

IMPORTANT

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NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

LIVING MEMORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

ERNA MEISSNER

interviewed by Katharine V A Thompson

F489, Side A

Interview with Mrs. Meissner, 29th September, 1989.

So Mrs. Meissner, could you tell me first of all when you were born and where you were born, and a little bit about your family and home background.

I was born in Prague actually, on the 9th of December 1921. But I was only born there, because my mother expected a difficult childbirth and so she went to the hospital in Prague to have a better care. Straight away after that, I spent all my childhood in Golecuv Jenikov. Golecuv Jenikov is a little town, I would say in my time about two thousand people living there, and it's about forty kilometers from Kolin, and probably I would say sixty, seventy, I don't exactly from Prague. And my parents had something, what we would call here a corner shop, a small corner shop. And I was the only child, because my mother couldn't have any more children. And in the same town there my grandparents lived. And my grandfather was a Rabbi, and he was an extremely wise, tolerant man, and I had a very happy childhood spending my time very often in their house, in my grandparents' house.

Was that your mother's or your father's...

My mother's father. His name was Moses Blan, B-L-A-N, and he was what I would call probably today a reform Jew, because I can tell you before say 1943, when I met the first Orthodox Jews in the camp, I didn't know anything about Orthodox Jews whatsoever. Probably, let's say (INAUDIBLE TWO WORDS - LAUGHING). And anyway, to go back to it. They lived there quite happily. My parents, I would think 1928, they bought a house, because before it was a rented accommodation where we lived, which was probably a mistake, because the economic crisis started, and they couldn't keep up with the payments of the mortgage, and at the end they got bankrupt and everything had to be sold as it usually is when something like this happened. And so they sold it, and then we moved, and that was in 1939, when we moved to Kolin. I started to go to the elementary school, 'obecná skola, in Golecuv Jenikov, and then I went to the Bürgerschule there as well. And finished that, and wanted to study, wanted to go to Gymnasium but my parents couldn't allow it and didn't want it. Anyway, a lot of discussions at home and disagreement, I went and started at the Handelsakademie.

The school you went to, was that a Jewish school, or...

No, these were all...just usual schools, Czech schools I would say. I was for most of the time, I would say the whole time, the only Jewish child in the school, and the only Jewish student at Handelsakademie. But I must say the school, the Czech schools at that time were very patriotic, Czech patriotic. You know, if you consider that there was Hitler already in power in Germany and so on; and I would say some times nationalistic, very anti German. But very little anti Semitism. Very little. I think it was so small it's nearly negligible. And the same actually applied to the Handelsakademie. When I started to go there I had one of the happiest times of my life. I studied well, and there was some...

What did you study?

I did Handelsakademie, the usual...the whole subjects, like, you had the whole curriculum at Handelsakademie. I took my Maturita, Czech language, German language, French language, commercial science, commercial law, and...(SPEAKS IN CZECH...Nauka o zbožú)...the science about merchandise, this is how I can translate it, which is not right. (LAUGHING)

It gives us some idea.

It was actually combined subjects, like physics, chemistry, and biology, and all...aimed to how it affects the production of goods. Does it explain it?

Yes, I understand. Was that in Kolin?

That was all in Kolin. And I actually finished in summer 1940, which was very fortunate, because this was the last year when the Jewish children could go to the usual, not a Jewish school, so I was very fortunate in that field.

Can I just ask you, did you know your father's parents as well?

No. My father's parents died before I was born, and actually I think his father died quite a long time before...when I say a long time, ten years, something. But I know for sure, that my grandmother, his mother, died only a few months before I was born, and my name, Erna, 'Arnoska' was her name, it was like, you know, for her. I don't know, but she was dead at the time. (LAUGHS) So that was how...this was about my grandparents.

Can you tell me a little bit about your home life. Did you spend a lot of time with your parents?

Yes, I had a very very happy childhood. I was a sort of...a child my parents prayed for for a long time, because I was born after seven, eight years of their marriage, and my mother I think would be at least 31, 32 years old, and they did everything possible for me. The only problems started when they faced these difficulties with the shop, and with the financial difficulties. And my father was very worried, because of...Inland Revenue will be here. And he got panickings. So at the time I...is it really interesting?

Yes.

...and at that time I was in the second class of that Handelsakademie, and I had to take over, so it was me going, a fairly young girl, to these offices, and of course being a young girl it was easier because they had more pity. (LAUGHS) That I...but otherwise. And it was...probably it was a Jewish household, but I would say my grandparents had a kosher household, but my parents so-called, at least was on the surface, because the grandparents were not supposed to know. But, you know, they sent me once in a week to buy some sort of salami at the butcher or something like that, which the grandmother was not supposed to know, something like that. (LAUGHS) But my mother believed very strongly, that was not in contradiction. My father was just...but Mother believed it really strongly.

Did you keep the Jewish holidays?

We kept the Jewish holidays, yes. The main holidays, like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and these sort of things. We had Pesach, you know, and all these different sort of dishes, and different sort of unchanged oil, and matzozes. And I of course...the food which I adored at that time, I was a child. And as I said, my mother believed. But it was not so much with me really. As soon as I started to grow up, and Fascism in Germany and all these sort of things, and all these dangers coming from outside. And then it was a fashion at that time in Czechoslovakia, a lot of intelligencia started to be atheists, and so I started to flirt with that very much. But I still kept the holidays with my parents, went to the synagogue with my mother, but started to doubt.

Did you have friends? A lot of non-Jewish friends, or Jewish friends?

Plenty of friends. But most of them non-Jewish I would say. Not that I choose them now, but this was the life; because it was a little place, Golecuv Jenikov, there were some Jewish families, but not many; as I told you, I was the only Jewish child in both schools, in that elementary schools. There was one Jewish family, the Stranskys, in Vilamov(?), but they were too rich for us, we were not rich enough to mix up with them. He owned a little factory there, and, you know, so it was not really sort of a friendship. And I really don't remember having...all my close friends, they were not Jewish. But, you know, we didn't pay much attention to it.

Did you do sport?

I did swimming, and that I've kept until now. I did a lot of swimming, because there were a lot of sail lakes in Jenikov - but lakes is probably a bit too posh name, I would say more ponds - and we used to go there very often, and I swum well and I can save...this all modesty, but I still swim well! (LAUGHING) Much later I went skiing, but that was much later. And then I went of course to Sokol.

You know what Sokol was? Sokol was a Czech gymnastic organisation, sport organisation. So I went there regularly. I think that would be all as far as sport is concerned.

Your holidays you spent in the country?

You know how it was, shopkeepers didn't have any holidays. So I was all the time with my parents, and really the holidays for me...but really the holidays for me were if I was able to go to Benesov - I will mention that quite frequently later. My mother's brother, whose name was Rudolf Blan, he lived there with his family: wife and three cousins, and we were very very close. We were all girls. And they had a much better standard of living than us, and I always was very happy when I was able to go there for my holidays and spend two, three weeks there. So that would be the highlights of my holidays.

Were they your only cousins, or did you have others?

Not really, because on my father's side I had three cousins. They lived not far from Usti (Aussig), but we didn't meet them very often. Not any animosities, but it was just a question of time and distance. We were on good terms, but didn't meet them very often. I went there once, when my parents wanted me to learn German, or to improve my German...forgot about these stories completely. And I went there with big enthusiasm, that uncle, who was my father's brother of course, he fetched me. But when I came there, I felt so homesick that I cried every evening; and I can still imagine closing my eyes and seeing my own kitchen in front of my eyes. And they had to take me back, after three days, as they couldn't stand me any more. So that was not a big success! (LAUGHS)

So your mother just had the one brother?

Yes. My father was from a big family, seven or eight children...eight children. That was the uncle Richard, he lived in Aussig, that was one of them, and he was the only one who lived in Bohemia. Then there was his sister, Auntie Rosa, and she was married to a German husband, and they lived in Dresden. That was a sort of love story, that was. But he behaved to her extremely honestly during that hard time.

He was not Jewish?

He was not Jewish. He was German...is it interesting to tell that?

Yes, do.

Actually he was a student in Prague, at the German university, and had his lodging at my grandmother's, and this is how he got to know my aunt, who was a very beautiful lady.

This was your father's mother.

That was my father's sister.

No, the grandma.

The grandma was my father's mother, that's right. And that was my father's sister of course, the Aunt Rosa. And they fell in love. And of course he was from a very rich German family, I think very nationalistic family, a family who had...it was a sort of noble family. And they own a very big...shop, but that's not the right word, sort of like a...

Store?

A store, something like (Broke and Buptar??), or something very huge, where you have here British Home Stores, but not as big as that, but that sort of thing. And that was in Dresden. And of course it was a big family crisis when he wanted to marry her. But at the end he did marry her, and she moved to Dresden. The relatives, her relatives, they were not supposed to come to see her in Dresden, because nobody was supposed to know that he married a Jewish woman...wife. That's good English!

(LAUGHS) But they were very very happy together, it was one of these really ideal marriages. And she used to come to see us every two years and bringing big...a lot of things with her, looking extremely elegant; she was a lady from another world. And then during the Third Reich, he behaved extremely honestly, he didn't leave her. I must say, the family didn't press him to leave her - this is what I learned later - and so she stayed there. She was not arrested, and the day when she was...in 1945, when she was supposed to be arrested at the big attack on Dresden, you know, that raid...

The bombing raid...

That bombing of Dresden, and so they actually were able to escape. And from that time they lived, you know, illegally say, and so she was saved in that way. And after the war, when I came back from the camp, I found the letters among those things which the people returned...the people returned to us. My mother kept...my mother took some of those things to friends, you know, so that we could have it when we were back. And I found the addresses, and wrote to all relatives, what happened, and who returned - mostly who didn't return. And so I wrote to them, and since then started...not since then, it was impossible, but since 1952 I think, started to visit them in Dresden. They were very keen to help them, and they...even Franta, the man whom I was supposed to marry in Germany...(LAUGHING - INAUDIBLE WORD) And so that's that. And then my father had three, four sisters, who lived in the United States. They emigrated at the end of the century, some time...1890, in that time, you know, from Czechoslovakia, practically from Bohemia at that time, to the United States. So they lived there.

When did you say they emigrated?

When? Some time 1890, 1880.

Oh I see, last century.

Last century, at the end of the last century, don't know exactly. And then he had one brother who was very ill, and lived in some sort of a home because he was disabled, and he perished of course, among the first. And he lived somewhere, I don't know, I never met him, somewhere in Sudetenland.

So that's your father's family.

That's Father's family, yes. I think I have all, yes.

You mentioned that you had quite a lot of argument before being allowed to study. Why was that?

There was actually quite a few reasons. Now, looking at that from the hindsight, now I can understand, my points of view. My father was from that old school: you are a quite good looking young girl, and you will marry anyway, so why should you study? Then, the main reasons were, that they couldn't afford it. And if I wanted to study, they wanted me to do something where I would finish relatively early, and then to be able to earn some money. It was necessary, they wanted the best for me, and they couldn't do better. And so they actually wanted me to study at the Handelsschule. You know, there was a difference between Handelsschule and Handelsakademie: Handelsschule was two years only, and Handelsakademie was four years, with the 'Maturita' at the end, which meant that if you had this 'Maturita', which was something like 'A'levels here, you could go to the university. And that was my trick, they said if I have that I can go to the university. And then my parents were quite adamant, they didn't want me to study. And then, again my uncle from Benesov came, like a god from heaven, and said, "Never mind, Emernice," he called me, "Emernice, I pay the difference." And so he started to pay the difference. Oh my uncle in Benesov, his wife was Christian, she wasn't Jewish, and she was one of the best persons I ever knew. She was so tolerant, and so marvellous, to the grandparents, to my uncle, and after he died, to me as well. Because, as it happened, I started to study in 1936. 1939 the occupation started, and my uncle was among the first people who were arrested. He was arrested practically...only probably two weeks after occupation, or two or four weeks. He was one of those 'Rukoime', I don't know the word. Shall I look it up?

What is the word?

'Rukoimi'. (BREAK IN RECORDING)

You looked the word up.

Ya. And so it is hostage. Horrible. And so he was taken...there were about sixty hostages taken at that time from Bohemia, and he was one of them. Because he was very well known for his patriotic...Czech patriotic attitude. He arranged some Czech concerts; he was very gifted in music, and some Czech concerts and the people knew him there, all the Fascists, whenever he did it, knew him as well. And he was...he had a very good job with an insurance company. But at the same time he was a part time Rabbi. And he did both. And so he said he would pay the difference, as I mentioned...(BREAK IN RECORDING) So he was one of these hostages, sixty I think there were of them. And he was kept for a short time in the prison in Tabor, Tabor is a town in Bohemia. And shortly after that he was sent to Buchenwald, where he died, I think it was 19...before they arrested...1941 it had to be, 1941. And, going back to my studies, the aunt, without hesitation, paid again, until the end, and she was not really so well off. She was comfortable relatively, but she had a lot of problems, with the house, with my grandma, who was staying with her and was an old lady at that time, couldn't understand what it was all about, the occupation and all these restrictions. And in her absolutely innocent way, blamed the aunt very often, and the aunt did everything what was possible to do. Then the daughters - they had three daughters as I said - they were brought up in the Jewish faith. And according to this Nürenberg law, because they were half Jewish, half not Jewish, but being brought up in Jewish law, that made them Jewish. And therefore they were transported later. And all these restrictions applied to them. Not only the oldest, who was at least of the same age as me, once they started to defend my grannie against a German, or SS officer, she was arrested, and was for six weeks, or seven weeks, in the prison. So the aunt had a lot of problems, but always coped extremely well. Never ever complained, and was just a saint, really. She lived quite a long life, she died only three years ago I would think. And so that was my education, that was where we stopped.

So you managed to finish your studies?

That's right. I finished in 1940.

At that time your parents were still at home?

My parents...we were arrested at the same time, together, but my father was...we moved to Stary Kolín from Golecuv Jenikov, that was a little town, we would call village really, about six miles from Kolin, and my father worked as a...in a corn warehouse, as a keeper, storekeeper of this warehouse, which was quite a drop in our standard of living. And I still went to that college, tried to help my parents, teaching other students, you know, giving lessons to the other students. Working quite hard at that time.

Were you not affected by the occupation of the Germans in that part of the country?

Oh yes, we were very much affected actually. But I didn't feel it...when I go back to the studies, or studying. I didn't feel it very much in the school, because the students were marvellous. They were Czech students, only Czech students, and there was only one professor with Fascist inclinations, but all the class stood behind me, and they were very very good. And one of our professors was Dr. Feder, who was the Rabbi in Kolin, at the same time he was a good friend of our family. And after the war, when he himself, from the whole of his family, returned, he wrote the book, 'The Jewish Tragedy', which was published in Czechoslovakia in 1947, and he asked me to write a chapter in that book, which I did, and it's published in that book, in that part of the book called 'The Voices from the East'.

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Right. You were telling me about the book that was...

Yes, that was published. But you asked me about the restrictions. So actually, straight...the same day if I remember correctly, when the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia, which was on the 15th of March '39, the restrictions, or the persecution of Jews started. So shops and businesses were expropriated practically the first day. We were not supposed to go to theatres, cinema, cafes, parks. We were not supposed to mix with non-Jews, Aryans as they were called of course. And then...they were sacked from most employments. But fortunately my father could still keep that job, because that job was so low paid, and nobody wanted it very much. (LAUGHS) And from 1941 we had to wear the Stars of David. But as I mentioned before, I just managed on time to finish my school, because I finished summer 1940, that was June 1940, and from the next school year which started there in September 1940, the Jewish children were not allowed to go to the usual schools.

But up to 1940 you didn't really suffer too much.

No, I didn't. I was frightened, because it was very frightening, you know, what was happening, and what was going to happen, that was...that terrible uncertainty. And of course...then all the girls went for a dance and I couldn't go, because I couldn't go to the cafe, and couldn't go to the cinema, I couldn't go to the theatre. And so that was not a very pleasant experience. Say for example...and they always wanted me to come, but I was frightened to go. Or say when we graduated, the school and the class arranged a graduation party: I couldn't go. Sitting in the corner of the kitchen and crying. I didn't know what was going to happen, but this was nothing in comparison to what was going to happen.

Did you have friends in that period who stood by you?

Oh yes. I had all these friends, they used to...from the school, and people who lived nearby, this was a friend of mine, Jirina Pokanová, who actually was very good, and her family, they own a mill, and they were very very good to us, and they kept coming and visiting us. But I wasn't supposed to go with them, I was not allowed to go anywhere with them. And then it started to be dangerous for them to mix up with us. But they still did. Of course in a secret way, you know, they came... But there were not many informers in that little town where we lived, so that was relatively easier than probably in big towns. Of course there was already these Czech Fascists' newspaper, 'Arijsky boj', 'Aryan Fight', and they announced me once, because they saw me with one of my professors, and that was a big article, a very unpleasant time, but nothing came from it; you know, the Germans didn't pick it up to do something about it. But of course, when I finished the school, the hard times started, because I finished as the best student in the class, but in spite of that couldn't get a job, because you always had to prove that your grandparents were Aryans: not only the parents, even the grandparents. So whenever I applied, then I had to supply these Aryans' documents, couldn't do anything about it. And then of course, that was the period when the uncle was arrested, the uncle in Benesov. And at the end I started to work from spring 1941 in the Council of Jewish Communities in Kolin. I don't know if it's appropriate to talk about it, because the Council of Jewish Communities at that time, acted or worked, functioned, much differently than the usual Jewish communities would be.

Talk about it, it's interesting.

Because it became a sort of administration unit for all Jews in that area. Kolin was 'Oberland', was made 'Oberlandrat'. It enclosed a big area, a lot of towns. I would say...I don't know if I can compare it with a county here, something like a county, that will be the nearest as I can go. But you know, all the dimensions there were much smaller than they are here, so probably county would do. But the Jews were not...all these...everything, say for example, taxis and housing and everything, they were excluded from all the usual official papers, official offices, and therefore it was always the Council of Jewish Communities which had to deal with it. (BOTH TALKING TOGETHER) All the administration work...I don't know if I explained it properly..

Yes, I understand. They took over the work of the councils...

Of the council for...yes. Because they didn't want the Jews to mix up with non-Jews. Therefore everything had to be separated. Which means that, with taxes, with housing, that would be probably the main area. So they had a sort of, I would say contradictional job. On the one side, they were trying to help the Jews, on the other hand they acted as a sort of extended hand of the German authorities, on the Nazi authorities of course. They communicated this 'Centralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung' - you know what that was. And with the Gestapo in Kolin, the 'Sicherheits' in Kolin, which means communicate, they received orders from them, and had to deal with it. At the same time they were in contact with the Council of Jewish Communities in Prague, and again received from them orders. Because the orders from Centralstelle für Auswanderung in Prague, was connected with this Prague Jewish Council, and all our orders came from there. And I worked there as a secretary. At the very beginning, when it was a real Jewish community,which you ought to understand what it was here in the usual conditions, there was the Chairman and one secretary. And in 1941 there were about twelve employees, because...they were just terribly big at the time. And at the same time of course the Jewish communities tried to help the Jews, when the transports started they gave advices, what to take with them and how to behave and what to do with... But of course, when the Nazis wanted to move in big houses, good houses owned by Jews, they would ring to the Jewish Community, and the Jewish Community's task was to notify that poor Jew that he has to move out in ten days' time, and to move in such a sort of very modest, very shabby accommodation.

They were a sort of go-between.

Liaising I would say. But very very unthankful task, and very difficult task. I would think, what I could see, they did it in a very honest way. They tried so much. And I can say, once they tried so hard, that Jewish Community in Kolin, that the Chairman and the referent for housing, were both arrested and were both sent to the camp, straightaway, much earlier than the other people. Sometime...that was 1940, '41 probably. And I started to work there. Of course there I found quite a good company, because everybody was in the same boat, we could mix together, nobody had to...when you were inside you didn't need to wear the Star of David. And everything seemed to be quite nice, and I started to date my fiancé, Franta Aschermann; and we were going...you know, we didn't go where we were not allowed to go, but we still could go for walks. But later, we were not even allowed to travel far, only in a circle of twelve kilometers, without a special permission of the Gestapo. But even so, we were used to the situation, and we were quite contented. Not happy, but quite contented. And the transport started. And when the transport started that was like a bomb really.

You did not expect it?

No, we did not. Because what actually happened... We did not expect it. But we knew that some transports were sent from Germany. And then, by a special decree from Heydrich, or, no, not from Heydrich, from Neurath, the German spelling, was by the special decree, Terezín was made a new home for the Czechs from Protektorat Böhmen and Mähren. And so we hoped that we would be...in the very beginning, that we will be transported only to Terezín. But that was one of the Nazi tricks, because that was of course not true. Then the transports, as probably you know, started to go in the very beginning from Prague only, and our Dr. Smrcka, the referent, always rang to the Jewish Council in Prague, they said 'Fear' when our turn was going to come. And actually it happened in...we got to know in March 1942, the registration started in April 1942, and the transports left in June 1942.

And did they go alphabetically, or how did they choose?

I don't know, in Prague it was different. In Prague it was say, everybody who was there, people starting with the letter M, or everybody starting with letter S, or something like that. But from the provincial towns, it was practically everybody was included. All of them, with the exception of people living in mixed marriages, and that was all, only these mixed marriages were excluded. And in the very beginning, even our transportation - when I say our, mine and my parents' - were supposed to be delayed, because I worked for that Jewish Council from the very beginning. But then we were included in that last transport from Kolin Oberantrag. On three days' notice...

Do you know how many transports went?

Yes. I have the summary here which I will read for you in a minute. Why we were included in that transport? This was the time when the Reichsprotektor Heydrich was assassinated, and there were all these German reprisals for it. And these transports...and this was the unfortunate fate of all these three Kolin's transports, that they actually...their time of departure coincided with the assassination of Heydrich. You asked me about how many people...(TURNING PAGES)...only to explain to you...I made some sort of footnotes when I translated this, and therefore I found these numbers, therefore I know the figures exactly. So there were, in the first transport, there were 744 people, and 44 returned. In the second were 724 people, and 31 returned. In the third transport there were 734, and 62 returned. And this was unfortunate, because it was at the time of that Heydrich assassination. So, as I said, we were included in that third transport from Kolin Oberantrag, and we had to assemble in a school in Kolin, to be searched there, and after three days staying there we went by train from Kolin, at that time to Bohousovice, and that was at that time the railway station for Terezín. Later there was a railway station directly in Terezín, but at that time it was still there, at Bohousovice.

Why did you say it made it worse, the transport, because of the Heydrich assassination?

Because they made...when I say 'they', the Nazis, made a decision that they wanted to punish the people, punish the Czech people, and that was at a time when the Lidice were destroyed, and they sent one transport directly from Jewish towns, or directly from Prague, which was called...the transport had to use always initials, like...letters, and these initials were A.A.H.; this was 'Attentat Auf Heydrich', and they were sent directly from Prague to the east, and after crossing the Czech borders they were all shot. And then...and the Jewish administration in Terezín received an order to send two transports to the east. And later we found out that they were doing this as well, and in that first transport sent from Terezín at that time, the most people from the first two Kolin transports were included. And always the transports were usually transports from Terezín that usually had one thousand people; sometimes, much later, 1944, even five thousand, but the usual number was one thousand. And the second transport, again, I can say now, this transport, was supposed to leave Terezín on the 13th of June...

This was 1941 was it?

That's '42. And that was the day when our transport arrived to Terezín, to Bohousovice. And when we arrived at Bohousovice, 700 people already from Terezín boarded the train which waited there to be dispatched from Terezín to the east, and 250 people from our transport were to be chosen to complete the required number of one thousand. And that was my first selection actually, in my life. I had to survive quite a few more, but probably I will never forget that fear, to be included in that transport. But I did manage to escape, because my fiancé, Dr. Aschermann, was...his family was not supposed to be sent away, because his sister, who was already in Terezín working there, and there were sort of rules at that time, still 'human' rules - in inverted commas - that one shouldn't split the families. And so the Aschermanns were saved, and when he proclaimed that I was his fiancé, we were saved as well. So we arrived to Terezín.

Your parents...

My parents and myself, and of course my fiancé and his family. So that was the first very good luck in my life, because otherwise I wouldn't be here today. And so, as I said before, Terezín, according to that decree of Reichsprotektor Neurath, at that time I would think, was that Terezín should be a new home for the Jews from Protektorat Böhmen and Mähren. In fact it was practically a transit station. The Jews were coming, and more leaving than coming. Not only Jews from Bohemia, Moravia, but also a lot of Jews from Germany. And some of these old people were told to sell everything, from Germany, that they were going to a sanatorium, everything would be kept...would be done there...would be arranged there for them. And imagine these old people coming, not understanding our Czech, but most of them speak German, but being faced with a camp instead of a sanatorium. They said, "We were supposed to go to a sanatorium". And it was Terezín. I started to work again in an office, because I had that qualification that was in the labour office. And then I started to learn the hard facts of life. First of all, that not all the Germans were bad, that there were some Czechs who were bad, but...

Who were what?

Some Czechs, who were not very good either. And some Jews. And I learned that through the whole time, because later, when I will tell you, I will tell you how much the German workers helped us. So that taught me a lesson, very hard way, but taught me a lesson. Anyway, I worked in that labour office.

Can you describe a little bit, when you arrived in Terezín, where you lived?

Yes. I should have said that. Terezín, as a town, before the occupation, was a garrison town. It was created at the time of Maria Theresia, this Hamburg empress, and most of the buildings were garrisons. And there was a 'Festung'...'Festung', and that's why it was very convenient to make a ghetto, because there were these big buildings. And the labour office where I worked was in Hanover Kaserne. The Kaserne where I lived was called Hamburger Kaserne. There were Dresden Kaserne... Of course there were always women together in one, no families together; only a few of these families from these people who were leading the ghetto, lived together, but this is negligible, these were only the leadership. And so we lived there. We had our...we were supposed to take with us fifty kilogrammes of things and goods, and this is what I...when I said how the Jewish communities helped the people, we were advised what to take. You know, nothing fancy, warm, more or less like sport clothes, food, which is not easily...it doesn't go off easily. Sugar as much as possible. Dry...

Food.

Dry food, but...dry spirit, these spirit cubes, for cooking.

For primus stoves.

Yes. Then medicaments if possible. And so on. So we had all those... But we could still supplement that food which we were receiving, you know, with something which we had from home. So it was not so hard in the very beginning. Then of course the administration and the preparation of food in Terezín was excellent, because it was all in Jewish hands everything was done extremely honestly; it was very fairly distributed. So everybody had his meal at lunchtime - not a meal what we call here a meal, but something to eat. Emphasing now, I will tell you later how it was in the other camps. And, as a whole, you know, people who stayed in Terezín only probably won't agree with me, but if I compare Terezín with everything which had to follow, Terezín was still a 'recreation' place...in inverted commas of course, but in comparison it was much better. Because the Jews at that time, I don't know later on, I'm only talking about what I really saw, what I experienced, at that time it was extremely well managed, and it was still possible to live.

Did they separate your father from...

Oh yes, my father lived in another garrison. All the men lived in... But we still...it was possible to meet him in the street, in a Terezín street or sometimes he came, sometimes it was possible to meet him. Not so often, because I slept in the same room as my mother, so I saw her every evening. And I could date my fiancé...or, not as when you are free, but it was still sort of life. But Terezín was still...when we came to Terezín the ghetto was not open yet, had not been opened yet. Because there were some Czechs living, and there was always...that you mustn't meet. But later, when we were there about four weeks, all the Czechs were moved somewhere else, and the ghetto was opened, which meant you could go until 7 o'clock or 8 o'clock, you could go out, and you could go for a little walk, which was rather restricted, because it was a very small area. But what I started to say, learning this lesson about different nations. When I worked in that labour office, we often had to work later in the evening when we were busy preparing something for the authorities. And if it happened, it was a habit that one of the men would accompany me to home, in case we meet an SS or somebody, it was much better than to be alone. And everything worked perfectly alright, until one of these employees, his name was Jack Schaling, I will remember him until the end of my life...

He was Jewish?

He was Jewish, one of these employees where I worked, in that labour office, said to me...he just wanted to have sex with me. And I said, "You have your wife here, I have my fiancé here, no way." And he said, "Do you know, that in a fortnight's time, there is a Jewish transport"...sorry, east

transport. I said, "I don't know, but if you say so, you will know", because he had the connection. And we were in that transport. So, we went to see him, straight away that terrible morning. I remember that morning, that was Saturday.

Which morning was it? After he told you that?

Yes, that was a fortnight after. This was exactly on the 29th...28th...29th of September, '42.

He told you you would be on this transport as a revenge.

Yes, that was actually a sort of warning. If you don't, you will. But, I didn't take it really very seriously. But it was for him, that was the end of the story. Then, I was in the office, and my father run in, white as a sheet of paper, "I am in." In no time, my mother came. And then I got that terrible paper as well. So I went to see him straight away, and I said to him, "Is that your job..." or whatever, "did you do it?" And he said, "Yes. But if you are willing to do what I ask you, I can still do something for you. But not for your parents." So I said thank you. But then quite a few other people offered to help. But it was always the same: they could do something for me, but nothing for the parents. And it was a terrible dilemma. To be honest, I didn't want to go. I left my things...

End of F489, Side B

F490, Side A

You mean to say you would have lost your fiancé...

I would, yes. If I did go, I would have to say goodbye to him, that's what I really meant. I didn't want that. And the few news we had from...you know, we knew for sure that the situation wherever we go, would be worse than it was in Terezín. But my parents wanted badly that I go with them, and so I did go. We were...my...and when people were included in a transport, they had to spend usually three or four days, before the departure of the transport, in sort of special isolation. The Nazis called it 'Die Schleusse'. You know what I mean, what those German words mean? And that went through all the time, always from one transport - because I went through a lot of transports - there was always, before the transportation, that...staying in those isolation rooms, I would call it. And we were already in that 'Schleusse' when the transport from Benesov arrived, with my cousins, and with the grandma. But my mother was not allowed to see her mother any more. And we left Terezín...

How do you know that she was in this transport?

You know, the news travelled quickly there, because the people...because there were always these sort of...adjutants, and different sorts of Jewish services, which connected one 'Schleusse' with the other. Because when the people arrived they were in the 'Schleusse' as well. And so you got to know...and you knew in advance which transport was supposed to come, so we knew that the transport from Benesov was supposed to come. That was not a secret, everybody knew, and all the leaders in the ghetto let the people know, because they wanted them to know. Therefore we knew. And so...at that time we were still allowed to take these 50 kilogrammes with us; this was less than that at the time, because we ate something, some of the food, but still quite a few things it was possible to take with us. And we travelled...and this was the last travel in usual trains, with seats and so on, and we travelled probably for four, five days. And on the 5th of September 1942, we arrived to Raasiku, that's spelt R-A-A-S-I-K-U, Raasiku.

Where was it?

That was in Estonia. That was about...you know, these distances are not exact, that was how I imagine it, this was about thirty kilometers from Tallinn, Tallinn is the capital. But the Germans called Tallinn always Reval; when I sometimes say Reval or Tallinn, that's equal, that's the same. And we arrived there in the very morning, and I was in the (SOUNDS LIKE 'lever' - leader?)...I was with my parents in that wagon, I was in the last...we were in the last wagon. But when they started to unload the people we were the first out, right, because the train was very much in the front. There were a few German SS, but the most of them were Estonian SS. Because the SS were...and we met during our stay in Estonia, much more Estonian SS than German ones, because the Germans were only on that very high leadership in Riga, because Riga was the leadership for all the camps in the whole Baltic States. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? And I was probably one of the first young girls, I was only 19, 20, when we came there. And the Commandant approached me, and put me on one side, and my mother to the other side. And I expected not to stay with my father, but I hoped to stay with my mother. So, I said to him that I left Terezín voluntarily, to stay with my parents, and therefore I would like to stay with my mother. He said, "You go where I ask you to go. The only difference is that the older people, they'll travel by the buses, and young people will go by the lorries, and you will meet there anyway." I didn't trust him, so when he didn't look, I ran back to the group where my mother was. But he noticed. And then he just shouted at me, hit me a bit, and said, "You go where I told you to go. You should be sent to me", or something like that. So I couldn't do anything about it. And at the same time, all the luggage was unloaded, suitcases and so on, rucksacks, and it was put on the lorry. Then more young girls joined me. And the first five of us boarded the lorry, on the top of the luggage; five of the very young Estonian SS, with their rifles aimed at us, started to journey. And we could see the older people boarding the buses. And that's the day when I saw my parents for the last time.

Before we go on, could you tell me a little bit about the train journey.

Train journey. As I said, we boarded the train on the 1st of September 1942. This was a usual train, with wagons: the trains are not as comfortable as here, but the usual train. And that was the last

transport I experienced in the usual train; the following ones when I start to talk about it was always cattle trains, trucks, cattle trains. And I was still with my mother. We had some food with us, if I remember properly, that was still partly our food, and partly something was given to us. And we received some sort of black coffee, if you can call it coffee, some sort of liquid, during the journey. I don't remember receiving food there, but I don't remember being hungry at the time either. To be honest, I don't know exactly if we had some food, but probably we had, because otherwise I remember how we...how we were hungry in the other trains, or transports. And we travelled to the north. I know that my father was very touched when we stopped, I don't know for how many hours, in Dresden, because, you know, the transit was an extraordinary journey, and therefore we sometimes had to wait until some other train passed. Sometimes they didn't want us to go through the towns during the day time, to stop somewhere. And then we saw that after we went all the way up to the north...because we could see from the windows, the windows were not blocked or something, it was still like a normal, civilized train in a way. And then we saw that we were going to Riga, because we knew there was a big ghetto in Riga, but then of course we arrived to Estonia, and as far as I know, and I think I know rightly, we were the first Jewish transport from Terezín to Estonia.

Could you sleep during the night?

Yes, but not sleeping...sleeping sitting.

And were people...

Crowded, yes, but still everybody had a seat. It wasn't like later, that you were cramped like blocks, this was not like that, this was still a relatively civilized journey.

And were people fairly...

People were very apprehensive. There were all sorts of gossips going round; every wagon was locked, and of course we were not able to go to the other wagons, you couldn't go through like you go through the wagons. That was locked. And the people were very worried, because everybody expected something bad to happen.

Did people try to escape at all?

At the time, no. It was hardly possible. Because, how can you escape from a train which is constantly moving? And when you have so many people with guns and with everything, you will be shot...

They were with you on the train.

Yes. You will be shot immediately. And that's what they wanted anyway. I remember nothing exceptionally about that actual journey.

Before we go on to Estonia, could you tell me what actually your work was in the office in Terezín.

This was just sort of...I did a bit of typing, as usual, a bit of shorthand. I was very good in Czech shorthand.

But what for?

We were just doing these jobs for the leadership, Jewish leadership. Because you had always to supply a certain number of people, of workers, to different departments. Departments is a bit of a posh word for what it was. There were people, I don't know, cleaning, keeping Terezín clean, because it was clean; people in the kitchen, people in...there was a lot of sick bays - you can't call it hospitals, but something like small hospitals. And there were people constantly changing, because there were always people leaving for transports, and new people arriving, and you had always to arrange so-called 'Hilfsdienst', German word, Hilfsdienst, and this was usually a group of young people who were helping to the new transports with the luggage, loading it, unloading it, helping with the people who were leaving for transports. And these people were constantly changing, because of the transport, nothing stayed constant.

And that was your job?

That was...I was not doing it, there were people doing it...well they were men more or less, (LAUGHS) doing it. But I was keeping the records and writing it, and doing notes. And then there were very often different sort of night shifts, where we went to help, I can remember; very very sad transports of old people coming, I think from Frankfurt, from one of these German towns. These were those people who were hoping to come in a sanatorium, and they were ill, but really ill, really fragile, incontinent. And so you had to help them. Because we were taught what to do, you know, it was not something, I do this, and that's the end. But it was a relatively alright job for Terezín.

What was daily life like?

We started I think, I can't remember, about 8 o'clock, and worked there until 5. And after Terezín...after the ghetto was really open, then we could go for little walks like. At lunchtime we had our lunch, which was always divided, we had our 'Esuses', you know, oh, I don't know the name in any other language than in Czech. It's a sort of ball, like the soldiers have...

Sort of tinned...

Tinned ball, but it's a special name, we call it...this must be a German name, 'Aschuss'...'Schuss'?...don't know. And so we had our lunchtime break when we actually collected our food, and...

What was that usually?

That was soup. And sometimes they made a proper meal, sometimes when it was possible they might make some kind of Czech Knôdels, you know, Knedlíky, or sometimes we had a bit of potatoes with sauce. Not much meat. But I would say, the food was nothing really very good, and there was not enough of it, but it was relatively well prepared, because they had very good cooks there. Because they had all specialities in all food there all the time, and they really tried...from that little, they had...they did everything that they could do. And I think that the first Judenrat...oh, what sort of an English...there was a group of extremely honest people, and extremely capable people; they finished tragically, all of them, they were sent to the east and all shot. And this was...I think his name was Dr. Edelstein, I'm not absolutely sure. There will be people who can tell you much more about Terezín than I can, because I was there only for three months. But the food was, I would say...we were still hungry, but it was good, relatively good. And later...but I don't want to say about things which I only read, I would like to concentrate to things which I really experienced. But I know that they started a lot of education work, and I know, when we were there, there were special rooms for children, children were taught there. There were music lessons. There was a sort of Jewish court, and there was...if somebody committed a little crime or something there was a...Dr. Feder was one of these rabbis, there were the rabbis as well...

Religious services?

I don't know exactly the religious services. I don't remember those. But surely funerals. But I don't remember, I wouldn't like to say something I don't know.

Were there evening lectures, or concerts, or something?

No, that wasn't possible. Because I think...nobody was supposed to go out after 8. I think that much later, 1944 or something, they did a Czech opera, Prodaná Nevesta there, but this is something...you can find that in this book, Dr. Feder's book, but unfortunately that's in Czech.

You just talk about your own...

Yes, I think that's much better. So that's what I can tell you. But as a whole, the life wasn't easy, but much easier than later.

Well we'll go back to Estonia now, to this awful moment when you...

And that's what I said, in Raasiku, on that 5th of September 1942, I saw my parents for the last time. Of course I didn't know at that time, much later, after I came back from the camps, after I came back home from the camps, I gradually got to know that all the people who were on these blue buses were driven to a rifle range, to an old Estonian or Russian rifle range, which was called 'Kaleivi Liiva' - I will spell it for you, K-A-L-E-I-V-I, L-I-I-V-A. And they were all shot there, all of them. They had to undress, because they even collected these dresses and those things, you know, to be used. They had to undress and then they were shot. You can ask me probably how do I know. First of all, we got to know in the very beginning, straight away, some time in September 1945, maybe even a month earlier, when a group of 'our girls' as we always called ourselves, returned from Sweden, and apparently some of these Estonian young Fascists, who had to shoot the people, had so many remorsees, and were so...

Their conscience?

Yes, their conscience, and so they actually went to confessions, and confessed to the priests these crimes. And these Estonian priests let to know the Swedish priests, and from those our friends got to know. And I later...and that was in...(BREAK IN RECORDING) So it was in March 1961, when I was called as a witness to a trial which took place in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, and three or four of these men were actually sentenced during that trial. It would probably interest you, that one of those, his name was Mere, I could give you the exact name, I think Alfred Mere, and he was tried in his absence; and at that time, that's 1961, it was said that he lived in England, in Manchester, that he escaped to Manchester. Even I look at you, I can sense that you probably think, if I did something about it when it was said that that group of Estonian Fascists was in that...when that Mr. Wiesenthal started to, you know, to persecute them. So, I have to admit, I didn't. I was thinking about it quite a lot. But probably if I were called as a witness...no probably surely, if I were called as a witness, I would witness against them. But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

When you were in England you mean?

Yes yes, now. Because that happened last year, when the Israelis got the list of these Estonian Fascists here. And there were all these...it was in the paper, and on the television. I followed it very carefully, but, the reason was...I don't think that I didn't want to be involved, but I was very apprehensive, that I wouldn't be able to identify him after all these years. You know, I saw him twice, three times in my life. In 1942, and today we have 1989. I was in Israel last year, and met some of my friends, whom I haven't seen for 30 years. I didn't recognise them, and I used to know them well. So that's actually not to the story really.

But it's interesting, yes. So you were called to this trial.

...to this trial, and from all the witnesses, I learnt exactly what happened on that 5th of September, 1942, with the other people. Because at that time I could speak Russian relatively well, and all the trial was held in Estonian and translated into Russian, so I always knew what was going on. And there were people witnessing what they saw, other people witnessing - there were the other prisoners I mean, there were people who actually were in Tallinn prison, the women in Tallinn prison, where all these bloodstained dresses or things were delivered, they had to wash it. So they knew about that. There were people who were living, three Estonians who were living nearby, and they saw what happened. So, from all these sources, it was established without any doubt what happened. And I can tell you that all the people, all these three men who were on trial, were sentenced to death, and they were...they died, yes, they were hung, I think, I think hung. Anyway, to go back to that journey, from Raasiku to Jagalla. We were on that lorry, loaded with all this luggage, sitting five of us with these rifles aimed on us, and travelled, not a very long time, I would think only half an hour, something like that, through a big forest. It was already cold. And I was promising to do everything for my mother I could, and to let her feel that I loved her. Because I felt that I didn't behave - I knew I didn't behave extremely well. I wasn't rude, but I only let them feel, let my parents feel, that I didn't know how to go with them. But I never had time to do it. Then we arrived to the first concentration camp in Estonia, Jagalla. Spelling: J-A-G-A-L-L-A. Which was very very primitive. There was three or four wooden barracks with camp beds, no light, no electricity, no water, just nothing. And at the end of that horrible day, we were again summoned in a big room and were searched there, if we didn't have any gold things with us, which they still could sell. Yes, I didn't say that during that trial I just mentioned a few minutes before, it was

said that the Lagerführer, Laak, who was the Lagerführer in that camp, became the richest man in Estonia selling all these things.

All the jewellery.

Yes, the jewellery, and all these things which I will mention, because from this transport, you know, the dresses, I will mention that later when I say what we did. And so we were searched, and then all in tears, going back in that barrack where we had to sleep. We didn't have at that time any blankets, anything, and because it was raining everything was wet, and everything was terribly hopeless and terribly gruesome and black, without any hope. And that night, I got to know by best friend, Anka, who, when we were all crying and talking, we found out that she was a cousin of that fiancé of mine, and that was the bond which we... And then we stayed together and helped each other through all these times. The following day we started to work, and we worked as we call it, in the 'Schleusse', because that was that slang word I mentioned before, and the Fascists called it 'Schleusse' as well. Everything which was connected with the searches of people was called 'Schleusse', so 'Schleusse' was not only searching the people, 'Schleusse' was the building where the people were assembled, and also the things which they had to leave there. Everything was called 'Schleusse'. And our work consisted from outpacking all the luggage, all the cases, and sorting it out.

End of F490, Side A

F490, Side B

You were telling me about your first day in the new camp.

Yes. So the following day, the first day, we started to work in the 'Schleusse'. And I described what a 'Schleusse' meant. All the luggage was concentrated there, the luggage from all people, all these thousand people who arrived originally to Raasiku. And our job was to sort everything, like underwear together, dresses together, coats together. And then each of these according to the quality, first quality, second, third. And the things of the last quality were sometimes sent to other camps. Because during the time we realised that there were plenty of camps - we didn't know at the time how many - plenty of camps in Estonia, plenty of camps in Lithuania...in Latvia and Lithuania. And the first and second quality was always collected by the Lager commandant and his adjutant and these people. We didn't know that they were really selling them at that time. The work in this 'Schleusse' had its big advantages, because we were inside, we could help ourselves to good clothes.

Oh, you could take some for yourself?

We were not supposed to, but we did. And we helped ourselves to food, because there was food in it as well. Again, they didn't tell us we could, but they knew, and they didn't do much about it, because they were so concerned to get as much from it themselves. And mainly Anka and me, we were in charge of it, so we had a sort of privileged position. And they were very anxious to be on good terms with us, and us to find for them what they wanted. Later on, we found out how cruel they were. I will give you an example. One night, during the night, the adjutant woke us up, Anka and myself, and asked us to go to sort the best things, and he said, "You can have something really good to eat, good warm blankets, good dresses, the best one, because we will send it to your mothers. I am doing you a special favour." The same man shot the people a few weeks before. Why he wanted us to find the best things, because he wanted to sell the best things, and wanted us to choose and to find him the best things. So we wrote letters, were absolutely thrilled to be sending that to our mothers, and they were already three or four weeks....three weeks probably, dead.

You could write letters, or you...

Well, we enclosed the letters with the goods, but the mothers would never see them, they destroyed them, the mothers never received it, because that was a trick to get the best things.

They told you they would send the letters?

They would, yes, but they never did. And they never intended, because these were the same people who shot them before. So that was only one of these tricks. I just remembered...

How long did you work, per day, and did you get some food inbetween?

Yes, actually that was not too hard. Because we worked probably four hours in the morning, four hours in the afternoon. We had food from those things there, and at the same time we had three girls who cooked some warm soup, which we had at lunch time. So from that point of view, at this stage it wasn't hard. What was hard was that it was terribly cold. As I said, there was no heat. It was already the beginning of October when it started to be cold there. And there was no water, we had to walk to get water at a distance. And when we left...later, in November when we left the water in the bowl, it was so cold there in the morning, that the water was ice, and there was ice from the water. So that was hard because it was very cold there.

Didn't you have any blankets at all?

We took the blankets from the 'Schleusse', because this was our advantage. For all of us.

You took for the other girls as well?

Yes, because...that was not only us, all the girls worked in the 'Schleusse', but we were in charge, Anka and myself. But all the others at that time worked in the 'Schleusse'. And so we had good blankets at

the time, and we had good warm things. Because we choose the good things from that, you can imagine. But that work actually we did only say two months, maybe less, because then it was ready. And we started to fell trees in that forest, because as I said, the camp was in the forest. That was very hard, because it was very cold; but we learned to do it, and we were young, and we were still strong, so it was difficult, but manageable.

How did you do it? With saws, or...

With saws. They supplied the saws and they taught us how to do it, showed us how to do it.

They were men?

They were these SS men, Estonian SS. The name of the Commandant of the Lager was Alexander Laak, and he was sentenced to death, but before that he committed suicide. He lived in Canada at the time, and when all this came out he was so worried what was going to happen to him he committed suicide. And there was Ralf Gerets (SPELLS IT OUT), who was his adjutant, deputy commandant, and he was always with us, and he was in charge of the goods. And he was the man who told us to choose the best things for the mothers. And he was sentenced at that trial I mentioned previously, to death. And there was Jan Vijk (SPELLS IT OUT), and he was a guard, we didn't have much contact with him; and there was Ervin Mere, that's the man who lived in 1961 in Manchester. But we were more or less in contact, more contact with Gerets, and we called him 'Stonoska', do you know that Czech word, 'Stonoska', you can't translate it.

It was the name of an insect.

That was the name of the insect. And that's how we called him because he was very tall and he had very long legs and very long arms. And at the time he didn't behave...wasn't selfish, didn't behave to us very badly. Of course, we had to work hard, but we had to accept that. And then we worked in that forest. At the end of November we were sent, part of us, thirty of us, to Tallinn, to prison in Tallinn, and Anka and me we were in that transport. Whenever one of us was included in a transport the other one volunteered, because we wanted to be together. And before we went, we again had to assemble in a 'Schleusse', but I was lucky at that time, you know, we learned...I managed to smuggle my luggage through, one of these suitcases, and so I kept all my luggage. And strangely enough, I had with me the photographs of my parents, and the photograph of my fiancé, and until the very last day, through all these searches, I managed to smuggle that through, and I brought it home.

Fantastic.

Oh, they said that was my talisman. Always they did all the transport during the night, because everything seems to be worse during the night, and they expect that they can actually manipulate the people better during the night. And after not a very long journey, I would say three-quarters of an hour, one hour, we arrived to prison, to Tallinn prison.

It was a proper prison, or...

Prison. Proper prison building. And with big advantages between camps and prisons.

What were the advantages?

It sounds strange. Because you know the prison was built for people who were supposed to send them to be punished, but to be released after that punishment. The camps were built for people who were supposed to die anyway. And therefore... Then we arrived to the prison, we were in a cell, there was central heating, there was running water, everything...and there was a toilet, inside. It was not very nice, but there was all these hygienic things which were not in the camp. And we arrived there, and we were in that cell, and there were seven beds, you know, these sort of...(BREAK IN RECORDING) It was a sort of hammock. But the problem was, there were seven beds, these beds, and ten girls all the time. I have to emphasise, there were thirty girls, all young, from fifteen to twenty-one, and the other ladies stayed in the previous camp in Jagalla. And so we straight away put down our rules. 7 beds, 10 girls. So we slept, each of us, for 7 weeks on the bed, and the last 3 weeks 2 of us on the floor, and

because there was not enough room on the floor, always one had to sleep on the table. But all that was manageable. And we put down the rules. But we would share everything, every little food, everything, all which we were receiving we would share; that we would help the others; that we would not talk about the food, because when we started to talk about food we started to be more hungry; we shall wash properly every day, which was not such a sort of easy thing, because it was not too bad in prison but it was rather hard in Jagalla camp; and then we would try to look well all the time; and Anka, that friend of mine, she was a milliner, so later, when it was cold for example, she made for all our group, sort of woollen turbans. Because we had these woollen knickers, you know, the woollen knickers with very long legs, so actually, from one of those, we had three or four turbans. Anyway, even the SS did admire us, they would always saying that we always look alright and always look well, even if they're only sacks on us. And that was extremely important for the future.

They never shaved your hair?

Not until 1944. I will mention that, not until 1943. We still looked quite normal. We had our dress, and the dress had some sort of white strip here. Then we started to work, and we were told in the very beginning that we were going to work, to do some sewing. But this never happened, and they knew that this was not going to happen. We worked on the building site. And it sounds terrible like that, but we got used to it, and it wasn't as bad as it looked in the very beginning. We came there in the winter, when the nights were very long. Therefore actually at nine it was still dark, nine in the morning, and at two, half past two, it was already dark, which meant that we worked only...not so many hours. They told us, in summer you will be working twelve hours. We couldn't imagine that. But there, during the time, some of us learned and became really skilled bricklayers. We could do everything on the building site, 'Beton' and you name it. And to be used to it. And the people helped us...because we were not actually dependant only on that food in the prison. The usual day ration for the prison was 200 grammes of bread, and a litre of soup which was terrible, that was just a smelly soup which we ate. But we met on the building site the German workers, Estonian workers, because it was in the docks, because we were building...there was a building in the shipyard, and there were ships coming with Dutch marines, and they were extremely kind to us, and they offered us even a way to escape, because they could put us on the ships, and we both, Anka and myself were offered. But we thought...and this is what they were telling us, if you escape, your parents will be shot. But they were dead at the time! So we never dared to do it.

I see. They allowed you to mix with...were the Germans and Estonians, were they prisoners, or...

No, it's me not saying it clearly enough. I should say, SS or the SS people, or the other people, all the people who work in...because there was on that building where we were, there was some sort of steel workers as well. And all the people who work there were free people, free Estonians. And the German foremen who supervised us were either civilians, you know, people who were sent there from Germany instead to be sent to the front; some of them were members of 'Organization Todt', you know, organization, Todt, T.O.D.T. I don't know who that man was, Todt, but it was a uniformed organisation, but nothing connected with SS whatsoever. This was just a uniformed workforce, and they were very good to us, really...

Did they know who you were?

Oh yes, very well. And they were very good to us. For example, I had one of these men, a German, who helped me...I still remember his name, his name was Werner Moravec, and he came from Frankfurt, and I gave him a letter for my aunt, and he sent the letter to his wife, who lived in Frankfurt, because if he sent a letter to Czechoslovakia that was obvious, the SS knew where we were from. And she sent the letter, his wife sent it to Benesov, and the same day my aunt sent a letter to her, and a parcel to her, and she would send it to Tallinn, to me.

You actually got it?

I got it, yes. And for example, I wanted her to send us two died linen sheets, blue ones, and then with Anka we made our overalls from it. And I had contact with my aunt through this man all the time we were there.

How long was that?

For how long time? We came there in the beginning of December '42, and left December '43, the whole year.

And so you had exchanged several times.

Several times letters, which was very...this was dangerous for him. Therefore I said, when we started to talk, that I learned a hard lesson, that among all nations, you get good people and bad people, people who are brave and willing to help. And a lot of these German workers helped, and a lot of these Estonian workers helped. When I went there for that trial, in 1961, my photograph was in the paper, and one of these Estonian men, Juku, J-U-K-U, came to see me; we met after all that, yes, I gave him my silver...necklace.

It was a good experience.

Yes.

Did they bring you food, or...

Yes, food, bread. They gave us their soup, because some of them didn't like the soup. For them the soup wasn't good because that's what they had officially, in their canteen, but of course we were absolutely thrilled with that soup, in comparison with that prison soup. And when we worked there in the summer for these twelve hours, it wasn't too bad. But we had...Anka and myself, we had one very bad happening there. This was...we called it...'ping-pong with Mr. Bergmann', which is a sort of girlish saying, saying that he was dirty dangerous. What actually happened was...

Who was Mr. Bergmann?

This was the SS Sturmbandführer, the highest man in the whole of Estonia! And what actually happened, as I said before, we were very inexperienced, and somebody gave us a piece of bacon, on the building site, and not that bacon that you have here, that sort of Polish bacon, like a cube of fat, and with that sort of hard skin on it, you know, it looks like a cube...

And you can eat it raw can't you?

You can. And we ate everything what everybody gave us, somebody gave us. And what we did...and we had a sort of fireplace, fire things, on the building site, because it was very cold. And so we actually, we thought...we cut it in little pieces, and had it in little sort of...little pot...

Cook it.

Cook it, and then had it cold, and took it...stupidly, took it in the prison. Because we wanted to put it on the bread, didn't we. The same evening there was a search. And that Mr. Bergmann, who was a horrid man, found it. He came with his adjutant, searched, found it, and now the affair started. "Where do you have it from?" And he was holding that piece of...that hard piece from that bacon...can you follow what I'm trying to say...yes, the hard skin, in his hand. And we couldn't say who gave it to us, because that man would have been in terrible difficulties. So we said that we had it still from Prague, which was rather stupid, he could see straight away through it. So we said, "Do you have it in Prague?" And so with that skin, he started to hit us, like that and like that. And it was very dangerous, and terrible, and I said quietly in Czech to Anka, "Look, he's playing ping-pong!" (LAUGHING) Not much for laughing, but we were young. And then of course they left, and the trouble started. They came every Tuesday, every week, and always wanted to know where we had it from. With hindsight, I think these people wanted to justify their job there, because they didn't want to be sent to the front. And they had a big fuss, wrote everything we did, and were saying, "Nobody gave it to you because of your blue eyes, and you had something with him, and..." And it went on and on. Then we said that it was a German driver who came there for a few minutes, and he gave it to us, and oh, they started again. Of course it was that man who gave it to us, that 'Juku' I mentioned before, but we didn't want to...under any circumstances, because they would have sent him to the camp. So, but they came...I can

laugh about it, but at that time it was terrible. They came every Tuesday, and at the end we were so worried that we couldn't actually do anything. I remember every single thing that I took in the hand fell out, because I was so worried it was going to happen again on Tuesday.

Did they beat you, or...

Not until that moment. They only came and said...once they said they are going to send us in a 'Vernichtungs-Lager', sometimes, you know, or else they'll send us...they'll shoot us. Always something not very nice. And they left again. Then, after six weeks they came again, and in the very beginning they took me in an empty cell and took Anka somewhere else, I didn't know where to. And they said they were going to shoot us. Because this is what they were promising all the time. And I remember praying in that cell, and thinking about my uncle, and wishing to behave bravely, not to let them know. And after some time, which seemed to be of course endless, they took me out, and in the corridor I met Anka, who was taken back again, she was in tears, but she was still alive. So, I knew probably it's not as bad. And they took me down in the cellar, it was really very terrible this experience, of all these cold, dark corridors, and there I found this 'Obersturmbandführer' Bergmann, with an Estonian prisoner, lady prisoner, who was in tears as well, with a whip in her hand. I had to undress, naked, and she started to beat me. And I was told I had to count it. And so I did. And of course it was very painful. At the end, she finished, and he said, "That's not good enough". And he started to beat me. And they were trying to hit in the scar of the previous thing, and it was really terrible. Then he asked me to dress again, and started to chat me up. And he asked me if I know where my parents were. And he was the same man who shot them! And then I was brought up to the cell; I tried to describe our beds, and I told you that it was like a steel frame, and some sort of linen in between. We were so beaten up that during the night there was blood everywhere, not only in the beds, underneath, everywhere was full of blood. And next day we had to go to work. But the people there, all the workers they were extremely kind to us, we didn't need to work, they said openly what they thought about it. And we were sitting in that rest room, I would call it, the whole day, and that was the end of the affair. Actually it wasn't the end of the affair. What happened after two or three weeks, maybe four weeks, I can't remember, this driver came, and took Anka, and I was worried to death what happened to her. She came after four or five hours, and said, "You were lucky." What actually happened, she was driven to his private residence, was shown to the bathroom where a negligée was prepared, she had a bath, a good bath - she said, "I enjoyed that", and changed in that negligée, came out, and was worried what was happening. And when she appeared he said, "It's you. I didn't want you, I wanted your friend." Because they had the names mixed up. And this was the end of it. And so he had a chat with her, and she was driven back to the prison. So that was the end of the affair.

End of F490, Side B

F491, Side A

You said you wanted to add a few things to the things we talked about yesterday.

Yes. First of all, our philological problems. You know when I mentioned 'Stonoska', that adjutant Gerets, whom we called 'Stonoska'. I tried during the night, every evening with my cousin, and she's very good in languages, and so the German translation is, 'Tausend Füssler', and the English translation is 'centipede'.

Centipede. Yes.

Centipede, or some dictionaries say millepede. But centipede, millepede. And we called him like that because, you know, we had to smuggle a lot of things from these big stores if we wanted, and he was always everywhere, he had these long arms and long legs, and his eyes everywhere. And therefore we called him 'Stonoska'. And I think, it would probably be useful to say a few words about him. He was an Estonian Fascist, talking quite good German. Not all of them did speak German, but he did. I think his mother or father were German. And he was not allowed to talk with us, but he did sometimes. Sometimes he did in a nice way, if one can use that word, nice way, sometimes in a very cruel way. Say for example, once he was singing very very quietly, that melody of 'Lily Marlene' and Anka said, "Oh, you know Lily Marlene". And he said, "Of course, we Estonians are a cultured nation." And then he started to talk with us like that. But otherwise...for example, they distributed pieces of soap to us, and on that soap was 'R.J.F.', three initials, and he said, "Do yo know what that means?" And we said no. "That means, 'Reines Jüdisches Fett'." And he was right. This was made from those victims. Like these lampshades in Auschwitz, this was really made from it.

From the bones, wasn't it?

Yes, from the bones and from the flesh, and from the...I don't know how they made it, but that was true. But of course we didn't believe it. And then, the problem in Estonia was, that actually there were a lot of Estonian Fascists. The people were very...they didn't like the Russians, they were very much frightened of them, and there were these connections with the past, middle ages, the German knights and so on. And the German tradition. So it was quite strong there, for Germans. And then, later, pro Fascists. I think a lot of people joining the SS, joined the SA. And therefore the most people in the prisons and in the camps, in Estonia - because it was altogether two years there - we met there were Estonians. Only the poeple on the very top were Germans. And he told us for example when we complained, he said, "Mm! The Estonians were sent to Siberia by the Russians." And of course we didn't believe him, but it was true. So, these was this complicated political situation there. I would think even the workers who helped us, and who were very good to us, didn't like the Russians. Because when I was there during that trial in 1961, that 'Jugo' told me in his very very...not very good German or Russian, that they were always hoping that a big white boat will come to the river port, and it will take them to England. So, that was the situation in Estonia. This is what I was going to mention, because I think that's probably a bit missing, because we were with him, with that Gerets, that 'Stonoska', we were with him for the whole year. And then he was one of those people who was hung during that trial. And he was...it was amazing, that after these twenty years, during that trial, he was shocked when he saw us, he never expected...because we were five of us as witnesses there. He was absolutely taken back. He never expected that we stayed alive. And when he was describing what he was doing, shooting people and so on, suddenly he said, "And after we worked the whole day, we came home, and had something to eat" or something like that. And when the Judge asked him what do you mean, working, the working meant for him shooting people the whole day - that was work in his eyes. Still in 1961. That was one thing which I was thinking about. And the other thing, when we talk about this Tallinn prison, I thought I should have described one of our days in the prison, because I forgot about that yesterday.

You just mentioned that you went off to work.

Yes, so we got up always at 4 o'clock in the morning, and we had to clean the cell, that has to be spotlessly clean, really spotlessly clean.

How would you clean it? They gave you water and soap?

Yes, there was water, and we had a bit of soap...very little, but we had to clean everything. The beds had to be put up to the walls, and we put always the luggage what we still had, all the blankets, in between. And if it was not spotlessly clean, one girl was the Zimmerälteste, so she would have been sent to...they called it 'Karzer', it was like...

It was a special prison...

A special prison, 'Karzer'. And at 6 o'clock, one of these Estonian wardens came with the prison commandant, and she shouted 'Korale', that was an Estonian word for 'Achtung', To Attention, and we had to answer 'Tervig', which was again an Estonian word for, something like, German 'Servus' or 'Guten Tag', or something like that, like 'Hoorah' probably, that was the actual answer. And they counted us, and then he left again. And at 6 o'clock...that was at 6 o'clock, and according to the season, in the summer, already at half past six we were marched to the building site. That was through part of the town, and it was in the shipyard. And in summer we came back late, 7 o'clock, we worked there for the whole day, which meant that we missed the evening 'Korale' which we didn't regret; but in winter we were back already at 3 o'clock because it was very dark.

What about breakfast? Did they give something?

Well, we had a bit of...they called it coffee, it was sort of black water. And we had our ration of bread in the morning. And they brought us some sort of soup at lunchtime, to the building site. And in the evening we had always a sort of raw fish, which we didn't like, but thinking about that now, it was probably good, because probably there was quite a lot of things which we needed. We ate everything, but we didn't like it. So that was what I thought I should add to the description of the day there.

What happened if you came home early, how did you spend the rest of the day?

Well, you mustn't...you had to sit still, because whenever somebody came and shouted, 'Korale', everybody had to go to attention. And we were not supposed to have any paper, any pens, not to write, not to have any...we were not allowed to learn Estonian, not to have any newspapers. Of course we had all that which was forbidden of course.

Where did you keep it?

Hidden. You could always...you learned...when you are there, you just learn, you put it somewhere, behind the toilet, you stick it somewhere. And sometimes they found it, but that wasn't so bad. If they found it they gave you a few lashes, and that was it. And you can't...you couldn't live in these strict rules, because you had to do something. We didn't have any books, so what we did, each of us knew some of these Czech poems, so we recited the poems and wrote them down. Volker, you know, 'Jiri Volker' one of his most favourite lines. And so we did all that. And we were talking, and learned quite a bit, trying to learn Russian, trying to learn... And the workers in the shipyards, they brought us...if we wanted some sort of textbook or something, they would bring it to us. Of course all that was strictly forbidden. The 'Sangsgerot'(??), which is...and Czech songs, and then there was that 'Theresien March', which was...I don't know if you know it. I have it at home, even the translation, I can bring it to you. It's quite interesting, because I found it last year in Israel, when I was there, and I still remember it; of course it's in Czech. And we made our Estonian song, which was like something..."We are sitting in a small country called Estonia, we are thinking about Prague and our friends, and hoping hoping hoping..." it went like that, you know, go on like that about the bit I still remember. And so, but of course once, they said...that was late spring probably, '43, they said that we had some sort of infection, and we had quarantine, and we were not supposed to...isolation, and we had to stay inside, for quite a few days, in the prison. And then we realised what sort of blessing it was to go to work. Even if the work was hard, it was a blessing altogether because we had food, we were in fresh air. And so, at the end of our stay in this Tallinn prison, we were still strong and healthy, after a year in prison.

Did you ever meet any other prisoners in that prison?

Not at that time, no. We were strictly only our group. Because the prison was full of Estonian prisoners, but we were not allowed to talk to them, that was strictly forbidden.

You never saw them even?

We saw them. And, oh, I remember, when we were marched to the work, I found among the group of prisoners, men prisoners, walking in the opposite direction, a friend from Prague, who was not Jewish, he was there because he was in the Czech underground movement. And when we met he always shouted to me...he was from Prague, and he shouted to me, "Prague greets Kolin". And I shouted "Kolin greets Prague". (LAUGHS) But the other prisoners, the Jewish prisoners, we hadn't met until 1943, after we left Tallinn. And then I can go with this Tallinn business, because when we were in Tallinn, in the summer, I think it was either July or August 1942, the other group...

1942?

1943, sorry, '43. The other group...I mentioned that we were only thirty of us, sent to Tallinn, so the other group, this meant the girls who stayed in that camp, Jagalla, arrived to Tallinn as well, and joined us. I mentioned at the very beginning that we were seventy, so which meant that actually forty should have arrived, but they didn't, because in the meantime some of them were shot. We didn't know at the time, but what happened was...it's a complicated situation. Some of these girls became too friendly with the Lagerführer Laak...

With the Germans...

They were Estonians, the Fascists. Laak, and Herr Gerets, with both. They were the heads there, in Tallinn, in Estonia, you know; and the German Fascists always came from Riga, because in Riga there was the head office of all these SS...for all the Baltic States. So we met all the time with the Estonian SS. And so these girls became too friendly. And one of those, who was a beautiful girl, excellent singer, and she was a very clever girl, she kept asking the commandant, what happened to the other people from our transport, because she got to know from these young guards, who were guarding the camp - that was Jagalla, in that camp - and she got to know from them about the shooting. Not the details, but something, so she wanted to know. And he hated these questions. So by the morning...and that was at the time when I still was in Jagalla...the adjutant came, that was Geret, that 'stonoska' I mentioned before, came shouting, "Anka"...that was not that Anka, that friend of mine, that was this one, and Puppe, the other. And he took them away. And during that trial in 1961, it was established that he took them to this rifle range at Kalevi Liiva, and shot them there.

Because they asked questions?

Because they asked questions, and because some of those were too involved with them, and they wanted to enjoy it, to put it bluntly, but didn't want to have any sort of witnesses for that. And the other thing which happened before, which I forgot to say...no, no, that's alright, sorry, forget it. So when they arrived in the...

In the prison...

No, I am wrong. That was right what I wanted to say before. When we were in Jagalla, in that camp Jagalla, probably for a month, yes, a month, another transport came, and this was a transport of Jews from Frankfurt and Köln, exactly the same happened with them as with us. There was a selection at the railway station in Raasiku, about fifty German girls came and joined us, all men perished, and all the men were shot, these German Jews, and these fifty girls joined us. And then they were with us, part of them were with us in Tallinn prison, in one of these cells, and then the rest of them joined us, as I said, in Tallinn prison, in August 1943. So we were there in August 1943, all of us. Probably...I think at that time probably ten or twelve from the original number of seventy were shot. And they shot them, the same people whom we saw, shot them there at Kalevi Liiva.

And the others joined you in the prison.

Yes, in the prison. And started to work there as well.

Also in the same building...

In the same building. And we were there until...(LOOKING THROUGH PAPERS)...December 1943.

The 3rd of December '43.

The 1st of...doesn't matter. 1st of December '43. When we were in Tallinn, we still had some sort of connection with the fifty men who were originally with us in Jagalla, and three of our girls were married to the men there, and therefore of course they were very anxious to know what was happening to them. But since we left Tallinn, Reval or Tallinn, we never heard of them again. And none of them returned. So I assume that they were all shot after working in Tallinn.

The method of killing there was shooting rather than gassing people.

Shooting. Everything what I experienced, what I saw, was shooting. And during that trial in Tallinn, we were told that they shot all the people, in that Kalevi Liiva, that was for shooting. I don't know how, but they used...but it was shooting. And then on the 1st of December we had to face another transport, and that was a terrible transport. We were in cattle trucks for five days, without any food, very little water; we couldn't go to the toilets, it was very difficult, they stopped always for a very short time. There were these Estonian guards in that first wagon of that train, they were drunk, really drunk, and they didn't have any orders to shoot, but they did shoot all the time, people.

Shoot people in the carriages?

Yes. And it was terrible, because I still have...after coming home, I still was absolutely...like a sort of trauma. As soon as that train went through a tunnel, they started to shoot. And you don't know who was going to be hit. And after it was out, they just threw them away. And when I came home, I just couldn't...I was not able to take any train which went through a tunnel.

I can understand that.

And, imagine that Estonia is a very small country, travelling by train for five days, you have to go in circles. I don't think they knew exactly where they were supposed to take us. And therefore we went back to Reval(?), and back there, and back there. And then, one of these girls with us, her name was Hanka Fischer, her husband was among those men, among those fifty men. And when the train stopped, she just started to talk to one of these Estonian guards, and she asked him if he knows where her husband was, and he said to her...and that while we were there, "Do you want to know?" And she said "Yes." And he said, "Do you want to go there where he is?" And she said, "Of course I do." He shot her dead, like that.

Shot her?

Yes. And the situation got worse and worse. One of these girls with us, our girls, her name was Inge Sirten, S-I-R-T-E-N, Sirten, she was actually half Swedish. And she was in the camp by mistake, she was only...according to the Nürnberg Law she shouldn't be there, but that didn't matter, she was there. She was extremely beautiful, tall, beautiful hair, and she was like a...really very beautiful young girl. And very brave. And when the situation got so worse, and it looked so bad, when it looked...I didn't know what was going to happen, she said, "I have to go to see them." And so she bravely went in that wagon, where all these guards were...

They had a special wagon?

They had a special wagon.

But you had one with you who was shooting you.

Yes, but they changed places. There were plenty of them there, because the train was relatively long, there were plenty of them there. And so she went there, and since then the situation changed. And then when we arrived to...it was Kochtla, the name...no, Narva where we arrived, Narva, N-A-R-V-A, Narva, it's nearly on the Russian, the Soviet borders, on the Russian borders. A relatively big town, but we'd never been in the town. So when we arrived to that railway station, she was in that wagon with all these guards, and the Lager Commandant from that camp where we were going to go, met her for the first time. And he fell in love with her, but really in love with her. I will tell you later what happened. Anyway, we arrived to there. There were two camps near to Kochtla, K-O-C-H-T-L-A, and the first camp we came to, was Erroda, E-R-R-O-D-A, Erroda. And then, that was December 1943. There we, for the first time...this was an established camp, and there we met for the first time the Polish Jews. And it was like an encounter of two completely different worlds. We were young, having still our clothes, even with all the clothes that are sort of long stripes showing that you are a prisoner, but otherwise it was our clothes. We had hair. We spoke German, or Czech, but no Yiddish. Most of us didn't know much about Judaism. They were...some of them were elderly. Already they had been shaven. Not a lot of them spoke German; if they spoke German it was with a strong Yiddish accent, which the SS hated, because they were after this...you know, Rein...Germanian...whatever...race. And they hated us, and we hated them. The beginning was terrible, and they tried...they thought we were traitors, because we didn't have any sort of proper...according to them proper Jewish background. And we were...I would say that the SS treated us better. Because somehow they could more communicate with us. And so that was the beginning. Then they were... I don't blame them so much now, but how I blamed them then! But stealing from the other prisoners, was nothing wrong in their eyes, and it was the biggest crime in our eyes. And they were stealing from us, and they were extremely clever in it, really extremely skilled.

Did you share the same lodging, or did they keep you separate?

These were barracks. They could come anywhere they want, you know, and everything was open. So we tried to keep together, and we did. But everything was open. I remember, once we went for a short transport, only for two days, you know, to work somewhere; Anka and myself we were there and quite a few other girls. We got two portions of bread, each of us for these two days, and we had them here like. And after walking probably for...I don't know, one, two kilometers, my bread...or her bread actually, disappeared.

Were these Polish Jews walking with you?

Yes, they were in the group. And so we were very distressed. I said no, never mind, we share mine. And in ten minutes, or half an hour probably, mine disappeared! (LAUGHS) I watched it, I never noticed. Later, all these animosities...and we learned each other...you know, to understand each other better. So later the conditions improved a bit, and we got to... One of our girls got to know one of these young Polish boys, and we told him when he came to see us, "How is this possible?" And he was just so open about it, he said, "That's in your hand, like, this piece of bread, have it. You watch it. And I can tell you in ten minutes I have it." And even if we all watched it, he managed! So that...

Were boys with you then?

Yes, at that time men were in that Lager, and women, yes, and children. And this was...it was a very cold, very terrible Lager, no...

End of F491, Side A

F491, Side B

The problem was that we had to...we worked on the building site again, but that building site was quite a big distance from the Lager, and we had to walk and we had to get up very early, when it was still very very dark, walk quite a long way and then start to work, and then come back. There were some sort of fires, but we didn't have time to make the fire, and it was always cold there, so the beginning was very very hard. But now I will go back to this Inge Sirten, which I mentioned before, that beautiful girl. So she became the housekeeper for the Commandant, and she gradually ruled in the Lager.

She what?

Ruled in it, because she had such a sort of big influence on him, he really loved her. He was not SS, he was SA or something, he was not exactly SS but one of those...Schnabel was his name. And he managed that the children in the Lager, they got marmalade; she managed the children got some sort of sweets; and she was always nicely dressed. When she went through the Lager, the children were following her, the little Polish children, and there was, "Who is she? Who is that woman?" Because they'd never seen anybody like that before, you know, the Polish little children. "Who is she? Is she a princess? Is she a Madonna?" That went through all the Lager, "Who is she?" But of course, that relationship didn't stay a secret from the other SS. And he planned, the Lagerführer, planned to escape with her to Sweden. It was not impossible. And so he got two horses, and she could ride, and they were escaping, but the informers informed the SS, and a big hunt started, and when he realised that they couldn't escape he shot her and shot himself. That was the end of the story.

Did things change in the lager afterwards, when she wasn't there any more?

No, the children didn't have any sweets, any sort of things, and a lot of people...it was amazing, these things brought the people together. But the Polish Jews started to understand more about us, and, you know, they never actually agreed with us and with our attitude to the faith, and with our... We didn't do anything wrong, you know, because you couldn't do, but they were brought up so differently. So this was the beginning of the state in Erroda. But about two or three months later, maybe only two months, they decided that it will be better to build a Lager near to the building site. And this is when they started - when we started actually, because we were marched there and we built up the new camp, and that camp was called Goldfilds. Goldfilds, which is a funny sort of English name, G-O-L-D-F-I-L-D-S, Goldfilds.

Goldfield.

And it was...that was an Estonian name, actually it was the name of that little village there, can't call it a village, a little settling. And we worked there, and we worked there in the very beginning on the building site. And there was a big labour force, German labour force, all this 'Organisation Todt', that's the organisation I mentioned yesterday. It was called 'Organisation Todt'.

How do you spell this?

Todt, T-O-D-T, like if somebody's dead in German.(LAUGHS). And this was a sort of uniformed German, uniformed German labour force. They came from Germany, and instead of joining the army, or maybe it was in the way they were sent after joining the army, they were ordered to go and work there. Most of them were bricklayers and people who were used to work on the building site.

Was it a sort of punishment for them to work there, or...

No, I think they were quite pleased. I think it was better for them, not to go to the front, to build these. And most of them were very decent people, very decent, they behaved very well to us. And a little group of our girls, Anka and myself included, were ordered after some time to work in the 'Organisation Todt' kitchen, and we worked in the senior staff kitchen, and a few other girls in the workers' kitchen, which was a big advantage, because we were working inside, and you can imagine we have enough to eat. And the people there, the men, this was the engineers there and the people, the

architects too - because they were building their houses and so on - they were good to us. I can't say anything but this.

That was the senior staff?

The senior staff. But they were very good to us. They treated us as if we were not Jewish. So not all...I don't know how they would have taken it, say, in Germany, but there they treated us very well. And the German lady who was in charge of the kitchen, she was not a member of that 'Organisation Todt', but probably she volunteered to go there, I don't know. Anyway, her name was Mrs. Fertig, and she was relatively alright to us as well; not so friendly as the men, but she was alright. And we were there of course...because we arrived in December, so we were there at Christmas time. And the Lagerführer in that new Lager, his name was Stiewitz, S-T-I-E-W-I-T-Z, Stiewitz. He was a very handsome man, but he was a terrible sadist, terrible sadist. Everybody was frightened of him. He was very moody, you didn't know what he was going to do...young man...to do next. Anyway, this Mrs. Fertig decided to send him a present, Christmas present, a bottle, and we were supposed to take it there to him, which was like going in a lion's den. It was terrible. And there were four or five of us, and only Anka and myself spoke German, so the others couldn't go there, that was impossible. So we drew lots, what to do, and it was my turn. You can imagine how fraught I was. And I came in, passed the message. He was relatively friendly, and he said...and that was an evening of course..."When you are here, make me the fire", in his fireplace. And there were only just very big logs, only a few matches, and I was never skilled in making fires, I never could do it well anyway. So it was a very complicated situation. I tried, and of course it didn't work. And he got more and more cross. And the matches were disappearing of course, and there were only a few left, and he said, "So what's wrong with you? You can't have any fire yourself if you can't make that fire. If you don't do it this time, tomorrow morning you get 25 lashes on the upperplatz." That was not talk, he would do it. And I don't know how, but I looked at him and I said to him, "Maybe you have some fire, let's try yourself." Which was absolutely unbelievable.

What, maybe you have some fire...

More fire, like, more energy, more fire like. Which was meant in a sexual way, more fire. And he tried, and it was an impossible task of course, he didn't manage. He said, "Go in the camp and send somebody with dry wood here...and...you are cheeky, but I like you." But that was a warning, that was not a compliment; I was very worried when he said that. Anyway, that was the end of it.

You didn't get any lashes?

I didn't get any lashes. And he always...yes, and it had a continuation. So we stayed in that kitchen for...until...I would say until March.

When you had the Christmas celebration, did you take part in this, when you said it was Christmas time, or did they do...

(BREAK IN RECORDING) So, this was a very nice Christmas. It sounds very unbelievable, but we were cooking Christmas meals for the senior staff. They were only six, seven of these men there, because it was really the senior staff of the building site.

What did you cook?

It was of course Mrs. Fertig who was in charge, so it was just a sort of usual German, or even I would say Czech meal, you know, it was fish and potato salad, and apple strudel and all that. And of course we knew how to make it, so we helped her. And there were drinks. And we served the meals. We were dressed, because we still had the dresses don't forget, because we had less and less, but we still had some. And we joined them there at the table, and we ate with them, we danced with them. And so that was our Christmas that year, which is unbelievable for the other prisoners, but that's the truth.

Well at least you were warm, and you had something to eat.

We were warm, and we had to eat, and...we had Christmas, celebrated Christmas. We sang the carols, and the songs, you know, we all knew the German...not all, but some of us knew the German songs. So it was sort of a German Christmas. (LAUGHS) So that's the answer. But sometimes, February, maybe March '44 that ought to be already - is that right? Yes. '44, we were all sacked from these kitchens; not only us from the senior staff kitchen, but also the girls from the labourer's kitchen. And we started again to go to the building site. We never...weguessed, we never knew what the reason was.

Before you do that, did everybody in the camp work on the building site, or what happened to the rest of the...

Oh yes, the other people worked on the building site.

And what happened to the children then?

The children...only the young people who were...'arbeitsfähig'...able to work, they came to this Lager, the others were taken in the other Lager.

And they did nothing all day, or...

I don't know really. Something in the camp maybe, but I don't want to say things which I didn't see really.

You don't know what they got to eat, or...

I don't know. They had the usual...I know what they had, they had the usual ration, which was always 200 grammes of bread, and one litre of soup, and that stupid liquid in the morning, which was called coffee. And so that was what they had.

Did you ever have to stand in the morning to have this roll call as they did in other camps?

Oh yes, we had these roll calls, but not yet, that was later when...not in this camp, I don't...yes, maybe we had some, but I don't remember that exactly, to be honest. I remember very well those in Germany later, but I don't remember very well in the camp here.

It probably was different there.

It was much more...the camps in Estonia were different. At least they were different for me. And so...

You were sacked from the kitchens.

We were sacked, and started to go again to the building site. Anyway, Anka and myself didn't stay very long there, and were by this Lagerführer, who didn't forget me, ordered to work for the prisoners' kitchen, which was better, because you didn't...but of course, you couldn't have anything more to eat, because if you ate there you were actually stealing it from the other people. So from that point of view it was not a big advantage, but still you had more hot water than everybody else had, you had better possibility for washing because you had...you had probably as much hot water as you wanted. It sounds nothing here, but it was great there. And it was better. The lady in charge there, her name was Anuska; she was Polish and a very beautiful girl, lady, her husband was there as well.

Her husband was there?

Was there, yes. And we slept in a room adjoining the kitchen.

You did not sleep in the cell?

No, there were no cells there, it was a camp, barracks. And when we were ordered to go to the kitchen we moved from that usual barrack where we slept before, to a room which adjoined the kitchen, which was again a big advantage because it was warm there. The problem was, Anuska was, even in Poland, a sort of bar girl, she didn't take things so seriously as we did. And it was known in the camp that she

was mistress of Stiewitz. But she was good to me, I have to emphasise that again and again, she was very good to me. And one morning she called us in, and she said, "The Lagerführer wanted me to give him a list of girls, as we have the night shift." Because every few times you had to make the soup for the people for the morning, and that had to be...you had to start at one o'clock in the morning or something, to be ready, because everything took a long time, until it started to boil. So you had to start really in the middle of the night. And she said he wanted that list. "As far as I know him, he's after one of you. If you want to do it, it's your choice. If you don't, and if you are able to do everything to wake me up, I go there." Which was very nice of her. And I guessed it was...

He wanted the shift of the girls working at night.

Yes. Because he wanted to get...

To use them, yes.

Yes. And he drank a lot as well. And so I had that night shift with a friend of mine, Anka, and we were there, worrying what was going to happen. And then suddenly, you know...and we always locked everything there. And that was his order, to lock the kitchen, really locked, properly. And then big bangs, and, "Open the door!" And I said, "The Lagerführer ordered us not to open the door to anybody." He said, "It's me, open the door!" "How can I know that it's you?" So, I said, "The order is that I have to wake up Anuska. And then we open the door, and we shall see if it's the Lagerführer. I can't believe it's the Lagerführer." So I woke up her, she came there, and there was him of course, which I knew from the very beginning, because the other men have a completely different accent. And he said, "Come with me, and make me breakfast."

To you?

To me. And I said, "I have to cook here in the kitchen. And Anuska said, "If you like, I go with you." And he said, "Oh, you old whore, come with me." And so she went with him, and that was the end of the story.

It happened again?

No, it didn't happen again. And I don't want to get any sort of credit for it myself, because it was Anuska who saved me, not me. And funnily enough, he remembered me all the time, and whenever there was a transport from there, and he knew which sort of transport they were, like death transports, he never put me in. So, that was the affair with him.

So he saved you, somehow.

In a way he saved me.

And your friend Anka as well?

As well, yes, Anka is now in Israel, yes. We stayed in Goldfilds until August 1944. At that time the Russian army started to advance in that direction, and they started...the Germans started with the evacuation.

And if you stayed there until 1944, that meant since December '42 till August 1944. That was a year and a half.

Yes. We were actually altogether. I was in Estonia from September, the beginning of September '42, until August '44. So practically two years, nearly two years.

And the whole time you stayed in that camp you worked either in the kitchen or on the building site?

Not exactly. Because I didn't say about these little transports which were not really transports, they were something, we were sent say for a week to help with a crop of potatoes to the agriculture, or in the spring to...

Weed?

Weed. How do you say to...'jednosti hrepa', do you know how to say 'jednosti hrepa' in English?

Oh, to single out the weeds.

To single out the weeds. Or something like that. But this was only always for a week, so we didn't stay at one place like that. But that would be such a sort of...there's nothing really very interesting to talk about.

Where did you stay when you did this?

Oh, on the farm. And always guarded by the...there was always a...

No chance to escape from these places.

I don't think so. But I think there was a chance, but we didn't want to. This is what I meant, we could escape before. I was once sent on my own from the building site in Tallinn, all the way walking on my own, back to the prison. And I didn't escape. Because we were told, as I mentioned before, that if we do, the parents will be shot. And we were absolutely sure that the parents lived, because they were always telling us they are in the Wintlager. And so we didn't want to harm them. We had dozens and one possibilities to escape. So in August '44...

Did the farmers behave well to you when you stayed with them?

Yes, relatively well, yes. We had more to eat and we had milk when we were on the farm. So, actually, until August '44 we still were...our group was healthy, young, and relatively well.

How long did it take you to recover from this very bad beating you had when you were bleeding and you had an open wound?

Yes. I don't remember well, but I remember sitting on the first day there in that rest room, feeling really awful, but later...you know, we were young, and everything healed well. And we kept...that was probably our advantage, we kept very clean, and that was one of these rules. We washed and washed, and even if we didn't have enough soap, we washed and we kept clean. A lot of people whom we met in these camps, which I was just describing, in those...in Erroda, they had a lot of furunculosis. And a lot of things were obviously caught by malnutrition and these sort of things, but a lot of things were caught because they were dirty, they didn't wash enough. What I forgot to say is, before I come to this evacuation, that these Polish Jews told us for the first time about the murdering of Jews in Riga, that was the other place in Estonia. They told us about murders in Poland. They knew all that. And that was for the first time when we started to doubt if we would ever see the parents again. But of course we never lost hope. It's strange, because it's probably...human, one doesn't want to believe these sorts of things. And they told us also about two Czech transports from Terezin who came to Riga, and when these transports arrived to Riga, when they were marched from the railway station, and when they passed a hill which was called 'Parnass', they already knew that they were not going to go to the ghetto, but they were going to be shot there. And that was known to them already on the train. I don't know how they got to know, anyway they knew. And they actually attacked these Jews, the men, young men, attacked the Jews with their razor blades. And they killed some of them. And this was one of those things which all these other Polish Jews appreciated very much, because these were people who really started to fight.

Sorry, who attacked, the prisoners attacked the Germans?

The SS. Yes. With these razor blades, which they still had because they had their luggage, they still had their razor blades in their..

They tried to fight back.

They tried to... Of course they were shot. But they knew they were going to be shot anyway, but they really did fight.

Did none of them manage to escape?

No, no. There was no escape. If somebody... You know, this is...I used to give a lot of talks in Prague and everywhere after, and the people couldn't believe, couldn't understand, I had always the question, "Why didn't you fight back?" But you couldn't, because, how could you fight back if you haven't got anything in your hands, no guns, nothing, and you are surrounded by people having tanks and having big machinery, war machinery and everything. And they only want to kill you. So if you start to do it, you are playing into their hands. So now I can go to the evacuation.

Before the evacuation, can you tell me a little how you eventually got on with the Polish Jews.

The situation improved. We didn't get friendly with all of them; the situation improved because some of those we started to sing together Polish songs and Czech songs, and they started to talk with us. This is when they told us about the situation, what happened. And they could see some positive traits of our characters, and we learned to see some good ones of theirs. But we never were really friends. But when I say that, we really couldn't be friendly because we stayed in that first camp, Erroda, a very short time, and then we were straight away transferred to the other camp, Goldfilds, and in Goldfilds there were no Polish Jews at all in Goldfilds, on that building site where we worked.

Do you know what happened to the Polish Jews who stayed there?

No, I don't. And there were some transports from Erroda, and from Goldfilds, but we were not included in these transports. And I don't think they stayed alive actually. I forgot actually to say that our hair was shaven in Erroda, when we were Erroda. We were very...you can imagine how we felt, and we blamed at that time, that it was some sort of intrigues of the Polish women, because they were shaven and wanted us to be shaven. But we got some sort of white cloth at that time, and we straight away made turbans, so nobody could see at that time how we looked. But of course we were very very upset when this happened. The excuse given was that we had lice, but we never had lice, we never had them, because as I mentioned we really tried to keep very very clean.

Did the hair grow eventually?

Yes, it grew very well actually. Sometimes they were better afterwards, but unfortunately they were shaven again.

They didn't allow you to grow it?

They didn't, they were shaven again when we were in Stuthof, yes. But of course, then they didn't shave it any more, and I had quite a bit of hair, and coming home it was not completely bald.

End of F491, Side B

F492, Side A

You were telling me about the evacuation from the camp Goldfeld.

That's right. That started sometime in September...August 1944. As I said, that was the time when the Russian army started to advance on that front, and therefore they started with the evacuation. They wanted of course to evacuate in the first place the German people, and then the SS Fascists - the Estonian SS, because they were frightened. And the last was us. They concentrated...we were quite a long way again on the journey, but it was a very short distance. But again they didn't know where to send us. In the very beginning we came to Tallinn, thinking that we were going to Tallinn.

To where?

To Tallinn, that capital in Estonia, Tallinn, thinking that we would board the ship there. The ship was there, but not for us, because all the other people had priorities. So they took us again from Tallinn, to a little place which was called Lagodi, L-A-G-O-D-I. This was only something like 6 kilometers from Tallinn, and that was just only a glossy field, without any sheds, without anything.

Did you say a 'glossy'(SAYS THE WORD VERY DEFINITELY) field?

Glossy field...like a huge field. And at this time... I know, I forgot to say something. When we were still in Tallinn prison...very sorry for that...when we were still in Tallinn prison, sometime in April 1943, they confiscated our blankets. So that was something which we valued so much, but they confiscated them, so we didn't have the blankets. But we still had at that time our...quite a few dresses and our underwear, and these sort of things. We still had that. And we had these still when we were evacuated from Goldfelds to Lagodi. Is that clear? And then we came on that big, huge field, it was already cold, September, and we had to sleep and to stay there, without anything, like that, for a fortnight. Sleeping...

In the open?

Sleeping in the open, and no blankets, sleeping rough like that. We were digging trenches at that time.

Did you have something to dig with?

Yes, they gave us something. But that was not the main purpose, we just didn't do much. There was very little food because there was no supplies, very little food. We were losing weight rapidly at that time. And gradually they concentrated on this big field; when I say big, I mean really huge, 6,000 people, and these were the whole Jews, all the Jews which remained at that time in the Baltic States; not only in Estonia, but in Latvia and Lithuania as well. So who wasn't in there, was obviously shot before. You know what I mean? So that actually...that was for us again, if the parents weren't there, where could they be? But this was too late to escape now, just too late.

Were you surrounded by...

Yes, we were surrounded, there were dozens and dozens of SS, and everybody frightened, and we didn't know where to escape. But it was impossible to escape. I remember two girls running - not from our group - running to get some sort of potatoes, because there was a potato field, and they shot them straight away, shot them dead. That was it. And they were...as I said, there were 6,000 people on that field. One Sunday, the Obershauführer(??) Bodmann, came, Bodmann, B-O-D-M-A-N-N, and he was the highest person - he was a German SS - the highest person in the whole area. And he gave a sort of speech to people. In the very beginning there was a selection, and he divided the people in two groups, 3,000 and 3,000. And we had to run in front of him, you know, to show if we can run. It was terrible scenes. We were still relatively young, and we could run, but the older ladies - which I say older now, I would think thirty or forty - they were trying to massage like that, their cheek, to look a bit more healthy, and tried to walk of course, and run, and couldn't. Anyway, so he divided... And then he had a talk to those selected 3,000 people, saying to them that they are going to go to a very good camp, they are going to prepare everything there for the other people, and oh, and beware them to do

everything exactly, because if you don't you will be punished. And so on, so on. And there were already lorries, taking these unlucky people to the near forest and they were all shot there.

You could hear that?

You could hear that. Yes, I forgot to say that they...after a fortnight staying in the rough, sleeping in the rough, they erected sort of very primitive shelters for us. It was only from...it was from wood of course, and it looked more or less like dog kennels. It was something which didn't have any floor, didn't have any walls, and if you only imagine roofs, so you had to kneel and to come down on the floor to be able to go in, because it was so low. And we slept there.

How did they feed you in that fortnight when there was nothing?

Nothing much, a bit of...I don't know if they made any sort of...soup or something, but we were terribly hungry then. Because nobody cared about us, because they thought if we died, better, you see, because they didn't know what to do with us anyway. So after being there for these...I think altogether...I think altogether a month on that field, which felt like eternity. And we were transported, these 3,000 - that was our group, the remaining girls, our group; I mentioned at the very beginning these, what I called elderly ladies in our group, they were not really old, they were about 30 or 40, and only one of them returned, all the others perished anyway. And there were Polish Jews mostly; some Jews from Latvia, and a few Hungarian Jews, and I don't remember how they came there, but they were there, very few. And we boarded a ship in Tallinn - Tallinn was a port of course, is a port, and we boarded a ship...

It was near Tallinn, this camp.

This camp was about six miles, maybe, I don't know, near to Tallinn, and they then...then we walked to the port, and there we saw other prisoners, very distressed, digging trenches, and they didn't know if they were digging trenches or digging mass graves for the people, they weren't sure what they were doing really. Finally we boarded a ship in Tallinn, and we were all in the...you can't say underdeck for the ship, you know, at the bottom, what's the English...

The lower deck.

The lower deck. We were very cramped. No water, no food. It was terrible there. And the Lagerführer Laak, that was the Lagerführer who was with us all the time, the Estonian Lagerführer from Jagalla, he came to...

He still came with you.

Yes, from Jagalla he came too...I don't remember Gerets, that adjutant, I remember him coming, and coming on the boat, and I don't know if he was going with us. Obviously he wanted to go to Germany, because he was worried what was going to happen to him. After the war, when I...I'm mentioning all the time that trial in Tallinn, we found out that he was selling all those things from the 'Schleusse' in Jagalla, all these first and second quality, and then he gradually became the richest man in Tallinn. And he managed to escape, I don't know how, to Canada, later. Anyway, we were on that ship, and arrived after a few days sailing, to Danzig, now Gdansk. And from there we went by such a sort of motor boat, on a river, don't remember the name of the river, but on the river to the concentration camp, Stuthof.

How do you spell that?

Stuthof, S-T-U-T-H-O-F, like hof, Stuthof. And that was actually the first real German concentration camp I saw. It was...shouting, and the terrible organisation there, or disorganisation; it was a really terrible camp. Nothing in comparison with what we experienced before.

What happened when you arrived?

We arrived and we were straight away marched in these wash houses, where we had to undress. Everything that we had on at that moment was taken from us, including a toothbrush which we missed

terribly, soap, 'esschuss'...what was the name of that...mess tin, spoons...we didn't have anything at all. And there were these mainly German Kapos, like prisoners, but they were not only German, I experienced one which was Greek, and she was terrible. And these were always the people...the worst people were in charge, that was on purpose. I don't know if somebody else mentioned that to you, the people in German camps had these different triangles. Everybody had his transport number here, and next to the transport number was a little triangle. Jews had yellow triangles, the political prisoners had red triangles, the homosexuals had violet triangles, and the criminals...I mean, somebody like murderers, had green triangles. And in charge in all these German camps were always the people with these green triangles. That must have been on purpose. And so...and then we came in a room, which was not terribly big, a hundred women; there were no beds, nothing. We had to sleep on the floor...

Did you get some clothes then?

Yes, they gave us some sort of very primitive things, but it was only...but it was still like autumn, so it was a sort of skirt and blouse, but it's flattering if you call it...I never had that striped uniform, never ever, we had always some sort of old dresses or something like that. And we were...this was absolutely...there was no organisation. When food was distributed, there was not enough of these mess tins, so you had to have the mess tin from somebody else. Some people who were very...you know, with elbows, they would have three soups and we had nothing probably because we were not able to fight so well. And that Lagress, 'Zimmerälteste' in our room...

What?

'Zimmerälteste', that Kapo, in our room, she was Greek, and she was in the camp because she murdered her husband and two children. So you can imagine what sort of person she was. And she had a special room in that big room, and when the women in that room were noisy during the night, which was obvious because there was no room where to sleep, she just ordered five women to bring...not kettles...

Buckets?

Buckets, buckets of cold water, and she threw all that cold water on us. So we were actually...we were lying in cold water the whole night. She was sadistic, she was horrid. And there was no food. And so we stayed in that Stuthof, I think I stayed there until October...only four weeks, until 15th October 1944. So actually only four weeks, but it looked terribly long because it was horrible. We were really starving, and there was nothing to do. This was a sort of 'Vernichtungslager'.

All day you just...

Nothing to do. We were looking round and thinking what's going to happen, and...

Could you walk around at all in the camp?

Yes, I think we could. These camps, it was always say, three barracks. The camp was huge, three barracks formed some sort of unit, which was divided from the other barracks, and there was a little ground around. So you can walk that way around, but there was nothing much pleasurable in walking there, but you could go there.

Did you meet or find people you knew?

Not at that time, I don't remember meeting anybody there. Later on that train I met a few friends. But I'm not absolutely sure.

But you'll come to that.

Yes. And then there was a transport from Stuthof, and we volunteered, Anka and myself, and practically all our group. And we had quite a big advantage in comparison with most of the others, because, in spite of everything bad that happened to us, we still looked better and looked healthier and looked stronger. And it was a transport, you know, work transport. And that was a transport from Stuthof to the concentration camp, Neuengamme, in Germany. And...you want me to spell that,

Neuengamme, it's like two words, Neuen, like Germany Neue, new, and gamme, G-A-M-M-E. But we didn't stay directly in Neuengamme, we were sent to a branch of this concentration camp which was called Oxenzoll, again German spelling, Oxenzoll, Z-O-L-L. I think one word, but I can't swear on that. I think it was one word. And we were there, which, that Oxenzoll, it was a hygienic camp; it was a camp with a very strict German SS supervision, and with a very sadistic commandant, but we were allowed to have the administration of food in our hands, which was a big advantage because we did it just...everybody had...and we managed to have these mess tins for each of us, and we had very little food but everybody had a bit, which was not the case in Stuthof.

Was this camp near Hamburg?

Near Hamburg. It was not far from Hamburg. Oxenzoll, I think Oxenzoll is the name of the suburb, I think it still exists, and everybody said Oxenzoll so we called it Oxenzoll. Maybe if somebody looks in some sort of documentation it will be only called...I don't know, number so-and-so, of the concentration camp Neuengamme. And we were working in the munition factory.

Well describe the camp a little. You organised your own food.

Yes, and we had the usual...the camp was...three stores like, and we had... We didn't have any belongings any more, and we managed to get some sort of pieces of material or something to clean our teeth, at least with that. And two German girls from our group were in charge of the food, and everything was fine. We had very little food, we had this time only 150 grammes of bread per day, and a bit of soup, and that was all. One teaspoon of marmalade, teaspoon...jam...marmalade, jam.

Did you have coffee, or some sort of...

Some sort of coffee, you can't call it coffee, some sort of dark water, in the morning. And we worked twelve hours night shift...12-hour shifts every day, excluding Sunday of course, twelve hours night shift one week, twelve hours day shift the other week. And when we...I wanted to describe how it looked actually when we had this night shift, because that was really horrid. We had to get up at four o'clock in the morning, and this was calling, "Nachtschift aufstehen, Nachtschift aufstehen". And we'd get up at three o'clock in the morning, get the food at four o'clock, and we had the food for the whole twelve hours, but of course we ate it straight away, because we were so hungry. Then we had to wait fourteen hours. And then we had to go straight away to this Appellplatz, roll call, and there we waited until we had to be marched to this munition factory. Sometimes we waited there for one hour, but if something went wrong we would be there for hours. I remember once returning from the night shift and we had to stand there for the whole twelve hours. And we stood there, that was like a punishment, because we worked in this munition factory, and this was piece work, and I worked on a Capstan; C-A-P-S-T-A-N, it's a...in the munition factory, you find it there...

What did you make?

What you put in the...we made the shots. And we had to fulfil our quota every day, because it was piece work as I said. It was impossible, because it was too high. But we had to manage at least twice a week, and if we didn't we would get 25 lashes again. So that was always like a sort of... Always like that. And when say the factory reported that we didn't work hard enough, we would stand on that Appellplatz for hours. Or once what happened, one of these young girls, Polish girl, got an apple from somebody there in the factory, and her good friend was very ill in the sick bay, within the camp. She brought that apple there. Unfortunately that girl slept...because she was not allowed to go there, she should have left it there. And before the girl awakened, and could eat it, the Lagerführer saw the apple, and he started to beat that ill girl. Therefore this girl who brought it just said it was her who brought it. And it was in winter. And she had to stand in the middle of the appelplatz. He ordered to bring buckets with cold water, and they were thrown on her, that froze on her that water, and we had to stand there the whole night, watching how she was dying, because she died there of cold, being frozen. So, and that was a time...this was a very very hard time. Gradually some German students, girl students, started to work in the factory, checking the production, if everything was correct. And they again started to help us. And they brought us a bit of food...not all, because they didn't have much at that time themselves. And one of them, when I asked her, agreed to send a letter again to my aunt in Benesov. So you know...

Direct?

Direct, no, from Germany. And you know, I tried all the time, because I was very close to this aunt of mine. And so, after some time, she came back and brought that letter looking cross and worried, and said, "It's in Czech!" And what happened, the aunt wrote a letter. When I read it, I was absolutely petrified. She said, "I am writing this time to you in Czech, because I feel, I had always to have it translated by somebody because as you know I can't speak any German, and I feel those previous letters I ever sent were not sincere enough, and so I wanted to tell you that the war is not going to last very long, everything is going to be alright; the daughters are still in Terezín." All this in full...written like that! I was astonished. I straight away tore it up and put it in the toilet, because I put it in the toilet of course. Nothing happened. But imagine if somebody discovered that! But, when I returned I asked her, "Why did you do it?" "Oh, I felt so sorry, I just thought all these previous letters were so cool, I must write something to cheer you up!" (LAUGHS)

Could have killed you.

Yes. And of course at that time, as I mentioned, it was very near to Hamburg. There were these very big raids on Hamburg, air raids. And that was usually during the night, and that was the greatest time for us, because there was a clock in the middle of the huge hall where we worked, and under the clock there were different sort of lights, which was like for an alarm, thief alarm, and so on, you know, the different stages. (You can't translate that in English). And we were not allowed to leave the hall before thief alarm started. But when we were sitting there, in front of the toilets practically, and were ever so happy. First of all we didn't need to work, we could sleep, and we sometimes sung, which made them totally furious, the Germans. Because it was a great feeling that, first of all, this time they were frightened, and there was somebody very high above, who had the same feelings and the same desire, just to destroy them. And so we worked there, and we stayed there actually until the beginning of April 1945, in Hamburg, in that camp, and it was really a very hard time. Because the work was really strenuous, and we had very little food, nothing to complement it, because that's what I said, eventually which we got from a few of these girls, this was much later, and very very little.

I suppose when you got back you just slept.

Yes, we slept. And then we woke up, because the hunger woke us up, because we were so hungry. So, and then, sometime at the beginning of April we started to see that the Germans were very agitated, and everybody...and mainly the SS were very worried, and everything started to be very tense, everybody started to be very tense. And there were some foreign workers, free people, and they brought us newspapers, and they started to whisper about the allies coming near...being near.

Which nationality were the foreign workers?

They were mainly...they were Italian some, I think they were...I don't know really. I don't know exactly. But I don't think Polish, Polish were not there.

But they spoke German, did they?

They spoke German well. Also we could understand a bit of French and we could understand a few... Because a lot of these girls were well educated, so we could speak languages. So that was again our advantage, in comparison with some other people. Then we were thinking, is Hamburg going to be a front line city, what is going to happen? But then of course, they didn't want us to stay there, and to be liberated, so...

End of F492, Side B

F492, Side B

So I think it was on the 2nd of April, when the 'Blockälteste' came, and everybody, and the German... Because in this camp there was a German 'Aufseherinnen', German Kapos, 'Aufseherinnen', and they were very sadistic. Sometimes they were worse than the men were. And they came and, "Quick, quick, a transport." And again they put us in the cattle trucks. And there we were, and we were in it for five days. They didn't know where to take us. We had no food at all, very little water. And we went three times through Hamburg, and at the end we unloaded in a place called Celle, near Hannover. I think the spelling is C-E-L-L-E, Celle, near Hannover. And from there, they marched us to Belsen, to Bergen-Belsen.

Marched?

Yes, we walked all the way. And that was, as is well known here, a 'Vernichtungslager'. In comparison with this Stuthof, Stuthof was a sanatorium in comparison with Bergen. I call it sometimes Bergen, you call it always Belsen, that's the same thing. And there was filth and lice and bugs everywhere, that's just impossible to describe. The people were dying like flies. Nobody had pity on them, nor on anybody. Nobody offered to a dying person a cup of water, because there was no water, no cups. The dead people, the bodies, were lying everywhere. Everywhere, like, you know, when you have logs in the forest, in these groups like, so were the bodies there, in open...like sort of logs, sort of cubes of bodies...

Heaps.

Heaps of bodies, looking symmetrical. And we slept...or slept...the camp was overcrowded, there were camp beds, so-called camp beds, but they usually were for three people, one, two, three, like that, above each other. But we were twelve of us in these silly beds; in each bed four, which you couldn't sleep, because you couldn't actually stretch your legs at all. If you had to go out during the night you will fall over somebody who died during the night. I don't remember gas chambers because people were dying there anyway, and we met a few Czech girls there, and they told us...they were skin really, absolutely, you know, and they said, "Everybody's going to die here, it's impossible to survive here." And we could see that it was true, because we had some sort of soup at lunchtime, but again, they took all these mess tins from us, and so until you get something...and you look at this tin, you haven't got any soup; everybody wanted the soup and it was so disorganised that the people would throw that thing over, with the...

Spill it.

Spill it. And nothing remained. And so we thought, we can't live here longer than a fortnight, because it's impossible to survive this place. And it was of course on the 15th of May when everything in the very beginning...

April.

April, sorry, 15th of April, when everything started to look really very bleak. And suddenly, one of our girls came running, and said, "The British are here, we are liberated!" We couldn't believe it, we just said she was hallucinating. But it was true. The first British tanks came to...is it tanks, like...tanks came there. And the night before, or the nights before, we could see some of these SS leaving, and trying to get these uniforms, these prisoner uniforms, to be able to escape. But we were really...before that we really lost hope, because the situation was...I haven't got enough words to describe it, how gruesome the situation was.

Was your friend Anka still with you?

Not at that time, because what happened, when we were in Neuengamme...not in Neuengamme, sorry, that's a mistake, when we were in Belsen only for a week or something, the Lagerführer from Hamburg came and took about twenty girls from our group with him back to Hamburg, and they started to work in the factory again, and when the British were approaching there they put them on a ship...on a train in the very beginning I think, I'm not absolutely sure. Anyway, after a long, very exciting journey when

they didn't know where they were going, they came into Sweden and the Red Cross waited for them at the port, I don't know which one. And these were those girls, you know when I mentioned in the very beginning that we got to know from the confessions of the priest what happened. And they lived there for a while, and the Swedes arranged some sort of parties for them, or to see people, and you know, cared for them. So they met the Swedish priests who told them what happened in Estonia. You remember when I said that in the very beginning.

Yes. So you were separated.

So we were separated. I couldn't do anything about it, she couldn't do anything about it. And so the camp was liberated. We couldn't believe it. We just couldn't believe it. That first reaction. The problem was, I think the British were genuinely shocked, they couldn't imagine what they were going to see. They were completely unprepared for it. The whole unit - I don't know what sort of unit that was - they actually gave up one day's ration of their food and gave it to us to eat, telling us not to eat it. But that's easy to say. I remember this was a tin of beans, and I don't know, probably something in it, and bread. Of course, we got terribly ill. Not only that, one day before, I think on the 14th, or 13th of April, we received bread; we never received bread in Belsen before, but we received bread, which was amazing. We ate the bread. And then we got this food. And people started to die even more than before. And there were...I think there were several reasons. First of all there was that typhoid, because everybody had typhoid, nearly everybody had typhoid. Second, then we found out that the bread which we received was poisoned, and where we were supposed to get three rations of that bread and that should do the trick, but of course this time fortunately the British were quicker. And then that was that food which we were not used to eating, which they gave us in good intentions. So the beginning was rather difficult. You know, we were happy, but the life was still very very dicey. And they opened the whole Lager, because before it was a huge Lager, and always the three or four barracks as I said before, formed a unit, and there was a barbed wire before. But now the British opened all that, which meant you could see people and meet people you hadn't seen for ages. And I met a friend of mine who was very ill at that time, and she said, "My mother just died yesterday." And I never met her since, I don't know, I looked for her afterwards. Maybe she died as well. I think if somebody ever does the statistic, I think more people died in these last three, four days...in these first three or four days after liberation. And we were still very hungry. But we could understand that it was very difficult...talking absolutely sincerely about these things as well, it was very difficult for the British to get food there, because it was still like a front line. What we couldn't understand was that they were not able to bring one, two, three planes with surgical things, with the real doctors, you know, some sort of medical staff. Because it seemed to be so terrible, we felt that people lost their lives, all those, all these were just dying unnecessarily.

Well of course they probably were not prepared for the numbers. They had medical staff, but not enough.

They were not, they were absolutely...but they could do something. My sister-in-law, being here in England, volunteered when they heard about it, and they never called her. There were people who were willing to go, I am sure from here. But they moved us very soon from that horrible Lager, to another which was actually before a soldier Lager, which was built, you know, and proper walls, for the German soldiers. And we were there, and we had proper showers there, and we got soap, and we got the essentials. But I think all of us got typhoid.

Before the British came, or after?

After. I got it...plenty of people had it probably before, but I was there only a fortnight before they came. This is probably why I survived. And we didn't know if he was a soldier. He was a man in a British uniform who came every morning to check how we were. And we knew it was a temperature he was after, and the tongue, the tongue got such a special colour like. And we didn't want to go to the hospital, so-called hospital, because we knew nobody cared for the people in the hospital, and that we could not understand. Because I felt they should do something about it. So what we wanted to do, we wanted to stay together, and didn't go to that horrible hospital place. So what we did, when we knew...we had always our communication sort of, in Czech, and when we knew that he was near to us, we just went to the bathroom, cleaned properly our tongue, and when he measured the temperature, we just didn't measure the temperature properly; and that man, I'm nearly sure he was not qualified at all.

So he didn't find out we had the typhoid. But we were really ill. I remember on the VE Day, you know, hearing the music outside and so on, and feeling ever so sorry that I was going to die, because I was so ill. But as you can see, I didn't die.

So the whole time you had typhoid you didn't go to the hospital?

No, no, no. I didn't have any sort of drugs, any sort of treatment whatsoever. It was only the mother nature.

When they released you from the camp, did they do it in an orderly fashion, took your name and your history?

Yes. Actually, gradually, all the situation started to improve in the camp. It started to improve. Gradually they brought the drugs, and they brought some sort of, you know, dresses. Because it was already summer, summer dresses, and we got all summer dresses. And they started to bring food, you know, we had enough food. And of course we started to live again, and there was plenty of soldiers as you can imagine, because there were plenty of soldiers around. Because the front line was still near. And they arranged parties, and we started to dance and to go to the parties straight away. Actually, one of our girls, as I call them, Hanka Katz, she spoke German very well, and English very well. She went to this English gymnasium in Prague, and she became a secretary to the British commandant of the camp. I can't remember his name, I was trying to remember, I think something like Shrum, but I am not absolutely sure about that. And then we of course were invited to different parties anyway, through her. So, the life started again.

That was after you recovered from typhoid?

After. But strangely enough we recovered relatively quickly. Because, then we recovered, and we started to work everybody, because I worked in some sort of store, with these dresses, because they supplied the dresses from England, and they supplied food, plenty of soap which we really were very pleased with, really good soap again. And we started to live... At the time the hair started to grow, we had quite a bit of hair: not long hair, but we were not bald still. And so the life started to be life again. And then my home town, Kolin, was the first town from Czechoslovakia which sent its coach for the prisoners, and so I came home. Because I was the first one from our group who left Belsen.

Do you remember how long that was after liberation?

Yes, I wrote it somewhere. It has to be some time on the 7th of June, 1945, because we went by coach, not terribly quickly you can imagine at that time, and we arrived to Frantiskové Lázně, in Bohemia, on the 9th of June, morning 9th of June. Why I remember the date exactly, as unbelievable as it sounds, I left home on the 9th of June 1942 and returned to Czechoslovakia 9th of June 1945. And we stepped on...

You didn't leave '44, you left '42.

'42, three years, '42. That's probably a mistake.

Not '41?

No, '42. 9th of June '42 we came to that Kolin 'Schleusse', 13th of June '42 to Terezín, and 9th of June '45 back to Bohemia, where we sang the Czech hymn, 'Kde domov můj', and we were back again. And I arrived to Prague, I didn't go to Kolin, because, as you can guess now, I wanted to go to Benesov to my aunt, that was the first journey I wanted to make. And I had to do some sort of formalities in Prague during that day, you must have some sort of paperwork, and I got the first money, five hundred Krone, because otherwise I had nothing. And came to Wilsonovo Nádrží railway station, and bought a ticket, came on the train - a journey I made before a thousand times - and came on the train, the train full of people, and said, "Oh, it's 8 o'clock in the evening, we shall be in Benesov some time around ten." And people looked at me, and said, "What? We shall be pleased if we are there tomorrow morning, are you coming from abroad?" And I always was ever so proud of my Czech, it's perfect, I just sort of...what's wrong with me? What's wrong with them? And they said, "Oh, you know, the

transport..." So I said I was coming from the concentration camp, and so they explained that, actually that was the Malinovsky army which was actually transferred in that direction, and therefore all the trains were terribly delayed and had to wait everywhere. So they explained that to me, and were very very anxious to know where I was, and so I started to tell them, and then I said, "I'm so looking forward to see my aunt again, and to have the Czech 'buchty' again, you know, buchty, that special cake with leaven pastry like, bridge cake, very simple one. And one of these very simple men in that train said, "Oh, my wife is just making buchty, I am absolutely sure about that..." That was in the train. "And when we come to Pisaly..." - Pisaly is a small...probably in the middle of the journey from Prague to Benesov, - "I have have my bike there. If I use the bike I can get the buchty to you, because the train stays there anyway for ages, and I manage that, and she will be pleased." And he managed, he brought this buchty to me.

He really did!

He really managed. And they were quite...

The people were nice to you.

They were nice to me, yes, they were nice to me. Not all of them, but most of them. And then we arrived to Benesov. And they were right, in the morning. And I straight away...it was very near to the railway where the villa of my uncle was, but when I came there the villa was occupied by Russian soldiers, Russian officers. And I was told...and they were again very pleasant, that my aunt lives in Bystrice, B-Y-S-T-R-I-C-E. That's about ten miles from Benesov. And what actually happened, during the occupation, Benesov was declared to be a German town, and I don't know, two-thirds, maybe three quarters of the people were moved from Benesov to the other places, because the Germans lived there, the Fascists lived there. And so my aunt was moved to Bystrice, where she lived in the house of her brother, who lived there as well. He lived there before. So, now I had the problem to come from Benesov to Bistrice. The problem was that all trains finished in Benesov; no transport from Benesov to the south, that was the transport from Benesov to the south. So I went to the railway station and asked the railway station master if he can do something for me. He took pity on me and he said, "No trains. But there is a locomotive going down. The only thing I can do for you, you are young enough, I can put a piece of wood on the bumpers, on the back of the locomotive..." you know what I mean, the bumpers?

Yes, out in the open?

Yes, out in the open. And if you hold tight you can drive...you can go like that.(LAUGHING) "But you must make sure that you jump down there, otherwise you come to Tabór, all the way down, because that locomotive is not supposed to stop. I will tell them to stop, but jump straight away, otherwise you go down..." So that was my arrival to...

Oh no! Was that very terrifying, to ride...

I was not terrified about anything at that time. I would be now, but I was not terrified. I found it quite challenging, quite interesting you know.

How long did that take?

That was six, seven miles, so it was not a very long time. Anyway, I arrived to Bystrice, Sunday morning that was, because we started as I said. The people going to the church in Bystrice, of course my aunt told everybody she has a niece who is in the concentration camp. So when I came out, I said to the first person there, do you know where Mrs. Blanová lives now? And she said, "Of course I know, you must be Erna."(LAUGHING) And so she said, "I'll show you." Many other women, going to the church, saying to her, "You know who that is? That's that niece of Mrs. Blanová" And it was like a real procession coming there. And my...

They all turned up...

All...And so we actually...and then my aunt was over the moon, and she straight away made a cake, and she said, "I was keeping that cacao for you to make that 'báborka'" you know. And we celebrated. So that's the end of the...

It was a wonderful homecoming.

Mhm. (BREAK IN RECORDING) I stayed in Bystrice with my aunt probably a fortnight. During that time I received a letter from Dr. Feder, that was that man who published the book about the camps, and he wanted me to write for that book. And this is what I wrote, which I passed to you. And of course, at that time, I put in all these...I would call them girl stories, but he didn't like it, so he actually crossed it out, he thought it wouldn't be...probably it wasn't the best thing for that book he wanted to publish. And after this fortnight I decided that I had to go back to my home town to Kolin. So I travelled back to Kolin, and when I...

Can I just ask you something. Were you not very exhausted when you came back from the camp, and feeling ill, or did you recover quite quickly?

I think I recovered quite quickly. I felt quite alright. You know, not completely alright, but I would say ready to face the situation. And staying with the aunt for this fortnight, and being really cared for, and meeting my cousins, because she had three daughters, and they were in Terezín the whole time, and I was always very close with the cousins as well, but they wanted to work more of them in Prague, and I decided to go to Kolin. Because at that time I was still hoping that my fiancé was going to return, or maybe that he did return. Because I didn't know the others, couldn't write to anybody. So I travelled back to Kolin. The first person whom I met in Kolin was the father of Franta, and his wife, they returned. So I just thought it was a good sign. And they were extremely kind to me, they always were very kind to me, they cared for me as if I were their daughter.

How did they survive? Because they were the older generation.

Yes. There were such sort of...you can call it coincidences, good luck. Different sort of rules in Terezín. Different sorts of bad luck and good luck. I suppose Dr. Feder explained in that book he wrote, how it happened that he returned, because he was an old gentleman when he returned. He must have been in his early seventies, he was quite old. And all his family vanished, all the young people. He had one daughter, two sons, and grandchildren, all vanished. And the same thing with the Aschermanns, these were the parents of my fiancé. He was actually included in one of these Auschwitz transports from Terezín in September 1944. Because he was wearing glasses, those people were straight away selected for the gas chambers. That of course we found out a bit later. So I met the Aschermanns, and I stayed with them...

That was your fiancé who was wearing glasses.

Yes. And the parents returned. And they were staying in Kolin, they had already their house in Kolin, and I stayed in the very beginning again with them, because they wanted me to stay. At the time I think they didn't hope any more that he would return, but I did. And then I went to this little town where we used to live, which was Stary Kolin, I mentioned that before. And that's about, I would say eight to ten kilometers from Kolin, not far. And I found their friends again, but you know, not my generation. And I will explain why not. And I started to work straight away, I got myself a little flat, furnished it modestly but furnished it, and started to live there.

How did you get some money?

This was the sort of arrangements. When you returned from the camp, you were entitled to get some money from the State, very little in the very beginning, and then you were entitled to have some sort of furniture and these sorts of things, household things, which were confiscated when the Germans, when the Fascists left Czechoslovakia. And it was in such a sort of big warehouse stores, and you can just choose what you want. My problem was that I was never very good in these sort of things. A lot of people were able to furnish it much better than I did. I was not really so much, at that time, interested in it. And probably didn't have enough experience what to choose and what to find, what to look for.

End of F492, Side B

F493, Side A

You were telling me how you furnished your flat.

I furnished the flat and started to work, again in the office of course, because that was my job all the time.

As a secretary.

As a secretary. This was a sort of, not very big factory, making furs, you know, ladies' furs, men's furs, fur coats or whatever. So that's not a very good start! (LAUGHING) And I worked there, and I started to feel terribly lonely, terribly lonely. Because all my life I was used to have friends; when I was in Golecuv Jenikov I had two schoolfriends, very close friends. And when I went to commercial college I had that Jirina, who actually lived near to Stary Kolín.

Actually you never mentioned how you met your fiancé, or where. That was a bit we left out.

Should we put it in now?

Yes, do, just tell us.

We met...you know, he was part of that Jewish youth I started to mix up with, when I started to work in that Jewish Council, the Council of Jewish Communities. He didn't work there, but he belonged to this...because we were not supposed to...well we mustn't mix up with the non-Jewish people. So there was quite a big crowd of girls and young men at that time, and this is when I met him for the first time. So I started to work at that fur manufacturer company, it was Kris was their name.

This is post-war now, yes.

Yes. And I felt very lonely. I just was missing the friends. Because before, as I said, always I had Jirina and Manka... And in camp I made a lot of very good friends, and we were very close. Strangely enough, probably I felt in a way more unhappier at that time than I felt in the camp, which sounds terribly difficult to understand.

Did you hear about your parents at any particular time, that they didn't come back?

At this time I didn't know.

You were still hoping.

I was still hoping. But not hoping very much, after what I heard, you know, generally. So I more or less lost hope, but I was quite a long time hoping that that fiancé would return. And so...and now in this little town, Stary Kolín, those friends I had before the war, they married, they left Kolin for Prague, for other places. So suddenly there was nobody. And the people were generally friendly to me, and tried to help. For example, my mother left different sorts of things like dresses and household things with different friends, and I even didn't know where she left it, and they would approach me saying, "You have this there, you have this there." But, not all people were so good. There was a family, and I was very friendly with the daughter of that family, and so I went to see that family, hoping to find Vlasta there. And she wasn't there, she married as well, and I met her mother. And she looked at me, and she said, "Hm! So you did return!" Like if she was hoping I didn't. And the reason was, that my mother left quite a few things with her; they were using everything, and she just didn't intend to return it.

Did she return it?

No. Never did. But I had relatively enough, you know, for that usual living. And I was very modest at that time, because we were so...we had to be modest in the camp. But I felt terribly lonely. And somehow couldn't understand, when everything was the same, like the roads and the woods and the river, and everything, but the people were missing. Suddenly I felt like walking through a churchyard.

And once I decided to go after work - it was summer - to go for a walk, and that was a walk along the river Elbe, Labe, to a sort of weir, where we used to go swimming. And I had an old coat on, which was returned to me, and suddenly I put my hand in the pocket, and found there an old letter from that fiancé of mine, from Franta. And so I read it, and was all in tears of course. And then, after some short time, I happened to look in that...there was a bit of lining in that coat which was ripped, and there was an old recipe, written in the handwriting of my mother. And I just had the feeling, that's it! It was a mistake that I returned, and I have to finish that. I can't live here without anybody. And just thought, I'm going to die from that river. But there was...

You really tried to commit suicide?

Yes. And there was a friend of my father, who was coincidentally following me, and he said, "What are you going to do now? What do you really intend to do?" You know, looking at it from the...now, I would think I would never be drowned, because I was such a sort good swimmer, and as soon as I would be in the water I would start swimming. But, that was a decision for me, that I can't stay there. And I wanted to leave Kolin, and started to live in Prague.

Did this friend pull you out of the water?

No, I didn't reach the water. I didn't reach the water. That was a sort of a modest attempt. (LAUGHS)

Did he talk to you...

Yes, he talked to me. He was such a very simple man, but very wise. But, you know, reasons, I always feel, is one thing, and emotions and the feelings are the other things. And it's very difficult to make some sort of bridge between these two. So I... At that time it was relatively easy to get a job. And I had a friend actually who was a personal manager at the Central Office of the Trade Union in Prague. And I had quite a good qualification for office work, because I passed the basic examination in shorthand before the war, and realised that I never forgot it; I could do it straight away when I started again. So I had quite a good prospect in these office jobs. And so I started to work in the Central Office of the Trade Union in Prague.

Did you find somewhere to live there?

They found a lodging for me at that time. In the very beginning, I was lodging with a German lady who had to accept me to be there. But that was a short time, and then I lived in some sort of...nice flats for single women. It was like for business women, for people who were employed.

Which year was that?

That was 1945. And it was called 'Women's Home', if I translate it literally, but it doesn't say anything really. It was modern, and with all which you needed; not very big, but very comfortable to live there. And I started to improve my shorthand again, started to go for these lessons after I finished my work in the Central Office. Started to study a bit of English, but never went on with it, because I did only two lessons and left it then, because I started to be very busy in the office. And I always was very keen on the shorthand, it was like a passion. And so I did that, and gradually passed the next examination in shorthand, which was called 'Journalists' Shorthand', that's a literal translation. That was 90 words per minute. But it meant that when you are making the transcript you shouldn't do the literal transcript of it, you should do it sort of to improve it slightly, but very slightly, to prove that you could do it, but still keep the ideas of the speaker. So I passed that, and started to study for the next shorthand examination, which was the highest at the time, which was called 'Chamber Examination' in shorthand...Chambers, or like Parliament Chambers. And that was 110 words, and that had to be literal, because at that time tapes didn't exist, nothing existed. So actually that entitled you to take shorthand during the dealings of Parliament, you know. And so it was called 'Chambers Examination'. So I did that. And in this Central Union Office there was a very strong influence of the Communist Party. The situation of the Communist Party in 1945 in Czechoslovakia was, I would say, special. A lot of people who were either idealistic, they joined the Party, because there was a lot of disillusionment about the Western powers, connected with the Munich Agreement, with the action of Lord Runciman, and with these sort of things. And there was a lot of intelligencia who joined the

Party. The most famous writers did, poets, journalists, you name it. And of course a lot of people, ordinary people. And I joined as well. And I had my membership card from the 1st of January, 1946. And I always remember, one of these questions when you fill in the application form, was, 'Why do you want, Comrade, to join the Communist Party?' And my answer was, 'Because I want that these sort of things, like concentration camps and all these horrors which I went through, won't repeat again.' Which was really a bit irony, after what one learned afterwards. And I started to work there, and was actually happy working there. In summer 1946, I went with that cousin of mine, that was the daughter of the aunt of Benesov, for a holiday to Spindleruv Mlyn. These were recreation centres and hotels owned by the Trade Unions. Because the Trade Unions got hold of a lot of hotels which were nationalised, or which before belonged to Germans, and they were evacuated from Czechoslovakia, and you could get the recreation there, for say one week or two weeks staying, for a very reasonably price, for a very cheap price. So I went there. And at that time, we wanted to catch up with everything, you know, with the life. And we went for a dance every evening, and when there was light we were there, we wanted to be part of it. And once some officials of the Trade Unions from Prague came to Spindleruv Mlyn for some sort of conference. And there was a party after that, and I was invited for that party. Any my first husband, he was invited there as well. He stayed actually in the same hotel as I did, or as we did, but of course I didn't know him. When I say I didn't know him, it's not exactly true, because once there was a meeting, of the people who were holidaying there, and he actually was talking very strongly that we are not having enough food, and that actually the man who was in charge of that place didn't do it honestly enough. And I was ever so cross, because, you know, from my experience from the camp, to talk about food was something which was not on, that was taboo, you didn't do it. And so this was when I saw him for the first time. And then I met him at this party. Because he left in the early morning, he actually accompanied me home. And I fell in love with him. He was 22 years older than me, and to me he was such a sort of father figure.

Was he Jewish or not?

He was Jewish, but I didn't know.

He was not in a camp during the war?

No, he was in a camp in the Soviet Union. And he was one of these idealistic Communist Party members. He joined already in 1923, before the war. He had an extremely good career ahead if he didn't, because he was extremely well educated. He had two degrees, in law and in philosophy, and he spoke fluently eight languages. Really fluent, eight languages really fluently. But he joined the Party, and started to work as a journalist for...that was before the war, 1924, '25, for Rudé Pravo. Rudé Pravo was the Communist newspaper. And then, as an important member of the Party, when he was actually sent to...actually he originally was going to be sent to England, but in the very moment he was sent to Russia, and he spent the whole time in Russia, working for the Czech radio in Moscow, and a bit in the publishing house as well, but mostly in the radio, because he was extremely good in translations. So I met him, and I just...I was missing my parents, and then there was he, who knew a lot about life. And he always was saying, "You have me instead of a dictionary, because whenever you want to know something you ask me." And he was very charming, and he was one of these persons whom you don't meet often; he was charming when we were in company, like social, but he was just as charming at home. You were never bored with him, and you never longed to have visitors, because you were just happy with him. But he had tuberculosis, and he had that tuberculosis before the war, and he didn't actually do enough about it of course during these difficult time. It went worse during the war. And so it was not in a good state when I met him. As I said, I fell in love with him, and we wanted...actually I wanted to marry him. And he loved me as well, but he was very apprehensive, you know, because of the tuberculosis, because of the age difference, both. So, he introduced me to his GP you would say here, who told me exactly about his situation. And you know, painted it in very dark colours. But he was mostly right, which sort of tuberculosis it is. Because it reacted to everything. When it was raining it was bad, because he could catch a cold. When it was sunshine it was bad as well because somehow it activated the actual process. But I just wanted to marry him. And then the next thing, we went to my aunt in Benesov, because she always acted as my mother.

So obviously you met again after this meeting. You arranged to meet in Prague.

Yes, and we met several times in Prague, you know, after that we met several times in Prague, and we started to be friendly, as I said, and then gradually we wanted to marry. But he was very apprehensive. Next thing was that he took me...we decided to go to see my aunt, because he wanted...there was somebody who would really advise me, because he was very very honest. And so we went there, and he talked privately with her. And her conclusion was, "If you love him really, it is better to be happy for three or four years, than not to be happy at all." So, we married.

In Prague?

We married in Prague. And our wedding was something which doesn't happen very often. Yes, I forgot to say something. At that time, when I started to date him, or when he started to date me, as he wanted (LAUGHS), so I started to work as a...shorthand typist is not a good word, more or less secretary, to the Chairman of the Trade Union, and the Chairman of the Trade Union was Antonin Zapotocky. And at that time he was Chairman of the Trade Union. How I got to know him was quite a sort of, again, coincidence. He was teaching the course of the chairmen of the Council Committee, you know, Council Committees. And I was sent there to take his speech in shorthand. And so I did it. And then I dictated to somebody, it was a little typist. And he was extremely pleased with it. And so since that moment I was moved, and I started to work for him, and I worked for him, later I will mention, that he became the Prime Minister, and then he became the President of the Republic, and I worked the whole time with him and for him. I mention that in more detail a bit later. So I'm going back now to the wedding, to that unusual wedding. So I worked as a secretary to the President of the Republic, and Gustav was at the time - that was 1947 - he was at that time the Secretary of the Communist Lobby of the Parliament...I have to...(BREAK IN RECORDING) So if I translate it literally, it was Secretary of the Parliamentary Deputies of the Communist Party. So he knew a lot of people, and a lot of people knew him. And because of me being the secretary to the President of the Republic.

He was already President?

No, the Chairman of the Trade Union, sorry. A lot of people knew me. My husband was a very private person, extremely private person. On the surface he was outgoing, but deep deep down he was very private. And he wanted to have such a sort of wall between his private life and his public life. Therefore, this wedding should be very secret, nobody should know about it. So we pulled all strings to make it as secret as possible. It was not only a civil wedding, it was not even in that hall in Staromestské Namestí, it was just in an office. And my cousin, again that who was from Benesov, was a witness. And Dr. Rattinger, who was a friend of my first husband. And that was only us four. And it was arranged for Saturday. Unfortunately, there were two meetings where Zapotocky had to go, and me with him, which I didn't know when we arranged the wedding a few weeks before. So we arranged to have this so-called wedding, straight away at eight o'clock in the very morning. We went there, and then rushed back. The only thing we did, was to say "Yes", nothing but. And then we had coffee, and cake, and I rushed back to the office and he went back to the House of Parliament. But of course, even when rushing, I was still late. And Zapotocky was always very kind to me, and he liked me, and he said, "What's wrong? I'm waiting for you, we are going to be late!" And I said, "Something happened that I mustn't tell you." And then he said, "What's that, what does it mean?" So I will tell you if you don't say to anybody. I just married!" And he said, "That's you! You are really mad!" (LAUGHING) So, we went for that. And I went with him again, and took the shorthand, took all that long speech and so on, so on. Then, we met for lunch, the same day, and he was there, and my husband came there, and quite a few people got to know, but not very many. And that was it, in the afternoon I went straight away again to work. And that was our wedding.

Did you have somewhere to live?

Oh yes, my husband, he had what we call here a maisonette, but it was called 'Garconiere'. And it was only one room, and kitchen and bathroom etc. And it was a bit of a problem, because of his illness, sometimes it was infectious, you can catch it easily. And...

You mean he was infectious.

Yes, he was infectious. But this was probably one of my happiest times.

What was his name actually, your husband's?

Gustav Czaban, C-Z-A-B-A-N. It's a Polish name, I think the family came originally to Prague from Poland. But that wedding, it was more of a joke than a wedding, you know, you can see that it doesn't matter, because our marriage was an extremely happy marriage. But of course, the illness was something like a cloud all the time over it, because as I said, when it was raining I was worried that he can catch a cold; when it was sunshine I knew it wasn't good for him either. But we had a great time together, because he was extremely charming, and he loved me very much. And so, everything went smoothly, and then on the 14th of February, '48, George was born, that was our son. And he was born in February, and I was in a very big dilemma, because I loved George, and you know, I think all the women who return from the camp really longed to have children. And we had a lot of problems, you know, medical problems, because we were not strong enough inside and so on and so on. And so George was born in seven months. But everything was alright otherwise. But, I really loved my job, and I loved my son. So, there I was in the middle.

You mean you loved your...

To stay with him, and to be with him...

With your son?

With my son. But at the same time I wanted to work. And so, after some sort of trying, I got a nanny for him, which was something very very unusual in Prague at that time, and it was a girl who had all these qualifications, a real nanny, you know, she was a nurse later, which was a very good solution. And I could go to work practically straight away after six weeks staying at home. And I remember her bringing George to my posh office, and me breast feeding him there, which was again...which is nothing much today, but very unusual at that time, you have to go back all these years. And there was another very sad thing. Because Gustav was extremely honest, extremely disciplined, and he was very worried that either me or George could catch the illness.

End of F493, Side A

F493, Side B

And I always remember me staying in the doors of our bedroom, having George in my hands, like, and only from that distance showing him to him; because he never wanted to have a real contact with him, because he was always saying the day when it would be established that either Jirka, or you, did catch my illness, it's going to be my worst day in my life. So he was extremely careful that we didn't catch anything, and we didn't. But in spite of this, our marriage in that time was a very happy time. The illness was something which was difficult, terribly difficult, but the marriage otherwise was really very nice, very very good. But I don't know if it really got worse, but I have to say, Gustav died on the 29th of December, 1950. Which meant that George was less than two years old. And I felt, at that time even, that his death was not natural. Because he...at this time when he got very ill, and then when he had to go to the hospital, and then he was released again and it was better again, it was up and down. But then it was a special sort of sanatorium for the members of the Communist Party and for the members of Parliament, and the Government was created, it was a so-called State sanatorium, but it was for these prominent people. And why I suspected something, was this reason: on the 9th of December, he was in the hospital, and I met the chief doctor there. And why I remember that it was on the 9th of December is, that it's my birthday. And he told me that Gustav's health is improving, and that probably he will be able to go home for Christmas, etc. And I just thought that's the best present I could get. In a few days it was much worse and much worse, and on the 20th of December, the same year, the 20th of December, I met this doctor again on the staircase, and he told me, just like that, "This is not a question of months any more, it's a question of days." So, and I collapsed. And he died on the 29th. And I started to ask questions, because I was working for the people who were near to the government. And I asked everywhere, that it's impossible, and what happened, and so on, so on. I never found out exactly what happened, but in 1968 when all these archives were opened, not all of them but some of them, one of these historians I used to work with at that time, rang me and said, "You were right, there was something sinister about his death." But a few days after that we emigrated, so I never found out exactly what happened. So, I don't know exactly.

You think the...

What I suspected, later, was that he knew too much, and he was too honest, and he wouldn't stay silent. Because he was an extremely honest man, and an extremely brave man. And I felt that actually they didn't want anybody like that during these crime times.

You didn't actually mention 1948, the Communist takeover.

Yes, because the funny part of it... I'm talking about my life, and George was born on the 14th of February, so whenever you had always these question marks, like, 'Comrade, what did you do during the February Events - this was the official name for it. And my answer always, "I was in the hospital, in the maternity hospital." (LAUGHS) And so it didn't influence my life in a big extent.

Because you worked for the Communist Party.

Yes, anyway, and then Zapotocky became gradually, not only the Chairman of the Trade Union, but also the Deputy Prime Minister, and later the Prime Minister.

When did he become Prime Minister?

He became...'49.

1949.

1949. And I moved with him all the time, you know, when he was Prime Minister and so on. But...yes, I forgot to say something. When Gustav died, and the funeral was arranged, it was a State funeral, with all the honours etc. And this was the time when I met for the first time Gustav's relatives, who lived in Prague. Because he was so private, I still sometimes can't understand why he did it, but he wanted us to be absolutely private, and not to have anything to do with all the other world. And so, at that time I met Jenka, who was Gustav's sister - we always called her 'Teta Karna', Aunt Karni - and Suzka, and that's the Suzka, I am staying with her now, you know. She is actually the daughter of

Gustav's sister. (TELEPHONE RINGING) And so I met them for the first time during that funeral, and they behaved to me very very nicely, I must say, they were...

Did they know that he was married?

They knew, they knew of my existence, but I was never introduced to them; and they knew that I was much younger, and that was probably all they had known at that time. But the Aunt Karni, that was Gustav's sister, when I was so down after he died, she just stayed with me for a fortnight, and they cared for me. She died of course in 1970, but she... And the Steiners, that's Suzka and her husband, they emigrated in '68 to England as well, and we are still very friendly and we still meet. But we started meeting after his death, and she still can't understand it, because she used to be very close to him, and she keeps asking me questions which I never can answer. But I think, at this moment I should say a few words about Antonin Zapotocky, who was the Chairman of the Trade Union and later, as I said, the Prime Minister. I'm not going to make any sort of historical portrait, I can't do it, that will be long, and I am not qualified for that. I only can say how I knew him. I knew him as a person who was extremely modest. He had a lot of understanding for our people. Never wanted to have a lot of money; never wanted to be a rich person. He was not...he was intelligent, gifted, but his former education was not high, and he was aware of it. And he sometimes didn't pronounce some words properly, like foreign words, and I kept correcting him later. But he was very...to me a very kind person. Again, in 1968, when everything came to light, I couldn't believe that he had to know about all these crimes during the Fifties.

You worked with him until...

Until he died. And he died in 1957. But he must have known about this.

About the trials.

About the trials. He must have known. But in the very beginning, when it came to light, I just couldn't believe it, because it was such a difference. The person I knew, and how he could accept it, you know. But that's the fact, and I can't say anything more about that.

What happened to you during those trials?

Nothing. I will come to it, nothing happened to me. Because...

After your husband died...

After my husband died, I continued working, but George was not...the nanny I used to have, she didn't want to work for us. She left us actually during my husband's life still, because she wanted to have a career, which was understandable with her qualifications. So George started to go to kindergarten. And this was even more difficult, because I used to have to work long hours, and never was sure when I was coming home. So that was difficult. It was difficult when Gustav was alive, but it was even more difficult after he died, and I stayed only with George. I had a lot of support of friends. I have to say that I was meeting my friends from the concentration camp as well, who returned to Czechoslovakia. Then it was even more difficult, because I had to get very early up, and it was difficult for him, for a little child. But I kept working, because first of all, at that time, in Czechoslovakia, nearly all women were working, that was a completely different situation than it was here. And on the top of it I liked the job. So it was always these divided loyalties. And then I went for a skiing holiday in Spring 1952, with George and with friends of mine. This was again Hanicka, this was one of these ladies who returned with me from camp. Because we kept this friendship, it's still very strong. And we went for this skiing holiday, and during this skiing holiday I met my second husband. First the big difference was, that he was extremely good in skiing and I was extremely poor, I couldn't do it; I started to do that very late, and I just couldn't do it. And it was always too slow for me when we were skiing down the hill, and too quick for me and so on, so on. But we had a good laugh and all that, and some sort of arguments. And I started to date him, but there were again some problems, because his father was an old Social Democrat, prominent member of the Social Democrat Party.

Before the war.

Before the war. When I met Honza, that was my second husband, his father was already dead, but his mother was still alive. His family belong to the few Jewish families in Prague who remained intact after the war. Because all members of the family were alive.

Did they go to camp?

No. Actually their parents, his father and his mother were in Terezin, but they stayed in Terezin the whole time, which was an extremely good luck. It was not only the luck, it was probably, I think, the acting of the people who had some sort of influence, because he was a man who was known to a lot of people. He was...before the war, he was Minister of Justice, and Minister of Social Services you would say, social affairs, social services, his father was. And Honza and his brother and his sister were sent, after the occupation, straight away to England, so they stayed all the time in England, loved the English of course, and Honza joined the Air Force, and they lived here. So when I met him he had...

He came back after the war.

Yes, he returned to Prague. When I met him of course, he had a completely different background than me, much more cosy and much easier. But at the same time, his future at that time was a question mark, because he studied law, and he graduated in law, but he never could do it.

In Czechoslovakia?

In Czechoslovakia. Because he was a so-called potential traitor, because being in England during the war, and having a Social Democrat father, who was so known. So as soon as he got a good job, or something...better job, he was sacked after a few... So he had quite difficult times before, because of that. When I met him, which was 1952, he was working on the shop floor, doing some sort of piece-work on the shop floor. And his job was never really secure, you know. As soon as he had a better job, or something...he worked on the shop floor, and I would think...1954, '55, quite a few years, which meant working night shifts and these sorts of things, and not earning a lot of money, quite little. And I was still working, still having this good job, so my income was always higher than his. And there was again that question coming up again and again, that divided loyalty. Because I wanted to work, I adored my job, I really needed that job, because of his obvious insecure situation. And at the same time, I felt that I didn't have enough time for George. And I still have these feelings sometimes, that I didn't have enough time for him. Honza was extremely good to him, he couldn't have a better father than Honza was, he cared for him and when I worked long hours he would collect him from the nursery and do everything which was necessary.

When did you actually get married?

We got married on the 6th of March, 1954. But the problem was, Honza's mother, Babitcka. She never actually accepted George as her grandson; she was very unjust to him; and, probably logically, she preferred very much the grandchildren of her daughter and of her son, but mainly of her daughter. Which was logical and natural, but the problem was that she let George to feel it, and he was hurt, and I was hurt. And we had quite a lot of problems with it, because Honza was like in the middle. And he never was a person who would fight for something, and I had the feeling that he didn't stand up enough for me. And then I started to study Russian as well, and I passed the examination in Russian and Russian language, some time in 1957.

You were still a member of the Communist Party. And your husband as well?

A member of the Communist Party. And he was as well, yes. He joined the Party when the Social Democratic Party, in 1948, fused with the Communist Party, so he was a member. But of course he had a lot of reservations. I hadn't for a long time. You know, I didn't have enough political experiences. I knew a lot of people who were members of the Communist Party, including Zapotocky, from the better side. And then, I trusted very much what Gustav was always teaching me about the Party, this was the usual things: you have to trust the Party, you have to see the wood, not to see some of the trees which are not good enough...this is something...or, these other things was, when... And I

didn't see a lot of things which were happening. Or, even when I saw something wrong, you know, a friend of mine was arrested suddenly, and I was very worried about that. But then, I approached Zapotocky, discussed it with him, and he did something for him.

Who, Zapotocky?

Yes. And so I thought oh, that was one of these trees, you know, which is wrong, and the whole wood is alright. So it took me quite a long time to start to see these things which were happening. Honza was much more aware of it, but he loved me, and we didn't discuss it very much; he didn't talk about it. But of course, when he was again sacked, that was quite a hard impact on the family. Then on the 15th of November, 1957, Zapotocky died. Yes, I forgot to say one thing, which is quite essential. In 1953...'54...sorry, 1953, he became the President of the Republic, Zapotocky, and again I moved with him to the castle, to the Hradcany Castle, and I had such a sort of very posh title at that time, Press Secretary. But don't mix it with the title here, Press Secretary, it was something much smaller than what you understand of a Press Secretary here. What I was doing, was, again, taking these speeches in shorthand, then having the contact with the newspapers, with the radio, with news agencies, Czechoslovak news agencies. And some of these speeches were published at that time, so I was editing it for the publishing houses. So it was not such a sort of big thing.

But very interesting.

Very interesting job, but not something like what you would call... It was...the official title was Press Secretary, but I am going in these details that...when somebody says Press Secretary here it means something much higher, this is what I am trying to say. But he died in November 1957, and I really didn't want to work for the next President, because I didn't have any good opinions about him.

Who was that?

That was Antonin Novotny. But I didn't want to work for him. So I actually stayed for another year, at that office in the castle, but I did only the archive of the speeches and of the manuscripts; I didn't come into the contact with Novotny at all. And after that, I started to work in a publishing house. And that was actually a very interesting job. I did Russian literature, German literature, in the history department, and memoirs. I always liked working with languages, to use languages, and so that was a very interesting job. I met a lot of very interesting and very well educated people.

What was the actual job?

It was called 'Redakteur', editor here, editor. So it was in the publishing...you know, my name was printed in the back of the book, like the responsible editor, or whatever. And it was a very interesting job, because you had all these sorts of things. You had to find the right authors, you had to discuss with him the subject, and then to...the usual things. And then you got the manuscript. And we did a lot of language work on the manuscript. That would be here something more or less something like a ghost writer. But I did a lot of writing, when I felt that it was not good enough in Czech.

Rewriting.

Rewriting. And this is probably still my problem with English, till now, because you know, I was used really to express myself exactly. Even now, when I talk, and when I feel that I didn't say something exactly enough, explicitly enough, I feel a bit panicky, because Honza when he talked, he read English, his English was better. But he had much more...I would say confidence, because he was not so concerned to say so exactly. And sometimes these pluses in your life turn into negatives like. And so I worked there, in that publishing house, practically from...not practically, from 1959 until 1968, that was nearly ten years.

Did you have any more children?

No. George started to go, in the last year he started to go to university in Prague, studying law. And I worked in that publishing house, and gradually, when the situation started to improve, the political situation, Honza could get better jobs. So the financial situation was slightly better as well. And so the

life looked up really. But of course, in 1956, that was when the archives were open, and so I started to see the things, and started to be terribly, you know, shocked, and couldn't believe really, in the very beginning, that it happened. It seems to be unbelievable, but that was true. Because you know, that so-called Prague Spring, it didn't start in 1968, it started much earlier than that. And I would think a lot of members of the Communist Party, those idealists, with the same vigour they tried to build the Party, with the same enthusiasm. The same idealists in the Party who, in '45, with this vigour and enthusiasm, built the Party, with the same enthusiasm started to try to improve the situation, to start to put right all these crimes, and to do something that the situation really was better. You probably heard the same from Mrs. Pavel. And so, we lived through that very exciting time, I would say, I was very much involved every day at the meetings, and every day doing something. And very apprehensive, and very actually sad, and disillusioned, that it could happen, and that it did happen. Of course there were all these trials, you know, when the facts about the trials came to power, I started to edit the memoirs by Mrs. Slanská, that was the wife of Rudolph Slansky, and I met a lot of those people who actually were in the prisons in the Fifties. We started to deal with London, and published his memoirs, and these sort of things. And so the life went on, until August 1968 came, and with the occupation, which was just a shock, a real shock. Because we were worried the last weeks of course, but we didn't expect...I didn't expect that the Russian would invade Czechoslovakia, but they did. And my reaction was, I wanted to leave the country, straight away.

Straight away?

I didn't want to stay a minute later. Honza hesitated. He knew how it was in England, that not everything was rosy, that it would be difficult. But I had a nervous breakdown, I was absolutely down, exhausted, and wanted to leave. So, in a week's time, after the occupation, we left. Actually, as it happened, we wanted to go for holidays to Yugoslavia, and when you travel from Czechoslovakia to Yugoslavia by train, what we wanted to do, you have to go through Austria. And therefore we had the passports and the visas etc, for Austria, which we used at that time. But of course, we had to pretend that we were going for holidays. So we were able only to take again these two suitcases with us, which was all.

End of F493, Side B

F494, Side A

You were just telling me that you were planning to go to Yugoslavia, but because you had your Austrian visa you could in fact defect. Is that what happened?

That is exactly what happened. George was able to leave one day earlier than us, and I still remember him, seeing him from the window in front of our house, with all these boxes and suitcases, and that was such a sort of like flashback, you know, what happened before. And I just completely collapsed, completely collapsed. And my husband didn't know...he knew what to do, but it was rather difficult. So George left, and then I couldn't do anything; I was in such a state, that Honza told me, for example, "Go to Cedok, (that was the agency) to get our tickets." And I had been living at that time for twenty years, more than that, in Prague, and I just said, "Where is Cedok?". And so it was up to him to pack everything, to prepare everything. And then he didn't know if I am able to go, you know, from the health point of view. So what he did, he rang a friend of his, who was a doctor, and asked him privately to come to see me, because we didn't want to tell anybody. And he examined me, gave me some sort of injection, and then said to Honza, when they were talking in the other room, "As a doctor, I have to tell you that your wife is actually not able to go, but as a friend I will say go. And hope that somebody will help you." Then he gave me some sort of tablets. And I couldn't think about anything, what to take with us. So we actually had only those sort of essentials, again, two or three suitcases, that was all, nothing else. And I must say we didn't have any money abroad...anything. And we left.

By car?

No, we left by train. And we came to Vienna, after a short journey...well, no, not a very long journey from Prague. And we came to Vienna, and of course Vienna at that time was a place where all people were helping, because everybody knew about this Prague Spring and everybody was helping. All the churches and all the Jewish organisations, all the charities, from the very beginning.

You had no problem at the frontier at all?

No. We expected, but we didn't. At that time actually all these officials and so on they were very inclined to let people go. And we didn't know where to stay, we didn't know where George was; but as soon as we...because he left, as I say, a day before us, for Vienna.

You arranged where to meet?

We did, but that was such a sort of arrangement which went wrong. You know how it is in these sort of situations. But at the end we found him, which, I was over the moon, because we found him again. And then we stayed with a sort of distant friend, but not really... And they didn't have room for us. And the lady, very nice person, she went... And there were...you know the Austrian Czech, or people who were still speaking a bit Czech, more German, but still didn't forget that they used to be Czech, if you know what I want to say. And she went to the church in the evening, and there was somebody offering a flat to one of these refugees. So she straight away went there, and got that flat for us. And there were two brothers, one was a businessman and the other one was an architect. And this was a flat, this was like a town flat, of this architect, who had another house, somewhere in the country. And so he left us this flat. We came there. And you have to understand that we didn't have any money. And there was everything prepared: there were flowers on the table, there was a fridge full of food, there was some money, and there was a letter, "You are a welcome guest here in our place". And we stayed there probably for a fortnight. And these people kept meeting us, and taking us out. And so, that was a very...you know, one thing. But of course, I was in a terrible state.

You were still feeling ill?

I was really feeling ill, that's an understatement, I really felt very poorly. Couldn't sleep whatsoever, and was absolutely...no, nervous breakdown, how can I describe it? And then we applied for British visas at the Embassy in Vienna, and expected to have them straight away, but that took a time. And we stayed in Vienna, got a bit of money from that Joint, from that Jewish organisation. And then Honza had a friend here in London, who was with him in the Air Force. So he wrote a letter to him, explaining the situation. And he straight away sent a letter to us...addressed to us, but meant for the

Embassy, that he is taking charge, and then he will help us. That was a letter which was needed. And then we were sent two hundred pounds, which was a lot of money in that time, 1968. I forgot to say that actually we went for a visit to England two years previously, and that was my first journey to a Western country. And I was like Alice in Wonderland. And we met this friend of Honza at that time, and it was a very strange coincidence, because we were about two or three days staying in London, and Honza said, "Oh, I would so much like to meet Fred Launer, but I don't know his address. And we were in one of these underground stations, where are the telephone boxes. And I said, "You know, if I don't know what to do in the office, I look in the telephone directory." And he looked, and there were only three of that name.

What was his name?

Launer, L-A-U-N-E-R. That was the usual spelling. I think he spelt himself then L-A-W-N-E-R, to make it easier for the people here.

He was Czech?

He was Czech, but stayed here, he didn't return to Prague, he stayed here since 1939 probably. He was in the Air Force with Honza.

Is he the friend who you're talking about, who invited you to England...

Yes. And so he dialled the first number...as I said, there were three of that number; so he dialled the first number, and it was him. So he straight away, he said, "I'm going to collect you." And this is how I met them. And that was 1966, summer 1966. And at that time, he offered us to stay here. And I was crying the whole time, thinking that Honza would accept the offer, but I didn't want, I just wanted to live at home, I didn't want to leave Czechoslovakia. But in 1968 it was me who wanted to go; I just didn't want to stay any minute in an occupied country again. You know, I just thought, I had enough of one occupation, and George studying law, what sort of law can one study in a country which hasn't got any law anyway? And these were my considerations. And so, going back to Vienna. So we received the letter from Fred Launer, and then we were issued the visas, and we came here to London.

How long was that after you...

We stayed in Vienna probably for two weeks, and we came here...

Two weeks?

Yes. Because waiting for these visas and all these...

In that flat.

In that flat. And living there such a sort of strange life. Because I was...Honza was very...he said, "Let's go to Schönbrunn, in Vienna." I said, "I don't want to see Schönbrunn." "No, you will never be able to go again to Schönbrunn, you have to see Schönbrunn." So we went to Schönbrunn. (LAUGHING) And so, then we got the visas. And George was with us. And all three of us came to England, to London. And these Launers, that was Fred and his wife, Barbara, they waited for us at...

Victoria Station?

Victoria Station. And when they saw our suitcases, they said, "Is that all you have?" They couldn't believe it. "You are brave!" And then, we stayed with them. And he arranged a sort of lodging for us, somewhere in Edgware, that way. Because they lived at that time somewhere Edgware way as well. But I was in a horrid state. I just couldn't stop crying, I was constantly crying, couldn't control that at all. And usually I'm quite confident; lost my confidence completely. And so at that time, the Steiners were already here, that's Suzka and Jusek. And Jusek was a doctor, is a doctor, and so they had a lot of doctor friends here. And one of them was a psychiatrist, so she arranged for me the appointment with Dr. Wolff, and then he gave me plenty of tablets, obviously some sort of tranquillizers, whatever. And I started to take that. And Fred tried to arrange some sort of job for Honza. I forgot to say that when

Honza was here during the war, before he joined the Army, he worked in Birmingham, and he worked in some sort of Midland firm, some sort of...

Office?

No, it's a factory. (BREAK IN RECORDING) Ammunition factory. And he worked there, that was during the war. And his foreman was Jack Holloway, and this Jack Holloway and his family became a very good friend of Honza, and they stayed our friends all the time. But Honza couldn't keep in touch with them during the Fifties, because it was very dangerous to have some sort of correspondence from any sort of Western country. So that correspondence stopped. But as soon as the situation improved - I mean the political situation in Czechoslovakia - he started to write to them again, and they invited in the very beginning George here, in 1965, and we came on their invitation in 1966. And this is when I met the Holloways for the first time. So, as I said, we were in London, staying in London, me being very ill, and Honza trying to get some sort of job, which Fred tried to arrange for him. There were quite a few jobs, but it was not well paid, and we needed quite a bit of money. Then, Jack Holloway, who found out that we were here actually, he wrote a letter to us saying to Honza, "Don't accept any job in London before you come to see us. Come straight away, because you can stay with us, no problem." So we came to Birmingham. This is how we came to Birmingham. They had - the Holloways - had that usual, three bedroom, semi-detached house. They were not rich, far from it. Extremely nice people, one of the best friends I have ever had and have. And they had three children, but at that time they were all married...two of them married, so we used one of these bedrooms. And Jack arranged for Honza an interview in the factory where he worked, in Aldridge. And very soon Honza got a job there, and we stayed with the Holloways for...since the beginning of September '68 until something, June, July, '69, living there all the time. Edna couldn't speak any other languages than English, and I learned quite a few languages but no English, so it was a very good conversation. But she was a teacher, and she was extremely patient with me, and with my English, which I can't say was my husband. And she tried, she tried to take me to friends, so that I could hear English. And I applied...actually Honza did all that for me, to go to college, to learn to study English. And I started actually...it was called Brooklyn College in Birmingham. I started to go there, they already had...they started in the middle of the first term like, and I came there. And then we had to pay some fees. We didn't have any money, so they said I can stay there, and we could apply for a grant. I was there for two days, when one of these teachers, who could speak German, told me, very embarrassed, I couldn't stay there if I can't pay the fees. So I came again back home in tears, because at the time I was still very ill, but wanted to learn, because that was the only thing I could do. And then the Holloways said, "We can lend you the money." But we didn't want that, because they were quite hard up. So Honza applied for a grant to the Wiener Library, which is nothing to do with libraries...and it was like for the intellectuals, some sort of... And, after some time, I got that grant from there. In the meantime I had another grant from the usual council, so I returned that council one and kept the Wiener Library one. But of course I came there, and that was my first encounter with people...say, with Indians and Pakistanis, and one boy was Chinese; I'd never met them before. And I could be not only their mother, but even grandmother. I have one photograph, I will show you one photograph from that school. And of course they could speak English, they only wanted to improve their English and be able to write. I couldn't, because when the teacher said "Page 14", I had to look actually which sort of page it was, because I couldn't understand a word. But I was used to learning, and used to study. And at the end, I started to study there, and started to find out more about these...coloured people, things like that, found out that actually, it's not that say, the East Pakistanis hated the West Pakistanis. At the end, when I started to talk with them, I was some sort of intermediary. "Can you tell him, can you tell him, can you tell her." And I was...there was only one girl, a Persian girl, and the others were boys. And I had good contact with the teachers, that was obvious. And that was supposed to be a two year course, finishing with sort of Cambridge examination...nothing to do with Cambridge...Cambridge examination in English. Two years. But I studied really hard. What I actually was doing was, it was every day, from Monday to Friday; we didn't have any money, so I walked from the house of the Holloways, to that college, which was nearly two miles, maybe more, in the morning, and back in the evening, staying there at lunchtime, because I couldn't afford to go back; going to the library and studying. It was different how they were teaching of course, because there was no common language to use, so they said, "That's the table, and that's the chair." Easy enough with the concrete subjects, much more difficult when you come to these abstract ones like hate and love etc etc. So what I was doing, I was listening carefully during the day, in the evening doing the exercises which we had at the Library, coming back home in the evening, and studying from the Czech textbook, Czech-English

textbook, and learning the grammar and these sort of things in that way. So I complemented both. After Christmas they offered me that I could go to the second class, which I did, and then in June, 1969, I passed this examination in English. I was the only one in that class, which was rather funny. (LAUGHING) So that was that. But of course, that was not that...really, I could understand, could make myself understood, but my English was still not really good enough. Honza was working all the time in that factory where Jack was working, in Aldridge.

What sort of job was he doing?

He was working as a 'time engineer', some sort of engineering. Because, I don't know if I mentioned that, when he was here during the war, and before he joined the Air Force, he worked in that factory with Jack, and at the same time he studied at the technical college here in Birmingham, and graduated there. So he had a proper qualification for any sort of technical job on the shop floor. And he got this job which was a relatively good job. He was not very happy doing it, because his qualification was much higher than he was doing. But he was working overtime a lot, and so we started to save money to get something...you know, to start to live again. And when I finished that studying English, I started to look for a job. Of course I really didn't know what job I could look for. And it took me quite a time, until I realised that I had to start at the bottom, because my command of English wasn't good enough for any sort of jobs I used to have. Still wouldn't be now. And so, I got a job through a private employers' agency in Birmingham, and started to work in Birmingham as a typist. And my typing was not very good, but a copytypist wasn't difficult. And then, I gradually started to work in the accounts. And the company was called Pay Bonds. And the principle was, the company was...this was at the time when credit cards practically didn't exist, and the company was issuing some sort of vouchers, for people who applied for them, to a special shop. And you could buy, for example, a TV set, at that shop, Telefusion for example, and then repay monthly the money. And the company made the profit on the principle that the shop will give to the company seven and a half per cent, and the applicant seven and a half, which was fifteen per cent profit. And it was a very fair business, you know, and they were no trade unions, it was small, about sixty, eighty people employed. And every half a year I think, they made a sort of assessment of your work, and they would explain to you if they increase your salary or not. And I started with twelve pounds fifty per week...they were shillings, and finished there after three years with twenty-two pounds, which was quite a bit step forward. But it was hard, because I worked long hours. And then, in summer 1969 we...no, autumn 1969, we left the Holloways, at some sort of lodgings, still in Greet Bar area, that's a part of Birmingham. And that was a very unhappy lodging, because that lady...I can understand now, this was an old lady who owned the house, but somehow I was of the same age, like her daughter would be if she were not killed in an accident, years and years back. But, because suddenly I was there, she just...it came back to her mind everything she lost. She started to hate me, and I was terrified of her. It came to the point that, when Honza was working overtime, and I came home from work earlier, I didn't want to stay with her in that house, because I couldn't lock myself in; there were no locks. So I would go to the bus stop in the night, and wait for him, because I was frightened of her.

Where was your son?

He was...oh, that's a good question. Actually he stayed with us only a few weeks in Birmingham. Then his friend came, Czech friend, and they both left for London, and he started to study here in London, started to study history at Queen Mary College of London University. And his English wasn't good enough, far from it. But of course they were very tolerant in the very beginning, but of course he had to learn hard, in the very beginning, and we couldn't support him whatsoever. His grant was very low, because he didn't qualify for a proper grant. So he was washing cars, and doing everything to be able to study. And his first results were disappointing, but during the first holidays after...that's 1969, he actually managed to go to a special language school in Oxford Street for modern languages, and so he studied there, and his English improved. And at the end he finished with a First degree at the university, after three years. So, he was OK, in a certain way.

But at least...he was not with you.

But he was not with us. And I missed him terribly at that time, you know, really missed him, and was thinking about him and once tried to go to London as soon as I could. That was difficult, because of money and because me not being able to speak English, so whenever I went there I was always

worried, how will I managed the Underground, what will I do if something happens? How will I make myself understood? Etcetera.

How long did it take before you got over your breakdown?

Actually, it always helps me when I start to study, and I started to concentrate on it. The first few weeks after having these tablets, and staying with the Holloways, I was sleeping and sleeping, not doing anything but sleeping. Which helped me. Then I started to go to the college, and gradually, I just overcame that. But it took quite a bit of time.

So you were afraid of this lady...

Of the lady. And we were saving money, you know, to be able to buy something, and to have something, like, for our... And then...and that was in spring, 1970, we were going round, what we could find. Aand then Edna...that was Edna Holloway, that was Jack's wife, she found something in Aldrige, and we went there, and we saw this maisonette, which is where we are living now, and I was absolutely enthusiastic about it. Because in comparison with that lodging which we had, it was a palace of course. But I said..."Oh, you know, the rooms are ever so big, much bigger than yours", which was not true, their rooms were of course much bigger. I saw them much bigger than theirs. If you come to see me you will see that they're not big at all. And this was a maisonette, two bedrooms and a lounge, and everything, and that small garden, in the front and in the back. And that was Easter. And we saw the maisonette and I said, "We shall have that!" And you had to put fifty pounds deposit. And we didn't have these fifty pounds in cash at home, because it was already the beginning of Easter holidays. So, the Holloways and all friends, collected the money, and another friend who lived in Aldridge, was there, the first thing in the morning, to put that deposit down for that maisonette. So...

Did you buy it, or was it rented?

No, buy, we bought it. We had enough money for that. Because as I said, we saved hard and economised terribly hard. And then when we came to this agent, I just couldn't believe my luck that we could have it. So I said to him...and Honza said, all these facts, know, what we have, and what his income was, his salary and my salary etc etc. "Are you sure we can apply for that?" And he said, "Madam, I am doing this job for 25 years. I know what I can do and what I can't!" (LAUGHING) And some time in May, 1970, we moved from that lodging there...

Why did you have to wait so long before you moved?

We applied in March or something, and it has to be completed, that you have to have the mortgage, you know, and all these sort of formalities. And so we moved there. And of course, all the friends with cars helped us to move these few belongings we had. And the neighbours who were friendly people, are always waiting for the van with furniture to arrive, which never did, and they asked us about it. The only thing we had was a double bed. Because the company I worked for had some sort of principle that they don't want to make any profit on their employees, and if you were a trusted employee you could apply for one of these vouchers, and you repaid it back, and not only that you didn't need to pay the actual value of the goods, you even paid less back, because this was less the seven and a half per cent I mentioned before. So, that's the only thing we had, a nice double bed.

End of F494, Side A

F494, Side B

So you moved in with a nice double bed.

With a nice double bed, and quite a few things which the friends the Holloways gave us. You know, an old table and old chairs, and a very old, really ancient cooker, which was really very difficult to use. And these sorts of things. But Honza was a handyman, and he could do a lot himself; he built the wardrobes in the bedroom, and he did a lot of things, you know. And we tried to buy everything secondhand. But at that time you could buy good things secondhand, if you really concentrated on what you wanted to buy. But of course I found that the journey from Aldridge to Pay Bonds in Birmingham was much more strenuous than I expected. And this was at the time when they were in Birmingham changing or rebuilding the whole network of the roads in the city, and so there were delays on the buses, which meant that I had to go...in the morning to leave half past seven from home, to start working at quarter past nine in Birmingham, and came back again at eight o'clock, half past eight in the evening. So it was more than twelve hours actually. So Honza usually did the cooking, because he was quite good at that. But it was very strenuous from that point of view. Otherwise, I found quite a lot of...not friends, but people I get on well with in that company, and the work was quite monotonous, working in the accounts, but I was not too bad with figures, so it was...you know, for the situation we were in, good.

So you built up a new life.

A new life like this. And we started to buy gradually things, you know, what you need for the house. And it's amazing how you start to appreciate, we loved every saucepan we bought, and cared for it. But, in 1973, sometime February, the Pay Bonds fused with the company called Provident, that was a bigger company working on the same principles as I explained before, these vouchers etcetera. And we were offered, some of us, that we could move with the company to Bradford, or to be made redundant. But of course I didn't want to move to Bradford, because Honza had a good job here, and there was no point. So I accepted this redundancy. So everything that happened it always affects me, you know, any problems, you see, like, attracted. So I had that. But the company was extremely fair to us, with these redundancies: it was a very generous redundancy payment, and we were told about it already before Christmas, 1972, and it was closing down in March '73, and we could go for as many interviews we wanted, and to do everything that we wanted to get new jobs, which was very generous of them. So I went for two or three interviews, which were absolutely disastrous. So, George got me a book which he had, how to behave at the interviews.

Why was it a disaster?

Because I just didn't know what to do, and how to answer, and went to the hairdresser and came late, and all sorts of things happened. And then I read that book, and decided to go for as many interviews as I was offered, because...I don't know how many application forms, because I just thought I had to learn how to behave at these interviews. So I went for the interviews for jobs I never wanted. And at the end, I was offered two jobs...three jobs, and that was even when I was still working. And two were in Aldridge, which was very convenient, one was actually with a company which was very keen on having me, and I found them very pleasant, and the other was with the same company where Honza worked, with BRT. BRT was a company which is part of GKN Group. And that seemed to be a more challenging job, and I just thought it will be good to work with the same company because of transport and these sorts of things, and time arrangement, etcetera. I regretted that later. And so I accepted that job. And as it happened, we finished the beginning of March, and I could start work straight away, but I wanted one week off. And then I had more or less suddenly money, which I didn't expect, you know, the redundancy money came, like it was double money. And I always felt this was well earned money, because I found these interviews very hard. But then we having that money, so I bought myself a good new coat, but a really expensive one, for George a new suit, for Honza a new suit, and then we still had money, and we went for our first holidays abroad, to Majorca. But of course, we chose the cheapest one, and it was in summer, and it was terribly hot, a terribly small hotel, and fifth floor, and no lift. So it was a lot of disadvantage, but this was our first holidays abroad from England. And I started to work at the BRT(?). Don't ask me what the initials stand for, because this goes somehow back to the history, they were doing some sort of blades during the war, and it's some combination of that. And as I say, it was part of GKN Group. And I worked there as a shipping clerk, later shipping supervisor,

and later shipping manageress. It was a very strange working condition. As it happened, the man who was doing that job before was supposed to retire some time earlier, and the company wanted him to stay, because they didn't have anybody to replace him. But the trade unions insisted that he has to leave. And I came, and I said during that interview that I studied some sort of things about shipping, and about letters of credit, and bills of lading and so on, but ages ago, but I could learn. So what I did, when they accepted me, I was with this George, was his name as well, was that man who was the shipping supervisor before, and he was telling me during the day all what he was doing. I was writing it down, in Czech shorthand, writing it during the night, and showing it the next day to him, and make it as a sort of...because I was used to do, indexes to books. So I did it as a sort of, you know, alphabetical order, and indexes in some sort of special setting. So it was like a handbook at the end, it came from it. And I was with him only for a month, and during that month I was supposed to learn it; it was quite a demanding job, because it was the shipping arrangements for export, import, returned goods, and all these financial arrangements connected with it, like, as I said, letters of credit, bills of exchange, all sorts of things which you have to do when you are exporting goods. And of course there was always this time pressure, because the goods had to catch the boat, had to catch the plane, and so on. And that was, I must say, frankly the only job in my life I didn't like; it was very stressful. There was no much co-operation between the departments, and I felt that there were a lot of people who didn't do properly their jobs. And I was at the end of the chain, so whenever something came I had always to work harder and harder to catch up, because the goods were not ready, but it was supposed to be shipped. And, oh, there were a lot, a lot of problems, a lot of troubles. And it was very stressful and very demanding; in the very beginning not well paid, because this was before the equal pay was introduced. And I was always fighting hard for my jobs and for everything, I wouldn't let go. And so I had a lot of hard discussions. Because in the very beginning I was supposed to present all these documents, legal documents, or shipping documents, to the director's secretary to be signed. And of course when he was signing it, I could talk with him, and so I was fighting for my rights. And later, when they found out that I could do that job, I was signing everything myself. But the increase of my salary was very slow, and then I had a big increase when this equal opportunity payment came to power, like these arrangements. But they reacted, because I was the only woman who was in that grade. You can't imagine the reaction of the men. They were absolutely...they could eat me, they were so annoyed, how is it possible that a woman has this salary, that she is in the same grade as they were? Because all these prejudices, they were really really hard. So, but I got the job, and then gradually, we furnished the house, furnished the maisonette, started to go a bit for holidays, few holidays abroad. George graduated as I said, 1974, at Queen Mary College. And he was, not in a similar situation like me, when I started to look for a job, but analogical. He always wanted to be something like a journalist, or something like that, and of course his background wasn't good enough for that; his command of English wasn't as good as it should be, for this sort of job, and there was big competition. So there was a time he couldn't get a job. But gradually he decided that he would study chartered accountancy, so he started to study chartered accountancy, but working at the same time. So he started to earn money.

Do you know which company he was with?

Spencer and something...yes, Pegler and Spencer, something like that. And he worked for them. And this is the place where he got to know his wife, she worked there as a...she did comping...you know, this comping machine, counting on the comping machine, all these...

Computer?

It wasn't a computer, it was only that, they call it comping, how do they spell that? I don't know. It was something...counting, and so on. She was very good at that. And this is where they met, 197...I don't know. They married 19...wait a second...they...(BREAK IN RECORDING).

So they married when?

They married on the 23rd of November, '74. Marion was an English girl, as you can expect. And she is a very good wife to him. And they started to live in London, and they started to build their life gradually, later buying a flat and so on.

And he passed his exams, for the chartered account?

He was still studying for the chartered accountancy. He actually passed only two of these exams, he never passed the final ones. But as a whole, the life started to look up again. But, in autumn 1974 Honza started to be very ill, and we didn't know what it was, and gradually...it looked like thrombosis. Then he was in the hospital, when we didn't know how it was going to develop, if he was going to survive. And anyway, gradually he recovered. And I was told by the GP, the name of the illness, which was Myelomatosis. But the GP told me, "Don't look it up, because everything you will find doesn't...everything is now much better, and so don't look for that." And I didn't. But Honza was a very investigative sort of person. And so as soon as he came home, as he told me much later, he found out what it was, and you probably know, that's a sort of cancer: it's a cancer of bone marrow, because that's myeloma tosis. But he reacted very well to the treatment, so gradually he started to work again; it took months, because he was still at home at Christmas time, and he was still at home, I think January, but then he started to work part time, and gradually started to work again. He reacted very well to the treatment; I didn't know, but it was obviously chemotherapy, but it was little tablets which he had to take every day. And strangely enough, I never actually tried to find out what it is. It's amazing when you think about it. Probably...

You didn't want to know.

One doesn't want to know, exactly. You know this was the same thing which I experienced in the camp; I don't know if I mentioned that, you know, say, somebody would tell you in the camp, "Tomorrow is a transport", or "In two days' time there is a transport", and "This is a death transport, nobody can survive." Next day, the same person would be included in that transport; his reaction would be, "I'm in that transport, that's an élite transport (this is how it was called), and we are going to work." You know, if you don't want...probably if you don't want to face something, don't want to know, you just ignore it. And this is exactly what I did, I feel. So I never...and he gradually felt well, he worked full time, we went for holidays, we always used to go, do a lot of sports, he could do swimming, he could do climbing, everything really. The only problem was, he had to be very careful, that's what I knew, because his immune system was affected. So actually, I was always saying, if I had a cold he would have the flu. And he always had to have antibiotics, because that affected the...the illness affected his system. He had to go for regular checkups, which always made me very worried. But everything was fine for years, and... Yes, then the first grandchild was born, Anna was born in 1980, and we were over the moon, and George and Marion were very happy, and everything looked fine. And I was supposed to retire in 1981. Honza retired a year before, and he was at home, and it worked very well, because he was doing his jobs at home, which he liked. He never liked working for that company before. And so it was really fine. Then I was supposed to retire in March '81...no, sorry, in December '81. The company asked me to stay a few months longer, because again they couldn't get anybody for that job. And I accepted, which I actually then very much regretted, and I stayed until March 1982. And everybody was saying to me, "What are you going to do, you are so active" and so on, so on. And I said, "Oh, I will enjoy that, I will be a housewife for once in my life. And I will do gardening..." And we bought a new car...not new, secondhand, but our first car. And we liked going for walks, we shall be going for walks, and travelling round the country, because we don't know enough of this country, it will be like exploring, it will be very nice, so on, so on. Unfortunately, my retirement practically lasted...that happy retirement, only three months. That was March, and some time in summer 1982 we were told that Honza had...his eyes were affected, and he had a cataract on both eyes, and then the eyes had to be operated, that was the first thing. And that drug he was taking, that was called Melphalan, that drug he was taking, it had some side effects, and he couldn't take the Melphalan any more, and then that illness was active again. So, he had the operation, the eye operation, in late autumn 1982, and then after the operation he was ill, and he had to have a new drug, and the drug didn't work, and he had only the side effects and no any positive... And I still didn't know that it was cancer, but then I started to find out if the drug that he was going to take, the next one, is a good one. And I couldn't find out anything about the drug. In the meantime George left that company he worked for and started to work with a company which was...he was like in the financial department of course; the company was among other things, issuing sort of medical dictionaries, medical indexes, ITS it was, International Medical...don't know, something. So I just thought, why can't he tell me what it is? But he didn't want to because the description of the drug would say that it is an anti cancer drug. So he was saying excuses, and he was in a very difficult situation, because he didn't know what to do. At the end, when I forced him, he sent a photostat, and I got it, and this was...when I read that, this was like a shock to me, I just couldn't believe it. And he wrote on it, "But you know about it

anyway, don't you." You know, in his writing. And so I was...I can't describe my situation at that time, I was absolutely...I was so resentful, I just couldn't believe it, I just thought, why me again? This is just unbelievable. I asked the question again and again. And then Honza's illness went worse and worse, I didn't have any trust in that Manor hospital where he was treated in Walsall. And I had my reasons to mistrust them actually. And Easter 1983 came, that was obviously, because all these troubles went from 1982. Then his eyesight was alright at that time, the cataract operation was successful. But Easter '83 came, and I was out of my mind really, feeling...depressed is an understatement. And I didn't have many friends in Aldridge, the reason being quite simple: I was working full time, doing the household, concentrating on George, going to London when we could meet him. So I knew a few neighbours from parties or so on, but not many. And then, one of these friends, or actually ladies whom I knew, was Sue Stringer, and she was actually distributing the invitations to Easter services, Christian services. And she put it through the letter box, and I went down to collect it, and met her, and she looked at me - I surely looked terrible - she said, "What's wrong? You look terrible." So I told her, and how depressed I was, and so on. And she said, "Oh, we can help, at least we can do something." And in no time Jo Beck, that's the best friend of mine now, and Nigel came; I knew Jo Beck before, because I met her in some sort of...I joined that NHR, which is National Housewife Register, that ladies' group, and she used to come there a few times, so I knew her. And they came, and they started to say, "Can we help? Can we do something?" And so gradually they started to help me, and started to help us. And I just started to think again about my faith, coming back everything, my Jewish upbringing and that and that. And I must say I started to think about it already in spring 1968, and I read a German book on that subject, it was by Gardavsky, G-A-R-D-A-V-S-K-Y, and I have it in German, 'Gott ist nicht ganz tot.'

God isn't quite dead.

Yes, and I read that. And then there was a big pause again, and I didn't do anything about it, then started to think about it again. And then I had this, you know, my mother, I think I mentioned that my mother believed, but when I started...before we came to Terezín I started to think about it: oh, it's not right - we were all atheists at that time. And I said to my mother...my mother said actually to me, "Maybe you are right, if God can allow all this to happen, maybe He really doesn't exist." But I feel that she believed until the very end. Because after saying that she started to pray again anyway. And gradually I just thought, it's not like this, it's probably...you can ask, if something like that bad happens to you, not, Why me? You can just as well ask, Why not me? And gradually really I found my way to God. And with the help of the people I became a Christian, and I found a terrible support in my faith. And it was not only like the people helping me, but really I had that feeling that God was helping me. As it happened for example, I really wanted Honza...

End of F494, Side B

F495, Side A

You were telling me how you really became converted to Christianity.

I was trying to say actually, these sort of things happen, which seem to be unbelievable. For example, I was so distressed and so unhappy about Honza's treatment in that hospital, and I wanted very badly for him to have a second opinion, but of course I hadn't got any idea how to go about it. And I prayed. And I was on different sorts of tablets myself, tranquillizers and anti depressants. And I went to see my GP, but he was at the same time his GP, because this was the same surgery. And Honza was waiting for me in the waiting room. And I started to talk... And usually, if I want to prepare something, or to do something, I would even write my notes, you know, to really be able to say what I really want to say. Didn't do anything like that. Went there, expecting to talk about these tranquillizers and anti depressants, and then Martin, that was the doctor - I knew him actually from different sort of social occasions - and he started to talk, and then I started to say that the reason of my illness is actually Honza's illness, etcetera, and started to describe what all sorts of things happened to us in that hospital, in Walsall. At the end he said to me, "Erna, what you really want is a second opinion, isn't it?" And I said yes. And he said, "Alright, I'm going to arrange it." Didn't go so easy, because he tried...we were supposed to go to see that consultant at Walsall, which we did, and ask for that second opinion. And mainly his assistants they were very annoyed with us, they didn't want to know. So we were rather worried, and Honza drove straight away back. I said alright, we go back to our surgery, and I will tell Martin what happened. So I did, and he said, "Is that what they say? Alright. If they think I should arrange it, so I will." And next day he rang me and he said, "I made the arrangement to the Queen Elizabeth (that's the best hospital in that area, it's a teaching hospital in the Birmingham area). And you should come there (I think) next Monday. And I am sending my daughter with the letter which you need, and which I am preparing." And then I remembered that I forgot to tell him something, so I said, I rang to the surgery and they told me, "Oh, Doctor Hosskinson, that's his free day today." And I said, "He just rang me." So he said, "So ring him at home." So I did, and he did all that in his free time. So Honza had this consultation there, and gradually - it didn't happen straight away - he was transferred to that Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and I am still sure that it actually extended his life, and made a big difference to his suffering, and had a big influence altogether. Then we went to Bristol Cancer Help Centre, you know that alternative medicine.

Which one?

Bristol. Bristol Cancer Help Centre. Which I think there is a lot about it now on the radio, television. It's like how the alternative medicine can help to the people who suffer from cancer. So it was more or less a combination of diet, which was strictly vegetarian, Vegan, diet and relaxation, these sort of things. And I think it helped tremendously. And his health really improved. And then 1984 wasn't too bad at all, the whole year. 1985 was tremendous. It was absolutely unbelievable. The bone marrow started to work again; we went for these check-ups and the doctors at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital were delighted, saying he doesn't need any transfusion. So we went to Wales for holidays. And he was able to walk all the way to the foot of Snowdon, and we went to Malvern. It was restricted holidays, the Malvern was something like a combination of holiday place and health farm. But it was much better actually. And then it was 1982. And I felt this last year, that 1985 was some sort of year God has given us, to accept the situation more or less. To accept it. But from the beginning of 1986, everything started to go really bad. He was more in the hospital than at home, much more, and one transfusion for all the others...not only red cells, but also platelets and everything. You know, the platelets have a very short life span. So, it started to be very very stressful and very difficult. But again, strangely enough... And I always went with him to all his check-ups and to everything, waiting and trembling in the waiting room. And we were always saying it's amazing, that myeloma must be a very rare illness because we don't meet anybody here: we met always people suffering with different sorts of blood diseases...cancer...like, what is the famous one? I can't remember... Right. And so a lot of people with all those sort of blood cancer illnesses, but we didn't seem to meet anybody. And we asked the friends, doctor's friends, and they said it's not so rare really. And then during this last month, in 1986, suddenly we met in the hospital, three people suffering of it; much younger than Honza, and they had it for two years and they died of it, and in terribly pains. And then there was a man who was in the same room with Honza, and he died there. And it was terrible to see it. But it was such a sort of, like confrontation, what you can expect now, because that's it. And Honza had pains, but with the exception of the last day, which was very bad, I still remember him when the nurse came with that box

with drugs saying, "Do you want any pain killers?" And he always saying, "Oh, I don't need any pain killers." But of course the last day was terrible, and then he died on the 14th of June, 1986. And when he was alive, I never could imagine my life without him, because we were so used to each other, and I don't like my own company, I feel very lonely. And when he was always worrying about money, how we shall manage during that time - we'll mention that money at the end - I was always saying to him, "Don't worry about that. If something happens to you, I'm going to finish it anyway, I'm not staying here, I know what to do." And even...and I really didn't want to leave him, and to be alone for a minute. I remember once, when he was already ill, and I had some sort of flu as well, nothing terrible, but exhaustion and these sort of things. And he had to go to the hospital for a check-up, and that was some time in '85, whatever, and I was so exhausted, and I couldn't go with him having a temperature myself. So I let him go. And the first two hours I felt in a way relieved, because I could relax and I could sleep. After sleeping for two or three hours I just got up and was at the window all the time, waiting when he comes. So I couldn't imagine to be at home alone, couldn't imagine to come into an empty house. But I strongly feel that the faith helped me to face it. I still find it terribly difficult, but I have found a lot of really very good friends, within the congregation; and I don't mean like some sort of actual help, you know, material help, but what I mean is that people are there, and are really friendly with you. And I became very friendly with that Becks family, this is that Jo and Nigel I mentioned before, this is a couple which are George's age, much younger than me. A lot of my friends there are much younger than me, married families, usually in their forties or something like that. But really with the Becks I became like the third granny to the children.

Becks?

Becks, B-E-C-K. And just last week we had some sort of meeting, and we were talking about single people, and I said something that one regrets, you know, that couples very often don't invite single people, and there are exceptions like Nigel and Jo. That was in their house, a sort of little meeting. And then it is difficult that one feels that one doesn't want to interfere and so on, so on; and how complicated is this. And a spontaneous reaction of both Nigel and Jo was, "What do you think? You are helping us. Because even if we sometimes don't agree, but because we have this very deep relationship, sometimes when we have an argument, when we can see your point of view, it's helping us as much as it helps you." So...and the main thing I feel...I should be really grateful to God for having two very happy marriages, having three very nice grandchildren - didn't mention...I mentioned Anna, and then there is Thomas, who is six now, and Natalie, who was five last year. Thomas is going to be seven...Thomas is seven and Natalie was five. But there is that emptiness sometimes, when one can't help feeling like lonely, and feeling...not deserted, but missing the husband.

What happened to your husband's mother and the other children, brothers and sisters?

Honza's mother died when we were already here; she was an old lady of course. So she must have died...I can't say...I think some time in 1972, something like that. Honza's sister and brother, Honza's sister married of course and had two daughters, and one of these daughters emigrated and lives in France. And Vláda, that's the brother, Vláda's wife died, and he is living with somebody else, and he has two children who are married and quite middle aged.

In Prague?

In Prague, all in Prague. I don't know, I think I forgot to mention about these twenty girls who were with me in the concentration camp, who left Belsen after staying there with us for a week or so, and they were transported back to Oxensoll, that was that factory near to Hamburg. And from there...when the British were approaching, they were sent by the Red Cross to Sweden, and in Sweden they met this priest when they were...and the people who actually got to know about the crimes committed in Estonia.

I think you did tell me that.

I did tell you that. But when we returned home, our group from Bergen Belsen, we were under the impression that these girls wouldn't return, because we lost trace. But to our big surprise, our happy surprise, they returned, and some of them of course went straight away to Canada, or straight away to the United States where they had friends. And some of them returned to Czechoslovakia. And

probably I should say as well, this transport which consisted of a thousand people who left Terezin on that first of September 1942, from this thousand people, only about forty girls returned, all the other people were murdered. So one of the negative sides probably of my life is that, most of my life, not all my life, I have had some sort of difficulties with money. Not that I'm causing it, it's just circumstances above my doing. So for example, a lot of people who returned from concentration camps had these 'Wiedergutmachung', you know, this compensation from Germany. And the deadline for that was 1965. Of course we came here in 1968. I couldn't apply...I could apply, which I did, but nothing came of it. So that's one thing. I worked all my life, as you can see, but, because there is no legal contract between Czechoslovakia and England, my pension is only for that time when I worked here, which is practically only the third of the State pension that the other people have. So, everything is always somehow above my doing, because I can't do right, I'm always missing it somehow. (LAUGHS) But then you have to consider, probably it's much better - I would think - it's much better to have friends than money. But sometimes a bit of money wouldn't be bad either.

End of F495, Side A
END OF INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

Ref.No.: C410/055 Playback Nos.: F489-F495 inc.

Collection title: The Living Memory of the Jewish Community

Interviewee's surname: MEISSNER Title: Mrs.

Interviewee's forenames: ERNA

Date of birth: 9.12.1921 Sex: F

Date(s) of recording: 29.9.1989

Location of interview: interviewer's home

Name of interviewer: Katharine V A Thompson

Type of recorder: Marantz

Total no. of tapes: 7 Speed:

Type of tape: C60 Noise reduction: Dbx

Mono or stereo: stereo Original or copy: original

Additional material:

English text and music of Terezin hymn
Text of a chapter written by Mrs Meissner and published in
"The Jewish Tragedy" by Dr Richard Feder

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F489, Side A:

Born in Prague but lived in Golecuv Jenikov, a small town near Kolin. Grandfather was a reform Rabbi (Moses Blan). Parents had a corner shop, was only child. Was often with grandparents (mother's side). Bought house in 1928 but later bankrupt because of economic crisis. Moved to Kolin in 1939. Started school in Golecuv Jenikov, later Bürgerschule. Was not allowed to study; went to Handelsakademie. Was only Jewish child in school, school nationalistic but not anti Semitic. Happy time there and matriculated. Finished in summer 1940 - last year Jewish children could go to non-Jewish school. Did not know much about father's parents but her name 'Arnoska' (Erna) after father's mother. Had happy childhood - only difficulties came with financial difficulties. Grandparents ate kosher but not parents. But kept main Jewish holidays - Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach. It was fashion at the time to be atheist which appealed to her and she started to doubt. Had mostly non-Jewish friends, only other Jewish family too rich to mix with. Did a lot of sport. Had no holidays but loved to stay in Benesov with mother's brother and 3 cousins (Rudolf Blan). On father's side there were 3 cousins near Usti (Aussig) but did not see them often. Father came from family of 8. One sister (Rosa) married a German - had great opposition from his family because of being Jewish. But happy marriage, survived the war in Dresden where husband's family had a big store. Aunt very rich and used to come every two years with big presents. After the war Erna found letters and address, wrote to them, and since 1952 visited them in Dresden. Father's 4 sisters went to USA in about 1890. Had also one disabled brother. Argument before she was allowed to study, mainly financial reasons. Parents wanted her to study something useful. Handelsakademie - 4 years and expensive, but uncle from Benesov paid the difference. Uncle's wife was a Christian, very good and tolerant. When uncle was arrested in 1939 she continued to pay school fees. Also looked after grandmother. Their 3 children brought up as Jews and were also transported. Erna finished studies in 1940 - moved to Stary Kolin. Father worked as storekeeper in warehouse. Was not affected too much by presence of Germans while in school, only one Fascist professor, but was supported by her classmates. One professor - Feder - was also Rabbi and wrote book 'The Jewish Tragedy' and Erna wrote one chapter for the book called 'Voices from the East'. It was published in 1947.

F489, Side B:

Restrictions during German occupation - no theatre, cinema, no mixing with Arians. Sackings etc. Had to wear Star of David from 1941. Finished her studies in 1940 - after that no more Jews allowed to study. She could not go to graduation party. Non-Jewish friends stood by her. Not many informers in a small town. Hard times started when studies finished, could not get job. Spring 1941 she worked on Council of Jewish Community (explains function) as secretary. Gave advice to transports but also had to work with Germans. Tried to do it fairly. Fiancé Franta Aschermann. Could travel only within 12 km. Terezín was made a new 'home' and people hoped to go there. Transports started in Prague, the first from Kolin in 1942. People of mixed marriages were excluded. She and her family included in last transport from Kolin. German reprisals due to Heydrich assassination. Mentions numbers in transport and how many returned. 3rd transport assembled in school - by train to Terezín. German revenge: the first transport direct from Prague - A.A.H. ('Attentat Auf Heydrich') was sent direct to East and all shot. And Terezín was ordered to send 2nd transport (including most people from first two Kolin transports) east and all also shot. On arrival in Bohousovice she saw people from Terezín to be sent east and also 250 people from her transport (her 1st 'selection'). Fiancé's family worked in Terezín which saved her from being sent east and so she also came to Terezín. In Terezín also Jews from Germany, many old people who were promised to come to a 'Sanitorium'. She learned the 'hard facts of life' - found that there were also bad Czechs and Jews and good Germans. Description of Terezín. Separation of women and men. Describes what they had taken from home - supplemented food. Good administration in Terezín. Later removal of Czechs and people allowed out of Ghetto. She worked in office. Jewish employee there wanted sex with her and she refused. His revenge to put her in transport. Her dilemma to decide whether to go with parents or stay.

F490, Side A:

Decided to go with parents on transport. Description of isolation before transport (Schleusse). 5-day journey in train to Raasiku in Estonia near Tallinn. On arrival there were more Estonian SS than German SS. Was separated from mother with other young girls. Description of train journey to Estonia. Talks about work in Terezín, secretarial, for Jewish leadership who organised various work and duties in the camp. About life in Terezín camp and the food. Back to Estonia. Learnt about fate of parents only after the war - they were all shot - tells how she heard about it during her part in post war

trials, and from other witnesses to the shootings. Describes journey to Raasiku and Jagalla concentration camp. Description of camp - search for valuables. Met best friend Anka - cousin of her fiancé. Work in 'Schleusse' - isolation place. Unpacking people's cases.

F490, Side B:

First day in new camp in Raasiku. Worked with sorting of clothing. Poorest qualities were sent to other camps. Lager commandants were selling clothes. Advantage of work there: one worked inside and had access to clothes and food. Later found out about cruelty. Adjutant woke them at night to sort best clothes - pretended to send them to their mothers, but he sold the clothes. Worked for about 8 hours a day, had some food, but very cold. Worked there for 2 months. Later had to fell trees in the forest with the Estonian SS. Commander of camp sentenced to death later, but committed suicide in Canada. Ralf Gerets was adjutant and in charge of them. He was also sentenced to death. Ervin Mere - lives in Manchester. Girls called Gerets 'stonoska' (an insect). End of Nov. thirty girls were sent to Tarin prison. Erna managed to smuggle her luggage with her - all along - even brought it home. Transports were always at night. Tallinn was proper prison which was an advantage as was better equipped. Cell with toilet and running water. 10 girls in one cell but only 7 hammocks. Decided on rota, everyone 7 weeks in bed and then 2 on floor and one on table. They made rules: no talk about food, wash properly. Anka made woollen turbans from woollen knickers for everybody. They always looked well and clean. Worked on building site but as it was winter it was a shorter day. Ration of food in camp: 200g bread and 1 litre of soup. On building site there were other workers - Dutch marines offered escape possibilities - but they were threatened that parents would be shot if they escaped. All other people on building site (shipyard) were free civilians; some belonged to 'Organisation Todt', but were very good to them, brought food. One called Werner Moravec took a letter from Erna for her aunt - which eventually reached aunt and she wrote back via the same way. She stayed there for 1 year. Had one bad experience: was given a piece of bacon by building site workers, cut it up and took back to prison to cook. But that day they were checked and the 'Sturmabführer' - Mr. Bergmann of the SS - discovered the bacon. Pretended it came still from Prague but this was not believed and they were beaten. After that Mr. Bergmann came every Tuesday to question them on where the bacon came from. Eventually they said it came from a German driver. After 6 weeks Mr. Bergmann took Erna to empty cell and she expected to be shot. After some time she was taken out and taken to cellar and she was beaten, naked, blood was all over the bed. But at work people helped her. After some weeks friend Anka was taken to Mr. Bergmann, provided with negligee and bath - but Mr. Bergmann had wanted her and not Anka, so nothing happened to her.

F491, Side A:

Erna wanted to make some additions to F490, Side B. She had looked up the word 'Stonoska' - which means centipede. Also more about Mr. Gerets who was Estonian Fascist: spoke some German and sometimes friendly, other times not. They received soap which had letters R.J.F. (Reines Jüdische Fett) on it - made from Jewish bodies. Many Fascists in Estonia, they hated the Russians and therefore were used in prison camps. Gerets was sentenced to death at the trials in 1961. Tallinn prison: description of one day. Got up at 4 a.m., had to clean cell. One girl responsible, and if not right she was sent to 'Karzer' (prison). Inspection 6 a.m. Commandant said 'Korale' (attention), and to reply 'Tervig' (Guten Tag). Then they were counted. In summer went to work at 6.30, through town to shipyard, back at 7 p.m. In winter back at 3 p.m. Coffee and bread in the morning, soup at lunchtime. Evening raw fish. Leisure: no paper or writing material, nothing to read. But had things hidden. Recited poems, talked, tried to learn Russian, sang songs (Terezín march). Made their own Estonian songs. Spring '43: they were told they had infection and were kept inside prison - that made them appreciate work. Met Prague friend amongst prisoners. Summer '43 they were joined by remaining other groups but some had already been killed because they got too friendly with Estonian guards, asked too many questions. A transport from Frankfurt had same fate as their group. All men were shot, girls came to Tallinn prison. On 1st December '43 they were taken on another transport - in cattle trucks for 5 days, no food. Had drunk Estonian guards who were shooting people, especially in tunnels. Train seemed to go round in circles. Guard shot a girl who asked after her husband. When things got very bad one very brave half Swedish girl went to the carriage carrying all the guards - and things got better. When the train arrived in Narva the girl came out from guards' carriage. They came to Kochtla camp, occupied and managed by Polish Jews. Found great difference between Polish Jews and themselves. Difference of language, religion etc. Hate between them, treated the new arrivals as traitors, were stealing from them, even food. Later conditions improved as they got to know each other.

F491, Side B:

Worked on a building site - long walk there and very cold. Story of Inge Sirten (the girl who went to the guards' carriage on the transport train). Inge became housekeeper for commandant who had fallen in love with her and so she gained power for the camp: got more food, was admired by the children. She and commandant planned to escape but informers told the SS who stopped the escape and both committed suicide. Incident brought various prisoners together. Later a camp was built near building site. New German labour force arrived - behaved well. They were ordered to work in kitchen which had advantages, and were well treated. Woman in charge of kitchen - Mrs. Fertig - decided at Christmas to send bottle to camp commandant (Stiewitz) and Erna was sent to take it to him. Was frightened of him. When there, he asked her to make fire which she did not manage. He threatened her but she challenged him to try it himself and it all ended with him being nice to her which frightened her even more, but all ended without further consequences. Cooked proper Christmas dinner and had good time eating and dancing with staff. In Feb. everybody was sacked from the kitchen and back to building site, but quite soon she was taken to work in prisoners' kitchen. Advantage of plenty of hot water! Polish woman- Anuska - was in charge of that kitchen. She was mistress of campführer. He asked to have list of girls on night shift. Anuska warned them that he was after one of the girls and offered to go instead of them. Story how Lagerführer knocked at night on locked door and how they managed to sidetrack and were rescued by Anuska. But Lagerführer remembered her and never put her in death transport. Stayed in Goldfild camp until 1944. Russian army started to advance and Germans started to evacuate. Occasional work on farms, staying with farmers. There was chance for escape but did not do it because of fear that parents would be shot. Recovery from beatings some time ago - fairly quickly as they were young and kept very clean. Polish Jews were the first to tell them about murders in other camps, also about some transports who were attacked with razor blades and prisoners fought back. She was often asked later why they did not fight back and had to explain the impossibility of that. Relationship to Polish Jews improved with time, more understanding for each other. Their hair was shaved off in Ereda camp but they made white turbans for themselves to cover bald heads.

F492, Side A:

Evacuation of Goldfil camp in Aug.'44. First to Tallinn and then to Lagodin which was just a big field. Still had dresses and underwear then. They slept in the open for about 2 weeks. Gradually 6,000 people congregated there - remains of Jews in the Baltic States. It was impossible to escape. Man called Bodmann came and divided people into 2 groups. One group had to run to see who was still fit. 3,000 people were selected and were promised a good camp. The others were taken to a forest and shot. Rough shelters were erected - just roofs. Were several months on that field. The 3,000 left were Czechs, Poles, Latvians, Hungarians. They boarded a ship, on the lower decks, had no food or water. The Estonian Lagerführer who sold clothes from the 'Schleusse' was still with them - he had become very rich. After a few days they arrived in Danzig (Dansk), then by river to Stuthof camp (German camp). They were taken to washhouses, had to undress - everything was taken from them. Worst people were 'Kapos' (those in charge of groups). Different prisoners were marked with different coloured triangles. Those with green triangles were the criminals and they were in charge. She got an old dress, slept on the floor. There was bad organisation. The 'Zimmerälteste' (or murderess) was their Kapo. She threw cold water over them. Was 4 weeks in Stuthof (Erna) with nothing to do. She volunteered for transport for work to Neuengamme. Then were sent to a branch called Oxenzoll. There was a sadist camp commandant, but they organised their own food. She was sent to work in a munition factory. They had camp beds, cleaned teeth with bits of material. Had some bread and soup and a teaspoon of jam. Worked 12-hour shifts. Nightshift: Got up at 3 a.m., got food at 4 a.m. for whole day. Then roll call and marched to munition factory. Worked on capstan (shot?). Worked piece work - if minimum was not reached they got lashes or had to stand. Story of apple for sick girl and punishment meted out. German students started to work there and brought a bit of food. One of the students offered to take and send a letter to her aunt in Benesov. And he brought a letter back from aunt, written in Czech which gave her real news. When there were air raids on Hamburg they had alarm signs in workshop - were happy to be in shelters - it was a happy time! She was there until April '45. Germans got very agitated and tense. Foreign workers there brought newspapers.

F492, Side B:

German women in charge who were very sadistic, worse than men. They put them in cattle trucks for 5 days, seemed not to know where to take them, went 3 times through Hamburg - eventually to Celle - near Hannover. Then they walked to Belsen. Belsen was worse than anywhere else. People were

dying everywhere. There were 12 people to 3 beds. Everybody expected to die. Had very little food. Suddenly someone announced 'the British are here'. Could not believe it. Germans tried to get prisoner uniforms so that they could escape. But before that the Hamburg Lagerführer came and took some girls - including her friend Anka - back to work in the factory. But during last days of war the girls were taken by ship and arrived in Sweden. There they found out about the priest who told what had happened in Estonia. When the British came to Belsen they were shocked - gave up their own rations. They all got ill by eating too much and people died, also died of typhoid. Before British came they got unexpected amount of bread which later were told was poisoned, but due to arrival of British they did not get remaining portions. British opened up camp sections and so she met some other old friends. They were moved to ex-soldiers' camps which had essentials for living. Someone came to check on them daily. But Erna did not want to go to hospital, so she cleaned her tongue before the inspection came. She was very ill but survived. Gradually drugs, clothes and food was brought, they even had parties. Life started again, she started to work. Kolin was the first town in Czechoslovakia which sent a coach to collect prisoners - so she was first home (7.6.45). Arrived at Frantiskové Lazne on 9.6.45 and had left home on 9.6.42! Arrived in Prague, there were some formalities, got money. Then went by train to Benesov but it was very slow journey. Talked about getting buchtý (cake): old man on train got her some from his wife while long stop at a station. On arrival in Benesov she was told that her aunt had moved to Bystrice. No trains there but had lift on an engine and had to jump off at right place. Aunt had told inhabitants in Bystrice about her so she was expected and taken to aunt - had wonderful reception. Stayed with aunt for about 14 days. While there had a letter from Dr. Feder who was writing a book about the camps and wanted her to contribute a chapter. She went back to Kolin, hoping to find fiancé. Met his father there; both parents had survived but fiancé - who had to wear glasses - was killed. She stayed with his parents, went to Sary Kolín where she used to live. She got a flat, furnished it and started to work. Got some money and goods from the State.

F493, Side A:

About furnishing her flat and work in fur factory. Was very lonely (goes back to tell how she met fiancé), missed friends and was still hoping for return of parents and fiancé. Most friends had left for Prague. Experienced some kind and some unkind reception from people in town. Walked along river with old coat on and found letter from fiancé in pocket. Got so depressed and decided to commit suicide by jumping in river, but a friend stopped her who was following her. She then decided to live in Prague. Approached a friend in the Trade Union in Prague and asked for help to find secretarial job. She started work there in 1945. She improved her shorthand and passed journalist exams. Studied then for highest shorthand exam (Chamber exam) which entitled you to take shorthand during parliament sessions. Talks about influence of Communist Party - a lot of idealistic people joined the party. She joined too, gives reason why and worked for them. Had holiday in Spinderlerův Mlyn in a Trade Union hotel. A lot of party members were there. Met her first husband there - fell in love. He was 22 years older - sort of father figure. He spent the war in USSR. Talks about her husband, his education and work and character. He had TB. His reluctance to marry because of TB and age. They went to consult her aunt who advised them to marry. She then worked as secretary to the chairman of the Trade Unions who later became Prime Minister and President. About her wedding: he wanted secret wedding, so they arranged wedding for 8 a.m. Erna had a meeting to attend at work, but she was then late for work and confessed to having got married. They had a very happy marriage. On 14th Feb. '48 a son was born. Dilemma of work and motherhood. Got nanny and continued to work. Husband worried that she and baby would catch TB.

F493, Side B:

Care they took for preventing infection from husband's TB. Husband died in Dec. 1950. She suspected that his death was not natural - she had good report of his health at the beginning of Dec. and then he suddenly got much worse. In 1968 she was told that there was something sinister about his death. She suspects the reason was because he knew too much and was too honest. Zapotocky became Prime Minister in 1949. Husband Gustav had a State funeral and at the funeral she met his relatives for the first time. His sister and niece were very nice to her. Talks about Zapotocky - a modest man but no high education. She continued to work for him and the child was in kindergarten. They were difficult times. She had a skiing holiday with her son in 1952 and met her 2nd husband there. But there were problems. He came from old social democrat tradition. He had been in England during the war and with his social democrat background had difficulties getting a job. Was working in a factory. So her income higher than his. Again had difficulties of divided loyalties between job and enough time for the baby. But Honza was very good father. They married in March '54. Honza's mother

refused to accept her son as grandson, which the child felt. Problems of Honza's between mother and wife. She studied Russian, was still a convinced Communist - until much later. Honza was less convinced. When Zapotocky became President she became 'press secretary'. Zapotocky died in 1957. She did not want to work for Novotny. Stayed one more year and then worked in publishing house. Worked as editor (Redakteur) from 1959-1968. George studied law. Honza later got better jobs. She was very shocked when archives were opened and realised what had been happening at the trials etc. Was much involved in Prague Spring. Met many people who had been in prison. About shock of Russian occupation. She wanted to leave but Honza doubtful. She had nervous breakdown. They left one week after occupation. They were due to go on holiday in Yugoslavia, so they had passport and visa for Austria. Had limited luggage they could take.

F494, Side A:

Defection in Austria. George leaving earlier caused her great distress. Husband made all the preparations. Doctor was called to help. Went by train to Vienna and found George. Stayed with friends who arranged a flat for them, where everything was prepared, even money. Stayed there for 14 days. Applied for British visa. Got money from Joint (Jewish organisation). A friend in London gave a guarantee for them. Got visas after 2 weeks. Were received in England by their friends who arranged lodgings for them. Erna still in a bad state of health, saw a psychiatrist. Husband contacted a friend in Birmingham (Jack Holloway) and he asked them to come and he put them up in his home. They lived with them for a long time. The wife taught her English. She also went to a college to learn English - with a grant from the Wiener Library. Had first encounter with coloured people at the college and learned about their differences. She studied very hard, at college and at home, passed the exam in one year instead of two. The husband worked as 'time-engineer'. She found a job as typist - later in accounts dept. (Pay Bonds co.) Explains the function of this company. In autumn '69 found lodgings but had unhappy times there. Son George left soon for London, studied history with small grant - earning extra money - and finished after 3 years. Erna's health improved with studying. In spring 1970 they found a maisonette in Aldridge. Friends collected fifty pounds for a deposit. In May 1970 they moved in - had no furniture except double bed bought with vouchers from the company she worked for.

F494, Side B:

Friends supplied other pieces of furniture. But husband was handyman and could make things. But the journey to work was much longer. Gradually they bought more for the flat. In 1973 Pay Bond company merged with another company and she was made redundant. But the company was fair and generous and gave time to look for other jobs. But she was a bad interviewee; read book on how to behave at interviews, then was offered 3 different jobs. Eventually accepted job at same company where husband worked. They went on first holiday to Majorca. Then she started work as shipping clerk. Was taught by previous employer and made herself a handbook. Describes job. But did not like job. Fought for her rights in the job. She was the only woman in that grade and had opposition from men. But life improved. Son graduated but had no job, so he studied to be chartered accountant. He met his wife there - married in 1974, lived in London. But did not pass final exam. In autumn '74 her husband became very ill but recovered. Her husband looked up the disease - it was cancer of bone marrow. He reacted well to treatment, did sport, had holidays. First grandchild was born in 1980. Husband retired in 1980 but she stayed on until 1982. In summer '82 Honza (husband) had cataract and the illness became active again. Had operation in autumn '82 but was ill afterwards, had side effects from the drugs. George at that time worked in a company which issued drugs information but did not show his mother so that she would not discover which drug Honza was taking, but she did discover it - that it was an anti-cancer drug. At Easter Erna was very depressed, had not many friends. One friend sent her an invitation to Easter service at the church, she confessed her troubles to her. Friends came offering help. She started to think about her faith. Found her way to God, and became a Christian and had a lot of support.

F495, Side A:

About conversion to Christianity. Talked to doctor about husband's illness - wanted second opinion which was arranged - which helped a lot. Went to Bristol Cancer Help Centre. In 1984-85 there was a great improvement in husband's health; thinks God has given them this year. But in 1986 things got worse and husband died in June 1986. She meant to commit suicide if Honza died. But her faith helped, together with friends from the church. Talks about friendship between couples and single people. Has now 3 grandchildren. Talks about Honza's relations and their fate. Talks about her

concentration camp friends who were sent to Sweden who survived and made contact again. Out of 1,000 people in the transport from Terezín only 40 survived. Explains her financial problems.

F495, Side B:

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