

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Emily Schleissner
July 31, 1995
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PREFACE

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EMILY SCHLEISSNER

July 31, 1995

Question: Will you begin by telling me your name and your name at the time of the war, where you were born and when you were born?

Answer: Okay. My name is Emily Schleissner now. My maiden was Tausek. I was born in Prague.

Q: When?

A: September 22, 1914.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family in Prague when you were a girl.

A: Well, we were just simple people. My father was working and my mother was at home. And we didn't do anything special.

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

A: He was a company representative, a salesman, in _____.

Q: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

A: I had a sister, yes. She was two years younger than I. We didn't do anything special. We just went to school and that was about all.

Q: Was your family religious?

A: Not really. We went to the temple on high holy days and we belonged to a temple, but we were not religious.

Q: Was your school mixed, or was it a Jewish school?

A: The first five years I went to a Jewish school. Just for Jewish children. It was a regular school, but just for Jewish children. And then I had to go to the regular school from the sixth grade on.

Q: So your friends were both Jews and Christians?

A: Yes. But mostly Jews.

Q: In Prague, do you feel like you lived in a Jewish world, or was everybody pretty well mixed?

A: Pretty well mixed. I went to a Jewish school, but just through the fifth grade. But then it was pretty mixed.

Q: And everyone got along?

A: More or less, yes. I mean there might have been some single people or so. But pretty much okay.

Q: Do you remember any antisemitism before the war?

A: Not really. I mean you never trusted everybody, but it wasn't really enticing or anything. Maybe _____ felt it more because he was from a German speaking area.

Q: But it was pretty comfortable?

A: For me it was pretty comfortable, yes.

Q: Now, as a girl were you involved in any political organizations or Zionist organizations?

A: Once in a while I went to some Zionist meetings or so, but not really as a rule.

Q: And your family?

A: Neither.

Q: What were you doing at the time of the beginning of the war?

A: I had a job with a lawyer who was married to a Jewish woman, so he kept me because he wasn't enticing me and I think he needed me because I knew Czech and German with both shorthand and that was useful.

Q: Prior to the German occupation, did you know much about what was happening in Germany?

A: Well we heard about it, but we didn't like it so we didn't want to have it too.

Q: Were there refugees coming in to Prague who told you things?

A: They were, yeah, but not too many that I was in contact with.

Q: So you were working at the time when the Germans came in. Can you tell me what you remember about that day and when was it?

A: Well we didn't feel comfortable, but since it did not affect me personally, I was pretty indifferent. We didn't like it, but since I could go on working and could stay in my home, we were pretty indifferent; let's put it this way.

Q: Naive?

A: Maybe naive, yeah. Because, as I say, it was hard to believe so; it was easy enough to believe it.

Q: So when did the Germans come into Prague -- what happened?

A: To me personally, not too much. The only thing, I was working for the lawyer and we had German clients. But they behaved towards me okay. They needed me more or less. I was working for them. I was typing their things because the other girls in the office didn't know how to type German, so I didn't feel too much personally.

Q: Did the clients know that you were Jewish?

A: Yes, most of them. The ones we were working with did know it and the new ones, when Germans came, we didn't say it. They probably suspected it, but --

Q: Okay. But what I would like to learn more about is -- the Germans occupied Prague in March of 1939, right?

A: Yes.

Q: What happened the day they came in? What did you see? What was going on?

A: They were marching through the streets. Look today. Let's put it this way, it was simpler.

Q: Was it frightening?

A: Maybe people were afraid. But I wasn't -- personally, I wasn't too much afraid. I know I speak German and what can they do to me. If they need something from me they will come, but I think, what can they do to me? I was naive, but it was easier to think this way.

Q: Were they hurting people? Were they beating people? Were they shooting -- anything?

A: They might have, but I didn't know it and even if there was something going on close, I probably looked away. It was simple.

Q: And your parents too?

A: My parents too. As long as they let us work.

Q: Now in the beginning did the Germans take any people away or -- you know, like they did in some places?

A: They did, but they did not take away people that I knew or that I knew well.

Q: But you knew they were taking people away?

A: Yes. We knew it, but what could we do? Not too much. If anything, maybe look away.

Q: Who were they taking away? Was it a particular group of people?

A: I don't know whether it was a particular group. Someone was in their way or someone wanted his work, or so, they found an excuse to take him away.

Q: So it wasn't rounding up the Intelligencia or something like that?

A: Not really like this, no. Not in Prague, at least.

Q: So after the Germans came in, did they establish a number of rules for the Jewish people?

A: They might have, but they didn't touch me too much. So I didn't care too much. No, they're not against me too much. The rules were not applying to me.

Q: Do you remember what some of the rules were?

A: Not really by now.

Q: Did you have to wear a Jewish star?

A: Yes. I wore it in the office and when we had no Jewish clients it was covered.

Q: Was your father able to continue his work?

A: Yes. He was working on -- he was a salesman and getting commissions, so it wasn't so terrible.

Q: And your sister?

A: My sister went to Israel.

Q: Were Jewish people allowed to continue studying and in business as a rule?

A: Not at the university. In business, more or less. Because it wasn't public so much.

Q: What about --

A: I couldn't continue my studies at the university, of course.

Q: What about continuing to temple, that sort of thing.

A: Yeah, we could, more or less. It wasn't so open.

Q: So they didn't close anything down.

A: Not that I know of. In some places it might have. But not where we went.

Q: One more question about when they were starting to send the people away. Did you know where they were going, or what was the rumor?

A: The rumor was that it's a concentration camp, but we wouldn't want to believe it. I mean, it was unpleasant to believe it, so we just took it -- "what can we do?"

Q: Now, did they ever establish in Prague sort of a group of Jewish leaders who would help maintain order or anything like that?

A: They did, but I didn't know them. As I say, I was working for a lawyer who was married to a Jewish woman, but it didn't concern him that he is employing me.

Q: So what you're telling me is that for you personally, life didn't change too terribly much?

A: No. For me personally not.

Q: Were a lot of people trying to get out of Prague at that time?

A: I don't know about a lot, but the ones who had somebody who could help them tried and went. But I didn't have anywhere to go, so I didn't even try.

Q: Were people going to Israel?

A: People were going to Israel, but I didn't want to go to Israel. I said "I am not Zionist and I don't want to take place of people who belong there". It was funny, but that was my etiquette

Q: So when did everything change for you from this normal life?

A: I think when they sent me to the camp.

Q: When was that?

A: It was in '49. It was pretty early after they came about, I would say about eight months after they came in. But they sent me to Theresienstadt and I didn't believe that's terrible.

Q: Okay. Let me just backtrack a little. Now I have a note -- I don't know if this is correct -- that you went to Theresienstadt in December of 1941. Does that sound about right?

A: Yeah, yeah. Also it's a beginning of Theresienstadt, almost.

Q: And how did this deportation come about? Do you remember what happened that day?

A: They told me be there at 8:00 in the morning on this and this day at the place where they assembled us and they registered us and they took God knows what kind of -- take as they wanted from us and they sent us in the train, and that was it.

Q: Were you with your parents?

A: Yes.

Q: Did they tell you where you were going?

A: Well, we heard us go to Theresienstadt and since it was in Bohemia, we were not so scared.

Q: Did you take things with you? Did they give you any instructions?

A: Well we could take 50 kilo, including our bed spread and these things. We took what we could.

Q: What did you take?

A: My clothes and -- mostly clothes. Maybe some food, but not too much because it was heavy and spoiled.

Q: Do you remember -- I guess at this point you're talking about the German authorities or the Nazi's who were taking care of this process?

A: Yeah.

Q: Were they polite to you?

A: I didn't have too much to do with them. They sent me an invitation to be at that time at this place, and that was about all. I went. I didn't try to escape. I didn't try to get out. From today's point of view, it was the correct thing. But at that time we didn't know what was going on anyway.

Q: Did you and your parents talk about it, do you remember?

A: No. We just took it as it came. We were simple people.

Q: What was the train ride like?

A: Regular. At my time we still went in regular, personal wagons. Not in cattle wagons.

Q: So it all must have seemed somewhat normal.

A: To me, I never complained. I did what I was told and that was it. It was simple. When I came there, there was somebody who I knew, and he said "do you want to work?" and I said "what else would I do?" and he said "they are looking for somebody in this office". It was on top. And that saved my life, more or less.

Q: Okay, we'll get to that. When you arrived at Theresienstadt it was about how far from Prague?

A: Not too far. It was three hours train ride about.

Q: What were your first impressions when you got off the train?

A: I didn't think. I just took things as they came.

Q: What did it look like though?

A: Well when I came off the train there was nothing there, and when I came there, there were those places, or how you would call it, and they said "you go into this category, and you go into that one", and I was lucky. They told me you are assigned to this room and it happened to be a small house, and in my room, we were seven people. Sleeping on three or four mattresses from next to the other. And that was it. I didn't think too much. I just took things as they came. It's silly from today's point of view. But I did it.

Q: I'm just trying to get as much detail as possible. So you were sent to this room. Were you registered first? Was there some process, or were you just --

A: We were registered before we went onto the train. You know, so they had all our data already.

Q: And you were allowed to keep your regular clothes and wear them.

A: Yes. At that time still, yes.

Q: So did you share this house with your parents and other people?

A: Well my father had to go to the men's thing. The men's quarters. But that was in the big what-do-you-call-it -- and I went to the small place, to the small house. We were just seven people in a small room which was an advantage. We had three mattresses and we slept one next to the other, and the three mattresses filled the whole side of the room.

Q: And you were with your mother?

A: I was with my mother, yes. Because I knew somebody and that somebody said "where's your mother?" I said "over here". He said "you take her with you."

Q: Now did you have your own bathrooms? What was it like?

A: It wasn't that _____. It was in this way _____. You know, and for -- and there were bathrooms there in the whole place for everybody, these showers, and you could take a bath every day under the shower, which was an advantage. We could keep clean.

Q: What about food?

A: You had to go and -- at meal time we had to go with our small plate or shistle (ph) and get whatever they gave us. It was mostly soup and a little something extra. We survived on it. Let's put it this way. If somebody had somebody who worked in the kitchen, they stole. They got some. My mother worked in the kitchen. She didn't steal too much, but we had something extra.

Q: In terms of food, were people allowed to get packages from outside the ghetto?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Did people have gardens?

A: Yes, they were allowed to get packages. Not too many. I think once every month or so, or two months. Brown package. And most of them were opened and half of the things were stolen probably, but we could get packages. Of course, I didn't have anybody to send me packages.

Q: Did you all have gardens, or you just had to rely on what the kitchen gave you?

A: What the kitchen gave us. I mean, somebody worked in gardens, so they stole and got some more. At one time I did.

Q: But you had enough or you were hungry, or what?

A: I, personally, was not hungry. Because, as I say, my mother worked in the kitchen and then I was married to the chief physician, and he had extra. He got extra assigned so that he wouldn't steal, or people around him wouldn't steal.

Q: Tell me a little bit about what the daily life was like. Were there roll calls, were there things like that?

A: Not really where I worked. I just got up in the morning and had to get ready and get to my office.

Q: And what was the work that you did in the office?

A: Regular office work.

Q: What was the purpose of it.

A: I'd write reports that were submitted to the Germans and reports that were submitted to the other Jewish agencies.

Q: What kind of reports?

A: I couldn't tell exactly. What we have done, what was supposed to be done, and things like that, but I don't dream about any more what those reports really were about.

Q: Was somebody basically directing or writing these reports and then you would process them and you would type them?

A: I would type them. They were dictated to me.

Q: Was it a large office?

A: Well, that depends on what you compare it with, but it was a regular office, yes.

Q: About how many people worked with you?

A: About ten.

Q: And who was your supervisor or your director.

A: You ask me something different. I don't know any more. I mean, I know his name. He was . But he was assigned to be the leader of one department and I worked under him.

Q: He was Jewish?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: So you were all preparing reports about the administration of the camp?

A: Yeah. To the administration.

Q: Now was this a pretty good job?

A: Considering from today, it was the best I could have gotten because I was more or less protected. They wouldn't send me away because they needed me.

Q: Did you have access to any special information by working in there?

A: Once in a while maybe they brought something. But I couldn't use it anyway, so I wouldn't say I had a special possibilities or special things.

Q: But did you just have more information maybe than the average person?

A: Oh yes. Definitely. But if I could use it somehow -- from today's point of view, I wouldn't be able to say.

Q: Do you remember what kind of information? You worked in there a long time, so that's why I'm wondering.

A: Whatever the Germans wanted us to know or to do, we got it first. I can't remember any more what information was _____. The only thing I know since I was working there, I was some how protected. Not to be sent away. And since I was married at that time, my parents were protected by me, so they wouldn't be by the terrorists.

Q: They didn't divide families on the deportations too much?

Q: The Jews were mostly putting the transports together, so, you know, this way they did not divide families unless somebody did something that wasn't supposed to be done. Steal or something. You know, that they found out.

Q: Well you bring up something interesting, which is the internal administration of the ghetto. Who ran the ghetto and how organized was it?

A: _____. First it was just the Czech Jews. And then came the Germans, so the top men were from Germany. But otherwise --

Q: So you're saying that the camp was run really by the Jews?

A: Yeah, but it was pretty well organized. I mean, the Germans would talk to it if they didn't like something and give some general orders, but to do it, to comply, it was a Jewish business.

Q: And were the Germans around a lot in the camp?

A: They had their quarters which were inside the camp. But if somebody saw a German, he tried to go around them as far as possible.

Q: They weren't too threatening though?

A: Not really. Maybe someone did something or some of the fellows felt bad, he might have hurt the Jew when he saw him and the Jew did not get out of the way quickly enough, or so, he might have hit him, or something. But not in our camp. Let's put it this way.

Q: So when we're talking about this Jewish administration, what were they in charge of?

A: Well, what an administration would do. You know, give jobs, or say this and that has to be done, or complied with the Germans order that has to be done, but mostly it was the orders from the Germans that we got, or that they got to comply.

Q: You said they were also responsible for the transports?

A: Yes and no. An order came from the Germans, for instance, on this and this date, one thousand Jews have to be going east. We didn't know where east was, or we didn't want to know where east was. Everybody was afraid that it's worse than from where we are coming. And a thousand Jews had to go. No matter what. And they sent them and we were afraid it's worse -- in Terezin we heard some rumors where they are going to, but it was so terrible that nobody wanted to believe it. Nobody would have believed that there were gas chambers.

Q: Who had to make that list of the thousand people.

A: Well the Jews really. But they were instructions, for instance, everybody over 55 years, or under 25, or everybody who has done this work, or that work has to go. And it was always bad feelings about it. Among the Jews too, because everybody thought "if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have to go" or things like that. It was a very sad business.

Q: Did that come through your office?

A: Sometimes, yeah.

Q: The orders?

A: Yeah.

Q: I understand that within Terezin there was a whole court system and everything, is that true?

A: If you want to call it that, yes. If someone did something we had a court and he was set before the court, and was maybe sentenced to spend a few days somewhere locked up, or so, but I don't know too much about that.

Q: What I'm trying to understand is that it sounds like there was this semblance of a whole city -
- all the regular functions and activities of a city there. Is that --

A: Well, as much as the Jews could do it, yes. But we were supervised by the Germans and if the Germans didn't like something it couldn't be done.

Q: Was this ghetto or camp enclosed?

A: Yes. You couldn't get out. You can flee somehow. Hide and go somewhere but if they caught us, and where to go?

Q: Did people escape?

A: A few might have, but it wasn't made public.

Q: Could you move around pretty much within the ghetto?

A: Yes. After it was closed, yes. Before, not. We had to have passes to get from one building to the other or things like that. But after it was closed, yes.

Q: How soon after the beginning was it enclosed, do you remember?

A: I would say about a year, a year and a half. As long as they got the non-Jews out.

Q: So in the beginning there were non-Jews living there?

A: Well, they couldn't move everyone. And those people didn't want to go because they were living in their houses, you know, that they owned and they didn't want to leave it. So in the beginning there were non-Jews there.

Q: And then eventually they moved away.

A: Yeah, they moved them out.

Q: So I'm trying to get a picture of this because this is different than many other places. Basically, you moved in and took over a city?

A: Yes. After a while, not at the beginning, but little by little, and about a year after it was started we had the city.

Q: So all kinds of buildings that are in a normal city?

A: Not buildings, these were big casernan (ph.), if you know what I mean. So there were some houses and people who were lucky got assigned to live in a house after they evacuated the civilians. But that was a big advantage, and they lived in the upstairs without --

Q: Do you remember some of the leaders of the ghetto

A: I knew them all. I was working with them.

Q: Well -- the first one was --

A: Edelstein and _____, and then came the Germans. Epstein was the name of the German Jew who took them over. I mean from Germany. In the beginning, we were just from Czechoslovakia or from Bohemia and Moravia, but then they came, the ones from Germany, and they were assigned the top job, for instance. After the Germans came, the top leader was a German.

Q: What kind of leaders were they; were they good men?

A: Yes. When they could help they would help. Otherwise they would have to do what they were told by the Germans.

Q: In general, did you and the other people living there respect them?

A: We did not disrespect them. We took them for granted. Maybe somebody did respect them, you know, one of them or the other.

Q: But there must have been a big difference between the way one would run the camp and another one would; there must have been a difference between Edelstein and Mermelstein (ph.)?

A: Yeah, but they did not really have to run it by themselves. They had to run it together. Mermelstein we didn't like, but not because he was bad but because personally.

Q: Why, what do you mean?

A: I don't know. He was a funny fellow, let's put it this way. I couldn't say why. I, personally, didn't like him. That's for sure.

Q: Were they corrupt?

A: I don't think so. They couldn't have been too much corrupt if they accepted from somebody something sometimes, it's possible, but there wasn't too much to be corrupted by.

Q: Did you have any contact from the outside world? Did you have radios or letters?

A: I think somebody had radios. Some people who smuggled them in somehow or had some relatives who smuggled them in for them and -- I didn't have any personally. Not a radio, nothing.

Q: So you didn't know too much about what was going on with the war.

A: Well, we heard something, of course. You know, rumors were always coming and they had deliveries and the delivery men would tell us. Not me personally, but if you tell one, everybody else almost knew.

Q: So what were you earning?

A: What?

Q: What were you earning.

A: Not too much. Just live and know how to live and get by.

Q: You mentioned your work. Were there a lot of other type of jobs? Your mother worked in the kitchen, what about your dad?

A: My dad. It was the funniest thing what he could have done. They sent him to the sewing machines. Before he came to the camp he never saw a sewing machine in his life. But he could and they told him he should do so. I still can't believe that he was working on that. It's beyond the point.

Q: Was there a lot of industry, I mean, was there all kinds of different work?

A: It wasn't all kinds of different work, but they came -- some of the Germans wanted to have something done for himself maybe even. So he supplied the means.

Q: Was the ghetto making things for the war effort or was it basically trying to keep itself going?

A: Well, whenever they had something they let us do something for the war effort, but I don't remember right now what it would have been.

Q: Was the ghetto self-supporting?

A: More or less, yeah.

Q: So you mentioned a few times your husband. How did this come about and who was it?

A: He was a chief physician and I met him and we liked each other and he had a room for himself, so it was much more comfortable to live together and then, officially, I had my bed three rooms away from him, but we lived together.

Q: And?

A: Nobody objected. There wasn't anybody to report it to.

Q: Did most people have this kind of freedom?

A: Most couldn't have because there were not so many rooms available. But if they could, yes.

Q: What was his name, this chief physician.

A: Monk (ph). Dr. Erich Monk (ph).

Q: And you met him early on?

A: Yes. I was working and I had to work during the night and he was working too, so we met this way. So when I had a chance to go and sleep somewhere, I had a boss who had a room with him together and when my boss was working I could sleep in my boss' bed.

Q: Now, you said you got married there. Was there some sort of official ceremony?

A: Yeah, there was. They were wise enough there that they performed. It wasn't married to the outside, but it was married in the camp.

Q: I'm going to ask you maybe a strange question, but I --

A: Whatever you want to ask.

Q: I'm curious. When people like you got married in a camp or in a ghetto, would you -- I guess you were in love -- but did you do it thinking that you would have some future together?

A: We figured that much. The only thing is that they sent him away and I wanted to go with him, but he knew more than I. He was going to go not to come back. And he didn't want, as he said, three people on his conscience because my parents would have had to go with me. His mother had to go too when he was sent.

Q: He was sent later on?

A: What?

Q: When was he sent?

A: It was at the end when the people still could go -- be sent to Poland.

Q: So you got married and though, well you'll get through this and --

A: Well, we'd be together, but he didn't survive.

Q: Tell me a little bit about him. He had a very important position there?

A: He was a leading physician; he was the chief physician. But ask what you want to know.

Q: Was there a big medical operation there?

A: Yes. It was pretty big. There was a hospital. There was a hospital there before and they turned it over to the Jews. So at the regular hospital we had good physicians. Better than on the outside.

Q: A lot of them?

A: Enough, yes. Some of them were sent away or some attorney was sent away and they went with them, but we had -- considering what were, and where we were, we had lots of physicians.

Q: What about medical supplies and equipment?

A: The Germans wanted -- were afraid if something breaks out in the camp, it will go outside and they will be affected. So they supplied us this equipment and these supplies. Medicines and things like that. Because of that. Not because they liked the Jews. They liked to help the Jews, but they were afraid for themselves.

Q: Was there a lot of illness at the camp?

A: Comparatively not. Because the Jews took care of themselves. But there was, of course, you know, enough.

Q: Was there disease? Did people die there?

A: Oh yes. We had a cemetery even. Because they had to put the Jews somewhere and they didn't want them outside.

Q: No crematorium?

A: There was one, but I don't think it was used too much.

Q: So people had a proper burial there, or a mass grave

A: Whatever they could find. The family made some arrangements. It was a mass grave sometimes. They found a place where to bury them or so.

Q: I understand that there were a lot of different specialists in the medical community. Did they take all kinds of operations?

A: Operations -- no, they put the Jews -- the Jewish doctors were there, so there were all kinds of specialties. And if they could make an operation, if the doctor would think it would be good and he could learn something from it too on top of it, he would do an operation. We got the supplies. The Germans gave us supplies because they didn't want an epidemic. They were afraid for themselves, mostly. Not for the Jews. But, you know, how can you confine an epidemic in a small place?

Q: Did the Germans get treated by these Jewish doctors also?

A: Not as a rule, but some of them preferred them from the German doctors. They came on the sly.

Q: Were there a lot of nurses?

A: Well, yes. As many as we needed were there. Some of them came as nurses and some of them learned.

Q: And your husband basically ran the whole operation or he actually worked on patients.

A: Both. He worked on patients whom he knew and who he could treat. But normally he was assigned to people to treat or to work in this place or that. We had more doctors than we needed and we had better doctors than the people outside. Let's put it this way. Because we had doctors who were something and somebody before they came to the camp.

Q: Did your husband ever talk to you about special concerns with what he was trying to do?

A: Yes and no. We all felt -- everybody feared to get out of Theresienstadt because everybody was afraid it's worse than Theresienstadt itself. How much worse and how much other people knew than I did, I don't know.

Q: But did he talk about special problems in even running the hospital, or things he needed?

A: It was running by itself more or less. We had more doctors than we needed and better doctors than they had on the outside.

Q: Now what about -- I would think for some people maybe they would need some kind of social -- psychiatric counseling. Was that ever done there. I don't know whether it was done as, you know, just to help to it as specialty or what. But there were people who did it. They were doctors who did it. It was for their own better. You know, so to be able to practice and to see how it works.

Q: It was also a bit of a laboratory is what you're saying?

A: yeah.

Q: Now you mentioned -- well I think -- wasn't there a famous psychiatrist there? Wasn't there a Dr. Frankel? Did you know him?

A: I don't remember. We had better doctors than the people on the outside. Let's put it this way.

Q: Do you remember whether there was much of a problem with suicide?

A: Not really. I mean, I don't remember, but I don't think there were many people who committed suicide. There might have been some.

Q: You had mentioned the Germans coming in. Tell me a little bit about who were the other prisoners or inmates or whatever you want to call yourself. Who you were. It started off with people from Prague and --

A: Well, I was working for a lawyer and he kept me for as long as they let me work. As long as I was someone to go to the camp. So I wasn't affected too much. But I know that many people could not work any more because the employers didn't want to be accused that they were helping Jews.

Q: This was back in Prague?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay, but when you went to the camp, the ghetto, at that time it was mostly Czech Jews?

A: Yeah. Mostly, but then they started to send people from Germany there too. And even from the ones that were in Holland. Some people succeeded to get out to Holland and when they got hold of them, they took them also.

Q: So all these different groups that came in, was everybody mixed together?

A: They tried to stay together. The groups that came in tried to stay together because they knew each other. But how long could they stay -- they sent half of them or how many out of the group. They were sent to Poland because Theresienstadt wasn't such a big town.

Q: So you all had to mix together eventually?

A: Yeah.

Q: Now when the Germans and Austrians arrived -- you don't remember when that is, do you?

A: No.

Q: When they arrived, did they seem different than you? Did they have different expectations?

A: They had different expectations, and it went even that far that even some time or one time a German said "if our Fuhrer knew how you treat us, if our Fuhrer". Because they thought, you know, since they are Germans, Hitler would take care of them better than of the Czechs. But that was what some of them said, "if our Fuhrer knew".

Q: How did the Czech people react to the Germans who came in -- what did they think of them? How did you feel?

A: We took them for granted. They came the same as we, and the German Jews, they expected to be treated better which is true because "our Fuhrer", but they were not. And they got assigned the same as the others and then came an order, a thousand Jews have to go, so how do you select a thousand Jews and don't make a mistake, let's put it this way, or what?

Q: Were there ever tensions between the Germans and the Czechs and the people from Holland?

A: Oh, sure, sure. From Holland, not. Dutch people were nice, but the Germans were saying to the Czechs, "if our Fuhrer knew how you treat us", that you don't treat us better. That was tensions.

Q: Did that cause problems?

A: Yeah. It caused problem not to me personally, but I am sure there were bases where it was a problem.

Q: And didn't some Danish people also come?

A: They were separate. They were not allowed -- Denmark -- since they had to go they made a rule that they may not be sent to Poland and they even got them out of Theresienstadt shortly before the war ended. Because they were working for them. They were our citizens and we were responsible for them and they were protecting them. I mean, there were not so terribly many, but Denmark took care of their Jews.

Q: Were there a lot of children in the camp?

A: Well, the regular family has children and they were sent to Theresienstadt. The children came along. And there were children born in Theresienstadt, of course.

Q: That was allowed?

A: That was allowed. Well what can you do. We were human beings, and what can you do? I mean the people who had them were human beings.

Q: But the Germans allowed children to be born?

A: Once they were born they didn't do anything to them. They didn't like it, but what could they do? Sometimes they sent the parents with the children, but that wasn't as a rule.

Q: So women were getting pregnant in the camp?

A: Yeah.

Q: And that was allowed?

A: It wasn't allowed officially. When she wanted to have an abortion, she could have it. And if she did not, they didn't do too much.

Q: So they didn't force women to have abortions?

A: No, not really, but who wanted to have a child in a camp like that. So most of them did have abortions on their own really. On their own will.

Q: Did you ever get pregnant?

A: Did the children live separately?

A: Sometimes. They had some camps where they had the children separately if the parents were working, both of them. And sometimes no.

Q: I understand that when the Germans came in, the Austrian Jews, they sent a lot of older people, a lot of people from hospitals. Is that true?

A: Well they sent the other ones to Poland. So what they had to send the usually sick or older people. It came by itself, let's put it this way.

Q: That probably changed the balance in the camps in terms of working people.

A: Yeah. But as I say, they came from Austria or so, and they came. The people who work they were sending to work and the older people remained and they sent them to Theresienstadt.

Q: When they began deporting when they'd make the list of a thousand Jews, or whatever, to the east, were there certain categories of people who went first? Did they send --

Q: Yeah. They were sending everybody over 65 or everybody with this and this condition has to be sent or so. There were some instructions.

Q: What about women?

A: The same. I mean they said over 65 whether they were female or male, it didn't matter.

Q: What I'm wondering is if they would keep the men around longer because they thought they were better workers or something.

A: They might in some cases. If somebody knew something special they wouldn't let him go because they needed his work.

Q: Did you feel that women were treated the same as men there?

A: I would say from a Jewish point of view, yes.

Q: Who were the guards there?

A: The Germans mostly, but they took some Jewish people to do this or this as guards. But nothing extra. Any Czech guards. The same as the Germans. They didn't make any distinctions between the Germans or the Czechs. If they needed them they took them.

Q: What about all of the prominent Citizens who were there?

A: There were some that were by the Germans designated; that they cannot be moved away or have be in special quarters. But there were not too many compared to the whole population. But they had some extra people that the Germans wanted to protect because they thought they would need them more. If they know something.

Q: What kind of people were they; what kind of people are we talking about?

A: I couldn't tell you. Some scientists.

Q: And they had special privileges.

A: Not special privileges, but they lived in better quarters. They had a house assigned where they lived together more or less. To be available when the Germans wanted something from them. Some advice or so.

Q: Were these people resented or were they respected?

A: I don't think people cared too much. There were not so many and so I don't think people cared too much.

Q: Now Theresienstadt was thought of as a modern camp?

A: That is what they said, yes.

Q: And what does that mean?

A: They didn't send people away immediately. They had some extra food sometimes. They treated us nicer than maybe somewhere else. I don't know much more.

Q: Tell me about the cultural life there. Was there much?

A: Yes. Because everybody who knew something tried to apply it for his own sake and for the sake of the others. So I don't know everything, but we had pretty much to be proud of. Let's put it this way. Because of the people who were there and said about those things, were talking about those things. I don't think I could tell you too much about it.

Q: Let me ask you some questions.

A: Okay.

Q: We're talking about music, poetry, theater.

A: Yes. Music we had if somebody was a musician who was writing music, he wrote it, and he had a chance to have it worked on ___Poetry, it was a personal thing. Yes. If he wanted to write he was allowed to write, whether he would use it somewhere or not it was up to him.

Q: Theater?

A: Theater, yes we had some. We had some. But we were better than the outside because we had actors and we had seamstresses who maybe sometimes did some things for them to wear, but we were lucky that we had a cultural life.

Q: Do you thing that helped sustain people?

A: I would say yes. In many cases, yes. They didn't feel like being enemies.

Q: Was there a lot of this; were there a lot of musicians and concerts?

A: I know there were some. I don't know _____. Because they did it hidden or so. You know, if they could perform somewhere and the Germans wouldn't have to see it, they would do it. And if the Germans couldn't see it we couldn't see it either at many times. But we had pretty good cultural life. Thank God.

Q: Did you go to a lot of these performances?

A: I went. I didn't go to a lot but I was allowed to go. And being on the top I went -- I knew where they were.

Q: So did the Germans allow this; did they encourage it?

A: They didn't encourage it but they did not prohibit it expressly. And I believe some of them even went to see it because they didn't have it on the outside.

Q: Were there certain things that were not allowed politically or --

A: Well politically maybe, but I don't know which they were. Others maybe too but I don't know about it.

Q: Where would the performers perform?

A: Well in the camp we had rooms enough and they could be guarded. Let's put it this way. If the Germans were close, the lights went out.

Q: Unless it was one of these that was allowed?

A: Yes. But otherwise, the lights went out and that was it.

Q: What about educational activities? Was there any kind of teaching or instruction?

A: Oh yes. Oh yes. Hidden, but it was. We had teachers enough. We had experienced people enough. And they did teach the children and even the grown-ups. We had more than the outside. Because we had the people outside. They were not allowed or they didn't have them.

Q: Do you think the children had a pretty reasonable life in there?

A: Yes and no. I mean, what do you say about reasonable? They were allowed to sing, to gather together, to -- I think they had pretty reasonable life as a whole.

Q: Were they treated special?

A: I don't know whether they were treated special because they were children, but whatever could be done for the children was done.

Q: What about the old people?

A: That was sad. They couldn't take care of themselves and the old people was a sad story. If they didn't have any relatives who would bring them something extra to eat or so, it wasn't enough to eat and things like that. To be old in Theresienstadt without having family was very sad I would say.

Q: Was there a kind of a system for taking care of them?

A: There was, but not everybody could get in and there were too many to be taken care of by too few and things like that. That was sad.

Q: Were some of the musicians or artists given any kind of a special treatment or did they have more time to practice, or anything like that?

A: They could practice. Whether they had more time or not, I don't know. They could practice and if they had special treatment it was from the Jews, not from the Germans.

Q: Did you have to have tickets to go to these performances?

A: I didn't, but maybe some had. I was, you know, a relative of the leading physician, so I didn't have to. I could go wherever I felt like, or could, or when I had time.

Q: Was there money exchanged in the camp?

A: Not officially, but there were people who exchanged money for some reason among themselves. I couldn't tell.

Q: Wasn't there a national currency from that ghetto?

A: Yes, there was. But I don't remember too much about it. We got assigned at the beginning a certain amount. It wasn't too much, and what we did with it, they didn't care. So some people probably did something and some people didn't.

Q: One more question about all this activity with schools or music -- and there was political activity as well was there?

A: It wasn't officially allowed, let's put it this way; political. Music and that was, you know, we were better musicians and we had better musicians inside than there were outside.

Q: Did all of this culture kind of seem at odds with the situation?

A: I couldn't tell. We had to take it as it came, and whether it was or not I couldn't tell.

Q: You didn't seem strange to you?

A: No, not to me because I had access to those things, so I wouldn't know.

Q: I guess what I'm wondering is that in the midst of this horrible war it's interesting that there was so much vitality.

A: We didn't look outside. We took it as it came inside the ghetto, and what happened outside didn't have any influence any way. So as long as they didn't come to beat us or to take away things from us, we didn't know. We didn't want to know.

Q: Do you think that this represented kind of a spiritual resistance in a way?

A: Maybe to some people, yes. But I couldn't tell. I took things as they came. I was lucky. Because I came there early and someone asked me if I wanted to work, and I said "what else would I do" and I got where I was.

Q: Now since this was supposed to be a model camp, were there visitors?

A: They brought us some sometimes, but they prepared us and they said what we can say and what we can't, or how well they treated the Jews. To show how well they treated the Jews.

Q: How else did they prepare the camp for these visits?

A: Clean up everything and they gave us some things to show like some more food or some things like that. But unfortunately they did not come to often, and because what they gave us they took it then away -- they gave to one part and they took it away from the other.

Q: Who were these visitors?

A: I couldn't tell. They were some Germans or some Dutch people. Some from Denmark. There were Genish (ph) Jews there. They treated the Genish Jews better. They gave them more to eat and when the Genish came they put them in their place, you know, told them what they may say or what they may not say. Or took them outside to talk.

Q: Do you remember the Red Cross visits?

A: Not really.

Q: Did things change as time went on? You were there a long time.

A: Well in the beginning, we didn't have too much to eat, and we didn't have -- we couldn't go anywhere, and then they gave us more to eat and they let us go visit each other or things like that.

Q: So you had more freedom after a while?

A: Yes. Inside the ghetto we could move around freely. After they took all the not-Jews out of the town. We could move freely.

Q: Did it ever get really crowded?

A: It depends what you feel like crowded. You know, if you think five people in a small room is crowded then it was crowded. Less was not crowded.

Q: So it didn't change that much in terms of housing or the population.

A: No. Except when they moved the other people out we lived in the whole town and we could move around. Before that we had to have passes to go from one caserna (ph) to the other or if we had to work somewhere we had to have passes.

Q: Now do you remember there was some fortress where people were taken.

A: Yes, but it was outside Theresienstadt. The name was Terezin but it was outside Theresienstadt.

Q: What was this fortress, what happened there?

A: It was a prison.

Q: Why would somebody be sent there?

A: For reasons you go to prison. The only thing is they didn't send Jews there as a rule. Because they had for the Jews enough places. Theresienstadt and Thurmberg (ph), which was worse than the fortress.

Q: What was this?

A: Theresienstadt to the east of the camps. Extermination camps where they didn't have to have anything extra.

Q: So there wasn't too much of punishments and beatings or hangings, any of that horrible stuff that went on elsewhere?

A: Well inside Theresienstadt, not too much. There were some hangings at the beginning. I think they hanged about nine people. And they'd make big propaganda with it. But then they didn't do it any more. It was too much problems and it was easier to send them to Poland and then do with them what they wanted to, ____.

Q: Were the supervisors or the guards when you were working -- they mostly treated the people pretty well?

A: Regularly. They didn't beat us unless somebody did something. They didn't do too much bad things to us. Because they were afraid if we should survive they might get it after it.

Q: What else can you remember about life in the camp or something that might be important to remember in history?

A: Well I wouldn't know. Since I didn't live there a regular life I can't tell you exactly what bothered other people mostly.

Q: But you must have had friends who knew what was going on.

A: Yes, but they didn't talk too much.

Q: Your mother?

A: My mother was the same as I, more or less, privileged. Because she was my mother she live in a small room with seven people. She had regular food like the others, but just to live in a

small place was an advantage. My father lived in a big place but he didn't feel it that bad. What he did -- he was repairing sewing machines. Never in his life before did he see a sewing machine. They put him there so he did what he could and it saved his life.

Q: Was there any effort at resistance or any underground activity like --

A: I am sure there were, but I don't know about it. If I knew I didn't know not any more.

Q: So because of this relationship you had --

A: I was protected. They couldn't send me away without him and they didn't send him. They sent him and he said "if they don't call you separately I don't want you to come at all" because here I know where I leave you in and there he don't know what's happening. But he didn't come. He was sent directly to the gas chamber because he knew too much. He could have told the outside Germany what was going on more than I.

Q: He didn't share a lot of that with you though?

A: Well I think I knew about everything, but the Germans didn't know how much I knew.

Q: So you did know what was going on?

A: I knew more or less what was going on. I mean, I didn't want to believe what I heard. That's another thing. They were saying they put people in gas chambers and they killed them there or God knows what. But it couldn't be true. It was so horrible that it couldn't be true in my way of thinking.

Q: This relationship must have really helped you cope with your life there a lot better?

A: Oh, sure. First of all, I had somebody whom I loved. Since he was the leading physician he had a room for himself which I could share with him. I had an extra bed to move away, but I could share the room with him so I can't compare my life with anybody else's.

Q: Towards the end were there a lot more deportations out?

A: I think so because they tried to get as many people away so they wouldn't have so many people to tell about them; you know, about the Germans.

Q: So it was more regular?

A: Yes.

Q: Close to the end of the war didn't they start bringing people from the camps west and sometimes camp survivors would come into Terezin?

A: Yes, they would, but they said it wasn't true. It was so horrible that they were trying to say, but I didn't believe it.

Q: Where were they coming from?

A: When they were in Poland, for instance, and escaped some way or another, or the camp was liberated and they could get out and came to Terezin.

Q: From which camp?

A: In Poland. The extermination camps or so. Some people survived. They didn't put everybody in the gas chamber. When they came and were telling us I wouldn't believe it. I thought it was so terrible, I couldn't believe it.

Q: What did they look like?

A: By the time they came to Terezin they had something to eat and they looked -- to me, they didn't look too terrible because I saw in Terezin terrible looking people too.

Q: Were they shaved and they were in uniform?

A: They were not in uniform, but they were shaved. If someone wanted to grow a beard he did it, but it didn't impress me or it didn't seem funny to me.

Q: So these people who came out, they didn't look too bad?

A: By the time they came to Terezin they were not so bad.

Q: These people certainly weren't that emaciated in Terezin?

A: No. We had to eat. They gave us sometimes not too much, but we had our meals and Terezin was a camp that they showed off how well they treat Jews.

Q: That's why I was wondering, because it would seem that the people who came from the east must have looked very different from you people.

A: Yes. But as I say, by the time they came, they had something to eat or the Germans let them eat some. But I was lucky. I came there early and someone who knew me said "do you want to

work" and that saved my life and my parents survived with me which was unusual, but thank God.

Q: So tell me, what happened at the end? How were you liberated, what were the circumstances?

A: Well they came and say that the war is over and since I didn't have anywhere to go, I stayed.

Q: Who came and said that?

A: I don't know who came and said it, but --

Q: Who liberated you?

A: I don't know. The war was over and that was it.

Q: You don't remember that the last week or so the Red Cross took over?

A: No. I mean, you say took over. It didn't concern me too much. I didn't have anywhere to go so I was waiting for my parents to get established a little and in the meantime, I was very content in making my living.

Q: You stayed at the camp?

A: Yes. I stayed at the camp.

A: How long?

A: I thing about two months.

Q: What were you doing there?

A: I was working in the office trying to -- sort of the things that still had to be done still or what -- I don't remember anymore what was to be done.

Q: Were you helping people find families?

A: Well not even that. The families, when they were outside, they came in and otherwise, they were together anyway.

Q: Had your parents gone back to Prague

A: They went with me back to Prague, yes. We survived all three in Theresienstadt, thank God.

Q: When you went back to Prague what was it like?

A: It's hard to say. Someone said we were assigned an apartment and we moved in and my boss whom I worked for before I went to the camp said if you want to come back to work you are welcome, so I had my job and I had somewhere to sleep, and my parents were with me so I took it just for granted.

Q: Were the people you knew before the war there? Were a lot of them there still?

A: Some of them were and some of them -- well we didn't know what's going on which is, of course, not true, but they didn't want to so they wouldn't be blamed that they didn't help anybody.

Q: So here you had been away for about four years?

A: Yes.

Q: Did it seem strange to come back like nothing had happened?

A: Well I took it for granted. I got an apartment and my parents were with me so I took it somehow for granted. I was thankful that I survived but it seemed strange to people who didn't go through that. But I just took it for granted.

Q: Did a lot of the Jewish community return to Prague?

A: Not a lot, but some did. I mean, they even returned when they were in England because they couldn't find nice jobs in England and they had still their properties in Prague so they came to claim that.

Q: Did you think a lot about Dr. Monk at that time?

A: What could I do? I knew he was not alive. What could I do?

Q: I meant to ask you one other question about the ghetto.

A: Okay. Go ahead.

Q: Was there much religion going on in there? Were people observing Shabbat? Were they celebrating holidays?

A: The ones who were religious outside were religious inside. And the ones like me who took things for granted, we just lived on.

Q: It was allowed?

A: It was allowed, yes.

Q: So here you were in Prague working for the lawyer again. How long did that last?

Q: Until I left Czechoslovakia.

Q: Why did you leave Czechoslovakia?

A: Because I met my husband. We were married and he went so I went with him.

Q: So you met another man and got married in Prague.

A: My husband.

Q: Your husband today.

A: So he went away so I went too. He went out. He said I won't stay in this place any more.

Q: Where did you go?

A: Venezuela. I think we went to Venezuela first, to Paris, I think, then we went to Venezuela because he had his relatives there.

Q: Was it at all difficult starting anew?

A: I didn't think. As long as I was getting just for myself, I didn't care. The main thing, I had somewhere to sleep and then _____ the population 450 the first day I went out of the house, the neighbor came and said "welcome". So it was a nice thing to start.

Q: Do you remember what year you went to Venezuela?

A: 1939 I would say.

Q: To Venezuela?

A: No, I think --

Q: A few years after the war?

A: No, I think it was -- I don't know. I went to the refugee camp and someone came there and said we are going to Venezuela. I said "where is that?" They showed me and said to come so that if we find up to 50 people we grant them visas, so I went. That simple.

SHORT BREAK IN TAPE

A: I am confused myself.

Q: So we're confused together

A: Good.

Q: Okay. So you went back to Prague, your parents were there and you worked for the lawyer, you stayed there awhile. Do you remember what the next transition was? What happened next?

A: I didn't want to stay there because I was afraid that something like that will again happen and I crossed the border into Germany, of all places, into the refugee camp and someone came there and said "we are going to Venezuela". I said "where is that?" and they said "the console told us we need people like you". If you signed up to -- I don't know -- 20 people, we get some visas. So I went there to get a visa. I had nobody else to care about and I knew if I worked somewhere I will have somewhere to sleep and something to eat. So why not?

Q: Your parents went with you or not?

A: No. Not at that time. They were not with me. I let them then later on.

Q: Do you remember the name of that refugee camp?

A: No, not really.

Q: So then you went to Venezuela?

A: Yes. And I got a job from the newspaper. It was my husband's cousin and he came there after I worked there about two years or two and a half years. He came there to visit his cousin and since he was country doctor in Hugh (ph), Illinois, population 450, he proposed to me and I said yes. Very simple.

Q: So you met your present husband in Venezuela?

A: Yes.

Q: And was he living -- where was he living at the time?

A: In Hugh (ph), Illinois, population 450. He was a country doctor.

Q: So that was that and you moved to Illinois?

A: I moved to Illinois.

Q: How was it?

A: Very nice. Very pleasant. The first day I came out of the house the neighbor came and said "Welcome, you must me Mrs. Schleissner." So how much better can you go?

Q: So your first impressions of America were pretty nice?

A: Yes, I can say that.

Q: Anything surprising that you remember?

A: It has been a long time ago.

Q: What, when you look back on this period of time -- are there certain images that stick in your mind?

A: What do you mean by this period?

Q: This period during the war when you were in Prague and then in Theresienstadt.

A: Not really, I took things as they came and somehow I said, well, that's the only thing I can say. My parents were right with me, we came all three back to Prague and the good Lord was good to me. I can say the only thing I can explain things.

Q: Did it strengthen your belief in God at all?

A: Not really. I never was religious God knows me. But believe there is something. Direct the world.

Q: And you still do?

A: I still do because if I look outside, for instance, what else can I do?

Q: Do you think that these experiences during the war had any sort of long term impact on you? The way you think or --

A: How couldn't they? But I don't think about it as I said. I take it as it as it comes.

Q: You never think about it?

A: It was too hard sometimes to think.

Q: Do you think that what we learned during those years, what happened, has any relevance today?

A: To some people, maybe. Some people forget immediately.

Q: Do you think this could ever happen again?

A: I hope not, but you never know. The world is crazy.

Q: Do you ever wonder why you were lucky?

A: The good Lord was good to me. That's the only thing I can say, and I believe. When my sister went to Israel I didn't want to go to Israel because I wasn't Jewish enough, or I wasn't -- I said other people who believe in it should go first, I don't want to take anybody's place, and things like that. Today I think it was crazy, but it turned out to be okay so --

Q: Is there anything else you want to say?

A: Not really. If you want to ask something ask anything you want to, but I don't have any extra to say. I am lucky I am here. That's the only thing I can say. I am lucky I met my husband, although he studied in my home town and I didn't know him then. I had to go to Venezuela to meet him. When I went to Venezuela I didn't know where it was. They had to show me on the map. The good Lord, that's the only thing I can say.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW