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Fela Warschau interview 2/9/95

SWB: Okay, Fela, why don't you tell me how it is that you came to Bergen Belsen.

FELA WARSCHAU: Our camp was labor camp, was, the outs-, on the outskirts of Hamburg. Every day we were coming into the city by train, and working on the streets, cleaning [clears throat] the rubble from the bombs that fell. It was the end of 19, almost the end of March 1945 when the fliers came almost constantly, there was very little respite from the bombing, and we knew that liberation is at the door but if we would be alive to see that, no one knew. And sure enough, Germ- the Germany Hitler was so determined to destroy the Jewish people that every time the allies came closer, they evacuated us deeper into Germany. This is what happened to us. We were taken on a train again, and after several hours of travel, we found ourselves in Bergen Belsen. Bergen Belsen, it was something I have never seen in all the years that I have been a prisoner in the ghettos, at home, and in the camps. At the time when we arrived, everything was in disarray. They did not burn the bodies anymore. They were stapled up like cord wood on the side. It was unusual warm for this time of year. And the smell from the bodies was terrible. We were assigned into a barrack just a bare floor. Nothing anymore. There was a

skeleton crew only of SS people, and the camps were guarded by volunteers mostly, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Hungarians, and they were wearing white arm bands of surrender. But that did not stop them from shooting at us if we came close to the barbed wire and tried a hold of that piece of color abbey, all these big piles that were laying outside of the barbed wire, and supposed to have been the food, but they

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did not feed us for days. And that was decomposed already. But we were so hungry that this would have been even good enough for us. The water was turned off. It was chaos. We did not work anymore. You just walked around and people just dropped dead in front of you. And you were so dehumanized you just walked over these people and kept on going not knowing what are we doing here, what is going to happen to us. Typhoid fever doesn't carry, and lice. I always tell everybody that if you sit on the ground, they could almost carry you away, so many and so huge they were. My sister and I and two more friends, we always kept together, supporting ourselves. Whatever we could find to eat or even with moral support, giving each other courage. So we had a

little piece of bread that we got for the journey. This was gone. By some miracle, my sister found a potato and we were sharing this one potato, a slice every day. You try to find someone you knew, very seldom, but one day we found a woman from my hometown. She looked exceptionally good, and she said to us, I hope I live long enough to survive and see that I'm a free person. Looking at her, I thought oh, sure, you will. Next day she was dead. She was swollen from all the hunger. We just walked around like zombies, every day. Going back into the barrack, laying down, coming out, water, like I said was turned off. People that were so thirsty went to the place where the latrine supposedly was and licked the sweat from the walls there. I don't remember doing that, I just remember sharing this potato like uh, see-through slice each one of us got. Four of us sharing that. But we got weaker every day because there was nothing to eat. Finally, the last day when we had nothing, I could barely drag myself. I said to my sister I'm going into the barrack and I'm going to lie down and just die in there. I do not want to die and people should just step over me like

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others do. They followed me. We all lied down there and just almost said goodbye to life. One of our friends, she was even younger than I was, the youngest. She was always searching, trying to find a way. So she said she has to take the last look outside and see what's going on. When she came back she said to me, there's something funny going out there. People are running all over the place and, it's unusual. It's not what usually happen. And I told her to just lay down and die in peace. She must be hallucinating. She insisted, so my sister walked out with her. When my sister came back, I don't know with what strength she came back, grabbed me by my arm, and she says, get up, get up, guess what, everybody's running, and the gates are open, there's a man sitting, is it a tank or whatever, we couldn't distinguish at that time one thing from the other. He is speaking through a loudspeaker, his words are being translated, I think we were liberated. When I got up and walked outside, my eyes couldn't comprehend, it just didn't register. It's unbelievable. I couldn't believe this was really true, so I said to my sister that she has to grab me by my arm and do something physical so I realize that I am really alive and we were liberated. It was the English army that liberated us. And the way I understand is that they really didn't come to liberate this camp, they were just going, passing by, somewhere else, and they were attracted by the stench and wanted to investigate and see what's going on there. This is what they found. People, all over, laying, strewn, live corpses, dead corpses, because they did

not even bury before we came, they were just laying around. They didn't bury them in the pits, they didn't burn them, just dead bodies all over the place. It was, for them, unbelievable. They distributed food, pieces of bread, and they radioed ahead for more help because they did not

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realize what they have found. It was heartbreaking to see the sum of these living corpses being handed a piece of bread and at the same time, dying, on the day of their liberation because they were so starved, so far gone, that even this piece of bread didn't help them anymore. I got some food with my sister, we just stood there hugging each other and just crying and, it was a moment that I think I'll never forget in my life. Just walking around and trying to make the best of it. They, the English tried to instill some normalcy in that camp. They um, naturally, weeded out the sick people right away because there was a lot of people with typhoid fever. And they did not have any hospitals, not enough medication, so they had makeshift hospitals. What was make- just a plain barrack. After Belsen were the wooden camps, where we were. Bergen was farther, the brick

buildings, and this is where they took the sick people. There, people were laying on plain mattresses on the floor. The only one they did attend to was the ones they thought they would survive. The severe cases, they didn't even bother much because they didn't have enough medication. My sister got very ill, and she was taken to one of these places. After I found her, I didn't even know where she was, she told me that the doctor made the rounds and he said, we won't bother with her because she will not survive. If she survives this night, which is the crisis, then we'll give her some medication. She said, I did not sleep all night. If I die, I wanted to die with my eyes open. But in the morning, I was still alive, and when the doctor came, he said to her, oh you're still alive, now we are going to treat you. I had a slight case of typhoid fever, with me they didn't bother at all. Also, they tried to bring some normalcy into our lives. They did disinfect us, gave us different clothes, they burned down the barracks, the wooden

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barracks, we were- which were full of disease and we were transferred to the brick barracks. There were like bunk

beds and so many people to a room, and they gave us food and tried to treat us. This was it. Every day, there were posted lists from different liberated camps, telling of the survivors. We always run eagerly to see if anyone from our family had survived. We never found anyone. My friend, the youngest one, was so inquisitive, she got a message from two brothers that were...

SWB: We have to reload

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Let's start again with your sister bringing you out and you hearing the sound, and what sounds everybody made.

FELA WARSCHAU: It was noisy. It was loud. It's like joyous shouts from people that could still raise their voices, but most of them, the sick, were silent. Some of them had tears, you know, looking back, you remember more being asked, you remember more, people with tears in their eyes, just like we did, cry, from happiness, that it was such a long dream, all we dreamed about and what kept us going in the camps was if maybe, if maybe by some miracle we would survive, how happy we would be, um, that it shouldn't be a dream, it should be a reality and we lived to see this moment. What kept us also going is, was the thought of after liberation, that we also would be able to meet our

relatives, our family, which we were parted from. The people, what they fed us, is soup and bread, to begin with.

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They started slow. I know my husband told me that he was liberated by the Russians and they gave them a lot of food and people ate too fast and some of them died because their stomachs couldn't digest the food, it was to the point that your system didn't work right after being so starved. So I suppose maybe they were more cautious. There wasn't a lot of food. It was a moderation which was just right. Um, the changes with burning the barracks and disinfecting us, first of all we had the clothes, which we were wore there, which was full of disease and lice, we had to go through showers, then some powder. I- I couldn't tell you what it was, but I know, disinfected with a powder. They gave us different clothes, also. And then we were transported to the other brick buildings. We were assigned so many people to a room, and there were bunk beds there. We shared the room with other people. We were weak enough to get along with everybody, we were all happy just to be alive, and be liberated. But you see, um, reading the lists from other

camps, from the survivors, that lived through this, we did not find anybody which, at this point, what kept me going was all this, and I was fine but when I didn't find anybody this is the time we almost, I caved in. I only lived with that hope that I will meet my family. I had such a wonderful home life, such loving parents, and I had two brothers, and besides that, I don't count the rest of the family like uncles and aunts and cousins, I think it was almost close to sixty people our rel- we had such a big relation. And none of us survived to the end, it was my sister and I, and two cousins that survived all this. So you see, I was desperate after being liberated, knowing that no one had survived, he met a man that he knew from large ghetto. He was in the line behind my father and my two brothers. And when we met him after liberation, he told us

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that they went the wrong way in Auschwitz. But you know, you st- really don't believe it until you really hit it yourself. You have to be so convinced that no one is alive that even he told us, we still hoped, maybe it isn't so, maybe by some miracle they did survive. But it didn't

happen that way. So you see we were in a displaced camp, you just didn't know what to do. Like I said my friend got a message two brothers of hers survived and they were on the American zone. They wanted her to come there. They would come and pick her up. Well she persuaded us to travel with them, since we had nothing here, what did we have to lose. Their main argument was, maybe by chance you will find someone there. Maybe they weren't on the list and you will find someone. So we traveled with them. Not having any money, we traveled on freight trains, on coal wagons. There was only one time when we got in into a passenger train. The conductor didn't even come over and ask us for any money because he could see who we were and he just made a wide turn around us. We didn't have any money to give him anyway. So we arrived on the American zone in Feldafing. It was a camp about, I would say by train an hour away from Munich. And it was, um, the Americans were administering this camp, and of course they um, asked the survivors to form their own administration, like offices that if you have grievances even an infirmary was there, and a doctor, [clears throat] that was, excuse me, a survivor. He was the head of this infirmary. They also opened up kitchens and who didn't want to eat in the kitchen got supplies and you could, if you could manage in the rooms that you got, it was also brick buildings which supposedly housed before a Hitler unit[?] there. So this is where we were housed in. Also, several people in one room, all the four of us were in a basement room, and another girl which we didn't know at that

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time, we were assigned to this room. But we got along very well. There were bunk beds and there were just like one counter, and to keep a couple dishes if you could organize this, and whatever you possessed was shoved underneath the bunk beds. And in the middle of the room we had like a pot-belly stove, if you could manage to get food and cook, that's what we did on that pot-belly stove. The same thing there, no one was there, um, people in Feldaafing were from all over Europe. It wasn't only from Poland. We had Hungarian Jews, Rumanian Jews, Czech Jews, and also Greek Jews in this camp. Every one just walking around and trying to mingle and find someone. Like I said, we never did. But what the Americans also did, is organize art schools, they brought in films, they brought in um, organized our people the survivors that were musicians and also traveling from other camps they were giving concerts and believe it or not even dances, for those that were well enough to attend all this. And also a Jewish, our own police force, to police that it would be safe, you know, from other intruders. They kept us busy. But the problem was, there was no future in being there. Where do we go from there? You see, to

Poland, we didn't want to go back. It was Communist, first of all. I knew I had nothing to look for there and to tell you the truth maybe, I know the Polish people resent that very much, but I remember slurs and them being very anti Semitic, so I just had no, I didn't feel that I wanted to live there again. That wasn't what I wanted. Of course, we didn't want to stay in Germany, too much Jewish blood spilled there, so where do we go from there, you know? I, and meanwhile, I, en-, I signed up for [clears throat] art courses, it was um, like a technical, um, training place where you could learn a trade. And believe it or not, um, we were so alone that we need moral support [clears throat]

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in meeting young people there. Young man and young women, we paired off and we got married. Hu- You needed someone, and who else would understand you better than another survivor. It's like a soul-mate, you know, and you just somebody to support you. I don't think there were really great romances, it was something, someone that we needed to give, to comfort one another. And this is why we did get married. I got married in 1946. I met this man that was

originally from Lotch. I spent two years in the ghetto there, and we did get married. My sister also got married, I think the same year. We lived in one of the buildings afterwards in a different. Another couple, the same room, we divided the room with some wooden boards to be separated and have our own privacy, okay. And my husband worked as a policeman, and I went to the art school. This is how we spend our time, trying to figure out where do we go from here? To tell you the truth, I wasn't very strong. I did not regain my strength after the war. Some people did, and I felt that the rough journey to illegal Palestine, I couldn't take that. I wanted to go somewhere where I could recuperate, but where. You see, the problem was the world finally found out what happened in these camps. No one wanted to take the people in in the beginning. We just sat there. So what...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: Back in Bergen-Belsen, when you were liberated, did they bring in German nurses to help take care of you?

FELA WARSCHAU: Yes they tried. They had to bring them in

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at gunpoint. Even at that time, they did not want to come in. They had caught some of the SS men escaping, and they made them bury the people, the corpses that were laying around all over the place. And believe me, when you looked at them, it was a sad situation but it gave us satisfaction when we looked at them how worn and tired they looked and how their uniforms were all muddy from dragging the p- these dead bodies to the uh, pit and burying them, and we thought to ourselves, you were taught, you were taught that you were the master race and nothing can touch you. Now look, when the shoe is on the other foot, what you look like, and how you react to a situation like that. Because, this is what they kept on telling children, from little Hitler youth on down[?], that they are the master race, and they are only, they are the only, the ones that would be ruling the world and they are entitled to it, because this is it, you know. They're better than any other people or any other race. So, I thought look at yourself, what you looked, right, look right now, your master race, under certain circumstances you look exactly like any other person. There is no difference between you and I. That's, that gave us a lot of satisfaction, although[?]. And you know you could take revenge, you could do anything you wanted, nobody stops you. But who had the strength, even some people walked out to look around,

outside the gates, whoever had the strength. I didn't do that until about two weeks later, to see what the outside looked like. And then I was hesitant, I was afraid, I was so afraid. When finally I walked out through this gate, I kept on looking backwards if someone wasn't going to shoot me for walking out of this gate. You were so paranoid, not really. Being liberated and not really believing that you're allowed to go past this gate, this is how I felt. I don't know how others did feel about that. And the German

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population nearby, I think they feared a lot, they thought, now these prisoners that are going to be let loose will come and loot them or rob or take, um, um, your revenge. I don't think any one of us thought of doing that. First of all, we were too weak. And then, if I would do that, I would stoop to their level. I don't think I could do that. This is not the way to do it. Uh, I know our rage was inside of us, for what happened. But it wasn't me that should judge. You know, I judged them in my heart, but not me, personally, physically, to take revenge. I didn't think so.

SWB: Tell me other things you remember about the German population being asked to help, or things being requisitioned from them, taken from them.

FELA WARSCHAU: I do not remember more. Maybe there was.

SWB: Tell me about the nurses. Tell me about the, were Germans brought in to be nurses? Can you tell me about that?

FELA WARSCHAU: Yeah, they had German doctors also, and German nurses, but I think they did not come voluntary. They worked under duress, and not very willingly. And sometimes you could see, still, being conquered and like a revulsion on their faces that they had to attend these people. So, I think those people that were nurtured all these years with Nazi propaganda, most of them, the liberation did not change them. They were the same people. It just, the circumstances, they had to abide by the rules that was it. And the funny thing was, whoever you spoke with, if you had a chance, with the uh, with, the German population, every one of them was stumped. None of them

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knew what was happening. Like when he marched in, in the, middle road in Hamburg to work, lined up in five, being guarded by these SS men, some of these people really didn't know who we were. One time I remember a wo- a woman walking up to this SS man, and saying who are these women? Why are they dressed like that? And you know what their answer was? That we were young prostitutes. And we are, we were being punished, put in our camp, because we're not supposed to do that. Can you imagine [laughs] something like that all five-hundred of us Jewish women being prostitutes so we were put in camps for punishment. You, this is. And I do not know why the German population did not question some of them, did not question. Is it really true what they are telling me? It seems they did whatever told, like a mechanical man or a mechanical woman. This is what the Nazis say, this is what Hitler says and it has to be true. It has to be, because he says it. He was almost like a god-like creature to them. So you see, maybe there were some people, maybe there was a underground, but not enough of them. Not enough of them to make a difference, because if there would be enough, it would have made a difference. They would not abide by a regime like that almost for twelve years I think.

SWB: Now, let's go to the beginning, how long before you went to Feldafing, did you stay in Bergen Belsen as a DP

camp?

FELA WARSCHAU: I think we stayed maybe two months. I um really don't remember the dates.

SWB: Okay, tell me, before you left Bergen Belsen after you were out of the hospital situation, tell me what it was like

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in those first couple of months. Were you locked in...?

FELA WARSCHAU: No, we were free to move around. We were free to visit other prisoners in, in Bergen Belsen. The doors were open. You could come and go as you please. Even venture out to different cities if you felt like it. That's why people traveled, and some people did venture into the city. I don't know what they were looking for, but they did. Those that stayed there, after a while, what they told us, they got more food and they just did like every camp try employ the people by some kind of a trade or whatever, make it close to normal, and believe it or not, even in Feldafing, they developed like a trade thing with the German

population. It was like a in- unwilling partner. Because there were certain things you did get in the displaced camps. But it wasn't enough what you needed. Again, we did not have any money to go and buy anything. Let's say every month we got a care package. But every month and this care package was always the same thing. I mean, it was wonderful food, but you got a big bag like powdered milk, a huge bag dried eggs, and how much can you eat it through the month. So you see, you took this stuff and sort of trade it in, with the German population for something that you wanted. We had no money to deal any other way. And they just loved what we did. It was like I said, a very unwilling partnership doing this. We could not stay all our lives isolated there since we were there, from the German population.

SWB: Now in Feldafing, let's go to the early days in Feldafing. Were you locked in Feldafing?

FELA WARSCHAU: No, no, no. The camp was open. You could

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move around. They even had a hospital which was about I would say, close to mile and a half from the camp, and they converted a hotel into a hospital, it was called a, the hotel the Kaiser and Elizabeth. And was a golf course there, very big golf, golf course around there. People came from all over. And Feldafing was sort of in-between you traveled by train, you could go the other way to Garmusch, which was a famous ski resort in Germany, so there was a lot of traffic going, uh, I would say the second or the third station going towards Munich was Starnberg. ... Starnberg you see is very famous, people come there to stay in summer and to go skiing and boating. All around there, the places were very familiar to, in Germany, people knew about these places. But very few people remember Feldafing. It's an odd name. So we left, in Feldafing, and my husband worked. They were guarding, like there was a gate in the front, like a little house for them to be in there, you know like a policeman's guard house. Trucks were coming in and out with food, they were being checked, you know, who they were and all that and just to keep order in the camp.

SWB: Okay, now we have to reload.

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

SWB: Okay, now we're rolling again, do you, was there a difference between the American administration and the

British administration, did you notice when you got to Feldafing?

FELA WARSCHAU: Yes I did, the English did what they had to

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do, to me, it seems like, because they found us, and they had to do it, it was a job, but I don't think there was any special warmth or any connection, personal feelings, you know. Like sometimes you feel the people sympathize with you, maybe single ones, but in, all-in-all it didn't come across to me like that. But once I was in the American zone in Feldafing, you know the Military Police, they came in a lot to the camp because they had connections with this local police, the survivors. They always came in to this, their office there. For what reason I don't know, I never asked, but they were, there was a big camaraderie, it was, they didn't make any difference, to them, like you were an equal with them and there was great warmth that come, that came through. Even if we didn't understand the English. One day one of them came in, I remember this, because my husband told me that. He came in on a jeep, and he parked it. He

went into the office and then he motioned to my husband, he should come and bring the jeep around. Naturally, coming from here, and thinking he is a policeman, he knows how to drive this car, this jeep, or drive at all. Well he said I took this key and I kept on fiddling back and forth, and I brought him the jeep and he said this is how I learned how to drive [laughs], see they were so, you know, it's something that you felt close to a person when they do things like that. But I think the English were more distant. They meant it good but we didn't understand at that time.

SWB: Did you witness reunions of survivors, people who found each other who had survived and didn't know...

FELA WARSCHAU: Like my friend, when she met her brothers, and there was my other friend, she was looking for her

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brother but she found a cousin. It was very hard on us because my sister and I didn't find anybody, and our two other friends had found someone. We were overjoyed for

them, but at the same time sad for ourselves, knowing that there was nothing to hope for anymore.

SWB: What about visits to the camp by Eisenhower, do you remember?

FELA WARSCHAU: He was there. He was in Feldafing one time, I couldn't tell you exactly when, I know he was there.

SWB: And what about Ben-Gurion, did he come?

FELA WARSCHAU: I don't remember that.

SWB: Tell me about how the Jewish population in Feldafing organized itself and what kind of culture they did and did they make a newspaper?

FELA WARSCHAU: There really was no newspaper but there were meetings. Like I said, there were socials. There were dances, the organized dances, there were survivors that played the instruments before the war. Where they got the instruments I will never know. But they organized dances, the Americans also brought in films. It was like a great big building and they run films for us for free there. And also amateur theater. Also survivors that traveled from camp to camp in our own, from our camp, that performed little skits to entertain us, and like I said, I don't know if I told you that, one time they had a skit with that organ grinder, two people, one of them, uh, portrayed Hitler, and

the other one, I don't if it was Goebbels or Goehring or

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Weber, and they were going around and begging people, they were all gone and they need a few, I, you probably don't understand Yiddish or do you. No. Well anyway, there was a little, I remember a few words in Yiddish, how they were singing this. And to the end they say, we are so poor now and broke, give us a few pennies. And we all roared, and everybody threw their pennies on the stage, you know.

SWB: Tell me that story again as if you hadn't told it to me. Say the lines in Yiddish and then translate them.

FELA WARSCHAU: There were amateur theaters. They performing all kind of skits. One of them was, well there was another one about people needing to go to Palestine, you know it was like little propaganda, and this one was two organ grinders, going around and begging for money. And they were singing, the song was like [Yiddish words], that means our luck has run out, and we all we do is grind this organ and they beg people for some money to support

ourselves. I will never forget that skit because it was like throwing these pennies in face of these two performers, it gave us satisfaction, you know, you don't understand, you probably don't understand the feeling we had at that time. Thinking that we could sit here, free, and make fun out of them, that's what it was.

SWB: Do you remember ever having an election in the camp?

FELA WARSCHAU: I don't remember. I honestly don't. I know they had some kind of organization, um, I think the bunt they were called, and they marched at certain holidays, with flags through the camp, in the camp, you know, observing this holiday. I wasn't personally involved. I was not into

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politics at that time. There were other problems I had to deal with, how to get out of this camp, and this wasn't my top priority at that time.

SWB: What about children, do you remember?

FELA WARSCHAU: We had no children in the beginning. Only the people that got married there in the camp after a while had children. I also had a daughter there, and she was born in the year of 1949. So, uh...

SWB: I need you to tell me the skit story once more, because the second time you didn't tell me it was Hitler and Goehring who were the characters.

FELA WARSCHAU: So you had this skit, two organ grinders. One in the image of Hitler, and one, I don't remember if it was Goehring or Goebbels. And they came out on the stage, grinding this organ, and singing that song [Yiddish words], and we just roared, you know, it was uplifting that we could make fun out of them, on the other side of the coin we were. It was unbelievable at that time. Being for so long, shut up. And the smallest child which was a Hitler youth[?], he had the power over you. If he came over and told you, you have to do this, you have to obey them. You have no idea the feelings, what restrictions we had, we felt like cornered animals, nowhere to turn. So being free was, it was intoxicating.

SWB: Tell me a little about how you and your sister supported each other, emotionally.

FELA WARSCHAU: She did support me, because I was the one

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who kept on crying all the time because no one survived. And she said to me, now we came that far, if you keep this up, you're going to die too. And she kept on talking me out of it. She was the stronger one. I was more like a momma and daddy's baby, you know, we were always, all of us, we were four children but our parents were, to that point, like we were the most precious gems of the million dollars to them. It was unbelievable, the love we had at home and everything and this is what I missed so much. You only live for it that they will be here to, to comfort you after all what happened. And there's nothing, nowhere to turn, so it was very hard for me to take, I got real emotional. Somehow she thought she has to pull together because someone has to do something. So it was a comfort to know that she was so strong at that time. But after a while it came out that I was the stronger one than she was, later on [laughs] So you see sometimes the roles reverse.

SWB: Okay, thank you...

END

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