United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Regina Laks Gelb
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Regina Laks Gelb, conducted by Joan Ringelheim on February 20, 2001 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Hallandale, FL and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

REGINA LAKS GELB
February 20, 2001

Q: Good morning.

A: Good morning.

Q: It's lovely to see you here this morning.

A: Well, I'm delighted that you came and made this long trip. [Laughs]

Q: Can you start out by just giving me the name that you were born with and the name that you live with now, please?

A: Okay, my real, official, legal name is Regina born Laks. I also went by the name of Renia throughout my life, so actually I'm still being called Renia, but if you want to find the legal me, you will find it always under Regina, whether it's school or professional life or however or legal or - everything is Regina. My present name is Gelb; I'm married to Victor Gelb, so I basically never use my, my maiden name, which some people did retain. I did not, so my name is really now Regina Gelb.

Q: And when were you born and where?

A: I was born December 16th, 1929 in a place called Wierzbnik, which you could not find anymore on the map now because it has been joint to another town called Starachowice and renamed. It was basically incorporated. And if I know history of the town, the incorporation - the towns were joined in 1931, -9, just before the war, so that first these towns were adjacent basically, one was sort of a factory town and the other was the bedroom town. Wierzbnik was the bedroom town and the Jewish community really resided in Wierzbnik rather than Starachowice. And I was born in Wierzbnik and, as I said before, if you want to find it on the map, you will not. You will only have to look for the name Starachowice, so that's where it is and it is central Poland, south of Warsaw about two hours by car.

[Phone interruption.]

Q: I want you to do me a favor for a second.

A: Yes.

Q: I want you to close your eyes for a minute and think about what comes to your - then you can open them again - what comes to mind when you first think about your childhood? What's the picture that you get in your head about your childhood?

A: Could I open my eyes now?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, basically a very carefree life, because I was a young child, and the second is that I was sort of privileged, more than my sisters were privileged by virtue of being the youngest. I was sort of the baby in the family. As you know, the third one in line sometimes gets mistreated by the older ones, not that I was, but I certainly was spoiled by my parents because I was what you call the baby in the family, and anything around the idea of being privileged is not, does not include being spoiled; it's just being singled out for being special, it's more or less. I was forever being told I was smart and I was this and that and it actually served me very well in later years during the hard times because I always had the idea that I really could do certain things because I was always told, "Well you're was smart and you do well in school." And you… So that later on I could rely on this idea that was lodged in my head, which, well, today, I think they have all the euphemisms- self-whatever it's called today, self-appreciation, or whatever, the fact remains that because I was a) singled out by my parents for being a very good child and smart child and for being given this, this, impetus to build on that, I think I more or less relied on it in later years, I mean, you know, during the hard times, saying, well, I probably could do it because I was told that I really could do it, so let me just do it. And that's probably the single most important aspect of my memory of what I brought out of that, of my childhood, out of my childhood.

Q: Do you think that was true for your two older sisters, Chris and Hania?

A: Well, I really don't know. I couldn't tell you for sure for the reason that, you know, Hania was always the, what you call the brilliant one in the family and she was out of town, in a special high school for the gifted and whatever, and Krysia was the gorgeous, the gorgeous, the beauty of the family, you know, and I had no assets, you know, I had no such things to prove. So this is another aspect of it, you know, that Hania was always spoken of the genius of the family, which she really was absolutely, and Krysia was really strikingly beautiful, I mean, she wasn't just pretty, she was strikingly beautiful. And I'm always saying this, I'm repeating it forever because it's a fact, if Mother was walking, let's say, in the street with Krysia, with Chris, and people would stop and everybody would say "Oh, what a beauty!" And Mother said, "You can't say that because she would get it into her head that she's so beautiful, she wouldn't have to make an effort in life." But the fact remains that, you know, I always felt well, if my parents say I'm smart, I must be smart or whatever, because there was nothing to be said about me. I wasn't very, exactly very pretty and I don't think I was a genius, so… And I had these teeth, you know, my teeth were uneven sort of, and I was skinny, so that I didn't present anything so outstanding as to be pegged one way or another. However, you see, whether this was an excuse that I took the fact that I was supposed to be smart, or whatever, I really built on that idea. I absorbed it and I lived with it and I built on it, so for better or worse, it really, it really did come in handy in later years.

Q: Were you close with both of your parents?

A: Very, we were an extremely close family, and not just with my parents, but with my mother's side of the family, because they lived very near, within twenty - whether it's twenty miles or twenty kilometers, I don't know. Grandmother lived in Ostrowiec, which is a town very near. Father's family came from Silesia from Sosnowiec, and that was further, much further out, was western Poland; whereas Starachowice and Ostrowiec were in central Poland, because Mother's family came from Sandomierz, which is slightly to the south of Ostrowiec and Starachowice, so basically Grandma and my mother's family lived within the area right, you know, how far back the family went, I don't know, but I do know Mother was born in Sandomierz, and subsequently the family lived in Ostrowiec and my mother was married in Ostrowiec. In fact, after the war, when I went to visit Ostrowiec - Mother used to say that she was married on the balcony - and when I went back to Ostrowiec to look at it, of course, the houses were during Communist time in Poland and the building was extremely had the dilapidated look, you know. The outside walls were sort of shabby and peeling but the balcony was there, it was a corner balcony and Mother said they put the huppah out there, because, you know, my grandfather was religious, so that, I imagine, to satisfy his requirements, the huppah was outside on the balcony, and so I found, yes, that was interesting, the building is still there.

Q: What was your father like and what did he do?

A: My father was, well, you know, I shouldn't be saying that, but you know they describe German Jews as *Jekes*. My father was basically from Silesia and brought up, under the, under, you know, western Poland was occupied by Germany. You know, Poland was partitioned in the 18th century, so that the western part of Poland was taken over by the Germans, the south was taken over by Austro-Hungary - Austria, actually - and the rest was taken out by Russia. Now, my mother happened to come from the Russian quote-unquote zone. It's not a zone, but you know, Russian sphere of influence; whereas my father, having been born in Sosnowiec and grown up in Silesia, spoke German language, went to German schools and really was this very organized, straight, very precise type of man, which they describe as a *Jeke*, you know, whereas, you know, this is in no way derogatory, never.. What I meant to say that he was really very much German, rather than Polish sort of thing, but of course he spoke Polish beautifully. And he was an engineer…

Q: Let me ask you something…

A: Yes.

Q: …about his personality.

A: Yes.

Q: Was he a man filled with humor?

A: Yes.

Q: Was he very serious?

A: No, he was serious but, you know, there was a lot of singing. I remember that. There was a lot of singing going on in the house all the time. In fact, I understand that my - whether my mother only or both parents participated in - oh, you know, it wasn't what you call official, big theatre, but there were the amateur groups, because I know my mother's brother, my uncle Morris - Moish - he was very much involved in amateur theatrical group and I know parents had a little contact with that, but what I do know for an absolute fact is that my father always sung in the house, I mean, he loved Lehar. So, when I hear "The Merry Widow", I always, but forever, associate it with my father because all certain arias from "The Merry Widow" were his absolute favorite. You could always hear him sing, and my mother, too. Whether this is different now because there are radios and televisions and all this and there isn't much talking at home or singing whatever, maybe people sing in the shower, I don't know, but I do know that there was just singing, as you walked around the house or whatever, you were singing and so my father was one of these who really kept on singing and not for any audience; for himself. Mother, too.

Q: I understand that at least Krysia and, I don't know, maybe Hania and you also sang with…

A: Oh, yes, yes, yes, we did.

Q: …with them.

A: Yes, because, you see, singing was so natural in those days. As I said, you didn't rely on any outside - I mean, a circus came to town, you know, or something like that - but there was never what you call, there was never a regular theater or there was never an opera. It was a small town, you see, so that basically people just organized their own entertainment and I was too young to really know, to have even gone if there was one. I would never have gone. In fact, I remember that even to go to the movies, we were, you know, the laws were so strict, a child could not go to movies unless it was a Shirley Temple movie or something. I remember going to Shirley Temple movies, but I never ever went to the movies otherwise because they wouldn't have let me in. That was, yes, and, this is why - as I said, there was no official theater or, but there was entertainment provided by people who lived there and I, of course, our family being Jewish, in this particular respect, you should not associate our Jewish family with the religious part of town because that was a little frowned upon, you know. We lived a more secular - not more - we did live a secular life; whereas the religious Jews in town lived a totally different life, as you could see it even in New York these days, I mean, you go to Williamsburg, or you go to Eastern

Parkway where the Lubavitch live, and you immediately see that, if you belong to a reformed synagogue as we do, it really is not the way we lived life, and we still could feel as Jewish as they do and I'm sure as deeply identified with "Jewishness" but not necessarily religious "Jewishness" to the extent, because we are not observant and our home - at home in Poland - my grandmother was very religious so in order for her to come and visit, Mother had to keep a kosher home, but we were not necessarily kosher in any strict sense of the word.

Q: So even though you were a child…

A: Yes.

Q: How did you understand - I know that you went to your Grandma because she was very concerned that you weren't getting a proper Jewish education.

A: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: But was, did your father come from a more secular home and is that why your home was so secular?

A: I think so, I really couldn't tell you, I really truly couldn't tell you. All I know is that Grandmother basically, the grandmother herself did not come from a religious family, or maybe she did, because she was very well educated. And for a 19th century woman to know French and German and be fluent in languages is sort of unusual. She came from a good family. But she married my grandfather, who was very religious, and then she wore a wig. Yes, so I have one picture, which I have given to the Museum, where there's a family picture with Grandma in the middle, and you could see that she is wearing a *sheitel* and whether she did it because… Maybe it was an arranged marriage. I mean, I really don't know. This is all speculation, but I do say that I have never known my grandfather, but I was very close to my grandmother. And she used to invite one child at the time, in the summer, to spend a week with her. So, she did the *Baruch Atah* (ph) at the breakfast and she taught us how to pray at night but, you know, she felt she needed to supplement what was missing in our education because we - I, personally - went to public school, Polish public school, and I also went to the Tarbut Hebrew school after school, which was a Zionist organized - Mother was, you know, president of WIZO, and through her effort the Tarbut was organized. In fact, my sister Hania, Anna, reminded me that the teacher who was hired to run the Hebrew school in our town, a Mr. Wopata (ph), was brought over by my mother, and he lived in our apartment, in our home, until they found lodgings for him. So, you see, that in no way it disparages the religious group. It's just that there was a segment of population in Starachowice - Wierzbnik, meaning Wierzbnik because we are talking before the war - there was a segment of the population which was more, it was secular; not detached from Judaism, but detached from the strict observance, because, you know, the religious group, the Hassidim, had their own schools for girls, Beth Jacob, and of course they had the *heder* - the *heder,* that goes without saying. There

was a *heder*, and there was a girl. None of us went to any of these schools, you see, so I went to Polish public school and to the Hebrew Tarbut after, you know, after my school was out, after my Polish school was out. So it didn't separate us from the Jewish population, but we were not part of that other life.

Q: Was there a good percentage of the Jewish population who were more like you than were religious, or was it a really tiny group? Do you know?

A: Really, I couldn't tell you, but I do know a lot of people on my parents level who were, in fact some of them were survivors and I've kept in touch with them, and so there were, you know, they were sort of what they used to call "intelligentia", which is sort of, I don't know. I use the expression for the lack of better description because I don't mean in any way to show this group to be superior to the other group. It's just that this was the less observant group, no less religious, and the fact that my mother was so extremely, extremely devoted to the cause of creating, you know, the Zionist movement, the... helping along the pioneers who had gone to Israel, excuse me, to Palestine in those days.

Q: What was she like? What kind of woman…?

A: Very vivacious, extremely vivacious, quick moving, quick thinking and lively, lively, very lively. Father was lively, too, but in a more serious way. Mother was very vivacious and the…well, her outstanding characteristic was that she was really very…altruistic isn't the word, she was very concerned with others. She always did for others, one way or another, she did for others, you know. There was a - I remember there was a flood, somewhere in Poland, I really don't know, but I do remember that there was money being collected in the community - not Jewish community - for the cause, to help the flood victims. And I remember she made me a boat out of cardboard, because we went through the streets for donations, and I wore that boat, now, I don't know where the flood was and I don't know how that was all organized. I just remember walking around with this, like a ship made out of cardboard with _____, you know, and people would put in coins and that was the collection, so in retrospect when I think about it, and you know, all this idea of the Jewish population living parallel lives with the Polish populations but not mingling doesn't always hold true, because I'm sure this was not a Jewish flood, and I still don't know where the flood was, but I do distinctly remember as a child walking around with this boat, where people, it was like on a ribbon, you know, I had it attached on a ribbon, and people would put in money for the flood victims. So you see, to me, that is, this is already an indication that people who claim that there was absolutely no connection between the Christian Poles and the Jewish Poles doesn't hold true because, in our personal lives, I know for a fact that we were very close to Christians, to Christian families, some of whom saved our lives later on, but that's another story. But when we talk about the flood, this is a general, a more general overview of things, and much as there was anti-Semitism on another kind of level, but there had to be coexistence, that, you know, supplied some kind of a living arrangement if nothing else, so… but of course we got off the subject, I don't know how, we did…

Q: That's okay. Your father was a forestry engineer is that correct?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Did you know what he was doing?

A: No, I just knew that he - the first time I heard the word 'logarithm', was that he was working with logarithms. I don't know if it was a machine, but anyhow I found that it was the figuration, not a figuration, assessments of forestry, because he used to travel to eastern parts of Poland, where there were heavy forests, virgin forests and he would assess, you know, he would assess the forest for the lumber industry and that was engineering and - I - it was engineering for which there was another Polish word, but I don't know the English word, but that was his occupation. He was, as I told you, he was educated in the German language and I imagine German in those days carried a heavy weight in the scientific field, so he, I'm sure he had an easy life, easy time of it, you know.

Q: Was he away a lot?

A: What?

Q: Was he away from home a great deal, do you remember?

A: No, no, those were short trips, because, you know, he was basically employed by, in town. There was a sawmill owned by Jews, I think they were, I never knew, but I think they were from Vienna, or somewhere but the name was Heller because everybody talked about the Heller sawmill. In fact, Hania reminded me that subsequently when the sawmill was taken over by the Germans, there were Jews from our town who did slave labor in the sawmill which somehow or other I didn't exactly, you know… I only remember the factory, the munitions factory, in relation to the labor camps, because I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself, but I always think of war production in the munitions factory, but basically the sawmill was also a war production, if you really want to put it in it's proper perspective, I mean, they certainly weren't building, doing lumber for Jews to build houses or anything like that, so that goes without saying.

Q: Were you wealthy?

A: No, but we were well to do, but not until just before the war. That was, you know, during the depression, the Heller's I think sold it, or whatever it was, they sold it or they gave it up, I don't know, but I know that Father lost the position and then we had very hard times but so did everybody else.

Q: So, how, when you say you were well to do, what, how does that manifest itself?

A: Well I mean, if you look at the old pictures, and you they traveled to the Baltic sea to the Sopot. My parents have a lot of pictures from, had a lot of pictures from that. I also know that Mother had severe arthritis and she used to go for cure, for six-week cure and that was another very wonderful experience because she always took at least one of us. And I still have pictures that were sent to us from Palestine, from Israel, from friends of Mother's who had those pictures from Sopot and had pictures from Busko Zdroj which was that, that, no, spa and I remember going with Mother. In other words, what happened is one kid went to Grandma and two kids went with Mother to Busko Zdroj and the six weeks that Mother had treatments there, of course, generally weakened her a lot. So, when we would come back, we would go in the country, you know, on a farm, on somebody's farm and we would stay a week so Mother could recover, and I imagine that you couldn't well afford, if you couldn't afford to go to Busko Zdroj every year. In fact, you know, during the war when everything was closed off for Jews, meaning we couldn't travel, we couldn't go to school and such and such, of course, Mother could not go, I mean, not that we could afford it, but you know, but I'm saying that because she no longer was able to go for her treatments, which was sulfur by the way, sulfur baths, and she suffered terribly, she… her arthritis was much worse because, of course, she, she had no way of curing, I mean not curing, you don't cure arthritis, but alleviating the pain. And Busko Zdroj was a very interesting place for a child because the baths were within a park, you see. It was, of course, you could not, this was not a public park, and they had a band shell and they had music - opera, arias - and to this day when I hear Tosca, I remember sitting in Busko Zdroj in front of the band shell listening to the music, yes, it was very nice. And, and we stayed in a hotel, which was very nearby, because you don't need to cross the road, whatever, street, to go into the park for the baths, and I used to go and object to the smell because, you know, sulfur smells like rotten eggs. And I would go with mother and I would hear the sound when they set up - they used to call it mud, you know, those were mud baths basically, so you would - they would turn - there was always an attendant and then I sat out in a like vestibule type, or whatever it was, but I wasn't inside, but I would hear when the sound came out "bloto" - that means mud, mud was coming - and you know, and I know what they did. The person would be, Mother would be in a bathtub, the mud would fill it, they would put a wooden crate over the bathtub, and throw a sheet over it, so that she was submerged in that hot sulfur mud, after which the attendant would take her for a shower and then they would massage her, whatever, on the table like, then we would go home - she had to go to bed. Those were crude, very heavy-handed treatments, but they were good.

Q: They helped her?

A: Yes, because during the war she was really sick. She couldn't go anymore, you know, since Busko was very near Kielce and that required traveling, and there was no traveling for Jews.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

Q: I want to get, before we get to the war period, I wanted to ask you, up until 1939, what is your relationship with your sisters? You are…?

A: I'll tell you right away, from a viewpoint of the family type, they really liked me a lot, but I was never included. This is…

Q: [Laughs.]

A: This is… I probably should now refer back to what I started at the beginning, that my parents, sort of, I always felt my parents took pity on me. So they said, "Oh, you're smarter than everybody," and such, true or false. I mean, I took it for the truth, but the fact remains that I wasn't to bother, to bother, to bother them, because they were already older. I was just to, to be around my parents. So, if you went somewhere, my parents took me along. If they went somewhere, you know, I tagged along. And I even have a picture somebody sent me from Connecticut. His parents had a New Year's Eve party and you can see my parents and his parents, some other people and there's wine on the table, and in the middle of everything, I'm the only kid sitting there. I'm a little kid, a scrawny, little kid, meaning it really reinforces my memory that I tagged along, even though whether I enjoyed it or not, I couldn't say, but I do know that I was the special child, so to say, so they took me everywhere, but of course the truth was that they had to take me. [Laughs.]

Q: You know, it's interesting because Chris is only two years older than you.

A: Right, yes.

Q: But there was - you were the kid to her.

A: Yes. The reason is, I think that Chris is, first of all she is the middle child, you know. She was always very independent, Krysia was always very independent, you know, hands on, this and that. I was sort of a kid type of, that you had to look after. So Chris - maybe she felt I was a burden, if she wanted to go and have some friends, have some good times with her friends, why would she bother looking after the kid, if I fell or if I didn't fall of whatever? You know, but of course, we loved each other. As you very well know, we are the closest family that there is, that there ever was, and that wasn't even because we went through the war together, that we were bound by common horrible experience. But because the family was such, that we really were one, even though - and you know, I never felt slighted, you know. I just knew that, if I'm going to have a good time, it's going to be with my parents or with my own peers but certainly not with Chris and Miles, and that was even true during the war, not, why did I say? Miles, I didn't say Miles, I didn't mean Miles. I meant Chris and Hania. That was even true during the war when the refugees from Lodz were sent in. You know, there was a group of Jews sent into our ghetto. And immediately the quote "golden youth of Lodz" ended up in the circle of

Hania and Chris. And they would read poetry, and Byron, Lord Byron in translation and all this. I sat in the same room, but certainly not within the circle. I heard it, I was a non-participant observer. I was somewhere in the room, but I was not of the group, I was with the group, you see? But that did not in any way preclude the terrific devotion that my sister had shown me, because I know for a fact there were instances during the war that I was a goner, and had it not been for them, I would never ever have survived. So, you see, when push came to shove, and of course - but even without that, you know, you study kids in the family…you know, some kids… Maybe they felt my that parents protected me, so they didn't need to bother.

Q: Let me just ask you a question. Chris - when I interviewed Chris - she mentioned something about you, that she remembered, you as a child, and I wonder if you remembered the same thing. She said you would always pick up new words constantly and use them immediately, often inappropriately, sometimes not… Do you recall that?

A: Yes, yes. Absolutely, I mean this was really, almost an obsession. This is how I became a translator, because it's so easy for me to pick up words and think words. And when I came to America, I had no knowledge of English, but having known some French and Latin before and having fooled around with these big words - you see, Polish vocabulary contains a lot of words out of Latin, you know - so later on, I - because I really was crazy about words as a child, and of course quite often I used to misuse them, you know, misuse them, but I still used them, wrong or right or whatever; I stuck them in wherever I could. And this is why I had such an easy time with English, because it was really a matter of hearing the pronunciation and learning spelling. But if I read it to myself quietly, I could make out the text, because, you see, I have found the similarities with the other languages, and the fact that somehow or other, my mind was oriented to words, whatever. So that is true, she is absolutely right.

Q: So, as you're growing up - now, you're born in '29, so when the Nazis take over in Germany…

A: I'm 10 years old, no, not in Germany…

Q: …No, '33 - you're much younger.

A: Yeah.

Q: So, between '33 and '39, do you hear things - I know towards the end of '39, there are German Jews that come into your area, right?

A: Yes.

Q: So, do you begin to experience… sense something, even if you don't know what's happening?

A: Well, I sensed something, but I've said it so often now, and it truly is a fact, I really didn't know very much, I don't really know, and I keep saying it, I mean, it's repetition now until you can't take it anymore, but the fact is I don't know what my parents knew and when they knew it. And I certainly knew that times were rough; I knew that something was happening in Germany. But I also knew that there was a famine in China, you know, so - because there was a famine in China in the 30s, I think - so that I knew that there was famine in China and I knew there was something going on in Germany, but how that related to my personal life or to us, it was sort of far-fetched. I did begin, during the economic times, I did begin to feel certain pressures, and I did begin to feel certain anti-Semitic, well, direct anti-Semitic references to who we were, but that was not on any scale - because as a child, you know, a child can call you a Jew and he can call you baldy and he can call you any kind rotten name, and if you can rationalize to yourself within that context, you know how kids fight, and… So, I was aware of a certain change in atmosphere in Poland because I do know now from studying history that there was a wave of anti-Semitism that was extremely, to the naked eye, it was easy to see, because, you know, when I translated - I was working on Korchuk (ph) a lot, Korchuk's writing, and I translated his works - I realized that his only, the only reason for his being removed from the position of the good doctor, who read poetry and talked about child upbringing on the radio in the 30s, that he was removed from that position only because of anti-Semitism. He was a very progressive educator, as you know, and a very enlightened man and he was a Jew, of course, by birth, but he was very Polish in his upbringing and outlook, not Christian, but Polish, and he brought all these new ideas to Poland, because he studied in England, you know, and he brought the new ideas, the new approach to child upbringing, because he also wrote stories for children, you know. He wrote books about children and books for children. And he would read and they would call him the "old doctor", and I know, I used to listen to the old doctor, but then I didn't hear the old doctor. In those days, I didn't know, but I now know, that the program - that he was removed from the radio program only because he was Jew, because the anti-Semitic, the wave of anti-Semitism has progressed to the point where, toward the outbreak of the war, it was really almost palpable. And all this happened, you know, after Pilsudski died, Marshall Pilsudski, who died in 1935, had the idea of a federal, federalist state, Poland being, including minorities and such. And after he died - of course all this I know now from studying history - that those who opposed him so strenuously were of the national right-wing party, and they came into prominence in the late 30s, so that the wave of anti-Semitism, which actually was given freer reign, could basically come to the fore. You know, they, maybe they weren't encouraged, but they weren't stopped.

Q: So, though you know this now…

A: Yes.

Q: …from reading the history, did you experience the change as being that significant?

A: I experienced - you know, I have spoken about this several times. I have experienced a few, a few such - well, it was an incident or it was rather a sort of a one-two-three kind of a happening. For example, I had - I went to school. I don't know if it was 1938 or '39, first day of school, and I had a new teacher.

Q: But this was before the war?

A: Before the war, probably it was 19- No, I didn't go to school in 1939 because September is when the war broke out. So, it had to be 1938. And I went to school and this was a male teacher. And he said, "I would like every child to stand up, and tell me his name," you know, so that he could acquaint himself. When I stood up, and I said, "My name is Regina Laks," he looked up at me and said, "Your name is not Regina. You go home to your mother and tell her that your name is Rivka." (ph) Well, I was so hurt by it, I never forgot it. I always talk about it, always, always, because I was so very hurt by it. Apparently, I have already been feeling other things around me, but they were not as personal, in front of a class, with brand new kids. That was one incident that remained with me for a life, for the life, and another was a new family came to live in my neighborhood, and I got very friendly with a girl - her name was Kaya (ph), very lovely, lovely. They were educated people, and we used to play a lot. She used to come to my house; I used to go to her house. And then around Passover, and I don't know what year that was. that could have been maybe 1937, because I was a little kid yet, maybe. Anyhow, so I said, "Why don't we go home and play in my house." And she said, "No, I can't go to play in your house. My mother said not to go because it's Passover and the Jews take blood from the children for Passover." You see, that was a child who probably wasn't anymore than 7 or 8 years old. So, those two very personal, very personal, encounters stayed with me for a lifetime. But, as I was saying, I still felt part of the environment that I grew up in. I never felt that the Christians were against me or that I was against them. I could only see the difference between the Hassidim who didn't mix at all and didn't want to mix, and the Polish population. But as far as I was concerned, I really felt very much at home and, you know, we spoke Polish only at home. My parents knew Yiddish and spoke it to each other if they didn't want us to know. Of course, my father spoke German very well, and Mother spoke Russian by virtue of growing up in, under the Russian sphere of influence. But aside from that, Polish was the language. And, in fact, a lot of Christians were surprised that we spoke without an accent which is probably - with a subtext, with a hidden subtext, you know, when you got a compliment, "Oh, my goodness, you speak Polish so well!" Of course, there was a subtext, not that I knew it then but I know it now. In other words, I was not supposed to speak Polish so well and without an accent by virtue of being Jewish. But really that didn't bother me in the sense, in any way. I took it as a compliment; I took it as a fact, you see, and I've never felt in any way angry at the Poles or blaming them or, or I never, any animosity. I mean, they were people to me, dear people, and those especially who were very dear to my parents were very dear to us. And I certainly had wonderful friends among the Christian children, so that, that issue never came up. And when those two incidents came,

I took them as separate and detached from the bigger picture, you know, it was on a smaller scale, kids' stuff

Q: But let me - can I probe this just a little bit?

A: Yes.

Q: What was it, that your feelings were, when you - was it humiliation? Was it anger, when the teacher said your name is Rivka what…?

A: Very humiliated, I was not angry. I was… He put me to shame, because my name really was not Rivka. It so happens, if you want to, you know, give a child a Jewish name, it is Rivka - because Regina is really Rivka - but I was never, in Tarbut, in the Hebrew school, I had the name Regina then was Rivka and, but I was never ever - I was either Regina or Renia, I was never Rivka and to be singled out like this, I don't know. I - school was very dear to me always, and school was everything to me, and I was always good in school, so I felt always elevated and wonderful about the school experience. And this was a very harsh and very humiliating kind of experience because I by then knew what it was that he was trying to say. He didn't care about me. He perhaps wanted to imply that I was camouflaging my Jewishness. Because you see, I did not go to the Jewish school; I went to the public school. And there weren't too many of us, but there were kids, most certainly. So, I sort of felt that I was being humiliated for no reason, and not because I could analyze it in depth. It's just that I knew that Rivka wasn't my name. Regina - if you looked, as I said at the beginning, if you looked at any kind of my legal papers or otherwise, records or whatever, it's always Regina, not Renia, and its not Rivka, it's really Regina - so that this was my name, I was born and given this name. So that, that was a double humiliation, as if I were really telling a lie or something on one hand, or maybe I was trying to camouflage something which was not the case.

Q: Were there other Jewish kids in the class?

A: Oh yes, certainly, yes, children, absolutely

Q: Did he do the same thing to them?

A: Not in this particular instance. I don't know, he must have, I don't know, just me.

Q: And what did the other kids do when he said that? Did they do any- Did they laugh, did they…? Nothing?

A: No, and I went home and I told Mother. I said, "He told me to tell you that this is not my name." Mother says, "Don't worry about it." And what was done about it, I don't know.

Q: Did he ever call you that name again?

A: No, no, he had to call me Regina because that was in the record. But Mother did feel the humiliation I suffered and she said, "Ah, doesn't matter, it's not a big deal," whatever it was, but I never forgot it. So, it absolutely stayed with me all these years and, you know, Chris and Hania, I don't even know if they know about it, in the sense of… I had a few incidents in my life, including the German, the war. There were certain little incidents that hurt so much, that were totally insignificant on a larger scale, but somehow, you know, I guess it's how you, I don't know, I don't know what is important to you in life or whatever.

Q: Right, it's hard to know what it is that _____.

A: Yes, but those, yeah, those two things I never forgot, the one with the Rivka and with the Jews, blood for the matzos.

Q: So, what did you say to that little girl when she said this to you?

A: No, nothing!

Q: Nothing?

A: Nothing, I said, "No, you don't want to come? That's fine. You don't want to come." So, she said, "Okay, you come after the holidays."

Q: So, did you go home and tell your parents that she said this to you?

A: Yes.

Q: And what did they say?

A: They said nothing, "You don't even have to play with her because she's new." You know, so they said, "Well, you know she's new." You see, this is the whole point. Our parents, especially with regards to me - I cannot speak for Chris and I cannot speak for Anna, Hania, I cannot speak for them - because I was really truly protected. Anything that ever happened was somehow smoothed over. "Oh, she said that she's new here. Anyhow, you don't have to play with her." You know, "He told you that your name is like this? You know that's not true, you know you have your own name and that's what it is." So that, there, things were always smoothed over in a way where they shouldn't bother me, but some of course did bother me and they stayed with me obviously.

Q: Do you remember, do you remember people coming into your parents' house, adults, before, right before the war, where there was people talking about what might be happening? Not that you participated in it, but did you ever experience people coming in and there being a certain kind of tension in the house, even though you couldn't…?

A: Well, I know my parents were very sociable. They always had company and such, but I really don't remember, no, I don't remember. As I said, I do, did know something going on with the German Jews and I knew there was famine in China. I knew that, but this, those were such big issues and I was not ever invited to share this kind of conversation, you know, so I guess between that and being protected, it really ended up by my being totally oblivious to the realities of the late 30s.

Q: I thought maybe you would be sitting outside of a conversation…

A: Well, I would, I would listen, yes, but you know, somehow it sort of went in and out, you know.

Q: Okay. So then September 1939 comes, yeah, September 1939. And this must be a huge shock. All of a sudden…

A: Yeah, the Germans, yeah, yeah. That was, I mean, it was not a shock, because they were already talking about the war, there's gonna be a war, but of course the larger part of it I really didn't know. I just knew that the Germans were invading and there were anti-aircraft trenches being dug and all this thing - the youth, mobilize the youth to dig the trenches. I wasn't invited.

Q: [Laughs.] You were too young.

A: So, I wasn't invited, but I do know there is going to be a war. Why the Germans were planning on a war, I didn't know. I didn't know anything except for the fact that, when, when, Father was, what you call, they had civilians for anti-aircraft, what you call… a civilian force for alert, you know, so my father was a captain for the block, or whatever you call it. And he used to go to briefings to say when, you know, and then the sirens would wail. So, Father went to briefing and he came home and he said there's going to be a, a bombardment and they are going to be bombarding Starachowice because there is this factory here, this munitions factory, and the town is ordered to evacuate. You see, so then I knew the war was on. Now, that had to be very early September. The war broke out on the first, on the western part, so maybe this was the fourth or fifth or something like this, but first week of the war. And we were told to evacuate, I mean, not were told - everybody, all the precinct captains spread the word, and everybody was to head for the forest. There were woods, you know, surrounding the area. So, we did as told and everybody was going toward the forest. And Mother made sure that we got dressed very well, that we wore the best…this always amazes, amuses me because this was around the holidays, you know, the Jewish holidays. I got a pair of brand new shoes, so Mother says, "It's the best thing to do is to wear the best clothes and to have enough, because God knows when we'll come back and you might as well have the good stuff rather than the old stuff, right?" So, I put on a pair of brand new shoes which were never broken in, and after, later on when we came back, I had blisters on the feet. [Laughs.] Anyhow, we had

to get dressed in more than one thing because, in case, when we come back and there's no house left, we had to have something. This was the hottest September on record. So, we ended up in the woods outside…

Q: But how many…?

A: I had a few layers of clothes and the new shoes, brand new shoes, which I never wore. I was going to wear them for the holidays. So that we ended up in the woods.

Q: Did you take, I understand that you all carried something of value from the house. Is that right?

A: Yes, right, not so much of value. Mother took sugar, yes, and I remember she had the salami kind of a thing she took there, because we did not know where we were going or what we'll be doing, and whatever you could wear, that's the good stuff, you wore.

Q: Did you take something special of your own?

A: I forgot, that, maybe we did, maybe, maybe…could be that we did.

Q: No, no, no, I mean you.

A: Personally?

Q: A toy, a doll or something?

A: I really don't remember. I only remember the two things, that it was extremely hot and I had bad blisters on my feet because we ended up in the forest, in the words, mixed in with the, not just with the population of Wierzbnik, Starachowice, but all the peasants who lived in the surrounding area also evacuated and they basically took their horses and cows and dogs and so on. So you had this cacophony of sounds, the cows, and of course, I like to tell the story, of this, this sort of a joke on us type of incident. The factory, as you know, was smelting ore, because there was ore in the area, and they were doing, it was doing already war production, because in Starachowice, where the factory was, the plant, was located in a district called the central [says name in Polish] the central industrial area, that was organized for Poland after the first war, to arm themselves because they felt, you know, now that Poland was independent since 1918, they had to be armed. Well, they located these factories, the plants, in this central Poland area that had iron ore deposits, so there was ore smelting and such, so the rationale was such that in the first war, the first thing that was really destroyed were all the munition factories and all this. By virtue of this historic truth, all you could expect is smithereens in our town, so that everybody evacuated because if not, you were going to be wiped off the earth together with the factory, you see. And we found ourselves in the woods, with all that as I told you, the mixture of the Hassidim and the secular Jews and the Christians and the peasants and the

cows and the dogs and the horses. Meanwhile, the Germans came very close by. There was no bombing, no significant bombing on Starachowice, because obviously they were going to take over that factory in a blink of an eye, which they did. And we got caught in a valley - 'we' meaning the entire mixture of everybody - we were caught in the valley. The Germans were on the one - you know, I come from a hilly, it's not mountainous area, but hilly, the Swietokrzyskie (ph) mountains are not far from us, but this is hilly area - so that you had the Germans on one side of the valley, you had the Polish troops on the other, and they shot at each other while we were in the valley, so that one horrendous night, when all the bullets were flying, we were right in the middle. And of course, the Germans in those days, and I know this for a fact, many more times from this one…

[Tape cut off.]

End of Tape #2

Tape #3

Q: I think the tape stopped before you explained how the planes were swooping down with lights underneath them and shooting at you.

A: Yes, at the group caught in the valley - townspeople and the peasants from the surrounding areas - and of course that was real, true, naked warfare, that's what that was, because eventually, I hate to say that, but I do know that there was bayonet warfare going on, and that was my first real true awakening to what was happening.

Q: You must have been scared to death.

A: Scared to…that was a night of total fear. I mean, you know, later on, because I didn't know fear, how, how extensive and how fierce fear can be, but that one night was the first experience in my life of acute fear. I didn't know whether we would ever make it, because we were not just in the crossfire, we were also being shot at from the airplanes. But all this went on until the morning. At dawn, of course, everybody went back to town.

Q: Let me ask you something.

A: Yes.

Q: Did your mother hold you? Were you being held on to by somebody during the night?

A: Yes, yes, we, I remember there were, the peasants had carts, you know, a cart with the horse, and I remember everybody was hiding under carts, you know, because they could see, and as I said before, the Germans, they didn't see us. They could hear because there was all that barking and baying and, and whatever other animal sounds you could hear, and even if the people were quiet. You cannot quiet an animal when he sees, when he hears shooting, so that gave us away. And the funny thing is - I just remembered something - at daylight, at daybreak, we sort of scattered from the area, and then the planes came again, and I ran over - everybody said, "Run under the bushes." So, you know there were trees and bushes, because we stayed in the forest. The valley was sort of a clearing, it was in the clearing, but surrounding was the forest. So, I ran over as fast as I could and I grabbed a tree. Well, it wasn't a tree! This was a Polish soldier! Because, you know, they had olive drab uniforms, green, type of green. And, of course, in the panic, I mean, everything, so I - the thing moved, the tree could move. Well, I look up and there was the soldier, but that was more as a, you know, I thought I probably felt good about it because he was going to protect me, you know, whereas everything else was naked fear. And subsequently when we went home - this is also very important, I think I've already mentioned it - the town was not bombed, absolutely not bombed, and that was, with I'm sure by design. So that eventually when everybody got settled back and it was now official that the Germans have occupied Poland, the factory was taken over and converted to heavy war machinery and, whereas before the war, Jews were not employed in that

plant, now Jews were beginning to be taken in as a labor force. Now this is just the mere beginning, because eventually, of course, the Jewish labor force was the primary force, because it was slave labor and it didn't - they had to pay the Poles. So, I really, I'm not an authority on it, but I would suspect that the professional engineers or whoever it is in that war industry, were retained and perhaps these unskilled workers, maybe the Christians, could have been dismissed, so that Jewish slave labor was hired. Because subsequently - I don't mean right now at the outbreak of the war - but subsequently, not only would the Jews start working as a force, labor force, in the factory, while there was still a ghetto, but once the ghetto was liquidated, there was a labor camp set up just to supply workers to the factory and, since there were always typhus and there were shootings and killings and Jews were just disposed of here and there, there was forever a new shipment arriving of workers. Now, what the specific number was of workers of workers, I don't know, maybe 2,000, but I know that the number stayed as was, because they had all these assigned spaces, I imagine. So that the slave labor was already in full operation shortly after the outbreak of the war, but later, when the camp was set up, they kept the number - because you know the Jews, the town was cleared of Jews, so they had no more, no more people in Starachowice to supply for the labor force, but they did bring them in from all over everywhere.

Q: Do you happen to recall your first supper, dinner when you came back from the forest?

A: Yes, I absolutely do! You know, it was hot summer, and we came - in fact, when we left in the morning, we didn't clear the table, because it was such a rush, and we had to get dressed, and we had to pack up, and Dad said, "We've got to go, we've got to move because the bombs are going to fall any minute and the whole town is just going to be in ashes, and we've got to get out," So, we left everything. We came back, there were flies running all over, all the dishes were on the table, and I don't really remember but, whatever there was yet, I'm sure, you know, my mother must have kept stuff in her supply cupboards or whatever. So, I don't know that we experienced starvation when we got back, because it took awhile - you know, that was basically the German, the concept of eliminating the Jews by any way you could, so it's by starvation, or by shooting or whichever. But that did not enter the picture. You came home and whatever you had in your cupboards - and I imagine my mother must have stocked up on things because the talk of war was so prevalent. The only thing is that, you see, this is modern warfare - I mean, not by today's standards, when you have atomic weapons and such - in those days, that was modern warfare, but as you know even when you study sociology, they tell you, "First things happen, then culture and the way of living adapts itself to what's happening." Now, when the second war broke out, people like my parents, who survived, who went through the first war, applied the reasoning of the first war to the new experience of another war. In other words, what was true then should be applied now, and this is how you are going to manage this new event. But of course that was as far from the truth as it could be, because the warfare in the first war was not the same, the blitzkrieg itself, you know, the airplanes and all, that was the - I mean, the Germans occupied Poland I don't know how many, five days something like that - so who… in the

first, in the first war, there was no such thing. There was, there were battles fought hand to hand, and this is why the bayonet fight, that I heard later, that was sort of unusual because it didn't fit the picture, but we did hear it at night when they said they were fighting with bayonets. It could be that was also hearsay because, yes, people would expect that, judging by the first war.

Q: What is your most immediate recollection of the change for your life, not everybody else's life, but as a child?

A: Yes, the first and foremost, I didn't go to school. That was first. Number two, there is a river runs through Starachowice, Wierzbnik its called Kamienna, it's a tributary of the Vistula. Now, we used to go swim in the river. We had a little dog and he used to go, we had a maid, she loved that dog, so she - we would go swimming and she would soap up the dog in a bucket and throw him in the river, and then would go after the dog in the river. Anyhow, so number one, there was no school. It was very hot, September was very hot - couldn't go swimming. Then you started seeing - the Germans were marching through the town, all the time, in formation, they sung. You know, they were always marching wearing those boots and singing. And very soon, there were these - I cannot say whether it was Gestapo, SS or whoever - they started coming around in these little groupings, individuals, two Nazis or three Nazis, with a dog or two dogs, so that immediately put a stop to my even going outside to play. So, all the things that were dear to me, starting with school, number one, were now out, certainly couldn't go Ostrowiec to visit Grandma because travel was out. So, I probably didn't understand the larger picture of what was involved, but I certainly knew on a more personal basis that things are completely different and that whatever is happening is not good. That much, I mean, I could see.

Q: Did you feel, as a Jewish person, as a Jewish child, different from what was happening to the Christian Polish kids? I mean you had, there was a very close family, the Paliszewskis, to you, right?

A: Yes, exactly, the Christian people, yes. Well, the point is, eventually, I mean, I don't know, 10th of September, 31st of, 31st of October or whenever, the schools were open and the children went back to school, but we didn't. It isn't that the schools were closed. The schools were closed to Jewish children. So, that was the first and immediate, so to say, blow to my…to me. And whatever other bigger things that were happening, I was oblivious of that because nobody told me. As I've said so many times, my parents were so protective that I never really knew the full truth until the war was over and I started reading up on things that I found out what really went on. I just knew that nothing was good anymore, and certainly I couldn't go to school, so that was a big blow.

Q: Was your maid Jewish or Christian?

A: No, no, she was Christian, she was Christian.

Q: So, what happened to the maid and the dog?

A: Well, this is, this is an interesting story. I always talk about my dog, I loved him!

Q: What was his name?

A: Ledy.

Q: Lenny?

A: Ledy , I don't know whether he's meant to be Lady or Ledy or whatever, but we called him Ledy. And it was a birthday present for one of us. My father brought him in a packet. He was a tiny little pup, all white, a Spitz, and my father - I forgot who's birthday it was but that was a birthday present - and he was a very lovely, beautiful white dog but you had to brush him all the time, and the maid adored him, her name was Genia (ph). Anyhow, shortly before the war, he became vicious. What happened, we had, my mother, my grandmother, from Ostrowiec had a cousin by the name of Pfeffer (ph). They were very well-to-do Jews in Ostrowiec, and her son - her sons had all the motor vehicles that were good in 1939 - her son, one son had a Ford and one son had a motorcycle, and he came running through Starachowice on his motorcycle and had an accident and ended up in the hospital, in the Starachowice hospital. He was from Ostrowiec his name was Pfeffer (ph), the last name, but I don't know his first name. Well, anyhow, the mother immediately came, stayed with us, and she cooked for him. She started cooking all these exquisite dishes, and he wouldn't eat, because he was laid up in the hospital - I don't know he had broken bones - she would bring it back and feed it to the dog. Now, the dog was on a very strict, whatever. This dog started eating all these fancy things. Anyhow, this is the story I was told why he became vicious. One day, a woman was passing by - because there was a big courtyard, you know, in European houses, you had a gate, like a big gate you went through, and there was a courtyard - a woman was coming through the courtyard, he was barking to get out, he jumped on the handle, however, he got himself out of the house, ran over and tore the woman's skirt up front, a whole big chunk of skirt. Well, after that, of course, my parents had to pay for the clothes and so on, but he was taken to a farm, so we had to give him away, because he was unmanageable. I always knew that he was spoiled by that food, but maybe not, I don't know. But anyhow, so we didn't have the dog. As for the maid, she lived way out, at the outskirts of the town, with an old mother. And she was a maid for my parents from way back, I mean, way, way, like when Hania was a baby, because we have pictures from the Baltic sea and such, she sits there, Genia (ph) sits with Hania, you know, we see her in pictures, we saw her in pictures a lot. Anyhow, she lived in the outskirts of the city, and subsequently she turned out to be one of those who did not prove herself to be a true friend, because she took things from us during the war that Mother wanted to give her to save, like a sewing machine, you know, things of value, and she absolutely denied. When Chris and Hania went back to Poland and went to see her, she had drapes, velvet, green velvet drapes, and

bedspreads to match, it was hanging and she said she didn't have it. My mother had a box of china that was in perfect condition that she took. She denied it; it was right there. And she, I think she said she was going to denounce them, Chris and Hania, you know, because you know Chris and Hania went back to Starachowice and there was this horrible incident that night, and the Paliszewskis saved their life. So, you right away have this balance, you can balance this, whether Genia (ph) was greed, it was pure greed, or whether it was other motivation, I don't know, but she was member of the family for years, I mean, many years, so that she did not prove to be a friend, as good a friend as she ought to have been, because she was treated very well by the family. But of course the others, the Paliszewskis, they were people who saved our lives and such. So, you can see there is never a one answer to this kind of a problem. This is why I've always felt that, as much as you want to remember personal incidents, the true picture to me of living in Poland as a Jewish person is not of one of animosity to the others, you just, you have to have that understanding because always for one example, you will always find another example to counterbalance that, and this is exactly how I have felt right along and not many people feel that way, I know.

Q: No, I was going to ask you why, because often, certainly in my family, the anger at the Polish population is sometimes more severe than to the Germans.

A: Yes, this is how it was, and people from my hometown, very much so. I don't know if you know that I was involved with the restoration of the cemetery in Starachowice, and when I originally brought up the subject - later I went to Poland in 1980 and we went to the cemetery with the Paliszewski's granddaughter, she took us there - we took pictures of the cemetery itself and of different tombstones which were, of course, overturned and overgrown and whatever. I really don't read Yiddish, so I couldn't tell whose tombstones they were. Nobody from our family is buried there. Anyhow, when I came back and Victor made large size, you know he blew up the photo - we had them made into large photographs and I took them to the Starachowice reunion, at the annual _____. Well, I was practically attacked by some. They told me, "Renia, you should be ashamed of yourself. How you even think of having to, that we should restore something to give money to them. They never did anything for us. They would take the money, they wouldn't do it, anyhow." This is a project that started in 1980 and it was only realized ten years ago, because I finally realized there were people of good will who decided those who feel that way do not have to participate, and we did, and we did through the right channels and with the right money and everything is done. In fact, I just wrote an introduction to the book that's coming out about the cemetery, and I was very fortunate to have it registered with one of the people from my hometown who were dear friends of my family, Pola Frank (ph). She is no longer alive; she was my teacher in Poland. In then last minute, we registered the Jewish cemetery in New York with a Jewish organization - I don't know the name of it. The building is right across Temple Emanuelle on 5th Avenue, 65th Street. I think there was a Rabbi Chaiar (ph), or Chaiat (ph) somebody. And we came in, and said we don't have the funds yet, but we'd very much like to have this on - they were submitting a list to the Polish government of Jewish cemeteries - in

the nick of time, he said next week or next day, whatever, they were going to submit. We got the name in. So, immediately, within a year, there was a sign posted that this is a historic landmark not to be touched. But it took us a number, a good number of years to realize that we should not wait around or take the criticism of our hometown people for, to prevent us from doing the project. And between Israel and Canada and us, we had the money in no time. We send - it was done through Israel: the money was sent in, the architect was found, the caretakers were found. Apparently, that cemetery in Starachowice is now the model restored cemetery. But you see, this, I said that in reference to how other people felt. Not only did they feel terrific animosity to the Poles during all that went on, because, you know, a lot of people felt that the Poles did not do for Jews what they could have. But, you see, even after the war, for something as terribly important as a Jewish cemetery in a town that had all this population obliterated, there isn't a sign that there was Jewish community there except for the cemetery, and that was my project from the beginning, Pola Frank (ph) and I were saying: Here you have the pictures, here is what it looks like, the houses were being built on the cemetery, first the Germans took the tombstones to pave roads, then the Poles brought their homes closer and closer. Give it a few more years and you would have nothing, so that we were very lucky that, against all the criticism, we went ahead and because we worked in cooperation with Israel and Canada, we were really able to do it. And now I'm so pleased about that. This is really something, you know, second generation people go to visit, and other people from Israel, and I was told that even the people who do oversee now, you know, whoever oversees the Jewish cemeteries in Poland, says that ours is the nicest, the best kept and so forth. The stones are upright, the lettering was done, it's cleaned up, beautiful fence, iron fence with a beautiful gate with the magendavit (ph) on it, very nice, very nice.

Q: All right, let's get back now.

A: Yes.

Q: The one question I wanted to ask before the tape is going to run out is what did, happened in your family when school was no longer possible for you. I understand a little school was developed in your house?

A: A little school developed, right! And Hania, of course, was the main force behind it because she was the family genius - she had all the books. In fact, when she was in high school in Radom, she used to do tutoring, anyhow, so this was like breathing air for her. And she took three of my friends and myself and she formed a little class, and we followed the curriculum which she knew and for which the books were available in the house. So, it was a regular school, with regular homework, and I resented the fact that she expected more of me than all the others, and I said, I mean, she lives with me in the house - you'd think she could be a little easier on me, but no. But, of course, later on I realized that my really truly foundation for my further education came from that, because we really studied seven days a week.

Q: Seven?

A: Well, we did it at home. You couldn't go swimming, the dogs were - the Germans were out with the dogs, people were being rounded up for slave labor, and kids were just either shot or kicked or the dogs was, you know, they were always threatened with dogs and the Nazis went around with the rubber whips, so even if you didn't get killed, you could be beaten up terribly, a dog could eat you up or whatever, so the only thing was to be home and that, that really was…

Q: So, how many hours a day was Hania teaching?

A: I don't remember, but big section, a big segment of the day was for classroom, and then there was homework. And then I - he reminds me, of a friend of mine, Mitye Weigensburg (ph), they were neighbors not far from us, and people wanted to read books. There was no access to libraries, we are now talking about the secular Jews, you know. So he and I opened a lending library. He always reminds me about it - he lives in Connecticut we meet once a year at the _____. We took books from every house, whoever wanted to, and we had a lending library, so today you had my books and I had yours, and we kept records.

Q: So you're ten, eleven years old?

A: Yes, yes, and you know, the strange thing about it is, I always say, I talk about it, nothing ever goes to waste, because, in later years when my kids were in public school in New York, I was the volunteer chairman of the library in the school for 11 years, I ran the volunteers who worked in the school library here, so, I always tell him, I say, "Guess what? Whatever we did then applies now." And that was true, so the schooling was done at home the homework was done at home and the rest was still around the books, we had the lending library. People were delighted to get books because people couldn't go out, you know, and this is already in the ghetto, you know, because later on forget it, later on was different.

Q: You had paper, enough paper in the house?

A: Yes, because in the old days, you know how to recycle everything. I mean, you never threw away a little piece of paper that wasn't filled in. And we made little cards, so we wrote who - I can assure you it wasn't the Dewey decimal system - it was just a scribble here, a scribble there, Mrs. X got this book and Mrs. Z got the other book.

Q: Okay, I think we'll take a break now.

End of Tape #3

Tape #4

Q: Renia, tell me something about what you think the effect of having a home schooling was on you? I wondered whether you thought that in future years that it was very helpful to have all this - whatever it was you learned - in your head.

A: Yes.

[Tape interruption]

A: First of all, you know, as a child, you don't really plan a future and you don't look ahead to things that are included in the grown up world. You live in your own little world, and one day's this and the next day's that, and past it, maybe two more days, and past it, there is no planning. But absolute - my absolute thrill about being able to study was that I was back in school. Not for future background or future foundations of how I was going to use it or not use it. It was just the mere fact that my access to study was not severed as was my access to everything else, such as going swimming in the river or playing outdoors or whichever. So, this was absolutely the only viewpoint that I had. Never for a minute orienting myself to how that was going to come in handy. Aside from which, you know, as I analyze now the system, the educational system in Poland as against the system in America, Polish education emphasized - it was sort of an elitist concept - but it emphasized education for its own sake. You know? You could end up being a carpenter, but you could at the same time be the highly educated person who read all the philosophers and knew the highest level of mathematics, and never apply it to what you were doing, but had the education. And, I don't know, by osmosis, I guess, that rubbed off - that concept rubbed off on me. So that studying, as I said before, because this was war, and I was back in school, and just one day to the next being occupied by books was great. But by the same token, I always breathed that air that said, you know, you study because it's such fun; because you're going to be a mathematician or you're going to be a professor or whatever. You studied because that was really part of the great, great joy of life. And so, assuming that I, in my child's way, incorporated those two aspects, it was study for its own sake. Plus, it kept me out of the street where the Germans were with the dogs. And it kept me very occupied. Plus, it also kept me in a competitive setting. It wasn't monotonous to the extent that you were doing everything for yourself, by yourself, without measuring yourself against some other people. And these were my very dear friends, so that the entire idea really revolved around being occupied - gainfully occupied, not just killing time or wasting time. And whoever even thought - I certainly didn't know - planning for the future. I could never, ever visualize, even when I was older during the war and the war was coming to an end, I couldn't even visualize the end of the war or what I would be doing. There wasn't such thing in my mind ever of a pre-set plan, you know, of applying this to that and doing this and that. Everything that came after really evolved out of my basic studies with Hania, there's no question about it. It's just that I brought to it a certain attitude already, which of course lasted me for the lifetime, that school is joy and I loved it and it was good. But I didn't know how it was

going to fit in the future - who knew that I would even survive, and who even knew how the world would end, how it would look, and how... No, this is totally outside the realm of my imagination. Really, to put it totally in the perspective, that's exactly how it goes. It didn't… The idea of a future occupation or a future plan that would evolve out of the study with Hania never entered my mind, really!

Q: How many hours a day did Hania teach you?

A: You know, that I couldn't tell you, but I know it was a, it was a big chunk of the day, big. Plus the fact that I did homework, and lots of it. Lots and lots of it, so that I was really occupied all day.

Q: Did she give you good grades?

A: She did, but she always reprimanded me 'cause she said I could do better than that. So, she did reprimand me, even in front of the other kids. I didn't appreciate that, but I loved her anyhow. But of course my parents were absolutely thrilled because there was nothing for a child to do, and being outdoors was very dangerous, so that, that really filled all the needs. My parents were satisfied, I was happy, Hania was happy, so all around, it really was good.

Q: So, did you not go outside at all?

A: Practically not. Because, even if you did go to play, like kids play ball or something, and somebody would say, "Oh, they're out again with the dogs," you would immediately go in. Because, you know, people were being - grown-ups were being rounded up for all kinds of things: for deportations, for killings, for cleaning, for whatever. But children were just as big a temptation for a Nazi with a dog as a grown-up was, just for the sake of, you know, scaring a Jew kid.

Q: Just to get everything clear, you were 10 years old when…

A: …when the war broke out, right.

Q: Hania was 15 when she was starting to teach you, right? And Chris is 13.

A: Right.

Q: Right?

A: And Chris was also in a class, in Hania's class.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, but not in my class. Hers wasn't a real class; hers was more… You see, this was the whole idea of keeping yourself occupied with books. At my level, it was a class. I don't know that Chris had homework or anything. But it was more like maybe discussions or reading together, you know, like people could get together to read and share books. But that was a very wonderful - this wasn't an idea that came from outside; it came from the house. But that really kept us out of harm's way.

Q: It put you in a different world.

A: Oh, yeah, absolutely. So, to sit out the war - nobody knew anything about anything that was going to happen or wouldn't happen, but you know, you have to sit out the war and however best you can, and this was a fine way.

Q: So, the thoughts that you had are that this is war, nothing else terribly bad, it would be deprivation…

A: Yeah, it's not the first war that the parents were talking about, and people who were still around that have lived through the first war. You know, the deprivation, and then the soldiers are fighting, you see. And if you're not on the front, and you're not caught where the soldiers are fighting, then the war will blow over and everything will be fine again. Because it's the soldiers who fight; civilians don't fight.

Q: So, how do you remember what happened to your father? Do you remember what you saw when you were 10, 11, 12, during those…?

A: Well, I'll tell you what I remember. As I told you, the memory being so selective, that I remember all these nonsense things - not nonsense, but the little things that really stuck in my mind, when the biggest things escape my memory. But I do remember how my mother was upset when Father was rounded up for cleaning detail. You know, because this was below his station. I think I said that in the interview, because that also stuck in my mind. Mother always talked about it. Father was rounded up in the street and nobody knew where he was. And Mother went, and she said, oh, you know - she was told that the people who were rounded up are cleaning out - cleaning - are sweeping the railroad station. So, she went to the railroad station. She was looking, couldn't find him, and there was this German - German soldier, but she didn't see the men, the Jews there. So, she went over to him and asked him, "Excuse me, where are the *herren*?" - Where are the gentlemen? And he said, "These aren't gentlemen; these are Jews!" And how Mother was upset about that, and of course, Father was terribly humiliated. Because this was early on - this was still in '39 - and this was such a humiliating experience for a man, like this, and for Mother, too. So, Mother always talked about it. Of course, we realized later on that this didn't really mean all that much, because what came later is a totally different category. But in those days - this was right after the Germans conquered Poland - so, that much I remember that Mother was very upset about it. You know, those are small things,

big things, but they are a very big part of the bigger picture of genocide, because those were the initial steps, as you would now know, but certainly we didn't know then.

Q: Do you have any recollection of the time your father came home having somewhat been beaten up by a Nazi?

A: Very vague, very vague. That, I know it happened, but the recollection is very vague. Maybe I just eliminated it from my psyche somehow. No, that I don't really… I just remember one man, Roman Zinger, was brought around. He was hit and his jaw was dislocated. And he was taken around by the Germans to show what you're going to look like if you do not obey. I remember that, but I don't remember about my father.

Q: How long were you able to stay in the apartment you had been living in when you came back after the evacuation?

A: Well, probably 'til early 1940, because we lived on the main street, which connected the old Wierzbnik and Starachowice. That was called the main street, and that was called Piusutskego (ph). First it was called Starachowice, then it was called Piusutskego (ph). That was the first street evacuated, because that was the so-called best street. After - and we were just pushed further into Wierzbnik. You see, we were on the connecting street between the two towns. We were pushed further into Wierzbnik, but that was only the first location. We had three more places that we lived in before the towns were liquidated. I don't know how much of the Starachowice story was told in terms of the historical events. You see, there was no so-called closed ghetto, as we know a ghetto to be, like a large ghetto, like the Warsaw ghetto. Our ghetto was a gradual - As other parts were being cleared of the Jews in my hometown, they were being sent further into Wierzbnik. As little villages were being evacuated around the town, all these people were being sent further into Wierzbnik. But the Christians who lived there were not dislocated, you see, so that at no point was there such a thing as a barbed wire or anything like that, you see? Those Christians who still lived there lived there, and the Jews were just packed in and packed in and packed in. And then of course our street that we were sent to, that was cleared, so we had to go further in, and we ended up next to the Christian cemetery called the Old Cemetery - there are two, the New Cemetery and the Old Cemetery. We, our last residence was past the Old Cemetery - that was the location - and we lived in a Christian's home. He was a teamster; he had a horse and wagon. They occupied half, and we had a kitchen and a din- and a living- one room and a kitchen. Half of his house. And until the time until we were actually liqu- that the town was liquidated, that's where we lived. That's where went for the Final Solution, my parents and I, not Hania and Chris. And they lived next door; the Christians lived next door. So this is, this happened between 1940, early 1940, when Piusutskego (ph) Street was cleared, up to October 27, 1942. That was life in the ghetto.

Q: Until '42.

A: ’42, yes.

Q: When you moved each of these three times, is it your parents who found the place? Or you just run out? Do you have any idea?

A: No. I have no idea.

Q: You have no idea?

A: I imagine there was a relocation office or something. I really don’t know. I couldn’t tell you.

Q: What do you recall about what your father was doing? Obviously, he’s no longer for a long time doing…?

A: He was a scribe.

Q: What does that mean?

A: He was a secretary. He used to type. I really don’t know, but I know that he was not what you call a functionary of any significance. You know, he had, he had, he’s not part of any Judenrat.

Q: So, there was a Judenrat?

A: I think so. I’m not sure. But I know Father was always, because he was so neat and organized, and he typed, and so he was always that guy who did the secretarial work through the camp, you know, through the ghetto and the camp. But I truly don’t know. I think there was a Judenrat in town…

Q: But you’re not sure.

A: Not sure, and I really wouldn’t know who was in it. Even though I did read in the *Starachowice*, the book, the names, but I really wouldn’t know for sure.

Q: During this period, prior to the ghetto really being formed, even though it isn’t a closed ghetto, do you experience a lot of fear, knowing that you have to be in the house, even in spite of the fact that you love schooling so much.

A: Oh, yes, but then I first started to realize what this was all about. I mean, we didn’t know what this was leading up to, and we certainly didn’t - *I* certainly didn’t know what was happening elsewhere, that I didn’t know. But I did know that, by virtue of being near the plant, the war production plant, that people were being sent in for their labor. You see, I didn’t realize that basically it was the other way around. People were being cleared out of

other places to be sent here, not because they were needed. In other words, the Germans didn't go outside of the ghetto to find these people. It's just that all these other communities were being cleared, and Starachowice was the logical place to shove them into, even though it would be bursting at the seams, for the reason this was access to slave labor. Of course, I know this all in hindsight, but in those days, it just seemed that perhaps they were trying to have more labor, a bigger labor force, so they were just going out and sending these people in. But of course, it was the other way around.

Q: Is your, is your mother working also?

A: I think so. Yes, I think so. But I don't remember where, but I think she was working.

Q: So, you're in the house with your…

A: No.

Q: Both sisters? Chris was…

A: Chris and Hania were working in the brick factory.

Q: Right from the beginning?

A: I don't remember. I just remember at the end, that's where they were.

Q: Yes.

A: I was given a job very shortly, very - probably, at the, the same month probably that they cleared the town of Jews, I was given a job in the factory, in the plant, just putting the… You know, these were cannon shells; they weren't too big. You were supposed to put it on, on the machine, and the lathe would, you know, like you carve an apple, would take off the first peel and then you took it off. It was piecework. And they were around to watch you and count. You put it down; you put another one. Anybody could do it; you didn't need the Herculean strength to do that. And then, of course, after the town was cleared of Jews, and of course, that's going further into the camps, I started working in the laundry. So, after that, I never worked in the factory, only in the laundry. Whereas Hania and Chris were detained overnight in the brick factory, so that the morning that the town was cleared of Jews, they did not report to the square, the market square. But I did, with my parents.

Q: I want to get to that, but I just want to ask you a question about your little school friends, that you went to school with.

A: Yes.

Q: Were these close friends of yours?

A: Yes, I'm Jewish, obviously, yes, and from the same, from the same type of family. You see? Again, as I was trying to explain, I did not mean to divide it into superior or inferior or anything. The secular type of Jews who lived in town, and these were my friends. They were absolutely my friends.

Q: And did they live very nearby? Because given what you said, it was dangerous for kids…

A: Yes, well, they lived very nearby, yes, they did. They lived on Piusutskego (ph) also, so it was very, I mean, access was easy.

Q: Did you talk privately with them about what was going on?

A: Frankly, I probably did, because I was always very curious about everything, you know, but maybe I just… I absolutely don't remember. But, I'll tell you frankly, when there was talk about war, before the war broke out, and my parents said, "Oh, it's going to be a horrible thing if there is a war because the first war was so bad." You know, they used to tell us about the first war. And quietly I was thinking to myself, "Why would a war be so bad? You know? You could learn all these new things and you could find out and it's different…" So, quietly thought, well, I think the war would be good, because from my viewpoint, why not? I mean, all these exciting things that my parents were talking about, you see? So, then, when the war came, and I am quite sure that we talked - the kids, among ourselves - talked about the same thing, up to a point. Because finally, when we realized what was really going on, then I am sure that we changed around. Because once we started fearing for our own lives, it was no more that idealized version of new things happening. And that I remember distinctly, that I always used to say, "Gee, I really would like a war, because I would know what - you know, new things that are happening, you know, how they do it. Because war means soldiers fighting; it doesn't apply otherwise."

Q: So, it was a sort of entertainment that your parents gave you with these stories…

A: Not an entertainment. It was something, it was an experience that I would really, yes, I would very be glad to be part of, but… uh… it didn't turn out that way.

Q: Chris told a story of about a bunch of young people - I have no idea if you were there - outside when somebody - now, I don't know exactly where this is because I don't know exactly where she was describing - they were outside, it seemed to be the summer, and some young man came out from the bushes looking awful and talking about Treblinka. And Chris and Hania brought him into the house. Were you there?

A: I'm sure I was there, but I don't remember that.

Q: You don't remember the story?

A: You see, how big was the house? By now, we must have lived in one room. I couldn't absent myself. The fact is my parents never told me directly anything. Whatever I did know, I probably guessed, and then I probably rationalized quickly, that this was, because you know, they were saying rumors, all kinds of gossip. And rumors, gossip, I'm sure they were saying rumors and gossip just to protect us. You know, but I truly don't know. I've said it so many times. I don't know what they knew, and what they didn't know, and how much they withheld from me personally, not from Hania and Krysia. You see that I really don't know. Chris was really sort of a more mature person. Chris was always a hands-on and practical type, so I think she could have known much more than I did, but I did not know.

Q: Actually, she said that she didn't believe this guy. And brought him in to the house, and your parents asked her to leave.

A: Yes.

Q: So, she didn't hear…

A: You see, so she also didn't hear. And if she didn't hear and was asked to go out, I certainly would never had been told about it. That's absolutely a fact.

Q: Now, during these two years prior to the - because I want to get to the evacuation - during these two years, are things getting worse in terms of food, in terms of…?

A: Yes, this was the time when the screw was being tightened, you see. There was scarce food; you had to really fight for it. You had to keep - you could still barter; you still had access to the Polish population, you see, so you could barter and you could buy and you could try the hardest you could, but subsistence was meager, very meager. And then - I don't know if Chris told you about it - but one Sunday, when people are leaving church - you know, the church was up on Church Street. Cruzcherna (ph) was up on the hill, and the market square, where we were eventually, from which we were sent to the selection. The market square was - coming down from Cruzcherna (ph), from the church, was the market square. Something happened - Poles killed a German or something - and I remember distinctly, they built a gallows in the market square and they hung 12 Poles on a Sunday, when people were coming down from the church, from Cruzcherna (ph) Street, from Church Street, down to the square. In other words, I suspect that whatever exchange there was between the Jews and the Poles, surreptitious as it was and quiet as it was, could have diminished to a great extent, because that was a warning to others, too. Of course, I found out what happened years later that they lured a German or two Germans to a prostitute and they got there and they killed them. And so for that, 12 Poles were hung on a Sunday after church. So, I imagine - I don't know what year this was, but we were still living in the so-called ghetto. And, of course, whether this is a direct result - whether the starvation that was setting in was a direct result of this warning that they give

to the Christians, they gave to the Christians, I don't know. But, of course, food was scarce and, and things were very bad. The only thing was that Mother was very inventive; she once an excellent cook, so she made things out of nothing. The first time in my life I ate cookies that was baked with sugar beets, made with sugar beets - it's because there was no sugar, of course. So, that's, that's the screw was being tightened, but it wasn't yet completely tight. You see, there was still the possibility of surviving, if the sickness didn't kill you, if they didn't shoot you, if the dogs didn't tear you to shreds.

Q: One very brief question before we take a break, because the tape is going to run out: Do you remember when you had to put an armband? I understand you wore an armband?

A: Yes, absolutely, a white armband with a blue - a blue Star of David on it. Probably right away, probably when we still lived on Piusutskego (ph), I suspect, including children.

Q: Until the end? Until the evacuation?

A: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Q: Right. All right, let's take a break and change the tape.

End of Tape #4

Tape #5

Q: Renia, I want to ask you to describe one of the most difficult days, probably, of your entire life, the evacuation, October 27th, 1942.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Can you lead us through the day?

A: Yes. First, I have to say that Chris and Hania - Ana - were employed in the brick factory. Because, as you well know by now, there was the munitions factory, munitions plant, there was the brick factory and there was the sawmill, and I think there was one more. I don't remember. All these employed slave labor. And the word got around - first of all, able-bodied people were taken anyhow - but word got around that if you work, you have a chance to have a better life. Not survived - we didn't talk about survival and all that. It's just that you could live a little better if you had a job. So, anybody who was anybody secured a job. Now, Hania and Chris worked in the brick factory, and they had the night shift. October 26th to 27th is when they were inside the factory, in the brick factory. October 27th in the morning - I think 6:00 in the morning - is when the round up started for the evacuation of the Jews from the hometown. Now, Hania and Krysia were never released from the factory, and I really don't know about people who worked in the munitions plant, but I imagine they were also kept back, because they were already a work force that could be counted on. Well, I was at home at the last of our residences in the ghetto, sharing the house with this Christian family, and that was past the Old Cemetery, the old - old Christian cemetery. We were made to walk. First of all, the knock came on the door, and "Everybody out, everybody out." We got dressed - I know, again, several layers of clothing - and we were driven toward the market square. So, as we passed the old cemetery, we started coming nearer to the market square, and that's where a lot of Jewish people lived before the war anyhow, but now, of course, it was packed, because other streets have been cleaned - not cleaned, but cleared of the Jewish people. And as people would walk out of the buildings, if they didn't walk straight, if their child was crying, the Germans were in a total frenzy, and there were Latvians who were assisting. They were shooting at anybody who didn't rush, who didn't go as fast as he was told, who didn't walk straight, had one more bundle than, than it was absolutely allowed. So that, between the old cemetery and the square, which was probably no more than half a mile, there was such atrocities that I rather thought the world was ending. Because, I mean, I'd seen a lot of things up to that point, you know, but I had never seen people falling and children, infants smashed against the walls, and you know, horror upon horror, and this was only a half a mile walk. Now, my parents held me by my hand on each side, and as I said, I was overdressed because Mother insisted. I also was a very skinny child, and she wanted to make me look more mature. Of course, I wasn't developed, I was just a mere child, so she shoved some stuff into me to make me look mature and developed and she put rouge on my cheeks. And we walked to the market square, and as we were coming closer, there was a building where Mother's very dear

friends lived, and there was a family Kalinyerska (ph). Mrs. Kalinyerska (ph) was an elderly woman, maybe in her seventies - I mean, for a child, age at that time… I don't know, but I know old Mrs. Kalinyerska (ph), that's how I know her. Her daughter went to Palestine through the efforts my mother's Zionist *ha-sharat* (ph). So, she was there. And as we were passing very near the square, Mother - she couldn't walk - Mother took her under the arm and walked with her to the square, and I followed with my father. And when we came to the square, the scene was indescribable, because they had the Latvians and they had the Germans and they had dogs. And people were being whipped with rubber whips, and people were shot with rifles and with guns and with whatever. And people were screaming and everybody - they were shouting and - whatever. We came on a scene which was very hard to understand, because the Germans, who were standing at each corner of the square, directed the people coming out of these adjacent streets: "To the right here, you go this way, you go this way." You had no idea which way you were going. All I knew in the final analysis was that Father was sent one way, which I understood because the men were separated, I was sent another way, and Mother and Mrs. Kalinyerska (ph) were sent another way. So, I still couldn't make out what is happening here, and who is going where and why. Very soon, my group was whipped into formation, and I mean whipped in to formation, I think five rows and five across, and we were driven toward Starachowice, meaning by Piusutskego (ph) and that way. And we had to march in formation, as if to - as if to a beat, and whoever couldn't make it, whoever stumbled, was immediately shot on the spot. Now, I at this point had no - First of all, I didn't know where Hania and Krysia were. I knew they never came home from the factory. So, I could just imagine that they could have been sent in another group like this - whatever - or maybe they were somewhere dead and I didn't see them. I didn't know. And as I got into the group driven that way toward Starachowice plant, I found myself eventually in Strzelnica - of course, I didn't know what Strzelnica was about - but this is where I ended up, in Strzelnica in an open area, and we were told to sit down and stay there. I was beside myself with fear. I was horror-stricken and totally lost. I think of all my traumatic experiences in the world, that is absolutely the most traumatic. Because you know, at all other times, I had somebody to lean on - Chris and Hania or my parents - this, I was totally alone, and I really didn't know, you see. I didn't know that Chris and Hania were still around. I was petrified. I cried, and I was… So, people who knew the family, they said, "Oh, don't cry. Mother will come, and this will sort itself out. This is whatever it is. They…" Whatever. Eventually, I found out that Father was in the same camp, in other words, he was with the men and I was put with the women.

Q: So, you marched off with women.

A: With women, to Strzelnica, and Father marched off to Strzelnica with the men. Subsequently we found out that people like my mother and Mrs. Kalinyerska (ph) were put on a train. Nobody was saying where, but of course, that train went to Treblinka. Hania and Krysia, on the other hand, after all this was over, they were sent to place called Majowka, which was another camp in town. So that somehow, because then they started - people were beginning to be shifted, because I forgot how it was - I think Majowka

people used to work in the sawmill, or something, or the brick factory - I really don't know how it was all decided who worked where - but I do know that word came back to us that Hania and Krysia survived - no, the word was not 'survived' - that they were not shipped out. That they did not - that they were not shipped out, that they are still around, and that they are in Majowka. So, of course, now I'd met my father - not that I stayed with him, because men were separated from women. And Father again went into the office to do book work for the _____. And Hania reminded me that what happened later was that Father was sent to Majowka, or however it was, or Krysia was sent… How was it now? I forget how it was, but anyhow, two of us were in Strzelnica, Father and I. Hania and Krysia were in Majowka. Later on, the camps were combined. And, of course, later on the camps were shifted again. But at this point, I was with my father, and that, of course, was a great consolation, even if I didn't stay with him, because he was with the men's group. I stayed with women who knew me, who knew the family, and looked after me up to such time as Krysia and Hania joined me.

Q: Can we just go back?

A: Sure.

Q: I'm trying to visualize the picture you've created.

A: Yes.

Q: You're a child of… 1942… You're thirteen…

A: Thirteen, yes.

Q: …thirteen years old, and you're seeing a level of violence - you've seen some violence - but you're seeing a level of violence that…

A: Never ever.

Q: …exceeds anybody's imagination. Do you scream when you see things?

A: No, no.

Q: You're very quiet with your parents.

A: I am scared.

Q: You're so scared… Right.

A: I am scared out of my wits. I really, I couldn't scream. In fact, when we finally got to Strzelnica, and I didn't know yet Father was around, I couldn't yet cry - but I cried later -

but I couldn't yet cry because I was overwhelmed with fear. The terror of it all and the fear, it's sort of, you know, like you become breathless. I was frozen in the fear of it all. And I must say, this was the first time - the march to the square and then the march to Strzelnica - were my real first encounter with horror which I could not avoid. You know, like when we were coming back from the woods, when the war broke out, I saw dead horses on the road. I didn't see ever dead horses before, so I covered my eyes. I sort of covered my eyes, and I didn't see the - I saw the dead horses were coming up, and there was a dead horse, so I covered my eyes. But later on, there was no way of covering your eyes, because the horror was such, and you had to watch yourself, and you had to stay in line and you had to march as fast as you were told to. So that the overwhelming fear was sort of like paralysis, you know, paralysis of your brain. You don't think. You make the motion, your body propels you, but it's not the brain; it's the fear that propels you, I guess. And later on, until I wound down enough to cry - it took awhile because I was out of my mind with fear because, for the first time in my entire life, I was alone, left in these circumstances, where all these years I was so protected.

Q: This is going to be a strange question, but…

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think you were afraid because you were alone or because you were vulnerable, because you saw how vulnerable, or was the two of them…?

A: No, I was afraid because I was alone. Because, first of all, because of what I saw, you know? This was a shock to my system. Even if I were too much (ph) with parents and my sisters, I would still be shocked out of my wits to see the horror that I encountered between leaving the house and the selection in the square and the Strzelnica camp. I couldn't cover my eyes and I couldn't make believe it didn't exist because I had to have my wits around me to pay attention to everything because, if somebody fell under my feet, I couldn't stumble. So, the entire picture revolved around saving your life however you can, so you cannot disregard what's happening around you. So, that's 1942, and this is the rude awakening that is the point at which I was facing up to what is really happening, even though I wasn't yet told anything.

Q: So, when you… Is the first person in your family that you saw your father?

A: My father.

Q: And did you talk?

A: Well, maybe not. No, maybe waving or something.

Q: I see.

A: There was not yet, you know… We were segregated; he was in one group, but the fact is that he saw me and I saw him and we waved. And then other people got in touch with other men, so everybody said, "Oh, Renia, your father said that he's here and he'll look after…" And you know, so people would send messages that way. So, that was the only thing. But of course he did not know what happened to my mother. But of course maybe he knew and didn't tell me. Because my mother was supporting an elderly woman. So if you really had any, any understanding of the situation, you knew that Mrs. Kalinyerska (ph) was not one to be going to slave labor because she was old. And my mother, supporting her, had to go with her.

Q: So, one would assume if that young man who came out of the bushes - the story that Chris told - and if your parents really believed him as to what was happening in Treblinka, your father probably figured out where your mother probably went.

A: I can tell you, my understanding of everything is that they knew much more than they ever let on, because they were intelligent people, aside from which, you know, my father was fluent in German. In fact, he spoke and wrote and read German. He used to subscribe to German periodicals and such. I doubt very much that my father didn't know. I mean, that is impossible. But the fact that he didn't tell me, that is an absolute fact.

Q: So, did you keep in your head that at some point you would see your mother again?

A: Yes. Absolutely. I kept it in my head that - because, you see, the word 'resettlement' was being bandied about. What that word meant didn't quite - was never clarified, but they said "The resettlement to the east, the resettlement…" The word 'resettlement'. So, you know, you can always rationalize it. If you have already met the quota for slave labor for the Starachowice plant and the other factories nearby, then you resettle… I mean, on the child's level, you can more or less follow their train of thought. The others were resettled to places which was needed other people, so that was resettlement. And by the same token, I couldn't imagine that I wouldn't see my mother again, so that was another thing. Hiding from the real possibility of what happened. I felt that way right along, you know? I knew I didn't know. I knew what I didn't know. I really realized, but I didn't want to know.

Q: So, how long did it take before you met up with your sisters, do you think, about?

A: I don't really know, but my next recollection of the camp was - yeah, I worked in the laundry, you know, I was assigned to the laundry.

Q: That was right away?

A: In Strzelnica, right away. So that I did not go to the factory anymore. I worked in the factory maybe a month at the most. I worked in the fa-… And my next recollection of the place was that Hania became very - Hania must have already been in, because she had an

extreme case of typhus. And I remember that, because selections were being made. We had to line up, and they told you to run, and whoever could not run fast enough was taken out and shot. People were taken - ten or twelve men were told to dig a grave - and then people were taken over to the pit and shot. So, I do remember that Hania had such an extremely severe case of typhus, she was hallucinating and talking out of her head. I also had typhus but a mild form, so that, that was the one thing I remember so distinctly. And I met here in Florida, I met a friend of mine who worked with me in the laundry three years ago, and she said to me, "You know, Renia, you saved my mother's life." And I said, "I saved your mother's life? I never heard of anything like that." And she says, "Well, what happened is when we worked in the laundry…" She and her mother worked in the laundry with me, and her mother had a severe case of typhus. And they called us out and told us to line up, and she says that I stood - she put the mother between me and her - her mother was a tiny little woman; we were both taller than the mother and we held on to her and they passed by and didn't notice and she survived. Whereas I know for a fact that her mother saved my life because when I had typhus, she told me to stand over the cauldron where the steam was coming from, because I was red, you know, feverish, so she says, "When they see you, they will know that it's the steam." And so it was - they opened the door and looked in and then if anyone was sick with typhus, and we were all over the cauldrons there, and when I turned my head, they saw me all sweaty and red, and I was just one more slave worker doing laundry. So, that was actually, she - that was Mrs. Shacter (ph) - And so it was news to me when she told me I saved her mother's life. But the fact is that selections were being made right along, and typhus sufferers were eliminated one by one. So, Hania miraculously survived that selection.

Q: What did you - what went through your head when you saw these selections and people being killed because they were sick, or for some other reason? Did you think they were going to kill everybody?

A: No, absolutely not. I just don't know what I thought at that time. I just knew that times were very bad. And I just hoped maybe the war would be over and how it will be over, I didn't know. I didn't know who was fighting whom, and where was the front or if there was the front, or the Germans were there to stay, or whatever. I just figured that it couldn't go on forever, you know, one way or another it has to end. And I just - I made no connections. In fact, I was really, truly - I was not an independent thinker in any such way that you could imagine me, planning or… I probably understood what was going on very well. I understood it very well, because horror is not very hard to understand. It's naked horror in front of your eyes, so you know what is happening. But how that related to the overall thing, I knew I was petrified. I lived in fear every second of my life. That I knew. After that, I couldn't say that I ever could figure out the next day or the month later or if it will end - I knew it would end sometime - but how and when, no such thing.

Q: Now, you were probably a little past the age of when a young girl would have menstruated.

A: Oh, yes, not past the age, but, just to give you the quick overview, I went through all the camps - Auschwitz and Ravensbrück and Retzow and back home to Poland - and I still did not start. So, that was what you say called a delayed reaction.

Q: Right.

A: And of course, I was not developed and I lacked proper nutrition; I was a skinny child.

Q: Did you know that you were supposed to menstruate?

A: But of course!

Q: Yeah. And were you nervous about the fact that…?

A: No, I was glad!

Q: [chuckles]

A: I was very, very happy - not happy, but I was glad because I feared - that was one extra fear, what would happen if and when I did, because supplies were - if you can call them supplies - rags were hard to come by. No, but I never had such a fear because nothing was happening and nothing did happen and I never developed until after the war.

Q: Were you able to notice whether other women were menstruating in the ghetto?

A: No, I know that they didn't because in Auschwitz - I repeat that like an ignoramus because I don't know what it means - but in Auschwitz, they used to say that the soup, the so-called soup that we were given, had *brom* in it. Now, I don't know what *brom* is - and this was some kind of a - whatever it was, a medication or whatever - that that prevented women from menstruating. I have no idea, I am just repeating it as I heard it. So, I know that the women did not menstruate. Why, I wouldn't know, and whether it was due to some concoction or an agent or a chemical being put in the food, I couldn't tell, but I knew that much.

Q: Now, that's a long-term myth, that they put in something in the food.

A: It is.

Q: They put stuff in the food, but not to stop menstruation.

A: So, maybe lack of nutrition…?

Q: That's why I was asking, in the ghetto circumstance and in the camp circumstance - you didn't get it, but I wondered whether you noticed that other women…

A: I wouldn't know.

Q: You wouldn't know?

A: I know that I did not until way after we came back to Poland, and I mean, way after. Maybe even later than that - maybe in Berlin in '46. As far down the road as that.

Q: And what was food like in the camp? What did you get in the morning? Did you get two meals, three meals, if one could call them meals?

A: Would you believe that I really don't remember? I know that we were fed. But, in those days, we were getting Pancheska (ph), the Pancheski (ph) family were sending, you know, they had some of our better things, crystal, silver, and they were selling it off little by little and were sending in money. One of the husbands, actually, it was one of the sisters was married to one of the men who worked in the factory - you know, one of the Pancheska (ph) sisters. There were four sisters, so one of the husbands - the husband of one worked in the factory, and he used to bring - Maria used to sell the stuff - and he used to bring the money. And she was the only one who never even wanted that stuff originally, but Mother said those are things of sentimental value. In fact, after the war, whatever we had from home is from them. You know, those little Passover silver cups - Did Chris tell you about it?

Q: Yes.

A: Yeah, so those things, she kept that she didn't sell yet. Because, Genia (ph), the maid, she had really - she really wanted everything, and she took everything. But you know, a sewing machine is not of sentimental value, and bedspreads and draperies have not got sentimental value. So, she took it and it was her own, but Mrs. Pancheska (ph) took everything my parents had - you know, gifts, wedding gifts, and such, silver - so, they kept it and sold whatever they felt that would bring in more money and that's how we survived.

Q: So, this was an unusual circumstance to have somebody so close being able to get things in to you?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: And is it the case also that she was able to get medicine in when you had typhus?

A: I don't think so.

Q: No?

A: No. Money was nothing. I mean, money you can hide but you cannot hide things. And he used to give it - the husband of one of the sisters - used to give it to somebody we knew and they would bring it from the factory, so that worked out.

Q: Did they take away your clothes when you went into the - into the camp? You had all these layers of clothes.

A: Yes.

Q: What did you do with them?

A: No, in that camp, we kept our clothes. They didn't give you - I don't think so - not until Auschwitz. I think I wore my personal things.

Q: And where did you sleep?

A: In barracks. You see, Strzelnica was what they call a shooting range originally, and then they built a bunch of barracks there, you see, so that is where one of the camps was made, was Strzelnica. Whereas - Now, when I went to Poland, in 1980, I asked - Pancheska's (ph) granddaughter took us there. I wanted to see Strzelnica. Well, it's back to a shooting range, you see. And some of the barracks were left over but not all. So, that was an area that was inside the woods, and the barracks - again, I can't tell you whether they were built for us or built prior or however, but there were barracks and we slept with women.

Q: We need to take a break now, to change the tape.

End of Tape #5

Tape #6

Q: Renia, how would you describe your relationship with your two other sisters at this point? I mean, they're sort of… Do each of you have a different role at this point, I mean, could you describe it that way?

A: In a sense, yes, and in a sense, no, because as far as I'm concerned personally, I was always at the receiving end, meaning I received all the love, and I received all the protection, and I received all the care and all everything. I was the one really who most likely contributed list to the general survival scheme, or whatever you call it. I was on the receiving end of it most of the time. I adored my sisters. Krysia, Chris, my next higher than I sister, was always the practical kind and always very wise in organizing and assessing, so… Hania was sort of in the clouds. She was very smart and very brilliant, but she was always sort of - she was catered to, you know. In those days, if you had a very smart person in the family, you had to defer to that person because you couldn't disturb the genius at work. So, it sort of carried over to her… Not that she was a sponger of any kind - it's just that she was really at a certain level of higher existence that she didn't really have to so much worry about everyday things. So that basically, Chris was the one who pulled the two of us toward the center, you see? And Hania was very bright and very intelligent, and understood most everything better than I do anytime, but we loved each other a whole lot, and the fact that we were now separated from our parents - now, I'm saying separated because we were still separated from our father but we knew he was around and saw him every now and then and would wave to him, and we were separated from our mother because we really did not know what death was all about. So, we deluded ourselves that, well, this resettlement, whatever. Having seen so many people resettled from Lodz and from Austria in our own hometown, we knew what resettlement was all about. People were being shifted here and there, and so Mother was shifted somewhere else, and everything is going to come out fine, because when everything ends, she will show up. So, basically, we were even closer as a unit now than we ever were. And, I must say, I contributed only by the fact that I was there, and they felt that they had to protect me, and so that was a little more mortar to the binding. But I was not the planner; I was not a - I didn't visualize things in practical terms. I understood the situation very well, having now seen what was transpiring, but how that applied to anything; it really didn't, not in my little world, because this was all stuff I didn't know how to deal with. Besides, I had these two protectors. First I had my two parents; I was always the tag-along. Now, Hania and Krysia were sort of protecting me. So, I just had to see that I stayed out of trouble, that I was alert at all times to what was around me, that I understood the danger, that I understood how to handle myself, you know? And the rest, I knew I was being provided with the love and protection. And that truly was how I really survived the war. Not on my own account in any way. I don't take credit for survival at all, truly. That is how I actually saw myself. I saw to it that I really should know what was going on and try to avoid getting into trouble, meaning situations that had no exit.

Q: Why wouldn't you consider that - I don't want to call it a survival strategy - but why wouldn't you consider that things that you actually did? You had to watch, because…

A: But I was not responsible for anybody but myself, don't you see? In the way we were brought up, watching out for yourself wasn't the greatest thing in the world that you want to do, because you really always needed to think of that other person. But by virtue of being at the end of the line, and not being terribly attuned to realities and not being old enough to understand it all and put it together, I could understand the danger and the fear, but I couldn't relate it to the fact that I was doing anything special, because I wasn't doing anything for anybody. I was trying to keep myself alive by seeing that I survived, you know? That's about it. Not by harming anybody, not by doing anything special, but by just watching out, and of course, to keep control of the fear, which was a task of itself. Controlling your fear is extremely hard, if you see if your fear is legitimate, it's extremely hard to do.

Q: Could you control your fear?

A: At certain times I could, at certain I could not. Like the time when I was alone going to Strzelnica camp. But my fear was uncontrollable, but there was double fear of what would happen if I didn't control myself - because everybody was just falling by the wayside. You see, that much I understood.

Q: Were there other kids about your age in the camp, as well?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: There were?

A: Not only, you know, I imagine you must have heard about it. Not only were they in the camp, they were basically smuggled into the camp. They were outside the camp with Christians, or however they were smuggled. These kids eventually went to Auschwitz, survived Auschwitz, five and seven year old kids, survived Auschwitz, and one of them is still alive in Israel. But three of these little kids that lived in camp, who went to Poland after, to Starachowice after the war, were killed in Starachowice, so you heard about that. I think the name was - Hania reminded me - Eisenmann (ph) - and Wolfowicz (ph) was the man that was the boss of the laundry where I worked, so Wolfowicz (ph) I think had two children. They were in camp, you see, he smuggled them in and they lived in the back of the laundry or whatever, but I knew of the Wolfowicz (ph) kids. And they survived the evacuation to Auschwitz, they survived Auschwitz, and everything that came after, and they came back to Poland, and they were killed after the war in Poland.

Q: Do you have any idea why they smuggled the kids into the camp from these places they were being hidden?

A: I don't know. I just knew, because they were in a position to get them in, because they bribed someone or something. I know that Mr. Wolfowicz (ph) was my boss in the laundry, and his kids - he had two kids - so, I don't know how many there was - I don't know, less than ten - and they did survived. They were five-year-old kids.

Q: But how about children your age, young adults?

A: Yeah, they were, they were, some of them survived, down in Israel, of course.

Q: So, the contact that you had during the day - you're at the laundry most of the day?

A: Yes.

Q: So, you don't see your sisters because they're working elsewhere?

A: Right.

Q: So, do you have friends outside your two sisters?

A: Oh, yes, yes, my peers. For example, the girl in the laundry, Rachelka Shacter (ph), she was a very good friend. Then I had my Hania Tenser (ph), she was the one who came from Israel to testify that she was in the gas chamber, and she was my friend. Yes, I had - you know - they were all kids, but you know, a fourteen, thirteen year old kid can work pretty well in the laundry, believe me, and that was just as well slave labor as anything.

Q: Now, I'm going to go back to a question I asked you a long time ago, because you interpreted it somewhat differently than I had intended it. Do you now, when you're in the laundry, in some sense reap the benefits of having been in school with your sister teaching you, because you kept learning things? Did these things go through your head? Do you replay the books in your head, and poetry?

A: Oh, yes, most of all poetry. I am absolutely crazy about poetry. And, you know, the amazing thing is that the emphasis on learning things by rote, by heart, was very strong in my schooling years, and Hania kept on the same way, so I actually remember a whole lot of Polish poetry, I remember sections of Shakespeare in Polish, and you know, in the hardest of times - to this day I can recite poetry that I wouldn't even believe that I would. There is a Polish epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, that of course I must have read a million times now already, but I do read it - it's one of the greatest works. Anyway, I went to see the movie based on that - it was released about two years ago, by Andrzej Wajda, the director, and they stuck very close to the script and used at least 80% of the poetry as was the epic. I was sitting in the movie with Victor - of course, Victor doesn't speak Polish, but he enjoyed the movie subtitles - and I am reciting with the movie, I am reciting *Pan Tadeusz* because I exactly know what's going to come. And he walks into this room and he looks around and he sees the grandfather clock, and he recites this poem about his connection

to the grandfather clock, and I am going right along with him, and I know one line ahead of him all the time. So, those things sustained me, definitely. And I didn't see it - again, it's a connection, where it's going to lead me. This was like nourishment; perhaps that's how I should have put that - that learning for its own sake, if it was pleasurable, was the greatest pleasure. So, when you're down and out, what else but to draw on this something that was so pleasurable. And it was personal, intimate, because you didn't have to find a book, you didn't have to rely on the movies or on other people - all you had to do was start reciting in your head that poem - and there were so many, because we were forced to memorize good poetry, really. So, that was, to this day, I absolutely have every piece of poetry that I love, I have it now, and I re-read it, strangely enough. I enjoy it and I enjoy it and there is no end to the enjoyment, and that could have been part of what I call this lifting up the soul. Again, you see, it doesn't - I'm sorry that I don't answer, didn't answer your question to your satisfaction.

Q: No, no, no, no, no - that's not what I said. You interpreted it differently; it wasn't that you didn't answer it to my satisfaction. It's just that I had a slightly different intention, and it was very interesting to hear where you took it.

A: Yes.

Q: But perhaps I asked it too early. Asking you now is maybe more appropriate. Is there any poem that you recall repeating to yourself a lot there, that you could repeat for us, that was really important?

A: No, no, mostly it was Mickiewicz or Tuwim - I don't know if you've heard of him. Mickiewicz was a 19th century poet of Polish origin, but Lithuanian, he came out of, when Lithuania was part of - heavily Polish. But Tuwim was contemporary, and he wrote children's poems, and he was a Jew, a Polish Jew. And his poetry was very much taught in schools. Mickiewicz, of course, and there was Slowacki, and there were all other important poets, but they were 18th/19th century poets. Twentieth century poet was Julian Tuwin, who was a Jew by birth, and every kid knew his poetry. In fact, when our parents had company and they wanted to show off the kid, they would come and say, "Hey, hey, say that locomotive poem by Tuwim." You showed off that because it was such beautiful poetry. And, so I have Tuwim, I have him. Unfortunately, I didn't quite agree with the way his life turned out, because he sort of - he came to America during the war and then went back to Communist Poland. He had left this _____. Not that it means anything in the broader sense. He was nevertheless the greatest poet of the 20th… one of the great, outstanding Polish poets of the 20th century was Julian Tuwim. They're trying to rehabilitate him now, but his poetry lives on, so who cares, whatever the background. So, you know, all of those little poems and big poems would come back, and they gave you a semblance of continuity of something that was, maybe you didn't lose it yet. If you could remember that poem that your mother made you recite at that party, you know, and the connection, you see? And of course, you know, children, you had to curtsey for your parents' friends; you had to curtsey. So, when you came to make a big presentation, she

called you in, you had to curtsey and say the poem, and then would curtsey and walk out. So, if it was possible, which it was, to make the mental connection from the present situation which I found myself in to this thing that was once sort of part of the other life, that was great. And if you call it the thread that sustains you, fine, but that's what it really was.

Q: Were there any situations where there was a public sharing of poetry or singing in the camp that you remember?

A: Yes, a lot of times, because, as I told you, Polish education required you to know certain poems, period. That's it. So, this is how it was, that if you started, somebody else chimed in, somebody else sung. There was a lot of singing; it was good.

Q: In the camp?

A: In the camp, yeah.

Q: Did you sleep with your sisters?

A: Yes.

Q: In the same barrack?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: So, in the evening, you would be together. And were they able to get in touch with your father more regularly than you?

A: Yes, we saw Father, yes. He slept elsewhere, but he was working in the little office, so we could always see him.

Q: How do you remember him doing?

A: He was doing fine, because we were around. But people told us - people from Starachowice who survived the war and Auschwitz, whom we met after the war - they said that the minute he came to Auschwitz, he was another man. Father, according to accounts of other people that knew him, he perished in October, you see, we came to Auschwitz at the end of July; he perished in October. They said he aged so, and he totally, he was totally disheartened. He was totally - he felt completely lost. Maybe he by then knew - he could have known about my mother. I don't know. But then, of course, he didn't have us anymore. He knew we were somewhere in there, but he didn't really know. They said that his legs swelled up and he was gone. He perished in Auschwitz.

Q: Was he gassed, do you know?

A: Oh, yes, I'm sure.

Q: Do you know about how old he was by the time he got to Auschwitz? Would he have been in his 50s?

A: Yes.

Q: Was there a warning that there would be an evacuation at the camp; that you were going to be deported out of the camp?

A: Out of Strzelnica camp to Auschwitz? Well, you see, I might as well bring in the fact that we were not evacuated from Strzelnica and Majowka. We were evacuated from a totally different camp.

Q: Oh, so describe it.

A: Well, the munitions factory had a siding, you know, because to deliver and take out the stuff by train. At a certain time, at a certain point in 1944, in July or so, middle of July, we were resettled to yet another camp, but very near the munitions factory, next to the siding, the railroad siding, and that camp was the last camp in Starachowice from which the evacuation to Auschwitz took place. That is where the break-out was, the rebellion and the break-out. That is where we were loaded on the train for Auschwitz, which is not Strzelnica and it's not Majowka, but it's the third place which I don't even know if it had a name, but it was the closest in location physically to the munitions factory because the railroad, the railroad tracks were right there, and that's where we were loaded to go to Auschwitz.

Q: And how long were you relocated in that place?

A: That I don't know, I really don't know.

Q: Do you think, days, weeks?

A: No, days, maybe a week or two at most. And this was a transient type of - I can't even say it was camp. It had barbed wire, or it had a wooden fence, whatever - it was surrounded by a fence, and it had guards, guard towers, you see, because that was very, this was so near to the factory that this was really probably war production area anyway, but they had guards, and they had Ukrainians in them. And this is where, and I don't know, Chris or Hania would remember better how long we stayed, but this was absolutely not a camp that we lived in because by then we didn't work anymore.

Q: I see. So, both camps were emptied…?

A: …emptied to the third, into the third. No, even before then, those two camps were combined. You know, I really forgot how the combination went. First it was Strzelnica and Majowka, then it was no more Strzelnica, it was only Majowka, and then I think, then it was the third camp, but it was physically another place.

Q: But you don't remember quite the timing of Strzelnica?

A: Strzelnica, no.

Q: Strzelnica turning…?

A: No, I don't know. Hania and Chris would probably remember it better. But I do know that we did not go to Auschwitz out of Strzelnica and not out of Majowka, but out of the third place.

Q: So, you're there for a few days, you think…

A: Let's say a week or so.

Q: A week, and then trains come.

A: Yeah, and they load us on the trains.

Q: And of course nobody announces to you where you're going.

A: No.

Q: Now, are you afraid again?

A: The one thing that I absolutely never lost was fear. That is one thing that followed me right through the war. Fear was sort of like, like your skin. Skin is part of your body, and fear is another aspect of that. And we just, I don't know that we knew that Auschwitz existed. I didn't; I don't know who knew. I just know that when we were being loaded, however that was arranged, Father's train, the car on the train, and ours were adjacent, meaning whether his was the last of the men's wagons and we were the first of the women's or the other way around. I don't know. I just remember that when we arrived in Auschwitz, when they unloaded us on the platform, that as soon as the women came out of this wagon, we saw the group of men coming out of that one that was adjacent to us, and that was the last time we saw him.

Q: How was the trip?

A: That was most horrendous. Horrendous isn't the word, because it was summertime, you know, it was the end of July 1942… No, what am I saying, it wasn't '42, of course not -

’44! We’re talking now, of course, this is the Russian offensive that has started, so the Germans are emptying all these labor camps and they are sending people westward. And we of course have no idea how the war is progressing, or at least I don’t. Because I really am living on another planet. I just want to survive. I’m full of fear and I’m trying to manage, but other than that, I really don’t have any idea what is happening. The only thing is that something bad is happening to the Germans because now there are signs that they are a little scared, you know? So, when we are loaded on those trains, I don’t know that we know that we’re going to Auschwitz or I don’t even know that - I mean, I didn’t - I didn’t even know that Auschwitz existed, but I figured if there is a war and the soldiers are moving closer, there will be soldiers fighting with soldiers. Maybe they want us out of the - you know, this is another type of pipe dream kind of thing. There was no water, you know. People were dying. There was shouting for the water, it was just horrendous. You know, I always think, was it the fact that I was so skinny that I survived? Really, I didn’t require, you know, I wasn’t hungry like other people, and my body didn’t require fuel the way some other people’s bodies required fuel. There could be something to it, you know? So, anyhow, when we arrived in Auschwitz, 1944, I think it was either end of July or early August. And then we found out in Auschwitz that other camps were being evacuated from all over, meaning east of Auschwitz. You know, our camps, our camp - Majowka/ Strzelnica - Starachowice was located in central Poland within that industrial district, and there were others - there was Skarzysko-Kamienna, there was Radom, there were other camps that were now being all evacuated. And we knew, for example, that the Radom transport arrived. And one day we saw my Aunt Rose in Auschwitz, passing by - we were carrying rocks this way and they were carrying rocks the other way - so we knew that all these other camps - we didn’t know that Aunt Rosa was alive, but we saw her in Auschwitz - so we knew, the word spread, that all these camps were being liquidated, so we could figure out something wasn’t going too well for the Germans, and…

Q: Before we take a break with the tape, when you arrived in Auschwitz, was it as awful an arrival as your marketplace experience?

A: Oh, yes, except for me personally, Hania and Krysia were there to protect me. In the marketplace, I was all alone and younger. You see, I’m a little older now, and of course, I have already learned to cope a little. Not that I was a lost soul, no. I was resilient in a self-preservation type of way but I wasn’t yet totally what you call clever about things. But, no, when we arrived in Auschwitz, we were the three of us. The interesting thing was, of course, which we didn’t know before but we now know, but most of those transports, the last minute transports of people shipped out of the slave labor camps, whether there was no time or whatever, they were not subject to selection. This is why the five-, seven-year-old kids survived Auschwitz. We were just herded out, put into the so-called showers, given, thrown the clothes that they gave us, you know? Our hair was chopped off - I didn’t say cut off, I say chopped off - so that we realized that the situation was quite different. Because little children and older women and people were already just shoved in all at once, from all over - Skarzysko, from Radom, from Wostrowiecz (ph).

Q: I'm sorry, we're going to have to stop now and change the tape.

End of Tape #6

Tape #7

Q: I was just thinking that your middle-childhood years, from 10 to 15, is all during this horrible period. You're 15 years old when you enter Auschwitz.

A: Yeah.

Q: It's quite extraordinary to think of that, isn't it? When I asked you about the entrance into Auschwitz, was there a lot of beating when you were taken off the railroad car, or was it more quiet? Do you have a recollection of that immediate time?

A: No, I don't, no, the only thing I remember distinctly having seen Father on the platform. But after that, I remember they were rushing us much in the so-called shower room or whatever you call that. And maybe Hania, Anna, would tell you about how she objected to being pushed and shoved and screamed at and for that they shaved off her hair, whereas our hair was just chopped off. They grabbed you by the hair, they put the scissors to it, and however it came it came, but they didn't shave your head, they didn't give you a haircut, they just chopped off some hair, whereas Hania and her friend Irene Muller, Irka Muller (ph), who is now Irene Ross, both very tall, Hania was with her and objected to the fact that she was being pushed on and screamed, and said, "Don't talk to me like this." So, the woman in charge, she was a Czechoslovak woman, she said, "Just for that, I'll show you what I can do." And she put her on the side there, and they shaved off her hair and Irene's hair - total zero, you know, complete bald - and we burst out laughing, in total hysterics. We thought it was just so funny, because the fun in it was not the fact that the hair was shaved, but because they were both tall and little heads on the top, you know, the pin on top. And it was so grotesque that it really lent itself to absolute hilarity in these circumstances, so we just laughed ourselves hilariously silly to tears. And we left that area, as we were all herded out. We left that area with Hania shaved to zero and Krysia, Chris, and I just having our hair, as I said, just chopped off however, and…

Q: So, your bodily hair was not shaved. Only…

A: No, I had no bodily hairs. I don't remember, but I guess not. But we were tattooed right then and there, too.

Q: So, you had your clothes off. You were nude when they cut your hair?

A: I think so. I think so. And we were tattooed, and I really always stress the fact that we lined up together for tattooing so that we had consecutive numbers, which really contributed to our survival as a unit, the three of us. Because, you know, not having a name, you are always referred as a number, and when they call X number of people for detail or work somewhere, you happen to be in the same unit of numbers, so that was lucky.

Q: Do you still have your tattoo?

A: Absolutely yes.

Q: Did you ever think of taking it off?

A: No, not only did I never thought of it, but I was trying - I was absolutely almost forced into doing it, which I very much objected to. You know, during my early years in America, I used to work in the summers as a babysitter, as a governess. So, I went to a hotel in the Catskills with a doctor's wife, you know, he was a surgeon - a plastic surgeon - and they had two children - one girl was about four and a baby like eight months old. And the mother used to be there with the two kids in a bungalow on the hotel premises and we used to eat in the dining room, but we lived separately, and the husband used to come for the weekends. Well, anyhow, when he discovered I had - I got the job through high school, through my high school, but that is another story, but an interesting story. But anyhow, I go to this camp, and it was in Wingdale, New York. And of course I had came to meet them, and then the doctor used to come for the weekend, and he noticed my number. He said, "You know, I am a plastic surgeon. I'd like to remove this number." And I said, "No, I don't want to remove it." So, he says - he thought - you know, those were my salad (ph) days - and he says, "Listen, I will not charge you, you have nothing to worry about. I will do a fine job and it won't cost you a penny. After, you come back to New York, you come to my office and I'll do it for you for free." I said, "No, I don't want to do it." And I wouldn't do it. And he said to me, "Why would you want to have it? Why on earth would you want to keep it? You're a young girl. Why on earth would you want to keep it?" I said, "Well, I have brown eyes, they're a part of my body. That's a part of my body, too, and I'm staying with it." So, I kept it, and of course I never regretted it, never.

Q: Was it humiliating to have the tattoo put on? Did it hurt you?

A: Oh, yes it was painful. You know, they pulled on the skin. By the way, we had very "elegant" numbers, quote-unquote, "elegant", because I know people who got there much earlier than we did. They have these horrendous looking numbers - a '7' crooked, an '8' was something else. By the time we got there, which was, as the war progressed, it was really toward the end of the war already, they had such fine experience in tattooing that our numbers, Hania's, Krysia's and mine, are in perfectly beautiful sequence - even, really even - so that we don't have these numbers that others had on the outside, these humungous - we have these elegant numbers because they had all these - and by the way, I have the second serial. My number begins with an 'A' because they ran out of the first series of numbers, and they started an 'A' series.

Q: So, when you get tat-… You're shaved, you get tattooed, and then the clothes.

A: The clothes were thrown at you. Whatever happens to be, whatever - size does not matter. You get what you got and shift for yourself. If you were a size 5, you get size 27, and if you're size 12, you get size 6, and after that you have to go and exchange with others. And those were rags basically, rags. I mean you know, stuff - I understand now that they were shipping out to Germany, good clothes and such, so whatever was left in the piles was really second-hand already.

Q: Were they filthy?

A: Actually, I don't know. I don't think so because I imagine they must have steamed them for lice. There was always vermin in there.

Q: When did you find out that this was Auschwitz and what Auschwitz was? Was it very soon after your arrival?

A: Oh, yes, absolutely, by then there was no hiding from the truth. Because, first of all, you saw the crematories. I think by then there no five crematories left. I think by then, because you know, some of the crematories were destroyed by whatever means. The point of it is we were not burned. There was no selection for burning or for gassing. We were just brought in as a unit and shipped into Birkenau as a unit, and all the other camps - of course, we realized why this was happening. There were just too many camps being emptied into Auschwitz to be able to run the enterprise as they did before, with selections and such. So that when we came, you could smell - you could see the fire out of the chimney. And of course, burning flesh has a very strong odor that is nothing like anything else that you know. So, that was unmistakable, the burning of human bodies, unmistakable.

Q: Did you know at the time that there were huge numbers of Hungarian Jews being brought in?

A: Yes, we discovered that and, you know, my memory of all this is sort of hazy, but I do know that there was a gypsy camp not far from our barracks because they talked about the gypsies, and we heard that the Hungarians were being shipped in, too, at the same time. But you see, this was already very - I don't know how they brought out people to Auschwitz as far as numbers, but I am sure with the German system, the way they run everything to the last detail, they probably spaced these transports. Now it was just one after the other, but the Russian offensive was really nearing to Auschwitz. I mean, you know, the Russians stopped at the Vistula River, and that was another political treachery (ph), but who knew then that Stalin wouldn't cross the Vistula, but they were coming. The Russians were coming from the east, so all these camps - we were, after all, located not far from the Vistula, not all that far, so anyhow… I mean, not as near as Krakow or other cities that were on the Vistula, but we were within the area that could be contacted very quickly. However, they didn't because Stalin sat himself down and waited for the Germans to finish off the job. So, all these camps that were being emptied, we realized

that something was happening from the east. But how much could you know when you're living behind barbed wires, and now you're coming here, and you see all these other camps, Radom, and everybody else is there.

Q: You were put into a quarantine camp for the first month?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you remember what barrack it was? Do you have any recollection?

A: No, no, the only thing I remember is that after the war, in 1987, and I was there with Chris, that we went to see the barrack, so then I knew that was the barrack. But I remember the barrack as a barrack in the interior, but if you ask me what number it was and to find it in the complex, I couldn't, but I was there in 1987.

Q: How did you understand what a quarantine camp was? What was that supposed to mean, "quarantine barrack"?

A: Well, I'll tell you, all these fancy words of "quarantine" and all this other thing, you only knew that there were all kinds of new horrors coming, so one horror was of this nature and one horror was of that nature. Personally, as I told you, I could not figure out what it led to or what it led from or how it figured in the larger picture. I didn't know if they meant to keep us there for a month or for a year or forever or whatever. But having now acquired enough experience to see that nothing is certain, that nothing is permanent, that everything changes, and it always changes for the worse, because so far in our experience, nothing changes for the better. It was all downhill and by some miracle, we managed to stay together, which was altogether a miracle, altogether the most unbelievable miracle. So, that we knew was a lucky break, that one, but everything else was just pure horror. And this was just another thing, and God only knows what the next thing was going to be. And that horrendous smell of burning flesh was really… well, sort of like very ominous in the sense that that is maybe after all going to be, you know, the final, the final, the tail end part of this horrible journey, who knows - we didn't know.

Q: Do you recall the moment that you found out about the gas chambers?

A: Oh, we were told right away. The old-timers were there, of course. They said, "They burn people here. They ship them in, they burn them all the time." Of course, no question! How could you not know? I mean, even if you didn't know, you saw the flame. Generally, if you drive by the Jersey Turnpike, you see the smoke coming out, whether it is acrid smoke or whatever it is, it's smoke, it's belching black or white or whatever. This was fire, you see?

Q: Not smoke.

A: Not smoke; this was fire. You saw, in the dark of the night, this luminous ball of fire against the dark sky. It was unmistakable. You couldn't call it anything else. This was light fire. Now, this light fire also had an overpowering stench. And now, here you have the old-timers who tell you this. Now, how much more can you - do you need to figure out what was going on?

Q: So, did they also tell you things to avoid? Did you get clues about how one could survive in this thing? That there was a way…?

A: No, no. Because - I don't remember the sequence of things, but I remember there were some girls who ran away, who escaped from Auschwitz at that time, and they were brought back and they were hung. So, we already knew, you know, like the hanging in Poland on the square for the Christians to see when they came out, so we already knew that such tactics lead to other things, that this was just a warning but watch out because you're next.

Q: Did you see the bodies?

A: No.

Q: You just heard about it?

A: I heard about it.

Q: So, in the first month or two, do you three talk about this situation? Try to figure out…?

A: We talked all the time. First of all, we sleep nine to a bunk. It is very hard to accommodate nine people to a bunk, so we had to talk. You have nine people herded into one place, you have to talk. You talk because at a certain time, you can't even step down; you have to be up in your bunk. So, obviously some are old-timers - although we are still traveling - so-called traveling, quote-unquote - we are still within the Starachowice group because we were shipped as a unit, and we were placed as a unit. Of course, we are mixed in with others, of course, but we still have some of these people from Starachowice with us. And we were nine to a bunk, so all of us couldn't be all greenhorns; some of them have already previous knowledge of what this place is about and what's happening. So, now there are no secrets; now we know the truth. And I think I myself for the first time am beginning to realize that all these things I was trying to explain away - you know, this is now 1944, and for the last two years, '42-'44, it is always downhill, it is downhill, it is downhill, but now this could very well be the end of the downhill, but this is more than the imagination will allow. I remember being very scared in Auschwitz, very, very scared, because I thought that was the end, I really did. But by that time I think my attitude was a little different, you know? Sort of accepting of whatever was going to happen. Because, you know, by now, we still didn't know about Mother, we didn't know. I mean, everybody could figure out that she didn't survive, but

we didn't know. And what happened to Father we didn't know either, so now we're just the three of us, and whatever awaited us after this we didn't know, because we had no idea where the war was heading, which way. We knew it wasn't good for the Germans, but that's about it.

Q: Do you have nightmares?

A: Did I have then? No.

Q: You didn't?

A: No, I didn't have nightmares, no.

Q: Were you able to sleep okay?

A: Oh, yes!

Q: Really?

A: If you were made to carry heavy rocks and then be a skinny kid, you were exhausted! Too exhausted not to sleep. Besides, there's something to be said for being squeezed in with all these bodies. You know, you cannot toss and you cannot scream, because somebody is going to poke you right away and, "Hey." Maybe I had nightmares, but they didn't allow me to have nightmares because, when you're squeezed between two other bodies, how would you be able to thrash around or yell or scream? Somebody's going to go, "Hey, shut up, you," or whatever.

Q: Was it quiet in the barrack or was it noisy? Do you remember? Smelly?

A: Well, it wasn't clean… I really don't remember - I just remember the upper bunk is where we were at.

Q: You were in the upper bunk, so that was good.

A: I remember that. But there was nothing on the wood itself. A pallet, I think, but there was very little.

Q: Was there an oven in the middle?

A: I think so. But that I know from having gone back now to take a look.

Q: When did - I don't know the chronology, so I may be asking the question too soon - when did the incident with the boots happen? Was this before you were in *Effektenkammer* or after?

A: You mean whose boots? Hania's boots?

Q: No, when you were asked to clean the boots of the…

A: Oh, yes. No, that was exactly the time; that was exactly the time, inside the barrack, right. That was Aranka. She was the head of the barrack. And you know the latrine was outside. To go to the latrine, you had to have permission. To get permission, and there were only X number of people could go at one time so you were allowed in this group of three. So, whatever, I was going to the latrine, and she caught me coming back to the vestibule - Aranka who was as big as a horse and as fierce looking as the Gestapo themselves. She was a Czech girl, Czechoslovak. And she was wearing these black boots - riding boots - and she dragged me over. She says to polish those boots with my spit, and I was so terribly offended, but I knew I could pay with my life if I didn't, because she was so powerful and so fat and so big and I was a skinny kid, and one blow from her, that would have been the end. But I was so incensed about it. I remember that I always think about it in the sense of how stupid it was for me to get myself so worked up over it. Because from what I had already experienced and seen, I should have known that this is just one more humiliation, but it isn't of such great importance that it should make - I cried over it because, of course, she put her foot up on the stool, and I stood there on my knees polishing her boots and spitting and I had very little spit to spit with, and of course she would have killed me. And I felt so humiliated and offended and I never got over it for the longest time. And I knew as I told you that this was out of proportion to the reality. It seems, as I survey my war experiences, that always it was that particular instance, it wasn't the general, you know? The specific and personal was the one that stayed with me. For having seen all these things and having experienced other people's horrible experiences right next to me, those other things really count for very little, except that I could really have paid with my life. But it wasn't so much the fear for my life, but the humiliation that she was not German, you see? I had already accepted that anything that had to do with the Nazis was dreadful and to be avoided, but the source was different. In other words, it was coming from a Czech woman that the humiliation was double because I had yet not accepted that aside of the Nazis, there were other people who could do that. So, I was just absolutely - it destroyed me. But it really didn't amount to much. I did survive it, so… I polished her boots and I'm sure she never knew which one of those ugly looking people I was. So, there were no repercussions to it in a sense.

Q: So, she didn't take it out on you later?

A: No, because I did do the job, there's no question. I was down on my knees, and she was towering over me. I tell you, once kick and I could have been gone.

Q: Does this situation in some way remind you of the situation your mother told you about with respect to your father?

A: Absolutely, yes, absolutely, it was exactly the same. And the German said to her, "These aren't gentlemen, these are Jews. And that Father became so humiliated. Of course, he was sweeping the rail station. It was very, very upsetting to him.

Q: Was this Czech woman Jewish?

A: I really don't know. Her name was Aranka; everybody was scared to death of her because her physical presence was really very… threatening. And she had a very loud voice and screamed a lot. I was always afraid of her, but this is not why I felt humiliated, I think. It was because she was not German. Because by then I started realizing that it is not the Nazis only that I have to fear; I have found a new source of fear that I have to watch out for, and I could only handle that much.

Q: It gets bigger and bigger.

A: Yeah, the circle, so to say, is getting enlarged, and now I have other things to worry about, because just because she's not a Nazi doesn't mean she can't kill me, 'cause she can, and get away with it.

Q: We'll have to take a break to change the tape.

End of Tape #7

Tape #8

Q: Let me go back to Majowka for a moment, because I realize that - I wonder if there are any comparable incidents for you in Majowka - not necessarily of being humiliated, but maybe humiliated or beaten, or were there people that you were as afraid of in Majowka as you were in Auschwitz?

A: You know, I don't really remember, but I do know that I felt - probably, I would guess I would have felt less fear in Majowka than in Auschwitz because Majowka was still Starachowice and Father was still on the premises and it was really hometown, my hometown, even though there was no semblance to life or home or anything, this was the place that was a familiar - not the camp, but the town was a familiar town. Auschwitz was a totally different situation, where everything was threatening from Day 1. The mixture of fatherless; the total terror being surrounded by electrical barbed wire; by a system in place - you know, I think Starachowice camps were run sort of ad hoc, if you know what I mean. Run it as well as you can, and if you can't, then shoot a few and kill a few and run it. This was organized murder, planned, executed and otherwise set up to the last detail. And then you get thrown into a situation of different nationalities, so you are beginning to understand the scope of this entire drama - it's not a drama - of this entire epic is much larger. It isn't a little Starachowice slave labor camp that is kept to produce war machinery, where just soldiers fight each other. This is another aspect of something that is not yet even known or comprehended or - it doesn't seem to serve a purpose. You see, in Starachowice, you could always rationalize: "They have to keep these slave laborers; otherwise, they cannot win the war. If they don't produce the cannon shells, the war cannot be won, or whatever. They cannot fight the war." So, however you slice it, these people are not expendable because somebody has to produce war material. In Auschwitz, there's no such reasoning available to you because you realize this place is like a dead end. It has no function as far as doing something for any reasonable kind of an end. It doesn't produce war material. It doesn't do anything to fight the Germans… er… to help the Germans to fight the war. It houses people who are getting killed. Nobody is doing anything except stupid things - if anything, cutting marshes and, like Sisyphus, carrying back and forth the rocks from here to there. We saw our Aunt Rose from Radom. One day we are on the line carrying the rocks here and she was going with the rocks there and we waved to her. We didn't know she was in Auschwitz. So, you begin to understand, even as I was beginning now to more or less mature into this reality of what it was, that this is another story all together. This is absolutely the end of the line for not just Starachowice people and the Jews. It's the mixture people - you get Czech people and they brought in the transport from Salernjica Grise (ph) and all kinds of people who, for all kinds of reasons who have nothing to do with punishment. So, that's when it becomes obvious that that is another thing to contemplate. So, basically, a place like Auschwitz, where you do not produce, cannot be explained away. It must be confronted, even for somebody as - somebody who tries so hard to dismiss certain things, meaning, "Well, you know, tomorrow is another day, and this isn't so bad." But it is. It is. Now you know it is so bad. And, you know, we still don't know that Father perished, we don't

know that yet. But the ambiance, and the work that is not work, and the food that isn't food, and the constant roll calls, and the threats if you don't show on roll call everybody else gets killed and all this, this has another dimension. And this is when, I mean, you see, I have already learned to live with fear as part of - fear that could at least be used to motivate me to look out and to watch out, to see that I don't become a burden to my sisters and to see that I can maneuver somehow through. But here, there is just somehow - things are cut off when we come to Auschwitz because you don't see anything to justify your being there. "Why do they want me here? Over there, they needed the laundry, but here they don't need anything. They're just feeding you for nothing." Which is another thing that I understood by then: you cannot be fed for nothing - whatever feeding that meant - but if you are fed, that means they permit you to live, and if they permit you to live, that means they have to use you for whatever you that have. But here, there is nothing to do. I mean, it has no connection to all the things that you have already figured out, that I have already figured out. So, I realized then that this would really be the end for us. But I still didn't think that I would have to decide how to get out of it. I felt Krysia and Hania would really protect me. So, whatever happens, with three of us together. But that was a dark hour; those were really dark hours in Auschwitz, the first period, you know. Of course, it was getting colder, and after the quarantine we were sent to cut marshes and it was getting much colder. We were standing in water. And it was physically getting to be - not that it was demeaning. Nothing was demeaning anymore. It was just the physical hardship was beginning to creep in.

Q: What were you wearing on your feet?

A: I think we were wearing wooden shoes, and that was bad.

Q: So, you were probably blistering up again.

A: Yes, and you know, working in the marshes, we were in wetness always. And this is by now probably October. You know, it gets chilly in Poland. October is a very chilly month.

Q: Did you know about the uprising and the blowing up of the gas chambers in October?

A: Yes, the word got around. I didn't know all the details, but I knew there was an uprising, yes. Because, you see, we were now mixed in with all the other - the people who were longer and longest and we were the shorter and there were others the shortest. You know, so this was already - we arrived in, let's say, August, early August, and this is October, and meanwhile others came after us, but there were now other people who came two years before us. So, we were getting pretty - and nine people on the - you know, you could talk to your heart's content, because outside they wouldn't allow it maybe, but in the privacy of your nine people's perch, you can exchange information.

Q: How did you notice the way people were relating to each other? I mean, this is a situation of enormous deprivation, let alone terror and fear. When you think about the barrack, did you see people fighting with each other, or screaming at each other, or stealing?

A: Yes, definitely, yes, but I didn't experience any of it. I don't know, I really always talk about it, that human kindness is what I have actually depended on. That I have - Somehow, people have always shown me a certain kind of deference - not deference because of anything that I represent, in fact, because I was skinny and undernourished and a poor little skinny kid. So, everybody was taking pity on me, you know, so I always felt no matter where I went, there was always somebody taking pity on me to do this or to do that or to console me or whatever. We never had situations where we had to fight, but there were people in the barracks absolutely who fought. I mean, people would kill for a piece of bread. And people would… But, you know, I always have this habit in me to analyze things, why would… "Well, maybe the Greek people, they understand things differently." I was yet to grow up to understand that people are just people. You can come from the North Pole or the South Pole or anywhere in between. It's still the same people and it's exactly… The only thing is that in such unusual circumstances, different people reveal their character in a different way, so that some people who personify goodness become even better than goodness personified. Others who have the beast in them become even more beastly. You could see that among the Germans as well - those who turned a tender head when they could see something wasn't exactly according to the rule, and those who just waited for you to step out of the line-up two inches because they were ready to kill, and they were ready, and you stepped out and that was it. But those are all musings on a psychological kind of a reality that, in my own little world in those days - I could always depend on the Starachowice people who were still around, that I knew. And we were still around, mixed with them. And then there were others who were also riddled with fear. And then there were others that I always felt that I didn't want to be near - I mean, prisoners, you know? This was a world of its own, but a reflection of a bigger world, I guess, which is that human beings just are about the same everywhere, it's the circumstances that bring out in you whatever it is that you have in you.

Q: Did anyone ever surprise you, someone you thought was a good person turned out in that situation to be very difficult or harsh?

A: I can't remember those things really. I'm sure if I thought about it, I probably would dig it out somewhere in the recesses of my mind. But at this point, no, I couldn't off-hand think of anybody, but I do know that, speaking in generalities, I could tell you that people always took pity on me and were nice to me. That, I mean, I don't know how else to put that. There was something about people that made them look after me.

Q: So you never found a circumstance where people actually resented the fact that you were so young and still survived? Women who might have been older and had lost…?

A: No, quite the opposite.

Q: Really?

A: Quite the opposite. Maybe I reminded them of their kid. Whatever it was, but it was quite the opposite. And I always said to myself it's because I look like that. And I never fought my way to be first in line or first to get food. I always got sort of behind, I think. That's very strange when I think about it, but that's how it was. I did survive thanks to Chris and Hania, but I also survived thanks to the goodness of other people. There's no question about it. That absolutely is a fact.

Q: Did you ever get depressed during these first few months in Auschwitz?

A: No.

Q: You didn't?

A: No, and I'll tell you why. I was so preoccupied with survival. First of all, I was filled with fear. And out of the fear came the fact that I've got to manage. And you cannot let yourself - not that you can't - I didn't - I couldn't - I just - whatever it was, whether I wouldn't allow myself or whether I knew that it wouldn't lead anywhere. The fact was you had to face what it was and manage. And that was what took up - you can't be depressed. Because depressed means tomorrow they put a bullet through your head.

Q: Did you see many depressed people?

A: Oh, yes. I had already analyzed this before. I think older people had a harder time than younger kids. And I noticed this after the war, too, when we came to America. People who already lived a life, you know? People who had lived, who were married or whatever. They were forever probably, I don't know, grieving for what - I mean, I didn't have time to grieve because I didn't live yet. I didn't live yet, and all I knew was I had to watch out. That was just to sum it up in a very plain way. I had to watch out. And other than that, depressed - I don't that that was even a concept that I could really even know what it was about. I just knew that had to stay on the mark, you know? Not to allow myself to do what is not supposed to be done, and not to allow myself to be called into a place that I knew would be trouble. And that was it. And that was - you know, I think when prisoners are in prison who break out of a prison, I think that's how they spend their days, thinking forever how to break out. I had no idea how to break out, and I certainly wouldn't attempt it. But the idea of how to stay on the mark, it was a total preoccupation, which, of course, included how to survive on the meager food. It wasn't just the fear that could get you; it was the lack of food. And don't forget, I was a growing child and did not get proper nutrition. Other people required were hungrier than I because my body didn't require much, or maybe I was stupid to think that, but I really did not - I wasn't driven to insanity by hunger, because I was very hungry but my body tolerated it. So, you see, this idea of depression, I don't know that I knew the meaning of it, because

life was too busy surviving. And in any way of pushing my way or whatever; just minding my person. And that's about all I can tell you about depression. I will tell you 100% it was a totally foreign concept to me, if I even knew what it meant - I probably didn't.

Q: Do you have vivid recollections of the food?

A: Yes. I'll tell you what, I used to use… I'll tell you now, because Victor, my husband Victor, loved turnips. When we got married, he said, "Oh, I'd love for you to cook turnips." And I said, "One thing I'm going to tell you right now," because you know he's American-born, three generations. And I said, "One thing - I'd cook anything and everything. Please don't ask me to cook turnips." And he said, "Why not? It's a very good food." And I said, "Listen, I have an association with the smell of turnips and I will never get over it, not ever. Please don't ask me to cook it. I will not cook it. If you want turnips, you will have to go to a restaurant." Because, in Auschwitz, the only thing you ever got was turnips in a soup. The turnips, of course, were never washed, so you had the sand and the peel, and the turnip. If you found a piece of turnip, it was lucky. But the - I can't say fragrance. That's too fancy. But the smell of the turnip is so deeply ingrained with me with that period, that I truly cannot stand - not the sight of turnip, I wouldn't know, because it looks like a sweet potato. If you cook it properly and away from me, maybe I wouldn't know until I tasted it. But absolutely that is what remained - the business with the turnips. That was food. I think they gave out coffee once - Coffee with a capital 'C' - that was the water with a little chicory in it, I guess, and a piece of bread and the turnip soup. That was food.

Q: Did you ever have margarine on your food, or…?

A: I don't think so. I don't remember. I just know that there were other people who were always hungrier than I was. I was very, very hungry, but I was not as hungry - I think Hania was always hungrier than I was. She was always tall, very tall, I mean, as Polish women go, I mean, as people from Poland go, even Jewish, she was very tall, and I was just a skinny kid, but Hania was tall and I think her body required more food than mine.

Q: So, you think she suffered more than you?

A: I think so, and I knew people who really, truly suffered from hunger more than I. I used to dream about food. You see, you asked me whether I had nightmares. No. You know what I dreamt about? I dreamt about the table settings my mother used to put out. My mother used to love to serve elegantly. I love to remember that. And I remember this party and I remember the settings. I remember the food that was on it, but the settings, I was obsessed with the settings, in my dreams, in my recollections of home. So, that was really, that was part of getting fed.

Q: So, I'm going to take you back, just because you mentioned this, talk about being stimulated to go back for a moment to another time. Chris, when she talked about the first night that you came back after you had left town when the war started, and you came back. The first meal back home, she claims that your father said, "We are going to set the table with a tablecloth and a formal setting," even though you had very little food. You do remember that?

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: It's quite extraordinary.

A: Yes, as a matter of fact, as time went on, and we would always have proper settings and there was not much to eat - a boiled potato - because that kept a semblance of a life. But, of course, in Auschwitz you could dream about it. I mean, Mother used to set beautiful tables - I don't mean during the war. But you know, I even dreamt about sugar cookies, those sweet… sweet… beet…

Q: Sugar beet?

A: Yes, sugar beet cookies, because when she learned to bake that during the war, I even dreamt about that, and that's quite a leap from looking at an elegant table.

Q: Do you remember people having conversations about food?

A: Oh, all the time, all the time, all the time people used to talk about food.

Q: And what kind of a conversation was it? Did people exchange recipes?

A: Yes, they talked about recipes. They talked about what they saw in display windows. If they happened to be from the same town, "Oh, you remember, this pastry that had this display of every day fresh…" Whatever. Absolutely, all the time.

Q: Now, how did that function for people? I do know one survivor felt like "we ate with our talk", or something. It was as if the talk was a substitute.

A: It was.

Q: But it didn't hurt more or make you more hungry?

A: No, I'll give you an analogy. When I cook, you know, I like to cook, I used to cook fancier because now we're eating all this other simpler stuff. But in the days when I was cooking, and I would have a party, whatever, I would have no time to eat, and I was so hungry, hungry, but I had to cook, so I said, "Well, let me first start cooking." And by the time I was done cooking all these French dishes with the wine and all, I was so satiated

from the fragrance, this beautiful fragrance of the food, that by the time I was done with cooking, I really didn't need to eat. I definitely didn't need to eat because the idea plus the fragrance, the wonderful wine cooking, would fill me. That is analogous to the fact that, if you, perhaps, if you talked of food that was really part of another setting, and I don't mean food just for the eating of it, but for the sustenance and the other thing that comes with food, that that could fill you. Not for long, because eventually, five, six hours later you still would wake up hungry and famished, but that is the only analogy that I could think of. And it is true. It is absolutely true because people were talking all the time about food.

Q: And you, too?

A: Yes, yes. You know, people were describing this or these people talking about *ptishye* (ph), which were like *profiteroles au chocolat*, so you remember, and then it filled you. So, I guess there has to be something to it if so many people did it.

Q: Did you see a lot people smoking, women smoking?

A: No, I don't think there were any cigarettes. I remember that during the war they used to roll in a piece of paper and I don't even think they had tobacco; I think they had crushed leaves or something. My father was a smoker, though, but not my mother. Women, I don't remember that women smoke. Or maybe they did, but certainly not in camp.

Q: No, that's what I meant: did you ever see women using cigarettes to barter for other things?

A: Oh, to barter, yes, not to smoke.

Q: Oh, to barter?

A: To barter, absolutely. Let's say you wanted a piece of bread. So, you sold a scarf to get a turnip, then you exchange the turnip for cigarettes, and then you barter the cigarettes for bread. You see how that went? You were a non-smoker. The cigarette was a means of getting the bread in a circuitous way.

Q: So, cigarettes were very valuable?

A: Very, but the final object was bread. How you arrived at it is another story, but cigarettes were very often involved. It wasn't because you smoked them for yourself or smoke… Who eventually ended up with the cigarettes, I have no idea.

Q: Did you ever barter?

A: No.

Q: But your sisters must have.

A: I don't think so. I don't know, I really don't know. This is out of my hand.

Q: I think we'll break for the tape at this point, because I have a longer question to ask.

End of Tape #8

Tape #9

Q: I want to go back again to Majowka because I neglected to ask something, and it may make a connection to Auschwitz, I don't know. Was there sexual abuse of women in Majowka that you know about?

A: No.

Q: In none of the camps?

A: I really, I don't know. If there was, I am not aware of it at all.

Q: So, you were not afraid of any kind of sexual…?

A: No, how could I be, considering who I was and how I looked and who, I guess, would look at me? That was never, ever… Later on, when we were past Retzow and after the Liberation, that's a story further on, when we were inside of Germany and the Russians came, and we were warned that they rape women, so we should run away and we should not stay there. That's as far, but, but even by then, I didn't ever think of it. The only thing that I was afraid of in - unless other women experienced it in Auschwitz - that if you were sick and had to stay behind on the bunk, and you couldn't go to the outside, to work, like in the marshes like we did, that they would come and drag you out and they would do with you what they wanted to do with you, whatever that meant, but I guess that meant probably more of being killed than… Yes, but you see after the Auschwitz detail left, and barrack had to be emptied, they went through the barracks to see if anyone was hiding because sick people who couldn't make it to the roll call… So if they found you, they took you whenever they took you, but that was never, ever an issue, not with me.

Q: Do you remember the day when Chris was taken out of the barrack and told to take her two sisters, when you are given this, what ends up being a very protected job?

A: You mean in Auschwitz? Oh, yes, oh, yes, yes.

Q: Can you describe that day?

A: Well, in fact, somebody just reminded me that Chris and Hania actually were asked for the jobs and I wasn't. I was going to be left behind. No, this was an opening in - maybe I'll sort of put a frame around it - We are now in Auschwitz since, let's say, early August. We have been in quarantine and we have worked in the marshes and it's getting very much colder, very much, because winter is setting in. There is a detail of women that is to be sent to a place where they sort clothes that is left behind by political prisoners, not Jews, not Jews. We don't yet know why or how, but they request, I think, thirty women or whatever to be sent there. So Krysia and Hania are picked for the detail, and I am not to be in the detail because I am small. So, somebody intervened on my behalf and she

said, “She is a hard worker and she’s very smart. She would be very good.” So, instead of thirty, they let go thirty-one. And we arrived… The first week, we went to work and came back to the barrack, or maybe the first two weeks. I don’t remember. But in the beginning, we went there and then came back. What we found out is that the women at that job, that’s still Auschwitz property, except this is a sort of a separate unit - that the women, political prisoners, were somehow involved in the Polish underground or they were in cahoots or whatever, so they were shipped out. So, now, they didn’t want any more Polish women Christians; they wanted the safer type, which is from the Jewish camp. So, again, as I said, I don’t know if it was a week or two weeks or three weeks - whatever it was, originally we went there and back, there and back at night. Eventually, we didn’t go back to the barracks in Birkenau; we stayed there. And that was a Heaven sent. First of all, if got cold outside. We didn’t have to go to the marshes. Second of all, we were dressed now properly; you see, because we were next to those piles of clothes, so we could pick what we had, what we could wear. And now it was getting colder, so shoes were very important - very. So, we had warmer clothing, better shoes, and we worked at that detail, and these women were a very interesting group. They were all very intelligent, and they had real political connections. Some of them - we discovered one of them, Christina Jevulsha (ph), that she was Jewish actually, but she was a Polish political prisoner, passing for a Christian. Anyhow, we worked at that detail up to the evacuation of Auschwitz, the death march, and that really saved our life because we were already getting terribly run down from the outdoor work in the marshes, you see, and now it was getting worse because the winter was coming. And because we worked in that place - probably two months or so - and we slept indoors and we worked indoors, and we were wearing better clothes. So when the death march, the evacuation of Auschwitz took place, we walked out on the death march wearing proper clothes, meaning warm clothes for winter, and our health was restored because we didn’t work outdoors, and I think the food was a little better, too, although I do not remember exactly what the feeding was, how they - it was institutional food, and it was doled out, but it probably was a little more than the turnip soup with the sand in it. And that - you know, it seems, in that whole saga of this war experience, it seems that there were already a little - there was a little interval that allowed us a little breathing space which restored the soul and the body before we would face the other horror. So, luckily, that stretch of time - which wasn’t more than probably two months - allowed us to really, by not working outdoors, not to really come down with whatever, you see.

Q: Did it surprise you that, in the context of Auschwitz, there would be *kommandos* that would not have selections, that you really were not only protected from the elements, but protected from what Auschwitz was?

A: Yes, very much. But, you see, this was such an exceptional setting which was totally strange to us. The clothes of political prisoners were hung up, numbered. If a political prisoner died, the stuff had been packed and sent to the family. If a political prisoner was transferred, the clothes traveled after them. We were engaged in packing. And of course, Heaven help you if you stole something or took a thread out of it. And the fact remains

that I couldn't imagine that a thing like that existed. Send the clothes of that prisoner back to the family? I still don't understand it in the scheme of the genocide, of the Nazi genocide, why that was done. I mean, these were Christian, obviously, but what was the importance of sending the clothes back to the families? After all the harassment and the inhumanity that they have shown the human beings, that they should be concerned about clothes being… I just, it doesn't, I don't know. But luckily for us, that was the case. And so I learned to pack. But that was, it was good because we were in a more civilized setting, to begin with. These Polish women were very good. They were very intelligent and there was very little of that animosity, the Polish-Jewish type, no, this was rather…

Q: These were also old-timers who remained there. They had been there awhile.

A: Yes. I think most of them were shipped out. I think thirty or thirty-one were shipped out.

Q: But there was a group that was still there?

A: Yes, somebody had to be left behind to show the newcomers. But I do know that they were in touch with other Polish prisoners, but, of course, we never were aware of really, of what was going on. But I do know now that they had contact with the Polish underground.

Q: Do you have any idea how come Hania and Chris were chosen out of all the women in the barrack?

A: Yes, the woman who did help us wrote a book about it. She liked us, so writes in the book that we were not the pugnacious type, and she noticed that other people knew how to fight their way out and way in.

Q: Who is she?

A: Felicia Hyatt, Felicia Berlant Hyatt (ph). She was a scribe in the barrack, and she took a liking to us. And she, when the request came for people, she picked us, and she was the one who was instrumental in my being attached to this detail. And she wrote not a very nice chapter, it's in her book, it's called *Short Calls*…something *Calls*, what is it…*Close Calls*. And so she was instrumental in that she took a liking to us, she said they were intelligent girls and we didn't know how to fight our way out so, whatever. She says that in the book. So, anyhow, that's how we ended up there, and that was a lifesaver.

Q: So, then there's going to be an evacuation of Auschwitz.

A: Right.

Q: Did you have - I don't know how to use the word - to stay, or to go?

A: No.

Q: No choice.

A: No, the only choice we were given to others who did stays, was like my friend Hannah Tenser from Israel, who was left in the gas chambers because they ran out of gas, or other people who were too sick to move; they were left behind as refuse. But we were just marched out like everybody else. But we were lucky that we were dressed well because it was January and it was cold. So, I don't know that we would have made it. Maybe we would have - other people did. But it helped to have good shoes and to have good clothes.

Q: Did you have gloves?

A: Probably.

Q: Hat?

A: Yes. We had access to the piles of clothing that they wanted... You know, when we got there, they said take off everything you have on and go pick something that fits you - not from the prisoners but from the Jewish property. So, we had shoes to fit and clothes to fit and it was warm, because we were there toward, you know, in the winter.

Q: Yes, it was January 18th.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you leave Birkenau and walk toward Auschwitz I, or do you have any recollection where you went?

A: No, I only know that we went on a march, and I only know that I completely lost my mind. And I fell asleep while walking. I was sleepwalking. I absolutely fell asleep, and Chris and Hania were dragging me. And the whole march is one - it's not a nightmare, it's completely obliterated except for what I remember: the snow was on the ground, we were marching down a country road or whatever, with dark trees on each side and snow in the middle, and it seemed like a place - an enclosure. So, I was walking and they were dragging me, but I was dead asleep, totally. And I always talk about it, when, every now and then, they would stop everybody to relieve himself, and Chris and Hania would squat down and tell me to relieve myself, but I wouldn't because I wasn't here; I was in the other reality, so that - it's true, and so finally…

Q: Were you actually sleeping?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: This is an 18-mile walk…

A: Right.

Q: …to Gleiwitz . And you were sleeping?

A: It was to Gleiwitz? I didn't know. That's where we went, right, I didn't know. Gliwice now, right. And I didn't know where we were walking, and I have no recollection except for this enclosure, white snow and the trees.

Q: On the one hand, you say that you were dressed well, and you clearly felt better than you had two months prior, right?

A: Right.

Q: So, what's this sleeping about?

A: I have no idea. I walked as much as I could and the rest I slept. I know one thing which I am very proud of. When we got to a certain big barn with where to stay overnight, and I must have been terribly clumsy or horribly tired, and I wasn't moving right, and a German came and knocked me in my face - this is the second time, by the way. I once got hit in Auschwitz like this - with a ring; he was wearing a big signet ring, and he knocked me, and I fell right down at the barn door, and everybody else was chased into the barn. I had the presence of mind when I woke up, when they started blowing whistles for everybody to get up, I had the presence of mind to stand by the door, and found Krysia and Hania as they came out. But that was…One day I have to have this made to…I have to account for it, how it came about that I slept through this march. At least half the way I slept through.

Q: And also how to account for your two sisters having the strength to hold you for that long.

A: I don't know. I don't know. They were pushing me, you know. They were pushing me and talking to me and I kept sleeping, and I truly don't know.

Q: So, you think that you were sleepwalking.

A: Not sleepwalking, I was just sleeping. I do remember that I never thought of the place where I was as I was as the place I was in.

Q: Oh.

A: I thought that was somewhere - because, the dark skies - we walked at night - and the dark trees and the white bottom. So, I'm now in an enclosure. I'm not outdoors. You see,

I am not outdoors. I am somewhere in an enclosure, walking down. But how that jives with the reality, that I've never figured out, but that was a fact.

Q: Did they try to wake you?

A: No, they just dragged me. I mean, there was no reason, I mean, to wake me, so if I opened my eyes - I probably had my eyes open, but I was sleeping. I was really very much asleep. Much of the trip, I was asleep, until we reached Gleiwitz, was it?

Q: And then you were on…

A: …on the train, yeah, they were in open cars, and the snow was falling, that I remember Yeah, because by the time we reached Ravensbrück, I was awake, having slept myself out on the train. You know, we sat in open cars, so the snow was falling, and we ate the snow off our coats, so that between the fresh air and not having to walk and the snow, which was moisture, I came to. And when we got to Ravensbrück, I knew, finally I saw the sign "Ravensbrück". I did read it; I did see the sign. So I knew we were in another place, not that place that was an enclosure.

Q: [laughs] That's very interesting. Did you think you were going to die?

A: Um, many times, but not at this particular - I mean, by then I realized everything sort of was a chance, you know? Chancy, things were chancy, things were too chancy and all around. So, if I was going to die, that means that's what came up. Because there was no planning, you know, there was no planning, there was no decision making on that score. It's just how the wind carried you. If you were too exhausted and your legs were swollen and you fell by the wayside, that was the end. But it wasn't that you planned what I'm going to do ten days later, nothing. You just went with the event, went with the flow, as they say.

Q: So, none of you - neither of you - got sick in Auschwitz?

A: Krysia was sick, yes, Chris was sick one time. I forget what was her…her legs? No, I forgot. She was sick, and then she got better. You'd have to ask her, but I do remember she was sick, yes. But, you see, on the death march, I wasn't sick. I was just over-exhausted or whatever. And you see, I always talk about the fact that I was skinny, and I wasn't hungry, but maybe my body was growing and required more - maybe it didn't require food but it required rest. I don't know. It's a mystery.

Q: When you arrived in Ravensbrück, somebody made a decision - I don't know if it was Hania or Chris - undoubtedly it wasn't you…

A: No.

Q: …because you claim you never made any decisions - to say that you were Christian, and to take the name Gorska as the last name.

A: And I don't remember that.

Q: You don't remember that?

A: No, but I do know - I know that it happened, but I don't know how it came about or where or whatever.

Q: But you do remember that that's how you were known?

A: Yes, because Ravensbrück, as you know - this is about the end of January or so, early February - and Ravensbrück was so overrun with people. All these camps that were first evacuated from Poland into Germany, and then from Germany and Poland into - they were just shoving them in. They put up tents in Ravensbrück; there were no more barracks available. There were tents. So that it really, you were so, now - now we were completely disconnected from the original group. We were still traveled - when we were in Auschwitz we were very much with the group - but because we were not evacuated with the Starachowice people, we came there with another group, and then we got mixed in with all kinds of nationalities and people camps that you never heard of and that you did hear of and so on. So, it didn't matter who you were. You could have told them you were Roosevelt's daughter, you know, for that matter. You could have picked out something out of the blue moon, or King Farouk's first wife, whatever, you see? So, if Hania said that or Krysia said that, it must be so. But, as I told you, it wasn't my decision.

Q: How horrible was it in Ravensbrück?

A: Very bad - it was the worst.

Q: Worse than Auschwitz? Why?

A: Because it was disorganized. Not that it was disorg-…It wasn't in any way planned to contain the number of people that were shipped in. It was in no way organized with a plan for the future, even, because the war was now turning, you know, the war effort of the Allies was now taking shape. So, that the Germans, whatever they were up to, knew only themselves, but the fact is that a place like Ravensbrück that had all these people shipped in - and maybe the decision wasn't yet made what to do with that, with these people, I don't know - but the fact remains that the camp was overrun. We stayed in a tent. There were no more people possible to squeeze into the barracks. You can imagine they accommodated you now in the Grand Hotel now, in the tent, because, I mean, this was beyond any setting, especially since they always were so organized in the - their genocidal plan included every detail on down the line, and this was, of course, already

out of their hands. So, that was rough; that was bad. The food was - no food and no place to stay in, and just chaos.

Q: All right, you haven't taken - been able to clean yourself for days…

A: Yes.

Q: So…

A: I don't remember. I think we used snow, or something like this. That could very well be. Because we ate snow, and we probably cleaned ourselves with snow, too.

Q: And did the registration include giving you a new number?

A: I don't think so.

Q: So, you kept the same number?

A: Frankly, I don't even think they registered us. I mean, if you consider what was happening at the time, with the influx of the people. I really don't remember, I truly, I don't, but it was so chaotic that I can't imagine that they would still be able to count or whatever.

Q: Did you have a red stripe down your back from Auschwitz? A painted red stripe? Or did you have clothes that didn't have that?

A: Uh, no, not from Auschwitz. Later on I had the "X", white "X" on my coat, up front and in the back.

Q: From Retzow?

A: I think it was from Retzow, yes. It was a white enamel "X", big "X", right down from the shoulder down on both sides. But my recollection of Ravensbrück - I don't know how long we were there. Ten days? A week? Not long. But it was total chaos.

Q: Were people dying?

A: Yes, in fact, we have a friend from Israel whose mother we saw in the melee of people. We saw out of nowhere. Mrs. Linsburg, we ran into Mrs. Linsburg. And years later, we told the daughter who survived, who lives in Israel. She lost her mother somewhere in Ravensbrück and she never found out what happened to her - No, her mother disappeared and she never know where. And we told her, we saw her in Ravensbrück. We just glanced at her in Ravensbrück, because she was in Ravensbrück. But what happened after, we don't know. But I'm telling you, it was total chaos, so that it was just

impossible. And people who were with each other, if they were separated, then that was the end of that.

Q: By this time, by the time you're in Ravensbrück, have you found out what happened to your - that your father is dead - or you still don't know anything?

A: No, no, we didn't know yet.

Q: You didn't know?

A: No, because we had to find out from the men, you see. It's the men from Starachowice who knew what happened. I don't know at which point we found out about it. I don't know, but we did have to find it out from the men.

Q: So, that's later, then?

A: Probably, I don't know. Or maybe we already knew. I couldn't tell you for sure. But I know that we did find out that he perished in October, October of '44.

Q: And by the time you're in Ravensbrück, have you decided that your mother is already dead?

A: In all likelihood, we've thought that in all likelihood that she would not turn up because we'd seen too much and heard too much. We heard too much. You see, having now been mixed in with all the people from Auschwitz and in Ravensbrück, with the influx of people from every conceivable part of Poland, it was very easy to piece things together. So that…we had a pretty good idea I think by then, but not a certainty, and certainly did not give up the idea that they might still be alive.

Q: Do you remember the moment when someone asked for volunteers to get out of Ravensbrück and go to a subcamp?

A: Yes, yes, I remember that, yeah. And, not I, but Krysia and Hania, Chris and Hania, we all volunteered, and… As I'm fond of saying, we volunteered for what? We didn't know. It could have been going up the chimney, but we volunteered to get out of Auschwitz, not to go wherever - we didn't know…

Q: You mean Ravensbrück?

A: Out of Ravensbrück, right. We volunteered because things have gotten to be totally impossible, totally. So, they said, whoever wants to go, get on the truck, but where the truck was going nobody knew. But that was a very fine choice, because these were the first shipments out of Ravensbrück, and we ended up in Retzow, which was an empty camp, which was later to be receiving other prisoners, but we were lucky enough to staff

that camp. I ended up a maid for an SS woman. Hania ended up a maid for the - in an office. Chris didn't have a good job - I forgot, Chris told me, she reminded me the other day how I spoke on - you know, this I have to really relate again because…

Q: I think you should hold it because I think we have to change the tape before you begin. So, we'll start with your talking about Chris.

End of Tape #9

Tape #10

Q: We ended the last tape with your beginning to tell us about the three jobs you had in Retzow, and in particular, Chris, you said, had a terrible job first.

A: Yes, I forgot. She actually reminded me of it, but I remembered after she refreshed my memory. I worked for the SS woman. Our section, the women's section of Ravensbrück - of Retzow, excuse me - was ran by SS women, and they were a category of their own, awful, brutal people. And they of course needed servants, and I was one of the personal servants. She lived in a room. I did her laundry, I brought in wood to keep the stove going, you know, and cleaned the house and so on. She took a liking to me, but I was still a Jew. And she would not come near me ever. I would walk in, she would walk out. And if she talked to me, she talked to me from another end of the - because she just wouldn't be near me. So, then she started leaving crusts of bread for me. She didn't like crusts. So, she said, "I'll be leaving this crust. If you find it on the table, that's for you." And I said, "Thank you very much." So, meanwhile, one day she came in and she says, "Did you find the crusts I left for you?" I said, "Yes, thank you very much. I eat them." And she says, "How are things going for you? Who are you here with? Do you know anybody, do you have family?" And I said, "Yes, I have one sister who works in the office, she cleans the office, and then I have another sister, but she does not have a good job." I forgot what Krysia did. She says, "All right, I'll get her a good job." So, Krysia was assigned to the kitchen, and that was really a great, wonderful thing. Of course, she was the most vicious thing, but in a very paradoxical way, I really benefited greatly toward my liberation from being her servant, because they were so - they lorded over everybody so you not only had to do for her and so on. When the evacuation of Retzow was organized, we had to carry their rucksacks. They took their stuff, and we had to carry - the maids had to carry - not God forbid somebody else. So, when we were evacuated from Retzow, as the eastern front was approaching, the Russians were approaching closer and closer; the war was already going toward the end. I think this was by then probably April - end of March, early April. When we found ourselves on the road with all the evacuees of every stripe and of every possible persuasion, because you had the Jewish prisoners of war - Jewish - you know, prisoners from the concentration camps, and you had Polish laborers who worked on the farm, and you had German military and German out of uniform, and German civilians with dogs and cars and whatever - we had to carry their stuff. And then when it came to a point where the road was so clogged up we couldn't move, they told us to sit down. Well, we made a way - there were the few maids that were carrying the rucksacks - and by the way, I kept saying that there were twelve of us, but Hania reminded me it was ten, and Helena was one. There was one woman there, Helena, she was blonde, one of the servants, or whatever. She spoke German very well. I think she was from Krakow or somewhere. When we made it off the road, the main road where the evacuees were, I had this woman's rucksack with all her belongings, so in final analysis, I proved to be a skunk, because what Helena did - she was carrying somebody else's - and you know, they had those black capes, these women, they had black wool capes that they wore. So, Helena put her cape, the cape over her clothes and put the woman's hat, and we

all decided... No, I didn't decide… But the ten of us, not the twelve, the ten of us who made it off the road, onto the field and away from the evacuees on the road, were supposed to pretend that we are the prisoners and Helena was our guard, and she was guiding us - no, not guiding us. Guarding us. She was guarding us, you see. So, we had the paraphernalia, the German paraphernalia. So, she probably, in the final analysis, the SS woman, who trusted me, who took a liking, she probably said, "Well, like all the Jews, she betrayed me." She was so vicious, she was very, very… But to me, she was absolutely wonderful.

Q: And why do you think that was? How do you explain that?

A: I cannot explain it. I cannot explain it. The mere fact that she didn't want to be near me but she left me crusts of bread, that she asked me if I have it well, if everything is fine, and if I have family, on the one hand. And then on the other hand, I saw how what she did to other people. So, I cannot explain it.

Q: You were in Retzow for, what, a couple of months?

A: From the time we left Ravensbrück, which probably was February or so, in February. Yeah, about a couple of months, right, because the evacuation from Retzow was about early April, for 1945.

Q: And, in addition to these crumbs of bread, was the food…?

A: Well, the food was better because - I really got ahead of my story - but I didn't say that after we - those trucks out of Ravensbrück - that brought us in, all the so-called spots were filled with us, maid and this and the other, women were brought in - in fact, some of the people we knew from Poland - were brought into this camp, because there was an air force base, a German air force base, not far, and they were digging anti-aircraft ditches or whatever. So, these laborers were supposed to be working for the - maybe not only the air force - no, airport, or whatever you call it. Anyhow, once the camp was filled, we found that there were people who we knew from the other camps. And, of course, we had it very fine now, because having to work for the German women who didn't really want us to mingle with the population, so we slept in separate quarters under the kitchen. So Krysia always brought down a little more bread, and so that was really fine. And so we got restored again before the big evacuation on the road.

Q: I'm having an association. There was a story that Krysia told about Hania in Auschwitz that had to do with food. Do you remember?

A: Yes. Now, Chris remembers it much better, and I know that Hania fainted and all this, but I don't really recall this. I only remember it because Chris told me about it. I really truly didn't remember that. I'm beginning, you know, as I analyze and think back, I really think I that I obliterated certain things from my mind. Because I have a very distinct

recollection about certain things and none about other things, so there has to be some selective thinking here. I don't know.

Q: So, you're now on the road with ten other people - ten others?

A: Yes, ten women, ten.

Q: Ten women.

A: No, we are, the total of us is ten.

Q: And Helena is acting like the SS guard.

A: Yes, Helena is, because she is wearing the black cape.

Q: And she has blonde hair.

A: She has blonde hair and she speaks German very well. And we slide down an embankment. Because, you know, the traffic came to a dead stop. Every - you couldn't go if you tried - everything on the road. It isn't that we stopped for our own sake. There was no place to move. All the cars and all the trucks and all the military equipment and all the peasants with the wagons, and everything is stopped dead. And they are meanwhile giving out rations from Sweden - packages, Red Cross packages from Sweden.

Q: On the road?

A: On the road, in the middle of all this. And the German women are grabbing the cigarettes like crazy - there are cigarettes then - and these German women with whom we served, they are grabbing them. And I remember getting sardines there; we got sardines. But anyhow, I remember, we are stuck on this road, which is completely choked up traffic, and we slide down an embankment - we don't slide, we go down an embankment. The fields are a little lower than the road on an embankment. And we as far as where there is like - no, not snow - cut grass piled up. What do you call that?

Q: Hay?

A: Hay, right. We go behind these haystacks and we sit there hoping to sit it out, to wait until they move on. And before we know it, a person comes over, a man. He hears us speak Polish, and he asks if we're Polish. And we say, "Yes, we're Polish. We ran away from this here, this evacuation route." And he says, "You know, there is a lot of Poles here because we're working on the, in the farm. Why don't you go to that house over there and tell them I sent you, and they'll put you up." So, that's what happened. We walked away. Nobody ever missed us. We got to the villa, it was a German villa, and we

stayed there until the Germans came That's how we were liberated - except, one of the girls among the ten was a Russian, and she said the Russians rape women, so we should not stay around, which we had no intentions of staying around, no intention. We just were mostly here to get back and find out finally, put all of the pieces of the puzzle together to see who survived and who… So, very soon, we started toward the railroad and we got on the trains going back east. But that was easier said than done because everybody - people were so dislocated, and everybody wanted to get east, further east. So, we were on the train for a few stops, then we got bumped off. And then, there were Russian soldiers riding and all sorts of other people, and then we got on the train again. We didn't know where we were going, but we were going east, wherever the train will take us, as far as Bibgost (ph). Bibgost (ph) we knew was sort of a - what do you call it - a cross-, no, sort of a central line crossing. We still didn't know - we thought we were going to Starachowice, of course. We just said, "We'll make our way to Poland and from there, we'll worry about going to Starachowice." But we met a Russian soldier who was Jewish on the train, and he told us, if we're Jewish, not to go back, because it's not safe in those small - he asked us how big a town it was, and we said, "Small town." And he said, "Don't go back; go to a big city." And we said, "Big city? But we don't anybody." He says, "No, you go to a big city, and you can register with the Jewish agents. And that's where you can find family, not in a small town." Which is what we did, we went to Lodz, and he gave us an address of his sister, so we stayed overnight, and then next day we went to register, and we were given a place - not an apartment. It was a bombed-out place, but they assigned it to us, the Jewish agency. And I think they gave us ration cards or something like that. And soon enough, we found out that Uncle Alexander survived, that he was in Lodz. And, of course, then we started finding out what happened, that all these people who were resettled [shakes head] were no longer alive, because they were exterminated. They were not resettled. And all the people that might not show up didn't necessarily get resettled either. They died of a million different causes. If it wasn't starvation, it was sickness. If it wasn't sickness, it was a bullet. But then it came out that there were extermination camps, which served only the purpose of killing en masse. And that was something totally new. We knew about shootings on the highway and on the road and starvation and typhus. We knew; we saw it; we were part of it. We never really - of course, in Auschwitz, we also knew about Auschwitz - but we had no idea about all these other places, where all this was happening at the same time. So, the resettlement was a euphemism, and how the secrets were kept for all those years, when the Germans were committing the most heinous crime of all history, I don't know. I don't know how that could altogether happen without people knowing, but that's how it happened. And we settled in Lodz, you know, after the war. And Hania and Chris went back to Poland, and I told you about Genia (ph), that maid of ours. She absolutely said she had nothing, and she threatened them. And Mrs.Paliszewska - that night, the little children that came back from Auschwitz were killed in my hometown. And Mrs. Paliszewska - one of women of the Paliszewska sisters worked at the railroad station, she sold tickets there, and they lived very near the railroad station, so she secured tickets for them and put them on the train and they came back to Lodz. So, that was where the end of the war found us.

Q: Did this feel - on the one hand, you were liberated and free, and on the other hand, you find a world of tragedy - so, are you very conflicted about what you find?

A: Well, we are really in shock still, because we survived, and we still cannot figure out how it happened that we did survive. We are not yet aware of the entire truth of everything. Grandmother - after all, we had a tremendous family, extended family, on my mother's side especially. Originally, there were nine children - I don't mean children - nine siblings, who had all the kids and their kids, and my father's family wasn't so large, but it was large, too. So, eventually, we pieced it all together to find out that people perished. But it really took many years before the truth came out because, as you know, people were reluctant to talk about it. Everybody was busy trying to live, to return to normal life, and nobody wanted - was willing to talk about Holocaust. They just lived through it; why talk about it? So that, not too many things were yet known, but we knew now for a fact that Mother had perished in Treblinka, because we knew that the transport out of Starachowice, after the original evacuation of the Jewish population, from the square where they were segregated, that those trains when straight to Treblinka. So, we knew that. Then we knew that a lot of people perished in Starachowice camp, and then they perished right along as we got along. So, then, of course, it came out that there were such camps where slave labor was not required. The ultimate purpose of that camp was genocide, and that only Jews were being selected for that genocide. So, that was a total eye-opener. But, you know, life went on. Chris met Miles and they got married, and they sort of adopted me, so I stayed with them. I went to school while we were living in Lodz. Hania, Anna, went to school of diplomacy in Warsaw. But we lived with Uncle Alexander - Miles, Chris, I and Uncle Alexander. Uncle Alexander went to Sweden because his wife survived - she survived in one of the camps like Retzow - but she was shipped out to Sweden because she was quite ill at liberation time. And that was - subsequently, Miles, Chris and I went to Berlin, and I went to school in Berlin. And we were in Berlin from about March/April of '46 until January of '47, because we arrived in America February 11th, in 1947. So, that chapter was closed. We more or less knew how our parents perished. We also found out from people from Ostrowiec what happened to Grandma and the aunts. I had two aunts living there. One was single, and the other, Regina - another Regina - Aunt Regina, who was married, and Angia, who wasn't married - they lived with the grandmother because they ran a printing shop. And so they went - Regina with her husband and Angia and Babka - and Grandma - they all were sent to Treblinka, as well, because Ostrowiec was slated for Treblinka. And my father's family, only my cousin survived. One aunt, I mean, Uncle Alexander survived with his wife, and then one of my father's sister's daughter, survived, and a cousin, Angia, who lives in Israel. And the extended family numbered - I cannot begin to tell you because I wouldn't really know, but really, a very big number. And we did have three uncles who escaped from Poland in the 20's. Not escaped, but made their way out, because they were going to be conscripted. So, they made their way out, and they lived in Canada, so we eventually got in touch with them. But as far as the Holocaust story of our family is concerned, I mean, this is in essence not just a narrative covering our survival, the three of us, but really, the extended family, how that was decimated. Unfortunately, you know?

It was such a fine family, you know, my mother's big family. But unfortunately that's all gone. We've made peace with that, you know?

Q: For those, for those people who are watching this, there is a five-hour audio tape of life after the Holocaust which I think will cover an enormous amount of these years, from 1945 on. I have one final question to ask you, and I don't know if it's too big a question or too small a question. Do you look back - When you look back on your life, on this period, do you find a particular effect it has had on you or set of effects. And let me give you one example from your sister Chris, because I thought was very interesting. Someone asked her why she only has two children, and she said, "Because I only have two hands. And if something happens, I have to be able to hold onto each child, and if I had a third arm, I would have three children." Which I found a very interesting kind of effect. And I'm wondering if there is something in you in terms of your life, how you have led your life since, what you feel and how it's affected you…?

A: No, you see, I mentioned before in the interview that I felt older people had a harder time in the camps, and I also think they had a harder time after the war, whether adjusting to a new language, a new country, a new culture, or whichever, or altogether, even if they went back to stay in Europe, adjusting to the emptiness, to the horror that was still in the soil, so to say, European soil. In my case, I found that, because I had never lived and I always wanted to taste life, I had no time. I had absolutely - I came out of the war like a racing horse coming out of a stable. I was ready and willing and raring to go. I wasn't going to look back and I wasn't going to contemplate and I wasn't going to analyze, I wanted to live. And I did. Everything, you know that - in fact, when I was in Jefferson High School, and Dr. Horowitz, who - they gave me a big party for my 18th birthday because I'd done this and that - so, he said he wanted the newspaper to write about the party, so he brings in people from the newspapers - the Jewish paper and the *Post* - the *New York Post* was in those days a different paper, liberal paper - so, this guy is interviewing me for the *Post*, and he says, "I understand you have a number. Could you show me your number?" So, I showed him the number, and he took a picture of my arm, and that's how the *Post* printed it - me and they wrote about the birthday party and how the whole class was throwing me a birthday party and that I was a victim. So, when he said for me to show him the number, I thought, "Isn't that ridiculous." But I didn't want to disappoint Dr. Horowitz, because it was in his house and he was doing the party. I thought it was so ridiculous to start dwelling on those things. I am just trying to show you by illustration how I felt. I had no time for that. That was a closed chapter. Now, I didn't go to school yet, I didn't finish anything, I wanted to study, I wanted to do, I wanted to live, I wanted - I loved to dance. Here I am going to go through the thing - I'd had enough of it! And I really think a lot of people felt that way if they were yet young enough to more or less not to have the broken spirit because they had known already grown-up life, you see. So, I just burst right into life in America. In fact, I already had a great time in Berlin, when I was in Berlin. But when I came to America, that was absolutely everything, because I mean, I could now do all of these things, including going to school and going to college and having a great time and marrying and having

wonderful children and all this. Of course, now, because I have translated a lot of works on the Holocaust, I discovered - I have been discovering constantly new phases of the war that I was totally unaware of, because I didn't even want to dwell on it So, now, all these years later, 50 years later, I am first finding out about, okay, I knew about the Lodz ghetto, I wrote - I translated a book on this. So, I knew about this ghetto and I did this camp and such camp, where there is true translation or true people I know. But there is a whole world of Holocaust experiences that I never even knew about, which I am finding out about now. But in those days, when I came to the United States, why would I want to bother with that? Who had the time for that? I didn't have time. I didn't have time for anything, only for forging ahead. And that, I think, carried me through life, in the sense that, if I look back, of course, I always, always think of my parents and the loss of my parents and the loss of my family, the tremendous loss of the family. But to regret the life that was? I cannot, because, if I went back now, that life would be nothing like the wonderful life that I had in America. So, you cannot go home again, and I don't want to go home again, because I've been to Poland twice, and believe me, that would be the last place I would want to live in, under the Communist regime, especially, you know? So that, to sum it all up, I was lucky enough to be young enough to survive the war as a youngster, and to still be able - even though at the beginning, I did feel a little imbalanced, you know, my head was a little bit further away - higher - not higher - more progressive - my head progressed a little better than my other emotional, but eventually, it evened out, you see? And of course, I sort of apply the experiences to my life as it's lived from day to day. For example, everyone said, "How much do your kids know about your background?" My kids always knew everything they wanted to know. They knew I went through the camps, and I told them all the time, "Please ask me. I will never set you down and say, 'Sit down and I want to tell you this.'" I never did that. That was never - I said, "But if you want to know, anything you want to know, I will tell you." And every now and then I would relay an anecdote, and of course, they saw the films, and we're very close - our family generally, you know, our family - the Lermans and the Wilsons and the kids and the grandkids - we're very, very close. So you know, the stories are exchanged, but not as an imposition. I would never think of saying, "You've got to hear my story." I myself wasn't interested in my story when the war ended. I just wanted to say, "Okay, that's another chapter, case closed, keep on going." So, that was my attitude and still is. And, as you noticed, I am very short on specifics. For example, my sister Anna, she knows a lot of specifics about the hierarchy of the camps and who was what and how the camps were run. I don't know. I just know the particulars pertaining to my personal survival. And the fact that, when the war ended, everything was fresh in my mind, but I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in me, period. I was interested in the new life, and the me could wait. And of course, it waited until now, when every day I am finding out about another thing that I never knew about. So, the other day I read in the Polish press about Dietwagner (ph), this Polish community not far from Warsaw. Now, 60 years later, I am first, first finding out. Now I read avidly, whether it's in Polish or in English, on the subject. But in those years, it wasn't taboo. When I married Victor I told him, "Anything you want to know, ask me. But I don't have patience nor the time for that." There were other intellectual pursuits and other pursuits. I had to fit in all these

other things that I missed. I'm going to talk about Auschwitz and about Ravensbrück? Who needs it?

End of Tape #10

Tape #11

[Picture shown]

A: This picture was taken in Lodz in June 1945, right after we came back from Germany to Poland. And I have a few of these at home, and because of their size, I am quite sure that they were made for identification, meaning for my passport or ID cards or whichever. But this is what you call an official picture, and this is really what I looked like after we came back. I was 15½.

[New picture shown]

A: This is a group picture taken in Berlin, in a DP (ph) camp in Berlin, probably somewhere around June or July in 1946. I think our class was celebrating Lakbaumer (ph). At any rate, we were the oldest group in that school. We were on the high school level at that time. And if I were to identify, on the extreme left is my friend Tunia Rebak Couture (ph), who lived in Argentina and unfortunately passed away a year ago. Next to her is Rachel Kafaigenbaum (ph) whose married name was Gross. Unfortunately, she passed away four years ago. Next to her, I am Renia or Regina Gelb. Going further to the right side is Hanka Drescher (ph), living in Argentina, also. We have kept in touch with her. Next to her is a girl whose name I really forgot, and the last one is Heike, that was her name, but I really even don't remember her last name. The year was 1946, while I was in the high school in Berlin, in the DP camp in Schlochtenzeit (ph).

[New photo shown]

A: This is a picture of the Gelbs. On the left, obviously, the bride, Regina or Renia Gelb, and next to her Victor, and this was March 8th, 1953, in New York City. We met in New York three years before we were married. We met in 1950, and Victor went to the army in the meanwhile, because it was the Korean war, and I was at Indiana University, completing my degree, and when I got back, and Victor was just honorably discharged from the army, we got married, which was the right thing to do.

[New photo shown]

A: This is the picture of the Gelb family with the kids. If I remember correctly, it was taken at the New York World's Fair in 1964. Going from left to right, Harry Gelb, after him is Victor, next to him is Renia, and Paul Gelb on the extreme right. Harry was at that time 8 years old and Paul was 4 years old, and we've been to the New York World's Fair so many times that I couldn't possibly forget it, but I'm glad to have this picture.

[New photo shown]

A: This picture was taken in New York City for Harry Gelb's bar mitzvah. Going from left to right, sitting down, is Chris Lerman - Krysia - next to her Hania Wilson, next to her Renia - Regina - Gelb. Above, standing, from left to right, Mark Lerman, Jeannette Lerman, Pauline Wilson, David Lerman, Ruth Wilson, Paul Gelb, Adrian Wilson and, of course, the bar mitzvah boy, Harry. Okay, that's right - we missed it - I didn't see it on the monitor. Next to Renia, sitting down, is Victor, the father of the bar mitzvah boy.

[New photo shown]

A: This picture was taken in 1992 - the three sisters, going from right to left, Hania Wilson, Krysia Lerman and Renia Gelb.

[New picture shown]

A: This picture was taken at the Firebird Restaurant in New York, January 1999, celebrating for Victor's big birthday. It was a big, big bash, it was lovely, and pictured, going from right to left: Paul Gelb, next to him Max Gelb, Harry's little boy, next to Max, sitting down is Victor Gelb, the celebrity, next to him is Cheryl Cohen Gelb, our daughter-in-law, Harry's wife, holding little Joseph Gelb, sweetheart, above Cheryl is Harry Gelb, her husband and our son, and next to him is Renia, Regina, Gelb.

[New photo shown]

A: This picture was taken at Paul Gelb's wedding, July 23rd, 2000. Going from right to left, there is Victor Gelb, next to him is Janet - Jan - Jay Gelb, next to her is the groom, Paul Gelb. Next to Paul is Harry's boy Max, next to him is Harry, our older son, with little Joseph peaking out from behind, Cheryl Gelb, Harry's wife, Renia, and down below, I think we missed one person, we missed little Caitlin, who is six years old, and is the daughter of Jan, and now, of course, she's also Paul's daughter in a sense. She's a lovely child. And this was a very fine occasion. We really had a good time.

End of Tape #11
Conclusion of Interview