Interview with Felicia Weingarten

By David Zarkin

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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Felicia Weingarten for the JCRC/ADL Holocaust History Project, at the St. Paul Jewish Community Center, on June 2, 1983. Mrs. Weingarten, please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name, if it’s different.

A: My name is Felicia. Maiden name Karo. My husband’s name is Weingarten. My Jewish name would be Feiga, and in Hebrew Tzipora, meaning “bird.’ But I rarely use it.

Q: When were you born?

A: April 12, 1926.

Q: In what town and country were you born?

A: In Lodz, Poland.

Q: What were your parents’, grandparents’ and great-grandparent’s names?

A: My father’s name was Hirsch Karo. His wife’s name was Maryam Karo; I don’t know her maiden name. My mother’s father’s name was Pritzker; I don’t know the first name. She was raised by a stepfather whose name was Bernard Vasong. Her mother’s name was Chayeh Vasong, formerly Pritzker. She and her first husband were divorced.

Q: Where were they born?

A: My mother was born in Beloya Tserkov, which is a city not far from Kiev in the Ukraine. My father was born in Gostyni, Poland. My mother was a Polish citizen, however.

Q: Do you know where your grandparents were born?

A: My mother’s mother was born in Beloya Tserkov. Her first husband, Pritzker, was born and died in Beloya Tserkov. Her second husband, whom I knew as my grandfather, came from Warsaw. My father’s mother and father were born in Poland, I don’t know where.

Q: Do you know where your great-grandparents were born?

A: On my father’s side, in Poland. I know that his ancestors came to Poland probably in the 16th century.

Q: What kind of work did your parents do? What were their occupations?

A: My mother did not work outside the house. She was a housewife, and she took care of running the household. She didn’t do all the work herself, but she saw to it that it ran smoothly, and she took care of us kids. My father was an administrative principal in charge of a Jewish boys’ private gymnasium, really two positions. One was as a director that had to do with the curriculum, and the other one was in charge of the administration. Gymnasium is a high school, plus two years of junior college.

Q: What languages were spoken in your home?

A: Polish.

Q: Would you say your family was secular or religious in practice or orientation?

A: In between. They were not orthodox, they were not terribly observant, and yet tradition was kept, and to say that they were secular would be wrong. They did follow some of the religious customs. They kept the holidays. They identified, I think, much more by being “cultural Jews,’ but there were certain aspects of Jewish religion which were practiced in the house. They also lived quite a bit according to Jewish ethics and morals. But they were not observant, and kashrut was kept in a biblical sense. That is, my mother wouldn’t use milk and meat together, but there were no separate dishes, and no separate silverware. They belonged to a movement which was called Progressive. In Polish the expression was Postepowi. Postepowi means “making strides, modernizing.” It was not a Reform movement -- there was no formal Reform in Poland -- but in the larger cities of Poland there existed a synagogue like that to which my parents went. Actually, I should say my father, because in Europe, women did not go very frequently. The men did.

Q: That brings us to the next question. Did you receive any formal Jewish education?

A: Absolutely. A very good education. I attended a day school for girls. This was a Jewish organization which founded and funded three schools, two for boys and one for girls. My father worked in the boys’ school. We were noted for education. Most schools in Poland were not, prior to World War II. The school was the only school in the city of Lodz to be accorded the same rights as a first class Polish school -- Category A. The language of instruction was Polish; we had Hebrew every day for one to two hours. And when we had to pass examinations at the end of six years of elementary school, at the end of four years of gymnasium, and at the end of the two junior college classes -- called lyceum -- the examinations were done in two languages, all the subjects in the Polish language, and the Hebraic subjects, such as Hebrew, Hebrew literature, and geography of Palestine, religion, Bible, and so on were all done in Hebrew. The matriculation certificate was handed out on one side in Polish, on the other side in Hebrew. So the Jewish education was a very good one. The school did not indoctrinate. What you did at home was your own business, but they did give you the education.

Q: What events, either local, national or international, were you aware of from the mid-‘30s to 1941?

A: Well, I was aware of Polish anti-Semitism. One sensed it, really. I can’t say I discussed it; I was too young. I was just barely a child -- adolescent at best – but I remember what was being discussed at home, and I could sense it in the attitudes of the Poles. I knew that anti-Semitism, which was bad enough, had worsened with the advent of Nazism. And there was also a rather critical economic situation which affected the Jewish people immediately, not only economically, because anti-Semitism always increases when there are economic difficulties. And one couldn’t help but read in the papers what was happening to the Jews of Germany. We also, in 1938, had a large influx of Jews who had been born in Poland but lived in Germany. They were forcibly thrown over the Polish border. They were refugees who came to the town of Zbaszyn, and they were called Zbaszyn refugees. These were people who had lived for many years in Germany, but had originally come from Poland, and the Nazis just rounded them up -- some of them came in robes and slippers --and threw them over the Polish border. Their fate hung in the air, because the Poles didn’t want them. Eventually, they were accepted, and sent to different cities in Poland, where the Jewish community and individual Jews helped them. And so we knew exactly what was going on in Germany. We couldn’t say that we didn’t know that Jews were persecuted and robbed of their rights as citizens, and possessions, and so on.

Q: Then you and your family had contact with these people?

A: Yes. It so happened that next door to us, there was a Jewish widow with a large apartment, and she accepted a woman, with two little boys, whose husband was killed by the Nazis, and gave her shelter. Both my parents spoke German fluently, and I recall snatches of conversation -- my mother telling my father what was happening there with the family, and my father helped the boys enter school, at no cost, because the mother couldn’t possibly afford the high fee. The two boys were accepted to the Jewish gymnasium, and I remember trying to help the little boys with their Polish and lending them some books, because they were learning quickly.

Q: How was the news that these refugees brought to your community received in your Jewish community, and in your family? How was that dealt with? What was the reaction of your family and members of the Jewish community? Do you recall?

A: I was upset. But in 1938 I was only twelve, and you know you really don’t deal with it very well yet. My family was very upset, and they realized that things are going to get worse for us, because the war already “lay in the air,’ so to speak. People failed to do anything about it. First of all, there wasn’t much that one could do! Not all of us could leave Poland. And I think that people refused to believe that the same thing will be happening in Poland. Don’t forget, this was prior to World War II. But that we knew what was happening to the Jews in Germany, there is no question.

Q: What were your sources of information about what was going on, besides the refugees?

A: Newspapers and conversations. My father and his friends always talked politics. You couldn’t be living in Poland in the 1930s and not talk politics, and you couldn’t be Jewish and not be concerned with the Jewish problem. It became worse in the late 1930s, so this was a subject of conversation that was like bread and butter in our house. What is happening in Germany? What is happening in Austria? How is the Nazi government changing? What is going to happen to the rest of the Jews, all over Europe? Will there be war, or won’t there be war?

Q: Did your family, or you, have any contact with gentiles during this time?

A: Oh, yes. We lived among gentiles, and there was no ghetto. People seem to think that we lived in ghettos, but we didn’t. Jews clustered in certain areas that were predominantly Jewish simply for comfort, but one was free to live almost anywhere. Of course, there were certain areas that Jews avoided, because they were a minority, and they were rough areas, but I lived in a very nice residential area where there were some Jews. I would say about 20 per cent, maybe a little more. I really don’t know. But it was predominantly Polish and we had Polish neighbors --acquaintances, really. No one close.

Q: Did your family do business with gentiles?

A: We were not in business.

Q: And did you ever have gentiles in your home?

A: No, we were pleasant to one another when we met outside, and I used to play with Polish children, the neighbors’ children. They used to come to my house, and I to their homes. But my parents, though they were on very good terms with the gentile neighbors -- my father was frequently asked to place somebody on a job, because through his job in school, he knew a great many people, and this was a school where only wealthy Jews could send their children -- it was a costly school -- so there were a lot of manufacturers, and more than once he found a job this way for someone, for Jewish friends, Jewish acquaintances, as well as our Polish neighbors and acquaintances. But it was a distant, though pleasant contact.

QL Did you have relatives that lived outside your community?

A: Yes, I did. My father came from a very large family. He was the eldest of seven brothers, and the oldest one was a sister. They all lived in the area of Kutno, which was some distance from Lodz. I only met them now and then when we would go to visit, or they would come to visit us. I don’t remember them very well.

Q: Do you know what became of them?

A: After the war, I tried to find out what happened to people who lived in that area. They lived in smaller towns. I had an uncle who lived in Plotsk. I had an uncle who lived in Kitno. Another one in Zychlin. They were all taken to the death camp of Treblinka, where nobody survived. There isn’t a cousin left. They were all married men with wives and children. My grandmother had gone to her death probably with the youngest son and his wife and child who lived with her.

Q: And that was Treblinka, too?

A: Probably Treblinka. I never could find out for sure, but I know that people from that area were ghettoized for a short time in one of the larger towns and then, when the Nazis began to liquidate the Jews in Poland in 1941, they were taken to Treblinka.

Q: What age were you at the outbreak of the war?

A: Thirteen-and-a-half.

Q: And how did you receive news of the war?

A: When we went into the ghetto, sometime during that winter I looked through some of the things that I was able to take with, and one of my notebooks fell into my hands where I had written about the war in school, right at the outbreak of the war, shortly after Poland fell. And I was laughing at myself, how optimistic I was that Poland would win. Poland fell in two weeks! We didn’t realize the war would last, that it would be so horrible on the civilian population. And though we realized that the Nazis hated us and they meant us no good, nobody in their right mind would have been able to foresee what eventually was done to us. How could we know what lay ahead of us, when the Nazis themselves didn’t plan the extermination of the Jews until they went to war with the Soviet Union?

Q: So you were in the ghetto then, at the outbreak of the war?

A: No! We were still in our home in Lodz, in the city. We were ghettoized at the end of 1939, and my father and my mother and I went into the ghetto in January, in 1940. My father was arrested in October of 1939 as a member of the Jewish intelligentsia, and we didn’t see him until the very end of December. He came out sick, and had to spend some time in a hospital, probably three to four weeks. In the meantime, my mother and I tried to take a few possessions into the ghetto. Because the owner was Jewish, he no longer could function as an owner, and somebody else, a so-called “treuhaender” (custodian) was in charge of the building, and collected the rents. If you prepaid three months in advance, you could take a few sticks of furniture and some private possessions. Our furniture was very big and very heavy, and there was no way we could carry it. We were not permitted to hire a wagon. You had to take it on a sled, or on your back. So we took two beds, my sister’s and mine, which were small, and disassembled, and dragged the mattresses on a sled with the help of a Pole who lived in our building, who was a very poor man and always ready to do some small jobs for a fee. We took the bare necessities and our clothing with us. And the rest had to be left where it was. I think it was the very end of January when my father recovered from the beating and the terrible food they gave him in prison, and joined us in the ghetto.

Q: Where was the prison?

A: Outside the ghetto. It was in the city. There were many Poles in the same cell with him.

Q: What was the discussion, when the war did break out, among your family, or the Jewish community, about the war, and what was going to happen?

A: Well, we naively thought maybe Poland would win, because we were hoping that England and France would come to the rescue. They had a pact to help. Nobody realized the power and the might and the speed with which the German army would move. We did not foresee the horror of the Nazi occupation. We Jews were used to persecution, and learned to live with it and cope. We thought it would be a worse persecution than ever before, but nobody realized how horrible it really would be.

Q: And when did that occur -- the Nazi occupation of your town?

A: Right after Poland lost. On October first.

Q: What actions did the German forces take in the early months or years of occupation?

A: There were so many laws against the population. They were issued one at a time, two at a time, in the newspapers, and they were posted all over town. There were two sets of laws, one for the Poles, and one for the Jews, and of course the laws laid against us were always much more severe. The curfew for the Poles was seven in the streets -- for the Jews till five. We had to wear a yellow armband, which later on was changed to a yellow Star of David on the left breast, and on the right side of the back, and on our apartments or homes, so they could easily identify who was Jewish and come in. They helped themselves to everything we had. And these were plain soldiers who were quartered in the buildings. The German army was quartered in the better and nicer Jewish sections and apartments, and when they needed utensils or food, or when they needed somebody to clean their floors or windows, they helped themselves to Jewish people and Jewish goods. We had to give up our jewelry and furs, and little by little we became denuded, robbed of everything we owned. Our bank accounts were frozen in the banks. And then, I think it was in November, the edicts were issued telling us to leave our apartments, our homes in the city, and to go to a slum area called Baluty, which was designated to be the ghetto. In April -- the reason why I remember this is because it was the day of my 14th birthday, April 12th, 1940 - they threw barbed wire around the ghetto, dividing the ghetto from the rest of the city, and put heavily armed guards all around it.

Q: What was life like in the ghetto?

A: It was bad, and it continued to go from bad to worse. The food situation was horrible. There were at least 160,000 people who went in there, into a very small area. Often in a larger room there were two families. We had a tiny little room for the three of us, no bigger than a bathroom. But the worst were disease and malnutrition, because the ration was small, and became smaller and smaller, until in 1942, one couldn’t live very long on it. It was very, very little. And hard labor! The reason why they permitted us to live, was because they used us. We were a highly skilled people in an industrial city, and everybody had to work 12 hours day or night, in shifts. At first it was from 14 to 55, and then they said from the age of 9 until the age of 65. And if one didn’t work, one didn’t get the ration card, so one was as good as dead. One couldn’t live on the ration very long anyway, because it meant only a little bit of bread and a watery soup which was cooked in the factories or the offices where we worked, and issued at work. It wasn’t very filling, because it was just lukewarm water with maybe a bit of vegetable or some potato floating in it. Very rarely were we issued a piece of meat. Almost never an egg or butter. There was a bit of margarine, and then later on, no margarine, just a very smelly, low-grade oil. It was at best probably no more than 500 calories, and in ’42, ’43, ’44, much less than that, so that people actually starved to death. And there was no heating fuel, so we lived in ice palaces, and you had to hack through ice in order to wash yourself -- if you had the strength. And you had to work. But there were some places of work in the ghetto which were not as bad, where there was a little bit of food, and one could illegally help oneself to that bit of food. Some physical labor was backbreaking, some labor was not that difficult. It all depended how lucky one was and what connections one had, because within the ghetto we were ruled by a Jewish man, Chaim Rumkowski. He was the “eldester” of the Judenrat, our representative. And we also had people who were in charge of us who were Jewish people who were highly skilled and were bosses of the different sections of the work force in the ghetto. So our survival depended primarily on our skills, on the fact that the SS wanted to kill us, but the army needed us and kept some of us alive. And if one had the right acquaintances in the ghetto, it helped, so that one could try and get a better job.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

A: At first I went to school. The Nazis didn’t know about it, but I went to school for quite a while. In the beginning we had one high school. They gathered all the children from different schools, and the students formed one school which functioned on three shifts. Then, when the schools were closed and all of us, from the age of nine, had to start working, the school department saw to it that there was some education -- again, secret -- in the factories. Little kids from 9 to 14 would have to work five hours a day, but had several hours of instruction. The instruction was primarily in Yiddish, so the children at least could be literate. We tried the best we could. I worked five hours a day until I reached the age of 15, and then I had to work 12 hours a day.

Q: Doing what kind of work?

A: At first I worked five hours a day making decorations for ladies’ hats in a hat factory. Then I became very ill with typhus, the intestinal kind. When I got well, I received a good job where I could eat a little bit -- in a bakery, where, for the work that I did, I was given an extra bread ration. That job was given to me through an acquaintance. It was a job only for three months. And then later on I worked in a kitchen. Again, I could eat a little better, and leave part of my ration for my parents. Later on my mother became quite ill from malnutrition, and I had to look for a job which was less demanding, so I could come and help her a bit. And I worked in the office of a laundry. Then, in August of 1944, all ceased. We were deported. There were deportations all the time from the ghetto.

Q: Before we talk about the deportations, while you were in the ghetto, were you receiving any news about what was happening with the concentration camps, or anything like that?

A: None whatsoever. We had no newspaper and no official information. There was some unofficial information; I didn’t know until very late, in 1944, that there were several secret radios, and this was how we had some information. There were no labor parties going out from the ghetto, and no Poles coming into the ghetto, so there was very little information. I had absolutely no idea of concentration camps. What we did know was that people were sent away -- periodically, there were hundreds, or a few thousand, demanded for labor, for so-called resettlement and labor camps -- but very rarely did they come back alive. Once or twice a transport would stop en route and the people were skeletons. They were telling of horrible beatings and torture and hunger of the sort which made the ghetto seem better in comparison, so one dreaded these resettlements, these labor camps. But they were not called concentration camps. The words “Konzentrationslager” or “Vernichtungslager” were not used. It was called “arbeitslager” -- work camp -- and we dreaded them. It was only when I came to Aucshwitz that I found out what it was all about.

Q: When was that, and how it happen that you were taken to Auschwitz?

A: I belonged to this group of Jews that stayed in the ghetto until the end, because some of us were needed for work. September, 1944, there was about 70,000 of us still left alive, or barely alive. A work force, a skeleton of a work force, left. In ’44 the Russian army was marching. Already parts of eastern Poland were under Russian control, and we could hear guns. We knew the fighting was already in the area of Warsaw. Warsaw’s not that far from Lodz. You could hear the guns, the firing, and we were hoping that the SS will leave us alone -- that remnant -- because they certainly didn’t leave us alone before. All the time there were deportations. In ’42, they went for a whole week from house to house. It was called “Gehsperre” -- that means “house arrest.” They took all the children away, and the people from the insane asylum, and the people from the hospitals, and anybody who was emaciated. We were hoping that the remnant will be able to survive, we among them -- my mother, my father and I -- because the war was at the end. However it didn’t happen that way. I’m sure that you’re aware that there was a Polish uprising in the city of Warsaw, and the Russians, who were already in a suburb of Warsaw, Praga, stopped their offensive for three months and let the Poles fight on by themselves, while the Nazis slaughtered half the city and deported hundreds of thousands of Poles. This gave the SS time to clean out the Lodz ghetto. They issued laws. They told us to gather in certain places and to come with 25 kilograms in our knapsacks, because we’re going to be resettled. The German responsible for the ghetto, the Commandant, Hans Biebow – he was apprehended after the war, extradited, and stood trial, and was hanged by the Poles -- he opened his suitcase, and he said, “ See, I have no guns. I’ve been your friend. We are going to resettle you, to save you from the incoming Red Army.” Some friend! To us they were saviors; they were liberators!

Q: They carried you altogether, to one spot?

A: They didn’t. We started to hide, and they started to come in from morning till late at night with fully armed soldiers. When they didn’t have enough SS, they brought in special police detachments, and they went from house to house, from basement to attic, flushing out whoever was hiding. Some people didn’t hide, because one received a loaf of bread if one went willingly, and people were starving to death. We were found on August 16. We were hiding out in my father’s office, hoping that we won’t be discovered, because this was on the second floor. On the first floor there was a police office, Jewish police, and we thought they wouldn’t come there. But my father’s manager of the office had a child who cried, and they heard him, and they came and took us. They just said, “Raus!” -- Out! And “Line up!” They surrounded us with soldiers and took us to the depot and shoved us into waiting cattle trains. We traveled overnight, and the next day, in the morning, we arrived in a place which I leaned later on was Auschwitz. As the locked, bolted doors were opened by strange-looking men in striped uniforms with shaven heads, somebody leaned against the wall and found a piece of paper stuck between the slats, and he read it aloud. In Yiddish, it said, “Brothers, save yourselves! This is death. Death awaits you.” But it was too late. We had already arrived. There wasn’t a thing we could do. And even if we had found it earlier, where could one run? Into the hands of the waiting Poles? The Poles were not very anxious to help us. At night we stopped once, and we heard Polish voices under the train, obviously Polish workmen, and we asked, “Where are we going? Do you know where they are taking us? We are Jews from the ghetto of Lodz.’ They didn’t answer, but they said, “If you have any valuables, make a hole in the floor and throw it to us.” There wasn’t an offer of food or water, or of information. We were going to Auschwitz, and they knew it very well. It wasn’t that far, and they were railroad workmen who watched trains go by there for a very long time. And there wasn’t a word of warning.

Q: So what month or day did you arrive, then?

A: August 17, 1944.

Q: And who were the people that accompanied you at your arrival? Were you all from the same ghetto?

A: Yes. There were some classmates, some neighbors, some acquaintances, some strangers. It depended, you know, with whom you were caught on a certain day. Some people were caught right on the street. As a matter of fact, about a week before I was deported, a friend of mine, a classmate of mine who’s now in Israel, was caught in the street. She didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye to her widowed mother. And when I came to Auschwitz, after the selections we were walking the road into the camp, and I heard my name. My name in Polish is Lusia, and somebody was hollering, “Lusia! Lusia!: I looked up, and behind the high, tall, barbed electrified wire, there stood a creature in a ballerina outfit with a shaven head. I didn’t know who it was. She started calling my name again and again, and I recognized the voice. It was a friend. Her name is -- was -- Nicia. She was caught in the street, too. I knew then where I came, that this is where everybody from the ghetto was sent. This is where she disappeared to. And she hollered to me, “Throw me some bread. I’m starving!”

Q: How were you processed or registered into the camp?

A: I wasn’t registered. There were so many of us coming. There was still the tail-end of the Hungarian Jews arriving, and our ghetto. We went through the selection for life and death immediately upon descending from the train. After we were told to form into lines, men and women separately, it went very quickly. Probably in about an hour I stood in front of a table. There were probably four or five German officers who would look at one and just with a flicker of a finger send you to the right or to the left. I was not registered.

Q: What were the living conditions like?

A: I was waved to the left, which meant life -- which of course I didn’t realize at the time. I didn’t know who went to the right, and why. I could only see from the corner of my eye, that these were women with children, elderly, sick people, grey-haired people, people who were crippled, young women who were walking with middle-aged women. And to the left, I saw younger women. My mother walked with a friend of mine ahead of me. I walked behind her. I didn’t realize how close I came to being sent to the right, because I switched places. I walked with my friend’s mother, who was a tiny, grey-haired lady, and my mother, who was tall and handsome with dark hair, walked with my friend. They were waved, just a few steps ahead of me, to the left. And when I came to the table, one of the German officers looked at this small grey-haired lady, and he asked me, “Is this your mother?’ “Ist dis dein Mutter?’ I said, “No.” He waved her to the right, and he looked at me again, and he said, ‘Bei alt bist du?’ “How old are you?” I said, “Eighteen.’ And he said, “Old enough.” I understood He meant “old enough to labor.” I wasn’t a little kid, and I could work. I was sent with the others to the left, and we were sent to the transit camp, the so-called “Ausgangslager” in Auschwitz. We walked for several miles. All along the road on both sides I saw emaciated men, non-Jews, Poles, mostly. They asked us in Polish to throw any valuables and any food we had. They saw that some of us carried some bread. They said, “It will be taken away from you, anyway.” I threw away what I had. I couldn’t bend down and give it to them, because we were forbidden to talk to them and we passed very quickly, but as unobtrusively as I could, I threw away two loaves of bread I had. Then we walked into a bath installation. We were told to undress completely and line up and give up our jewelry. I had a watch and I had a very lovely small diamond ring, my mother’s engagement ring. I didn’t want to give it to the SS. I just threw it in a corner. And they looked in our crevices, in the mouth, and elsewhere, to see if one didn’t hide jewelry or money. Not German money or ghetto money, which had no value, but gold, dollars, and so on. And then they cut our hair, and slapped us with a dirty rag with some fluid in it. Probably it was supposed to disinfect us, but it was just awful, dirty water and a dirty rag. And then they shoved us into a bath hall. Fortunately cold water came out. Then we stood shivering, in another room. They left us alone, and after several hours they issued either striped uniforms or a ragged, very torn piece of civilian clothing. Then we were told to line up, and we marched for several miles again to another part of the camp -- into barracks number 20, I recall -- and we were seated, packed like sardines, in fives. We were seated with our legs crossed. You’d open your knees, and somebody would sit between your knees, until we formed five. And the next five, and the next, to the left, and to the right. We could not get up and we could not go out to the latrine without permission. We had to sit very quietly, without making any noise. And that night, when we started to be very tired from sitting in this position, we started to complain and cry, and to inquire about the people who went to the right. There was a kind of stove, a long low stove, built almost through the length of the barracks. We sat in what looked almost like stalls, on the bare floor. There were no bunks in that particular camp. Several young Jewish girls ran out, and in German and in Slovak, which is similar to the Polish language, they informed us where we were. They told us to stop screaming and yelling. They told us that we had arrived in Auschwitz, and that this is a death camp. And they said, “Be quiet and mind us, because if you are loud, you’ll bring the SS on us, and we will not pay with our lives for you!” Two of them pointed to their arms and legs, which were marked by scars. They said they came in a transport of 3,000 girls from Slovakia, and spotted typhus broke out, and they were quarantined without food and water. They drank their own urine to save themselves, and less than 30 girls survived! They said they’d been through hell, and we had to mind and obey them. Otherwise the SS would come running. When they said, “this is a death camp,” I recall trying to understand what these words meant. I know what death is, and I know what camp is. They used the German expression, Feindichtenslager,” but I still could not comprehend exactly what was meant by it, because how can a human mind comprehend that human beings are destroying other human beings just because they’re Jews, whether by gas and burning in the crematoria, or by bullets. I didn’t know about the crematoria right away, but I found out after several days.

Q: Who were the other people in your barracks? Were they from your same ghetto?

A: Yes, those that were selected for life. Everybody was missing somebody.

Q: What was the composition of the camp population? Do you have any idea about that?

A: I stayed there only a week. Otherwise I would not have survived very long. There were men and women, and many nationalities. The ones I met were mostly Jewish women from Poland and Hungary. Later on I would meet Jewish women from every Nazi-occupied country of Europe. There were also gentiles, a lot of Poles, a lot of Ukrainians, and other nationalities as well. My contact was mostly with other Jewish prisoners and Jewish overseers.

Q: Was there any difference between the treatment of the Jewish and the non-Jewish?

A: Absolutely! As badly as everyone was treated, the Jews were always treated worse, and the gassing and the crematoria were mainly for the Jews. The other prisoners were rarely gassed and sent to the crematoria; they were often tortured and shot. It didn’t take much to be tortured or mistreated by the Nazis, but the “customers” for the gas chambers and the crematoria were the Jews.

Q: Did you have any encounter with gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, baptized Jews, or Soviet prisoners in the other camps you were in?

A: Yes. Later on, when I was sent to branches of Auschwitz to do labor --– smaller camps -- I worked with Soviet prisoners of war and other prisoners of war. I had contact with some of the German women who were Kapos. Some of them were lesbians. I saw quite a few German Kapos in Auschwitz, and they were homosexuals. I didn’t have any contact with them, because they were in the men’s camp, but I saw them. And I was with gypsies at the end, in the last camp, in Bergen-Belsen. They sat vis-à-vis from me on the filthy floor of the barracks, a whole group of Poles, Ukrainian, and several German gypsies.

Q: What acts were you witness to, or aware of, about systematic killing and fatalities from other causes?

A: There were beatings, constant beatings. And there were constant selections, even after the first one, the main one. Every day we were looked at, at least once or twice, and they were weeding out those that were becoming weakened or emaciated, separating mothers and daughters or sisters who by chance missed being spotted as relatives -- they separated families -- and they were never seen again. As I said, on the third or fourth day, I found out that the people whom one never saw again went to the gas chambers. Later on in the camps, I saw people die of hunger. And in Belsen, I saw hundreds of thousands dying of malnutrition, disease and lack of medical care, and bodies, skeletal bodies, mounds of them, between barracks and at several points in the camp, among them my mother. Nobody could bury them, nobody had the strength to hack through the frozen earth, and they were dying like flies. In some of the barracks, the dead outnumbered the living. I had an acquaintance who lives in Detroit. She was the only survivor in her whole barracks. When they went in, there were probably a thousand or 1,400 women and she was the only one who survived.

Q: Was there a way of communicating between people in the camp?

A: Oh, yes, if you were in the same barracks, in the same camp. If you were in a different barracks, it was often difficult, because we were not permitted much freedom in the camp. You could exchange a word or two during work, or in the latrine. This was the only place where one could exchange some information or meet a friend -- in the latrines. But if the friend was in a different part of the camp, a different barracks, there was much more difficulty.

Q: Were you aware at all, of the ongoing war effort?

A: Yes.

Q: How did you receive information about this?

A: When I was sent from Auschwitz after a week. There was a demand for Jewish women, Jewish labor, in the branches of Auschwitz, and I was sent to an airplane factory in Bad Kudova, which is Poland now -- then it was Germany. There were several thousand other prisoners. Prisoners of war from Russia. Italian prisoners of war. Civilian slave laborers, men and women from Czechoslovakia, and from Holland. So there were a lot of civilians who tried to cheer us up, though they were not permitted to speak to us. If we were caught speaking to anybody, we were beaten or deprived of the ration, so we had to be very careful. But speak with them we did, nevertheless. They were the ones who informed us that the war is at the end, to hold out and not to give up hope, because the Germans are being beaten, and are losing. Also, I realized things must be very bad for the Nazis, because the foremen, who was an elderly man -- most of the younger men were at the front, so the older men had to go back to work -- he came over to my mother, who worked at a nearby machine -- my mother spoke a very fluent, fine German, and he could probably tell this was a nice middle-aged woman, and he knew that she spoke the language very well -- he came up to her with a notebook, and he said, “I’d appreciate very much if you would sign your name in this notebook, and if you would say that I treated you well, and I never hit you, and that I treated you with as much humanity as I could.” And I realized that, if a German foreman is that scared, the war must be close to an end. He was trying to assure himself that he will have some proof that he wasn’t inhuman, because he knew that they were losing and that things will go badly with anyone who had contact with the prisoners. He wanted to present proof of his “humanity” to the Allies! And when the Nazis did that, I knew they were scared. I also could tell that they were scared because their brutality towards us was even worse than before. The closer it got to the end of the war, the more vicious they became. In Belsen, towards the end, in March of 1945, they did not distribute any of the horrible food any more, and we were for days without food. And since the supply of clean water was very small, it was horrible. Most of us were feverish from typhus and needed water. It was just a terrible situation. When I recall Bergen-Belsen, it’s just like one empty, huge field with dead and dying bodies.

Q: What were the names of the major German personnel in the camps you were in, such as the commander and the officers? Do you know?

A; When I was sent to Auschwitz, the woman in charge was Irma Greiser. I remember when I was sent to Bad Kudova, the SS woman in charge, the Kommando fuehrerein, her first name was Lucy. But I don’t know any other names. I was switched from place to place, and I was in such fear of them. And naturally, of course, they didn’t tell us their names. They would tell us their rank and tell us to stand at attention and give us all kinds of orders, but they never introduced themselves by name. We would occasionally find out a name accidentally, when we heard the German SS calling each other by name, so as a result, I knew a lot of first names, but I don’t know very many last names. If I do, it’s from reading history after the war; I informed myself who was who and in charge of what camp. But at the time, I didn’t know. I could tell they were SS by the insignia on their uniforms.

Q: Can you recall specific accounts of behavior and actions of specific German personnel?

A: As far as the military, the people that I came in contact with were mostly SS. There were some auxiliary SS, and some volunteers in the SS. They were very cruel, but even among the SS, I remember twice an act of decency. Once a Hungarian girl was bending down, and she was very dirty. The Hungarian girls came into the camps and broke down almost immediately, because they came from rather normal circumstances, and they were not prepared for starvation and brutal treatment, where we in the ghetto already had a long exposure to hunger. And one of the German engineers -- there were two younger men, obviously they were indispensable and they had to be there, otherwise they would be at the front -- started to laugh. And the SS woman --we were guarded every few meters -- she was a fine looking woman, a young woman with delicate features, and she said to this engineer, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, making fun of this poor creature.” And I thought, “How decent of her. She’s a woman who is offended by the fact that this man was laughing at this young Hungarian doing menial work, bending down so that her dirty legs, and her dirty --whatever she was wearing underneath -- showed.” I didn’t expect such humanity from an SS woman. The second time was in another camp where, as punishment, the SS woman got mad at somebody in the group, for nothing, really, and she was asking her, “Did you have children?’ the woman said, “Yes, I had a child, who was taken away from me in Auschwitz.’ And the SS woman said to her, “I would never give up my child.” The woman was afraid to tell her, “I didn’t give her up. She was taken.” She just cried. The SS woman became very angry and she said, “Take off your coat!” We did get a coat, and the ragged dress or uniform, and a coat. And she made her work without a coat, and the woman was freezing. About an hour later, another SS woman came to relieve this cruel one. She was an elderly woman. And when she saw this poor woman’s face, which was blue, and her fingers totally frozen -- we worked without gloves, because we were not issued gloves, but the SS wore two pairs of gloves – she removed a pair of gloves and said to the woman, “ You can keep them.’ We looked at her in astonishment, and she said, very quietly, with tears in her eyes, “I have a son who is fighting on the eastern front in Russia, and I hope perhaps somebody will be kind to him, too.” These were the only two acts of kindness that I saw in the SS in all the time that I had the disadvantage of being in their hands. And as far as the civilians, outside of the elderly foreman who wanted to have my mother sign that he was quite humane, I don’t recall any acts of kindness.

Q: I was just talking about actions, period. You know, that’s fine, the acts of kindness, but any specific actions or behavior.

A: When we came for the first time to the factory --this munitions factory in Bad Kudova -- civilians were lined up on the street all along the way, almost up to the doors of the huge factory. They stood there and made fun of us. They called us, in German, “offenmenschen” and “lumpenfrauen,” which means “monkey people” and “rag people,” because we were wearing ragged dresses and our heads were shaven. They were making fun of us, and they were cruel, and they were mean, and they were ugly!

Q: You mentioned the SS. Do you recall any other units of the German army or Nazi police while you were in the camps?

A: Police, yes. During the deportation, they didn’t have enough SS, so they brought in the police. They brought in a lot of special detachments that were not necessarily SS. I couldn’t tell you exactly who they were. I remember the color of the uniforms, but I was so scared of them, who had time to look up at the insignia?

Q: What thoughts did you give to your survival when you were in the camps?

A: I tried not to think in specifics. I just tried to stay clean, if possible, to scrounge around for extra food if possible, to help my mother, because I adjusted a lot better to life in the concentration camps -- my mother was 48, I was just 18 -- and to help her survive. When I was on the death march in February, 1945 -- I was in a smaller camp, now in the vicinity of the city of Breslau, and they again drove us away from the oncoming Russian army – we walked through the snows of Germany, and they said that whoever lags in the march would be shot. I was afraid my mother couldn’t walk as fast. I don’t know how she made those three days. I think love drove her on, because she knew that if she would stagger, or if she would sit down, I would stay with her, and they would shoot both of us. We could see blood in the snow, and we knew they did it, because we realized they were driving a lot of prisoners from other camps ahead of us, behind us, and so on. And after three days, they dumped us onto open coal trains. They drove us around Germany, trying to find a camp that could still absorb more prisoners, and I ended up in one of the last trains that were detached, in the middle of the night. I found out that this was the town of Bergen-Belsen, and a few kilometers away from this little town, there was the huge camp, which originally was a transit camp, and in ’44 became a dumping ground for survivors from other camps. There were a lot of Jewish women there from other camps. They simply dropped us there and hardly fed us, and at the end did not distribute any food. There was very little drinking water, a lot of lice, and no work. And we began to die, die of disease and starvation. It was a slow process. One became thinner and thinner and thinner until one became a skeleton, and one died either walking or sitting where one sat, in the filthy barracks.

Q: And in the meantime, you didn’t know what was becoming of your other family members?

A: No. I realized that my father, if he was permitted to live in Auschwitz, then he was probably in another camp. And I had a feeling he passed the selections, because I saw a line of men as we were leaving the bath installation, and I saw my father in that line. I wasn’t sure whether he survived his sojourn in Auschwitz, and how long he stayed there, but if he were sent away from Auschwitz, I doubted very much that he’s be able to survive. I was in good physical condition, I was young, and my parents saw to it that I ate a little better, because they gave me food from their ration. But he was 52. He was emaciated, had lost a tremendous amount of weight in the ghetto, was exhausted physically, and was really not accustomed to heavy physical labor. I doubted very much that he would survive, and unfortunately, I was right.

Q: And your mother?

A: My mother had a chance as long as we didn’t come to Belsen. Once we came to Belsen, I knew that we would not get out alive, because there was no work and we were fed infrequently, and there was no way one could help oneself. And before I knew it, after a week or two, I realized we both became sick, because I was conscious only some of the time, partially. When I was burning up, I realized I had fever. I looked at my body and I saw red spots, and I realized immediately that we both had the typhus, which was carried by lice. The symptoms are little red spots on your body, and a high temperature.

Q: So your mother died then, in Bergen-Belsen?

A: Yes. She died, because I had no water for her, and no medical care. She probably would have lived, had I been able to save her, but I wasn’t. I was sick myself. There was no water. I was not in the same group that I was deported from the ghetto with, friends and acquaintances. I was switched from camp to camp, and I found myself, with a group of almost total strangers, and there wasn’t time to develop any ties. My mother and I were totally dependent on one another, and when she became ill, and I became ill almost right after, there was no one to help.

Q: And how long were you there, at Bergen-Belsen?

A: I came in February. I knew the month, but who knew the day? I was freed on April 15, 1945, by the British army. I was close to death from malnutrition. I had survived the typhus. My fever had gone down. My head cleared. I was totally lucid and conscious. But I could only walk a few steps. I was so thin that I was totally unrecognizable. I could not talk above a whisper, and I was dying of malnutrition. I don’t know how long -- a few days, a week, not much longer -- and I would have died, just sitting there.

Q: What kind of care did you get then? What happened after Bergen-Belsen?

A: When the British came, they tried to take out, of course, the very sick ones and the dead ones, and bury the dead ones with bulldozers. Physicians came in, donning workmens’s uniforms and gas masks, because we stank. There were women dying in their own excrement and lice, and they realized they’d become infected. They were afraid to touch us, because many had scabies, and that’s highly contagious. They would look us over, with a stethoscope, but really not listening, and determine just by looking. One looked at me, and he said, “you’re okay.” That meant I was better off than some of the others. At least I could walk a few steps. After the healthy ones were taken to a different camp, and the sick ones to makeshift hospitals, this camp was burned. And little by little, repatriation began for those that wanted to go back wherever they came from. About a month-and-a-half after I was freed, a truck came and they took us to a hospital, where we were examined properly. And to my amazement, the English physician, a young Army medical man, said, “You’re okay.” I understood English. I had English in school. And then he said, You’re okay, baby. Heart okay, lungs okay. You’re okay.” I was very thin, but obviously my vital organs were not affected. For several months the left leg suddenly would buckle under me, and I’d fall, but I did not complain about my leg, because there were worse cases. I never bothered mentioning it to the English doctor, because I was better off than some, and I began to walk a little better. Some years later I began to have problems with my back and left leg, and it began, I think, in Belsen camp, where I lay in a very damp place.

Q: Where was this camp that you went to after Bergen-Belsen?

A: This was also Bergen-Belsen. It was a displaced persons camp which was run by the British, and there were army personnel as well as Jewish relief. They are like the Joint Distribution Committee in this country, social workers, welfare workers, doctors. The camp was administered by the military government, and the people in charge of the Jewish people were the British Relief -- social workers. They were very kind, and little by little, some normalcy was restored. We began to look for one another, for missing relatives, tried to make contact with relatives abroad. Illegal aliyah began from Germany into Italy and then to Palestine. Many people were still in hospitals. Some took months to recover. In the meantime, here and there, a brother or sister or a cousin, occasionally a parent and child, very, very rarely there would be some survivors finding one another, or friends. Young people began to date. People began to marry. And people began, little by little, to start to make plans to leave Germany,

Q: Did you meet your husband in…

A: In Germany, but not in Belsen. I left Belsen. The memories were dreadful. I had relatives in this country, although I planned to go to Palestine. I was brought up to believe that this is where we belong.

Q: And you had relatives here?

A: I had an uncle here. And my mother’s death -- as she lay dying, she willed me to live -- she said, “I’m dying. You’re young. You live and go back to Uncle Leo in the U.S.” I had established contact with him already in June of 1945. By fall of 1945, I had an affidavit, sent to Bergen-\Belsen, but there was no immigration from the British zone, and immigration for the United States did not begin till later, in 1946, because the immigration quota was still the pre-war zone, which was very small. It took a special act of Congress to change it. In the meantime I had left Belsen. I had worked for a time doing interpreting from different languages. I knew German very well, I know some Yiddish, and I also know enough English to fill out applications. I couldn’t speak it too well -- I could make myself understood -- but I could read and write it rather well, so I got a job with the Jewish Relief immediately. I left Bergen-Belsen and went to Tzalheim, another very large Jewish D.P. camp near Frankfurt am Main. I stayed there for a while, and then I heard that there were some young people whom I knew in school who lived in the area of Munich. I heard that there were quite a few survivors from Poland in Bavaria, and I hoped that perhaps I’ll find someone who’ll tell me exactly what happened to my father and a boyfriend -- I had a boyfriend in the ghetto. I traveled by train, a broken-down train with no windows, traveled 24 hours instead of the few hours that it takes normally from Frankfurt to Munich. From Munich I took a train and visited all the Jewish D.P. camps. There were big ones near Munich, in and around the Munich area, and in Landsberg am Lech, where I ended up living for a while. I found several friends, and I met my husband there, but he left for the United States in September of 1946. I came to the United States in April of 1948, and we were married in New York in September of 1948. My relatives in this country, my uncle, begged and insisted that I come to the U.S. rather than to Israel.

Q: Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor?

A: I can’t say that it formulated immediately. I’m sure it’s understandable that it took a long time for me to really understand myself, and what I have lived through, properly. And it didn’t come as an accident, because I wanted to know what happened to my people -- not only me, not only where I was and what I saw. I wanted to know why and how my people were destroyed. I became a student of this period. I started to read history, accounts of other survivors, and the accounts of the survivors, although not always very well written, are I think exceptionally valuable, because there were certain things that I found I have in common with them, certain memories, certain pains, certain reactions, which made me feel a little bit that I am not unique. It gave me some comfort to know that other people feel what I feel and share what I feel. History made me understand how it could happen, because I had difficulty understanding how the German people could have done what they did, whether willingly or not, and how the Nazis could have succeeded in what they were doing, and how they could sway a whole nation. It was an invaluable lesson for me in many ways. I also learned that what my father believed was right. He believed that we have to have a country of our own. It came to me with an absolute and final clarity that if we had an Israel, even small, they would not have been able or even willing to kill us all. The Nazis killed us when other methods of getting rid of us failed. Originally they wanted to push us out, but there were no buyers. There was no place to go. It was my father and people like him who believed in the return to Eretz Yisroel. He worked all his life for it. Unfortunately he didn’t go there himself, because he always felt that, first of all, he had that job to do -- to teach other people about Eretz Yisroel. And my mother wasn’t very happy about going. She was not very well, and she was afraid of the climate and the harshness of life in Palestine. It was harsh, indeed, in the ‘20s and ‘30s. So they paid for it with their lives. But I understood there was no other way, that unless we have a country of our own, they’ll do it to us over and over again, that only with a strong Israel can we hope to survive. That doesn’t mean that all of us can and must live there, but the majority have to. And as long as I’m alive, I will do my share. If Israel fails, God forbid, I wouldn’t want to live.

Q: I can understand that. If you can, after your experience during the Holocaust, could you describe your general feeling about human nature, non-Jews and Germans?

A: Well, reading history and learning how they became Nazified, and why, helped me again to see them as human beings, because throughout the war, in the ghetto and in the concentration camps, and even after the war, I failed to look at them and see them as human beings like everybody else. They had instilled in me such a fear. What they had done to us during World War II made me fear that they were somehow outside humanity, and it was only through reading history that I began to understand how it’s possible to Nazify people, to change people to follow leaders and to follow certain ideas. And I realized, of course, the role that Christian anti-Semitism played in Nazism, because without Christian anti-Semitism, they could not have done what they had done in the short 12 years. As far as human nature, I’m sorry to say, though I have met good people -- I mentioned before, two SS women who were capable of an act of kindness -- it has not made me feel that humankind, mankind, is good. I think there is a potential in all of us for good and evil, and somehow or other, most people find it easier to do evil than good. It’s possible to sway people with clever promises and propaganda, especially in difficult times, and especially where Jews are concerned, because we’re history’s scapegoats. We don’t have to teach the Christians to hate Jews. It’s been there for centuries, sometimes more covered, sometimes a little bit more open. And unfortunately, in the Arab world, though they are free of Christians, anti-Semitism, what they call “Zionism” is really anti-Semitism under a different name. So I don’t think that human beings are very good. I’m sorry. There are some good human beings, some good people, and without these good people, it would have been impossible to live. I wouldn’t want to live. These worthwhile people make it possible to live and to hope for a better world. And certainly it’s incumbent upon everybody to try to do their little bit. We’re all just small unimportant, but together we can do something. But to say that I believe that humanity in general is good and beautiful, no, I don’t. I have seen too much horror. I have seen people do such terrible things, and even now, so many years after the war, has killing stopped? Has hatred? Has murder? Have atrocities stopped? They haven’t. Have they stopped hating Jews? They haven’t.

Q: You mentioned that you had done some reading about this period, about the Holocaust. Are there any particular books that come to mind that you could recommend?

A: Many. I would like to say that, unlike some people, in the course of my speaking to different groups on the Holocaust -- colleges and churches and so on, I go many, many places – I meet people who believe that the world is good, and people are good, and we should all love one another. The world is beautiful, but we human beings make it ugly. There is a saying in Latin, “Homo homine luposes,” “We’re like wolves unto one another.’ But I think that we’ve got to work for the betterment of the world, in spite of everything. It isn’t because I believe in the goodness of man that I fight and carry on. It is because I feel that, in spite of everything, we have to persevere, and try, and hope for a better world. I have read so many books, and I’m still reading. I imagine I always will. I will just mention some of the most important ones. First of all, books of history, such as The Destruction of the European Jews, by Raul Hilberg, The War Against the Jews, by Lucy Davidowicz, The Final Solution, by Gerald Reitlinger, The Harvest of Hate, by Leon Poliakov, The Trial of Eichmann. The Judenrat, by Isiah Trunk. To understand the administration of the ghetto, because that’s very, very poorly understood, and it’s a very difficult subject. I think people who are highly knowledgeable and educated ought to tackle it; each ghetto and it’s administration differed. And some very fine memoirs. The best, I think, is Night, by Elie Wiesel, and I recommend it to all my classes. If I have to recommend something for the lay people, I recommend Nora Levin’s The Holocaust, which is written for the lay person. It’s an excellent book. When I talk to younger kids, it’s The Holocaust, edited by Bea Stadler, which is very good for junior and senior high school, and of course, Night. A very beautiful book, which gives hope, which I read from time to time when I despair -- I have personal problems, as well as memories of the Holocaust -- is a book by Dr. Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning. It’s a very profound, very moving, very beautiful book which gives hope in spite of everything. He came out whole, sane, and conducts a full and productive life. He is the director of an institute of psychoanalysis, called logotherapy, in Vienna. There are many, many other books which are very, very good, too, but these are the two written by survivors –Night and Man’s Search for Meaning-- which I feel are a “must” for everybody. I do not recommend books of fiction, because there is a danger of mixing up fact with fiction. I do not approve of the Holocaust movies which were shown on television; most of the time they are not very well done. I resent most of the plays which are based on the Holocaust. There was a horrible play, The King of the Jews, based on the ghetto where I come from, and on a horrible book, The King of the Jews, by Epstein. They don’t know what they’re talking about. There are many other subjects that lend themselves to literature much better than the Holocaust, and I resent the fact that they’re using the Holocaust, the tragedy of the Jewish people, to gain themselves fame and money. It isn’t the money or the fame that I resent, I resent the distortion and the wrong things that are created, the misunderstanding that they create with these works of fiction. I think it’s a subject that ought to be left to historians, psychiatrists and survivors.

Q: Has your belief or practice in Judaism or a Supreme Being changed?

A: Yes, it has. I must admit that even as a child I questioned, although I was brought up to believe in God. I occasionally went to the synagogue. As I said before, women really didn’t have to go frequently, but I went with my school now and then, and we did observe all the holidays at home. My mother believed in God very deeply. Whether my father believed as deeply or not, I don’t know. I do know that he didn’t wish to become a rabbi as all his ancestors did. There was always the oldest son would become a rabbi. My grandmother was the daughter of a rabbi. There were rabbis going back. He was the first one to break the cycle, and when I asked him why, he said he didn’t feel that he wanted to. He didn’t feel the calling. When the war ended in Bergen-Belsen and I witnessed, not only Auschwitz and the other camps, but the utter horror of Bergen-Belsen, the death around me, the utter desolation, the complete neglect by the Allies, the disinterest of the Christians -- not only the brutality of the Germans, but the disinterest of other Christians --and the destruction of my people, the desolation, the abandonment that I felt in Bergen-Belsen, when my head cleared, after I began to recover from typhus and the fever left me, I was wondering, where was God? I was taught to believe that He exists, that He is omnipotent, and where was He? It was very difficult for me in the years after the war to even think about it, because it was too painful, and I was trying to cope with my pain, to live with the memory and the picture of my mother lying there and dying, and myself next to her. And trying to imagine how my father died. And trying to forget, at the same time, in order to be able to live a normal life, because I certainly didn’t want to go crazy. This plagued me for years and years. I was young, and I got well physically quite soon, but I wanted to be able to cope with my pain, with my memory. I was desperately lonely and confused, too. And so I pushed the thought of religion and God as far away as I could, and I would not go to a synagogue. I couldn’t because I felt that it would be blasphemy. I felt that I would probably start screaming, and dissolve in tears. I was married in a Jewish religious ceremony in New York for the simple reason that my husband’s uncle, who has since died, said to us, “Kinder,’ you’re Jewish children. If your parents were alive, you would have had a religious ceremony.” So we did, and I’m glad we did. But I did not join a synagogue until some years later. When our first son was born here in St. Paul, we asked one of the rabbis to come to this hospital. We didn’t want a mohel, because we witnessed a tragic accident in Germany with an old-fashioned mohel, so we asked our physician to do it (the circumcision), and a Reform rabbi came. But somehow or other I did not feel like joining the Reform synagogue. My husband didn’t really care one way or another because he was brought up in a Zionist, secular home. They observed nothing, and he received no Jewish education, which is painful to me. But I did not wish to join the Reform. I didn’t feel that comfortable with Reform. Yet I didn’t want to join anything. Some years later, when my second son was born, we spoke to Rabbi Raskas, and he said, “You ought to belong to a synagogue.” He said, “I don’t care which one. But you’re Jews. You identify as Jews. Join a synagogue.” So I visited the Conservative synagogue, because he was the rabbi there, and I found that I was more comfortable there, because it reminded me of the synagogue that I attended with my school, the one that my parents belonged to, the Progressive synagogue in Lodz. It was between the Orthodox, which is just way too much for me, and the Reform, which is not enough, and I felt more comfortable. To this day, I try not to dwell on God’s role in the Holocaust. I have kind of come to terms. It’s always a pain for me, because I’d like to believe that He exists and that He’s just, as I was taught, and that perhaps I’ve been blaming Him unjustly, because in the end, in the final analysis, men killed, not God. And that’s the best I can do. I attend a synagogue. I love the Hebrew which I learned as a child, which I had almost forgotten, which came back to me. I like to be with Jewish people. I like the Jewish tradition. I like Jewish ethics. I like being a Jew. I was born one and I’ll die one. But I try not to dwell on God that much, and I think it’s fortunate that in the Jewish religion, you can be whatever you want to be. I think that I am more a Jew culturally, and a Zionist, and I love my people. The religious part plays a role, too, but probably the lesser of the two. I’m glad that there is a way for all of us to be Jewish in whatever way we can. And that’s the best I can say. I do the best I can.

Q: Have you maintained contact with other survivors, or do you belong to any survivor organizations?

A: Yes, I have kept contact with other survivors all along, not only during the war, but right after the war. I have found -- sometimes with great difficulty, because we dispersed -- the few of us that were alive. I found everyone who ever meant anything to me. And whenever my husband and I travel, be it to Canada or to Israel, or once we were in Europe – I always look up the people whom I knew, neighbors, teachers if they are alive, some of my classmates, some of my friends. These people, and some of the people that I became very close with in the displaced persons camps in Germany while we were waiting to leave Germany, we meet. We make a special effort to see each other. Every two years we go to Toronto to see my husband’s only live Jewish friend. He went to a Polish school, and there are very few Jews left. We go to see them, not to see the city. To see them. We just made a trip to New York in January, to a friend’s, to a wedding, though it’s an expensive proposition. They are from Poland, and their daughter married. Wherever we go, no matter how busy we are, we look up old friends. I’ll explain why. It is not only personal fondness, which of course is very important, but I look up people who are not even that close to me, because that is all I have left of my community, of my city, of my people. That’s all that is left, that remnant. They represent to me my former self, that which my American friends don’t know. They only know me as I was here, as a grown-up. These people remember me as I was, a child. Some of them knew my parents. I am not a nobody to them, that suddenly arrived in this country as a refugee. I was not born a refugee. I was not born an orphan, and I was not born poverty-stricken. I was a loved child, that had a family and parents, and belonged. These people remember that, and that is very precious to me. They represent the remnant of my people, and of my culture, the culture of Polish Jews, of which I am immensely proud. I don’t know why some Jews in this country, and in the Twin Cities, look down on Eastern European Jews. I have no idea. It’s probably their ignorance. We had a great culture, and a very old one. And so I make an effort to see them. And I believe that’s our duty as survivors, not only to see one another, but to know our children, and to leave a legacy through oral testimony, through informing our children in our conversations and notes and whatever we can do, to submit it to them, because only through us does the past live, and only through us do the six million live. Once we’re gone, they will be completely forgotten. I think this is why I found a kind of purpose in life, outside of marrying and having two sons -- which is one part of my meaning in life. The second part is working for my people, and working to see that what was done will never be done again, with us or any minority, and that is not forgotten.

Q: That brings us to another point, about the work you’re doing in the community. Would you tell us about that?

A: I’ve been working in the Jewish community for many, many years. As soon as my boys were ready for school, even half-days, I began with Hadassah. I come from a family that was no stranger to K’lal Yisroel. I grew up with the feeling that we’re all brothers and sisters. This was said in my house over and over again.   
“Am Yisroel kulanu chavarim.” My parents instilled in me a love for the Jewish people and for Eretz Yisroel which I will carry with me as long as I live, I am very grateful to them, because it made me feel like something in the times when the Nazis did their very best to make me a nothing, and treat me and address me as less than nothing. I always knew, deep within me, that I am a human being, I’m somebody, and this is thanks to my parents. I felt I had the opportunity, once I came to terms at least partially with the pain and the memories, and established a kind of a foothold in this country. At first, it was impossible to do anything. I was busy learning to speak the language better, getting a job, finding a decent apartment, which wasn’t easy in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, and things were very expensive. My husband had great difficulty finding work, because he was a medical student. He wasn’t trained for anything, and he didn’t know English when he came, and he could not go back to medicine. We had to think of practical things, and it was a very slow struggle. I can’t complain. We always had work, because we were willing to do anything. We always had food, and we always had a roof over our heads. And when somebody among my American relatives said that we’re very poor, it surprised me, because I consider people poor when they have nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep. I considered myself not poor at all. I knew I didn’t have a great deal, but I felt I was lucky. I was in a free country. I had an opportunity to rebuild my life, and this is exactly what we did, together. When my husband had a decent job, and my kids were in school, and we lived in a small, but nice, home in a nice area here in Highland Park. I felt that it’s time for me to do something. I did it for me, too. I think mainly, I did it for me, because I don’t like to stay home all the time, and I was bored at home. I don’t like cards, and I don’t like golf. I just don’t like some of the things that other women do. And you can read only so much. Friends of mine invited me to go to a Hadassah meeting. I’m no stranger to Zionism, because I was brought up in a Zionist home. I know Hebrew. I went to a school where, though officially one couldn’t have a political coloring, all the teachers and the whole atmosphere of the school were Zionist. Many of the alumni went to Palestine, and that’s why I have quite a few friends in Israel. Some of them were there from the 1930s. They went as Halutzim. So I realized that this is for me. This is something I can do. And the women were very kind to me, and they helped me. They welcomed me. I quickly became Zionist chairwoman, and then membership vice president, and then other jobs. I became quite active in raising money for the United Jewish Fund and Council, in St. Paul. And then the first Soviet Jews began to arrive. I don’t really know Russian properly. I never learned it. But I heard it at home . My mother was born in Russia. Many of my parents’ friends were from Lithuania or Russia, and spoke Russian. Many of the intelligentsia in Poland were either from Lithuania or Galicia. A lot of Russian was spoken in my house. And when I was in the concentration camp with prisoners of war -- especially the one near Breslau -- there were a lot of Russian POW’s . There was a great similarity in the languages that they have, as well as Czech and Slovak -- Slovak roots. And since I am very good with languages, I can detect the root, and I can learn the language very quickly. I offered myself as a volunteer, remembering that the Jewish community in St. Paul was not overly organized or interested in us when we began to arrive from Germany -- outside, of course, of the Jewish Family Service. The community was not too involved on an individual basis. I felt that I should do what I can, not to repeat the error, because it hurt us very badly, that the American Jews in St. Paul were not overly interested in us. In fact, many of them looked down on us as “immigrants,” and “survivors,” and have-nots. I determined that I’ll do what I can to improve the situation. I began to visit. I’d call up. I’d say I was an immigrant myself, and I could speak a broken Russian, and understand it fairly well, and I speak Yiddish, so let’s just get acquainted. Maybe I can help you, maybe I can just inform you about things, and so on. And pretty soon there was a group of Jewish Women, through the Council of Jewish women, and we began to teach them, help in school, with continuing education for adults. The teacher was overwhelmed with work with other refugees, as well as Soviet Jews, and two of us came in every day. I became a co-chairperson. It lead me to a closer relationship with the Soviet Jews. Then we formed a resettlement committee, and I was one of the first members. Then I became very involved with the Jewish Family Service, eventually becoming not only a board member, but one of the directors. I was lead to it, through my interest in the Jewish community, and in the Soviet Jews in particular. I was approached by the Jewish Community Center sometime early in 1978, to work with the Soviet Jews here at the Jewish Community Center, to do cultural programming -- acculturation, both into the American fabric of life, and into the Jewish community. And this is what I have been doing ever since. It was my experience as an immigrant myself, facing a community that was not unfriendly, but not particularly interested, that lead me to my work with the Soviet Jews. And during the commemoration of the holocaust, the Yom Hashoah, I usually speak to the Soviet Jews, because to my surprise, I found out that they know only of the destruction of the European Jews in generalities. Then again, by reading history from the Jewish point of view, not the official Russian point of view, I realize that the Soviets kept much of the information away from the Soviet Jews and from the rest of the Russian people. They really don’t want the emphasis to be placed on the destruction of the Jews. They want to denjgrate the Jewish catastrophe and Jewish suffering, and present it as the suffering of all Russian people. The same is done in other countries, like Poland. First they tried to kill us. Then they tried to tell us that nobody killed us. And so I can tell the Soviet Jews in much greater detail what happened under the Nazis than what they have been permitted to know. I enjoy working with them, because I find them very warm, gregarious people, and because they are Jews, although their Judaism has been forbidden to them, and they are deeply assimilated. I feel the community has a job. We’ve done a lot, but we still have a great deal to do in order to make these people feel part of the Jewish people.

Q: I can see where that would be a very important thing to be involved in.

A: It makes me feel that I’m doing something for myself. All these things that I just mentioned, I don’t do it because I’m on a kind of crusade. Somebody accused me once -- a crusade. I’m not. I’ve done these things totally without premeditation. They came from the depths of my being. I felt compelled to do them. I think my primary motivation was that I wanted to do it, because it did something for me. It made me feel that I am not worthless, that I’m doing, in a very small way, something that is constructive.

Q: Yes, I would say that would be so. I can understand why you would want to do that,

Q: Because of that, it makes me feel that perhaps the fact that I have survived has some meaning, that the gift of survival which was granted so randomly -- it was pure chance that one survived -- that perhaps I have used those years, that were given to me as a gift, to a good purpose.

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