

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Blanka Rothschild**  
**July 13, 1999**  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audio taped interview with Blanka Rothschild, conducted by Regina Baier on July 13, 1999 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

**Interview with Blanka Rothschild**  
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Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jeff and Toby Herr collection.

This is an interview with Blanka Rothschild, conducted by Regina Baier on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1999, in Mrs. Rothschild's home. This is a follow-up interview to a USHMM

videotaped interview conducted with Blanka Rothschild on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1994.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gratefully acknowledges Jeff and Toby Herr for making this interview possible. This is tape number one, side A. So my first question to you is when were you born and where, and give us your full name again.

Answer: My full name is Blanka Irma Rothschild. I was born in Poland, in Łódź, and -- August 19<sup>th</sup>, 1922.

Q: And I would like to start with the time just before liberation. If you could set for us the context a little bit, where were you, when was it, and what was your physical health and your state of mind at that time. It's a pretty heavy question, but if you just --

A: Yes, Just prior to the liberation I was in so-called [indecipherable] which means in English, a sick bay. I was lying there with some broken ribs, which I received on the last beating that I got at the hands of the meister, the supervisor from the airplane factory in which I w -- slaved. And at that time the allied forces were closing on the -

- around our city, Bittenberg. We were not really sure who were they, but we were -- we were subjected to bombardments and the Germans closed us in the barrack, and the -- the doors were locked and the windows were covered, and we were not let out to work, and as well with the sick bay. Since this came so rapidly, they did not have time to dispose of us, because the plan was to somehow eradicated the camp with the inmates. I was brought from the sick bay to the main barrack when they closed it.

And the following day, or two days later, one of the girls looked through the window, the -- the shutter, and she have seen that the towers where the German soldiers were usually with -- watching us, ar -- they were absent, nobody was there. So they decided to break the door open and run. And the ones who could, ran to the kitchen.

They brought us some very silly foods, margarine, one egg, I think, a couple of potatoes and we stayed for awhile there. We had very mixed emotions because we didn't know what to do. However, we decided that the safest thing for us would be to leave the camp, since it was abandoned by the Germans. This was the supposedly moment of the liberation, and we didn't feel liberated yet. It was very strange feeling. We went across the street, my friends helped me.

Q: You couldn't walk?

A: I am -- I -- I walked, because I -- the human need to survive is so great that you summon all your energy to -- to survive. So I lived with this pain, and they helped me. And they -- as a matter of fact they say, Blanka, another day, another day and we will be free. And we crossed the street. There was the house in which the

commandant lived from the camp, with a garden, lovely flowers which I envied when I passed by and saw it. We went inside, it was abandoned as well. And there were, I think, seven of us, and one girl has -- had a mother with her yet. And they brought the food, and somebody was preparing the food, and all of a sudden the commandant came back with a gun, cocked the gun, aimed at the group of us and of course we were petrified, we thought that's the end. And this big, strong man with the gun was afraid of us. And he backed out and disappeared. At that moment we thought the safest thing would be to leave his house and go towards the fire, because this indicated that whoever is fighting, is a liberator.

Q: How many of you at that time?

A: I don't know what happened, but we split. I was in a group of five. Two of the girls were helping me, and the five of us were running. We passed a field, it was street or a field, there were two young men there, and they joined us. These were two Polish men who worked there during the war as hands at the farms because Germany needed laborers, and they joined us. Since we were from Poland, we spoke Polish, so the seven of us reached the front line. Unbelievable, unbelievable sight. The first soldiers that we -- soldier that we saw was of Asiatic origin, I believe, some Mongol maybe, with the eyes that make seem that he's Asiatic. And he was with the dirty uniform, filthy. And we kissed his boots. I remember that moment. And he motioned with his hands for us to go in the back. We went in the back, they told us that we can help ourselves to food, which was in a barrel, there were herrings. We ate some of

the herrings, we got very sick from it because the bodies were empty -- the stomachs, rather, were empty. And there was no water because the pipes weren't working. So -- but we were pretty sick, in pretty bad shape.

Q: So they were salt herrings, or [indecipherable]

A: Long herrings, long herrings. And then they -- they told us to leave. This was the front line after all, they were being shot and they shot back. So we reached a house -- this was a village, finally, and we reached the very first house, which had a slightly damaged roof, I believe, and we went in. And it -- since the fighting go -- was going on, we decided to go to the basement. They had the basement, which was very, very well appointed. They had two sort of cots to sleep, with -- with linen on them, and they were -- the walls were lined with shelves, and the shelves had all sorts of jars with conserves and meat and -- and fruit. And in the other part of the basement there were barrels. They were potatoes, carrots, and water. So, ever -- and -- and there were some candles. So they were really very well prepared. And of course we ate some of the stuff, and we lied down. And that basement was approachable by a swing door up and down, that's all I remember, up and down. And at some point during the night, the door swang open and two Russians came, and they demanded girls. I believe that at least one of them was drunk, because he pulled up his gun and started to shoot at the jars. Now, I said to myself, when I survived the five years, or over five years of war, and I'm still alive, I'm not going to be subjected to that, I'd rather die. So I ask one of the Polish boys to save me, and I said to him, look, tell them that I'm --

pretend I'm your wife. I was lying on this cot, and he covered me, and he sat down on top of me. And the other girl did the same, and one went in the back room where the barrels were, and two girls were raped. Now the -- the Russian who was shooting at the jars, was laughing like a child. To him this was absolutely normal. Women and men were made to -- to mate. So there was nothing strange to him. He couldn't understand that -- that we hated it, that we couldn't understand it. I remember that the pieces of the broken jars, the glass, embedded in my left leg, and I still have the scars. And I didn't make a peep, not a sound, because I wanted to survive, so I was quiet. One of the girls became hysterical; her name was Blanka, I remember her, she was the youngest. She became hysterical and she started to scream, so the Russian took a candle, put the light on -- lit the candle and brought her some water. And he put the compress, cold compress on her forehead, he said, okay. When the morning finally arrived --

Q: Had he rape -- had -- had he just raped -- I mean, after the --

A: Yes --

Q: -- rape, or before, or --

A: I he -- he raped -- one girl was raped on the floor, her name was Anya, she went to Israel, I don't know too much about her now, and the other one was lying on the other cot, and it was dark, but we heard the sounds. And she was quiet. She was raped. She came from a very religious family, Jewish religious family, so in the morning she did not tell us that she was raped, but we knew she was raped, because

you -- you could hear the sounds. Extraordinary. The next morning we decided to leave this place for something safer, and we walked through the village, found another house. They were -- all the houses were abandoned by the Germans who were running towards the American line, or English line. They did not want to be captured by the Russians. And the cows and the pigs were not fed so they were making sounds. We got into a house, we made ourselves comfortable, we ate. The two boys went to the garden and they chased some chickens, we cooked the chickens. After we finished eating we took the tablecloth with the china and threw it out of the window. That was -- this was the little revenge. We didn't want to wash the dishes, we didn't know what will happen. It didn't feel like we are liberated. There was not the sense of freedom yet. Oh, first of all, the war was still going on. We were so-called liberated by the Russians, who became in our eyes, another oppressors. So I questioned myself, is -- was this worth it, all my suffering, to arrive at this moment? What's going to be? What will happen later on? And there was a story about -- I believe that I had on media tape, that we were so scared of the Russians that at night we took a ladder and we went to the attic, and we slept in the attic, four of us. The two boys slept downstairs and one of the five girls, her name was Sarka, she found herself a r -- a Russian officer. She was a very enterprising young lady. The four of us were scared, four poor souls, so the four of us were upstairs, upstairs there was a bed, big, big bed, and the boys pulled the ladder down and we stayed up there at night. And the same night, we have heard German voices, and we thought that the



Germans came back. The Polish boys jumped out of the window. The house faced a small forest, a young forest, and evidently some of the soldiers who ran away, they were hiding. They were hungry, so they broke to this kitchen to eat. So the Polish boys jumped from the window because they were downstairs, and they ran to the Russian commandantura to tell them that the ru -- there are Germans in the house. And we hear the Russians coming, and we understand them because the Russian and Polish are -- are Slavic languages, the -- the roots are sort of -- you could understand. They wanted to throw --

Q: Hand grenades?

A: Hand grenades, and -- to the house. So the Polish boys said don't, don't, there are Polish girls upstairs. And we, all four of us, crept underneath the big bed, we're lying underneath the bed, and Blanka, the youngest one who -- who -- who was hysterical before, she wet herself and we were lying down there in the urine, not even thinking about it. Here we survived the Nazi camp, here we are so-called liberated, here are the Germans downstairs and the Russians want to kill us. The -- the situation was absolutely unbelievable. The Germans tried to escape through the kitchen door to the -- through the garden, and they were shot by the Russians, both of them. And the two bodies were for two days lying there. After that day, my fear was so intense, that I did not want to stay with the girls. The next house ha-had French prison -- ex-prisoners of war, and I moved with them, they said they would take care of me, and they did.

Q: Through all of this you had broken ribs --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and you were really ill, but --

A: Yes.

Q: -- did you get any kind of -- of medical supplies, or --

A: No, the Russians gave me -- as we -- when we were there at first, when they gave us some food, they gave me some bandages to wrap myself, that's all. I d -- I really don't know how these people fought, because they were -- they didn't change their uniforms, they were dirty, they had all sorts of food that was unthinkable, and they were fighting. They were very strong people, the -- the -- the stock. And the conditions were just tragic. I stayed with the French people, who took care of me. As a matter of fact, I have pictures. They -- they gave me some pictures. And one of them wanted me to go with him to France. He said, we will -- we will cure you there. And we stayed there for quite awhile, I don't remember the dates and how long. But then the war was over on May sixth. We still stayed, because we didn't know what to do and where to go.

Q: How did you hear about that?

A: Well, the Russians. Hitler kaput, Hitler kaput. It's over. Sarka had this Russian lieutenant, or I don't know what his rank was, she was very happy, and the three of them with the two Polish boys were still in that house. I was with the French people. I was absolutely scared out of my wits.

Q: [indecipherable] I will interrupt for just one second. So now we are continuing again. So you were really scared.

A: Yes. After I don't remember how many weeks, but few weeks, people started to think of going back to their native countries. Now at that point, I did not know that my family didn't survive, that not one of them survived. So I thought that my ob -- first obligation was to go back to look for my family.

Q: We should -- I'm -- I'm sorry to interrupt.

A: Yes?

Q: We should probably say for the listeners who have not seen the videotape that your father had already died before the war.

A: Yes.

Q: But your mother and --

A: Grandmother.

Q: -- your grandmother --

A: Well, my grandmother was taken away. I did not know if people who were taken away were all dead. We thought maybe some of them survive. And my mother was -- you know, when they parted us, I thought maybe she survived. So I thought that I have to fulfill my -- my first obligation and go back. And there were people from Poland who walked with little carts and Polish flags, towards Poland. And I decided that I will join them. There were carts, so I had some rides for awhile. And after tearful good-byes with the French people, that I will never forget, I left. And we

walked, and walked, and then they had the horse once. So the horse pull -- pulled the cart and I was in it. We reached a city called Lignitsa, which used to belong to German and became Polish, so I don't remember what the name was previous to it. Lignitz?

Q: Lignitz.

A: Lignitz, probably. It was not too far from Breslau, and Breslau became Brotswow. And in Brotswow people already had apartments, people who survived. Now, I was never very enterprising, so I just depended on that man who was walking. And we stayed in Lignitz -- Lignitsa for a couple of days, then we continued, and then we had part of the trip was done by a train that the trucks still remained somewhere. And eventually I reached Warsaw.

Q: How did you eat, and where did you get clothes [indecipherable]

A: Who needed clothes? Who thought of clothes? I had something from the German house. I -- I'm sorry to -- til today that I didn't bring with me -- didn't -- I didn't think of preserving anything from the camp, I just want to get rid of it. So I went through -- through the closets with my friends, and I remember that I wore, I think it was a man's shirt, blue, long-sleeve shirt, and some sort of a skirt. Some people were looking for watches, for thi -- I -- I didn't think about it. I just wanted to see my family. When we reached Warsaw, which was bombed to rubble, and they left me there, I didn't know what to do, how to reach my city, Łódź. I have no money, I have no possessions, I -- I'm -- you see me, that's how I am. And there was a truck, a

Polish man who had a sign he's going to Łódź. So I ask him if he could take me. And I said I have no money. He said okay. These times were different. People had some sort of -- I don't know, not obligation, but they felt like helping one another, because the survivors were streaming back. So this man ow -- took me to his truck, and the funny part of it is that he stopped in one city and he left the truck to go to eat, and he didn't think that I -- of me, that I'm hungry. Which -- which was sil -- really silly.

Q: So you didn't eat?

A: I didn't eat. I don't remember -- you see, certain things are faded in my memory because they are not of major importance. We eventually reached Łódź. We -- he let me out on a street, after all, this is my city, and Łódź was not really destroyed, because ra -- Łódź was occupied after few days. It's not too far from the German border, so it was occupied pretty much untouched. Few buildings I think we lost, and I knew my way around. So I went to m -- he -- he dropped me off in my vicinity on the -- the house that I lived in, the Dineska, 31A, still stood, very nice house, four story house, a corner. And I went in and there was the superintendent who works for us, because the building belonged to my family. And he crossed himself when he saw me. His greeting to me was surprise, and why did I return, how did I survive, and why did I come back? He said, you can't go upstairs because people live there, and the Germans took everything out of your place, everything. Carpets, and -- there is nothing left. But I said I w -- I still would like to go -- did somebody come back? Anybody came here? He said nobody did. But I still walked to my apartment and

rang the bell, and they wouldn't let me in, the people who lived there. You see, Polish people were not really very friendly, and this is mi -- putting mildly. I went downstairs and the st -- intendent -- the superintendent of the building told me that two blocks away, or three blocks away, there was a office by Jewish -- I don't know if this was HIAS, Jewish committee set up an office, and there were lists of people who came back, or who inquired, or who survived, and that's where I went. And when I s-scanned the list, I didn't see any names from my family, any at all, but I saw a name of my school girlfriend, and her address, which was not too far. And I went to her apartment. She lived with her husband, she was very happy to see me. She survived with her husband, she got married in ghetto. And when ghetto was being liquidated completely, after the great liquidations, there were two groups left. One group that I was with my mother in the hospital in on Wargevnitska. And the second group of 500 people, I believe, on Iyakuba in hiding. This is the only group that did not leave fa -- Łódz, and survived in hiding because the Russians came to Poland just in time. We were taken at the last moment, in November.

Q: How did you -- how did you feel, though, when you see no names from your family?

A: [indecipherable] The emptiness, and the futility of survival. The futility of the years of wishing and wanting and yearning to see somebody, to -- to live again, to -- the life was very bleak, that I had -- my feelings were that it wasn't worth survival. I didn't know why I was chosen to survive. You must know that at that time I was not

well, I had bandages on me, I had no money, I had no possessions. I went to my friend, I had some tapes put around me. You would be surprised how you can survive, how strong we are. The circumstances are just unbelievable. M-My friend at this time, with her husband, were already in a very nice apartment, and they lived some sort of normalized life. He was occupied with some enterprise, earning money, and I didn't feel very much wanted, since I did not have any family left, and Polish people did not greet me very nicely. And I remember distinctly my bitterness that my Polish girlfriends did not come to see me when I went to ghetto, not one of them. My dear friends from school, of all these years. I decided to leave Poland. We have heard of displaced person camps in Germany, people who survived wi -- camps. And there was another girl who survived as well, and I knew her, and the two of us decided to leave Poland and go to the camps.

Q: This would probably be a good place to change, to stop --

A: Okay.

Q: This concludes tape one, side A, interview with Blanka Rothschild.

End of Tape One, Side A

Beginning Tape One, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Blanka Rothschild. This is tape number one, side B. Before we go on to Germany then, let me ask you this, how -- what got you through all of this? How do you think you -- you survived? Was there anything in particular?

A: I -- I ask myself that question many, many times, because it is -- it seems to me improbable now. How did I cope with the situation? How did I survive, and why it was me. It was combined with a sense of deep guilt that I was the one who survived. Why I? I didn't feel worth it. There were people who were better in my family than I, and they didn't survive. They were younger, and some older. How did I go -- how did I have this burst of energy to proceed to leave Poland, to think about it? Maybe it was the -- the deep sense of bitterness towards people that I knew before the war who betrayed me, because I thought this was betrayal. These were people who were coming to my home, sleeping and eating, and I was helping them with work. I was fairly good student. And they did not know me when the war started. So leaving Poland was not as traumatic because there was nothing that I was leaving behind.

Q: How did you leave, what [indecipherable]

A: That's -- th-th -- these are amazing stories. You know, my -- my -- my -- my life is a -- like a kaleidoscope of different moments that collectively saved me. And it -- they came in the -- just the right moment. When I decided to leave with my friend Irka, her name was Irka, and strangely enough we shared the last name. We were not -- we were not related, but we were both Fisher. We decided to leave Poland and my friend, in whose home I was staying, said to me, you know, I'll give you a couple of zlotys, which was the Polish money, very little, and she gave me two bottle of vodka. She said, this is a very good trading mark with the Russians, if you need it. And it proved to be true. We were not bothered by any luggage because we had no



possessions, neither one of us. Can you imagine this? I still wonder about it. The two of us went, we reached Posen -- Posinine -- Polish Posnine, Posen in German, a university city which was on -- near the border, and we wanted to board a train which was going to Germany. Now how do you board the train when you have no money or anything? Just so happened on this station, there -- there were -- the whole Russian contingent of soldiers were sitting around waiting for this train. And Irka and I decided to find one of the Russians, maybe he's Jewish, so he would help us. So we said to -- how do you find the Jew? How does Jew look like? Wha -- wa -- how we can judge? We have to -- to chance. Or maybe we'll find somebody who is decent enough to help us. And we still have these vodka, covered of course, because the Russians and vodka, it's -- we walked -- they were making remarks as we were passing by, and we saw one tall individual in very long coat, reaching his ankles, with a very prominent nose. And we said, do you think he might be Jewish? He was an officer, he had some insignia. And we approached him, and we asked -- we knew the few words in Russian, Ve evrai means Jew in Russian. Ve evrai, and he said da. Oh, that was first relief. We are little Polish, little Russian, we are two girls that are Jewish, the families were killed. We have nobody. We want to leave Poland to go to displaced person camp. He offered to help us. He took us to his compartment, took his filthy coat, the dirty pea coat, put us in the corner, and covered us with this -- hanged this on a hook and covered us with this stinky coat, and he said, don't make a sound. And when the train started, he gave us some bread. He was very ni -- he -- we

gave him the vodka, we were so delighted. And he said he was a dentist, and he said to us, don't go east, go west. And he said if he would have his wife, which was in one of the Russian cities [indecipherable] he wouldn't go back either. It -- it's unbelievable this -- the situations that I was involved with, the people that I met, the people that did help me, that -- it's -- it's -- it's -- it's -- it's a story after story after story. And we reached Berlin after -- after stopping th -- at the border where we heard screaming because some women were being raped. I suppose German woman were being raped by the Russians, and we were still under that coat, and we reached Berlin station, we got off, we thank him. We found two men that looked to us Jewish, and they were, and they gave -- put us on the bus, they paid the fare, they told us when to get off. Now, both of us spoke German. We got off and that was the first Schlactensee camp that we k -- arrived at.

Q: And how did it go from there then, and so -- who -- who -- do you know who was ministering that camp?

A: I have no idea who was in charge, because I -- I was not too long in that place. I don't want to sound snobbish, but it was difficult for me to get used to it. They did give us a place to sleep and they did give us food, but we, both of us felt we would like to -- and they helped us to -- to get a room by a German family, the first one, Frau Beans, I think, I don't remember, a war widow with a son and with her aunt. And we got a room there by her. It was not too far from Alexanderplatz in the Russian sector. We had some money, some ration cards. We lived like the Germans,

on a ration card at that time. It was still unbelievable that we survived to this point. I did not have any joy of my freedom, because it was not the freedom that I was longing for.

Q: What would that freedom have been? Your family?

A: My freedom would be, in my childish thinking, my freedom would be to be reunited with my family, and living a -- a normal life. Normal meant to me to be the cultural life. Something that I -- that I thirst for, I had hunger for it. That's why Irka and I, when we have this room, decided to go to a movie one day, because we wanted to start some sort of normal life. And we went to the movie, which was German movie with Marie Carruk, I remember. I remember -- I don't remember the name of it, but I remember Marie Carruk, I don't know why. And once it was dark and the movie was running, and we whispered to each other and all of a sudden we felt both us hands on our shoulders [indecipherable] and the Russians took us out of the o -- movie house. And we -- we couldn't understand, we were absolutely stunned. Well, we spoke Polish to each other, so we were spies. Spiong. Crazy, crazy idea. Didn't we go through enough? They took us to a si -- a station, Russian station commandantura, sort of, and they had so many people they were get -- catching on streets, people, Germans, that they opened that -- I remember a large wrought iron gates. They opened and they pushed us in and it was full of people that they caught from streets. You know, they were sending them to Siberia. And the two of us were there too. Just so happened that that very day, Irka had a very bad toothache, and we

went to a dentist that the Jewish committee paid for, and he pulled her tooth. And it started to hurt her, and she started to cry. And she kept crying and they started to yell at her, they were annoyed that she was crying. And finally they were so annoyed that they opened the gate and threw us out. This is another moment that saved us, because we would have been sent with the rest of the people, God knows where. Once we were thrown out, and went back to our room, the very next day I said to her, I'm not going to st -- there were sectors, American, British, French and Russian. We were in the Russian sector. Schlactensee was in the Russian sector. I said, I'm going to go to American sector, or English, or -- anything but. Now, th-the -- the [indecipherable] that -- that train was going around Berlin to all the sectors. It -- at that time it was not close, you could get on and get off. So how do you go -- everybody had to be registered. You know, the German red tape, you have to be registered with polisi -- police. So what do we do? We were getting ration cards, certain rations from the American relief organization, Jewish. There was a rabbi, with a --

Q: Joint?

A: Joint -- Joint Distribution, that's it, Joint Distribution. So we had some coffee and cigarettes. Now, to have coffee in Germany, you don't need diamonds after the war, coffee was it. So our brains started to work, with this coffee, maybe they can register us in American sector. I can get rid of the coffee, anything just to get out from this terrible situation. And we left, we went to a police station in the American sector -- unbelievable, is -- isn't it? It -- it's -- it -- it's like -- like make- up story. And we

talked to the German who was in charge, and I said, if you put our names there, here is the coffee, we just want to be in American sector. He understood because he also liked to be in American sector. He took the coffee, he put two -- two cards with our names and registered us, and we never put a foot in the Russian sector again. We -- no, Irka got herself some friend. Irka was a flirt, she was very pretty. I was always scared. I was always scared. So I applied and asked, and -- I don't remember this was this was this German [indecipherable] of police that assigned me that -- to that room. No, there was another camp, I was in another camp. That was Schlactensee, defin -- I -- I'm mixing up. The first camp that I was was on Oranienbergerstrasse in the ru -- Russian sector.

Q: That was the Russian sector.

A: That was the rush --

Q: Schlactensee was the American --

A: Schlacten -- Schlactensee -- you see, I mix -- I'm sorry. Oranienbergerstrasse was the first one, that was Russian sector. Then we went to Schlactensee, which was in American sector. I'm sorry, it's so many years. And we were in Schlactensee, and we were assigned places of course, and -- and I was there for awhile, and I didn't like it. I just didn't like it. I don't want to go into details, I just wanted to leave. I wanted to live a little bit more normal. People were occupied doing things, going pl -- pl -- driving, making money. I-I was a lost soul, I didn't want to have --

Q: Sort of black market activity [indecipherable]

A: Sort of, yes. The exchanging stuff. They were going to Breslau and back, to Brotswow. I was never that enterprising. So all I wanted is to have a -- a private room somewhere and -- and be left alone. And I went to the American Jewish chaplain and there was some sergeant there who ask me if I have relatives in the United States. So I said, all I know is that my maternal grandmother had a sister and half a brother. And the sister lived in Detroit. So I gave him the name that I remembered, because I had really nothing to do with them, and their name was Polsonsky, that's all I knew. And we received the ration cards and Irka got herself a -- a -- a gentleman. And I was given the room by Frau Pegello on Tanaustrasseactsane. Yes.

Q: You still remember that.

A: I still remember that. And there was a nice room, and I stayed there, and from time to time I was going to this Joint Distribution, getting my ration there. I still had tough times. I still didn't feel that this is the freedom that I longed for, and I said what -- what life holds for me again? Wh-What I'm gonna do? I didn't want to stay in Germany. I didn't want to stay in a country that I suffered, and that killed my family. I didn't want to live in Poland because this was a country that I grew up, country that I loved, country that -- whose language and literature and music I loved, and where people with whom I grew up didn't want me, so I didn't want them. The idea of going -- at this time there was no Israel or Palestine, wouldn't apply to me because I was too sick, I was not capable of any work. And America was the only solution. About six months later I received a letter from the Joint Distribution, they

located my family in Detroit. Family that changed the name, from Polsonsky to Souls.

Q: That's amazing.

A: It's amazing. You see, as I said collectively, all these little things, like beads in the necklace, one was next and next and next. Evidently, when I have bad times, and doubts, why -- why did I survive, and all this [indecipherable] they say, well you were meant to survive and there was a purpose to -- to keep you alive. You propagate, you have a lovely daughter, and you have a wonderful grandchild. You have now small family, but it's your own. I carved myself a niche in this liv -- living here. And --

Q: We'll talk about that some more, in more detail a little later. So how did you get to America then?

A: Well, they -- I had to wait for my turn for the visa to -- to this family. And the family, the half-brother of my grandmother lived in New Jersey. And his s-sons-in-law were attorneys. One was even prominent in Republican party. A water commissioner from New Jersey. So they speeded up the process of -- to obtain visa for me. And I was awaiting that result in this apartment, Frau Pegello, who after awhile warmed up to me, and wasn't afraid of me any more, and Frau Pegello always told me, Fraulein Fisher, Miss Fisher, I am an old lady, I'm over 90, I have seen a lot. I was a Nazi and all my neighbors were Nazis. And now nobody was Nazi, only I. Well -- well, we ended up as sort of friends. I said, I want you to learn about me, who

I am, and -- and we -- we parted on friendly terms. And I awaited that visa and the visa came through, and I arrived -- well, before I arrived, I went to -- wh-which port was it that I sailed from? Not Hamburg, I don't remember.

Q: Bremerhaven? Bremer --

A: Bremerhaven, I think. I think Bremerhaven. On Marine Marlin, which was an army transporter, used to transport the army back and forth. And this was another piece of injustice that I suffered, because we, the people who were -- some survivors that were booked on this line were put in the very bottom of the boat, and the top were reserved for the German war brides. So we were again nothing down there. To top this off, we s -- we sailed in December of '46, and we encounter a horrible storm. We lost part of the bow, and we were 16 days on the ocean. Everybody, including the crew, was deathly sick. We were throwing up our guts, nobody could eat. And we were wondering if -- why did we survive to die in the middle of the ocean? And that was the trip. So -- and it was a gehanah.

Q: And then you saw New York, though?

A: I arrived in New York, and we were pointed to benches, long benches, above which there were alphabet na -- letters, A, B, C, your last name. Mine was F, Fisher, so I was directed to F to sit, and I was sitting there.

Q: Was that Ellis Island, or was that [indecipherable]

A: No, no pier. No Ellis Island, pier. I don't remember which one, but pier. And I was sitting there, and people were coming and picking up the -- the newcomers.



Nobody was coming for me, and I know that my family sponsored me and knew that I was coming. I was sitting there, almost the last one, and finally I saw a gentleman walking by waving a photo. And the photo was of my grandmother. And I said to him, my grand -- in Polish, and he didn't speak Polish. I said, speak German? No, he doesn't speak, he only speaks English, American [indecipherable] only English. No Polish, no German, no Russian, no French, English. But he picked me out by hand and we walked out and there at the outside door stood an elderly gentleman with gray hair -- white, snow white hair with pink cheeks and blue eyes and I knew that's my family because he looked like my grandmother, and that was her half brother. And this was his son-in-law who picked me up, he -- this was the lawyer. Now the story was that I was supposed to go to my grandmother's sister in Detroit. What happened was that it took our ship to sail for so many days that the elderly lady who so anxiously awaited my arrival, died just prior to the boat docking in New York. And the family from Detroit let know the family in New Jersey that I am arriving on this ship and somebody should pick me up because they are her funeral. Story. And they took me to their place in New Jersey, and m-my great-uncle's wife spoke Polish and German, and was -- this was the first moment that I had some warmth, that -- this older lady, whom I loved.

Q: Did you see your mother again?

A: I have seen my mother after the war. In Germany. When I survived and I went back to Poland, and I went back to Germany, my -- I don't remember these things. I

was trying to locate my mother because when they parted us, they said that she was going to -- not [indecipherable] some place, different place, that there was a group of -- from our group was taken there. And I was supposed to be with them, but the -- the young ones like myself were taken to this Bittenburg to work in Arando, and they separated us. And my mother was in Strussen, so she went there, where we were supposed to be, by this German, I think his name was Zifer, who said you will be my group. Sort of like a Schindler. And I -- when I came -- I left Poland, a-and came to Germany first, I was s-searching for her. And she was in Oranienberg -- Oranienberg-Sachsenhausen hospit -- but she died. She was completely --

Q: But you saw her one last time?

A: I -- I saw her. I don't even want to think about it because th-that's a terrible memory, so I -- certain things I try to erase from my memory. Subconsciously I'm erasing things from my memory. I don't want to see -- I don't remember the face of my tormentor who crippled me. I don't remember the face of the SS offzeering for whom I knitted the sweater. I don't -- don't want to remember the face of th-the people who, on our appelleplatz, the man who sends the dog to rip me apart. You know the story? That's amazing, this story, with this dog.

Q: Yeah, you -- you told that story in the videotaped interview, the dog did not --

A: The dog did --

Q: -- harm you, he licked your face.

A: -- he licks my face. The dog brought me to my consciousness, and the German let me live because the dog, the dog had some sort of understanding that I'm a dog lover, you know, there is some connection there. And something human woke up in him. He said, the dog let her live, I will let her live.

Q: So some memories are safer buried for you than --

A: Some memories are -- I pushed away. Sometimes I don't remember I've seen my mother, I don't remember her face or anything, I don't, I don't.

Q: Let's go ahead --

A: It's the guilt, the guilt that I survived. I just thought I wasn't worth it. I had a cousin i -- my family was very modern, everybody had one or two children, period. And my cousin who was the only child, his name was Nicoden Pishen. He left the ghetto, smuggled himself. Spoke German -- all of us spoke German. And he decided he's not going to stay, he's young, he's strong, and he speaks the language, he wanted to survive. He smuggled himself out the yudas -- the -- the -- the --

Q: [indecipherable]

A: -- stars -- the stars, and he went through Germany, and my aunt received -- you see how strange of the German -- the order, they killed, and yet they were orderly in keeping the data. They sent her a postcard to ghetto. Your son Nicoden died of longensindong, of --

Q: Pneumonia?

A: -- of pneumonia. He was 16, I think, struck on the Swiss border. The Swiss must have turned him back or -- or he was caught just prior to -- I -- I pretty much think that they turned him back, and he was killed. So here they were killing people, and here they sent her a postcard, which maybe she would have lived for the hope that he survived. So --

Q: We should -- we should stop here, this is the end of tape one, side B, interview with Blanka Rothschild.

A: Okay.

End of Tape One, Side B

### Beginning Tape Two, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Blanka Rothschild. This is tape number two, side A. So now you have arrived in New Jersey?

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And how was -- I mean, where did you stay -- I guess, where did you stay, where did you live, but also how was it to be in America? What did you st -- was it strange? You didn't speak an -- no -- any English yet?

A: Well, I arrived in New Jersey because the family to whom I was supposed to go in Detroit, there the lady who was my grandmother's sister passed away, and they let the New Jersey part of the family know of my arrival. I was picked up at the pier, and I stayed with them, since Detroit was busy with the funeral and the mourning period. I stayed for couple of weeks in New Jersey, and I developed a very warm friendship with the great-uncle, and his wife, who was an elder -- elderly, charming lady, speaking few languages, and she endeared herself to me, because she made me feel at home. It was warm, it was not anything material that I needed, I needed -- I needed love and affection, and that's what she gave me. But after couple of weeks they sent for me to go to Detroit. They put me on a train in a very beautiful, luxurious car. I was sitting with the chair facing the window, turn around chair, I remember, and they gave the porter extra money to take care of me because I couldn't speak the language, to bring me food and so forth. And it was a long trip, and when the train arrived in

Detroit, a whole group of people ar -- were awaiting me. Now, at this time, I forgot to mention that when I was leaving Germany, I was still having some ration from the Joint. I had some coffee, cigarettes, and I never smoked. So I decided to change this for some decent clothes. So I received for my cigarettes [indecipherable] some fur coat. Some -- I -- [indecipherable] I-I think it was, and a nice hat, and I looked -- I wanted to look presentable when I was arriving. So when I arrived in Detroit in this coat, and white gloves, and I looked -- I suppose I was already nourished because in - - Joint gave us food, and in -- in New Jersey I was getting good food and care. So I came -- I -- I looked almost human. They were all stunned. I don't know what did they expect? Some spectacle? Somebody wh-who is from beyond the moon? Who -- of course, I didn't speak English, but here I looked like a lady. And they brought me home. The older lady and her husband were very nice and they spoke some German, so there was some communication. But they had only daughter who was, well, I must say she had two degrees from various universities, but that doesn't make a person very bright, or very polite. And she made my life miserable. She resented me. I was the attention gathering point. My -- that -- that -- the daughter-in-law of this old lady that died wanted to be very nice to me. She was very nice lady. She was patroness of arts and music, and I could communicate with her because I loved it. And her daughter resented every single thing that I -- I did or said. They sent me to a night school to learn English. And this was a class composed of elderly people who came here very early as -- I suppose i-in the 1910 or 20's. They worked all their lives and

now that they were retired they were -- wanted to learn the proper language. So after a few weeks, the teacher said, my dear, this is not a class for you, because y-you will learn rapidly in a different class. And I stopped going there. What I really wanted was to have a good medical care, but my family, for some reason, did not take me to doctors.

Q: Did you ask them to?

A: No. I wouldn't ask.

Q: Did they know how --

A: They knew, but this was healed by this time. It was crooked, you can still touch it, how crooked it is, but I didn't ask. I -- I just -- I never partook of anything that welfare had to offer, or my family had to offer. I just wasn't brought up this way. So, way -- since I was here, I did not bother with that aspect, and it wasn't that noticeable at that time. And I -- I -- the family did not understand that I had pride, I didn't want to be given few cents. I was walking without a penny in my pocket. Now, when -- I wanted to work, I wanted to earn some money. Now, they took me to a bakery one day, and I was supposed to sell bread and cut bread, but evidently I wasn't fast enough, so after the whole day work, they dismissed me without pay. And I -- I came home and everyone said, you didn't get paid? You have to get pay anyway. I said, but they didn't like my work. So I didn't get any pay. So that was the end of the bakery. But I still didn't like being so dependant. I wanted to -- my independence. And I -- I was very unhappy with the daughter's treatment of me, so I decided to get

a job on my own. Now, Detroit has a large Polish population, and I went to that Polish sector -- these are people who live here many years, but Polish is still the language of the house. I got my serve -- sort of menial job working on camera cases, on -- I don't remember exactly, but I think it was --

Q: Don't go quite so close to the microphone, just --

A: I -- I -- I think I was getting about 18 dollars a week. I -- those days, I -- and my family -- so-called family was absolutely stunned. You don't have to work, you have bed, and you have food, and you have -- I want to be independent. I don't want to ask for 10 cents, if I want ice cream cone for instance, I just don't want to. So I decided to save the money enough for a ticket to go back to New York, and to the family in New Jersey that I loved, that old lady. Now, the old lady with her husband in New Jersey, who was my grandmother's half-brother, they were retired people in not too great financial situation. Their children were quite well off, but they lived a very nice, middle income group. And I got myself -- they accepted me with open arms, and I got myself -- I went to nursing class. By that time I was already rapidly learning the language, reading, going to movies, picking up quickly. And I -- I couldn't go for three years, so I went for a short course in private -- private nursing to take care of newborn infants. I loved babies, and I didn't have to speak to them. And I got my diploma, and my very first job that I had was with the doctor from the family who recommended me to another doctor, they had new baby. And I became part of their family, they -- they were just -- till today. Till today I am in touch with them. And



my very first pay I gave to my aunt, and I said, now I'm independent, I can pay. And it was a wonderful feeling. But the -- the freedom had a fringe always, of guilt. The survivor guilt. And I -- I was not the very happy person that I was before the war.

Q: Could you -- could you talk to anybody about your experience? Did anybody ask you, did they want to know how was --

A: Well, people knew that bad things happened to me, but they thought that by avoiding the subject they did not make me feel bad going back to it. And I thought maybe even for therapeutic reasons I should have talked about it, and I did not start my talking until quite late. It developed as my own project and it grew by word of mouth.

Q: Your public speaking, but not [indecipherable]

A: My public speaking.

Q: -- private, too.

A: In private, well we mentioned things. They knew about my back being scarred, and the ribs crooked here, and about family, yes, everybody's gone, and everybody's killed. Oh, that's just terrible, let's not talk about it. They thought that they did me a favor not to go back into it. But I felt that since we were getting on, getting a little older, and older, and something has to be said, something has to be aired. And when the museum came into being, this was for me a -- a tremendous step. But by that time I was speaking already on my own.

Q: Yeah, well, we'll get back to that a little later. So you were -- you now had to work, and you felt independent.

A: I felt independent.

Q: Did you make friends?

A: I made friends m-m-mainly were in the class, the nursing class that I was. I was a large group of people and I made some friends, I was invited for Christmas holiday, for the Christmas tree and so forth, and we became friends, yes. And the people for whom I worked, I was always very fortunate, I -- I worked for people who treated me as a member of a family, as an equal. Not like that cousin's daughter who made me feel very inferior, and th-that's what I said, you don't need the college degrees to be absolutely a -- a miserable, evil person. Knowing intelligence from book doesn't make you a whole person.

Q: Did you take -- take part in -- in Jewish -- in the Jewish community and activities -

A: Not -- no, not in the beginning, no. I am not really very religious person. It would be very difficult, even if I would have been, to continue being very rely -- religious. As I said in my tape, some people lost their faith completely, and some people died with the name of God on their lips. So my family, my father and my mother were no -- were very free thinkers. They were not very observant. My grandparents were. Th-The older family. And we spent holidays together, which the memories of this I treasure. That is the warmth, this is -- you ask me before what gave me the

background, the strength. The strength, part of it, is due to the basic background of the person. Of the family, of the ethical, moral upbringing of the behavior and of the sense of obligation to society and to myself and I always said that, if people ask me about religion I said I -- I am not very organized in religion, but if I obey the commandments, I'm religious. It doesn't have to have a label. I don't do anything that they say don't. And I -- and I do respect people and respected my parents, and I didn't steal and I -- thou shall not kill. Yes, I am that kind of p -- th-therefore I am religious. So I never thought that I needed a house of worship to make me religious. A human being can be religious, like my father said, that God surrounds us in -- in the nature. When you sit at a bank of the river, as I did with my father, and we watched the flow of the water, and the little ducks on it, and the flowers and trees, this -- this is part of my religion.

Q: Did you want to have a family at that time, and is that what you wanted your family to grow into, that kind of --

A: When I survived and came here, this was the uppermost thing in my mind. I wanted a child so badly, because I felt that I owed this to my family. I wanted a child to show Hitler that I conquered him. And when my granddaughter -- the strange part here is that I, my mother was not religious, my father was not religious, I was not religious. My daughter is not religious, but she sent her daughter to Hebrew school, and her daughter had Bat Mitzvah, which neither she, nor I, nor my mother had. And I spoke at that Bat Mitzvah, and at one point I said, if I remember verbatim, that

some honorable people up there must be smiling today, because our seed survived after all. I addressed this to my granddaughter. She is -- she's the one who is carrying on. So sometimes -- and when I was pregnant, when I wanted to get pregnant, my doctor said, this will be very bad for you, your back. It will throw you off completely. I said, it's worth it. I had to have a child. I wanted to get married because of [indecipherable] you just didn't have a child without being married that -- those days.

Q: Yeah, I was just about to say, before we get to your granddaughter, let's get to your husband.

A: Yes. Yes.

Q: How did -- how did you -- how did you meet him, and is he -- is he Jewish as well?

A: My husband is Jewish.

Q: Is he s -- a survivor, too?

A: No, no. He was born in Germany, and his parents, a middle-class family, had six children, and in 1935 - six - seven, started to send the children out, one by one out of Germany. And they followed them in 1938. So this was wise, because if -- some very wealthy people didn't leave because nobody could believe what would happen. I mean, it was just unthinkable. But they survived because they were just middle class people, they sent one by one the children here. My husband arrived here as a boy, went to high school and high school, and started university in Rochester, but had a very tough time financially, and had to -- he worked anyway. And I met my mother-

in-law first, before I met my husband, as a -- as a nurse. And she was a dear, sweet, wonderful lady, who she -- when she lived in Brooklyn on a f -- low floor, the window was open and theres was sitting Frau Rochelle with cookies, and gave everybody cookies, and she was known in the whole neighborhood. And when she -- when I took care of -- took care of -- was it that child in the hospital? But I got to know her, and I visited her. And way -- she said, I have a son, a very nice boy. And later when she talked to Harry over the phone, because Harry lived on the west coast, she said, she's not only nice girl [speaks German here], she speaks German. That was to her -- because she didn't speak English, so to her this was just wonderful. And I met my husband, she went to west coast, her si -- her daughter lived in Oregon, and they sent for me, just like that, and I started -- first I corresponded with him. And I met him and we went to Justice of Peace, I didn't have any wedding.

Q: So what did you like about him?

A: I'll tell you what I liked about him. I met some people in New York that were interested that I -- but I couldn't -- I couldn't find really what I would have done before the war. I was not that desirable either, because I was not that well. I had to compromise somehow. I wanted somebody who's nice, who has had some things that we shared, love for music, love for animals, love for nature. We are otherwise very different people. But I had to settle for certain things. My husband will like operas, I like classical music. My husband will read certain things, I love to read, I'm an avid reader. I enlarge my vocabulary, English, by reading. I went to community college to

better myself. I -- I -- under normal circumstances, I suppose I would have gone on and on because, education. My husband, education is important to him, but he was not as fast in it, and he worked, he made very mediocre living. I was happy. I mean, this was not the most important things. I wanted to create a home and atmosphere into which I bring the child and teach her from the very early on, love for music, love for the word -- written word, and I succeeded.

Q: Yes, you did.

A: Yes, I succeeded.

Q: When was she born, and what's her name?

A: Her na --

Q: [indecipherable] a little bit about her.

A: My daughter -- well, when it came to naming her, my mother was Ann -- Anna -- Annemarie. So, Anna. My husband lost a sister in childbirth, her name was Rose, and I didn't like Rose. So we -- we made Rochelle Ann. And aftia -- after awhile we dropped the Ro because the kids in school teased her, roach. So it was Shell Ann. And now it's Shelly. Now she's Shelly. And she -- she has Master's degree in advanced English from England. She writes, and she works for Santa Monica college, for the students. Her husband is from England, he's an attorney. And Alexis -- Alexis wants to be --

Q: That's your granddaughter?

A: My granddaughter is Alexis, Alexis Danielle. She wants to study environment law -- environment. She wants to save the world.

Q: Good for her. We'll get to her a little later, I still would like to stay with your daughter.

A: Yes.

Q: When was she born, and what kind of parenting ideas did you have for her?

A: Okay, she was born in March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1951, and I have to say that I was a little bit brainwashed being in United States, by Dr. Salk. Dr. -- no, no, doctor -- not Dr. Salk.

Q: Was -- was he the famous --

A: Yeah, yeah, the child --

Q: Oh, Dr. Spo --

A: Dr. Spock, Dr. Spock. I had his book, this was my bible, because I didn't know much about it. So I had Dr. Spock book, and I believed that the mother doesn't work, mother has to be home, mother has to bring up the child. Well -- well, my financial situation was very precarious, we lived on a walk-up in the Bronx on the fourth floor, one bedroom, which I gave to my child. We slept in the living room on a couch. I believed in the education. I was singing to her, reading to her, and she had dancing classes. I -- I would have gone out without anything, but she had to have things that I thought were important, and she -- she was taught she will be polite, she was taught proper manners. Well, she became American very soon, you know, after the -- with school, and the peer pressure, you know, that -- she was fairly good student, not the

best. She -- she did not try to achieve her potential, sometimes was lazy. But she developed very, very good background culturally. She is avid reader, she is avid theater-goer, she loves music. And Alexis plays piano beauti -- my daughter started to play piano but we gave up after I saw it was no use. It was no use. I had piano lessons and I wasn't good either. So I must admit, I wasn't good. My -- my -- my two uncles were pianists, but I didn't in-inherit this, and neither she did, did she? Alexis plays piano, but also she's not a pianist. She plays piano.

Q: How did she di -- how did you teach limits, though?

A: A very, very difficult in United States, because she would say, her mother let her do this, or -- I said, well -- there was a saying in my house. She -- her best friend was brought up in a very free house, very free. At the age of nine, she could go [indecipherable] hang out, or go to a movie or something. And she said Annie can go. I said, you can't go. So she used to -- she wanted to hurt me, she didn't know how. So she said, you're such a continental mother. This was the worst she could come up with. I was a -- I said yes, that's your misfortune. I -- I set the limits on -- to a certain point. When -- Annie was brilliant, her best friend. No doubt about it, extremely high IQ. She went to Bronx High School of Science. My daughter didn't, my daughter went just to high school. She was permitted to -- to do things, some her own. Her teacher told her mother that she reached the top, they can't teach her any more. Annie became some sort of a failure in life. They still communicate, they love one another, they -- when Annie used to come to my house -- we lived in the same building, too.



When a -- she used to come to my house, or -- I insisted on open door. This was one of my -- because Annie I didn't trust. Annie's smoking, and things -- what she was smoking. My daughter didn't smoke. I said, I'm not going to sit and preach to you that it's bad for your health, but I said, look what's happening to these people later on. You -- you have brain, use it. She never did.

Q: You mean drugs?

A: Drugs and things. Never did. Neither did Alexis, I'm very fortunate. Neither did my son, you know. Well, he was brought up by very square people in England. So we were very lucky there. I never pressed on her any strong beliefs, she develop her own. You know, we had many arguments, a number of them, yes, because I tried to foolishly spare her some of the disappointments in life. But evidently you have to go through the experience yourself to learn. And I wanted to spare her the hard lessons. So sometimes it was backfiring. However, at the end she realized that maybe I was right after all. So --

Q: Did she ask you -- did you talk to her at a certain point about what happened to you? Did she -- when was --

A: I la -- I never made a secret of my past, but she herself had -- her -- her love for me is so deep, so intense, that she did not want to know the details, til today. She cannot stand listening to how they did it to me, and what they did to me. For instance, they pulled my wisdom teeth without anesthesia, learning. And at one point, and I don't remember it was Ravensbrück, somebody pulled my teeth, yeah.

Q: [inaudible]

A: For instance, when we arrived in Ravensbrück, we were subjected to the medical exam. We had to be stripped naked in front of the men there and put on the chair with legs up, I never saw this. They were looking for valuables, and -- and they were laughing because we were virgins, few of us there. This -- it was very humiliating -- humiliating, degrading experience, that she wouldn't want to hear, and she wanted to spare me, le -- don't think about it. When I had bad dream, don't -- get away from. Til today she cannot stand my -- she feels sometime that I am too pessimistic, that I have bad moments, and she calls every night. Every single night. And no matter, even if we had argument, which we do, she ends up with I love you. Because she once said, I never want to be sorry that I never said to my mother I love you when she was here. That some people say it's too late, I should have told my mother this and this. We are friends as well as mother and daughter, and that is wonderful.

Q: Yeah. I have to change the tape again. This --

End of Tape Two, Side A

Beginning Tape Two, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Blanka Rothschild. This is tape number two, side B. So we just talked about your daughter.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And your very close relationship to her. It just occurred to me that in a sense that you have not recreated, but -- but cre -- created something close to the relationship that you had with your own mother, and your grandmother. And now you have very close relationship with your daughter, and it -- one child, you were one child, too. It's an interesting progression, and your grandchild is very close --

A: Very close. As matter of fact, she was here this weekend, spent with us, went with her Papa to the zoo, and here -- and Nana makes what she likes to eat, and we have be --

Q: Nana and --

A: Nana and Papa.

Q: Nana, that's you.

A: Yes. Very, very close relationship. As -- my relation with my mother was more formal than my daughter and myself. We are more friends. Where with my mother there was a -- a -- some formality, some respect, which here in the United States is a l -- sometimes a little absent. I sometimes wouldn't dare to approach my mother in a manner that my daughter will come to me. However, we very freely express the love for one another, and my daughter calls me nightly, saying I love you, Mom. And I'll say I love you, no matter how angry I can be at her. So -- and this is the closeness. My mother-in-law -- my mother, for instance, prior to the outbreak of the war, was being courted by a -- a physician, because my dad passed away couple of years. And she tried to keep me still very, very young. She used to come home in the evening,

and she'd say, is the child asleep, and I was 14. So th-this didn't happen with my daughter and me. That -- that was a little bit different.

Q: Well, that was a different age, and a different world --

A: Yes.

Q: -- still, it is a very close --

A: Oh yes, very close fami -- yes, absolutely. This -- this is as -- as I said previously, this is my -- my solid background that -- the basis that gave me that push to survive and to live and to continue.

Q: So how was survival in America, then? You continued to work? You had a daughter, what -- where -- where -- where are we? We are now in --

A: When I got married.

Q: Yeah, but when did you get married?

A: December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1949.

Q: In '49.

A: It's going to be 50 years this December. And we got married on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December because he had day off on Christmas, and we had no money, so there was very -- just right. I remember a small, little detail, we went to the store to look for a wedding band, and the clerk said which one would you like, and I said, I would like the cheapest. Yes, because it didn't matter to me.

Q: It's -- it's lovely though. It's a small, delicate -- delicate band.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: So then the 50's approached.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you feel -- wa -- di -- do you remember when you began to feel comfortable in this country, or in your identity as American?

A: The beginning was tough. I still had my European way of thinking. My upbringing. The -- certain things bothered me. I --

Q: Like what, example?

A: Sometimes there are bra -- they were abrasive, the Americans. I used to go to the subway, and I used to get up and give my seat away, and people thought I was crazy, but I was brought up this way. I couldn't understand otherwise. There were young kids spread around with the legs sticking out, they wouldn't dream of getting up. I couldn't under -- this. In my mind, I criticized this. I ate differently, I used my fork and knife differently. I was different. It took me time. Not that -- funny part is I learned to eat chicken drumstick with my hand now, and I think it's very comfortable. I really like it. But I wouldn't dare to do it at home. No, the beginning was tough. And the lack of the -- the knowledge of the language makes it very tough. And then you see people who even were kind towards the newcomers, still called us uh -- these are the -- they don't know much, they're from Poland, what do they know? And I thought to myself, they don't really know me. They don't know my potential, and to them I was -- I was just the newcomer, a displaced person. What is a displaced person? A person who was chased away from somewhere and came here in

order to rebuild their life. But that person, even though may not use your language yet, or your customs, can be equal, or sometimes even maybe superior to the people who criticize her. So the beginning wasn't easy.

Q: Did you feel that Americans knew about -- w-were they knowledgeable about the Holocaust, especially what survivors had gone through?

A: Nobody who is not walking in the shoes can understand fully what has happened. You have to suffer to understand somebody else suffering. My -- my experience with the family, for instance, with their daughter, she was minimizing everything, and I was -- I -- I wouldn't talk about my experiences, because I felt that I created a disruption in the family by my coming there. I didn't feel comfortable. I wanted to be on my own. So my beginning was difficult, un-until I went back to New Jersey and started working. And then I got married. Even after I got married, my English wasn't -- getting better, not as fluent as it is now, I am more articulate with the passage of time because I made my business to learn the language properly. And I will never get rid of my accent, but I will speak correctly, hopefully. I don't say don't, he don't, I mean, like, like, you know, you know. I try to avoid this, and I can see this in my own family, but th-this is something that makes me me.

Q: You should never lose your accent. When -- when did things get a little easier for you then?

A: Well, when I had my child, it wasn't easy. I was very happy because I had the child, and I wanted a daughter the worst way. I was so partial to it that sometimes it

scared me, because the doctor said I should -- if I attempt to have a child, I shouldn't have -- try again, because of my health. So I said, oh, if there is any power, anything -- I wanted a daughter because a daughter usually is closer to mother than a son. And when I had a daughter, I was absolutely in seventh heaven. At that time my husband worked nights because he had 15 percent bonus for working nights. We lived in New York, and I lived on this fourth floor. And of course my pains came in the middle of the night when he wasn't home. So we had prepared a telephone near my -- telephone -- maternity [indecipherable] sort of, and I called him, and the man downstairs came, he says, come down. I says what do you mean come down, I'm -- I'm -- I'm -- I have pains. I -- I had to walk down with my little piece of luggage down. It was a plain man with a car, who made himself maternity -- and he took me to the hospital in the middle of the night. I walked with this little luggage, with the pain, and they ask me, are you married? Because who comes alone to have a baby in the middle of the night. So I said, what do you think? So this was funny. And of course, after I had my -- my daughter, I was absolutely deliriously happy. And I totally devoted myself to bringing her up. And the result is good. It paid off. And we are very close. We share many interests. Well, they are diverse. For instance, our taste in literature is a little different. And I adopted some love of the new music, because after all I had a teenager home, a girl, so I could tolerate The Beatles, for instance. But when the new groups started coming, I couldn't take this, quite. You know, it -- an-and especially

now, it -- it's a lot of vulgarity and -- and in the movements and in the -- in the lyrics, so-called. And this is -- this is totally u-undesirable.

Q: When you began to make friends here, were they other survivors, or was it a -- a range of people?

A: No, strangely enough, when I moved to New York City, because I got married on west coast, we -- we decided to come back because my husband's mother became ill with cancer, and I said, I lost my family, and I love your mother, we have to go back to New York. And I was pregnant. We arranged rides from city to city, sharing expenses until we reached -- reached New York. And we got an apartment at this walk-up in the Bronx, and I see my mother-in-law deteriorating, but she did see her granddaughter born. And I loved her. I respected her. What else can --

Q: I asked -- I asked about friends.

A: About friends, yes. We moved to this building in the Bronx, and there were no survivors that I knew in that building, but we became then the really good friends, because we were in the same, at that time, little lower middle class financially people, but with the same hopes and aspirations. We wanted our children to be educated, and th -- to have a decent upbringing. I learned how to play Mahjong. And I played Mahjong with the ladies. And they were one Italian lady, Connie, whom I adore, and three Jewish ladies, one in my building, two across the street. It was safe to walk out on the street in the evening. When I took my baby in the carriage, we walked to that park in the evening because it was hot, there was no air conditioning,



and the apartment was s-stifling, and nobody was afraid because the times were different. And we -- I met the other mothers with carriages there. And the -- it wasn't easy, but it was a happy time, because I had what I wanted. Of course, financially was a little difficult. We never hit if off really, but it -- it -- it -- it didn't matter to me that much because I saw what can happen. We had so much and we lost it overnight. So, the priorities changed. What was important was to have good family and enough to eat and be dressed and go to s -- schools are free here, libraries are free here, which is wonderful. People don't know, there are so many free. We used to go to Lewison stadium those days for free concerts. I took the baby in the blanket and we were sitting like in a amphitheater, around, and listen to concerts. It was free, it was wonderful. So if you partake of what the city could offer you, it is not the amount of money that people try to amass more, the greed is so enormous. They never have enough. My priority was not to amassing wealth, but wealth of cultural things, of good life, and I hope that in some measure, I achieved it.

Q: Since you mentioned The Beatles, let's just say we are in the 60's somewhere.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Which events out of the 60's, say, remain as events that were -- had an impact on your life? Can you -- whether here in the U.S., or in Israel.

A: The Seven Day War, you mean?

Q: I don't know, anything that --

A: Well, as I previously s -- mentioned, I am not religious, however, I have a strong feel of Judaic tradition in me, because it is -- it is ethical, it's moral and it is misunderstood. And I thought that my people deserved to have their homeland after f -- millennia of suffering. And the creation of the state of Israel meant an -- a lot to me. I was deliriously happy when Israel came into bene -- being, because it gave home and hope to countless people who didn't have it. I remember one event on -- at Madison Square Garden, there was a big gathering on -- that was on the eve of the Six Day War, I don't remember the date, but Golda Meir was speaking, and I got there in, with a friend of mine. And they were holding that Israeli flag and people were just throwing money in it. And I had very little, but whatever I had, I put it in, because it was an -- I -- I was elated that the people deserved it, they should have it, and -- the homeland. So, I myself could not fit into the life there, because you have to be strong, you have to be healthy. My life I made in United States, I'm very happy here. I became an excellent citizen, my husband and I, because we are civically mind people. We are volunteers; my husband in hospitals four days a week, and I with my speaking and helping, and I was a school mother. I went on every trip with this class. I was always he- helping. Of course, without remuneration, just because I thought it's necessary. And -- you know. Yes?

Q: I -- I want to talk about in -- in -- in depth, really, about your work a little later. For the time being, I would just like to ask you t-two more questions. Did you go to Israel?

A: I went once.

Q: When was that?

A: After the Six Day War. Six Day War, it was -- when the wall --

Q: So it was [indecipherable]

A: -- in Jerusalem was liberated. Now, the trip to Israel was, my husband had a sister in Israel, who was sent by the parents prior -- in the 1930's, early 1930's. So we went to his sister. And she had three daughters [indecipherable] were married and the -- the -- the sons-in-law took us with the car, we went to Jerusalem. This I have to say, I have to mention this. For somebody who is not religious, when I walked in Jerusalem, this was one of the biggest impacts on my life. When I touched the wall, something happened to me, because it was like a link in history. I touched the wall that for so many years was important to my history. I remember my grandfather having the sign for Jerusalem in his room, because every Jew's hope was someday to be in Jerusalem. I walked the streets that Christ allegedly walked, the 14 station of cross, and something happened to me. I was walking on the cobbled streets that Jesus walked. It was important to me, historically. I went to the Mosque, to the Grand Mosque. I took my shoes off, paid my respects. I went there and I went down and I saw the huge rack that was supposed to be the sacrificial -- he was supposed to sacrifice his son there, Isaac, and God stopped him. So all these things that you read - - I have books on -- on all the world's religions here, because I was interested, the impact of Jerusalem, it was very deep, emotionally, spiritually, and -- and I thought

to myself, if people only would know -- all three great religions are meet in this little place, if we could learn how to get along. The Arabs say Salaam, and we say Shalom, it's so much alike. Both are Semitic. Yugoslavia, all these people, it -- it's religion divides them, why? Why?

Q: Did you see the Yad Vashem, too?

A: Of course.

Q: What -- what was that whole experience? Did you learn something that you didn't know?

A: Yes, I -- I learned so -- a very powerful lesson, I'll tell you what. Yad Vashem, when I went in, I was in the gallery, af -- that was only once, and so many years ago, and I looked in the somber, dark cham -- chamber, with the names of the camps. I -- I broke down, I cried, because I thought of the people who did not survive. And when I left Yad Vashem, and I opened the door, and I walked out, and that was very sunny day, and there was this street with the trees, and -- called the Avenue of Righteous Gentiles, with the name of the Righteous Gentiles underneath each tree, this was my greatest impact of Israel, because I was not aware, up through that moment, that there were Gentiles who did help. This was the very first time. Nobody told me about that before, I don't know why. That people did help, and people paid the supreme sacrifice, that people cared. I thought nobody did. And this, in itself, motivated me to speak and to mention this fact in most of my speeches, that there were people who

were righteous, that there were people who cared, in spite of everything. It was tremendous impact. I always mention this.

Q: Excuse me. Let's talk about your work then. When did you begin -- when did you begin to speak out publicly in a more cons -- sort of in a more concentrated fashion?

A: Well, I became -- I became more reassured in my English, and I -- and my daughter also said that I have something that I should share with people, that a -- maybe -- she calls this a gift, that I am able to communicate and impart of myself, and -- and present in such a way that it will be not offending to some people, but rather, instructional. And I try to do my very best to -- to fulfill this. I go -- I used to go to every place that ask me, anybody who was willing to listen, to schools, and churches, and public -- not really public, but groups of people that wanted to hear me, and I was very happy. And when I started to see the results and the letters that I was getting, this became the impetus even more so, that I was able to reach some of them.

Q: What -- what did people say? Say a little bit more about what kind of different groups you went to, and what -- what were some of the responses that you got.

A: Well, as an example, I can give you for instance the Navy intelligence unit. This unit is comprised of very young people. And I always tell it -- I have to repeat myself that if they're in intelligence unit, they must be fairly intelligent. I have to say this because -- but they are also, at the same time, are very gung-ho, very -- how did you let yourself to -- to go this way, and to be done to you. They cannot perceive that the circumstances under which we were, were so outrageous, we were not only

persecuted and beaten and starved by the Germans, but the Polish population was sort of enjoying it. Helping, and not helping us. We tried to -- to -- if we could get a gun smuggled to ghetto. Me -- I understood first in Yad Vashem that there were some Polish people who did help, but up til that moment, I did not know it. There's a whole wall of people names that did help, and I was in a shock, because I didn't know that. My love was concentrated on the country of Denmark because what -- what they did, as a country, as a country. They saved about 95 percent of their Jewish population. And I -- each time -- in San Diego there is a little place in a Balboa park that has that little -- a Danish place, and German place, and Polish place with the flag. On Sunday they're open. Whenever I walk to the little Danish place, and there is a book that you write, I say thank you, Denmark. They don't know why and who and what, but it makes me feel good.

Q: So you are trying to communicate to these little macho young people that --

A: I try to communicate and you have no idea what a tremendous response I've got.

Now this was, I would say from the entire group, there was one Jewish woman lieutenant, and one half-Jewish. That's it. They were magnificent, all of them. They listen intently, they made sort of mental notes. They ask question after my presentation. They listen to my explanation. I told them, yes, it's easy to say, but the circumstances were such, we were completely helpless. I said, do you know how many people committed suicide because they couldn't do anything? The world didn't listen. They -- there was a Polish representative who -- who reached United States,

Jan Karski, he tried to tell them. They didn't want to listen, they didn't want to believe. So we were -- if the war would have been cut by a year, they could save God knows how many people. They never bombed the trucks that were leading to Auschwitz. So --

Q: Did you tell them about s-small acts of resistance, as -- such as your -- your own?

A: I did -- my -- absolutely. This -- this was a hit, because this sabotage, in their eyes, was a tremendous act of courage, which it was, because we risked death at every moment. But at that point we didn't care anyway, because we thought we will die anyway.

Q: This is a story, just for our listeners, a story that Blanka has told in the videotaped interview, when she was working in an aircraft factory, when she committed acts of sabotage, really.

A: Ye-Yes. While -- excuse me, while I was riveting -- joining parts of the wings of the p -- airplanes, I noticed a small notation in a Russian script, done by the Russian prisoners of war who worked at night shift, i-instructing us what to do and how to sabotage. When we joined the two parts, to leave a little bit opening at every third or fourth rivet, hoping that the force of air will force this rivet out. And this was tremendous, tremendous thing [indecipherable] us, and -- for us, and the -- the young intelligence officers were absolutely s -- mesmerized by this story.

Q: Yeah, we should -- unfortunately we should stop here. And this is the end of tape two, side B, interview with Blanka Rothschild.

End of Tape Two, Side B



Beginning Tape Three, Side A

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Blanka Rothschild. This is tape number three, side A. So, I just wanted to follow-up a little bit on the response from the Naval intelligence unit. Just maybe elaborate a little bit more on what they said, and -- and --

A: Well, when I spoke, it was very quiet, they were very intent on listening, they were very polite. And when I finished, I've seen few tears, I must say I did. Because they were -- majority were men, but there a couple of women lieutenants, too. And then there was a question answer period, and the qu -- two questions which very frequently come up were asked there as well. And one of them was how did we permit this to happen to us. And of course, the answer is very incomprehensible to them, but I try my very best to tell them that the circumstances under which we were kept completely prevented us from doing anything. There were a couple of revolts in some camps, I believe, small, that the people were able to get some guns, some ammunition, and even the Warsaw ghetto had revolt. But in Łódź ghetto, for instance, where I was, it was impossible. We were surrounded by very anti-Semitic population. We could not get any gun for the life of it. We were -- as a matter of fact, the people were rejoicing seeing our terrible situation. So -- and we were starved. Now, if you are starved, you don't have strength to pick up anything, how can you fight? That's why people were committing suicides, a lot of them. Besides the spirit was completely broken when you saw members of your family and children being

taken away, and knew -- by that time you already knew that they were going to places where they were disposed of like a -- like a vermin. The second question that very often I am asked is if I can forgive. I believe that I even spoke about it on my videotape, and this question has two prongs. The people who committed these horrible acts, and destroyed human beings, murder human beings, no I cannot forgive them, and I never will. But the other people, the other German people, who did not participate, who were born after the war, who help, like Jehovah Witnesses, there is nothing to forgive. They did not do anything wrong. So as I said, there are two parts of this question.

Q: When you go to -- you go to other place, to schools for instance, what -- ho-how do you sort of experience a response there?

A: Well, when I go to schools, I try to tailor myself to the audience that I'm speaking to. If I am in a class of let's say, junior high students, who are young children, I always tell them to close their eyes in the beginning of my presentation, because what they see in front of them is an elderly lady who has some problems walking, and they cannot relate too much to her. So when I ask them to close their eyes and try for a moment to visualize me as they are now, a-as I once was. I was a young girl, and I had shared the same interests as they do now. I was thinking of my friends, and I was thinking of boys, and of secrets. So I was young, and I was fairly good looking, and I didn't have any other worries as -- if I g-got enough weekly allowance to buy myself something. But of course, now I'm older. So I -- I try to sort of bring them a

little bit up to my level, and lower myself to their level and I go from there. So when I speak about us as young girls in ghetto, they try to -- try to bring this to the previous saying, that oh yes, I was once young, and how did I got into the situation? They listen intently, and they ask question afterwards, and they write me letters. I'm a recipient of many, many hu-hundreds of letters, some of them which I sent to the archives, to the museum.

Q: In the end of this interview, maybe you can read a few excerpts from such letters. I have some, yeah -- not -- not right now, maybe.

A: All right.

Q: But -- but later on, so --

A: All right. There is a Catholic school here in San Diego, Saint Madeline's, and I spoke. I was invited there three times already, to different classes. And I said to the teacher, but I'm repeating myself. She said, but what you think the teachers do every year, they repeat themselves. And it's a different class. As a matter of fact, some lay-sisters came from other classes, were standing at the door to listen, and -- and the receptionist always [indecipherable] they -- they -- they ask questions, they bright, they have -- they show that they have good schooling, and this is very rewarding to me, because if I can reach couple of them, then th -- I accomplished something.

Q: Do you think the impact, or the impression of a survivor in -- in person, talking about it, is a different one than reading it from -- i-in books or seeing films?

A: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. And this is why I drive myself even though physically it's getting exceedingly diffing -- difficult for me to do so, because I am disabled. But I -- I -- I still try and -- when I tell them that they will be able in the future to say to some -- maybe their own children, I heard the story from the mouth of actual survivor, not from a book. And there is an impact there. And the children, especially the -- the brighter ones, they do respond to it. They react. And that makes me happy.

Q: Can you think of an example?

A: Yes, I can think of the example of -- which is the letter that --

Q: Yeah [indecipherable]

A: -- from the high school.

Q: I -- I looked for the --

A: And th-this was a girl in high school, in a very affluent part of San Diego, who has written me.

Q: Which one is it, this one?

A: Yes. And my --

Q: Oh, your glasses?

A: I had them --

Q: [indecipherable] they're just looking for -- over there.

A: Yes. The girl who has written me, and I thought that was very significant. As a matter of fact I sent a copy of it to Dr. Ringleheim in the museum. "Dear Mrs.

Rothschild. Thank you for coming to our school and telling us about the way it was for you in the World War II. It meant a lot to me. My views on white supremacy and hating people of other ethnic backgrounds were changed. Your presentation helped me realize a lot of things that I never even thought of. I felt terrible to think my boyfriend of a year and a half, worshipped the man, the same kind of a man that broke your back, or hit your grandmother. I'm very sorry for many things I have said and done. I feel ashamed, ashamed for the SS tattooed on my hand. There are a lot of young people such as me who never even stopped to think of the real terrors. I know you made a great impression on my mind, and I had stopped to think of the things that I have said and done. Sincerely, C. Hale." Now, the letter is grammatically very poorly written, especially for a high school student in an affluent area. However, I made a dent in her way of thinking. I made her think, and that is extremely important to me. She thought well enough of it to sit down and write to me. That means that she -- she some -- some sort of changed occurred in her. Now, even s -- even small change. If she asks me to please continue speaking to people like her, that means that I have done some good.

Q: You have spoken now for about 30 years?

A: About, just about.

Q: About [inaudible]

A: Yes.

Q: What is the price that you pay for that role?

A: The price that I pay is my health. It is getting extremely difficult for me, especially when I have to travel. But I do not want to s-s -- keep that occasion. If I'm invited -- for instance, I was invited to Duke University twice already. And I went the first time a-absolutely on my cost, because I do not charge for my speaking, I feel this is my obligation, my obligation to -- to those who cannot speak for themselves. The second time I was invited, and I was -- I was provided with a fare and a hotel, which helped. But of course, nothing for the speaking. And I received a booklet, beautifully done, because I spoke for two days. The first day it was in a large auditorium which was filled to capacity. Besides the students, there was also some contingent of faculty and ministers, couple ministers. And the kids who came little bit late, were sitting on the aisles, on the floor, because all the seats were taken. And the second day I spoke in a classroom. This is a special course on Holocaust at Duke Institute at this year. And the teacher of the course, Miss [indecipherable] who is Polish, was kind enough to send me a booklet comprised of the letters, he-headed by her own letter, and in which she said that she gave the students a task of instead of a final, to write a letter responding to Mrs. Rothschild. And I have the letters, and this just very special to me, and a copy of it I send -- she sent me two copies, and the second copy I sent to Dr. Ringleheim at the museum.

Q: Yeah, at the end of this interview we will read a -- a few excerpts from -- from that booklet. But let me ask you also, when I ask you about the price, does it get

easier to speak about it as the years go on, or do you still have a -- bad nights before or after, and bad dreams?

A: I -- I usually have, no matter how many years I will speak, there is apprehension before I go, because I don't know what kind of audience or reception I will receive, and there is sleeplessness that is usually associated with it, and it -- it bothers me a great deal. And then after I speak, and I come home, even though it was very good reception, I always have some thoughts that I omitted something important, that I should have said this or that, and that was of major importance. But there is a sense of accomplishment.

Q: Have you ever mistrusted your memory?

A: I made couple of mistakes, even on my video. I tried to -- to tell Dr. Joan at the very end, when I speak of my liberation, on the interviewer asked me the day I was liberated, I said, April 26, 1944, and it was 1945. That's one thing. And another one was oh -- of -- I get mixed up with my mother. I -- I just cannot say the right -- maybe this is this -- the terrible pain that I have in my heart. And also, once I made a mistake on --in my speaking, when I talked about Bittenberg, which is the city that I slaved in Arado airplane factory, and I said that the city had the church on which door the Martin Luther affixed the 1905 thesis. And in one speech I said Martin Luther King. And they couldn't take that King out, because it was too late.

Q: Well, we have corrected it here. Do you do anything to -- just to -- to ha -- to stimulate your memory? Is it -- is it fading, or is it still very strong, except for now and then?

A: A cert -- no, certain things are very deeply engraved on my memory, that I will always repeat it, and they stay with me. But many things slowly start fading away. And that's why it's so important that I did speak for all these years. Yes, some things I -- as I said previously, I try to erase from my memory, like the faces of my tormentors. But some -- dates, for instance, I don't remember. And I don't remember what I wore when I left that camp. I called my friend in New York who was also in a camp, she's, don't you remember? I said no. Then I -- I ask somebody about something and she said, Blanka, but I was with you. And I didn't remember that. So the age takes over. That's why I'm speeding with my speaking.

Q: Did you ever go back to Germany, to Poland?

A: I was in Poland only after I was liberated, and once I left after the bad reception, I decided never, ever to come back to Poland. I was back in Germany couple of times, because the German government recognized that they did impair my health quite badly. They crippled me, and the condition is worsening with age, so a couple of times I was granted a so-called cour. I was in a resort that the doctor treated me, and I received treatments, however what they gave me was not sufficient to cover all the expenses like flight and the hotel, so I had to stop going to Germany for that reason. The treatments were wonderful, much superior to the ones that I'm getting here. I'm



going now to, so far, couple of times to Canestoga spa, which has some bath, and they are not quite the same quality and value. But it does help me, so I do go there.

Q: You never received compensation for slave labor?

A: Not so far, I -- I'm receiving a *gesundheitshan*. I'm receiving a m-monthly rent for my broken health, but now there is a class action for the slave labor and I filled the papers, and I hope that I will be able to -- after all, I worked in Łódź ghetto for a few years, in a -- is -- not factory, but this was establishment. I was working making sweaters for Germans, they needed for the winters. And then we were working on some cement place, making blocks for the buildings that were being destroyed. And of course in the airplane factory until the liberation in the camp.

Q: When you went back to Germany, what was your impression then of the country of the Germans? Was there something that stays with you? Conversations you have had, things you have seen?

A: Well, when I went there, I used to go to the spa. In the spa there were many people who were coming for their vacation, and they were at the -- their very best, at leisure. And if they ever ask me anything -- not a person that I met knew about anything, so they were quite innocent. They did not know about the atrocities, they did not hear about the camps. Anyway, the people that I met never, with the exception of the old lady in Berlin after the war, who admitted that she was Nazi and so were all her friends, the doctor and the personnel in the spa were very nice. After all, they were being paid for it, and the people that I met there were friendly with me,

but then I met couple of Dutch people there who come in for the same treatment. And there were a couple of people even from Israel that I met there, and the local population I -- I -- I made friends with a man who made me brace, because I have to wear back brace, I just put it on. And in the beginning he -- his reaction was not too friendly, but after awhile when he got to know me, he became very friendly. He and his wife visited us in United States. He made me brace, for which he was paid by the German government, and he made me a brace as a gift.

Q: Do you think his original unfriendliness had -- he was just a grumpy person, or did it have something to do with who you were? Not you as a person, but that you were Jewish?

A: I really couldn't put my finger on it. He was not too intelligent man, but he was a very good businessman. So he knew how to -- how to work for the government because he was doing this type of work for war amputees and -- and the braces, not too many people nowadays know this. There's no industry for making this type of braces, so he was just about one of very few in all of Germany, and he cashed on it. In the beginning why he wasn't too friendly, well I was somebody strange, and maybe he thought that I resented him. I had to go to him from Bad Kissingen to Schweinhold on train, but the next time when he saw me and he -- he met me, and he sort of liked me, he came with his car to pick me up, and spare me the ride on a train.

Q: Nice. Did you have any anti -- did you hear any anti-Semitic remarks anywhere?

A: Well, wa -- once. People were careful with me when they knew that I was Jewish, but once I had an incident because the couple did not know I was Jewish. And that was in a café and we were sitting at the same table, and they admired me, I'm -- to them I was somebody from America. And they said, how do you like Germany? And I said it's very nice. And they said, well it's very nice, but too many Jewish people are coming back. And at that point I excused them from my table. At the same token I spoke -- my husband was with me the last time -- couple of times because I needed escort, I couldn't travel by myself. My husband and I were sitting in the park, speaking of course, English. And an elderly gentleman with wife were sitting nearby and start the conversation with us in German. And he became a friend. He was there for his health. And we went to the cafés together, and he was a very charming man, and he -- when we left for the States, they brought us very nice gift. And we exchanged Christmas greetings.

Q: You also told me, and not on the tape yet, but I would like you to talk about it, that you had invited younger German people to your home in New York. Maybe you could say something about that. When --

A: Yes.

Q: -- when was that, and what --

A: When I lived in New York City, prior to being on the west coast, we lived for 20 years in the city, we -- I contacted the -- The Quaker Society, American Friend Society, and I ask them to send a couple of students for a holiday for a dinner,

because I wanted people from different countries to learn about us, and I thought that one on one, it's the best way to learn about people. And one day the lady from The Friend Society called me and asked me if I would mind if she would send a German girl. And I said, by all means send her to me, let her see me as I am. And she and a Dutch girl came together to our house. She was in the beginning very shy, and very sort of frightened. But as the things progressed, and the dinner, we became quite friendly, and she left as a friend, and that was an accomplishment. Yes, I think that the young people should try to reach and meet, maybe some survivors, or people who -- whose family suffered to -- to form a common bond. It's very important when people try to understand each other. After all, we are all individuals, we are all different. We have different points of view, religions, cultural background, but we are all human beings, so if we try to overcome our prejudices, and reach a hand and listen, then the world would be much better, much better off.

Q: Do you still have hope?

A: Ah, that's such a tricky s -- question.

Q: Honestly now.

A: Honestly I -- I am -- I am at times pessimistic, because I don't see much progress in many parts of the world. I'm afraid that the human race did not learn the powerful lessons that Holocaust and the previous genocides provided. They are still going on around the globe. And it's not only Yugoslavia, but it's in Rwanda, it's in Sri Lanka, it's in yugo -- it's in Ireland. Bo-Both people are Christian, only different

denomination and they hate one another. I -- this is the greatest divisor of people, religion. And if people would really, truly were religious in their hearts, they would find a way to -- to find this common bond, and the link. But truthfully, when I see the situation in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, I -- I am not too optimistic, sadly.

Q: This is the end of tape three, side A, interview with Blanka Rothschild.

End of Tape Three, Side A

Beginning Tape Three, Side B

Q: This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Blanka Rothschild. This is tape number three, side B. So after the sort of skeptical statement that you have just made, maybe we can continue with some hope afterwards, because we are looking at a booklet now. Maybe you should say something about that --

A: Yes.

Q: -- and then we'll read a few ex-excerpts.

A: Yes, on -- my last speaking engagement was at Duke University, and I spoke twice, one day to the third auditorium of student and some faculty and ministers, and the next day I spoke before a class which was instituted this year, specifically on Holocaust. The class is small si -- consisting of a teacher and 16 students, and this teacher was kind enough to send me a lovely, bound booklet with some of the -- with the letters. And she said she had high expectation for the class and student, and she worried, but eventually the class -- she was afraid that the class

become desensitized by the narratives of horror. But eventually she saw the transformation of students to deeper understanding. And she said, "This is the moment that all teachers dream of, and I knew that the class had been successful. It was your visit and your important message that coincided with this success. The student had already begun to bring the Holocaust, the human capacity for genocide, and the responsibility of the bystander into discussion about current social injustices around the world. They had started to question their own complicity. They asked what they could do for Kosovo, for Rwanda, for East Timor, for those suffering on our own soil, and it was your talk, your willingness to speak of your losses and to testify for those who are forever silent. Your dedication to social action that solidified this response from the students. It was invaluable for all students, ranging from those who had never studied the Holocaust to your own granddaughter, to hear a survivor bear witness. All of the students posted lengthy notes about your visit on our email news -- newsgroup." And I will read a couple of excerpts.

Q: Yeah ga -- about five or so, because they are really important, I think.

A: Yes, by the way, they -- they endeared themselves to me because they all called me Nana, as my granddaughter does, who is part of this class. "Dear Nana, some people come into our lives and quickly live -- leave. Some stay for awhile, leave footprints on our hearts, and we are never, ever the same." This is how she started her response. Maggie Gandhi wrote, "Mrs. Rothschild made clear not only her appreciation for the fact that we are studying the Holocaust, but also channe --

challenged us to spread what we have learned to future generations. Therefore, I'm going to take from this class, more than the images provoked by any one passage or movie clip, are the words of Mrs. Rothschild. The challenge that we not forget what we have learned, and that we bear some of her burden by passing our knowledge onto our children and peers, so the stories of the Holocaust are never forgotten." Another student wrote, "I had such a great time talking to her, not only about her Holocaust experiences, but about life in general. I think that it took so much courage and fortitude for her to speak for over 30 years about -- 20 years, about her horrific experience during the war. I just want to finish by saying that I admire Alexis's grandmother so much for not only coming to talk to us, but for just volunteering to talk to anyone who is willing to listen. I also admire her because she has such an air of dignity and pride that surrounds her. I am definitely a better person for having met her." There's so many. [indecipherable] Let's see now, I can't find -- "In our final meeting the students presented me with a gift. They gave me a picture from -- frame engraved with the words, we will remember, April 14, 1999. Inside was a photo of you and I with the entire class, taken on the day of -- of your visit. For me this gift is a lasting monument, a commitment that the members of col -- Holocaust testimonies will remain vigilant, strive for social justice, and educate future generations about the Holocaust." This is what -- she had it -- her letter with, but I wanted Melina.

Q: Take your time. Just look for the ones that you really want to -- to read.

A: This letter I'll -- I'll read an excerpt from, is from a girl from a -- Kosovo. Dear Nana, I'm writing this letter to thank you for coming to Duke on Wednesday. I -- although I was unable to attend your formal talk, I enjoyed hearing your stories from an intimate perspective. They're extremely vivid accounts of your experiences in the concentration camp, and encouraged me to think more about the situation in regards to my relatives in Kosovo. I am sure that those who have heard you speak will agree that you have made a tremendous impact on their lives. I will never forget being moved to tears by your words and emotion. I find it extremely fortunate that I was able to hear your experiences. Again, I thank you so much for coming. Until then, to your health and happiness. Melina." And this is from my granddaughter. "Dear Nana, thank you for doing something for me that forever will be part of my memories at Duke. Your speech was wonderful and inspirational as us -- always. The presence that you have while speaking to o -- strangers, bearing your soul and revealing some of your most painful experiences, astounds me. As I have said before, your family can rest in peace knowing that you told and continue to tell their story. You are -- you have touched many lives with your testimony, but you have touched me because of the person you ca -- became -- become after the war. Your generosity, love and strength are your greatest assets and you have taught me well, as I now enter my senior year of Duke and begin to look for the road I will travel next, I will keep all that you have told me in my heart. Thank you again for coming to Duke and for sharing yourself so unselfishly. I love you. Always, Alexis."



Q: How does that make you feel when you read that?

A: Wonderful. Wonderful. Th-There's so many of them here, it's -- well, but Joan has it.

Q: Yeah. So you -- our listeners who would like to read more of those can find it at the Holocaust Museum.

A: Yes, the booklet is -- I -- the teacher was thoughtful enough to send me two copies, one for me and one for the museum specifically, and I forwarded it to Dr. rongar -- Ringelheim.

Q: Well, since we are with the museum, let me follow up with a question about the museum. How do you -- how do you see the role of the Holocaust Museum in -- in Washington, D.C.? How do you feel about what -- what they are doing, or what they have done already?

A: Well, I express myself, I feel very eloquently about it on my video. I -- I was absolutely delighted with the creation of this museum, because it is a tremendous tool, not only of showing people what has happened, but as a tool for educating people for the future, how to learn to get along. How to -- how to see things from the perspective of different human beings, people who went through it, people who did help, people who taught about it. The museum has testimonies of so many survivors, and they range from people who can hardly express themselves to people who are very articulate and who can just bare their soul, and try to teach the listeners, and open their eyes and ears and teach them the lessons.

Q: I've heard some survivors be quite critical, though, of the fact that this is not a museum solely dedicated to Jewish survivors. Ho-How do you feel about that?

A: No, I disagree strongly. I disagree because then it would defeat the purpose. If it would be only to perpetuate the Jewish Holocaust, it would be very parochial. I think that the museum is a warning and teaching experience for people of all persuasions all around the world, of all the people who can have the access to the museum. It is a morally and ethically marvelous tool, because it exposes people to -- not only to the evil, but also to the goodness. It exposes people to the teaching of the survivors like myself, what did they learn, and what did they want to tell the future generations? Because we as survivors are getting old, and we are dying out, and we will be the last ones who will be heard from.

Q: Do you think there can ever be too much education about the Holocaust? Because some people are also a little fearful that too much quote, fixation on the Holocaust takes away from more -- fr-from other aspects of Jewish culture.

A: I don't think so. I disagree. This is my point of view. You can never take away from the culture by teaching people how to get along with other people. It is this -- my individual understanding, and I hope by -- that people who will listen to me will agree with me, that the museum, it was created for the purpose of teaching people to avoid in the future, genocides not only of Jewish people, but all the people everywhere on this earth. Unfortunately, we have the bad examples occurring now throughout the world. And this museum teaches people how to -- how to understand

this, and how to avoid. How can the museum be a -- a -- o-only preaching about the Jewish genocide? There's genocide now going on.

Q: D-Do you feel that there was a certain point in American history when people were beginning to be more interested and more knowledgeable about the Holocaust in -- in -- as -- as a whole? Was -- do you think there was a certain turning point, or -- yeah, well, that's the first point of my question.

A: I think that many of the survivors who became successful in their private lives were very instrumental in pushing the idea of creating this museum, and they were able to support it financially. And ever since that time -- there are other museums in different countries that are being spurred by the idea of the -- of the Washington Holocaust Museum.

Q: And how do you feel about sort of popular films and -- and sort of popular culture to -- representing the Holocaust?

A: Well, I'm not too fond of them because they could never really portray the true Holocaust. The movie "Holocaust" that was in three or four parts, was a -- a -- a fairy tale, absolutely pointless. On the other hand, "Schindler's List" was a teaching tool. I feel that Schindler deserved to be mentioned because no matter what his motives in the beginning were -- he was a businessman who wanted to cash in on, and make money. However, eventually, by seeing the injustice and the h-horror of the German authorities, he changed his mind and he became instrumental in saving people. So this fi-film I believe it -- it was worthwhile.

Q: Do you -- are you a part of a s-survivor group, or do you -- do you socialize with survivors?

A: Not really, because where I lived, I -- I have my few friends here who happen to be just American born friends, and not necessarily Jewish. I -- we have a writing class, we have a reading club, and I also play Bridge. I do not belong to the group which is very active in our city, of -- there is no -- no reason really, I just can't travel them and I -- I stay in touch with people who help me because I can't drive, they pick me up and take me with them.

Q: Is there anything that you would like to say to end this interview? I have asked you what I wanted you to ask -- what I wanted to ask you and --

A: As usual, my ending would be first thanking the interviewer for taking the time, and being very kind, and asking me all the questions and traveling here in the very hot day. And my philosophy is always the same, I try to persuade people to open their hearts, and open their ears, and thinking of -- that we are here on this earth, put on temporarily, and we should make the best of the time that is allotted to us. Why do we have to fight? What divides us? We all are of human race, no matter what color, what religious persuasion. We should concentrate on doing the very best to get along and to -- to divert our energy and resources to help eradicate the [indecipherable] that we have spread around the world.

Q: Unfortunately, I have just thought of one more question, and that's the very last --

A: That's ok -- that's all right.

Q: -- I promise. When you think back about the last 55 years, that's a long time, it's five and a half decades, is there something that you can say about that second life, if you will, that you have lived -- and are still living, of course.

A: Well -- well, my life as I would have thought when I was young and hope for the future, it's very different from the one I pictured for myself. For one thing I thought that I will go on with my education to -- to the -- to the nth degree because school was always my -- my favorite. And my health problems prevented me from it.

However, I taught myself English well enough to be able to speak about it. And I -- and I educated my daughter in the manner that I wanted to be educated myself. And the next generation, my granddaughter as well. So these 50 years, I am proud of what I did in my small measure, to -- to help. And I can see that the help is in the form of the letters that I receive from people who listen to me, and in the next generation, my daughter and my granddaughter, who are perpetuating my dream of good life and education and -- and being close to the family.

Q: Thank you very much. This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with branka -- Blanka Rothschild, and this is the end of tape three, side B.

End of Tape Three, Side B

Conclusion of Interview