have any trouble on the way from Breslau to Hamburg?

A: No.

Q: When you came to Havana harbor, what was your reaction after a day, then two days when you weren’t able to disembark?

A: I mean we still hoped because you see in the beginning they told us all kind of stories. There was a holiday and nobody could come to inspect – everyday was something else. It took a time before we realized that we will never come in. And my brother-in-law came everyday by ferry boat but he never said anything (shouted up to the boat) discouraging but later on when we talked to each other here he said look, as the situation was, I knew from the very beginning you had no chance – before the boat even came he said.

Q: Were there any incidents on the boat ?

A: Yes, I mean one jumped into the water – he wanted to commit suicide. And One died (Prof Weiler).

Q: On the way over, were there any Nazi incidents? It was a German boat.

A: That I don’t remember but going back the crew was very nasty- there wasn’t enough to eat. On the way to Havana it was pretty normal. We had service every Shabbat and in fact the atmosphere going there was very good.

Q: What was the effect of the death of Prof. Weiler?

A: You know he was buried in the ocean. There was a service and he was sunk in the ocean.

Q: When did you become aware that you wouldn’t be able to land.

A: After a few days we realized there wasn’t much of a chance. After a few days we had to leave the harbor and we were standing in the ocean. And you see this is something what I think could only happen to German Jews – it would never happen to Polish Jews. You know what Polish Jews would have done – the right thing. They would have gone to the captain and told him you take us to Ellis Island or anywhere here or we kill you and that’s what we should have done. We were not used to – and that’s why we went to concentration camps too. You see Polish Jews at least they tried to fight. We didn’t. We were so used to go what we were told. We didn’t think left, we didn’t think right – that’s what we were taught. Only to German Jews that could happen – what happened to us.

Q: What was the moral on the boat like as you sailed away from Havana.

A: That was terrible. And then they started classifying because you know we went to four countries in Europe. Now, people with young children went to Holland. England is very smart – only those who have affidavits leaving the country right away to the United States for a short waiting period – those went to England. And the rest who didn’t have anything came to France or Belgium.

Q: At this point, you didn’t have an affidavit to come to the U.S.?

A: No, nothing.

Q: Let me just backtrack for a minute. When you found out that the JOINT negotiations fell through and you were cruising off Miami and circling around the area between Florida and Havana, how were you able to maintain hope?

A: I don’t know. I mean, you see you probably as an American will not understand and what I do understand if people in Israel say nowadays, they do not understand. I do not understand anymore. How could we just sit there and not do anything? I’m telling you at this time we were not prepared for this kind of situation. It would not happen to me anymore. I would kill anybody before I would do a thing like that. But I had to learn the hard way. We were not prepared for a thing like that. It wouldn’t happen to me on that ship anymore. I would get a few people together – the captain would be killed before he would go back.

Q: Was the captain sympathetic?

A: I have never met the captain. How he felt only found out – there was once an article – Schroeder right? I never met the captain. There was that committee that worked for – I’m telling you we were not prepared to take any active role in that whole thing.

Q: When you knew that you were going back to Europe, did the committee play a role in keeping up morale on the boat?

A: We were told and we did not realize how bad it would be and what would come out of it. Because at this time the Germans were not there (in those countries).

Q: Did you have any choice in which country you would . . .

A: No, no, no. We were glad already we didn’t go to Germany. This was already a step.

Q: Did all five of you go together?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go?

A: To Belgium, to Brussels.

Q: What happened to you in Brussels?

A: In Brussels, there was in each country a committee and we were looking around for a furnished room and I mean we were supported by the committee.

Q: Meaning a bike a relief committee?

Q: Right – I think it all came from the JOINT.

Q: Did you make any further attempt to get out of Belgium at that time?

A: You couldn’t. You were just trapped. This was in June when we arrived in Belgium and in the meantime the war had started right?

Q: September.

A: September, 1939 the war started and pretty soon the Germans came in and the Belgians still remembered from the first world war – they were terribly afraid of the Germans because at this time when the Germans came in, I mean they raped the women and they made such a mess in Belgium so everybody was afraid so when they heard the Germans came in, this was a terrible situation – this was the only time I did something right. So when they heard the Germans came in, everybody was running to the train to get out of Belgium. And I was alone with my mother and I went too to the train station and I saw what was going on. People with crutches – everybody was sitting there waiting for the trains to leave. In the meantime, there were trains standing there, trains were not leaving anymore – everything went very fast. And people were running by foot they were going to the border to France and don’t forget there were the bombardments all the time. So I went back to my mother and I said what will happen, will happen. I am not running. I am not taking – people too taxis and cars and whatever they – I’m just not budging. I’m staying. Whatever will happen, will happen, So a lot of Belgians were out, the whole city was like dead – nobody in the street. Everybody was afraid, the Germans are coming. So we were staying in the house. And the funny part was, once I was in the street I saw people marching- soldiers. This was the English Army – this was when they wanted to help France. And everybody was very glad to see them there. And then later on in the afternoon, I was in the street again and I saw the army coming from the opposite way. I said there’s something not right. Later on I heard that they realized the French gave up they figured why should we die for France. I mean they all just gave up. Nobody was fighting. The Germans just marched in. When the German army first marched into Alsace-Lorraine – at that time it was German – and the German Army was told when you march in the first shot you hear, you come back. And as there was never a first shot, they just marched in.

Q: You mentioned you were alone with your mother. Where were your husband, brother and father?

A: This was shortly before. When the news came out that Belgium gave up and the Germans were coming in, they said all German Jews have to meet at a certain place because we were aliens. So all the men had to go there and they took them right away to the unoccupied part of France to the internierungscamp.

Q: Where were they taken?

A: First they were in St. Cyprien and then they were in Gurs and then they were in Septfong. The men were taken right away.

Q: What happened to you and your mother?

A: We stayed there. And you see the Germans did nothing wrong the first two years during the occupation because this is an international law – while a country is occupied for two years, the occupying country is not doing anything that is contraire to the laws of the country. So they didn’t do anything. After the two years, they started to take people to the concentration camps.

Q: Where you in contact with the men during this time?

A: Yes. For quite a while. As soon as they could, they wrote and we wrote. And then they wrote for money but from each post office we only could send 100 Francs – Belgian francs. So my mother and I, we went through all Brussels from one post office to the other and we sent money. Then, my mother-in-law wrote she was deported to Poland in the meantime and she wrote for money and then we went to each post office and sent money.

Q: How did you get the money to send?

A: We sol thing which we had brought along. For instance, my parents, as soon as the lift arrived, my parents went over and got out what they put in. My lift I never got – it arrived much later and was all destroyed by the Germans.

Q: Their lift was originally bound for Havana. It was shipped back to Brussels and you sold things in Brussels to send the money?

A: Yes.

Q: Did the three men stay together for those two years?

A: Yes, they were together and then all of a sudden we didn’t have any news anymore, didn’t hear anything anymore. Then in the meantime, we started – when we heard that they take people to the concentration camps – now in the meantime we were not told it is a concentration camps – we were told it is a working camp, only nobody believed it. After the two years we were told to wear the yellow start. Now, my mother and I we said right away we are not going to wear it. I mean we are not going to do it that easy and then sometimes we stayed somewhere where we were not declared that we lived there – hidden a little bit here and a little bit there.

Q: How did you find such places?

A: The Belgians, partly they helped so they were in danger too. For instance, that’s how I kept all the documentary papers. I have it in a suitcase to a woman who worked for the underground movement and she kept everything for me. I mea that’s how I could declare when the Restitution started. I had all the papers. You know that was the funny part of my father – my father kept everything and he said I’m sure it will help one day. We still will see some money.

Q: Do you know exactly what happened to your father, husband and brother?

A: They all perished. They were probably shipped to one of the camps. From a certain time on, we didn’t hear anything anymore. In the meantime, my mother and I, we managed to escape from the Gestapo until – I was taken in January, 1944 and my mother was caught a week or two before.

Q: All that time the two of you were alone, it must have been very fearful.

A: It was – you see it came to a point where you had the feeling you know it’s not quite the right thing to compare but sometimes you read from a criminal he is getting tired of running. Sometimes I felt how long can you run? I had the feeling one day because from all the people we knew this one was caught and that one was caught. I mean we figured okay another day, another day but it was only a matter of time. Ja, then you could fro instance, I had people, acquaintances, they stayed in a room of gentile people – I mean certain people managed to survive by living underground. They never ventured into the street. These people I know they stayed in a room with gentiles who had a house by themselves and they stayed in this room – they had enough money. They supported in fact because the gentiles in Belgium – it’s a miserable people. Whatever they did, in general, they didn’t do out of their goodness. They took out from the Jews whatever they could the last penny. So these people had enough money – but you know how long can you take it. They were sitting in this room let’s say for two years or longer never seeing the street, always the blinds down because they saw the Gestapo was going everywhere taking out the people. They had certain times when they could go to the toilet because every house was searched. I heard it afterwards because these people I saw when I came back from the concentration camp – she said my husband always had his suitcase in the hand and he said I am giving myself up – I can’t take it anymore.

Q: You did go into the streets and you didn’t wear the yellow star . . .

A: Because I always said I can’t stand it in the room and you know what I did - you could buy a Belgian identity card where it said you were born in Belgium somewhere, on a certain date, you had a French name. I mean my accent will always give me away – I don’t sound Belgian, I don’t sound French. So one day I had just gotten my identity card and I was going in the street and a Gestapo came and asks me for my identification. I gave him my identity card – no I can laugh about it – and he looks at it and he said where were you born? I didn’t learn that yet – I didn’t know where I was born, I didn’t when I was born, I didn’t know my name – I first got the card. I said you can read. The funny part was he was such a little Gestapo man and one woman in my house where I was living with my mother – she was a German gentile and she knew that little man. He was not as bad as the others. So I walking with him and he always wanted to know where and when I was born – so I always repeated myself I told him all the time – you can read – whatever is on the card. But from my accent – he recognized my accent so he took me until the police headquarter and there he gave me back my card and let me go. Then I went home and I learned where I was born, when I was born only to a Belgian I could get away with it but a German would recognize me accent right away. So I was walking with that identity card for quite a while and in the street I didn’t have a problem but I dared to much – I worked. I worked in a gentile place. . .

Q: How did you get the job?

A: The jog I got through that German woman. Look, I didn’t want to sit at home all day long. I just couldn’t take it. So I worked and I was ironing – it was in a laundry and I did ironing. Now, you see we did one stupid thing. I told you my parents came along with all these valuables and we were always prepared - in case we get caught – and we knew a Belgian family whom we trusted and to them we gave the suitcase and in the suitcase was a little case with all the valuables but among the clothing and they must have looked at it and when they saw all this, they wanted to get rid of us. This was why we were doomed. So first they caught my mother when she was at home.

A: No, I wasn’t at home and when I came home – ja, afterwards when they left, they sealed the apartment which didn’t bother me. I unsealed it. I mean this I had learned in the meantime. For instance, I had a friend who they were looking for but she was not at home so they went in the apartment and then they sealed the apartment. She was somewhere else but she was with out any clothing or anything. So I still remember, it was – the moon was shining bright and both of us went to the apartment and unsealed it – it was just with mystic tape – we unsealed it and took everything out she needed, we sealed it back and she went back to the other apartment. And you know, this woman was highly pregnant. The funny part was that this woman was in her 40’s and she never thought she is pregnant. She had three grown up children and she went to the Dr. and she found out she was pregnant. They took away from her the husband and the three grown up children to the concentration camp and that woman was pregnant. A very religious woman – so I went with this woman t the hospital – now this was a Catholic hospital. They kept her in the hospital with the child for the whole time. I met her afterwards when I came back from the concentration camp. When I came back, the child was a few years old and one day she said to me – she was very hard pressed financially and one day she asked if I would like to baby sit for her child – she is going to see a man who she might marry. But you know as orthodox Jews; she was not allowed to see him alone. At this time she went to his house and he lived with his sister and so I babysitted for this boy and when she came back she told me – she said Ilse, he’s a chochet and his wife was for 10 years in a mental hospital and you know according to Jewish law after 10 years you can remarry because she was incurable. And she said to me – I knew her husband and I knew her children – they were very religious but very modern and she said Ilse, he is much older with a long beard but he looks very good natured and my financial troubles would be gone and his children are married and to make a long story short, she got married and he was nice to the child and the child had a father.

Q: Just to go back for a moment, when you were working in this laundry.

A: Yes, I was working in that laundry and all of a sudden a Gestapo came in and that was it.

Q: Do you think it was this family that . . .

A: Oh, there is no question about it because over there nobody knew.

Q: Did you already know that you mother was taken.

A: Yes, that was before, the night before. That’s why I didn’t sleep there anymore. I slept in somebody’s house – with a Belgian.

Q: Did you know at this time where you were going?

A: At this time, we knew already and I always said to my mother – I wanted to put my mother into a convent because you could do that and I said to my mother in case they catch you, you have no chance to come back. I might have a chance – older people have no chance. But my mother didn’t want to go without me. Maybe we both could have gone to a convent – I don’t know why. But I was caught right after so I met my mother still in the headquarters which was in Belgium near Brussels, I forgot the name, with Malines it was, something like Malene – that’s where they gathered all the people and from there we went to Auschwitz.

Q: You were sent together?

A: We were together and we arrived there and you know they separated left and right.

Q: And they separated you both?

A: Ja. I mean this time I knew. That was the last time I saw her. They put them right to the gas chamber.

Q: Did you know at that time what had happened to your husband and father.

A: You see, I always thought for older people there was no chance. But I mean when I came out I always hoped that my brother and husband might have survived.

Q: That must have been an impossible feeling – coming there and watching . . .

A: You have no idea. I mean I was in Auschwitz and I saw the buring and I couldn’t grab the idea. It was three days when I was in Auschwitz and I saw naked people walking towards the gas chambers. I thought I was dreaming – I just couldn’t grab it. And they came in – people – was the SS came in I don’t know and they looked at our numbers and you know I had a number there and I probably was like in a dream – I mean I couldn’t grad this whole thing what was going on there – and after they were out, I asked Why do they look at the number? So they looked at me like I am crazy and they said you don’t know? I said no. They said if they don’t like the number, you just join the others. They just picked out. Selection, it was called.

Q: How did you manage to survive in Auschwitz.

A: That’s a good question. Let’s say, I mean, as a young person if you didn’t take sick and if you were not selected, you could survive. I mean I got typhus and there was every morning somebody coming and looking if there are any people who got sick and they were taken to the hospital. We had the blockalteste, she was the head of the barrack and she was everyday if somebody was sick was supposed to say and we were taken to the hospital. Now going to the hospital I knew that was the end. At this time was young and I didn’t want to give up yet. I had typhus, I didn’t say a word. I didn’t tell anybody. I mean accidents happened and at night, I went out and I washed. Everything wet I put on – I didn’t have anything to change. In the morning, everybody left the block, I left the block with temperature. I didn’t say a word and somehow I survived.

Q: Were you able to work?

A: You know what our work was? We had to get up every morning because we were so busy. We had to get up at 4 a.m. and we had to go outside and stand for hours outside until some SS came to look us over. Now who could stand for hours? When the blockalteste, in general she had a little bid understanding, she was one of us – we were allowed to sit on the ground and when she said Achtung – that means jena was coming and we got up. So we were standing there. Afterwards they brought in this kind of – like our garbage can looks – with coffee. We got back in the block and everybody had like a little mug and we got our coffee and our ration of bread which was this big and this high and one slice of bologna and this was for the day. On this we had to manage to pull through the day.

Q: Balogna?

A: What looked like bologna. Now I was looking for quantity at this time not for quality. So I exchanged my bologna for bread so the piece was bigger than that little bit bologna and then in the evening we got a mug of soup. That was it. So this was not the worst. Then at six o’clock an SS with his dog came and we had to go outside. Don’t forget it was January when I came there and it was very cold. At 6 o’clock we had to be outside and we were standing in line and we had to take big stones – we had to carry. Big stones we had to carry – for half an hour we were walking with these stones and we had to put it on a pile there and then we took a stone from there and had to bring it back to the block. And this we did every morning – I think five times we walked back and forth. And then we were through for the day – for our busy day. And everybody was laughing – I mean we were all walking around in these striped uniforms and as I am a small person, everything was too wide and too long for me. Everybody knew me – I was always sewing. I couldn’t see me running around like that. I was busy making things shorter – I had to do something. And then one day, ja, everyday, for instance, when we came there, we had already everyday a shower, a sauna. A sauna was called – it was a big place and there was just one shower next to the other and everybody got undressed and took their shower and then we were standing a little bit until we dried up and then we put everything on again. One day we were standing there, it was after I was there a short time, naked, stark naked we were standing there and the leiter form the camp came in - you know he was in court, it was in the paper he was put to death – his name was Hessler. And at this time he was pleading he was so good to the girls and nobody said a good word for him. He was put to death. I wish I could have gone – I would have told them all the goodness he did in the camp. We were standing there all naked and he come in. I mean he couldn’t have waited until we were dressed? I mean we were stark naked, he walked in, all the soldiers walked in – you just were not a human being anymore. Okay, I managed to stand in the back but people had to stand in the front too. And he was standing there and holding a speech – there was a munitions factory there and he said up to now, no Jew ever worked there because we were not trustworthy. But he will try to put us to work there. But in case of any espionage, something drastic will happen. Okay, so he said he will ask to start with 100 people to put them to work in the munitions factory. Next day, the blockaltests came and asked who wants to go. I always was very pessimistic and I figured I let the other go first, I wait with the results they are coming back from there. Now they came back at night – there was two shifts from 6 AM to 6PM and the other one from 6PM to 6AM. Now the first shift came back and they were complaining left and right. They didn’t – the soup came in with meant but our – that was all our people – who were the top they took out the meat and the others got the water. And they were terrible treated and they didn’t want to go anymore. So I figured Ilse, this time you were right. Wait and see. Now next day, nobody wanted to go anymore. The blockalteste came in and she said 100 people have to go. I will see that something is done about it. In the meantime, it happened that Red Cross sent packages.

Q: Into Auschwitz?

A: Gorgeous packages. Big packages. But you know nobody would have thought to share with somebody – that’ didn’t exist. Now, these packages – in order to make it attractive to work in this factory – only those who worked got his package. So there I lost out – gorgeous packages. There was bacon in there, the best things you can imagine were in there. So I lost out there. They got the most gorgeous packages. They couldn’t eat it. But when they left the block, they put down their number, they gave it to the blockalteste- she kept it. Nobody would give somebody else not even a slice of bred.

Q: Wasn’t there a lot of trading?

A: Yes, that went on.

Q: How about stealing?

A: Stealing too. But you see, that’s one thing you learn. Even the mug. You know if you didn’t gave your mug, you couldn’t get coffee, you couldn’t get soup. So you had it always around the belt – it was hanging there. So one day it was gone, my mug was gone – so I stole it from somewhere else. That you have to learn – otherwise you can’t survive. Then I had a girl, she was extremely swift with everything. For instance, cabbages, potatoes they came in there with big trucks and they were thrown there in front of the kitchen and it was just laying there. So somebody who was swift went there, hot themselves or herself something and had something to eat – it didn’t matter even a potato was not cooked or a cabbage was not cooked – it didn’t matter. I never could do that – I wasn’t fast enough (laughs). I was always caught. Now this girl, she was so fast. She always had under her bed plenty – but nobody would ever have thought to give somebody anything. That didn’t exist. And don’t forget they were all our people.

Q: Why do you think that was so?

A: Everybody figured just she wants to survive and that’s it. You know what the border between a human being and an animal is very small – it doesn’t need much. That I have learned. It does not need much. It is not difficult to be a human being in a human surrounding. Otherwise it doesn’t need much. Believe me what I have seen there – no animal could be worse. The wild beast in the jungle couldn’t be worse.

Q: Where you assigned to any work commando?

A: I worked in the munitions factory finally. So finally the situation got better – after everyone complained the German soldiers took over. They were standing there while the soup was given out they were standing there – no Jewish girl could take out the meat anymore. Then it got to a point where we all had the feeling we were better off in the munitions factory than walking with stones back and forth. So I joined the party and I went to the night shift. In the meantime I had heard that the night shift is better because in the night shift, the soldiers had their “chondas” and they didn’t have time to watch. They were sitting in this corner and that corner with their “chondas” and they had a good time and the prisoners had a good time.

Q: Was there ever any instance that you saw of knew of where the soldiers abused . .

A: I heard, I heard. I even knew of pregnant Jewish girls. I heard. So then, I joined the night shift from 6 PM to 6 AM but it came to 12 o’clock at night – ja, I don’t know why they picked me out, I’m not a big girl. I mean usually the small people they set at a table and they had light work to do. Me, they put at a machine where there were mostly men and husky women and I did the heads for the grenades – I turned it and I burned these things. So it came 12 o’clock at night and I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I was standing there 12 hours and doing all the time the same thing, I couldn’t keep my eyes open and I must have falled asleep. My machine started burning. Thanks god, one of the men came over, he turned off the machine and he woke me up. If an SS would have caught me, he would have put me to death – this was espionage right away. Then I learned, the minute my eyes are falling, I turned off the machine and I walked around until I woke up again. (new tape) and you know when I was caught, I heard two girls from the underground movement were caught and they were terrible tourtured because that was the worst thing you could do. And they were with me working there and they were very careful – they were afraid to take about but somehow I got in contact with them so they told us what to do to help them. Now, we put these heads of grenades – we put in a box – I forgot there was either twenty four or forty eight in one box. Now they told us the first we do we should do them badly so they couldn’t do anything with them and then on top in case they are checking, we put the good ones. So that’s how I did it.

Q: When you say do them badly, you mean they would misfire or . . .

A: Definitely. They couldn’t do a thing with them. So that we did at the machines. We did all who had contact with these girls what they told us we did. I figured we will not survive anyway at least let’s do something to do them harm. So, that’s what we did for a long time we didn’t hear anything. Then one morning, they summoned us in the sauna again and the leiter, Mr. Hessler, he told us about his and this happened. They had trucks and trucks and everything misfired. Now, it was suggested to him to gas the whole camp. He does not want to do it – he will give us another chance. In the meantime something happened. A few girls worked where they had the explosive powders – gunpowder – and these girls took it out and they intended to explode the whole camp and they were caught and four girls were hanged. Two in front of the – we had to be present – two in front of the day shift and two in front of the night shift. I mean I was looking away but you knew what happened. It didn’t bother us too much, we figured we are going this same way – not being hanged but one way or another anyway. Nobody thought of ever surviving. So we did the same thing again and evidently either they didn’t say anything anymore or they didn’t catch anybody anymore.

Q: On a day by day basis when you certainly didn’t know there was a chance to survive, how did you keep going?

A: You know what, there is a Jewish saying – you can get used to all “Tzures”. You learn to live with tzures. Another day. You know what, I slept together – I mean next to next – we always were two people together with another girl. We were on the same transport from Belgium – she was born Belgian. And every morning when I woke up, I said to her Adele, I wish there would be a change. I do not care better or worse. I just can’t take every day the same thing. Some change should be. And she would say to me, Ilse, if it is worse, isn’t it better status quo? I said, no, no. and end should be one way or the other. I just couldn’t take it. One day I was standing outside in the camp – this was before I went to the munitions factory – I was standing outside and we were working something there and it was near the hospital and the hospital had very small windows and I was thinking I want to go to the hospital because I know that’s the end. But I was standing there and a terrible smell came from the hospital and I said no, Ilse, it’s not the right thing, wait a while, maybe something will change, somehow. But very often I was, and you know very often, people were running against the fence which was barbed wire and was electrically loaded. Okay, they shut off the electricity and they took them off and they kept on living. I mean, sometimes you had a feeling you just can’t take it any more. So and every day the same thing and what you saw and you heard the selections here and the selections there. And it is working on your nerves.

Q: That’s what I meant.

A: But youth overcomes and unbelievable, I was there together most of the time a mother and a daughter and the mother kept going – she survived. And very often when I was there, I thought of my mother and I said isn’t she glad she is gone. I wish I would have gone with her. (pause) you know it came towards the end, I was there for sixteen months. Sixteen months is a long time. And one day we stopped working for the factory. It came to an end and this was Poland and as the enemies closed in towards Germany, we were chased towards the center of Germany because altogether I was in four camps.

Q: You were taken away from Auschwitz?

A: Yes. We were taken away from Auschwitz and I don’t know exactly – I was first in Birkenau but Birkenau and Aushwitz was together more or less. Then we were chased towards Neustadt which was Mecklenburg near Berlin. And we were on these big open trains where they usually don’t transport people but coals and this stuff. We were sitting on these open trains and we were near Berlin and we saw Berlin burning – what a pleasure! And then people came towards us – they were from the underground and they said Berlin is burning – just keep up your spirits. Another few days and it will be all over. And you know what helped us morally were the soldiers – German soldiers. Sometimes they were very decent – they were the older ones, the ones . . .

Q: The old Wehrmacht?

A: Yes. The younger ones were on the front. They were fighting so the old ones they were with us. And a few days they took us to the forest and we had to dig trenches so this was in the winter time, it was hard work and it was cold and windy so the soldiers very often were very nice to us – they just let us dig little bit and then we could sit in there – it wasn’t so cold and if they knew somebody was coming, they told us Achtung and we got out and we started shoveling again. Whenever we were sitting, you know we were hungry all the time, and you know what we were talking about – cooking and baking. I mean me the housefrau, very ambitious housefrau – we were talking about cooking and baking – about recipes. So we were in the forest there digging these trenches and every morning the soldiers gave us the news. They told us how bad it is and one day they said you will be luckier then we are. They kept us morally going. And here and there, they gave us cigarettes and the cigarettes we took to the camp and for the cigarettes we got soup or we got more bread.

Q: Were you able to bribe the SS?

A: That was no SS. We game them to the blockalteste and to the girls because don’t forget, the polish Jews, they were at these camps before us and you know when we complained to them, they told us what a life they had. They said to us, you don’t know how well off you are here now. When we came, there were no tents, there were no houses. We were standing in snow, in ice without shoes. People were dying left and right.

Q: I wanted to ask you, what were the living conditions like when you came to Auschwitz?

A: You know what, typical German. Whomever they want to keep, they keep. When I came that was 1944, we had regular houses, we were sleeping on – no beds – it was called “koyen” – that was just wooden shelves and there was a kind of a mattress on it and you got a blanket. Every morning a sauna, - I told you I mean we were kept clean. Finally, we got a towel and finally we got soap. And every morning we were looked after if anyone had lice. And what I didn’t know but evidently you get lice first just behind the ears because they always looked just behind the ear. Now god forbid somebody had a louse because you didn’t have to have it. You could keep yourself clean as long as we were in Auschwitz. You see as soon as it started towards the end of the war, when we were chased to other camps, then we didn’t have that anymore. There was no hot water anymore and there was nothing to sleep. In the first camp we came to, there was straw on the floor – like animals. And there we started with lice. You know I still came back with lice to Belgium. You can’t get rid of lice.

Q: When you were going from camp to camp, did you know that the Germans were losing the war?

A: Oh sure, that we knew. But we were not hoping we could survive. We figured they will put us to death in the last minuet.

Q: Where you afraid to hope that you would survive?

A: I never thought I would survive. But you know what they did and this is typical German – this order until the last minute. Now before we left Auschwitz, that I didn’t know until later, they destroyed all the gas ovens. But they kept all the documents. When I started the restitution, I couldn’t have told them I was in the camp. They knew exactly in what camps I was, what number I had – everything.

Q: You said you were in four camps – from Auschwitz you went near Mecklenburg?

A: Neustadt and then there was a fourth one and I forgot.

Q: From where were you liberated?

A: From Neustadt – that was the last one.

Q: Who liberated you? The Russians?

A: Yes. That was very funny. You know Hitler’s birthday was on the 20th of April. Now this was already toward the end an every morning we had to stand outside and we were counted from the SS – appeal. We were standing outside and we had in our minds something should happen today – nothing happened. We didn’t work anymore, we were just sitting around. We were liberated on the 10th of May and this last day, we were standing outside and a soldier came and he was throwing around cigarettes. And we figured that’s a different atmosphere – something must have happened. And then they told us to go back in the barracks and they locked us in and we stayed there. But people are sometimes too fast so two girls jumped out of the window and they were shot in the last minuet before the Germans left. They left and afterwards we were allowed to got out. And we saw, when we were taken out to the forest to dig these trenches, we saw that private planes were standing there. They were somehow covered. But we figured that they were waiting for the last minuet evacuation. So after we heard the two shots, nobody budged in the block but after awhile, we started breaking the windows and getting out. So we walked out and we saw the gate open – you know that’s what is much be like when a prisoner is coming out of prison – the gate was open. But there was something which I still regret. We went out there and a German soldier was there – evidently they forgot him or he got lost there. So he said what are you doing here. This should have been enough – we should have killed him. I still regret it. I mean altogether as weak as we were, we would have been able. How can he ask us this? I still don’t understand that we didn’t kill him. I regret it – he should have been killed. And there I will show you again – the polish Jews are way ahead of us. Probably they were trained against unnormal anti-Semitic situations from hundreds of years while we German Jews did not know. Now, we were standing there and you know, we were hungry. We were a group, you know there were always groups together too, let’s say from Belgium, from France, we were always together. So, we were four girls and we saw the polish Jews running – where are they running to? All of a sudden I was very healthy. I didn’t feel anything, I wasn’t weak. I was running after them. Where were they running? Next to the camp was a small place like country. Everybody lived there in a one family house – the Germans. You know what, we went there to the cellars, these cellars had so much food, they could have had war for another 10 years. In every cellar there was so much food and they were all running away from the Russians. From the Americans they wouldn’t have run, but from the Russians they were running. So we saw all this food and we figured how do we get it to the block and they were still shooting all over. They were still destroying bridges and whatever. All of a sudden, we saw a little four wheel wagon so we took that and we put everything in there. Then all of a sudden we thought of a little human feelings, we thought of forks and knives and at night candles and whatever we thought to put in there. We didn’t get very far and the wagon broke down. So we looked for another one with two big wheels – this was country – and we put everything in there and we started back to the block. And we took pots for cooking and one girl with whom I was together – she was the cook. So we brought everything back and we cooked and we ate and we had a good time. Then we decided we don’t want to live in the block – we want to move out from the barbed wire. The SS lived outside the camp and they lived in gorgeous little houses so we moved into these houses.

Q: You knew all these houses were vacant?

A: Everybody left. There was nobody there. There were little stoves there and we took wood and coal and whatever we found and we started washing and clothing, whatever we found we took. We changed all the time clothing. And if I think of it, we were sitting there like monkeys, one taking out the lice from the other. And you cannot get rid of them. We used hot water and we took it outside and put it over the clothes hundreds of times. Before we got to Belgium, we passes a lot of doctors they gave us injections against the lice. I was four weeks in Brussels, I couldn’t go to a hairdresser because you couldn’t go with lice.

Q: When you left this camp . . .

A: Oh, that was terrific. So we wanted to get to look human. You know, I came out from the camp, I was seventy pounds. I mean I looked like a living skeleton. So we wanted all to pep up a little bit, to get a little bit human like. Food we had, and at night we had candles so we stayed there for a few weeks, and then we would go back. One night, somebody comes in with a light-speaks Russian – it was good that girl I was with, she understood Russian. She was Polish. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have know what they wanted. So they told us, everybody who wants to go to his country or her country should leave the next day otherwise, the rest we take with us. I said that’s all I need. And the next day we all decided where we wanted to go. We wanted to go back to Belgium and so we assembled with the Americans – in the meantime the Americans had come. There you have another stupid thing of the Americans . . .

Q: Why did you decide to go back to Belgium?

A: Where should I go? Not to Germany. So I wanted to back to Belgium because I figured from there, I will go to the United States. I didn’t want to go back to Germany. So the Americans came, oh boy, if the Americans are reading that, I mean they didn’t know that we had something to eat after we came out of the camp. They were throwing something to us – little packages so I – we all thought maybe it was chocolate. At least that would have made sense. No, chewing gum. On an empty stomach, if we would have had an empty stomach, what do you do with chewing gum? And something else, then we were in that German neighborhood and a few Germans were still there. So, the first thing when we had come out of the camp, we all had diarrhea, so we went to a pharmacy and there was still a German there and I asked him for charcoal and he said to me, do you have money. Then I got very angry – I was a real rebel. I said look, you have two choices, to give us the charcoal because you must see from what we look like that w are coming from concentration camp. You can give us the charcoal nicely or we will take it. The rest of the consequence, I will not tell you. So he gave us the charcoal. You know here and there, there were still a few Germans and you know what two girls did. They took two well dressed German women and they undressed them in the street.

Q: I wanted to ask you, you must have come in contact with Germans during those first few days and weeks. How did you feel towards them?

A: I tell you I could have killed them altogether. You know and then we went into a grocery and we saw up there (on a shelf) all these, you Germans put in jars fruit for winter time, and she had it up there and wewould have liked it and she had plenty there so we asked for it. First we always asked nicely. Coming from the concentration camp, they couldn’t ask from us very good manners, right? They dehumanized us so how good manners could we have but we tried first. But then she didn’t want to give us anything. So we told her frankly. You might give us some or we will kill you. I said look, you were one of them who took everything away from us. We not asking anything – we are just asking to eat because we are hungry.

Q: Where there any instances of violence against the Germans?

A: No, just that they undressed them But you know the Americans they behaved unbelievable. One night we went and this cook we had with us – she said would you like good chicken soup – that was so cute. So you know what she did – there was a peasant living there and some chickens running around. I could never do it – I’m a typical city girl. She went over there- she plucked a chicken and she brought it over to the block and she made a good chicken soup and then we want back to that peasant and we asked for candles because we had no light at night – no electricity. And somehow when we went out the Americans were there and they came over to us and they told us we shouldn’t do that to the poor Germans. I’m telling you – I wish you could turn that off – for American stupidity there is no limit. They had no understanding - for the poor Germans.

Q: You were liberated from Neustadt. How did you get out of there?

A: The American trucks were waiting for us – there were no trains yet. The Americans took us to – our first stop was Holland. You know Holland is very hospitable. That was so nice. We came to Holland – the table was all set in white tablecloths, white bread we got, priests were waiting for us to place us.

Q: Who organized this?

A: The government of Holland. Defiantly. This is Holland. White bread and noodles and the priests were there – they blessed us and everybody got a big package from Red Cross and then from Holland we came to Belgium.

Q: You had gotten clothes from the farms around Neustadt. Could you still be pointed out as a survivor from KZ? Was your hair still short?

A: No, they only shaved it once and the they let it grow. But you know what they did – these people who were sitting in the munitions factory at tables – the had very boring work, they assorted things for 12 hours at a stretch. If they caught somebody falling asleep there, they shaved off their hair again. That was the punishment. For us, it was only when we arrived there, right away they shaved off the hair and we got our number and we got the clothing.

Q: You used the word dehumanizing, for a young girl this must be very . . .

A: This hurts so much you have no idea. You know the funny thing is that was always my first thought when I heard a girl is going to be a nun. The first thing that impressed me that they shave off the hair. This hurts so much.

Q: That’s what I meant, to have a number put on . . .

A: This is the end of the human being. You are – that’s for slaughter.

Q: Emotionally, how did you come back from that kind of experience?

A: Let’s say I have never become the same again. I was never that soft, I was never that shy. I have become a rebel against the world. And I would never take any nonsense anymore. You wouldn’t believe it, in our time it is understandable, but I always walk around with a knife. I wouldn’t give it up if somebody is attacking me. I mean I have learned – I have gone through a hard school. I am a person very easy to get along with but I can make my point and I’m not taking any nonsense. I wish I would have been that way before.

Q: From Holland, the Americans took you to Belgium. How long did you stay there.

A: Too long, I hated that Belgium the minute I came there. First of all, it’s a miserable people – very anti-Semitic. You know when we came back what they said – too many Jews had come back. Don’t forget, some of them gave their fortune to the Belgians to keep it for them – now, they wanted them to come back? They hoped they would never come back.

Q: Did you ever find those people to whom you gave the suitcase?

A: I tell you. I knew these people and I found these people. I went to the police. The police wouldn’t be on my side and I couldn’t prove it. How could I prove it?

Q: Did you try at that point to find out what happened to the rest of your family?

A: Look, I hoped somebody would back. Nobody came. When the transports came, I hoped. You see that girl from Belgium I was with – we took first two rooms together. Each of us a room and she was cooking. I mean that’s all we did.

Q: What did you do for money?

A: We got it from committee – I think the JOINT. We got a certain amount of money, we got injections, we were under doctors care all the time. We were skeletons. All we did all day long, we were eating. You know, it was years after, when I arrived here, I was a size 16. (She is a size 8). My whole pleasure was eating. I didn’t care what I looked like, I couldn’t care less – that was my whole pleasure. Only this friend I lived with – when I became friendly with her (Mrs. Eppingen – she was a widow – she had emigrated from Germany in 1936 about to Cali with her physician husband who then died in Colombia of a tropical disease and she came here and they shared an apartment for many years) and she was very vain. She was very good-looking, very good figure. One day she said to me, Ilse, once in a while, do you look in the mirror? I said yes, Erna, I couldn’t care less. I know I look very plumpy. But I was always hungry. On my first job here, you know I arrived with three sandwiches every morning. I had a big sandwich at 10 o’clock – nobody is eating like that in America. I had a big sandwich for lunch and another big sandwich in the afternoon. Everybody looked at me but this was my pleasure. Then she told me she would put me on a diet that wouldn’t be hungry and I would get enough to eat and I would get a nice figure again.

Q: did you plan immediately to come to the United States?

A: yes, I hated Belgium. This is another thing – typical American. I mean I got the best impression from America before I came here. I had my uncle here and I had my brother-in-law here – he was in the army already. The first think I came from the camp – I sent a cable to each of them. My brother in law cabled back where’s Kurt? - his brother. Then I told him I want to come over. My brother-in-law didn’t have much money – where should it come from? My uncle came here with a lot of money but in the meantime I understand the situation. He didn’t want to declare the whole thing because of tax purposes. Anyway, they both gave me an affidavit and the American consulate was in Antwerp and I always got the news, it’s not enough. Then I got a third affidavit from cousin here and again – it’s not enough. I mean at this time I was young, I could work. Another cousin who was a little bit more alret, she went to her congressman and she said I have a cousin in Belgium, she is young, she is healthy and she can work. She has already gotten three affidavits and she is always told it’s not enough. Something is wrong. The minute she said something is wrong – it took a few days and I was summoned to Antwerp and I got my affidavit. You know what happened, everybody who could pay, paid him and those who couldn’t, the papers went on the bottom. Finally, with four affidavits for one person, I came over.

Q: Who picked you up at the boat?

A: My uncle.

Q: How did you manage the first few weeks?

A: I managed all right. I lived for one or two weeks with my uncle and then I was looking for a job which I got at Fleck.

Q: How did you get that job?

A: Through the Self-Help.

Q: How did you manage without knowing the language?

A: Don’t tell me I didn’t know the language. I had English in school eight years. We had schooling. Five years French, three years Latin, some Hebrew. In fact whatever, I know, I forgot because I was always together with Germans here. They were all Germans. The whole bunch were immigrants. But you know, if I speak German with my friends, it is a different story. For instance, when I am in Switzerland and somebody talks German to me, I’m getting like – everything is getting stiff in me. I do not answer. It’s like when a bull sees red. Once here, we were in a restaurant and I usually speak German with my friends and we were speaking German there. All of a sudden, a German turns around and says, oh, how nice to hear somebody speaking German. I got up – I didn’t say a word and I left.

Q: in line with that, how do you feel about the Wiedergutmachung?

A: Look, if the widergutmachung would be a gift from them, I wouldn’t accept it. But it is not a gift. It is in fact a small part of what we lost. A gift I wouldn’t accept.

Q: In looking back today, do you feel yourself more a part of American society or more a part of German Jewish community in New York?

A: Part of the American society – I found out when I was traveling with the American Jewish Congress that I can very well fit into American society but in general, I feel, I lost my roots. Because of my experience, I cannot love this country. Let’s say, it’s more like being without a home. This is not the general attitude of German Jews. For instance, my brother-in-law, he got married here, he built a family here. He I’m sure feels completely at home. But for my, I have most in common with German Jews. Most of my friends are all German Jews. We have one fate.

Q: Do you participate in the cultural events in New York?

A: I’m an opera fan, I got to concerts, I got to museums. I do something for my fitness – I go swimming.

Q: In looking back, do you think your experience which took so much from you, changed you?

A: It defiantly did. It made me a lot tougher. If my parents would wake up, they wouldn’t recognize their daughter. I was very shy and timid. I can stand my ground. My mother was always afraid – my mother always said I would never be able to stand on my two feet. But I went through a hard school and I learned.

Q: Going back for a minuet to the first job you had, what kind of job was it?

A: When I went to the self-help, I was living with my uncle in Queens, and they told me about a job on Sherman Ave. What American would ever travel from Queens to Sherman Ave? When I was told, I said I wouldn’t go there. I was glad I had a job. So I went there and the shop was half of my living room. And you know what we did? He bought big bottles of sun-tan oil and he filled this in a little jars and for 8 hours I put on the labels on these little jars. I thought I will land in Bellvue. And I had to stand the whole time. I can walk for hours but I cannot stand on one spot. And we were two girls. And he didn’t go to his office – he was watching we shouldn’t talk to each other – we would lose some time. I suggested we could sit but no – then it goes slower. So I hated this already very much. I only stayed eight days – I didn’t have a penny.

Q: How did you get to Mr. Fleck?

A: That was very nice. He was an immigrant himself. He had all the feelings for an immigrant.

Q: how long did you stay there?

A: Too long, for a factory job. Because, two or three years, Every night, my friend that I lived with and I we had the same discussion. Finally, we got to a result. Every night we said if our parents and our men would see us, especially my parents, who spend so much money on my education, they would say that’s all you can do? So we talked that over every night. After one year, we got a weeks vacation. And this friend, she had some money, I didn’t. she said you know what, I think we need a change. We went for a week to Bermuda. With all the money I had. Then we came back to Fleck bros. and then he said when what to do. But that’s how I started.