

JUSTINE LERNER
May 5, 1999
Tape 1, Side A

[copychecked & partially authenticated by A.D. -9/1/05]

Q: This is an interview with Justine Lerner, conducted on May 5th, 1999 by Arwen Donahue. We're at Mrs. Lerner's home in Louisville, Kentucky. And this interview will become part of the Holocaust Survivors in Kentucky Oral History Project Collection. Okay, Mrs. Lerner, would you begin, let's begin by you telling me your full name as it was at birth and your date of birth.

A: I was born October 23, 1923. My name was Jospe Weisman, my maiden name was Weisman.

Q: Would you spell your first name as it was at birth?

A: Yes. J O S P E.

Q: J O S P E, and your last name?

A: W E I S M A N.

Q: And where were you born?

A: Poland, Białystok.

Q: Will you tell me something about your early life in Białystok? First of all, why don't you say something about your parents, what they did, what your father's occupation was and perhaps something about your family's history in the area of Białystok.

A: My father's name was Josef (*ph*) and my mother's name was Chaya (*ph*). I was born, I was the fifth child; we were eight children. I was one of the youngest. We were four girls, four sisters and three brothers and one was a twin. I was the, one, two, three, four... I was the fifth child, like I said before. And I had a very healthy, happy upbringing. My mother was in business. My father, at that point already, couldn't work because he was sick, so he used to help in the house with the children and he helped Mom in the business. And we were loved, getting along sisters and brothers, very good. And it was great. I went to school. My mother always believed in a private school. She never believed in a public school. So, we were taught Hebrew and Yiddish and Polish.

Q: What was your mother's business?

A: Food business. We had a food store.

Q: You had a shop?

A: A shop, yeah food store.

Q: Did you live near your shop?

A: Not too far, within walking distance, not too far. And my mother was a very devoted mother.

Q: What was her maiden name?

A: Her maiden name was Rosenberg.

Q: Rosenberg?

A: Rosenberg, R O S E N B E R G.

Q: Okay, okay. What were your brothers' and sisters' names, starting with the oldest and moving down to the youngest?

A: My oldest sister was Itga (*ph*), the second one was Shayna (*ph*) and the third one was Fulma (*ph*). In between was a boy, his name was Mihal (*ph*). And then I came and my name was Jospe. And then I had a brother, Abraham. And then there was Mischa (*ph*) and, uh, what was my sister's name, the youngest, the twin? Fega (*ph*).

Q: Okay. So, the two youngest were the twins?

A: The two youngest were the twins, yes. And it was a very happy home. I had a grandmother that lived with an aunt in the same building. And we were always playing together, my aunt's children and us. And never had a problem. It was a very happy house. My mother used to tell jokes and did birthdays and everything for the kids. She was a very hard working woman. People used to say that I looked like her and I care like her. It was never a dull moment, all this happiness.

Q: Was your family religious?

A: I would say not orthodox, but conservative, conservative.

Q: They go to services every Saturday?

A: Not every Saturday, no. Holidays mostly. If something special came up, but I wouldn't say every Saturday, no.

Q: And can you say something about your father and his, what he was like?

A: My father was, I could only say my father never hit us. He didn't know what means. He had patience. He was very good to us. He was like playing the part of the mother, because my father was in the... he had... he used to make skins. But this didn't... he couldn't carry this on,

because he had problems breathing, had a weak heart. So he couldn't continue to doing that part. So, that's when he had to quit his work and he stayed home with the children and helped out Mom at the store. He was a very lovable man, good, caring, very caring for the family. He was not born in Białystok. He was born in Sokolka, which is not too far. My mother was born in Białystok. And we were surrounded, always, by love and by friends and by family. We didn't know from any hardships because we always had what to eat, being my mother was in business. And we got along with everybody. That's it.

Q: What language did you speak in the home?

A: We spoke mostly Yiddish with the parents and then Polish, of course, in the streets and the school. And Hebrew.

Q: Was it an all Jewish school that you attended?

A: Yes. Yes it was.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism in Poland before the war began, in Białystok?

A: I had very little... the only time I experienced is when, the ghetto, when we were in the ghetto. Otherwise, I really didn't, because we were, like I said, I went to Hebrew school and my friends were mostly Jewish. But the neighbors on the block, just enough to say a hello and good-bye and they had their life, and we had our life. I never had any problem. My father used to have problems, because he used to love soccer and every Saturday they had a soccer game. And after we finished our lunch, we used to go. But he always took along a cane, in case they hit him or they throw stones or whatever. If the game... if that team lost, you couldn't get home, because they used to be very mad. And that's what they used to do. They used to throw stones, hit you, so he always took a cane along with him. But he wouldn't miss a game. He loved it. He loved that sport. And that's it. Mom took care on the kids, he was at home and that's what it's all about.

Q: What did you, did you and your family... were you aware of Hitler from the time that he rose to power in Germany? And did you feel threatened by what was happening in Germany?

A: Actually when you heard the stories, when you heard what's going on... we, of course you started to get scared, but we didn't know so much what, what's going on. And my father, may he rest in peace, always said, he was a medic in the First World War and he always says that the Germans wouldn't do that. They may put you to work, but they will never harm you in any way. And like anything else, you listen to your parents, whatever they told you. I mean, you didn't have much of a chance to run any place. We were on the... in our town, first came in the Russians. And we were with the Russians maybe a year. And we were on the... they evicted a lot of people that were in business for themselves. So, they put us on a truck to go, I don't know where, to Siberia or whatever.

Q: The Russians did?

A: Yes, the Russians did that, because my mother had a house and we had a store, so we were already like, rich, you know what I'm saying? So that's what happened. And my mother gave them some money and they took us off the truck and we remained home. Had we known what was going on, that we wouldn't stay home, of course we would have gone to Russia better. But that's what it was. And then a year later, this was 1939, when the Germans came in. The Russians left and the Germans came in. And we were with them for a while from the beginning, then they started to make all kinds of things. When the men went to the Temple, like on a Saturday, they burned down the whole Temple with the people inside, whoever it was there. Then one Saturday they took away all the men. They left the women, but all the men. And that's when the trouble started. A while later, they put us into the ghetto and this was terrible. The ghetto was terrible.

Q: Okay, before we get to that, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the time before the war started. When the war started it was 1939, you were about sixteen years old? Is that right?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you tell me something about what your interests were? I mean you were a young woman, you're just coming into your... you're getting close to adulthood. Can you take me back into that time and just recall what your life was like?

A: Well, like I said before, I have... I admired my sisters. I always looked up to them. My oldest sister was a designer. She was very good at it. She used to design for me clothes. She used to make me dresses. My second sister, she was in the house. My third one, she loved school, but she was sick. And I always used to complain to Mom, that she's... takes advantage of me. She hits me. Whatever she has, I cannot have it. Like we used to come from school on a Friday. She wanted something special. She wanted some kind of pastry and she always got it. And milk, she did not want it to eat, but it was in the house. I was forced to eat everything, whatever they cooked for me. And I rebelled. And I came to my Mom's store. This was after months. And I came to my Mom's store and I started to cry. And I said to her, "What's going on? You don't love me." I mean, what could a child think? I don't know how old was I, maybe seven or eight. And I said, "You don't love me." I says, "How could you say that to me?" My mother said... I said, "You see, you yourself said when Fulma touches me..." in other words, she gives me a...

Q: A pinch?

A: A pinch, exactly, I was looking for that. And that place hair wouldn't grow, that's what she used to say, because she was strong in her hand. And when I would go to school with her, she has, she walks and I run, and I couldn't catch up with her. "So, how could you tell me that she is sick and I am well?" "Oh," my mother said, "Oh, I see you have already brains." I said, "Yes." She says to me, "How many fingers do you have?" I said, "What are you talking about? Everybody has ten fingers." So, she said, "If you hurt one, if you cut one, does it hurt you?" I said, "Of course, what kind of talk is that?" That's when she sat me down on her lap and she explained it to me. "I love you all the same, but she happen to be sick, that's why she gets everything. I don't want to upset her." So, again, I said, "I don't believe you. How could you do that to me?"

So, she said, "Watch." She had, what do you... now it's going to come back to me. I'm getting all excited. Epilepsy.

Q: Oh, mm hmm.

A: And most of these things happened during the night and I never saw it. So when she told me that, I trusted her, my mom. But I... still I had to see it for myself, that kind of child was I. And sure enough when the light came up and I used to see everybody running to her bed and foam came out of her mouth. And from then on, you couldn't do nothing to her, she was the best sister. She couldn't be wrong in any place. I looked into her eyes. This all I have to thank my mom, that she explained it to me properly, because otherwise I would grow up hating her, how she dared do that to me. That kind of mom we had, very smart and outgoing in every way.

Q: What was the sister's name again?

A: Shayna. She was the third one and I was under her. And...

Q: What were your interests? Did you have any dreams?

A: My interest? To go school. And that's what it was. I didn't have any other ambitions, but to go to school at that point, because I had older sisters to care for. You know what I'm saying? We didn't jump to any conclusions ahead. That's the way we were raised. My oldest sister got married. And she had two children. The other sister got married in the ghetto. And my brothers, my brother got married in the ghetto. And they all had children in the ghetto. And that's what it... it was kind of hard on us. And my sick sister, she too got married in the ghetto and she had a baby.

Q: Had you started dating by the time the war started?

A: Not dating, actually not dating, just having friends. We used to belong to organization, and... Zionist organization.

Q: What was the name of it?

A: Jabotinsky¹? Would you know? Mm hmm. Yes, yes, yes. And that's... we used to be together, like, and go on, you know, like hikes and things like that, but of course, everything was supervised. And that's it.

Q: Okay, now tell me a little bit more about the Russian occupation. The way I understand it, it started in 1939. The Germans occupied for a week and then the Russians came in.

A: Uh huh. They were more than a week. They were there for maybe a year.

¹ Refers to Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940), a Zionist leader who established the Revisionist movement, and was the head of Betar, the Revisionist youth movement.

- Q: After the... so the Germans came in, and then they occupied just for a little while and then the Russians occupied for...
- A: No, just the opposite. First were the Russians, first were the Russians and then came the Germans.
- Q: The Germans returned and occupied again and established the ghetto later on.
- A: Right. Uh huh, right.
- Q: During that time that the Russians were occupying, you mentioned that your... did your family actually lose their store?
- A: Oh yeah, we lost everything, yes. Yes, at that time. Short time after we went into ghetto.
- Q: And what, how did you feed, how did your family support itself during that time, before the ghetto, that it lost the store?
- A: Before the ghetto, I, it wasn't a long time, let's put it this way. We didn't feel the pinch in anything, because like I said before, my mother took care on everything. In the ghetto we felt the pinch, yes, definitely, but not before.
- Q: Do you remember when the Germans came in and occupied Białystok?
- A: Oh sure, oh sure.
- Q: Can you tell me about that day?
- A: The day, we heard planes coming back and forth and they threw bombs. We were right, not far from there. And we still thought that they were practicing. The Russians are practicing because we didn't believe that this was the Germans already. A short time after, you saw already riding on the motorcycles, you know, and coming into town and that's what it was. And that's when the trouble started.
- Q: Were they brutalizing the Jews of Białystok?
- A: What? The Germans?
- Q: The Germans.
- A: Of course, of course.
- Q: Did you witness any brutality?
- A: I mean, thank God, we were lucky at that point, that nobody was missing from the family, but a lot of people didn't have their husbands already. They took them away, or their sons. They used

to pick them up from the street and, and take them out. But at that point, we were yet, the whole family was together yet, until the, the selection that they made. That they put us into the ghetto and I had to go out to get some food, because nobody else could. My brother wouldn't go out, he was afraid. And so my father couldn't carry anything, so I used to take off the yellow star that we wore. And I was blond. And I took it off and I went out through the... they had like a hole they made. And I went underneath and I went to the Poles, the ones that used to do business with my mother. And I used to buy from them potatoes. And I used to bring it in underneath the... on the way back, the same way like I came out. And I did it quite often for the family, they should have what to eat.

Q: How did you get money to buy the food? Was that saved from before?

A: Oh, money left, we had money from before. Yeah, money we already had.

Q: So, it wasn't taken away when you went into the ghetto?

A: No, no, no. No, the money, at that point, they didn't take nothing. When we came into Auschwitz, that's when they took everything away. You hid it, you know, in certain places. You know, you prepared yourself. But at that point we still had money.

Q: Can you tell me a little more about going into the ghetto. What were your living quarters like? Or do you remember, how you were... do you even remember being informed that you had to move and what your family's response was to that?

A: Yes. Like I said before, I was not of the ones that listened into everything. I had older ones than me, listening in, you know, but you followed whatever they, they told you. It was one bedroom that we had in that... in the ghetto. And that's what everybody was together. But my sister, my oldest sister and my... my oldest sister and my second sister, they were married already and they had babies, so they couldn't go with us when we were hiding, because they were afraid that they going to give out. Because if the kids start crying, the SS will hear.

Q: You were hiding in the ghetto or before?

A: This is the last time, before they, they made those selections, so we were in the ghetto.

Q: Okay.

A: From there they took us, they took you out.

Q: Right.

A: And that's from there where they took you. First they put you all into a ghetto, in order to be easier for the Germans, that we should be all together. And that's exactly what happened. They took... so we were separated. My mom went with the... with the younger ones, the ones that had the babies. And my father went with the older, like me and my brother, that had no children.

Q: Okay, before we go on... I definitely want to hear about that, but I wanted to focus on the time in the ghetto and going into the ghetto. So just on that early time, right as you were going in, did your whole entire family, beside... go into that same bedroom?

A: You had no alternative. Now my oldest sister, she was married; she had two children. So she went with her husband, but not too far. And my other sister was not with us already. And neither did my brother, because he was married. So, it was just the younger ones, that we were all together.

Q: Five children, five children and your parents.

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: Yes, yes.

Q: In that bedroom.

A: In one bed, yes, yes, yes.

Q: And when you were in the ghetto, did you work in any way?

A: No, I never worked, no. No, I never worked. I was going... I didn't go to school already then, because you weren't allowed to go already. But I was home with my parents, because I had to watch them.

Q: Do you remember the, the...

A: It was a lot of things on my head. Let's put it this way, because I knew my father was sick and they had to get certain things and I had to... I had to be the one to go out and get it. So, every time you, one of you went out, you wasn't sure if you were going to come back, but I would never say no. Never.

Q: So, you were the main, of the children that were left with your parents...

A: Right.

Q: ...you were the main caregiver?

A: Right. Caregiver. Not God forbid that it was sick, bedridden. But as far as providing food, and I remember my sister was having a baby in ghetto. And at that point already, they wouldn't take no money, the doctors. So, I had to go get the doctor. My mother sent me, so I went, of course. And he came. And I had to be the one to, to stay with them in the room. They chased off my mom, everybody from the room and she was having the baby.

Q: Which sister?

A: Shayna. That's the second one. Daniel², could you bring me a little water, please? And the tissues, please, if you don't mind.

Q: Do you want to take a break?

A: For just a few minutes.

Q: Sure.

End of Tape 1, Side A

² J.L.'s grandson, who was in the room for part of the interview.

Tape 1, Side B

- Q: This is tape one, side B of an interview with Justine Lerner. Okay. You were telling me a little bit more about the ghetto. Did any of your brothers or sisters do any work in the ghetto, in any of the ghetto industries?
- A: None of them. None of them, no. No. No. My brother, like I said, didn't go out, out of the ghetto, you know. And of course neither did my father or my mom. The only one that I went out, and I used to bring in the provisions, whatever, whatever it was able to, mainly potatoes and flour. Sugar, my mother, she knew that something's coming up. So, the main doctors didn't take, if you needed a doctor, money was no good, because they couldn't buy nothing for the money. The main thing was sugar and flour. And that's what she saved up a lot of it. So, she paid the doctor, when my sister was giving birth, that's what it took, is sugar and flour. And none of them worked, no, no.
- Q: Was it frightening to be sneaking in and out of the ghetto?
- A: Yes, it was, let's put it this way. I had no fear. I knew I had to do it, because I could not give it over to somebody else. It was my job and I did it very, very nice. I went out, like I said before, I wasn't sure if I'll ever get back, but that's it. You have to do what you have to do. And I was always successful. I went in the same way and I came out the same way. And that's it. The family was happy and I was happy that I was able to do it.
- Q: Did you have any close calls?
- A: Not in the ghetto. I was fine. In the camps, yes, but not in the ghetto. In the ghetto I was fine. I went in okay and I came out okay. And it's not like... my mother made meals and we ate and... the best she knew how, I mean whatever she had left, you know? But we never felt hungry or anything like that.
- Q: Were you aware of any organized, underground resistance in the ghetto?
- A: No, no really don't... we were, we didn't, we didn't... how do I say? We didn't mingle with people, you know what I'm saying? Because we were a close family, and we were mostly by ourselves. But I knew that people were working for the Germans, but we didn't know how could they do it! You understand what I'm trying...? How could they do a thing like that? When I came to the, when I came to the concentration camp, to Auschwitz, then I saw what was going on. Up till then, I did not know. Like I said before, my father always used to say the Germans are educated. They wouldn't do things like that. The only thing they could do is to put you to work. But not to hit or... or do certain things uncalled for. Those are vicious killers, that's it.
- Q: Do you remember when, approximately, you entered the ghetto? What month and year?
- A: No, I really don't remember that. I really don't remember.
- Q: That's okay. And do you have a sense of approximately how long you were in the ghetto?

- A: Not too long, I would say. People remained after they took us away, of course. Maybe three months, or four months the most. That's all. And of course you couldn't take nothing with you, because you had to carry it. Just like a pillow case, that's where you put some, your belongings into it. You went. Because they didn't give you enough time. So, you wrapped whatever you could. And like I said before, I was not with my mother. I was with my father then and my two sisters, my older sister and my younger one. My, my younger brother and my older brother and that's what happened.
- Q: Did you witness any actions in the ghetto or any round-ups during the time that you were there?
- A: No, we just read a bit or, or were told. But I never witnessed anything like that, no, thank God. Like I said before, we were lucky at that point, yet. We were all together.
- Q: When did you go into hiding and why? How did that come about?
- A: Because they said, I mean they didn't say, but you heard rumors that's going be a selection, that they're going to take people away from... from the ghetto. And they're going to ship them to Auschwitz. So everybody went in either to a basement or they built something underneath and that's the way they're hiding. You took some water with you or some bread and that's what happened. And you were sitting up and waiting that somebody should knock on the door or whatever. And that's exactly what happened. We heard them walking upstairs, Germans with the boots, and we were underneath. And from nowheres they found out. And they knocked on the door and that's what happened. They took us out from there.
- Q: You were in the same building as where you had lived?
- A: No.
- Q: You were hiding in the same building?
- A: No, no, this was a different building across the street. Yeah, my mother and my sisters were in the same building underneath.
- Q: And you, will you repeat who exactly you were with? You were with your father...
- A: My father, my oldest sister, because her children were older, my father and my sister and her two older children and my brother and me.
- Q: Okay, so, four of you, okay, and plus the children.
- A: Plus the children, yes. My... what did I want to say, I forgot. Yeah. And we got out and they put us on the trains. And... crowded. A lot of people. And we were riding, like I said before, my father kept telling us, you see all the way, close to Auschwitz already.
- Q: And this was taking place in the winter time?

A: In January, February, yes, when the snow was falling on us. And we were sitting. A lot of... there was no room to go to the bathroom, you should excuse me, a lot of people made on themselves. It was just like, cattle have a better, better look than we had. It was just unbearable. And my brother, the oldest brother jumped the train. He didn't want to come into Auschwitz and they were standing there and shooting. So, I never heard from him, so I don't know if he got shot or he got killed afterwards. My father to the last minute still had good ideas, that they're not going to hurt us, they're going to put us to work. But it was not so. The minute we arrived to Auschwitz, we still saw people standing and digging ditches. And he said, "What did I tell you children? They're more civilized than anything else. They're not going to do these things. They're not going to kill." And as soon as the train stopped it became like a terrible wind. And they separated us, the women this way and the men that way. Didn't see my father anymore. Didn't see my sister, she was next to me, but she wouldn't part with her children, so you pulled her out on this side. So, I ran out from my side and I went to see... to be with my sister. And the SS, they had canes. They took the cane and put around my neck and pulled me out. They pulled me back to that line. So, I ran again over to my sister. I think I was scared, I didn't know which way. I wanted to be with her. So he took me out for the second time and he opened up my head. Hit me with the cane over the head and that was the end of it. I never saw them afterwards. So, when you come into Auschwitz, you had to get undressed and of course, I started to cry very much. I wanted to go to my sister. I didn't tell them what, what I was crying. And an SS woman comes over to me and she says to me, "Why are you crying?" Disoriented. Everything... it was unbelievable what they could put people in. And she says to me, "Why are you crying?" So I said to her, "I want to go back to my sister." And she said, "You are going to see her tomorrow." She was a good one. And then another SS woman came over, said, "Why are you crying?" I cried harder. I said, "Because I want to go to your sister... to my sister." She said, "You'll never see her again." And since that point, I never cried again. Because first they, they cut your hair, and then they tattooed, and my hand got swollen like this. And lonesome, you have nobody. I was really transport from the same town, but they were no, not related to me. And I had nobody. And the following day when they took us to work, we saw the smoke coming out of the chimney and I put two and two together and I knew exactly what was going on, that they not around anymore. That's exactly how it was.

Q: Did you have any friends from Białystok outside of your family?

A: Oh surely, and I met a lot of them. Not from the first day when we got there, but they had another transport and that's when I met a lot of people from Białystok, yes. I knew them. I went to school with them. My mother knew their mothers. They were in business. And that's it, we stayed together. We tried to hold onto one another.

Q: So you, did you talk together about what was going on there and try to figure out...?

A: We all knew the same things. You couldn't figure out anything. You couldn't escape as far as this is concerned. You had to listen, and you had to be strong, and you had to help one another the best you were able to. And that's exactly what happened. I was always helping and one day, one morning... it was called the block, the place where you were staying. And every day somebody else had to go to get coffee in the morning. And... two people, because it looked like

a garbage barrel. With two _____ and you had to carry. And that morning was my, my turn to go to get the coffee in the morning. Had to go to the kitchen. And sure enough I went and the other girl went and from nowhere a girl came along and she had a, a plate like a... you know, like a... I don't know what, how to... like she used to get the soup there. You know? They used to carry with you all the time. And she stopped the, the pot to get some coffee. And an SS woman saw her through the window. She came running out with the dog, and she poured the hot coffee, boiling coffee on my leg. And the skin came off right away. And... and that's it, and there was nobody to talk to. Nobody to, nobody to complain. Because nobody would listen to you. They would gas you. So, after being three weeks like that, and without medication. I used to put on, they had like a little blanket to cover yourself, whatever it was. And I used to, I ripped up a piece and I made like a, like a bandage. And it used to get stuck during the night and in the morning I used to take it off and I went to work like that. And couldn't go on no more. And I said, after three weeks, "I can't go on no more to work. I cannot carry on." I said, "Whatever's going happen, it's going to happen. I'll remain on the block." And you were not allowed to go to... to remain on the, on the block, because they would kill you. They would gas you the same day. So, I went to work and we were digging ditches and they moved away from there and I threw myself into the ditches and I figured I'll let me lay there. It's like a grave. Let me remain there. But somehow they walked away and I crept out and I went on Revier. The Revier meant, like a hospital. And they wouldn't accept no Jews, of course. So, I went in there and they accepted me. They asked me who did it. I said, "I burned myself." I was not allowed to say that the SS woman did it to me. I says, "I burned myself," and that's it. And they accepted me. You didn't get no help or medication or anything like that, but at least you had the rest. You didn't have to get up six o'clock in the morning and stand outside for *Zahl Appell*. They used to count everyone in the morning. And this took an hour if it rained or snowed, whatever, they didn't care, because they were dressed. And so, I said to myself, at least I don't have to go through this. And that's the way I remained for two, three weeks, and then they had a big selection. And, and I don't know if you ever saw it, it's... the beds were like boards, you know what I'm saying? Straight boards. And you were... it was down and up. It was two, two layers, the boards. And I was upstairs. And they said everybody should go down because they had like a selection.

Q: Was this in the Revier or in the block?

A: No, this was at the Revier. Revier means a hospital, that's what they used to call it. Yes. This was at the Revier. And the SS came in and they said, "Everybody come down from the bed. Used to call it colliers (*ph*). And... and everybody should go down. I touched my next door girl and the other side and they were dead. They came from Greece and they couldn't... they couldn't take the climate, because they were used to warm climate. And it, at that point it was not warm in, in Auschwitz. It was winter time. And they just, they used to fly, lay, they fell like flies. They went to bed and they never got up. And I said to myself, "I don't stand a chance." This is all your head, you're talking to yourself. I don't stand a chance by going down, because you had to take off whatever you wore and parade through them naked. And if they like the way you looked, they put you one way and if they didn't, they gassed you. So, I said, "I'm not going to give them satisfaction. I'm not going down." And I remained like that on the bed. Somebody carried on with you, you know, tell you not to do it. And the Doctor, Doctor Mengele was a very tall fellow. And he touched one, two, and here I was laying in the middle. And he didn't touch

me, because I was still warm. They could have taken me down and killed me. And I remained like that, so this actually saved my life.

Q: How did you know it was Doctor Mengele?

A: Oh, you could tell. They announced it, too. They announced everything. You knew. Yeah, you couldn't do nothing about it, but you knew. And then somehow, I, I don't remember it was from Greece or from a different country, that gave them a lot of... I think it was from Greece. And they shouldn't gas. They stopped gassing for a while. And that's the way I remained on the... on the Revier. And it saved me because I didn't have to get up in the morning, like I said before, to stand outside and wait for the *Zahl Appell*. And I got the same, how did we used to call it? Same amount of food that I would get when I worked outside. That piece of bread and that soup. And I was friendly with a girl, she was not far from Auschwitz, we were sleeping together and eating together and between the two of us... she lives in England now. Between the two of us, we had two slices of bread, so we were rich. So one slice we have to... we used to save it up for the night meal and for the morning, we took along the other one to work. We never finished both slices of bread. One we put away.

Q: Was she in the Revier with you?

A: Oh yes, she was all over. No. She was not... after. After. No, not in the Revier. She was not with me in the Revier.

Q: What was her name?

A: Halina.

Q: Halina, what was her last name?

A: Oh, what was her last name? I know, I have to take a look in the book, because... She lives in England.

Q: Okay, we can check later, if you'd like.

A: Yeah, I have to take a look in the book, so. You want it now, shall I take a look?

Q: Sure. You can say it. What was her name?

A: Halina Lichtenstein.

Q: Okay, thank you. Can you, were you about to say something else or shall I ask a question now?

A: Ask me a question.

Q: Okay, you mentioned before you got the burn on your leg, that you were working, you were digging ditches. Were you working outside of the camp?

- A: Outside, outside, yes, we used to go from the *Zahl Appell* from in the morning, they used to take you to work by groups. I don't know how many people they needed that day. So, like they counted off thirty, forty, sixty, whatever they needed, and we marched. We followed them and whatever they said to do, that's what you had to do that day. A lot of times they brought back a lot of girls, back dead ones, because they didn't like the way they looked, or for no reason at all. And they brought them back on... on two pieces of wood, actually. And that's they put them back, because they had to account, each and everyone they took out from the gate, to bring the same amount back, even if dead. But they had to bring you back. And that's what happened.
- Q: Were you living in the... do you remember where your barrack was? Was it in...
- A: Oh sure. Twenty-one was the, from there they used to take you to gas. But this must have been four or five.
- Q: In Birkenau?
- A: In Birkenau and then we went to Auschwitz. From Birkenau it was a terrible place. First of all when I arrived there we didn't have no water yet. We had a lot of mud and I lost a shoe. If you put your foot in, you couldn't take it out, you had to leave the shoe. And it was horrible. It was not to be believed that you could do that to people. And mostly young people, because they never chose elderly, because they didn't, they only needed you to work. And the elderly, of course, didn't have no strength, so they gassed them right away. But the younger ones, they... as long as they needed you, they used you and then after that they killed you. And that's it.
- Q: Do you remember the prisoner functionaries, Kapos...?
- A: Oh sure, I remember the Kapos very well, yes.
- Q: Will you tell me about, what your experience was with them?
- A: I had very bad experience with them. Like I said, we were in Birkenau and the first thing in the morning, after they, of course, cut my hair, put the number on and did everything else what they had to, separated us, of course, from the loved ones. And six o'clock in the morning or five o'clock in the morning, these four people from Czechoslovakia, they came before us. And they were real meanies. Mean. They had nothing nice about them. And the first thing out of their mouth at six o'clock in the morning was "*Polska koovi stavach (ph)*." I... I, the first time in my life, by that point, I heard. It meant, to explain it, "Polish whores, get up." And I was so bewildered with that saying, because I didn't know even what a whore meant at that point. And that was my first greeting with the Kapos. And from then on, like I said, there was nobody that told you, but you figured out already what's going on and, and that's it. You cannot go under their nails, you cannot ask for anything, because you're not going to get it and you have to obey. You have to leave at a certain time your room and then that's it. You couldn't stay there. To remain on the bed? Never, because they would gas you right away. And like I said, luck was with me, I don't know if it's luck, or... I always said, that through my life, through my stories I always feel that somebody carries on with you. Or whatever it happens in life, that somebody

carries on with you. It's God will. I shouldn't have gotten off the bed. Had I gotten off the bed, they would have taken me immediately. But like I said, my brain told me, you'll never make it. And don't get undressed and don't go through him. And I remained. And like I said before, I was in the Revier after a few weeks. And of course they didn't treat me, but at least I had the chance to... not to go outside. And then I got a better job. So the woman that took care on me, she was a Polish woman—not took care, but she spoke to me, let's put it this way—on the Revier, was a very nice person. So one day I approached her after being there maybe three or four months. So I, I asked her if... she used to come in the morning, she was wearing a white coat. And she was clean and she had a short hair cut. She was really pretty woman.

Q: Do you remember her name?

A: She was a Polish... Magda, I think it was. And I, I approached her one morning. And I said to her, "What do you do with the water after you finish washing yourself?" And she looked at me. She says, "Why? Do you want to drink it?" I said, "No, who drinks dirty water?" I said, "I want to wash myself around the way you do. I want to be clean. I want to look good like you do." So, something went into her head and she, every day that she came in, in the morning, she brought me a, you know, a basin, a small basin with water with the soap and the dirt and everything when she washed herself. And I used to wash myself around. And I felt so good, like a million dollars. So I said to myself, how could I help the woman? I had no money. I can't give her no money. I can't give her nothing that I have of me. What could I do? I said, okay, I'm going to help her to clean out. She was cleaning out under the beds, the walk. And I said, I have to help her. Before she gets here, I'm going to do it and when she comes she won't have so much work. So, I told her. But when I went down, I could, I fainted from laying so long on the bed. That I couldn't, I couldn't do. So I got up, and somebody helped me to go back on the bed. When she came in that day, I told her what happened. She says, "If you want to live, you must get off that bed." I said, "Sure I want to live." So, she said, "But let's do it..." excuse me. "You start doing it before the SS comes in, before they change." So, I don't know what time it was, four or five o'clock, I don't know. So I climbed down again from the bed and I was able to stand for a minute. So this was really a big accomplishment. And I took a chair and I pushed it. And I was walking, like jumping, I couldn't put down yet the foot all the way on the bottom, on the floor like. But every day I tried, until I got stronger.

End of Tape 1, Side B

Tape 2, Side A

- Q: This is tape number two, side A of an interview with Justine Lerner. Okay, go ahead with the story about cleaning.
- A: About cleaning for that woman. And she appreciated it very, very much. And she thought it was very clever of me to do a thing like that. And she used to give me an extra piece of bread. And at that point, she told me that I cannot remain on the bed. I have to get off and they were, they were trying out... there was a period of time that they didn't gas. They got a lot of money. I think it was from Turkey or I can't remember exactly from where it was. And this was to, to hold off the, the selections. And she said they were trying, they were looking for, for nurses. That pretty soon they were going to ask who wants to become a nurse. So, she said to me, "I would advise you to volunteer for that." So, that's exactly what I did. I volunteered and I was transferred from this into a different, a better place, not too far from one another. And I didn't get as a nurse, but I got as... when the new arrivals came on, when they took off their clothes, the personal things you had to leave there too, everything. And you had to go through to look for diamonds, or for money people used to sew in their clothes. And that's what was my job.
- Q: This is the Canada commando?
- A: Oh yeah, that's right. You know that. Yes, yes, Canada, yes, right, right, right. So that's where I worked. And of course the SS stood right by and there was big boxes like, how do you... like piggy banks, but of course it was not a piggy bank, but it was a, big boxes with locks on top. And they used to... had to put in all the, whatever you got, put it right in there. And this was my job. And then you had to bring in the clothes to the zone or whatever they call it. It's like a, they used to... like cleaners, they used to clean the clothes. They went through the heat, and that's what... I don't know what they did with it afterwards, but that's what it was. And that's what I was working for. And this helped me, too, not to get outside with my leg. And of course, it healed by now, but I... it left me a terrible scar. It... it grew like wild flesh on it, but I was happy that I could walk on it. And that's what it was. When I came out of there, when people saw me that they knew me, they didn't believe that I'm alive, because months I was not with them.
- Q: Did you go back to living in the same barrack that you were living in, sleeping in before you went to the Revier?
- A: No, I didn't go to that barrack because I was in a different place already. And... but it was a better place, because there, like I said before, you didn't have to stand outside in... for the *Zahl Appell*. They knew exactly where we are and where we're working and that's what it happened.
- Q: So, there was not more *Zahl Appell* at all?
- A: No, no more in the morning, no more *Zahl Appells*, no. You didn't have... they didn't have to count you already, because they knew there were so many people, so many people are working there and that's what it was. My luck that I had the job.

Q: Is this where you met, you mentioned that you had a friend...?

A: Halina?

Q: Halina.

A: Yes, that's where I met her. Halina Lichtenstein, yes, we became very good friends, like sisters. And like I was telling you before, we never finished the bread and everybody used to be envious. How could we do it? I says, that's exactly what happened. We're not vultures. We thought tomorrow, we're going to live maybe till tomorrow, so we'll have the bread for tomorrow. A lot of people didn't do that. They... whatever they gave them, who knows if they'll make it to tomorrow? In the meantime, they ate it up. And I never cut my bread. I always gave her, she should do it. Because thinking, God forbid, maybe I'm taking a bigger slice for myself. Would never do that. That was in my mind. That's the way I was raised. And we were wonderful, we were just like family.

Q: Was she from Białystok, too?

A: No, she was from Bendin (*ph*), that's near Auschwitz, not too far from Auschwitz. So she was from around there, yes.

Q: Do you think it helped you to survive, to have that little bit of humanity and kindness in your life? Did that help you to have hope for your future?

A: I don't know. It has to do... I never changed as far as helping people. All my life I suffered for that. I never changed. I think it has to do with the upbringing, to do, be good, to help. Even now, all my life I've been like that, after the war too. If somebody... My mother was that way. If somebody needed a donation, or to marry off a child and they had no money, my mother was always there helping. She knew already the people, and they always gave her and she always put it in anonymous, not to know or to thank you what you did. This is a wonderful thing. And I do it the same way. All my life I've been doing it. I got... my hair was cut off, but later on towards the end, they allowed you a little hair to grow. And when the transfers from Białystok came, and like I said before, I had a good job already and I was trying to help. And they told me that the *block elteste* (*ph*), in other words, this was the one that was watching them, the Kapo, she wanted a doll. Like I said before, we were working, we were working with the clothes and, and so I told somebody else, if they came along, you find a doll, put it away. Hide it. I took the doll and I threw it over the, the fence. And they caught me. And they pulled me out. And they cut my hair, again, because at that point already we had, you know, they let you have a little hair already. And of course, when they take the hair off, they take all the beauty away, especially to a woman. And they put me on a, on a pail in the middle of everybody, like at *Zahl Appell*, and they gave me sixteen, uh, with a belt.

Q: Lashes?

A: Lashes. And that's it, you couldn't cry, and you couldn't say anything. And that's that. You were guilty. You took it and that's what it was. So you would think I forgot already? No. Then

somebody else needed something else, but that's the way I am. I can't help myself, always good to people. I always shared.

Q: Were you injured by that to the point where it was hard to work? Or did you recover?

A: I wasn't injured. No, I was not injured, but I was ashamed. The shame was there, but not the injury. It hurt for a bit, the backside hurt, of course, but not ashamed. I was ashamed rather than pain, let's put it this way.

Q: Did you have dreams and fantasies, things that you would do to escape in your mind, at least?

A: No, I knew I could never make it. No, no, no. I was just like a lamb. I was following whatever they said. I helped people, yes. I have a friend, that I saved her. She lives in Brooklyn yet. Called me last week. Sonja Rotenberg (*ph*) is her name. She had malaria, and there was a selection going through. And she, and I was working that time. She said to me, "Justine, Jospe, Jospele, help me, help me, help me." So I took a beet, and I rubbed her cheeks, and I put her on a clean nightgown. And instead of going through this way and shaking, I put a mattress under her, she could quiet down. And instead of going this way, she went that way. And all her life... she's in Brooklyn. And always, forever, said, "She was the one that saved my life. She was the one that saved my life." And I always did things that seemed possible, let's put it this way, just to help out somebody. But that's my nature, I can't help it.

Q: When... what would... do you remember what you would talk about with your friend, like with Halina or any other friends when you weren't working?

A: I remember a lot... you couldn't talk while you were working. I'm talking about already after the war we were together in France.

Q: Did you have a chance to talk together while you weren't working while you were in Auschwitz?

A: Here and there a word, but you couldn't make the conversation, because they were watching and nobody wanted we should get hurt. You know what I'm saying? So if it was important you said one word, but otherwise you wouldn't talk. You couldn't have a conversation, especially when they were standing and watching you. Uh uh.

Q: Did you work, how many days a week did you work?

A: Every day. There was no Sabbath, no Sunday, no, every day you worked.

Q: From morning until...

A: From morning until, they had to bring you back at a certain time, five or six o'clock, depends the time of the year. If the day was longer, you worked longer. If the day was getting dark, you had to return back.

- Q: Did you have any hope that you would survive? Did you have an idea that it would end sometime?
- A: Not at this point. Not from the beginning, you had no hope. Later on you started to have hope. But not from that point.
- Q: How did you start to have hope? Did you get any news from the outside world?
- A: You didn't have to get news. First of all, they were evacuating us from Auschwitz, because the Russians came close and they did not... the Germans did not want to fall into the Russian hands. So, they evacuated us to Ravensbrück. Ravensbrück was another camp, but it was not as bad as Auschwitz. They didn't have the gassing chambers. It was just a concentration camp and there I got a job in the kitchen. And I was dishing out food and everybody came over, "Jospele, Jospele, give me some food." Just pour it in. You know, because I, it was not mine to begin with, and they were hungry. So I always did that. In that respect I was lucky, I always got good jobs. And then from Ravensbrück they transferred us to Switau. That's where we were liberated. And there, I was already there with nine, nine girls. All of us were Jewish girls. And somehow, like I said before, this was not a concentration camp. They couldn't gas you there. It was just working, a camp, a concentration, but without the, without the, what do you call that? The gas chambers. So, now we were there nine girls and there were a lot of Polish women that were from Auschwitz. And they exactly knew that we are Jews. So, one day we spoke among ourselves and we decided that we're not going to go in, all of us, together to wash in the morning, because we didn't want to be with anybody that should identify us. So, we ran in and we washed ourselves, like three of them and three stood outside. And that's the way we made it up. Sure enough, one day all of the Polish, and they were even anti-Semites. They were very mean. It's not that we took anything away, but they had to squeal, they had to tell that we are not, that we are not gentiles, we are Jews. And sure enough, one day they found out. And they went and they squealed. And they called us all out. These, these, these, you know, the numbers they called and we had to go in the front. And they said to us, "Are you Jewish? Are you Jews?" We said, "No." We made it up before, because we felt that it's the end. That was what it was trying to come. We heard the, you know, that's a battlefield going on. We heard the shooting. We heard the *cannonen* (*ph*), they used to call it, the... everything, but we didn't know exactly when it's going to be the end. We knew it's nearby. So, that's the way we made up, that we... each one was going to say, "My mother was Jewish, my father was a gentile." The other one said, "My father was gentile, my mother was Jewish." You know, all of us denying. And they looked, and they looked, and they looked and thank God, they didn't kill us. But... and then from there we went to Switau. This was the last camp.
- Q: I'm going to, sorry, I'm going to interrupt you a little bit, because I wanted to hear about how you got from... I don't want get too far ahead of it, because I wanted to hear about...
- A: Hmm. I'm making it already finished. (Laughter.)
- Q: ...Yeah. There was a time...
- A: You got to go?

Daniel Lerner (Justine's grandson): Yeah.

Q: Would you tell me about, let's go back to the time that you were in Auschwitz and you're getting ready to leave. Did you leave on a forced march? How did that happen?

A: We left, they put us back on buses, open buses. And I remember like now it was snowing. And we all climbed up on the buses. And they were taking us... we didn't know where, but we got to Ravensbrück.

Q: This was winter 1945? Is that right?

A: '45, right. We stayed in Ravensbrück not too long, maybe six months. And from there we went to last one, Switau, the Czechs. And that was, that's where we were liberated from.

Q: So, you were, you didn't have to march out of...?

A: No, no. Some of them from the beginning, they took them by foot. We went by train, by bus. Yeah, they loaded us up on the buses and we traveled by bus, because it was a few selections from Auschwitz, two or three, because a lot of them went by foot and they ran away from there. That my friend's... her husband did that. He escaped, because he knew the area. It was, Bendin was not too far from Auschwitz. And he knew exactly the area, the woods, and that's where he escaped to.

Q: Who, who... I'm sorry. Will you repeat who escaped?

A: That's my friend's husband. Halina, the one that is England now, her husband did that.

Q: She was married at the time?

A: She was married before the war, right. Right. She was a little older than I was. She was married before the war. And that's what her husband escaped into the woods, because they knew the area very well.

Q: Were you with Halina on the buses away from...?

A: I don't remember. I really don't remember. She had to be together, because we were on the last one. We were in Switau together.

Q: Were you in Ravensbrück together?

A: In Ravensbrück together, too, yeah. So we were there together, right.

Q: Do you remember anything about the journey by bus?

- A: It was not a bus like a bus. It was like a truck, you know. The journey was terrible, because it was like unknown, you didn't know where you were going. And that's all I could remember actually from that.
- Q: What kind of a bus was it? Was it closed?
- A: Open, open like cattle, you know, like an open big bus. A truck better than a bus. A truck I would say, an open truck, yes.
- Q: And were you with people who were from the Canada Commando that you worked with?
- A: Yes, yes, yes, yes.
- Q: All women or women and men?
- A: All women. There was no men down there, all women. Different blocks had men, but no, we were all women.
- Q: Is there anything else that you can think of to tell me about your time in Auschwitz? Was there anything striking that happened to you? Anything you want to say?
- A: The only thing I could remember is like I said, they burned my leg and when they cut my hair off. And they hit me. Otherwise, oh sure when I came out of the Revier, out of the hospital, people didn't want to believe that I'm alive, because they, they didn't see me for months. So, this was a shock to a lot of them, even my cousin, but we stayed together. And nothing else, I mean I witnessed a lot, but nothing else that I could really say, that unusual, you know what I'm saying? Everybody else there lived the same thing.
- Q: You had a cousin who was in Auschwitz?
- A: Yes, yes. The only two, my mother and her mother were sisters and she came with the second transport, but she was ten years younger than I was. She was, I think, the youngest thing in Auschwitz. She passed away three years ago. She had a heart attack.
- Q: What was her name?
- A: Her name was Leah Weitzenfeld (*ph*), and she was married in New York.
- Q: Weitzenfeld was her maiden name?
- A: Weitzenfeld was her maiden name, yes, Leah Weitzenfeld, yes. And she has two children, a son, who's a pharmacist and he married a pharmacist. And we are in touch. They live in Brooklyn, yeah.
- Q: Did you try, did you have any information at all when you were in Auschwitz about what had happened to your family? Was there any way to find out?

A: No, no. When the second transport came, or the third one it would have to be, they said that they saw my mother coming into Auschwitz. The people from Bialystok, interviewed them. And they said... and that's when I got hit, when they wanted a doll for the Block elteste (*ph*), for the Kapo. And that's when I tried to organize and give it to her. And that's what happened. And that's when they said, in that transport my mother was, but I did not see her. I did not see anybody, no. That was last time. When I met them at, when we arrived in Auschwitz, I never saw them again. Always hoping, always searching, always looking, but of course, nothing. When I was in Paris, we lived in Paris for a year, after the war, of course. And I was always going on the trains, looking. In Europe the trains are much better than... you never saw a train, did you? Oh, in Washington they have beautiful trains. Here, because it was riding in Washington on the train. But by us in New York, the trains were horrible. And I always used to run from train to train. That's what I did in Paris, looking, the searching. From the back, look like my sister, from the back look like my brother. Always thinking, looking into their eyes, but of course, it was not them. But I always thought, yes, yes, I'm going to find somebody. But that's it.

Q: Now, going back again, just a little bit. I don't know whether this question is going to be clear, but you described before you arrived in Auschwitz how, what a close-knit family you were.

A: Right.

Q: You were all very close and you were dependent on your parents to a certain degree to kind of tell you what was going on and to give you a sense of how things, like what the future might be. And you talked about how you trusted your father and your father always believed that things would turn out all right. It must have been a terrible shock to arrive and be suddenly separated from everyone you knew and yet somehow, somehow you survived that. Can you say something about how you adjusted to that extreme change?

A: I always felt, this I told my friends in Paris also, that this was my mother's and my father's last wish, that somebody has to remain from the family and carry on. And I was the one to survive and that's what I have to do. I have to build back what we lost. That's the way I lived after the war. But of course, it's just like a, like a made up story, but it's, this helped me a lot in my life. Like I'm not doing it, but somebody else tells me to do it.

Q: That was what kept you going in the camp?

A: That's what kept me going. My friend told me that, too. Halina, the one from England. There was a time in my life when I was in Paris, I'm going way ahead. This was after the war and we were liberated. And the Americans liberated us. And each of us from the nine girls that there were, had family in the United States. I had an uncle. This one had a sister and this one had in South America. Every one of us had family and they advised us that we shouldn't go back to Poland. They asked us, what do we want to do. And we said, we want to go to Poland to look for the family. And they advised us not to go back to Poland, because at that point already everything was shared up already, what belongs to whom. Poland belonged to Russia already. And they told us not to go, because we'll never get out of there. So, the only thing they advised,

advised us, excuse me, is we should go back to Paris. Excuse me. So, the Americans, the ones that liberated, advised us not to go back to Paris, uh, not to go back to Poland. We should go to Paris, from there the organizations will take over and we'll find our family and then we'll be able to get to them. So that's exactly what happened. They gave us a paper and they put us on, because we had no clothes. So, they gave us a paper, and they gave us uniforms that the WACs wore and they put us on the train. And we were going to Paris from Switau, from the Czechs, we were going to Paris. And on the way they took us off the train one stop and they said that we shouldn't talk to them, we should just give them the paper. And sure enough on the, the next stop they put us back on and we came to Paris. And there Rothschild gave us, it was a hotel. And they gave us the hotel for the misplaced people. And that's what it was. We slept two in a room and downstairs was a kitchen. So, and we used to be able to come down and eat. Now, I don't remember how long I was there, but I just couldn't go down with a dish again and eat. So, I cried so much. But it was more tears in the dish than it was food. And I decide I'm going to cook for myself. And each floor, they had like a two burner. So, that's what happened. I bought some potatoes and that's what I used to cook. But of course, there was like a line. You know, you had to wait quite a while, but it was for me better not to go downstairs, but to cook and eat for myself. And so, that's where I got in with my friend. I slept with Halina, with my girlfriend. My cousin and another friend was in the other room. We were... we had nine rooms, one after the other. And at one point practically everybody found their family already and they were leaving. And of course, me, I didn't find my family, didn't find my uncle. And the only thing is, I said to myself and I said to them too, either he's very rich, he doesn't want to identify himself, or he died, one of the two, so many years. So...

Q: I'm going to, I'm sorry to do this, but I'm going to interrupt you again, because I'm going to forget...

A: We skipped too much.

Q: Yeah, we need to go back.

A: We need to go back, yes.

Q: And find out a little bit. But we'll remember...

A: Where we stopped...

Q: ...where we left off.

A: Yes, in Paris.

Q: And come back to that, okay?

A: Right.

Q: You were, we were talking a little while ago about the trip from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück.

A: Ravensbrück, right.

Q: And you had mentioned a little earlier a little bit about Ravensbrück, but would you tell me more about the conditions there and what the living conditions were like, where you slept and so forth? And then I'll ask you a few questions about Ravensbrück.

A: The sleeping conditions were practically the same, but the only thing is, there we already had water. You could wash yourself whenever you wanted. And of course the food was the same, but we didn't have the...

End of Tape 2, Side A

Tape 2, Side B

- Q: Tape two, side B of an interview with Justine Lerner. You were telling me about arriving.
- A: Ravensbrück, yeah. And we didn't have it on our heads that there is gas chamber. So you were a little bit more at ease than you were in Auschwitz. That's the only thing. That's the only thing.
- Q: You were with your cousin at that point, too?
- A: My cousin, I don't remember her being in Ravensbrück, because I think we were not. In Auschwitz we were together. And then after the war, in the last one we were together. In the last one we were, but Ravensbrück, I don't remember if she was with me.
- Q: Do you know how long the journey from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück took?
- A: I really don't remember. It had to be a few hours, maybe five or six hours for sure.
- Q: Did you have the sense at that time that the war was coming close to an end?
- A: Only from, because you were talking among yourself. I mean, here and there somebody passed by and they heard a radio. So this came the news, but otherwise we were not allowed to have any, any news. But like I said, you heard, heard the guns, I mean you had to be deaf not to hear it, because it was nearby. But of course, we did not know when we were going to be liberated. We knew it was close, but how close we did not know. Because at one point like we used to hear "roooh, roooh" all night long and then all of a sudden it got quiet. So we figured it out, geniuses, that they pushed them back. You know what I'm saying? And then again, and then again it was too quiet. But we knew that the end is near, but we didn't know how near it was.
- Q: You said you got a job in the kitchen? Is that right?
- A: Always the kitchen. I love the kitchen. (Laughing.) I... how did it happen? By luck, like I said before, nothing unusual, just picked, you know. And that's it. And like I said before, everybody put in their, their thing and took out some food and of course, I didn't stop them. And that's it. And that's what people appreciated. Always was there for the undertaker, I always let them do.
- Q: Did people look out for you, too? You talk about how you were looking out for other people. Do you think people were looking out for you too, as a result?
- A: I always had belief that they would. I always believed that they would. I had very dear friends and that's what actually helped me in actual life, because family we didn't have. And we were like sisters and brothers. When you first came to the, to the United States and prior to that, we were looking for one another and when we found each other it was like, like you found somebody from the family. And don't forget, it's over fifty years and we still, the ones that are alive, we are very, very close. There is no week that I shouldn't speak to them. And helping in

every way that we could, if God forbid somebody's sick. When it happened to me, only my friend from concentration camp helped me.

Q: When you were, when you had... when you were attacked?

A: Yes, when I was attacked and left in the house. So, I was all alone. My husband had passed away and my tenant moved out that day, the one that lived upstairs. And there was nobody, nobody. And that day I was supposed to go to a funeral, also from, one from concentration camp. She lost her son of cancer, young fellow. And I was going to go to the funeral. And I had a ride. She didn't live too far from me, a few blocks. And when I came down on the block they told that they just left. They didn't wait for me. I was very disappointed and hurt, and unbelievable, how could you not wait? I don't know if up to today, if they forgot or they just didn't care. I don't know. Because right after this it happened. And I never... I don't know them so well. But being she lives on the block, I was going to go with their neighbor, which they were also survivors of the Holocaust. But like I said, I didn't know them so close. So I really don't know if they did it deliberately or if they forgot, because I never was able to discuss it with them. So, when I came there on the block and it was very short for me, maybe two blocks. So the neighbor said to me, "Whom you looking for?" So, I told her. She said, "They just left. Everybody left." So, I came home and I got undressed. This was on a Friday, and started to prepare for dinner. And I opened up the window. And the, I had a, a, you know, what they call that? For the air to come through. Like a shade or whatever it's called. And not thinking, not thinking, that God forbid somebody's going to climb in through that, open up the window and get in. And he hit me in the head, cut my face. I don't know, he broke my arms, they were hanging, both of them. He did something terrible. And my friend... me and his wife, she passed away, we were the best of friends from concentration camp. I'm now friends with her daughters, always was. They live in New York... he knew that I was supposed to go to the funeral. He didn't go. And he kept calling. Called in the evening and no answer. So he couldn't figure it out what's going on. Then he thought maybe I went to, the woman that lost her son, to their daughter, to stay with them, help out. So, Sunday he came along to the house and I lived on the corner. And he walked around, parked the car and he walked around this way. "Justine, Justine, where are you?" And I don't know from what and when. I yelled out, "Here I am. Save me, help me." And that's when he heard my voice. Across the street was sitting women, neighbors. So they, he asked the neighbors, "Did you see Justine?" And she said "No, but I'm wondering, the light is on. She never used to leave the light on. The light is on and I haven't seen her." So, when he heard that, he ran over to them and they climbed through the window, the kitchen window, because I had a porch, like a terrace like this, but higher. And they went in, one of them went in through the window and they found me laying on the floor in my bedroom in a puddle of blood. And that's when they called the police. And the police called an ambulance and that's why they put me into a hospital, a trauma hospital. And they called my son and that's what happened.

Q: How long had you been lying there before somebody found you?

A: Twenty-four hours.

Q: Oh, my.

- A: Twenty-four hours, from Friday, I don't know what time Friday. But from Friday till Sunday. It had to be Friday maybe twelve or one o'clock in the afternoon. And that's what happened.
- Q: Well, let's... we'll come back to that time again later, but let's again go back to the time that you were in Ravensbrück. And you, you started working in the kitchen. Was there brutality on the part of the guards? Or were things starting to ease off?
- A: No, no, we didn't find it so bad. It was like a paradise away from Auschwitz in Ravensbrück. It was much better, much better, different people, different looks. And like I said before, the gas chambers were not on top of our heads, on top of it. And we had experience already. We were about already a few years. So, it was much easier than Auschwitz.
- Q: You had enough to eat? Did you have enough to eat?
- A: Like we were... I don't know. We never complained about the food. Never. We never. You, you didn't have the room to complain, but I think it was much better than in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the worst.
- Q: How long were you in, do you have any sense of how long you were in Ravensbrück?
- A: I really don't, maybe five months at most, I think.
- Q: And then how did it happen that you went from there to Switau?
- A: They used to take people to different camps, so that's where they took us to Switzerland. Uh, to Switau. That's in the Czechs, Czechoslovakia, yes, that's where it was.
- Q: And that was a camp?
- A: It was a camp, yeah, but they did not have, like I said before, they did not have the gas chambers there. Just working camp, you know? But no, no gas chambers, no smoke coming out from the roof.
- Q: How many of you were in that transport? Was there a large transport from Ravensbrück?
- A: Nine, we were nine girls.
- Q: Only nine girls.
- A: Only nine girls. No, I mean the Jewish girls. We stayed together, we were only nine. There was a lot of them coming from Ravensbrück to Switau, but we stayed together. We were, like I said before, the only nine Jewish girls, Jewish girls that were there.
- Q: So in Ravensbrück, you nine Jewish girls stuck together there, too?

- A: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. We stuck together a long time, yes, yes.
- Q: So when you were deported on the buses from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, were those buses, were the people on the bus mostly non-Jewish prisoners?
- A: Mostly of them. Mostly, but maybe there were a lot of Jews too, that we didn't know. You know what I'm saying? But we stayed together. Yeah. Everybody had somebody that, you know, was holding onto somebody. And that's exactly what it was.
- Q: What were you doing in Switau?
- A: The same thing like we did in Auschwitz, nothing worked that you could say that you worked at a machine, you did something, something that you learned a trade or anything... nothing like that. We just were working and digging and that's it. And first, one day you digged and the second day you covered it. It's... that was the work, labor, that was nothing special that you did.
- Q: Did you have any idea what the goal was in the labor? Was something being built or arranged? Or were you in the dark about that?
- A: In the dark about everything. No. You didn't have a radio, you didn't have nothing. You only depended on the, on the people that heard news. If you passed by, you heard a radio, so you listened in on a word or two. That's what you....but you didn't have no first class news. No, you did not know.
- Q: How were the living conditions there in Switau?
- A: The same thing like in Ravensbrück, this was the same thing. It was a little more scary like I said because they pulled us out, you know, and we had to tell them. But otherwise it was the same conditions.
- Q: So people there...
- A: You had more bedrooms maybe. It was a little more elaborate than Auschwitz. You had the water, you had to go to the bathrooms. So this was... when we first came to Auschwitz, we didn't have that.
- Q: You could clean yourself in Switau?
- A: In Switau, yes, you were able to do that.
- Q: You could... every day could you clean yourself?
- A: Every day, yes, yes, you could clean yourself, yes. They had a big washroom maybe three times as big as that room, for the ladies, for the women to go into. So they had a basin and they had soap. You could wash yourself around, yes. Yeah, it meant a lot. Because, well, you liked to stay clean, that's what it's all about, it means a lot to you.

Q: Was it all women there in Switau?

A: Yes, all women. There was no men there. There was no men there.

Q: Do you have any sense of how many people were there?

A: Oh, thousands, I'm sure. Thousands, I'm sure. But it was not comparing to Auschwitz. No. None of them could you compare to Auschwitz. Mm-mm. The men's camps some of them you could compare, like Dachau or another one, say you could compare to Auschwitz. But Auschwitz was the worst.

Q: You mentioned a little earlier and I didn't fully understand... you were talking about how you were trying to conceal your Jewish identity, you and the other girls. So when you arrived in Switau, people, the camp authorities didn't know that you were Jewish?

A: No, no.

Q: Is that right, they didn't know?

A: No, they did not know. But the Poles, of course, they find out and they... they didn't know what it means, the triangle. Because the Jews had a triangle by the number. And they knew it. And because no matter discreet you could be, but they were always on top of you. And that's what happened. And they were very mean. I mean, what did it hurt them that somebody else should remain alive? But that's in their upbringing, hate, hate, hate. And that's the way they have to live with them for the rest of their lives.

Q: Did that surprise you, the anti-Semitism that the Poles were showing?

A: The Poles, everybody knows that they are very anti-Semite. They had no love for us and I had no love for them. I had love for the ones that my mother used to do business with, but they changed too, during the war. They did. When I asked for something else like this, "We don't have it, we don't have it." They did not go out of their way to help. But yes, a lot of them, I heard from stories, my friend for instance, that the people used to leave the children, like infants a few months old. And they wanted to place them in a home in... by Poles, when they knew, they gave the money for keeping. And the children never returned back to the... I mean the parents didn't survive, but the kids never returned back to their home, they remained Catholics, the way they raised them.

Q: Did you have any sense of faith during the war years?

A: A sense of what?

Q: Faith.

A: I would say that I had. I always believed that somebody above carries on with you. Whatever happens in your life, somebody's there to, to help you. Yeah, faith means a big thing to me, yes.

Q: And that wasn't destroyed by what you saw at Auschwitz?

A: I wouldn't say that I became more pious, you know, more, but I would say I'm on the same level like I was. A lot of people made fun out of me, too. Some of them turned out to have no religion at all. I always believed. I always kept a kosher home, when I was there. After the war, up till today, I wouldn't mix certain foods, like we are not allowed to have cheese and meat. I would... I wouldn't touch that. It goes against me. I was raised that way. I was brought up that way. And that's the way I tried to keep it. Now I have my different town. It's very hard to get certain foods. So I used to have separate dishes all my life. I used to conduct myself very, very nice, didn't mix up anything. Now, I don't do that. To be honest, I don't do that. But I will not, still not eat the meat and the dairy together. Goes against me.

Q: You said that people made fun of you?

A: Yes.

Q: They made fun of you for having faith or...?

A: For having faith.

Q: In the camps?

A: No. No, out of camps. When we were... after the war I'm talking. In the camp, no, no. After the war. And those were all, we were all among our own, but some of them, like I said before, lost their faith completely and some of them didn't.

Q: What would they make fun of you about?

A: Not fun exactly, it's fun... because... "Oh, stop being stupid," or things like that. "It doesn't mean a thing." You know what I'm saying? They had no religion in them at all. I couldn't do that. I like to go to the Temple when a holiday came along or anything that came up. I felt that's my place. Even my husband was not a believer and he came out from a very pious family. But he saw what's happening, he lost it completely. But I was different, I was holding onto this.

Q: So when you, it was discovered that you were Jews, you and the other girls who were in Switau. The Poles told the authorities of the camp that you were Jewish.

A: We were hiding that we are Jewish. And we were hiding and not telling the truth, that's what it was. A day or two later they took us out from the *Zahl Appell*, there where you stood there to be counted. And they called out all the numbers. I don't know how they knew the numbers. They must have pointed it out, days. And they called us all out. And we had made up, we figured something, because once they found us and they started to ask us questions. So, we knew right away that they were going to... they not going to keep our secret. And they were in Auschwitz

the same like we were. But those were mostly people that had, either they were, what do you call that, politics³ or... because they wouldn't take them Poles just to Auschwitz, or they were prostitutes or whatever, something like that, that's why they were, stayed in Auschwitz. But they had to give out, they had to squeal. And that's what happened. They called us all out. We were nine people and they started to ask questions. I said, you know, "My father was Jewish, my mother was Irish," whatever. And the other one said her mother was Jewish, her father was not. Each one, we made up among ourselves that's what we were going to say. And that's exactly what happened. And they spared us the life. They really did.

Q: They believed you and they...

A: They believed us.

Q: Did you, did they do anything...?

A: That we were mixed, mixed. They used to call us *mischling*, something like that, to that effect. Mixed marriages. And it was practical because a lot of people did get married, you know, like this. But they didn't touch us. They didn't do nothing. Of course, we didn't know, we were shivering. But that's what it was. And the minute they spotted us, they started to ask us questions. How, how, how come we had the triangle?

Q: Did anything happen to you after that? Did they do anything to... Was there any more harassment from the Poles in the group?

A: We stayed away from them. We tried to stay away from them as far as possible. We shouldn't meet. But of course, sometimes you couldn't help it. You had to walk through the same path like they did, but we knew exactly not to say anything, not to talk, you know. Be proud and go on and that's it. And that's right. No, they were very mean people, a mean machine. That's it. They had no conscience.

Q: Do you remember how you found out that they had squealed?

A: We didn't find out that they squealed, but we understood. Because that's the only ones that met us. Nobody else knew us. And that's what happened. We knew right away. The minute they started to ask questions about the triangle, we knew that we are finished. And that's what happened. Because nobody else would know that Jewish people have a triangle. They had numbers just like we did, but of course they didn't have.... So they compared right away and they knew what was going on. Because nobody else would think up a thing like that.

Q: What were the questions that... you said that during the *Zahl Appell* they were asking you questions and you responded with talking about how you had...

A: Mixed marriages.

Q: Mixed marriages. What kinds of questions were they asking you?

³ Political prisoners

A: Are you Jewish? And I said, "Of course, it's a mixed marriage. My mother was gentile and my father was Jewish." And they bought it. And all of us said the same thing. So, that's the only way we could get out of it. Because of course, Jews they didn't keep. They, they, I don't know what they did with them. Did they kill them back in the... I really can't say, but that's what it was. And that's what came to our mind to say, that all mixed marriages. And for that they had a little bit more respect, I guess.

Q: Do you remember the day of liberation?

A: Oh, sure. I remember like now. Everything that happened in my life, I'm always in the bathroom. Any excitement. I'm always _____. And all of a sudden you hear screaming. It was a lot of hills, in Switau, I mean in the Czechs, a lot of hills. So everybody started to scream, "The Americans are here! The Americans are here!" What you heard them coming with motorcycles up the hill, you know, up and down, a lot of them. And they were wearing masks, like to see through, the dust shouldn't go into their eyes, I guess, and mouth. I mean, that's the way I assumed. And they all came to a certain spot. Like in the middle of the... and they, and they stopped. And they announced that the Americans... that they are the Americans and they came to liberate us. And we shouldn't be afraid. And of course, they had the business of picking up the Germans, too, that watched us. And I ran out from the bathroom with my pants down and I came to the spot and I pulled it up. And it was like a miracle, like, like you see it in the movies. You couldn't, you couldn't see it otherwise, and unbelievable too, that we are free. And they said to us, "We came to liberate you. Be very, very careful not..." —this was on the second or on the third day, I remember— "not to pick up any food and conserves." They had a lot of things, the German, in jars. And we shouldn't eat no meat, because our stomachs are not used to it, because a lot of people fell and they died from it. And we should be very careful, if possible, we should mostly eat rice and drink water. And they were just like, like sisters and brothers we found. And among of them was a chaplain and he said to us, not to us, to everybody, to the whole camp, whoever is Jewish should come forward. And we were still hesitating, because we didn't trust anybody already. And a few minutes later we stepped out, all of us. He said not to be afraid, they'll try to help us in every way. And this was a few days later, about two, three days later, maybe. And that we shouldn't go back to Poland like I said before, because the Russians are there already. Everything was already arranged. And that they'll help us and everybody from among the nine of us had family in the United States, so we should come to, go to Paris and from there the organizations will take over. And they'll find the family.

Q: What language was he speaking?

A: Yiddish.

Q: Yiddish.

A: This was a chaplain from the Army.

Q: Did you speak English at all?

- A: Hello and good-bye. (Laughing.) No, I did not. I spoke Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish and that's it. I didn't speak English at that time. And they brought us to Paris and like I said before the organizations took over and Rothschild gave us a hotel and that's where we stayed until we left Paris.
- Q: So how long did you stay in Switau after the liberation?
- A: In Switau maybe three or four days.
- Q: What was your physical condition like at that time?
- A: I don't know. The impact in you was driving you, you know, you were healthy, but underneath you were not healthy, because when I came to Paris—this was months later—I used to go and I used to fall, had no strength in my legs. But at that point, I was strong like a bull, I didn't, you know, that drive, that drives you to do, to survive, and to go on. And after a while when you find out that's when it all starts. You find out that you have nobody and you get disappointed and it's harder to take. But with a little help from your friends... that's what it did. Like my friend, the one that's in England, I got very depressed after while when I knew that this one is leaving and that one is leaving and I'm staying, I'm going to remain alone in Paris. And I didn't want to go out. I didn't want to see anybody and... and I didn't care. That everything was finished, and there's nothing more to go...

End of Tape 2, Side B

Tape 3, Side A

Q: Continuation of an interview with Justin Lerner. This is tape number three, side A. You were talking about being in Paris?

A: Yes. And I started to get very depressed and didn't want to go on. There was no use in life already. And then my friend, that she's now in England, said to me, "You know, I'm sure that the mother's wish was somebody should survive. And you are the one that survived and if you don't want to go on, open up the window and throw yourself out and get it over with. But don't make everybody miserable and yourself." And this few words put so much sense into my mind. I took a turn around and I said, "She's right, I've got to go on. I've got to do it for them." And that's the way I live all my life. That they would want me to be that way. And that's it.

Q: Did you feel a lot of anger after the war ended, at the Germans? Or at the world? Or at anybody? What did....

A: Anger was not the word for it. Disgraced. Anger, I knew I can do nothing, but how could people live like that? To do that, one to another? This was hard to understand. And to kill everybody, not to have anybody. To be alone in the whole world. That's what bugged. But we all of us had the same thing, the same actually lookout on life. You got to build, you got to start from scratch and be productive and do what your parents wanted you to do. And that's exactly how I went on all my life like that.

Q: Do you... go ahead.

A: The, the will to live and to carry on and to bring a new people into this world, that's what we tried to. And to help one another. And we very seldom spoke about anything like that. Took us years. When they erected the monument in, in Washington, so we went to Washington. And we went like eight or nine friends. And I remember being at the cemetery, Arlington Cemetery in Washington. And... and we had a lot of soldiers down there, came to, interviewed us. They had the American flag going around and they had people from the media. And in the back of me, they had, they were taking pictures and they were talking, speeches. And there was a big, heavy cable. And all of a sudden a young gentleman touches me and he says to me, be careful. I shouldn't go back, because the cable, I'll fall. And the answer was I cannot fall anymore. I was fallen enough. And somehow, that youngster, I will never forget him, did not disappear from us. And he started to make conversations. And he ask us, where do we go from here? From the cemetery? And I told him, we are going to the Capital that time. And he says, "Could I come along with you?" I says, "What are you, you know, hanging around us? Somebody send you?" And it turned out that... I said, "Do you go to school? Do you go to college? Do you have to write thesis?" I... we couldn't understand. He took us by train home, because he had a... he had a small car, so we couldn't go in, all of us, into the car. So left the car where it was parked on the cemetery, not far from there and he took us by train to go to the Washington, to the, where the monument is going to be erected. Because he asked us, where do we have to go? And for the first time we went on a train. A beautiful train in Washington. And then we went to the Capitol. We had lunch there and we paid for his lunch. And he wanted to spend with us a whole, a whole evening, but we were going from there on. But he found us so interesting. And

he was in law school and wanted, like you, and he wanted to know more and more about it. But he was a very nice gentleman. He had company that night coming, so he couldn't stay with us in the evening, because we had everything set up for us. You know we were there for three days. But it was very interesting. And... and that's it. And that... because he wanted to know more and more and more. How do we feel out of life? How do... our outlook on life. I said, "It's time to cry and it's time to love, and that's the way it goes. Time for life and time to... and that's it. That's our motto. You got to go on till the end, there's no alternative. You can't go backwards. You got to go forward."

Q: You mentioned earlier, that you were staying in a hotel in Paris?

A: Yes, Paris, Rothschild gave us the hotel.

Q: Do you remember the name of the hotel, by any chance?

A: It was on Rue Gipeart (ph). That was the address. And this was Rothschild gave this to us, without charge, no money, no nothing. Yes.

Q: Were you still with all of your friends, the girls?

A: All of my friends, yes. We were there, yes, but like I said, I remained the last one. They all left before me. And it was... it was nice, I mean, it was livable. We had... everybody had the same. You had two beds in every room and a bathroom, which was very nice. And of course, no charge, because we had no money to pay them. And we got the meals downstairs and... and those were your headquarters. If you had to go to... and a lot of times people came, helping you, asking you questions. "Where are you from? What was your family name?" Reporters. "How many in your family?" You know. All kinds of questions till you get tired of answering, too. And nothing came out of it. And then towards the end, I didn't want to talk about it, because it brings too much hurt in you. And one night, I make... I was sitting in my room and I think it was with Halina, yeah, or maybe she went down, I was alone. And all of a sudden I heard screaming on the corridor. And I said, "Oh my God, the Germans came back?" You didn't know. You were like a lamb. I said, "What's going on?" Finally I opened up the door. I wanted to see what was going on. And there was my husband, at that time I didn't know him yet, and kissing my two friends, the two sisters. And they were crying and screaming and they introduced me to him. "This is," how did they call it? "A *landsmen*," this means from the same town. And they met him. He came looking for people that survived. He heard that there was people there and he was still in the Army and that's when he came over. So, they introduced me to him and I went into the house, to my room and I said "Good night, nice knowing you," and I left. And he used to come to them every single day. He used to bring them soap, a piece of chocolate and sardines. And if they had too much, they gave it to me. They shared with me a little bit, which was very nice of them. And that's when I found out more about it. And a short time later, they left. They went to South America, to Paraguay, which they had family there. And at this point everything was ready and they left. And my husband came around a few times, but I didn't pay no attention to him. And then he was discharged from the Army and he went back to the States. And he came in twice more. And the girls had made up with me, the two sisters, they knew I had nobody. At that point I didn't find my uncle yet... that if I want to come

to South America where they are, they have a brother, that is, that is, his wife was left in Poland. He left before the war, and the wife didn't get a chance to go out. And that they would want me very much in the family. And that's when all the trouble started. And I said, that's nice, that was very nice of them. But of course, they meant more for themselves than for me. And then my husband, I told him the story about what happened and after a while he came out and he told me the truth. They had mentioned to me that he was married before the war and they had one child. And my husband knew that he had two children. And he must have been old like my father.

Q: I'm sorry, who was married before the war?

A: The two friends, the two sisters that left for South America, to Paraguay. This was their brother and they wanted me for a sister-in-law. And they think I didn't have anybody and they knew me from concentration camp. So, they wanted me, I should come out to them. And they have a brother that the wife didn't... did not survive. And they wanted me, I should...

Q: They thought they could make a match.

A: ...a match. So, I didn't know anything. So, I said, "Let him write to me and we'll see later what's going to be." But I never got a letter from them. I only got telegrams. I should come out there. And they send, they bought me the passage to go and everything and like a dummy, I didn't know from nothing. I'm going to Paraguay.

Q: What were the names of your friends in Paraguay?

A: Sure, Sonja and what was the other one? Sonja Braun (*ph*), Braun is her name. And what was the other one? I can't remember her name.

Q: That's okay.

A: Maybe it's going to come back to me like before, but right now I can't think of her name.

Q: That's okay.

A: And that they want me there very, very much. And like I said, "Tell him to write to me and we'll see what's going to be. Or send a picture on top of it." But this never materialized. I only got like right away telegrams and telegrams and that they're making out the papers. And they're going to send me... I have to go and get a visa. And they're going to pay for the fare and everything. They knew I had no money. And then when my husband came back and he asked me, did I find my uncle. And I said, "No." "So, what are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to Paraguay, that Sonja and," oh I can't think of her name, the other one, "wants me there. And they want me, they have a brother for me." And he knew the whole family, what was going on. Then it came out a few months later, didn't tell me right away, the truth. That he was married, I said, I knew, but he had two children. They only said he had one. And the age they didn't tell me. And he was almost the age like my father. And that's what happened. And then, so my husband said to me, "Give me the, all the particulars that you knew about your uncle. Give it to

me.” I said, “I’m sick and tired. I don’t want it, anything else.” The only thing is I could think is he’s very rich, the same speech, or he’s passed away. I remembered the children, their names, I remembered his name. I remembered his wife’s name. But I did not remember the address where he lived. This my mother told us just before the war broke, before we were, we were separated, that we should all remember. And that’s what happened, the address I forgot where he lived. And that’s what it was so hard for him to find me, for me to find him, rather. Excuse me. And the papers that he read, there was a lot of Jewish papers them years. So, instead of *The Day* they called it, you read *Good Morning*. So, I put it in this paper and he read the other paper. So, so I gave my husband all the particulars, he went back to the States. And that’s it. And two days later or three days later, I get a letter, my uncle. And he sent me twenty dollars, he put it into the envelope. But he just found out from the soldier, Mr. Lerner, that I’m alive and he’s going send out papers for me that I should come to the States here. And being nobody survived with me, my cousin, that was his sister, too. It was one brother and two sisters, so I was from one sister and my cousin was from the other sister. And he wants very, very much I should come to the United States. And that’s the way it started. So, in the interim I, I sent him a letter. That I was mad, because I took it very wrong that he doesn’t want to acknowledge himself. This was my pride, but it was not so. He was very, you know, devoted and healthy, happy that I’m alive, that somebody’s alive from the family. And interested, very, I should come and he’ll try to help in every way. And that he’s sending out papers. But then from there instead of sending me letters, they sent me telegrams. And they bought me already the, the, everything, they paid the fare in for me to go by plane to South America. And I started to put... and then he came again, my husband. I was over a year in Paris. And by that time, he came again, once more. He joined the Merchant Marines and he went back and forth. And he told me... and I told him what’s on my mind. And when he told me that... yeah, a picture came from them. And he was in the back. Because I wrote them, “I never got a picture, I never got a letter, I don’t understand what’s going on. You don’t keep your promise. I’m not going to keep my promise.” You know, that’s the way I was talking to my... writing to my friends.

Q: Your friends in Paraguay, you’re talking about now?

A: Right, right, them two, yes. And then I got a picture from them all. The ones that I knew. When my husband came, I showed him the picture and he said that’s not him. He was very short. But they put a stool in the back, that’s why he was in the back. So, that’s when I put two and two together. And I went back... yeah and between... I had to go through Spain to go to them, through Spain, I had to stop in Spain. So, I had to have a visa from Spain. In the interim, Spain and Paris, and France didn’t... had some kind of delay or whatever. They had some kind of argument. This was right after the war and they wouldn’t allow anybody. So, I had to be stuck again in Paris. And that’s what happened. I went back to ORT, ORT is a Jewish organization that they knew the whole story. And I went back to them and I told them, “I’m not going.” And the girl said to me, “What are you crazy or something? You couldn’t wait to get out of Paris already to go and now all of a sudden you change your mind.” And I told her the whole story, what was going on. And she said, “I’m sorry. I cannot help you. You’ll have to go from Paraguay, if you don’t like it there, you’ll have to go whatever you want from there. But in the interim you must go.” I said, “There is no such thing with must.” I went... I said, “I want to see somebody higher than you, different authority. And there came a gentleman and I told him the story. And he says, “Don’t go.” And that’s when I... I had a friend in Paris that went with me

with all these things. Halina's friend, she came from the same town. And she was very nice to us. She used to call us in for dinner and whatever we had to go, she went along with us. She was very, very helping. And then I decided I'm not going to go. And I waited in Paris and my husband wanted to marry me. And I said, to myself, "Okay." It was over a year. I couldn't find anybody. And we decided to get married. But in order for me and him, go together to the United States, we had to get married in Paris. So we had a beautiful wedding in Paris, invited all my friends. And after a while we came over here.

Q: Had you had any feelings for your husband before that point? Did you ...?

A: Oh sure, it took me over a year. I didn't want to... he was coming back and forth, but I didn't understand what was going on. You know what I'm saying? He had feelings, and I had feelings, but I wasn't ready yet, let's put it this way. Because I was still searching and looking and once I promised, I didn't want to break my promise on top of it. Once I heard what he told me, I believed him and that's what happened. They were very nice and very good, but they wanted good for their brother, too, so they wanted me. Because they knew I wouldn't have to go any place else. I wouldn't be able to get out. And that's what happened. But I'm happy. Got married already after a while and had a child, which I was very happy for the whole story. But we got to see them after the war.

Q: Really?

A: Oh yeah. We went to South America. My husband had a sister in Argentina. And from there we went to, to see them. I didn't want to go, but my husband insisted and we went. And that's what happened. And after that they came quite a few times to New York, so they came to see me, too.

Q: Did you talk to your husband about what had happened to you during the war? Did you tell him stories?

A: Oh sure, all along, sure. He knew everything, because he only hung out with people that lived through the war, because we were always together.

Q: You mentioned, did he, was he born in the United States or was he born in Europe?

A: No, he was thirteen years old, that he came to, his father was, left before, five years prior to that. And then he came with the rest of the family.

Q: Where was his family from?

A: The same place where my girlfriends, my two friends. Where was he born? Not too far from Białystok. Oh God, your mind escapes you. Łomża. Łomża. That's not too far from Białystok. That's where he was raised and born, down there. His mother was still in Europe. His father was in the United States. So he went to visit her in 1939, just before the war broke out. And that's when he met all these people again, because they were from the same town and they were

very close. So, when the war ended, that's when he met them in Paris. He came searching. That's exactly where he met them.

Q: Was your husband the first man that you had ever dated, or had ever been involved with romantically?

A: I would say we went out in Poland, actually, before the war broke out. Like I said, I belonged to the Jabotinski, to the... but yes, to be exactly, yes. Yeah.

Q: Was that difficult for you to be, becoming involved with someone after having gone through what you had just been through?

A: Well, I was not, not like today the girls, they go and they sleep with their men. We didn't do these things. I would never do that. Had to wait to get married in order to be near each other. I stayed at Rue Gipartean (*ph*) and he was in a hotel. But it was, you have to trust somebody in order to, to be honest with somebody, I mean. You look nice and you look good and had all kinds of promises, and that's what happened.

Q: You had lost so much of your childhood and of your teenage years, that young women are normally, you know...

A: Wild, and... yes.

Q: ...just learning about each other and having fun.

A: No, we didn't have that, definitely not. We did not have that. We had no, a broken childhood, actually. That's what it was. Yes, and that's why when I see a kid of twelve, thirteen years old, including my grand-daughter doing the hair, streaking. I say, "Is that necessary?" I can't see it for dust. I cannot see it. Because we were... I didn't put on lipstick until my wedding day. Did not. Now I cover all up all the things. (Laughing.) But them years? No. Never smoked, never did anything like that.

Q: Had you had a fantasy of getting married? Had you ever thought about it?

A: Yeah, a fantasy, of course. But you didn't talk about it. It's not like over here, you talk to your friends. "This happened, that'... no, we didn't... I was not of that age, you know, to talk about things like that. Because like I said, I had younger, older sisters than me. But no, I didn't have such fantasies, no, like the kids today, no. My fantasy was just to bring in food in the house and we should have what to eat, and... and we should all be together. This was my childhood. It's different.

Q: What about your hopes and dreams for yourself after the war and you got over your depression and you made the decision that you were going to go on living your life? Did you want to continue your education? Or did you want to have children? What was the thing that was in your...?

- A: The education, at that point, I did not go, because you started to build a life for yourself. And of course, I wanted to go have a child. And we were just starting out, so it was not actually for me to go to school. That's the way I looked at it. I just wanted to help my husband and build a home. And I used to go to school at night, night school they had them years. And I was helping my husband. We were working like hand to hand, and to become somebody, to make something out of yourself. And then we wanted to have a baby, so it took me almost seven years until I had my son. And this was a big thing, because all my friends had children already. So, it's another thing. But thank God, he was born and I was very proud of him. And he was the whole life to me and to my husband, both of us. And we only saw that he should have a better life than we did. And he should go to college and he should be somebody. That's it. That was my main thing.
- Q: Before we go on to that, when you were in Paris and you had the opportunity to come to the U.S., had you had any thoughts before that or any dreams of going to Palestine?
- A: No. I... my cousin went to Palestine, because she was younger than me, ten years. And she went with a child's transport from Paris. And I wanted to go with her very, very much, because once I found her, I didn't want to let go. And especially I was older. And, but I couldn't go, because this was just a child's transport. So, I said to myself, I could always go to Israel later on. So, I remained in Paris and she went on to Israel. But at the end, I brought her here. She finished her schooling. She was in a kibbutz. And she finished her schooling, she became a nurse, and then I took her here. But she was sick. I didn't even know. It was not an easy life, not easy, because she saw her mother gassing. They put her in the twenty-fifth block they called it, when they got her. And she noticed the smoke coming out right away. They gassed her.
- Q: In Auschwitz?
- A: In Auschwitz, and she couldn't cope with it. I didn't know at that point. At that point we were all the same. But when she went to Israel, and that's when it all came out. She was lonely, and I brought her to me. And she stayed with me a while, but she, she did not listen. I thought she was mean, but she was sick already. What did I know about mental health? I didn't know about all these things. And then I married her off, but she did not stay with me anymore. She, she moved out. She went to my uncle...

End of Tape 3, Side A

Tape 3, Side B

Q: Tape three, side B of an interview with Justine Lerner.

A: And she went to my aunt, to my uncle's house, to stay with them for a while. But of course I had said to my aunt, "Call me one night." And she came, when I brought her, I was pregnant with my son. And like I said before, it took me seven years almost. And she... when he was born... I was maybe in my ninth month already when she got over here, and if I said to her, "I want to spend more time with the kids." She came... I got her a job to work in a hospital, but not as a nurse, as a nurse's aide, because she didn't have the diploma. And they wouldn't acknowledge it at that time from Israel, all the years, you had to go through a test, which she wasn't ready for it. And no matter what I said, she took it, everything she took wrong. If I said day, she said night. No matter what, how I tried, no matter what I did. If I jumped off the roof, she would keep... but I didn't know like, she was sick. Couldn't understand. When I slept, she used to come into me in the bed. She was scared. She used to come in to sleep with us. And I said to myself, what's going on here? So, I took her to a doctor, took her to a family doctor, of course. Who knew about psychiatrists them years? And he prescribed a pill and she took it and that's it, but it was not enough. She needed more than that. So I got her a... a room on my block and said, "You could come to eat by me, but not, not sleeping." And that's exactly how it was. And then she, she was keeping company, already she met a nice fellow. But she had a hard life, she did not know what... She had one, what do they call that? One attack after the other. She wound up in a mental hospital. And she couldn't deal with life. And that was a very big strain on me, punishing myself, what I didn't know. I didn't know what was going on. And I couldn't be to her a mother and I couldn't be to her the father. I could only be like the way I am, warm and, and everything else. Caring. But she didn't buy it. She didn't... she didn't understand. She didn't have a happy life. She had a wonderful husband, a good, educated man. But she, herself, didn't live the way it's supposed to, and she left two children. The boy I'm very... very, very nice, and the girl is just like the mom.

Q: This is the same cousin that you mentioned earlier, you were in Auschwitz with?

A: Right, right.

Q: Yeah.

A: Right, right. And that's the way it went on.

Q: How did you get from Paris, how and when did you get from Paris to the United States?

A: In '47, 1947. We got married and then we came to, to the States.

Q: Did you come by ship?

A: No, we came by plane. I came by ship. (Laughing.) They, they were transporting the soldiers back home. But being I was a G.I. bride, so I had the same privileges, but of course, you had to wait for a boat. So one day my husband goes down to get a paper and he comes back and he

shows me that the boat that we're supposed to go—it was Marine Flasher (*ph*)—I remember it like now, got a... on fire in the, in the dock. And I thought he was kidding me. I thought he wasn't telling me the truth. So I looked at the picture. I didn't know how to read. So I looked at the picture and that's exactly how it was. And then we had to wait three months for another ship, for another boat. And on one side I remember was the men, and on the other side was the ladies, gated off, you know. And I was not a good, I couldn't take the ship. I was very sick, dizzy and sea sick, couldn't take the water. And I was laying more than I, than I was walking around. And he tried to bring me food. And there was a matron watching us and she took a look at the tray. He put down from everything, this was a joke. Put down from everything and the matron took a look at it and she says, "If you bring her so much food, she's not sick enough to get up and eat." (Laughing.) So... but instead of going, we were supposed to go like nine days or ten, we went fifteen days. It was a broken up ship and was... got filled full of water. We thought we going to drown. And then they fixed it in Halifax and then we came to the United States.

Q: Was it a U.S. military ship?

A: It had to be. I don't think she was in use in the military or they retired her. But that's what they took and that's what we came back. Yeah. It was not a luxury ship, that's for sure.

Q: What were your expectations of the United States or your ideas about it before you came?

A: Before I came, dreaming, just tall buildings, you know, to see, how different would it be? How would people accept me? My husband had a father, that we lived together. And he was very, very nice to me. I adored that man. He was a very nice, pious man, very lovely and respectful, very respectful. And it was just a pleasure to be with him. We moved into him. And he wanted to give us everything, whatever he had. He wanted to give us his room. There were two bedrooms. I says, "Pa, how could I take your bedroom? It's yours." So, we slept the two of us, his bedroom was big and to the front, ours was like in a driveway. But I was happy that somebody accepted us and I was very grateful. And you go on with your, whatever you have to do. I went down in the morning to get breakfast, it was local, on the same block, a grocery, today you don't see it. Today you have supermarkets, big ones. That time everything was, and from the beginning when I went into the store everybody gave me their next. And then I figured out why, because they wanted to see if I have horns. (Laughing.) If I... how do I speak. It was a pleasure. I didn't have to wait on lines, but it didn't last long. Because after a while they heard that I'm the same like they are, so they let me go to wait in line. And I used to shop, and bring home the food, and make three meals a day, and it was just like my mother did, the same thing.

Q: Where did you live? Where was this?

A: On Newport Street, 448 Newport Street in Brooklyn. Yeah. It was a nice area. You were able to get a bus and a train. You know what I'm saying?

Q: Yeah.

A: They didn't have so many cars like they have now. You must have a car, otherwise you can't move. No such thing.

Q: And when you said people wanted to see whether you had horns, were you talking about people who were...

A: American, they were born here.

Q: Non-Jews? Or...

A: They were Jewish, too, yes.

Q: They just had stereotypes about Holocaust survivors? Or ?

A: They didn't have a stereo... I don't know if they have stereotypes. I wouldn't say that. But I made up that joke. That's the way it was going on. That they wanted to see if I have horns, how do I talk, how do I move myself different than they are. Curiosity I would say more than anything else. But then when they found out that I'm just like them, they didn't let me go ahead of them anymore. I had to wait in line. And that's it.

Q: Did you feel that anyone, did anyone discriminate against you in any way?

A: No, I can't say that. I didn't find it. I never had that feeling, no, no. My friends had that feeling, a lot of them, but I never had that feeling. I never felt any different than they are.

Q: Your friends had the feeling that they were discriminated against because they were survivors or because they were Jewish?

A: Oh, they were Jewish, because they were survivors. They mixed with different kind of people. I really don't know. A lot of them felt that way. I never did that. I never felt that way. I felt I'm the same like them, not any better, not any worse. I'm the same platform that they are.

Q: When did you start to learn English?

A: A short time, right away, right away I would say, when I came to the States. They had at night, the night school. Thomas Jefferson was the school, I remember. And I said if I want to live here, I have to learn. Have to learn to read and write and that's what I did. I went at night. And one day I came home and I see the light is on, because my father-in-law's windows were to the front. And as I was walking home, and I see... I got scared. I said, I hope he feels all right. And I come upstairs. We lived on the first floor. And I come upstairs and he's sitting and learning. I says, "Pa, what are you doing? Do you feel all right? What's the matter?" "Well, I'm jealous on you," he says. "You're here such a short time and you're learning English. I want to learn, too." And that's when he got one of my books and he was sitting and reading English. I thought it was so cute.

Q: Did you speak Yiddish with him?

A: Yeah.

Q: And with your husband?

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: Did your husband speak Polish?

A: Broken up, very broken up, not *grammatisch*⁴, like they say. Not like the... how do you say. Like with the ABC. I don't know how to express myself to say it.

Q: He didn't speak fluently.

A: Fluent, yeah. Not only fluently, but not, if a man, he would say it's a woman, you know, you use the same phrase. You know what I'm saying? But very poorly.

Q: Back to your journey, just briefly, do you remember your first impressions? Did you see the Statue of Liberty as you were approaching the harbor?

A: Oh yes, saw the Statue of Liberty. I saw, at that point, was Ellis Island, then years, but of course I didn't see... the tall buildings amazed me very, very much, just to keep it up. And we had somebody picking us up from the, from the boat and that's it. And my husband took me to, to his friends. I mean not right away, but days after and we all became like friends. I fitted in right away, they did like me very much. And that's the way we remained friends all our lives. I had a good life. And if it wasn't good, you have to make it good. That's my motto. You got to make good.

Q: Did you talk to people about your experiences during the war?

A: No, never.

Q: Did you ever want to?

A: Uh uh, didn't want to. I didn't want to be different than anybody else. I was always wanted to be like somebody else. The number, couldn't live with it. I had to take it out. And I did and I was very happy. And once I took it out, I'm like everybody else. You don't know what's in my heart, but on the outside I look alike. If I open up my mouth, of course you'll see I'm a foreigner, but I was never ashamed of being a foreigner. But I couldn't live with the number, because this made me different than everybody else. This I couldn't accept. So, when my son started to go to school, I said, that's when I'll take it off. And exactly I did that. And like I said before, I... if you ask me, "Oh that's what the _____?" No, this is my number and I'm very proud of it. In the hospital, whenever I was, that's my number. If somebody rang the bell and it was in the morning, I could open up the door in a house dress or my nightgown, but I could not, would not let you see my number. Had to take a dish towel from the kitchen or something to put it on top. It was like unacceptable in my, in my life. I can't do it. One time a child caught me and she asked me, "What is that?" And I told her, "Oh it's my telephone

⁴ German: grammatical.

number.” I always found an excuse, I figured how the age, how she’s going to accept it. Of course, she didn’t accept that, she understood something. She says, “Nobody puts a telephone number,” but I said, “I don’t remember, so I didn’t want to lose it. So, that’s why I put it there.” But you couldn’t catch me the second time already without anything. I used to put on a tape to cover it if I had to go out. All the time until I took it off. It was like a, I don’t know, it was like a disbelief, a hurt. Not everybody felt the same way like me. A lot of my friends still have it, but I just couldn’t live with it. I took it differently. And that’s it.

Q: Did you talk to your son about your, did you talk to your son about your experiences during the Holocaust?

A: I didn’t talk to him directly, let’s put it this way, to sit down like I’m sitting down with you and talking about it. Here and there I had the picture together. Because he always saw me crying. Like a holiday came, any occasion and it hurt him. I remember when my son was six, five or six years old. And he came into the house and I don’t know, I was sitting and crying. It had to be some kind of a holiday, because this was the worst time of my life, not to have family sit at the table, just the three of us. It was very hard for me, because like I said before, I was... I had a big family and warm family, and I was missing it a lot. And he said to me, “What’s the matter? What happened?” “Nothing happened, Joel. I don’t feel good. I’m just crying. Everything is okay.” And I wouldn’t tell him. He took me around and he said to me, “Ma, when I get bigger I’m going to marry you, don’t cry.” (Laughing.) I never forgot that. And boys have like protected me then already. You know what I’m saying? But he knew, I’m sure that he knows everything, what went on. Here and there he heard it. But I never sat down, like I’m sitting down with you and telling, never.

Q: What made you want to tell your story now?

A: I’m getting on in age. Kids are learning in school about it. My granddaughter went to Poland. The March of the Living, for the March of Living. And she preaches in school and college, now. She tells everybody the story. And she’s very much into it. And I said, “What the heck, let me tell my story, too.” And that’s it. I always said they have enough without me, but I guess each and everyone brings a different story to it.

Q: That’s right.

A: And that’s what it’s all about.

Q: Are there certain things, that you, even though you didn’t talk about it, are there things that you... did you think a lot about it over the years in your own mind? Were there images...

A: Oh yeah.

Q: ...that haunted you? Or did you have nightmares?

A: Oh yes. Nightmares I didn’t have. I am blessed, what I think, that a lot of people don’t want to believe me. Even when they attacked me. I don’t have no nightmares. I’m not scared. This is

something in me, that I have no nightmares. My husband used to have nightmares. My friends told me that their husbands had nightmares, but I never had nightmares. No, I can't say that.

Q: But you did think a lot about that time in your own mind?

A: Oh sure. Oh, in my own mind, all my life, I live with it. Like I said before, mostly holidays was very painful. And feeling sorry for myself and hating myself. Why did I have to be the one to survive? But there's no answer for me. That's the way God wanted it and that's what it's all about.

Q: Did you talk to anybody about those feelings? Was there any way? Any release for them?

A: No. no. I was always able to solve my problems. I never spoke to anybody, no. I was a strong woman, very strong.

Q: Tell me about your, what your husband did as a profession in the years that you spent in Brooklyn. Initially, how did he build his own life?

A: My husband was in the real estate, not the big buildings, of course, but multiple dwellings, that they called it. It was... we bought a house, an apartment building, four bedrooms, three bedrooms and he held that house. He did alterations. They fixed it. A lot of them were closed up. You brought them back to life. And not in the best areas, in the... for the poor people, let's put it this way. Middle class, no, it was lower than middle class. And it was working them. He went for the plumber, he went for the electrician. He brought them back to life, those apartments. And that's the way he used to used to build them up. Them years if you put in a new gas range or you put in radiators they had in the walls for the heat, so you got a raise. And that's the way he was working it. And from this he made, from one house, then he bought another house, then he bought another house and paid the bank the mortgages, and... and I took care on it. And that was his job. And I used to take the complaints in the house. So, this was my job. And that's the way we built it up. He used to come home for lunch and dinner. We had a real family life.

Q: Did you feel like, you were talking a little bit earlier about how it was important for you to not feel different than everybody else. Did you feel, did you come to feel like you belonged in this country and that you were an American?

A: Yes. I never had that... I felt I'm just as good as everybody else. All my life I felt like that.

Q: When did you become an American citizen?

A: Right away maybe, I think it was a year, a year and a half after. I didn't have to wait the five years. So, I went and I passed the test. Yeah.

Q: Was it a significant event for you to get your American citizenship? Was that important, an important, memorable occasion?

A: Yes, it was. I was very proud of myself that I made it. And I always felt if you live in a country, you have to be able to know what's going on. Quite a few times I went, they called me for jury duty. And I told them, I says, "Can't you get somebody better, more educated than me?" And they said, "No. You have a brain, you're using it, that's what's important. You know how to read and write?" That's what it is. And one time, I was... they picked me on a case about weights and measures, and... and I told them... so, we made... they settled it out of court. And they said, "You could go home." I asked the judge, I was there a whole week. "The money that we're going to get, do we have to declare it?" And he turned around and he said to me, "Let your conscience be the guidance." (Laughing.) And I'm still laughing about it. Whatever they give you. I don't remember exactly, seven or eight dollars a day. But the way he answered it. I said, "Do I have to declare it?" Like afraid to be good. You know what I am saying? To do what is the right thing to do. That was always me... I was always. And I asked him. He said, "Let your conscience be the guide." I said thank you, and I went on.

Q: So, did you report it or not?

A: No, I did not, had no conscience. I think it was about sixty or seventy dollars I made that week. Don't forget I had to take off transportation, too. (Laughing.) But it was very funny. I thought it was very funny.

Q: Did you make friends with people who were American Jews...

A: Right away.

Q: ...outside the survivor community?

A: Oh yeah, right away. My husband introduced me to his friend that he came the same time like he did to the United States. And his wife was an American girl. And now she's, poor thing, in a home. She has Alzheimer's. And we were the best of friends, all our, through our life. We always said we're going to help each other when we're going get... she had no mother. Her mother passed away. Her father had remarried, and she had a hard life, and she had two boys and the sons write to me and they call me all the time. And we became like family right away, and helping one another. If I didn't have no children yet, she wanted to go someplace, I babysat. We always, always helping ways. If I made something and I knew that the kids are going to like, I used to bring over some food, and they enjoyed it. Things like European things, but they loved it, certain things that she didn't know how to make. And I had a lot of friends, American born, here, but they were people, they were... I never had a problem. Never. They were them and I was me, that's it. Maybe because they considered themselves an American and had friends. So maybe that's what it was, but I never, never found any fault.

Q: When you think back over the eras, the years after the war that you spent in the United States, and you think about the 1950s and the 1960s and the 1970s and some of the movements, the social movements and political movements that were happening at that time, was there anything that touched you directly? Like the Civil Rights movement for example, or the McCarthy era or the women's movement. Were any of those interesting to you or did they affect you personally in any way?

A: The only thing that I cannot watch here and I cannot agree with them is like, no love for your brother. The guns, the killing, the stealing, the... all these things goes against me. There is no reason for it. There is no reason for it. Or you see somebody robbing in the street. There's no... it doesn't call for it. You could work and make a living. And I'm very much against these things. I feel that everybody is the same, has the same right. I have a woman that takes care on me from the day I got here. And now it's almost two years, it's going to be in June. I treat her royally, better than I treat myself. She has a chip on her shoulder because she is black. And I keep telling her. Like she gets excited if somebody looks wrong at her. I says, "Teresa, grow up, it's all in your head. It's no place else but in your head. I don't know why you have that feeling in you." She was persecuted and this and that. I said, "I was not sitting on my beautiful chair and watching television all my life, too. I was very hurt in my... but you got to let go, you can't hold on to these things." I don't agree with a lot of things. I personally think they have it too God damn good, they should go out to work better. Even those kids, what went on now. It's a terrible thing that doesn't call for all these things. And how did the parents not know about it? I will never believe it.

Q: You talking about the shooting in Colorado?

A: I think it's a disgrace. It's a disgrace.

End of Tape 3, Side B

Tape 4, Side A

- Q: Continuation of an interview with Justine Lerner. This is tape number four, side A. Okay, were you finished?
- A: About Bosnia we were talking. Yeah, the way they're throwing them out of their homes. It brought back so many memories.
- Q: And Kosovo.
- A: And Kosovo, yeah. I was sitting and crying. My son called me, said, "What's the matter, Ma?" I said, "That's what it is. I can't take these things. It doesn't call for all these things. It's enough is enough." But I guess it's not enough yet.
- Q: Did you ever go back and visit Poland?
- A: No, I would never go back there, never, never in a million years. I went to Israel. We traveled a lot. And we went to South America. We went a lot of places, but I would never go back to Poland. I feel that I have nothing there but misery. I have no graves. I have nothing to go to, even to go on the grave, I don't. To say hello, I don't have no graves. I have nothing, so what am I going to go see? Never. Never, never. My husband did go, to see my house where we lived. Oh yeah, but I would never do that. He went without me. We went to Washington that time and he went to Poland.
- Q: He went to Poland to see the house?
- A: Uh huh. He went on a... on a tour. And I would never in a million and one years go. I have no... I have no heart for this anymore. I cannot make it any better, so. I want to remember it the way it was.
- Q: You moved to Kentucky after that very horrible event happened to you. And I imagine that after what you had already been through in your life... how did you recover emotionally, psychologically? I mean, to experience such a tragic, traumatic event again. Were you able to recover your hope and your faith in the good of humanity after that? Did you feel like it all turned your sense of hope...?
- A: It's a very funny thing. I still have my beliefs and I cannot change it. It's... I take him for a bad boy. The child was on dope. That's what the mother says. I don't know. I didn't know him and I wish I would have never known him. I'm not there to fight the case. He only got six and a half years, which is nothing.
- Q: It was one person who had attacked you?
- A: One person that did that. He robbed me. If he would come in and would rob me, he would want my jewelry, I would give it to him gladly. He didn't have to kill me. But... and if you ask me,

do I remember him? No. The detectives came when I was in the hospital, I remember, the day I left. Showed me pictures of him. Never saw him before in my life.

Q: How did they catch him?

A: The kids from the area gave him out. The police went around, detectives searching what went on, you know, looking. And they were the ones that gave him the address and the name. And he did two people the same day, me and another woman a block away. So, I mean... and it was not a black boy. It was a white boy. So the mother is there. I should say that I feel sorry for the mother? No. That this would be a lie. She goes every day to court when it went on the case. I was not there. My son was not there. So we had a lawyer, but they couldn't fight it without us. He left me a cripple for the rest of my life and all the pain that I have with me, but nothing helped. Because he was there, and that's what he got, six and a half years. He'll come out, he'll do it again. But I can do nothing about it. Cannot take a gun and go and kill him, because it's against me. I can't do that. But that's it. But on the other hand I have to take that thing out of my life. I could lay down and die? No. My time wasn't up yet. When my time is going to be up, I'll go. But I have another extension of life, so I have to go and enjoy it. And that's the way I'm doing it. I'm enjoying it... I'm not enjoying it, but I'm alive. Let's put it this way. Like for the holidays, my son belongs to a... the Reform temple, so I went with him. And the four doctors that used to take care on me in the hospital were there and they came over to wish me a happy New Year. And they couldn't get over how good you look. I said, "Thank God for the make-up." I always have something what to say. I said, "Thank God for the make-up, it covers all the sins." I says, "That's nice." He said, "A lot of people's make-up cannot do such a good job like this." (Laughing.) But I always have something I could always make a joke out of it. You know what I'm saying? But that's it.

Q: Will you say your son's name for the record and something about him?

A: Would I say something for my son?

Q: Just about your son and his name?

A: I was always a good mother. I have to... I have to compliment myself. I was always a good mother, looking out for the child. Always being there for him. And I think that's what he repays me back. He's there for me all the time. He cares about me. But I understand very much he has his own life and I don't want to take nothing away from him. But he's a very good boy. He's good. And I'm thankful to God that I have him. And that's what it's all about. He takes care on me. I was good to him, too.

Q: His name is Joel?

A: Joel Lerner.

Q: And your grandchildren, you have how many?

A: I have four grandkids.

Q: What are their names?

A: The oldest one is Shawn. Which he was just, in February fourteenth, he was twenty-two. He's in school, college, rather. My second one is Lindsay. Lindsay is twenty. She was twenty, in March twenty-seven, she was twenty. And she too is in college. The number three is Daniel. He's still in high school. Daniel was sixteen, he's going to be seventeen. And my youngest one is thirteen, Ashley.

Q: And they've taken, at least Daniel has taken a special interest in your history.

A: They all do, I would say. I would say they all do. Now, the youngest one now, wants to go to Israel later on, I guess, when she's going to be sixteen. I said, "I'll help you every way I can. I want you to see your land. And I want you, too, like the others did." Ashley went, uh Lindsay went, so did Shawn. Daniel's going to go along maybe later on a little bit. And I always visit them, because I lived in Brooklyn and they know I have the love for them and they have their love for me. I know they are very busy. I would like to see them more often. But I understand that not only do they have their life, but I can't demand anything from them, because I'm not going to get it. I should be thankful whatever I got and that's the way I go on. They respect me and I respect them and that's what it is. A lot of people cannot see it, the way I see it. I cannot demand from anybody. I'll do myself. But my friend just lost her husband not long ago and he used to be, he used to take her all over and help her with every way. And she couldn't walk two blocks. Now of course, she finds it very, very hard. She has one daughter and the daughter is getting tired of it already. She has a family too and she works. I said, "Betty, get a hold of yourself. She has her life too. You can't demand too much, because you're not going to get it. That's it. It's nobody's fault that, you know, you got spoiled all your life. And that's what it's all about. That's it. You, you can work. You can't go, walk? Get a cab, go whatever you have to do. There's no alternative. If you don't drive that's what you have to do." And I cannot lay on anybody... I'm always appreciative whatever you do, it's good, it's okay. I may think differently, but I'm not going to give it out. I can't do that. I still know between right and wrong and I'm a happy bird. I'm very happy, all my life, like a stupid... [laughing] I'm a happy-go-lucky.

Q: You came to Kentucky after your attack, you were attacked in New York. And that was 1997? Is that right?

A: Uh huh. Uh huh. Yeah, it's going to be two years in June.

Q: What were your ideas and expectations of Kentucky and what were your first impressions?

A: I had no expectations. I didn't know at that point what was going on in my life. I... my husband never wanted to move to Kentucky. He didn't like Kentucky. It was not for him. But being the neighborhood started to change, so I started to talk to him about it. He didn't want to listen to me. "That's my home and that's the way I'm going to be there." So, I didn't have too much expectations. I knew what was going on in Kentucky. The money talks. He found out, he felt like that... if you want to meet somebody, you go out for lunch. My husband was from a

different era, he knew his wife is going to make lunch and you come to the house. And I found it very hard, too with that thing. Because they don't want to cook, everything is going out and he was not used to a life like this.

Q: You mean in Kentucky...?

A: In Kentucky, in Kentucky, yes, yes, yes. So, he was not too much for Kentucky, but after he passed away, I didn't know what to do. I knew I couldn't stay too long where I was, because the neighborhood was changing. A lot of my friends moved away. So, where did they go? Either they went to Florida or they went to New Jersey. And I figured I'll find out. So I went to Florida for the winter for four months, and I... I still was undecided what to do. And then this thing came up and... and here I am. And that's right.

Q: What were your first impressions of Kentucky? You moved to Louisville, right?

A: Yeah. What was my impression? I mean, I knew I'll never make a friend over here, because that's my age. You make friends when you're young and you hold onto them. When you are an older person, I don't want to hear their problems and they don't want to hear my problems. You talk about sicknesses. Especially if I don't drive, that's a disability already. I cannot... I have to wait for somebody to take me. And I don't like that. I was always used to walk and do my own thing. And solve my own problems. I was a private person. I didn't like anybody to feel sorry for me or whatever. So... but here I have no alternative. I have a woman that helps me. She takes me all over, wherever I have to go. She makes the appointments for me with my doctors and that's it. I do my own cooking, and that's it. It's a lonely life.

Q: Did you make any connections with the Jewish community, the Holocaust survivors?

A: I never went to the Holocaust... I didn't even know that they had one over here. I would like you to, if you have an address, to leave it and I'll find out more about it. This I would like very much. I didn't even know that they have a Holocaust... the Jewish, JCC, the Jewish...

Q: Community Center?

A: ...Community Center. I went after my husband passed away, and I came down for a holiday over here by myself. And my son took me around to show me I should settle over here in Louisville. So we made an appointment with the JCC that I should go over there, you know, and they'll tell me what I could do, what, what kind of facilities they have for senior citizens and all that thing. So, he dropped me off at ten o'clock in the morning. This was before I got hurt, before my accident. He dropped me off at ten o'clock in the morning and she showed me the building. She showed me all the things what they have for senior citizens. And he says, "Ma, you're going to have lunch over here and I'll pick you up after lunch." I says, fine. So, the lady takes me for a walk and shows me the building. And then she showed me downstairs where all the senior citizens meet. And they were making a journal, because a journal comes out like every month. And I was helping them to put the journal together. And I was very happy. And of course, I was the youngest one, you could imagine. (Laughing.) One didn't hear, one didn't see, but I took everything fine, it's good. And I had my pocketbook with me, and I said to the

woman that I was working with, I said, where could I, where do you leave your bags? Where do you put your pocketbook? She says, "Put it next to me on my... at the table. I'll sit over here and you'll sit next to me. We'll have lunch together." I says, fine, thank you. And it must have been maybe about ten to twelve. And the lady comes over, "Whose bag is that? I said, "It's mine. What's the matter?" "That's my seat." I said, "I'm sorry. I'll take it away. I didn't know. The other one told me, that lady told me I could sit over here, no big deal." And it threw me off so much, that I just... I wasn't used to it. I said, "Ah, that's not for me. Let them stay with them. I'm not going to come back." And since then, I went again. I went to a concert there not long ago. I try, but somehow, I don't get... it's not for me. I can't be like that, them... it's like anything else, I don't know them. Let's put it this way. And to get acquainted at this point and to have their lunches, which I don't care for, it brings back too many memories. So, I'd rather stay home. And here they have a pool and maybe I'll join the pool. I'll go over. I'll take a look. And that's it.

Q: Are you a member of a synagogue, a temple here in Louisville?

A: Yeah. Yeah, I belong to the Reform and to the Conservative, to both of them.

Q: Do you go to services?

A: Oh sure I go, holidays, not every Saturday. Holidays I do go.

Q: So, are mostly the people that you spend time with are Teresa, who's your caregiver and the members of your family?

A: Right. Right. Well, I made friends with a lady over here. She's not Jewish, she's gentile, but we have a lot in common and we're very good... so I go with her sometimes to a movie. Teresa's off, Saturday she works a few hours and Sundays she's off. So that's the days, she took me, that lady, to her daughter's. They had the Derby party. So, I brought a bottle of wine. I went there, and they were very, very hospitable, very, very nice. I had a good time. But otherwise, I stick to my family. And of course, my friends in New York. I talk to them. Saturday and Sunday, I'm busy with the telephone. I mean during the week, too, but... I keep in touch.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any concluding thoughts?

A: Including what?

Q: Concluding thoughts? (Laughter.)

A: Concluding foxes?

Q: Thoughts, thoughts for...

A: I think I've had enough.

Q: Yeah... I've put you through the wringer.

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Q: Yeah... well, thank you so much.

A: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Q: I appreciate it very much. This concludes the interview with Justine Lerner.

Conclusion of Interview