


July 2010

Rachel Nurman oral history interview by Carolyn Ellis, July 5, 2010

Rachel Nurman (Interviewee)

Carolyn Ellis (Interviewer)

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Scholar Commons Citation

Nurman, Rachel (Interviewee) and Ellis, Carolyn (Interviewer), "Rachel Nurman oral history interview by Carolyn Ellis, July 5, 2010" (2010). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 175.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/175

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

**Copyright, 2010, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.**

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.

Holocaust Survivors Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: F60-00032
Interviewee: Rachel Nurman (RN)
Interviewer: Carolyn Ellis (CE)
Interview date: July 5, 2010
Interview location: Tampa, Florida
Transcribed by: Kimberly Nordon
Transcription date: October 18, 2010 to November 8, 2010
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: November 8, 2010 to November 15, 2010
Final Edit by: Michelle Joy
Final Edit date: November 18, 2010

Carolyn Ellis: Rachel, we're really glad that you were willing to join us today, to tell us your story. And I would like to start by getting you to say your name and then spell it for us.

Rachel Nurman: Oh, yeah?

CE: Okay.

RN: Okay. I'm a little bit hard of hearing.

CE: Okay.

RN: Yeah.

CE: I'll speak loud, but if you can't hear me, you just ask me to repeat it, okay?

RN: Okay.

CE: Okay, your name?

RN: My name is Rachel Nurman.

CE: And can you spell your last name for us?

RN: N-u-r-m-a-n.

CE: And what was your name at birth? When you were born?

RN: Rachel Zysmanowicz, that's from my—this is hard to spell. I could spell it for you.

CE: Can you?

RN: Yeah.

CE: Okay, go ahead, spell it for us.

RN: I could write it down.

CE: Oh, you can write it? Well, you know what? I think I can spell it.

RN: Yeah.

CE: You tell me if I'm right.

RN: Yeah.

CE: Z-y-s-m-a-n-o-w-i-c-z.

RN: Yeah, correct!

CE: Okay, and when were you born?

RN: In Warsaw.

CE: Where?

RN: Warsaw.

CE: Warsaw?

RN: Yeah, a suburb near Warsaw.

CE: Near Warsaw, okay, a suburb near Warsaw. Okay, and when were you born?

RN: January 1, 1926.

CE: Okay, so you are eighty-four years old?

RN: Yeah.

CE: Yes. And what was your father's name?

RN: Harry.

CE: Harry, okay. And your mother?

RN: Razel.

CE: Razel, and that's R-a-z-e-l?

RN: Yeah, yes.

CE: Okay. And can you tell me where your father died? Where?

RN: He died in the gas chambers.

CE: In the gas chambers. Do you know about when?

RN: He was fifty-three years old.

CE: He was fifty-three.

RN: Yeah.

CE: And your mother?

RN: Also, the same; she was fifty-three.

CE: Fifty-three years old. And do you want to tell me the names of your siblings?

RN: Of my siblings?

CE: Yes.

RN: I had four brothers.

CE: Okay.

RN: The oldest was Chaim Josef, his full name, and the second one was David, and the third one was Samuel, and then I was Rachel, and then the last one was another boy, Mendele.

CE: Mendele, okay. And I have all those names written down.

RN: Oh, you do?

CE: Yes, because you wrote them down for me the last time I was here. And did they all die in the Holocaust?

RN: Yeah, they all died.

CE: In the Holocaust, okay. Now, let's start with your childhood. So you're growing up in a suburb of Warsaw; can you tell me a little bit of what it was like?

RN: It was like a small town. Not too many Jewish people lived in there; it was about a thousand families. And it was a very peaceful life. It was—like everybody knew each other and they went to school, to the Catholic school.

CE: The Catholic school.

RN: And it was about five or six Jewish children, but at this time they are starting—like in the Polish government, the schools start to separate the Jewish children from the—I used to have—my best girlfriend was a Christian girl and I was inseparable with her. I was her best friend and she was my best friend. And at that time they told us to sit in the back of the class, and I was short-sighted all the time and they didn't make no glasses like here, (laughs) so I didn't see nothing on the blackboard and I had to sit in the back. And my parents asked the principal about that; he [her father] told them that I couldn't see that good from the back, that I sit. So he said that this somebody who is in charge of that and he gave that permission to him, that he should seat the five or six Jewish children in the back, and that he cannot do nothing about it.

CE: And were your parents religious?

RN: Yeah.

CE: Can you tell me a little about that?

RN: We had a very kosher, nice home, and my grandmother used to live with us, my mother's mother. My grandfather was a rabbi in our town, our small town, and he died and there was no social security and she came to live with my mother. She was her favorite daughter, so she lived with us about seventeen years, till she died. She died at eighty-four.

CE: Okay, and what did your father do?

RN: We had a store, like the gentile people used to buy in our store everything for Christmas; [it] was our best—for the Christmas time, they make the money for the whole year to live on.

CE: What did you sell in the store?

RN: Everything.

CE: Everything.

RN: Everything: men's clothes and women's clothes, Sunday shirts for the men at the church and all dresses, and food, too.

CE: Food, too?

RN: Everything, yeah.

CE: Okay, so do you remember your childhood as being happy?

RN: Yeah, yeah. I had four brothers and I was very secure. But they were older, but the man that came to take me and they didn't want to take me (inaudible). But I was very happy till my oldest brother went to the army, to the Polish Army.

CE: Do you remember what year that was? It's hard to remember, isn't it?

RN: No. I remember he came—for this time, he wore a pelisse, and he was in the *uhlans*, in Polish. He was on the horses, riding of the horses. And he came to—for, like, a—how do you call for a couple of days to stay at home. But the whole town came to see, to our house to see, because at this time Jewish people didn't go to the army, so they came to see it, if it's true that he had that big rank. He was an *uhlan*. He wore the big pelisse in our cheder and it looked so beautiful on him, I remember, and I was a child and I was so proud of him. And when the Germans came in, he [was] fighting in the Polish Army against them.

CE: Okay. And then, when did your life start to change?

RN: This was in 1939, when the Germans occupied Poland; we were the first country to be occupied. And then, starting immediately with the Jewish people.

CE: But before that, had you felt any anti-Semitism?

RN: Yeah.

CE: Tell me about that.

RN: Start being anti-Semitism from the Polish people.

CE: Okay. From your friends at school, too?

RN: Yeah, because this friend of mine, she had—her father was a high officer something in the Polish Army, so he used to tell my father that it's starting now, being bad for the Jewish people, that we should go [to] some other country, to leave Poland. But my father said that he worked all his life for the things that he has now and he cannot just leave it, and he need a future for the children, too. And he never thought of that. Some people left immediately when Hitler came to power. They came here [the U.S.] or they went to other countries. But my father didn't want to hear even of that. He had accumulated money in the bank and everything we needed—our garden, a beautiful garden—and we lived comfortable.

CE: So you were thirteen years old then?

RN: Yeah, fourteen years old, when Hitler occupied Poland.

CE: Okay, and how did life change for you at that point?

RN: After a few months they took us out from our homes, and this is the worst that could happen to us. We were not supposed to take nothing, just to take a certain amount of pounds, like ten pounds. So, what is ten pounds? You left behind everything, the bedding and the furniture and the clothing, everything that we had! And they took us to the Warsaw Ghetto, and there was—they have trouble themselves, it was such a hungry, such a panic. They used to come into the ghetto, the Germans, shooting just straight at the people walking in the street.

CE: So you had to move into the ghetto from your house?

RN: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

CE: And it was the Warsaw Ghetto—

RN: Yeah.

CE: —that you moved into?

RN: Then on the trucks when they came to take us, it was horrible. They got the dogs near them, the German shepherds, and they [were] chasing the people to the trucks because we didn't want to go, didn't want to leave. We're standing the whole day in the street—it was a summer day—with the children, with the older people and no water, no food; they didn't let nothing go near. The gentile people wanted to give us something to eat, they had pity on the people, but they didn't let it. They didn't let nobody nothing. After standing a whole day, in the end the trucks came in and the people start having a panic. We didn't want to go to the trucks.

So the dogs was making such a big tumult and they are such loud, barking so loud, and I was holding my brother by his hand. He was—I don't remember how old he was. And I let go of his hand, because before they put us on the truck, to make it little quieter they gave everybody—the women—a little bread to share. So I got that piece of bread. My mother told me, "Go get your father." He's standing on the other side, also waiting for the truck, for the men separately and the women separately, with the children. So I went

to the other side to give him that piece of bread, and the Germans saw it and he hit him so bad, my father. He hit his face, his face was all bloody. And I start screaming so loud and I asked the German, “He didn’t do nothing to you.” I told him, “Why did you hit him like that?” And I showed him; I just gave him the piece of bread. “Why do you scream?” he said. “Go, because I’ll do the same to you.”

So I just went straight back to the mom, and my father told me, “Go to the mom and stay with her in there and take care of your brother.” And to this time, I couldn’t find my brother anymore. He got lost in the whole crowd, with this people. And even at the trucks—and I was hysterical. So she told me, “You must forget about it and go on, and maybe you’ll live through this.”

CE: Your mother said this?

RN: Yeah. And we all went to Warsaw.

CE: So did you find your brother again in Warsaw?

RN: I didn’t find him, because I went to a farm.

CE: You went to a farm?

RN: The Germans came in and they picked 100 girls, young. It was like a Zionist organization. So they came to us and they picked 100 girls and 50 boys to work on a farm.

CE: So they picked them out of the—once you were in the ghetto, they picked you out of the ghetto.

RN: Yeah, then I went to that farm near Warsaw, a Warsaw suburb, near Warsaw. The name was Czerniaków. And they farm; they’re still like this now, this place. And there was a lot of—

CE: Now, as far as you knew, the rest of your family was in the ghetto?

RN: Yeah, I left them behind.

CE: And your father was in the ghetto, too?

RN: Yeah, yeah, to this time. But then they start going out—not just going but they have to go over the wires. It was the wall: there was a big wall in the ghetto and on top the electric wires, and that wasn't good to go through that. But I went through that, too, before I went to the farm.

CE: Before you went—so you were in the ghetto for a little while.

RN: Yeah.

CE: How long, do you think?

RN: I was in the ghetto, like, a couple of months.

CE: A couple of months. So at that point, your whole family was there?

RN: Yeah.

CE: So all three of your brothers, or four of your brothers?

RN: No, not one was with us. They were all separate.

CE: They were all separate?

RN: One has—two of them was married and had children.

CE: Okay, okay.

RN: And the one after me wasn't married, and my brother Samuel—two of them wasn't married.

CE: Okay, and they were in the ghetto with your mother?

RN: No.

CE: No?

RN: They stayed separate, they wasn't there. There was, like, a youth organization, and they took care of the young people. This is the people that they start a fight in the Warsaw Ghetto, for the uprising; maybe you heard. That was my brothers and all these youthful people in our town and all this, which they was still helping. They put up a fight with them.

CE: Okay, so now I just want to get the timeline. So you were in the Warsaw Ghetto for—before you went to the farm, a couple of months?

RN: Yeah.

CE: A couple of months. And you lived there with your mother?

RN: Yeah.

CE: With your mother. Did you see your brothers then? You never saw them?

RN: No, she said she doesn't know even where they are. Everybody went their own way, (inaudible). The men run away from their wives, they left them, and the fathers left their children and that's how it was. Everybody want to save themselves, their own life.

CE: So what was life in the ghetto like those couple months?

RN: That was most awful—that I could describe you even. People are laying dead in the street, their hunger was so intense. They didn't let us go out, and they didn't let nobody

in; it was like a closed-up wall. And the wall was built in the Jewish people from the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Jewish police. And I did run out from the ghetto. The young children, we had a little gang like that and when—to take out a few bricks, from our side in the wall, and they climbed like that. And I was there, too, and I jumped over the—the wires wasn't always electrified, you know. So I used to go out in there and I fell on my knees and my knees were bleeding, but I run anyway. And they shouldn't recognize me, because on the next, they would jump out people living.

CE: Okay.

RN: So sometime they give out the Jewish people, and some of them were nice and they didn't: they helped. I don't say that they all was bad, no. There was good people, too.

CE: So did you take your Jewish star off when you—

RN: Oh, yeah, definitely!

CE: Where did you put it?

RN: I never wore a star!

CE: You never wore a star! Not even—

RN: Never, never!

CE: Not even in the ghetto?

RN: No.

CE: No?

RN: No, I refused to wear that. I didn't. I didn't even have one.

CE: You didn't?

RN: No, because I was so revolting against that, and I didn't put it on. And that was easier for me. I used to walk on that side when I jumped over that wall, on the street. The Germans go right near me, and they didn't even know. I was blonde, very light blonde, and I wore braids, so you know, sometimes put that up on my head. They never thought, even, that I'm Jewish. They didn't recognize me—unless the gentile people which know me, they tell on me.

CE: Were you scared? Were you afraid?

RN: No.

CE: You were not afraid?

RN: I just walking right near them. I wasn't afraid. I didn't understood the horror of that. I didn't think that somebody wants me to die. For what reason? I didn't do nothing to them, or my family. I was terrified for my family, for my brothers. I loved them dearly, my four brothers. And I suffered a lot from that after the—when I came back from the farm. I was two years on that farm. When I came back, not one was left: not my mother, not my father, none of my brothers.

I wanted to run to that place where my brother used to live with his wife and the one child they have, one little boy. And they told me, "Better don't go, because this is like *Judenrein*." They took out all the Jews to the gas chambers and whatever leftover in the house, they taken away everything for them and they sending it to Germany, for the people in Germany. And the beautiful furniture and the pictures and everything for the house, they kept sending everything—even the hair from the people in the gas chambers, which they died. They make mattresses from that and they send it to Germany.

CE: Okay, so let's go back to the ghetto for one more moment.

RN: Yeah.

CE: When you crawled over the wall, jumped over the wall and went out into Warsaw, what did you do?

RN: We sell cigarettes.

CE: You sold cigarettes?

RN: To the gentile people, for the people which go by. And we slept under the bridge: we have a place under the bridge where we came together in the evening, all little girls and boys, with the torn clothes. It was cold and they are freezing, with shmates on their feet, put it on. They didn't have decent garments to wear because everything got to be spoiled from the rains, from the cold. And one time—it was a Friday night—I came back to—at home, I came back. And at the time to go back, we have to do the same thing, to jump over the bridge. But standing here are the Germans, in the front, so we have to go through them. So when they saw us—I was like that, going with my things under my coat. I bought a very long coat and I kept in the lining everything I have: some potatoes, some pieces of bread, what the gentile people gave me. And I could buy because I sold the cigarettes and I have some money to buy the food.

And I came home—it was a Friday night—and my father, when he saw me open the door he started crying. He was so hysterical. I never saw a man crying like that, and my father never; he was a proud man. And he said that, “We all said a prayer to you because we thought that you were dead already, that you didn't come the whole week long.” Sometimes it took me a whole week or two weeks that I didn't go back home, 'cause we couldn't go through the posts. They shooting at the children and the children fell like wounded birds. That's how they were laying. Then they shooting at them; the rest of them are running, you know, that's how it works. So we have to risk that. So, whoever got the bullet fell.

CE: And how did you get cigarettes?

RN: Huh? Oh, I went into the stores, like to buy some bread for me, to buy food. I need to eat also.

CE: And you bought cigarettes?

RN: Yeah, I bought cigarettes and I bought food—and I bought for the other one too, because they were more looking like Jewish and they believed that I don't look Jewish and I could go more freer than them, for the bread. So I used to take—everyone give me a little few—the money—and I brought everyone a little package with the name on. The lady from the store know me already, and she put the names on the piece of bread. It was

like two slices bread; that's what he could afford and not no more. And this is what I brought him and in a minute it was eaten up; we need to go buy something else. Then later on we have more money and we bought some other things. We bought the Polish kielbasa. It was so delicious. But didn't have money for that.

And somebody got to know about us. That's the Jewish—it was like a Jewish organization which they—I know even her name. I got her telephone number, even now. She brought money to the Jewish people, which they was in hiding by the gentile people; they have to pay them because there're so—they throw them out. You know? Some of them kept the Jewish people in a room, you know, that nobody knows, but they took the money for that and a lot of people died in there. Some of them took the money and gave them up to the Germans. But some survived, too, in the gentile homes.

CE: So, then you were picked to go to the farm? Right?

RN: Yeah.

CE: Okay, and how long were you in the farm?

RN: Oh, almost two years. And they always came for us, the Germans; they knew that the Jewish people are there. So meanwhile, they took out from the ghetto the people. And they blocked the streets. That people got to know what the thing means. They told the Jew that they lied to them. They told them that they are going to take them to work in the east, and that the ghetto's so bad and don't have no food, so they will be much better. They have food. They going to have for the children more things, and they have schooling for the children. Some of the schools are closed for the Jewish people. And the people believed them. The first transport, they went willingly. And they gave also—such a hungry people. They gave a pound of jelly and like five pounds of bread. So the whole family went, mother and father and the children, and they went willingly. And they took them on the trains straight to Treblinka, to the gas chambers.

And that Jewish organization got to know. They went after them, after the trains, to see what they doing with these people and they saw the truth. And they informed the people in the ghetto what they doing with the people, like not to go voluntarily and not to go at all on any transport. But they—you weren't able to hide from them, from the Germans. Lately, if they didn't have the—if they didn't have the volunteers, they took them, just like they came to the houses. First they start with loudspeakers, telling them, "All Jews come down. We are going on the transport, and you are going to better your life in there. You're going to have food, you're going to have work, you're going to have everything. And here, you just got hunger. It's better for you to go." And that's the beginning they

believed. But lately, they start fighting with them. Because the Jewish organization, they got to know that they killing them immediately when they come in.

CE: Were you part of any resistance in the ghetto? Were you part of any resistance in the ghetto? Did you resist or fight or—

RN: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was in this Jewish organization.

CE: You were? Okay.

RN: Yeah. That was my brother, too.

CE: Okay.

RN: And we are preparing for defend themselves—ourselves—and they gave out these leaflets for the people and put it on their walls. “Don’t go voluntarily, because they killing you.” They told them the truth. And the Germans didn’t like that, and they’re looking after this people which they did that, and this is what the people—Mordechai Anielewicz, you heard of him, which this. And then you took him on that (inaudible) in that kibbutz, in that place.

CE: Okay. But you left that to go to the farm?

RN: Yeah, they took us back to the ghetto.

CE: Okay, so you went to the farm—but you were in the farm how long?

RN: Like, almost two years.

CE: Two years.

RN: And the whole thing goes on in Warsaw.

CE: Okay.

RN: When the whole—in Polish I could say the *wysiedlenie*, the taking out of the Jews. The cleansing the ghetto of the Jews took them that long time, till they made it *Judenrein*; that means they took out all the Jews.

CE: Right, right.

RN: Because Jews resist, and fathers didn't want to give their children. First they left voluntarily with their children, but if they know—and then the German came in to their house, a couple of them came to our house, so our father and the children, he fought [*sic*] with them and give the children, some of them. And the stopped the German, and the German kill him at the last, kill him too, and the child. That they prefer more than going to the gas chamber: that was a better death than that. Some people came from United States to visit relatives, and they got caught in that time. And they took them to Auschwitz, in the camp that I was. And they came with a wife and a daughter and a son.

CE: The people from—

RN: But they were citizens in the United States—Jewish, but they weren't in the ghetto; they came to visit their relatives, so they were Jews just like everybody else. And they showed them the citizenship; didn't help. And they took them to Treblinka, and to that camp, too. Him, they let live: the man was a strong guy. And the wife and the two children, grown up children already, took to the gas chamber. And on the morning when he got up, the prisoners told him—no, he asked for his wife. “Where is my wife?” he said, “I just came with her here together. Where is she? What did they do with her?” So he told him the truth, the prisoner who was the (inaudible).

So, every morning there was an *Appell*: they were putting all the prisoners on the street to count them. They were afraid nobody should run away. So this man got from somewhere a knife, and the minute the *Appell* started he went over to him and he plunged right the knife to that German who counted us. And the German fell back, and we all saw that. He said, “Here, this is for me, for my wife, for my daughter, for my son.” And then the Germans came and kill him. So that was the end of the family.

CE: Okay, can I go back to your being on the farm, the first time? What did you do on the farm?

RN: Oh, this was a hard life in there. I was fifteen years old, to this time, fourteen and a half, fifteen. I didn't know nothing about farming. I went to school, just out of the seventh class of school, and preparing myself to go to college. Everybody said that I could go to college that I [was] capable. It was very expensive to go in there, to college. But anyway, I was preparing for that. Well, who knew there's going to come out a war like that, and Hitler is going to come? So, that was the end of my dreams.

CE: Yes, yes. So, you had to work on the farm?

RN: Oh, the farm. We have to get up at four o'clock every morning.

CE: Four o'clock?

RN: Four. And it was cold. The climate in Poland is very, very cold, and the summer is very hot. And we worked on the—they call it (inaudible). Do you know what it is?

CE: Yes.

RN: It was growing tomatoes or any other under glass.

CE: Under glass, okay.

RN: You know.

CE: In the hothouse.

RN: And when it was very cold, you have to close this with a mat—they call it a mat—to cover the glass. This shouldn't freeze.

CE: Okay, okay.

RN: And there was a walking distance to that, but so small that it could break the legs, walking through that to cover from both sides should freeze that. And a lot of women lost their lives going to them. They were such delicate women, some of them: the learned

one, the educated, and they didn't know nothing about things like that. And they wore this clothing, lumpy clothing, but they gave us these wooden shoes, even in there, on that farm. Right away they start making the wooden shoes; it was so very hard to walk in them.

First I worked in the—over time they had different jobs. The German was a *Volksdeutsche*: that mean first he was a Pole, a *Polak*; then he become a German when the Germans came in. He was our guard and he gave us all the work. He was such an anti-Semite, you know. He had a wife and children living in that place. So every day, like they—the other Germans came in, too, to that farm, to eat and to take out food from them. They grabbed everything they could in that farm.

CE: Did they feed you? Did you get food to eat?

RN: Very little.

CE: Very little.

RN: Very, very little. It was a separate kitchen for the Jews and a separate kitchen for the gentile, gentile kitchen. So for the Jews, they gave like half of the food to prepare in the kitchen than they give to the gentile people. And we had special days—I, too; everybody—to work in the kitchen. So I know about that, what's happening in there. Potatoes—they were feeding the pigs the potato, baked potato, but we never saw a potato in the—I was longing so much for a potato. And my girlfriend, she worked with the pigs and she was feeding them.

One time I went from work and I looked in for her to that place where she worked, and I see her, she's laying and all the little—on her, the pigs, the little pigs laying on her. And that was so funny. I see this Hasidic girl—I mean, from the Orthodox Jews—and she's feeding them potatoes. I said, "They don't give us no potatoes," so she gave me some. Whenever I came, she gave me something. She was such a nice friend of mine. And she gave me a couple potatoes and she said, "Go home. No one should see. Go to your barrack." Nobody should see; they could shoot me for that, and her, too.

So anyway, I used to go to see her. It was so unbelievable for me to see her in that situation, very wealthy people in the—doing that. And she got used to that and she was fine, and she looked good. I used to go to her every time, and she helped me a lot in there. As a matter of fact, she—after the war she went to that place; she survived, too. And she told me—I met her in Israel, and she told me that she came into that guy, they

call a *szlachcic*; I don't know how you say in English. The best farm like that; they call them such a royal name, a *szlachcic*, yeah.

CE: I don't know what that is, but someone will figure it out.

RN: So he gave her a lot of money after the war for her work. But at this time they didn't give us nothing—they didn't give us even food, nothing. The shoes they gave us [were] wooden shoes, so it didn't cost them much either. And then he took me to work, to a *prom*. There was water over there. We have to take the workers on the other side of the fields to work. So he said to me, "Oh, you little girl, you can manage that work." I had a pair of shoes at home: my brother, at the last minute I left, he got me good leather shoes that are for the time there. Anyway, my shoes got so bad that I couldn't put them on. The wood shoes, I have to take them off and put it on; that was hell. So that's—and I did put the people on that *prom* that you—it's not a little ship, but you pull it with the sticks. It's a thing that goes on the water: on the strings you're pulling it, till you come to that end.

CE: Oh, I know what you mean. Yes, and you pull yourself across.

RN: Yeah.

CE: Yeah.

RN: It came twelve o'clock and I was waiting for them with my little ship. I cleaned it, you know, and I was happy with that work. And at twelve o'clock they came, more than the ship could take them. So what happened, they didn't want to go out, I told them, "There is too many people; you go with the next transport." Well, they didn't budge. You know what happened? It sink. The whole thing just sink with the people. And everybody fell in the water, including me, too.

CE: Oh! Did they get out of the water?

RN: And he stayed in the end of the water and he's laughing hysterical—the German, you know. And some people came out, they almost got drowned, and we all got wet, the clothes and everything. And that's how it was every day. People got too many in that thing. That was my job. And I told him, the guy, "Look at my shoes." I showed him. "I cannot put them on anymore." He had a little pity, because I was small, a little girl, I looked even less than I was old, you know. So he said, "Okay, I'll give you another job." He put me to a place. Cows!

CE: Cows?

RN: Cows! And I should clean the cows. To clean them—they had this thing on the back, the things. You have to make the brush, brush it off, that thing. One time, I figured everybody wants to get some milk from them. People come in, the gentile people, to milk them. Now, one, two, three, I'll try it. (laughs) Get a little milk. And you know what she did? The cow, she give me one kick and I was laying on my side. (laughs)

CE: So you didn't get any milk?

RN: I didn't get any milk. I didn't know the right thing, how to do it. That's why she kicked me over. Okay, then there was an old man, too, working with us. He was with this cow for years, for years. So, he got sick one time. So the guy comes in and tells me, "You have to take today, the cows, to feed them on the grass." It was about fifty, or who knows how many of them were there: little ones and big ones and a lot of them.

So I got them out, all; they know where they're going to eat, they knew already. And I went with them and I was sitting on the grass with them. And it was time to go home and I start taking them back home. They disappeared. Not one I saw. I didn't know what's happening here. I asked someone there what happened. Did I just have too many of them? They're not there. He said, "They went home by themselves." But I was afraid if the Germans see me and I didn't take them to the—who knows what he's going to do to me? I was so scared. And I went home—I mean, to the farm. It was a distance to walk. And I came back, and he was laughing so hysterical. He took me by my hand. "Here, look. Are they all here?" (both laugh) I mean, that was so scary, everything, for a girl my age and to live through things like that. Very scary.

CE: Yeah, yeah. So then you came back to the Warsaw Ghetto?

RN: They came a lot of times to take us, but this guy needed us to work. But the Germans went to the war, and they didn't have people to work in the fields. So they gave him some whiskey and they told him—they gave him some more things to let us another while and told us to run to the fields, to hide in the fields. So that's what we did: one day, the whole night, we slept in the fields. And then, took another few months, and that's happening a couple of times, at the end.

But, come the time that they took us to the ghetto, it was *Judenrein*. That's what they called. They cleaned up the Warsaw Ghetto. There was no Jews left in the Warsaw Ghetto.

CE: Okay. None at all?

RN: No.

CE: No? Okay.

RN: They was all taken out. It was called *Judenrein*. You know what they did in Warsaw? They blocked the houses, not to let out no one. People want to run and to hide someplace, so they were standing around that block—a whole block, they blocked, so people couldn't escape. If they saw someone they shot him. And they burned the houses, the same time. And then they start taking them out. The people run from the burning houses, and then they—they jumped from the fifth floor, the people; they jumped to their death. But they shot them at the time when they are jumping down, the people. That's when we start the fight with them, the Jewish uprising. We were throwing *granats* on the ground—how do you call that?—*granats* on them.

CE: Oh, grenades?

RN: Grenades, yeah. Some went in the windows in our house, and here the house is burning in the back and choking our throat—the soot from the burning, you know. And we're throwing bombs on them.

CE: Were you throwing some of the grenades?

RN: Yeah, I did!

CE: So you were involved in all that?

RN: Yeah, yeah. They showed us how to make them in little boxes. Nothing, we didn't have no prepared ammunition. We could fight more with them. But they're shooting straight in the window where I was standing. And my girlfriend got killed at this time, in a similar place, similar organization. She was throwing that, too. So, that's what they

did. They watched which window the grenades come and they shoot straight in that window.

CE: Okay. And were you there—and then they came in and captured everyone, right? Or just about everyone.

RN: Then they took us to do the stuff for the people left. The (inaudible) was—the ghetto was emptied out. They left behind a lot of everything, the houses and clothing, furniture, everything. So they took a few people from the—they didn't know that I was throwing the bombs on them. They took a few of our people to help them to take out—they called the *Werterfassungskommand*—that's in Germany, the German language—that we should go in the houses and throw out everything in the street, and other people took this away in trucks and sending to Germany. So we came to things to see, I could never forget in my life. He came in for the (inaudible) with all bloody sheets, and the bedding was full of blood and some dead people laying on the floor and on the bed, which the German shoot them, you know. That's what we saw when we came in to take out everything. And anyway, we took out everything from there, the possessions what they left. The people don't live anymore, they're all dead.

CE: Yeah.

RN: Yeah. So this we worked for a while, but the kitchen—we had a kitchen for the poor; we gave out the soup for people. So, the Germans ate in that kitchen, too. So some—a brother of that guy who had the kitchen, who worked in that kitchen, he came to his brother where I worked in that *Werterfassungskommand*, told him, give me some to the girls—I mean that they could do that. And I made him because they just took away from the kitchen all the kitchen workers even was not enough for the chancellor, so they took the kitchen people in the kitchen. So they eat in that place, give me some too. So he came over to me. “Here, Rachel, go, you and another girl. Run into the kitchen.” I see a man, a tall guy standing cutting meat. I didn't see meat for ages. He said, “Don't worry; if you are here, you have food enough.”

So over the time a lot of people came; they escaped from the *Umschlagplatz*, the place where they loading the people in the train. Who do I see? My girlfriend, also, she was with us throwing the grenade; she came to the kitchen, to the roof. Oh, her face was black, like from the coals, so she went from the roof and she came and she told us. She told us that they're loading the trains now and she escaped, and she wanted another (inaudible) our leader for now in the kitchen, from the farm that was. She was our leader. And her, too, she was in the—she said, “I wanted to save”—her name was Leah. She want to save Leah; she's waiting for me to come back. So I give her some food and gave her something to take to her, and she went back, through the roof, the same way.

CE: Maybe we should stop here and change—

RN: What?

CE: Let's stop here and change the tape, okay? But don't forget where—so, you're working in the kitchen.

RN: Yeah, yeah.

CE: We'll start here on the next tape. Okay?

RN: Yeah, okay.

CE: Okay, thank you.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

CE: Okay, this is tape two with Rachel Nurman. So, Rachel, you were talking some about talking in the kitchen; do you want to finish that story?

RN: Yeah. So that same Germans, which they cleaned up the Warsaw Ghetto to take out all the people, came to eat in that kitchen that I worked. And they're sitting at the big tables and I have to go and put the plate in front of them, and I was so scared to death that they might show on me to take me away. Because that *Umschlagplatz* was right near that kitchen, that place, on the street, Niska Street.

CE: You remember?

RN: Niska 20, always remember that. So we served them that meal. That's why the kitchen existed a few more weeks, till they got everything settled and they had their place where to eat, the Germans. And after that, they said that they have to take us all out, the kitchen, to liquidate the kitchen. No people no more; they don't need the kitchen no more. And they're not going to be there to eat. But when I served then the meal, they holding their bayonets like that, and they—when I put the food in the kettle, it was a very

big kettle, so they was looking what I putting in, in that kettle. They were afraid that I putting poison in there, because they ate in there, too. So they [were] holding to me the bayonet like that.

CE: Wow.

RN: And I was scared to death. And I was so tiny that I thought they were shoving me in that kettle. (laughs)

CE: Oh, my.

RN: And I watched them, I was sure they going to put me in that. (laughs) That's what they did.

CE: Oh, that's horrible.

RN: That's what they did: they catch the Jew in the street and they put in a bowl of hot soup inside, with the hand, with the feet. Or they put him on ice, to see how long he could take it.

CE: Did you see them do those kinds of things?

RN: In the camp, in Auschwitz, they did it.

CE: In Auschwitz later, okay.

RN: Yeah, but they did that in Warsaw Ghetto, too. I saw them. Yeah.

CE: Now, you said the Warsaw Ghetto was worse than Auschwitz?

RN: Yes.

CE: Can you talk about that a little bit?

RN: Yeah. The Warsaw Ghetto, people didn't have even—what to call that?—that to put their head down. They get eleven people to one room, who didn't even have where to sit, even. The one was laying on the other. If it was relatives, it was okay—not okay, but it was much better than strange people, you know, laying one on the other just waiting to die. And so people looking only to stay in the street, in the ghetto. And the street was impossible to stay because the Germans came and they shoot. When they saw people together standing, or even individuals, they [were] shooting them right away in the street. People were afraid. They didn't have where to put themselves, where to go. So they didn't mind already; they took them in the trucks to the gas chambers. This is [what] the only solution was for them, that's where they made them to be.

There was a Jewish song like that, as well. A crazy man, his name was Nathan, and he was singing on the street, like he was really crazy. And the Germans listened to what he was singing and let him live another few weeks, you know. He was singing in Yiddish. (sings in Yiddish) You know what that mean?

CE: No.

RN: It's not going to help, no diamonds, and no gold—dollar gold—that you have to go take a bath in Hitler's showers, Hitler's gas chambers.

CE: So that was a Jewish guy who was singing that?

RN: Yeah, Jewish. He was singing. Jewish is similar to German, and they understood what he was singing. Yeah.

CE: Okay, so you're in the kitchen and they tell you that everybody has to go?

RN: Yeah, and the kitchen, working there (inaudible) the richest. They were waiting for the last to be taken. They thought [if] they're going to give all the possessions that they have, the Germans let them live. But it wasn't so, they're mistaking. They got killed the same like every Jew, like every poor and rich, the same thing. So they told us the one, that the Jews has a fight in him. He was like a little better than the others. So he told him, "On my honor," he said, "that not even one hair will fall off of your head. Go to that place," Poniatowa, they called that place. It's near Auschwitz, some place, Poniatowa. I don't remember exactly where.

So people from the kitchen, all of them, they went. And I didn't have where to go and my parents weren't there, so the chef in the kitchen offered me to stay with him. He had one child, a five year old boy, and the child liked me a lot and I stayed with them a couple of days. And they told us to get ready to go there that day. And they was sure that this is true, if he said it; that German, he was to them like an honest German.

CE: Okay. Did you believe it?

RN: No. But our Jewish organization put that contribution on these rich Jews to give money that we'll be able to buy ammunition. We have some gentile guys to bring the ammunition to the ghetto, but they have to be paid, good paid. So where is the money from? So we put this contribution. They were the wealthiest Jews in Warsaw, but they didn't want to give. They thought they were going to live through the war and they are going to need it, or they need to give [to] the Germans in order to live for them. So they—I have to think of that.

CE: Okay.

RN: So she start preparing that, his wife. When I came from the kitchen, so tired from working, she asked me to clean her house and to take care of the boy, and it was hard on me. I was so young, I wasn't able to do that, so much work; and the kitchen was very hard to work, to wash the floors and the big places, the big tables. So she had some bacon in her house—that, we didn't see in the ghetto. This? Never, no one has that, even the richest. But how she got this?

And she packed everything—I had to pack. A whole night we were packing the stuff; they told us how much to take. So she took like two big valises. And this little bacon she had in a special thermos, like a bottle like that. So she said to me, “You carry that separately, because in the valise it gets spoiled, so you carry it.” I said, “Okay, I'll carry it.” And when they took us out to the *Umschlagplatz*, to the place with the wagons, so I saw so many people there ready to take the transport to go and they—to the trains. And I'm schlepping this little thermos, and I said to myself, “Rachel, throw away that thing.” So, I did. I threw away that thing and I was free and I was looking all the sights, a place where to escape, where to go from there.

And all of a sudden I see her; her name was Mrs. Pludova. And I see her, and she said, “Oh!” and she start going into that train with the child and with her husband. “Oh, Rachel, you come with us, together. You don't have no father, no mother. Come with us. Oh, by the way, where have you got that thing with the bacon? We need that on the trip.”

I told her the truth: that I threw it away. She start screaming at me and calling me names, you know, and I got mad at her and I said, “No, I’m not going with you.” And their little boy start crying. “Rachel, you come with us, you stay with us on the train.” And here I see so many people packing, going in to the train, and they screaming to us, “Faster, faster! *Schneller!* Go to the train already!”

But I didn’t. I went to another train, to another—you know, it was still empty. And I saw two of my girlfriends that I know them from the Warsaw Ghetto, my age; from that same organization, you know. And they say to me, “Oh, Rachel, it’s good we go together, all three.” I saw there was no way to escape, so what shall I do? I have to go. I have to go. You have to go. I went into that train with the three girls, and after me start coming in a lot of people. And it was so sticky in that train, and no air. So I put right away my nose to a crack that was in the floor of the train to get a little bit air. And in a minute a man, a strong man, pulled me away from that and he got near that. But everybody wanted to live.

So I was laying like that with the three girls together, you know, and she was on the train in the front. And all of a sudden we—the train is moving, and some people knew what direction the train is going because it was in Poland and we are Polish, so we know the way the train is going, what town they going through, you know. And it was a couple of hours and we were on the train, and people needed to go to the bathroom, you know, and men start taking off their clothes and women—it was so hot that we couldn’t wear that clothes on us. And everybody start making—they don’t have no nothing. They did it on the floor and one on the other, and start smelling most horrible in there! Couldn’t breathe, you know.

CE: Oh, Rachel!

RN: And I’m start—a hundred in that train, or less, fifty maybe. It was cattles—for the animals, cattles, not for people, but they used it for us. And that stench, we couldn’t take it. All of a sudden, some of the youngsters start digging at the window. It was like iron, the windows, the little—and they escaped.

CE: They got the window open?

RN: They got out, got out, and we heard a shot right after that, because they’re standing on the roofs on the trains, the Germans, and they saw who—but they knew, the guys, that the Germans are on the top of the roof, but they did it anyway because it was impossible to be in that train. We are suffocating in that train. And a lot of them survived by that jumping. Some of them that I know today fell in the roof—in the ditch—and the German

didn't spot them. He shoot at him, but he didn't, so the guy survived. And some of them died, too.

CE: Did you think of trying to jump?

RN: Excuse me?

CE: Did you think of jumping?

RN: No, I wasn't able to do that. No, just a man could lift himself—

CE: Lift himself up and get through the window.

RN: It was a little one, a little window. I never thought. The things I couldn't do—I knew what I could do.

CE: Okay.

RN: And we are driving and riding with that train, and stopped and going back, didn't know. So some of the people say they're going to Treblinka, to that place where they getting the people immediately from other camps. They need some young people to work, like Auschwitz. Oh, we came to Majdanek.

CE: Majdanek.

RN: Majdanek, from that train. We got off in the middle of the night and the reflectors was shining on us. It was pitch dark on the street. It was so scary. I thought it was hell some place—it was hell. And they took out some people, young, and the rest they took to another place; they took them to the gas chamber. And the young people—they took me out, and my three girlfriends, also. And they put us in fives and told us to walk from that camp, Majdanek. And we're walking and walking, and I wore this long coat, still that coat. I had a long coat. And he told us to sit down. It was like 200 girls only; they choose them. And we sit on the grass and they did—go around us, the soldiers, with the bayonets and went like that (gestures) to us. "You sit here."

So, I thought that this was the end already, and I took off my coat. I was so hot from the pressure, from that scaredness, and I put the coat right near me. And we all thought that this is—this came the end for us. It took about fifteen minutes. They start laughing, the soldiers, the Germans. They played a joke on us! They scared us to death. They told us that. “I just played a joke on you, ’cause we need you to work. Don’t be scared no more.”

CE: Wow. And so they took 200 girls separate. Is everybody—

RN: The rest out.

CE: And what happened with everybody else?

RN: The others went to the gas chambers. The mothers with children, and men which they wasn’t shaved that day, people with glasses: that was the first.

CE: Okay.

RN: Yeah. And they took us to a place where the soldiers, the Polish soldiers which they took him as the—how you call it, when they capture the soldiers? Some Polish soldiers which had fight with the Germans.

CE: The political prisoners?

RN: Yes. There was a lot of Jewish were there, too. And they told us a few things which was very important. They told me to say that I’m eighteen. They’re not supposed to say that, but they went by us and they’re singing like a Jewish song, “Say you’re eighteen, say you’re eighteen.”

CE: Wow!

RN: I didn’t know. If he ask me, “How old you are?” I will tell him the truth, that I am sixteen, and this wasn’t good. So, now I was prepared to say I’m eighteen.

CE: Wow.

RN: And a couple of our people, too. And the mothers—I mean, before that, they told a young girl which holding a baby, they said to her, “Give away the baby to your mother, and you, they take to work.” Some of them listened, and they give it to the mother to hold it, and so they took the mother with the child to the gas chamber, and the daughter survived. And a lot of them did that. Some of them did it and some of them didn’t; some of them preferred to go with the child, like my brothers. Both of them went with a child together; somebody told me that. So they took them, the children, the little babies. Some of them cried so loud that they took them by their little feet and they did it like that on the wall, on the brick wall, and the mother is standing there and looking, and the father.

Then the chef’s wife, what I worked in the kitchen, I saw her in there. And they wanted to take the boy from her away, but she didn’t let them, the Germans. So she was holding his hand and the German—and she was holding this side, this hand, the boy, and the boy is screaming, “Mama, don’t let them! Don’t let them take me.” So with all her might she was pulling him on this side. And who was stronger? The German was stronger, and he grabbed him and they schlepped them right into the people, to the gas chamber, the young children there.

And this was Majdanek, and we was like six weeks at Majdanek, the camp. When we came in, I thought that I’m in a crazy house. We saw people all naked. Not one of them wore clothing, men or women. Men were on the other side, with the electric wires. We couldn’t be together with the men; they have a separate camp. And my girlfriend had a husband in that camp, you know, so they could talk some time in the evening through the wires. So, the clothes they took away, right away, from us, the clothes. So we find ourselves, young girls like that, naked. I was standing like that, I was so ashamed.

CE: Oh!

RN: It was the worst time in my life. They said they’re taking the clothes to disinfection, to make it clean. It took them like a whole week!

CE: To give them back?

RN: And they disinfected the clothes and they put them on the roofs of the barracks. They didn’t dry so fast; it was raining. And meanwhile we were naked, nothing. And it was cold, freezing, so we warmed each other like that, taking around the girls and warm the body. After like a week, they took us in the barrack and gave us clothes.

CE: Had they shaved your head?

RN: Huh?

CE: Had they shaved you?

RN: Oh, yeah, I forgot to say that. They shaved my head completely, yeah. You know something? In the middle of the street, the men, the young guys, they're shaving their private place and under their arm and everywhere. It was naked, you know. And the head, everything. Yeah.

So they put us in that barrack to give us clothes. They gave me pants, big, like could fit like three like me. This was pants from a prisoner, from a Russian prisoner. And a blouse, like ten like me could go in that, it was too big. And some of my girlfriends they give too small, too big, some too big, too small, and we looked at each other and we both start laughing, not recognizing each other. We looked caricatures, like somebody from another planet. Oh, the whole camp looked like another planet, like we are on the moon or some place that is unbelievable.

And at that camp was sitting between the barriers: the one side of barriers were men's barracks, and this side barracks was women's barracks. And it was cold, freezing, sitting like that the whole day without work, no work, and no food, no work. Give us like one slice of bread in the morning, and they give us a little bit of the black coffee. So me and my girlfriend had one plate, one thing of food they gave us, so we should share. So when they put in a little bit, like water food made with spinach, with their leaves, the green leaves, but we could feel the sand in that. But we have to swallow that anyway.

CE: What do you think that was?

RN: It was some leaves that growing in the field, and they cooked it with water and they didn't wash it out.

CE: So it was just sand?

RN: Sand, yeah. And also, they used the food that the people brought from homes. They put it in there to cook that, too. So you could find in this soup needles and pins and everything—

CE: Oh!

RN: —which the people have in their sack, in their rucksacks, when they came to the camp, you know.

CE: Now, let me ask you a question, because another woman who was in the camps told me that she thought that gritty sand stuff was something that they put in food that women would no longer menstruate.

RN: Yeah, that's what—a part of that, but I don't know what it was for. But we couldn't swallow that anyway. But the men used to give us something when we walked to work and they saw us young girls going around with the bloody feet and everything. They're working with the trees, they chopping off trees, so they prepared for us the big leaves and they threw to us, by going by to work. So sometime I catch a couple of them, so I have what to wipe my legs, you know.

So after that, the Germans put something in the food, that I know that. But the sand, I thought that's plain sand. But I couldn't even swallow that, that's how much sand was in there. And then we ate the core from the trees. And my girlfriends, they ate it, but I couldn't eat it. It was stuck to my throat. I tried to—

CE: What was it?

RN: From the trees, the core.

CE: The bark?

RN: Yeah. They chewing, chewing, and they could swallow, but I could never swallow because it was standing in my throat. I have to have some water to wash it down. Oh, they didn't have no water whatsoever. So that's what we tried to eat at work. That's how hungry we were, so very hungry.

One time, we working together with the men. They're building a little place, a little house—not the crematorium, I don't know what they build it. So some of the boys knew me and the other two girls and they told us, "We're going to have a nice meal today." They are preparing a nice meal, that the Germans left for a while and they'd be able to cook that meal; the Germans shouldn't see it. Sometime they're drinking and they went to sleep for hours and hours, so we had a ball at the times when they weren't there. So you know what they did?

CE: What?

RN: They caught a cat, running around cats. And they killed a cat and they put—I didn't know about it. Just after I ate, he said to me, my friend—(laughs) He said to me, "Rachel, did you like that food?" I ate that full plate he put down for me, you know, and a little potato he found, and he put it in that, too. "Did you like that food?" I said, "Yeah, the meat was so slimy." And I ate it in such appetite and I really did eat it. And then after we all ate, he told us the true story, what it was. That was something. But we had eaten already.

CE: That's right. What could you do?

RN: That's why I keep a cat in my house, that's the reason. My cat is with me for ten years already. I have a white little cat. And I have so much trouble with her, but I still cannot give her up, you know, for so many years she's with me. She's just like a human being, she knows everything. When somebody comes in, she has to check him out, not to harm me, not—you know. It's something that I sometimes thinking that this is impossible, for a cat to be that smart.

CE: So, you want to go back to the camp and tell me what kind of—did you end up working there?

RN: Then they start thinking of the Red Army coming near, so they took us to Auschwitz.

CE: So how long were you at Majdanek?

RN: Six weeks.

CE: Six weeks, okay.

RN: Yeah, then took us to Auschwitz. Oh, this was hell on the—

CE: Did you go on the train?

RN: Yeah.

CE: They put you on the train again?

RN: Yeah, we went on the train. They gave us little bit of bread. And always the same three girls; we were always together, like a family, even friends after the war. And we came to Auschwitz and the girls start doing that, the tattoo. And I asking her—a Jewish girl, speaking Jewish. I asked her, “How is the camp here? What is doing here?” because everybody said such a bad thing about Auschwitz. She said to me, “You wait and see. Here, you don’t have no mother, no father, no brother, no sister. You alone here. You live alone, you die alone.”

CE: Wow.

RN: That’s the courage she gave to live. And she did my tattoo with the ink and a pen and it was hurting terrible—not like today they making tattoo. But my hands were swollen up like that. It was a little pen like they use in the olden day; they putting in the ink and they doing that.

CE: So it’s just a regular, like, quill pen or something?

RN: Yeah, yeah. That’s what they did. That’s why the hand swell up like that. And in Auschwitz, you have to use a little bit head also, and it’s not just luck. I never believed in luck, but you have to create yourself your luck, I think.

They took us first to work: it was Kommando 105. That was very famous. This kommando was Polish Jews, the most—they hated the Polish Jews. I don’t know why, because they have Jews in other countries. They have Jews in Greece. From Thessaloniki they brought men, tall big men. They told them they could come—the Germans, they occupied in there, too, and they told the men that they’re going to find

work with them. They took them on the ships, on the water, and brought them to Auschwitz, and in Auschwitz they finished them.

And the women were most beautiful, the women from Thessaloniki in Greece. And the high officers used to have parties every Sunday night, and they're not supposed to mingle with Jewish people. So they got drunk in the canteen and they picked about twenty girls, twenty-five girls, and they took them with them. They gave them wine, they gave them food, and they got drunk like they didn't know what they—they knew. I mean, who knows? And the girls were all hungry. They didn't know what the Germans taking them for. Most of them, he took the girls from Greece—they were most beautiful girls I've ever saw—and girls from Czechoslovakia. But I was a short girl, so I always hid even my head amongst the tall girls so they never see me. And anyway, I wasn't that pretty for them; they had more prettier girls that they choose.

CE: Did they choose—

RN: But this helped me, too!

CE: Did they choose any Jewish girls?

RN: All Jewish!

CE: Oh, they were all Jewish.

RN: All Jewish, yeah.

CE: Okay, okay.

RN: Yeah, they was afraid to go to the Polish barracks. They didn't. So, always to the Jews. They just came to the barrack and told us all to go down from the barrack, from the sleeping quarter, from the bunks. And they choose and they, "This, this, this," and write down the number and that's it, finished. They took them with them to that camp, you know. It was rooms in there, it was—and we heard the yelling from these girls the whole night, yelling and screaming. You know what they did with them. And that got to be a whole night. In the morning when they—like I say, my friend, he was from another town; he used to talk with me all the time, but over the wires. In the morning, he told me, "Go, Rachel, have a look." All the girls he picked are laying dead on the sidewalk.

CE: Oh!

RN: So, put it nice, we're near each other. I saw them with my own eyes. And they came to take them to the crematorium, the boys which they were in the *Sonderkommando*. So you know what they did? They killed them. They was afraid of the pregnancies and they were afraid for their—not to be punished, 'cause they're not supposed to mingle with the Jewish. And that was the end of the girls. And every time they came to the barrack to choose them we all ran, because—

CE: Because everybody knew at that point.

RN: Yeah, we knew at that point. And then every Sunday they came, Sunday, like throughout the evening, and told us to go down from the bunks. It was like ten of them, the nurses with the doctors, and they took blood from everyone, from every girl. They need the blood for the wounded German soldiers, for them which they were wounded, and they took from the girls. They had the last little blood in them. They were skinny like sticks, like skeletons.

So what did I do? I always thinking of something to do, not to let them. If they would take me—one time they did, just one time, and then I said to myself, “You're not going to do that no more to me.” I said it to myself. It was on top of my bunk a little window, a small window, so I know how to work with it from the previous camps. I took out this little window and I walked out from that and sitting on the roof—this is in my book, too. (laughs) And I'm sitting on the roof, like that, scared to death, you know, scared just to sit on the roof. But I said to myself, “Oh, you sit quiet or you're going to be dead.” (laughs)

CE: So they took blood from you one time?

RN: One time.

CE: One time.

RN: And the rest of the girls. So I heard them coming into the bunk already, that they had done already. They came to the bunks and they lay down, they couldn't even move. So I came down and I laid down near them. Nobody knew what I did and where I was,

that's how many [there] were, you know. It was hard to keep count of everyone, you know. And I laid down near them, and that's what I did all the time when they came to take the blood. This was the worst. I couldn't take it, the blood taking.

CE: Wow! Now, did the other girls know where you were?

RN: No.

CE: They didn't know. So nobody knew where you went?

RN: No, no, no. Nobody knew that I know about it, how to do that. This you have to know, because I used to have a friend, a man who was a glazier on that farm.

CE: On the farm?

RN: He worked there as a glazier. He used to take me with him sometimes to his place of work, and he showed me how to do it. And I didn't want to listen. "Oh, I don't need that to know," I said that to him. He said to me, "Look, you never know what life could bring. You learn how to do that, maybe it will come handy to you and your way of life." So he showed me how to do that, and I knew.

CE: How to take the window out?

RN: Yeah! It's so easy to do that. And that's—that I knew how to do that.

CE: So you could take it out and then put it back in.

RN: Yeah, and then I put it back in a minute and that's all. Yeah. I just wanted to—that no one see me, because they would do the same and I would be in trouble. One time, I escaped in the selection from Dr. Mengele.

CE: Tell me.

RN: He did a selection in the place when we took a bath sometime; they allow us a bath every three months, maybe. It was so cold on the street, and they made hot showers for us. That was in January, I remember. And after the hot showers, they threw us out on the street. It was freezing cold, no—how you call it, the towels to wipe off, nothing. Just like that, a lot of girls had pneumonia, and a lot died of that. And we stayed outside and shivering like that; and the water was dripping, the hot water, and we took also each other like that to warm the bodies for each other, and that's what they did.

But in the same shower—they called it the sauna. In the same sauna, they make selection. Dr. Mengele came in and he looked at everyone. There was a little a chair, and everybody has to go on the chair; and there was a table, a big table standing near him. And from the chair, we have to go on that table. And everybody was scared to death. So that time—I was in a couple of selections, but he didn't choose me, but they still need me to work; maybe that's the reason. But this time, we was in that sauna with the clothes on, and the girls start whispering to each other that we heard the trucks on the outside, that the trucks were prepared to take us to the gas chamber, all of us. That's what they did sometimes: they took all, whoever was in that sauna.

So, I did again with the window, but I broke the window with my fist. It was so many girls that nobody saw. Just my one girlfriend knew, that I was very close with her. She was constantly near me, like she was even younger than me, so she considered herself as a child. So I just punched a big hole, and I was naked; he told everybody to take off the clothes before the selection, so I didn't have no more clothes on me. So, through that hole, I escaped. I knew that I don't have no place to escape. I mean, where do I—this is Auschwitz. I could never go out alive from there. But anyway, I tried; I just cannot give myself up just like, not to fight.

So on the way that I'm running out, I didn't even realize that the blood is gushing from my—that I hurt myself with the glass that I went out. The little pieces—I didn't knock out the hole, just in the middle. So Mengele saw that, or somebody told him from the personnel, and they start running after me. And this little girl also went out, both of us. I was first and she was after me. And I saw a little house for the bees making honey, you know, the little ones. And I figured, "Oh, I'm going to go into that." Didn't even know if I'd fit in that! (laughs) But I opened up that little door, was no bees in there at this time, and I'm sitting like that, sitting like five minutes. All of the sudden, I see my (laughs) I see my house turning over. He run after me and he saw the blood, showed them where I went in. And he did with his boots, turn over my (laughs) little house. And he took me out, and I had no hair but he took me by my shoes, and schlepping me just like a dead person, schlepping to the place where he make the selection.

And he told the girl—this was a *Blockälteste*; that means she was the guard for us. She was from Czechoslovakia, beautiful woman, nice woman. And she knew me because I

always did for her some work. I swept her room; I did something always to be with her that she would know me. So he took her and he said to her just like that, “Hold on to her,” on me, “and when I finish all the selection, when I send them to the gas chamber, her, too.” Send me to the gas chamber. “She should owe me.” And my girlfriend, they didn’t find her. I don’t know where she was then.

And she’s holding me, and he goes back because they told him that more escaped. So he didn’t want to see more escaping, so he stopped finishing the selection. That mean one on this side, one on this side, one to death and one to life, you know. The girls which wore glasses, they were the first one to go. I don’t know what he had against that. (laughs) And the first selection when I was before him, he told me to turn around. I was like all of my ribs you could see in the front, so he want to see my ribs in the back. So he told me to turn around, I thought he’d take me this time—but this wasn’t the time that I escaped. This was different, that before.

CE: Right, right.

RN: So when she saw him going back to that place to finish his selection with the other girls, she said, “Rachel, run! Run as fast as you can. Run out from here.” And she made it possible for me, and I did, and I run out. Because there was so many, you know, and she said to me, “He cannot be remembering you, maybe, after this whole selection, because he has so many to take care of. But try anyway,” she said. So I did. I run as fast as I could, and I come to a barrack. It was a Revier; that was like a little hospital for the sick.

So outside, I see a girl that I knew, also from our organization. I knew her. She was a nurse, really, and she worked in there. And she said, “What is that? From where are you running? What you did? And who’s running after you?” She start asking me questions, and I told her. And she said, “Come with me.” She took me in the—in that place they had little bed, separate beds for the sick, thin boards made little beds. Took me on top of the beds. There was a little straw on that: the sick had privilege, they had a little straw under there, on their little bed. And she said to me, “Lay down here, come here.” And she helped me and she put me down on there. She put the straw on top of me, and that’s how I was laying on there. And I didn’t know nothing what’s going on in there.

But later, this *Blockälteste*—I was in her barrack, but she knew me; my name was in her, you know. But she told me that, “Rachel, he didn’t even remember. He didn’t even look for you. He didn’t remember nothing.” After this, everything, and if I didn’t do that, I would be taken to the gas chamber. I was very bad condition then, when I did that. So, that’s what I mean you have to use your head also a little bit, beside luck.

CE: Yes, I agree.

RN: And then I went back to the barrack and she hugged me, and she gave me some little food from hers. And we became friends, good friends, since then. And she lived through the war, too.

CE: What was her name?

RN: What?

CE: What was her name?

RN: Beři.

CE: Beři?

RN: Beři. That was a Czechoslovakian name.

CE: Okay, okay. I think that this is a good place to stop for the tape change.

RN: Oh, okay.

CE: Okay?

Part 2 ends; part 3 begins

CE: Okay, this is tape three with Rachel Nurman. So, Rachel, we were talking about your time in Auschwitz, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about why you think you survived in Auschwitz. Why did you survive? What was it about you? Yes.

RN: It's the will to live.

CE: The will to live.

RN: Yeah, and to tell the world the injustice, what they did to innocent people because of religion, and to kill a nation. The world don't think too much about that now, because not too many was punished for that.

CE: You were talking a little during the break about how it took more than luck to survive.

RN: It's not just luck, but you have to think every step you make in there. But the same time, they hit you for doing things, or not doing, so it's better to risk and to fight for your life.

CE: Did you have to work while you were in Auschwitz?

RN: I worked in the crematorium now.

CE: Oh, my!

RN: That is some very sad chapter in my life. Yeah, I saw the people going into the gas chambers, and I was working right near there putting the bundles—clothes, men's to men's and women's to women's—from the dead people. And these people [are] alive, and they walking into that gas chamber, saw me and they said to me, "Hey, Jewish girl, tell us, what they going to do with us here?" And they saw the flames from the chimneys and they asked me, "Is this a bakery? They are baking bread for us here?" I couldn't answer them because they shoot me immediately, the Germans. I didn't say nothing, and they kept asking me, "Jewish girl, tell me, what are they going to do with us here?" They suspected something already. And the Germans start screaming through the megaphones, "Please, ladies and gentlemen, you take off your clothes and go in and take a shower, and make sure your shoelaces are tied, because later you don't have to look for your shoes. And after you shower, you have hot coffee waiting for you."

And that's how they—but the people saw by going in that this—what the place looked like, so they start being scared and they didn't want to go in. And they're hitting; this is the time when they are hitting them over the head with their—what they are holding in their hand, and they are hitting them. And the people are running faster—they don't want to be hit by the guards—and they fill up the place. And then they close the doors and they put the gas through the roof, and we heard the yellings of the people, the Jewish

prayer, the Shema Yisrael, and asking God what they doing, why this befell the Jews, why God couldn't choose another nation to be his favorites. They just choose the Jews. We don't want to be the favorites, to be killed.

CE: So, were you real close to the crematorium?

RN: I was right near, and I saw the people walking in, in there, and then when they opened the door they fell out stiff, all of them. It was little kids with the dolls holding, they're walking in with their parents and the little children on their arms, and I saw everything was going on. And the yelling from the people was going to God. God didn't listen then to these people.

And I supposed to sleep in the daytime, because I was working—two shifts we work. Some girls worked in the day and I worked in the night. And we changed every time. So I couldn't even fell asleep when I worked in the nighttime; I couldn't sleep in the day because we listened to these screams from the people, and it was impossible to—not to cry and to lamenting how the people suffered before they going to their death, this humiliation in how they treated the young girls, how they hung the girls with their feet. And about fifty soldiers was around her doing this, raping her. I mean, the women suffered more—I mean, the men, too; but the women, that's what they did.

CE: Was that—

RN: Without the shame, in front of every—of all the people.

CE: Was that common?

RN: In *Umschlagplatz* they did in the—in the Warsaw Ghetto, too. That's what they did for sport. They're hanging a couple of girls on the ceiling, by the feet, and that's how they—the German soldiers, some new tactics they have for that. And they keep raping her till she fell down dead.

CE: Oh, boy. Was that a common occurrence? Was that common to happen?

RN: Yeah, yeah.

CE: In the crematorium, near the crematorium?

RN: Yeah, yeah.

CE: (sighs) Oh, boy.

RN: That's—the moment I think of that, I remember every little thing. Then they brought to Auschwitz a transport, just children, without the parents. They grabbed them from their houses, from the parents, and they put them in a barrack right near my barrack that I slept in there. And I saw them going in from the trucks, the bigger children holding the smaller, and they were all—they were smeared with human waste, and screaming and yelling, “Mama, Mama, we miss you. Mama, where are you?” If God would listen then—if he listened and didn't do nothing about it, I don't believe in God. I don't believe in that almighty God, that he could see things like that, that he could let these people do things like that, but he didn't strike them dead.

Like, one time a German hit me very bad, for nothing. I was just going to my girlfriend's barrack. She used to leave me a little bit soup. I was shortsighted all the time, and I didn't feel so good and I spitted out from my mouth, and I didn't see two Germans walking just across to watch me. I didn't see them. I wouldn't do that. I just did it because I didn't feel good. And they came over to me, running, running over to me. “Why did you spit out?” they said to me. “Because you saw us?” That's what he said to me. And they start hitting me, one after the other, my head—in my head, both of them kicking me. I was on the floor, kicking me. And one of them hit me with the gun—with the handle from the gun, hitting me. I wonder they didn't shoot me.

And the other one said to him, “Come on, she still have her milk, her mother's milk, on her lips.” That's what he said in German. So I understand, still—I was still—and then I fainted. I wasn't—and he told the girls in the barracks to bring me into the barracks and put water on me, pails of water. And that's what they did. And I laying there the whole night, they told me, without any sign of life, and in the morning I woke up and they took care a little bit of me, and I survived from that, too.

CE: Did you ever give up?

RN: No.

CE: You never did?

RN: No, never give up.

CE: Never did?

RN: No.

CE: That's amazing.

RN: We sometime changed the bread, the slice of bread. I want to change for soup; we could do that with—it was like a black market, with the Russian girls—all different nations was there. So, I see a Russian girl holding a big plate of soup, and so I said to her, "You want to trade for my portion of bread?" Oh, yeah, yeah. She took my bread and I took the—I thought I got a bargain, she gave me a bargain. And I ate that soup and I felt sick from that, and I almost died. You know what she did with that soup?

CE: What? Oh, I'm afraid of—

RN: She make urine in that to make it more.

CE: Yeah, yeah.

RN: To this time we was so hungry you didn't even feel it. And I ate that whole soup. And then I was deadly sick. I was—I thought this was the end. But still, I didn't give up.

CE: You didn't give up?

RN: No, I went to that place where you get water. I could be shot for that, 'cause it wasn't allowed in the daytime to go to that water. And I did—how you say, shrink it down my stomach? I was washing my stomach as much as I could, so that everything could go out from me, and I got better. And then I didn't do that anymore, to trade for that. That was Auschwitz market. Also, we get a little *Blutwurst* on Sundays. So you could see the blood from there: it was so red, so bad, I couldn't eat it. So I trade this also for a little bread. Bread I knew it's clean, but they said that this *Blutwurst* was made from human meat.

CE: Do you think it was?

RN: Yeah.

CE: You think it was?

RN: I couldn't eat that. Today, even, I don't eat. I wash my chicken (laughs) fifty times and I salt it and brush it to take out all the blood from that.

CE: So, did you go work during the day? Did you have to go off and work?

RN: When I worked near the crematorium?

CE: Oh, you were working in the crematorium. Was that your job the whole time you were there, the crematorium?

RN: Oh, they took us to Bergen-Belsen from there.

CE: Okay, okay. On a train, again? Were you on a train?

RN: Yeah, on the train. We walked someplace that I don't remember where this was. A short distance we walked. I don't remember that was Bergen-Belsen or what. A lot of things I don't remember.

So this Auschwitz, and the crematorium—oh, being in there, why they send us out? The men made a revolt. We had the barracks and we were laying so much clothes in there from the dead people and we're sorting that, men's to men's and women's to women's and children's, in bundles. And we left the Jewish star on it so we made sure that the German people which they get this in Germany would know from who these clothes is. But they find out about it. The clothes came to Germany without Jewish star on it. And they came into our barrack and start questioning who make that bundle, that bundle. But to this time they didn't know; of course, after that, they start telling us to sign our name: whoever did these bundles to sign the name on the bundles. I put my name on the

bundles, that I made that bundle. So we stop doing that; we was afraid of that. And that's what they did with the clothes.

Oh, about the children, what I want to say. The children were standing in that barrack all night, crying, and that the wall could break from that crying. And I stayed outside. I thought it's my brother that I heard his crying in there. That my—that was my—among so many children, could I recognize my brother? I couldn't, but I thought so. That is my brother! And I didn't go into the barrack to sleep, I just standing under the barrack. She didn't see me. In the morning, one of the guards—"Bloody Brygida," they called her.¹ She came with a truck with a Red Cross band on her arm and start taking out the children. And she opened up that barrack where the children were, and she ordered the bigger ones to carry the smaller ones to the truck. And the rest, the little ones she took and she threw it on the children, on the heads, on the truck because they couldn't walk no more, the children. So she threw them over the heads of the other children, and straight to the gas chamber with them.

And I saw that, and I testified in the court in Düsseldorf. And I saw her in the court, and my son-in-law went with me, Eddy, and he was sitting in the front row. We had to go every day in the court. There was a judge and he didn't like to try his own people, because he was German. Anyway, but that's what they did. He asked me why I survived and my family didn't. And I told him just plain (audio garbled) I said, "I fill in for the soldiers which they went to the front in Germany." I worked in the fields first, and then I worked in the crematorium there.

But anyway, in the middle of the trial I saw her, and then he put me in a room. It was a little dark, let down the curtains with a—it was about four of them, women, the German guards in the camp. And he said, the judge, I should recognize the one who hit me. She wore the boots and on the (inaudible) of the boot was an iron thing to that. That's what they wore, the women. The women were worse than the men in Germany. So she used to hit a girl at work with that boot, in the bone, here in the foot. She was laying dead already. It was malnutrition, the girl; just one kick like that she was dead, you know, little children.

So, in the court, the judge told me to recognize her. And today she is—I mean, this was in—you know what year this is? It's written in my book, that I was with Eddy.

CE: Oh, it was on 1981.

¹Hildegard Lächert (1920-1995), also known as "Bloody Brygida," was a guard at Auschwitz and Majdanek. In 1947 she was sentenced to fifteen years in prison at the Auschwitz Trial; she served nine and was released in 1956. From 1975 to 1981 she was tried at the Majdanek-Prozess in Düsseldorf, at which Nurman testified. Lächert was sentenced to another twelve years in prison and died in Berlin in 1995.

RN: She was heavy, yeah.

CE: Nineteen eighty-one.

RN: She was heavy, and old. So the judge told me to recognize her, and I looked at every one of them, and I—anywhere I'd recognize her. She had this big—she was a pretty woman, younger then, and she was slim. And today she was a heavyset woman and—

CE: Is this Hermine Braunsteiner²?

RN: Yeah, yeah.

CE: Is that the one? Okay, okay.

RN: So I told the judge which one it is, okay. Then we went to the courtroom, and my son-in-law is sitting in the front row, right, and then I saw her. I remind myself that minute what she did with these children, how she's screaming to them, "Hup, hup, schneller!" she yelling to them. "Hup, hup, schneller!" like it was a joke to her. So many lives she destroyed, and here she yells to them, "Hup, hup, schneller! Schneller!" She wanted faster to go with them to the gas chambers.

So I'm just looking at her, and I felt if I be sitting near her, I could take her by the throat and kill her. I'm not a person to kill anyone, not a fly even. But with her, I felt that I could do it. And I went over to her. I did.

CE: Good for you.

RN: And I said to her—she was writing on a pad something. I asked her, "How could you live with that? How could you sleep nights, that you killed so many children?" I asked her that, how she could live with that. She didn't answer me a word, nothing, and

²Hermine Braunsteiner Ryan (1919-1999) was a guard at Ravensbrück and Majdanek. She served two years in prison after the war and, after being released, married an American man and moved to the United States. In 1964 Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal tracked her down and alerted the authorities; her citizenship was revoked and she was extradited to West Germany in 1973. Braunsteiner Ryan was also tried at the Majdanek-Prozess, where she was sentenced to life in prison; she was released in 1996 due to health problems.

she still writing on the pad. I don't know what she writing. So the judge, you know what he said to me?

CE: What?

RN: "I'm not going to continue with the trial, because you are not allowed to do that." What did I do to her? I didn't hit her—I should have, but I didn't. Just for telling these few words? And words she needs to get, for killing so many people. I didn't do nothing. I said, "Judge, I didn't hit her, I didn't do nothing. But this moment when I saw her," I said, "I remembered that so many children that she killed, and I was that minute in Auschwitz. That moment, I wasn't here, I was in Auschwitz, and I saw everything and I remember everything, and what it did to my childhood by seeing those things." So the judge is looking at me, and he said, "Okay, this time I forgive you, because you said that, that you were just in Auschwitz." And he continued with the trial.

CE: Wow.

RN: So I had luck, too. He could have finished and not to do it no more, because he was a German also. They wasn't eager to try their own people, you know that?

CE: Yeah. Did they convict her?

RN: Yeah, she got life prison, but she died in the prison. She had a son from before and the son used to come to her, but later he didn't want to know about her. He got to know the truth about her, so he didn't want to continue to come to see her. And she died, shortly after that.

CE: Shortly after that. Did you testify against other guards?

RN: Excuse me?

CE: Did you testify against other guards, or just her?

RN: Her the most, but there's another one which did the same to the girls, yeah. One was called "Bloody Brygida," and one was called Braunsteiner. She married an American soldier in there, and she lived a good life in Queens, in New York.

CE: So she didn't get convicted?

RN: No, they got to recognize her, and they say she was a good neighbor to the people. But they took her; they took her to Germany and she got prison, too.

CE: Okay, and she was in life imprisonment?

RN: Yeah, she also got it. Yeah.

CE: That must have been quite an experience, to go there to testify.

RN: Yeah, we was *in a hotel, both of us. I have to tell you something.*

CE: *You and Eddy?*

RN: *Yeah. So he has a separate room and I have a separate room. It's my son-in-law. If it be my son I would have the same room, you know, but the son-in-law. You don't know how they came at him, the Germans—the ones who did the room, the how you call them?*

CE: *The cleaning staff?*

RN: *Yeah, they was, like, good-looking girls, and he told me they kept knocking on his door all night. But Eddy, he is a decent man; he's a good person. He didn't answer them, open the door. And I said to him, "Eddy, no frauleins, because I tell my daughter on you." (both laughs) He would never do that, no.*

So, that's how aggressive they are. They don't care if the man has a wife or not. That's their nature. And the women were worse than the men. When it was raining outside, pouring terrible or snowing and pouring, when we wasn't in the camp, the men soldiers, the guards, let us go under the roof, when it was so very—raining and thundering. We'll be standing like that and with the water running from the head and from the nose, and we got just one dress on it: no underwear, nothing, just a dress. When the dress got wet, that's how we were. And if we didn't work, "Schneller!" She start screaming, "Schneller, schneller!" in a weather like that and didn't let us go under the roof. But the women

didn't let us, but the men let us sometimes go under the roof. They had a little something in them, humanely still left over in them.

CE: *So you went to Bergen-Belsen, then, from Auschwitz?*

RN: *Yeah. Oh, Bergen-Belsen, that was a horror thing. It was no work and no food and no water.*

CE: *Wow!*

RN: *And people start getting sick with the typhus in there. And here I was talking to a girl; ten minutes later she was laying dead. I mean, that was something—the sickness made that. Most we were undernourished, you know.*

CE: *You were undernourished, okay.*

RN: *Yeah.*

CE: *Did you get typhus? Did you?*

RN: *No. I had typhus in the ghetto, so that saved me from having it another time.*

CE: *Oh, because you don't get it another time?*

RN: *Yeah. So one day the men that—we have friends in there also; they're taking the same time from to Auschwitz, men that we knew them—boys, young boys. They was laying on the floor; there was no bed, just on the bare floors was laying. It was cold or freezing. And also, I have the—in the barrack with the people, the *Blockälteste*; that means the one who was in charge of the barrack. So I did open a little bit the door—the window, also, for the people to have a little air. It was terrible; it was so many people laying on the floor.*

And was a mother, took with her son with her, but we didn't know. They gave him the same dress, like they gave the women. He was a tall boy. He was like fifteen years old, a blond Jewish boy. So the mother risked that, too. She was from Hungary; they start

bring Hungarian transports. And they're laying on the floor, and I was giving out the soup. I helped the—I always wanted to be a helper and to own something, that she should give me something in order to survive.

So I'm giving out the soup, so I have to see everyone, that I give their little bit, pouring in their thing. And I looked at him and had a suspicion, but I didn't say nothing. I figured, "Good luck to her." If she did a thing like that, a mother—it's a mother, you know. So she knew right away that I have a little idea about it. And she was afraid also when he went out to the *Zahlappell*. We had *Zahlappell* every day; no food but *Zahlappell*. They're counting us: they was afraid that somebody escaped. Two men escaped them from the thing.

So, this boy was laying right near his mother on the floor, you know, with a little shmates over their bodies. One day she comes over to me and she said, "Look, I wanted to see you behave. You are like you treat the people. But I like how you treat all these people; you must be a nice person." That's what she said to me. I said, "Fine, thank you." You know, I did treat the people nice; I had always pity on these people that what they go through, the same what I've been through. And she said, "Look, I got from my home some jewelry, gold and diamonds. I'll give you whatever you want. Save my son, help me to save my son here. Nobody should see him 'cause he couldn't go out in the *Zahlappell*; the Germans will recognize him in a minute." The one who counted and looked in the face saw everyone. So I told her that, "Look, if you listen to me, I don't want no jewelry, nothing. I don't know if I would be a survivor, I don't know yet. You're still under German occupation, and they could do to us whatever they want." Right?

So I told her—every day, like, twenty people died in our barracks, from that thing: from not eating and everything, from the typhus. So we put him in the back of the barrack. The front we used to walk in to the barrack and the back was for the dead people; you put them out to lay there and we covered them with a little shmates, like, you know, because they were all naked. So I said to her, "If you agree on that," I said to her—that came to my mind, what we could do with him. Nothing else we could do than that.

We put him into the corpses. I told her, "I going to do it; if you are afraid, I'll do it." We both did it. We took him and we covered him with a couple of corpses, him on the bottom and a couple of them on the top, and covered him with the little shmates we had. We covered him and went in to the barrack to be—to the *Zahlappell*, because we needed to be counted, like nothing happened. Nobody knew; only me and her. We made sure nobody should see us doing that. We made believe that he goes to the bathroom, that we all three went to the bathroom when we went out and things like that, to make the people not to know where we going. And nobody was even interested to know.

And that's how he's laying till the *Zahlappell* was ending. Sometimes three, four hours, it was still no ending; somebody's missing. They counted again and looking for the one who's missing, that's how it was. And that how was laying the boy. And after that, after the *Zahlappell*, we both went out. It was dark in the street already; it was dark. And we both took him in the inside, in the barrack. And I saved a little soup for him from the day, what we have.

The boy didn't say a word. He didn't complain, he didn't—but his face was so—like from a dead person, so grey. And I looked at him and I said, "You go through this, believe me, and be strong." And I took him into it. "Nothing going to happen in there. The dead people couldn't do nothing to you; it's just the live ones could do to you, but not the dead ones. Don't be scared." It was a little boy, you know, and he's listening what I say to him. And every day for a while we did it every day with him, and this was a job to do it. And you know something? He survived the war.

CE: That's wonderful!

RN: And after that she called—her son was in the Hungarian Army, and she called the Red Cross and he came right away to the camp. He came. And you know something, what he did? They told them about me, what I did, and they threw me in the—

CE: *In the air? Oh!*

RN: (laughs) And all of them, they're screaming, "Ura, ura!"—Russian, you know, "We survived!" And he brought me a full truck full of cigarettes, but no money at this time after liberation. So they got from some place in Germany; they must have taken from a factory or whatever. He brought me a full truck full of cigarettes. What I did with the cigarettes, I gave it to my girlfriends. They could go in the German villages after liberation and buy food and clothes, everything for the cigarettes. Was just like money.

And that's how he was saved. And I kept contact with them for a while but in—before we survived we were in a hole, and they start shooting the people in the barracks, the men. That's where they started. So the men came running, some of them, to tell us: when they finished with the men, they are going to start shooting the women. Right straight, they open the doors and shooting into the men's. They're laying on the floors, too. And so they told us, "Come with us." So both of us, me and my girlfriend, he led us in a well which was covered with a—how you call it? With a deck, with a—iron deck.

CE: Iron deck?

RN: Yeah, he let us in. And that well wasn't too much water; there was a little bit. And we was letting in there with a rope, holding the rope. And two of them, they let us in, and we sitting in there, one almost on the other. It was little room in that. And he covered that.

CE: Oh, wow!

RN: He said, "You sick, kill—if we survive, we come to let us—let you out from there. And if not, you should know that we didn't survive." Because the Germans shooting all the barracks, in the men. So we were sitting like that, like a nice couple of hours. And we heard a tank coming into the camp. A tank was rushing. So I said to my girlfriend, "You know, that's something—that is something good, tells me, this going to be." Because days before they told us that the—from Holland—I mean, the English soldiers are near the camp someplace, but they're still far. So the Germans start shooting because of that, shooting the prisoners, because they knew that they are near the camp.

And all of a sudden, when the tank got near that hole where we were sitting, we heard them talking. People are talking a different language. We didn't understand that language; we didn't understand English then, like I understand now. (laughs) They open up the thing. "Come on out, girls!" And they helped us to go out, the same two boys that survived, too. And we went out, and here I see the truck, the English truck with a lot of soldiers was in there. And one of them came over to the—they caught Mengele. At this time they have him right near them. And they caught a couple of them, the big shots. And some of them put on the prisoners' clothes and they escaped from that camp. The soldiers should've recognized them, the English soldiers, but this one they didn't.

And the soldier come over and put his finger in the straw, and he said, "What you do here? You see that mess?" He showed them the big heap of dead people, was laying—a lot, a lot of big—you see on television sometimes, the big heaps of dead people. And she said, "You did a fine mess here, huh?" "Oh, we didn't do it; the people committed suicide. The people died or committed suicide." "Don't lie to me, I'm a Jew," he said, and put his hand—he almost choked him. "I'm a Jew, and I'm going to revenge my people. I know what's happening here." And they arrested him, and they carried him and they took from around that place—they took the civilian people from around that camp to help bury the dead ones. So one was carried by the feet and one by the head, and they holded their noses like that. So they claiming they didn't know nothing; it's not true, because the stink from the dead bodies could go to a lot of miles. They did know, but they make believe they didn't know.

Okay, they cleaned away the dead bodies and they carry—they make him carry also, Dr. Mengele and all those big shots, to carry the dead ones. In the dead ones was Anne Frank, too. She died in the camp, in the same barrack that I was there, near my bunk. She died of typhus, and she died, like, maybe a week before the liberation, a week or two. So her body was in there, too. So then the bulldozers came and they took all these heaps of people, of dead ones, and they put in that grave. It was hundreds of people in one grave, and that was Anne Frank, buried in that grave. And I saw this, when they did that, and I picked up my head and I said to God the kind of words that I should not say that, maybe, but I was so enraged. I was so tired of this, everything, to see—I want them to be punished. And I said to God that I don't believe now in a mighty god like that, that he could do this, chosen people that; that he should choose other nation now, not the Jews no more; to let the Jews alone, to let them live.

And here I see the English, they take him at the truck—they putting him this—into his hands, the shackles to Dr. Mengele. And I saw him, and I recognized him, and I picked up a big rock and I throw. It fell right in his head. I did.

CE: Good for you. Good.

RN: Yes. And he turn now his head and he said, "Du kommst nach wieder nach Auschwitz," that "I'll come back to Auschwitz again." That's what he said to me. I said, "Not on your life! No more." And that's when I saw him the last time. And then he was tried in Nuremberg, in another court, but I wasn't there. I didn't want to go in there, I was afraid for my emotions, for my—you know, I couldn't do that no more. This I did later in Düsseldorf, when I was a witness.

So that's when they took us all in the ambulances. They told me—one of them picked me up like I would be a doll. (laughs) And he put to the ambulance and he said, "They're going to give you the best food in there," and they did. They give us such a fat soup they got sent from the—from England, from their home in packages from Red Cross. They keep giving me, but I didn't eat. I couldn't eat; my stomach was bad from that food that I ate in the camps. But the other prisoners ate as much as they could: they grabbed the food—and they died from that, too, from that food. It was too fat for their system right after that.

And they took us to a DP [displaced persons] camp for all, and they asking if you want to go back to Poland, ask me if I got a country to go back, if I want to go my country. I said, "I don't have a country no more. I'm just a person without a country." And then later, when I got married—I met my husband in there and I had a child in there. She was two years old.

CE: *In the DP camp you met your husband?*

RN: *Yeah, I had my daughter in there: in 1947, she was born. And we schlepping around two years, till they took us to all the doctors to check if we are healthy enough to come here. My husband, they schlepping him if he has tuberculosis. He was so skinny in the camp, because he got a lot of beating in the camp and that was bad on his nerves.*

CE: *Which camp was he in?*

RN: *He was in Auschwitz also. He was in Buchenwald. And he had diabetes when he was twenty-seven years old. Doctors told us that he got this everything from these beatings that he had. Somebody saw us here in this country, a friend of ours, and they saw when he got a beating from that German—(inaudible) was his name, and if he went over to a prisoner he'd kill him right away, to a Jewish man. And he hit him so bad. Then, I didn't know him. And he was laying like that, and a friend of his put him into the barrack in Buchenwald and they revived him. And he survived, and the man who saw that, he said he looked at him, he said, "Are you alive?" he said to him—in my presence, I heard that. "Are you alive?" he said, and I asked him why. He said, "Oh, I saw (inaudible) beat him up and he was like that, he was laying dead." So he survived and he's alive.*

CE: *So you met your husband in the DP camps?*

RN: *Yeah, he came looking for his sister, and I knew his sister: she was together with me in Auschwitz. She had a child and a husband. She gave the mother to hold the child when she went into the gas chamber. And they took the mother; the mother was forty-five years old. And she survived because [when] she went before Mengele, she didn't have the child, the mother had the child. So that's how it happened with the mother, and the sister survived. Yeah.*

CE: *So after you got married, how did you decide to come to the United States?*

RN: *They asked me if I want to go to Israel. They asked every prisoner which survived if we want to go. We could choose because we didn't have a country. I say, "I don't have a country. I don't want to go to Poland." We had a little property in Poland from my grandfather, from the relatives. I said, "I don't want the money to sell that, and I don't want to go in there. I don't want to go to Poland." I was never to Poland now. And I don't know who took that place, and I got to know that it's still there, that little house that*

my grandparents lived in there. They send me pictures from the house, but I still didn't go. They killed the people for that. They came and they sell the houses and the same people which they bought it, they killed the Jews. You heard of that?

CE: Oh, yeah.

RN: Yeah.

CE: So you decided to come to the United States instead of Israel?

RN: Oh, yeah. I decided—I wanted to go to Israel to tell you the truth, 'cause all my friends went there, with this Zionist organization. I want to—decided that never to get married and to be in the kibbutz and never get married. But that life is—you never expect what is going to happen. And we came to United States and we came here without a dollar, even, without a quarter to buy for my daughter a hot dog. (laughs)

CE: Oh, wow.

RN: Yeah. There was a vendor with hot dogs near the ship when we went off and I didn't have the quarter to buy for her. And the nuns gave us donuts with coffee for the grownups. So I said to my daughter, "I could give you the donuts," and the nuns want to give her the donut. She's screaming, she want a hot dog. It smelled so nice. So my husband said to me, "Ask that lady that she bought for her daughter, ask her for a quarter." I said, "You tell her." And I told him, "You tell her," and we both didn't.

CE: You didn't?

RN: No, so she finally settled for the donut and they come from HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] to take us, and we came in there. My husband ate five boiled eggs at one time, that's how hungry he was. We was on the ship for twelve days.

CE: Twelve days?

RN: Twelve days. And I was sick, very sick, and the soldiers all laughing and they said they we were walking like drunks on the ship. They gave us the best food in there, big grapefruits and food, the best food. But who could eat? I couldn't eat, not—

CE: And where did you come into, New York?

RN: Yeah.

CE: New York.

RN: New York, yeah. So the HIAS people came with a cab and they took us to them. And we were there for seven weeks and they gave him a job. Like they say, the Jewish people, they care for each other, and gave him a job. He made fifty dollars a week here, in the beginning. And they gave us an apartment in the neighborhood, and they asked me if I want to live in the neighborhood of black people. I said, "Fine, I have nothing against them." You cannot hate people because of religion or color; this makes no sense to me.

And I moved in, and they treated me like a queen in there. Their children helped me with bringing the packages upstairs; it was on the fourth floor. To this time, it was hard to get an apartment, right after the war. And they helped me to take care of my little daughter. I need to go to make citizens papers, I didn't have to leave her for a minute, I didn't have no relatives. And was a beauty salon downstairs and she used to stay with us: a black woman, a very nice woman, and that's how they helped me out, with being in there. And I never regret that I went to live in there, 'cause my daughter, she just walked one flight and she said to me she cannot walk no more, she's tired. As a child! She wasn't even two years old, like a year and a half, and she couldn't walk that— (sound goes out) And the apartment, it was two weeks till they clean it up.

CE: And then, when did you come to Tampa?

RN: Excuse me.

CE: When did you come to Tampa?

RN: Oh, we came to New York.

CE: New York.

RN: They wanted to give us to operate a farm from the HIAS, from the—but my husband said it's too hard for him; he cannot work in the farm. It's very hard. To Ohio, some

place. So we settled in New York, in Brooklyn, and then we—he worked as a tailor. He could make woman's suits. He had a job of fifty dollars a week and we got by with that. Paid rent at thirty-five dollars a month and the rest we had for food.

CE: And then, how did you get to Tampa?

RN: To Tampa, my son-in-law is a professor at the USF—oh, you know that! And they send him from the school from Brooklyn. They send him here. No, first to Arizona; he was in Arizona for a while. And then I came here when they settled here. I went back a couple of times. I couldn't get used to that life here. Till twelve o'clock people are sleeping here! (CE laughs) At twelve o'clock I have done a half a day work already.

I worked in a store, in a big boutique that the actresses used to buy clothing. Like, Meryl Streep used to come in, and every time she'd come in she gave me a twenty dollar bill for helping her to bring her her sizes to fit her, and when I wasn't there she didn't come in. She asked the boss if I'm here. And I have to wear high heels and make my hair, and my boss paid me for that. It was expensive to do my hair. I didn't have the money, so he sent to me to—the money he gave me. And I worked in there, and we made good.

And then, after that, he didn't want to work in the shop no more, my husband, so he bought a store in Brooklyn, a store with cigars and cigarettes and papers. It was a good store. And then we sold it to the Arabic people. That's all. That was our being here. He got older and he died. He was sixty-eight years old. He died not from the diabetes; he had—but he had a heart attack with that.

CE: I think we better stop, 'cause we are probably near the tape.

RN: Yeah, you think it's finished?

CE: Well, we'll stop. Because we still have to do the pictures, so I think we can't end on this tape, is that right? Yeah.

Part 3 ends; part 4 begins

CE: This is tape four with Rachel Nurman. Could you talk a little bit about your philosophy of life? How you live, how you think?

RN: I don't know what to tell you about it.

CE: Well, we were talking during the break about how you think about death, but you come back to thinking about right now and living. Could you talk about that?

RN: I think that what people believe about heaven and hell, to me, it doesn't make sense. It makes sense to me here. People which has pleasure from their children and they are good situated and they healthy, that mean heaven they have in this world. And people which they have children taken away from them, killed in the war, or sick or dying, this is hell, what they go through on this world. It's only death, and after there's nothing left, just our bodies to rot. Nothing else.

CE: How do you think—

RN: That's my personal thinking.

CE: And you're okay with that?

RN: Yeah.

CE: I mean, that's the way you—

RN: Yeah, yeah. Hell I went through already, so if I go to hell, I'm not afraid of that.

CE: Can you talk about what impact you think the Holocaust had on you, going through the Holocaust?

RN: I think that the world didn't learn their lesson yet from the Holocaust, and looks like after the Holocaust they start doing it again to other countries, like the war what's going on now. That the world saw what was happening and they didn't do nothing about it. They didn't punish them after people. And being in Germany, I saw Germany so built up, and I hate to say that they built it up is more prettier than the United States, their stores and plenty of food and plenty of everything. And that's what they got from the robbing these people and putting them to death and they got their possessions. What do you think they did with this everything? That went to the German people, to the public.

CE: And what impact did it have on you, in particular?

RN: On me?

CE: Mm-hm.

RN: That I never knew why—I never had the answer, why they did it to innocent people, why the world let it happen? And the churches, what they did, from the Jewish—I cannot say nothing. They have nothing to say about that; they were persecuted themselves, too. But the churches, they go for that, that a life and a person is very sacred. And here they knew about what was going on, how they—little children being killed, and what a humiliation they did to people; sometimes it's worse than that. And nobody did nothing to them. Just a few of them got hanged, and that make no impression on them.

And the country is a good country, and they have everything more than everybody else with their robbing, what they did. Why did they have that? But they say now—they interviewed the big shots, (inaudible) and, you know, the other. They did it because they needed money. They needed the Jewish money, they said. And the world has that and the churches knew about it. For money, it's okay to kill people, to kill the innocent people for money? And they didn't do nothing about it, the churches. The priests didn't do nothing about it. And to me this everything what I see, what a priest doing the baptizing, they do that, they do that—to me, it's a humiliation to people, too, because they don't deserve to do that, because they don't value human life, because they Christian. Christians and Jews, to me, they're the same. We are all the same, God's people. Do I look different than you or somebody else, the same feelings I got than everybody else? So to me, this makes no sense, all these things.

CE: Did you talk about your experiences right after the war, or not?

RN: No.

CE: No? And why not?

RN: A lot of people cannot understand that. They just don't—some of them don't even believe it.

CE: Did you and your husband talk together about your experiences?

RN: Yeah, he told me his story and I told him my story, and we went through almost the same thing. And still, after this everything, we couldn't get along. We should be grateful to live through that, right? We have three children, and he still wasn't satisfied. I was satisfied having the precious children. But my husband, never. No, he didn't appreciate that. He didn't make peace with this world; he never made peace with that. He was always angry, always criticizing, always looking for the bad things in people.

But I did the opposite. I looked [for] goodness in people, too. I don't say that all Germans are guilty what they did to the Jews: was some of them good, too, good people who helped the Jews. So, it's not right to say that. Like Hitler said that all Jews were bad; that's why all Jews were have to die, have to perish all Jew. And who did put him to the power? The German Jews put him to the power. In Germany, the Jews were very wealthy. And the first thing, he did away with them, the people who put him to power. They could never imagine that come a time for that, they send them out from their country.

He sent them to the Warsaw Ghetto. The Warsaw Ghetto suffered so much from hunger themselves, yet they send in the Jews from Germany. They came so elegantly dressed, so beautiful, such beautiful stuff that was taken away from them immediately. And they told us in the camps, the last minute already, and this was in Bergen-Belsen, "Oh, soon you're going to see your friends from England with their cigars, with the cylinders; they come to the gas chambers here." And I said to myself, "Not on your life." That's what they thought they're going to do to England, too. Yeah.

CE: Did you talk to your children about your experiences?

RN: One of them is interested in that, my youngest son. He has a website on there. Yeah, Freddy Nurman. And the two of them—maybe my daughter's right. She tells me, "Mama, you have to try to forget as much as you can because it does you bad, to your body, to your mind." Like all my girlfriends that was with me in the camps, they all died from mental illness. Before they died in Israel they spending like two, three years in a mental hospital. I just talking to my girlfriend's son from Israel; he's a detective in Israel. He told me, "They want to take my mother," he said, "to a mental institution, but I'm going to keep her in my home, with my wife and children, till she die. I'm not going to let them take her out from my home." This her son, my girlfriend's son.

CE: What happens when you tell your story like now? Does it help you or does it not? Is it hard?

RN: I feel that with my telling people, they're not going to let it happen again, to any nation. I just not talking about Jews, but any nation. Any nation who's—how do you call—how you call it, not the majority but the opposite?

CE: The minority.

RN: The minority, right. Any minority, it could happen to them, that. To fight their aggressor all the time, and to Jewish people, also. We didn't fight because we didn't have no weapon. And the second thing: they did have a good system. They hungered out the Jewish people, so then they don't have a mind to fight. They cannot fight. A hungry person could fight just thinking of food, of what to eat today.

CE: Do you dream about the Holocaust?

RN: Excuse me?

CE: Do you dream—

RN: Oh, yeah.

CE: You do?

RN: Yes, sir, I dream all the time.

CE: You do?

RN: Yup, yup.

CE: And do you think about it every day?

RN: Yeah.

CE: You do?

RN: It doesn't leave me. No, no.

CE: And does this—does telling your story make you think about it more? Does it make you feel bad?

RN: Yeah, that this could happen in my generation—and to any human being that this could happen. And the world let it happen.

CE: Is there anything you want to leave the audience with that you haven't said?

RN: I want to tell people that no prejudice should be any more. People are all the same. They should live in peace and to see to that, that their children could live in peace. They shouldn't be afraid for any prejudice that they come and pick them up as a single person of their religion and not—to me, religion has no sense at all. Religion is just a thing of the mind. People are all the same to me. Are they this religion or that religion? They all the same and they suffer the same and they have the same time on this world and not to let (inaudible) to no one.

CE: Okay. I want to thank you very much for sharing your story with us, Rachel.

RN: And after that I go home and I cry a little bit and—

CE: Thank you.

RN: And I thinking of how this people choking in that gas chamber because I heard them screaming and to say the Jewish prayers and to suffer before that, you know? Sometime like the man comes in to spray my house with the things for the—

CE: Bugs.

RN: For the insects. And the smell is so bad, and these people went through that, to inhale that. And you know, to die from that, not to have the air in there. There was closed (inaudible) the doors in there, had no windows. And the men, they were stronger

than the women, so they was always on the top. They thought if they climbed on the top, on the people, that maybe it would not come to them so fast. But they all died.

CE: And now, I would like to think about your wonderful children, your wonderful son-in-law, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren—

RN: Yeah, but still, it's a hole in my—a wound in my heart. It's never going to heal. And whenever things good happen to me, all of a sudden something says to me, "You don't allow yourself to be happy because you lost your—all your loved ones." I had four brothers, which I loved them so much. I never forgot them. I always say a prayer for them, their lives. How good people they were: they working and doing everything as human beings to live in this world, not to harm no one. Now, my two sons—the older one, when I catch a fly he's screaming to me, "Mama, don't kill it, just let it out on the window." That's how they—and things that I couldn't tell my sons about me, also, that I cannot tell them the story, either. And I—the reason is that I don't do that, I don't want my sons to carry that hatred in them. It's not good for them to be carrying that, because if they would know, they would go out and kill every German, and I don't want them to be killers like the Germans. That's the reason I didn't tell them.

And I take this to my grave with me. And why I cannot—I cannot think of the reason. I thinking a lot about that, but I cannot find a reason why. The why is always hanging with me? Why? Why this happen to our nation? Jews are not fighters, they're not violent people; it's hard for them to fight back. Like, they come in the town and they put them—all the townspeople in the church, in a synagogue, and they locked the doors and the windows and they're burning the synagogue with all the people inside.

CE: Is there anything else you want to add before we turn the tape off?

RN: Excuse me?

CE: Is there anything else you want to say before I turn the tape off?

RN: I say that the Germans—I don't say that all people are guilty, but the ones who did this to our nation should be cursed for generation and generation to come. To the tenth generation they should be cursed for that.

End of interview