

1989-10-19, Anna Heller (Survivor), Escaped from Plaszow, Oct. 19, 1989

Interviewer: Sonia Weitz

0:10

WEITZ: Let's talk a little bit about where are where you were born and maybe about your family in school.

0:17

Just to start, I was born in Krakow to a sort of middle class Jewish family with these traditional values.

0:28

I was middle of three girls.

0:31

I had an older and a younger sister.

0:36

I went to school through the elementary school and then I entered gymnasium and I graduated.

0:47

When the world broke up.

0:50

I was all scheduled to had already had a boyfriend and fiance.

0:56

We were supposed to be married and these were my ambitions.

0:59

I actually taught for a while going to medical school, but I was reluctant to do all this work and then rather protected, kind of typical Jewish Princess type of thing.

1:17

And then the world came and everything changed.

1:21

WEITZ: What about your childhood?

1:23

Were you always living in Krakow?

1:25

HELLER: Yes, I always,

WEITZ: What street?

HELLER: Starowińska.

WEITZ: I know my father's business was on that street.

1:32

HELLER: Oh, really?

1:32

WEITZ: I was there just three years ago and it really hasn't changed.

1:36

Have you been back?

1:37

HELLER: I went to Poland right after the war.

1:40

I was able to have a private car to go to Poland because my husband started working in the Polish mission and then this converted into a Polish embassy.

1:51

That's where we stayed for the next two years in Vienna.

1:55

And then things were changing there too, and he didn't want to stay because he knew this was not permanent.

2:03

We were contemplating of returning to Poland.

2:06

WEITZ: Well, wait, we got to back up.

2:09

What, what really touched me terribly was last night when I recalled and said that you escaped from Płaszów.

2:16

But even before that you were of course forced into the ghetto with everybody else.

2:21

HELLER: I was in ghetto and I worked for Madritsch in order to get the job.

2:28

This was sort of not that easy.

2:30

I had to buy a sewing machine to become a member of, to be a working.

2:36

I tell you the irony that after the war I was a neighbor of the Madritsches.

2:40

I never made the contact.

2:43

WEITZ: They live in in Austria or?

HELLE: They live in Vienna.

2:46

WEITZ: In Vienna.

2:47

HELLER: It was nearby where I live.

2:49

WEITZ: But tell me, when we both worked for Madritsch at one time or another, was this inside the ghetto or outside?

2:56

HELLER: Outside.

2:56

WEITZ: Outside.

2:57

How did we get there?

2:58

We walked or trucks or what?

3:00

HELLER: To Madritsch?

3:01

From the ghetto?

WEITZ: Yes.

3:02

Do you remember?

3:03

I can't.

3:04

HELLER: I'm trying to think.

3:06

I think we walked there.

3:07

WEITZ: We walked there.

3:08

HELLER: I walked, of course, from the Płaszów.

3:11

WEITZ: That's later.

3:12

That's later.

3:14

But in the ghetto you only worked for Madritsch, nobody else?

3:17

HELLER: No.

3:17

At the beginning there was some jobs, building jobs.

3:21

I don't know.

3:22

They would be taken with a truck to some building sites where you had to clean.

3:27

WEITZ: Yes, exactly.

3:29

I remember doing that once.

3:30

So tell me, was your family still with you in the ghetto?

3:34

HELLER: I was alone.

3:35

I had a boyfriend and we were able to get into.

3:40

Not everybody could go into the ghetto.

3:42

You had to have some viable job or something to the that you are necessary to be there.

3:51

And that wasn't easy.

3:52

That's why you tried to and you had to have some in to get a job, which was considered an important one.

4:01

My parents by then were near Kraków.

4:05

They, they found a place where they could stay. This eventually, this was a time where they, the Germans and Nazis organized the method of concentrating.

4:19

Did you sending them to these places?

4:21

We still didn't know, of course, where they are being sent.

4:25

And I had my younger sister who was with my parents and her husband actually.

4:35

And that's where we obtained first sets of these false papers.

4:41

And as it is, my brother-in-law tried to get a set for a friend of his.

4:45

WEITZ: What year was that when it started?

4:47

HELLER: I have a very hard time.

4:49

WEITZ: Was it before 1942?

4:51

Just right in the beginning.

HELLER: I think so.

4:54

It was.

4:54

Maybe it was.

4:56

When was the ghetto established?

4:57

WEITZ: '41.

4:59

HELLER: So it had to be probably toward the end maybe.

5:02

WEITZ: Or then it was already '43 because the ghetto was liquidated in March 43, before everybody went to Płaszów.

5:11

So my mother was there.

5:13

HELLER: I was there.

5:14

WEITZ: You were there all the way to the liquidation of the ghetto.

HELLER: Yes, yes.

5:17

WEITZ: We were together practically to the end.

5:21

HELLER: That's right.

5:21

Because I was taken to Płaszów.

WIETZ: When they made the ghetto smaller.

5:25

HELLER: And that's right.

5:26

WEITZ: You remember that 1942 aktion?

5:31

HELLER: Yeah.

5:31

Oh, sure.

5:32

WEITZ: That's when my mother was taken.

5:33

HELLER: Oh, yeah.

5:34

WEITZ: Many, many.

5:35

HELLER: The people.

5:35

As a matter of fact, I only by a fluke that I was I – some my relatives on the outside arranged for some, some statement that that I can get out of the ghetto.

5:52

You know, and I went that's right.

5:55

I went through my parents and then I came back.

5:58

When this was over, the action was over, I returned and then I got this job at Madritsch.

6:05

WEITZ: Yes.

HELLER: here was a problem.

6:07

I didn't know how to operate a sewing machine and there was a problem that there were some people who were real seamstresses and they resented actually all this teaching.

6:17

But they were they did this.

6:20

And I remember these times were sort of big at Madritsch wasn't bad.

6:28

It was sort of good and I made friends.

6:34

I had a friend.

6:36

She was much younger than that.

6:37

She was just a younger, but she was well built so she could pass as a woman.

6:42

And she's the one that actually stayed with me in the camp.

6:47

We had the same bunk.

6:48

WEITZ: Do you remember her name?

6:49

Doda.

6:51

Doda (Lundvit?), She is alive, She lives in Florida.

6:56

I found her, but she has a complete amnesia about the time.

WEITZ: Really many people they don't want to remember and they can't remember.

7:04

HELLER: I was so amazed that she didn't remember.

7:07

Really, I, I was providing all the information and she but yes, but it was obvious that she really has no memory.

7:15

WEITZ: It's a lot of many people have blocked out a lot.

7:17

I have.

7:18

I don't remember people there.

7:19

There's one person, Rena, I told you about Rena yet last night.

7:23

She remembers everyone and I just wish she was here because she really would be very helpful to trigger some of your memories.

7:32

Tell me when after the ghetto, when we when you worked in Madritsch, whether it was in the ghetto or already in Płaszów, I was thinking about it last night.

7:41

Did you ever do what we did like sew up two legs of the pants together?

7:46

HELLER: We, you know, we first we were making not uniforms, but the overalls.

7:51

WEITZ: Yes, we did too.

HELLER: There was a number like you had to complete, 7 or 8 by the end, and these I don't know one in particular.

7:59

I don't remember her name that she by the end of the the day when we were still, I was on the 3rd or 4th.

8:05

She would really work very hard and and complete this.

8:09

But then they converted this to uniform.

8:11

Yeah, that's when I that was very difficult.

8:14

There was a much more difficult work.

8:16

And I remember that around that time that I began to think of this escape, I had a boyfriend on the outside who...

WEITZ: Now you're already in Płaszów – the ghetto was liquidated.

8:31

HELLER: That was liquidated.

8:33

And Madritsch arranged that we would come back.

8:35

I took about 3 days

WEITZ: I was never lucky enough to get out of the of Płaszów.

8:41

I always worked inside.

8:43

So I, I didn't work for Madritsch then just during the ghetto.

8:46

HELLER: Oh yes, we were taken, as a matter of fact

8:48

that was a great privilege because he made the arrangement that we will be taken back to work and we would march every day there and there.

8:59

And that much reached the, the dress, you know, the people that had the managers or whatever they arranged to, for a soup to be cooked there.

9:10

And we were given food and it was very we were making fun of that soup.

9:15

I remember we were sort of young and joking that this, this they were going to starch ourselves up because it was a just full of starch.

9:25

But it was very lucky and how I managed this escape because through the room where I was sewing, there was an adjoining room where Polish girls going to work.

9:39

And one day I approached one of the girls if she would lend me have her Kennkarte – And they they had also ID.

WEITZ: Permits

HELLER: And permits.

9:52

And she and, and she said yes, she was a young girl maybe of 16 or 7 or so.

9:58

Look to me that way.

9:59

She was very nice.

10:00

And I was planning this when I had first of all, we had the clothes which was painted and stripes.

10:07

I remember I had a coat.

10:09

WEITZ: You had a #2 on this.

10:10

HELLER: I don't remember that.

10:11

I remember the stripes and I had to change the clothes and then Doda.

10:16

I remember she was all nervous.

10:21

I borrowed a sweater and somebody had hidden, you know, the civilian clothes there.

10:27

And I changed and I stood in the in the door.

10:31

That's what I was asking you that the gate was there was a Polish like a janitor with this huge key that was opening the gate.

10:40

It was a Jewish, a policeman that was that (Villacranz?) who knew every Jewish person from the camp who worked there, so he he would recognize it.

10:51

And there was a Ukrainian soldier with a rifle.

10:58

And I waited till the only person that mattered to me was this Jewish policeman.

11:05

The truck came with supplies and he went to a company that trucked to the court.

11:11

It was like a court building.

11:13

And in that time I had to walk out with this girl and she walked with me.

11:19

And, you know, she she brought another apparently ID.

11:23

And this took a long while before he opened this gate with this huge key.

11:28

And as I was already about to walk, I heard the voice of this Polish, this Jewish police.

11:34

But I thought if he will catch me, I would be torn to pieces because it was also his life at stake.

11:41

Of course, the girls with who I marched every day, they agreed that I should take that chance.

11:48

They felt they will never survive it anyway, so I may as well take the chance.

11:53

And I walked out and we walked towards, you know, this was (Port Goujo?).

12:01

There was like a like a, I don't know, some kind of a fountain.

12:09

And I was so terrified.

12:11

I wanted to go back.

12:13

And this girl says, where are you going?

12:15

You just walked out of there.

12:18

I just didn't know how to—

WEITZ: Broad daylight?

HELLER: Broad daylight.

12:21

I didn't know —

where what how could I walk?

12:24

How could I without someone supervising, not telling me when to go?

12:30

And then I did have a place to go, which this boyfriend arranged for there was a family, the man was a physician, he himself was converted Jew and married to a non Jewish lady.

12:44

And they allowed me to stay there for a few days.

WEITZ: In Krakow?

12:49

HELLER: And then he actually escorted me to the railroad where I went to meet this, my boyfriend who lived in [place name?].

12:57

He had things arranged.

12:58

They had a he had a room rented.

13:01

And all this I had, as you know, to live on these forged papers wasn't so simple.

13:07

You had to say where you came from and you had to have a place of registration from you from where you came, which I didn't have.

13:19

And I had to invent a story that I ran away from home because my parents didn't approve of this boyfriend.

13:28

And I also had few things of my of clothing.

13:33

You had to have something.

13:36

This is so difficult to realize that you couldn't go and buy and, and the problem was that even my clothing was sort of different than the environment I lived in.

13:55

And then then I, and I had to justify it by saying that my parents were of course, well to do and that's why they objected to this boyfriend and, and all this sort of thing and not to be viewed with suspicion.

14:11

And that was probably 1943, because I spent a year in that Cheshire.

14:20

KRAKOW: Was there still a ghetto?

14:22

HELLER: There was still a ghetto.

14:23

I think it was being sort of done away with.

14:27

I didn't have too much information.

14:31

I had to find some employment because there was a must that you had to work to

WEITZ: the next time you come and you must meet a person who lives in to [place name] from here, who is from [place name].

14:46

He and his mother went into hiding from the ghetto.

14:49

HELLER: And that's how you said I lived actually in sort of like a suburb of [place name] I remember that.

14:56

I don't know the town.

14:57

I had my family there.

14:59

But

HELLER: Yes.

15:01

WEITZ: And the people you were with, of course, knew that you were Jewish.

15:06

HELLER: No.

15:06

No, Only.

15:08

No.

15:08

WEITZ: Only boyfriend.

15:09

HELLER: Oh, my [?], who also was pretending he was Polish.

15:13

He was.

15:13

They were blonde.

15:14

WEITZ: And people didn't know that he was Jewish either.

15:17

HELLER: No, no.

15:18

So the hiding was strictly your own.

15:20

WEITZ: Nobody was really helping you as a Jew?

15:23

HELLER: No, he did.

15:25

He he knew.

15:25

He arranged it.

15:27

WEITZ: And your boyfriend?

15:28

HELLER: My boyfriend, the people who are helping no, no, they didn't help the he, he came there as a, as a, he pretended he was an electrician.

15:39

He also was a, his whole life was good to become a violinist and he had a violin and this sort of helped him to make friends and but he worked for the Germans as a electrician.

15:58

He wasn't too great of an electrician, but he was handy and he was sort of managing.

16:05

But there was a man, his I guess superior, who was a German and he couldn't get along with this man.

16:18

And eventually this came to this, this, this was the problem because this around this area, they were everywhere Polish partisans and this man denounced him that he is involved with some communist or something and he was arrested as a Pole.

16:38

But then they, I don't know.

16:39

I think I that he must have confessed.

16:42

I don't know that he's, I have no idea.

16:45

Because when, after he was arrested, I tried to find out what happened.

16:50

I had to find a way of getting away from there, which wasn't simple.

16:57

WEITZ: Did you?

16:58

Let's stop a minute.

16:59

WEITZ: When you were in [place name], did you witness, did you hear of any executions?

17:04

Because I know they rounded up a lot of Jews and

HELLER: They were taking people on the trains.

17:10

I don't know.

17:10

I went for the railroad.

17:12

WEITZ: Why?

17:13

HELLER: And I saw these trains.

17:15

WEITZ: Trains

Only Jews or also Polish slave workers?

17:20

HELLER: No, only Jews.

17:21

They were these transports were going to probably Treblinka and the horrible part of it was I would be at the railroad and I've heard that these trains were standing there and the people were screaming and the people would say that because they killed the Christ, this is what happened.

17:43

She's even little girls would repeat that

WEITZ: a lot of children

HELLER: Oh they on the train they were probably I didn't see they were just telling me about it how the people would be stretching their arms through the barbed wire trying to get some water screaming

WEITZ: the liquidation of the ghetto industry.

18:07

HELLER: But these people were coming from various other

WEITZ: small towns around

HELLER: it was probably [?], a place of transport.

18:17

That's why I actually worked at the railroads.

18:20

WEITZ: What did you do?

18:22

I was involved in this whole system of transportation.

18:29

You had to.

18:30

I was in this little.

18:32

It's so modernized today.

18:33

I don't know.

18:34

There was called a stork nest.

18:36

The people that would shift the

WEITZ: the tracks

HELLER: tracks and I was in a little shed at night.

18:46

I will have to go with a with a Lantern and wave to the to the railroad.

18:53

WEITZ: So there many people involved in this railroad project.

18:58

There were.

18:58

WEITZ: They were all and they knew most of them knew what was happening the with the trains full of Jews.

19:04

HELLER: Yes, they think, but it wasn't different, not that these were people involved in their own lives and this was just peripheral.

19:12

WEITZ: They would mention you just mentioned a matter of fact Jews were being taken.

19:16

HELLER: Yes, they're being they some were sympathetic, but also very superficially I would say.

19:24

WEITZ: Yeah.

19:25

All right, tell me.

19:25

I have a couple of questions.

19:26

First of all, I think it's impossible for a survivor to to interview another survivor because an interview we should keep quiet.

19:35

But I, for instance, my questions are like when you were still in Płaszów, Do you remember the do you remember the hangings?

19:43

HELLER: Of course, you know, there were two young girls who stole some potatoes.

19:47

I knew one of them.

19:49

WEITZ: You knew the girl, one of the girls who was hanged?

HELLER: Just because she's told the name.

WEITZ: Do you remember her name?

19:55

HELLER: I don't remember the name, but I remember her sister.

19:59

WEITZ: What a shame that I don't remember the name to memorialize it on this piece of tape.

20:05

Yes.

20:05

WEITZ: How about the old man and the little boy?

20:08

There was a boy who sang a Russian song.

20:10

He was hanged and there was an old man.

20:13

Now, if you saw it, you remember because he tried to kill himself.

20:17

He cut his veins and they wouldn't let him die.

20:21

They patched him up and they.

20:23

HELLER: I wasn't there anymore.

20:25

I remember every day I was coming from Madritsch, we were marching in this, you know, there were 5-4 or five right passing always this guest house and there will be somebody being shot at the time.

20:42

And because this was actually beginning, they would bring these people that they found in the ghetto hiding and these platforms wagons like they were horse drawn.

20:57

And then they would be shooting them like in a they would they would be naked shooting them with a machine gun right.

21:07

And I remember they used these Polish-Jewish policemen to guard these people so they won't escape.

21:14

And I remember when I was walking and one of these men was returning from the execution, utterly destroyed.

21:24

And he says I was helping.

21:26

It was a, a, a businessman who I knew before the war.

21:31

I used to go there with my father to shop for his suit.

21:38

WEITZ: Most of them were killed.

21:39

Were you still in Płaszów when they killed

21:41

[name]?

21:43

HELELR: No

WEITZ: you were gone already?

21:45

Yes, and I know him.

21:47

WEITZ: You remember him?

21:48

HELLER: Yes.

21:49

WEITZ: And his wife.

21:50

HELLER: I remember the whole group.

21:52

Yeah, I have.

21:53

I remember experience.

21:54

One of them came to the barrack where I was at night to Make Love to one of the girls on the top Bunk.

22:04

And when the women on the lower bank complain they can't sleep and they have to get up at 5:00 in the morning, he made the line and said, you idiots, but you think they are.

22:16

You are here to to live.

22:18

You are here only to complete a certain job and then to be done away with.

22:25

This was the most horrible, I think.

22:28

WEITZ: Horrible people.

22:29

HELLER: Terrible.

22:30

WEITZ: Tell me you remember.

22:31

[name].

22:32

HELLER: Did you see him?

22:33

Yeah.

22:34

Yeah.

22:35

Terrified, too.

22:36

Terrified.

22:37

WEITZ: Very, very tall.

22:38

HELLER: Yes.

22:38

WEITZ: Tall, very handsome.

22:39

He was trying to verify that with the White Scar.

22:42

HELLER: He used to be there when they had this apparel flats and and they had the beating and the beating and he was always standing there that and these two people whipping this and the terror that I might be the next.

23:00

They would pull down the the panda, whatever, and each whip would break the skin and and oh God, this was this was just about and then it was impossible to to think that these people will survive.

23:17

WEITZ: Many didn't.

23:18

Many didn't.

23:20

Do you remember that hanging that I was talking about and the music?

23:25

I'm I always hear that music.

23:27

The only thing that I don't remember is whether the music came over loud speakers or was did we have an orchestra?

23:35

HELLER: Do you remember the Rosners?

WEITZ: Yes, of course that I

HELLER: I see a brother, Herman Rosner.

23:42

I met them at this reunion.

23:44

2 very fine musicians finally lived in the building that I grew up and Herman Rosner, who is the oldest singer ever, was there because he was always abroad.

23:55

I see them now everywhere.

23:57

WEITZ: Do you really?

23:58

I I met them once in New York and they're fine musicians.

24:01

Did they play in Płaszów?

24:03

HELLER: That was the job.

24:05

I knew that there was music, I just didn't remember

HELLER: they were part of the [?] that Schindler [?]

WEITZ: Yes, yes, that's right.

24:16

So you are how long in Płaszów?

24:18

HELLER: I was just several months.

24:20

You know, the time it was something I I just well,

WEITZ: you could research and you could find.

24:26

WEITZ AND HELLER: I suppose it's truly this book should at least help me to me too, But I I don't like to remember.

24:34

That's why I don't like.

24:36

I only remember that I was one year in Russia, so I and one year in Vienna, so that

WEITZ: so how did you get out of Płaszów?

24:44

HELLER: I had to escape after my boyfriend was arrested and that was quite complicated because by then the Post could not travel on the trains either unless you had a certain permit.

24:57

'43 I think.

24:59

WEITZ: Right.

24:59

HELLER: And because I worked at the railroad for a period of time, I don't remember how long I had a ID from the railroad, but this ID had two sides.

25:14

And then the other side they used to put a stamp for each month.

25:18

And mine was already not valid for number of months.

25:23

But I took the chance and I went on the train, I went to Krakow and I would show just the ID this, this side with the picture.

25:33

And somehow they never turned it around to look whether it was valid.

25:37

And that's how it got to Krakow.

25:41

WEITZ: I never knew that anyone escaped from Płaszów when I spoke to you last night.

25:45

I was just, it's, it's amazing.

25:48

It's really,

HELLER: I told you that I met few years ago, some people and they recognized me.

25:53

There was someone from Płaszów and she too went to Auschwitz and all that.

25:58

WEITZ: I feel badly that you have to talk with me because there are many people that would have known exactly, you know, they would have remembered.

26:04

HELLER: They, they remembered.

26:06

I was amazed because I didn't remember them at all.

26:10

But I guess she had to change color of the hair and she got heavier and she did recognize me and she actually inherited my buddy, this Doda

26:22

And she knew that she was alive.

26:23

And I found her after that.

26:25

WEITZ: Tell me.

26:25

So tell me about it.

26:26

When you left, when you got on the train and you managed to you went through Krakow from [place name].

26:33

HELLER: I went to Krakow.

26:34

I had I found this is so complicated.

26:37

My boyfriend used to say to me something should happen to me in Krakow there is a woman that used to work for us and she lives.

26:48

He told me the address and I said if something happens to you it will happen to me.

26:53

So I that's no point for me to remember.

26:56

And when I got Krkaow I had no place to go and I they had like rooming houses.

27:04

I took with me a little suitcase.

27:06

There was nothing in it and I went to this rooming house.

27:10

I didn't have any money in there, but I knew some people.

27:16

They were neighbors of ours, of my friends, of my parents.

27:20

My parents gave them some picture to to save and I called them and asked them if they could give me some money.

27:29

I give them the pictures and she's agreed.

27:34

And there was the their son was sort of relative my age.

27:39

We were friends as children.

27:41

And I met with him and he gave me money.

27:44

But before that, I, I left the suitcase in this rooming house to stay there overnight.

27:51

And then I walked around and tried to remember the address that he gave me.

27:57

And somewhere I, I did, I found that woman and she says don't go to that rooming house.

28:04

That's the first place they they come to check on people.

28:10

And I stayed with her.

28:11

She had a one room apartment and she was married to a Jewish man who wasn't partial at the time.

28:19

And she had a little boy with him.

28:22

And this boy, because he was half Jewish, could not go to school.

28:27

So we, I stayed in her place and there was a, a man coming to tutor him, a, a, a Polish professor who she was able to feed.

28:40

She worked in a, in a German kitchen cooking.

28:45

So she was, yes, she had the food she would bring home all kinds of things.

28:51

And I stayed there for quite a while until they made a contact.

28:57

I knew that my my husband, later husband, there was a friend that he made this, that he went to German.

29:07

I was corresponding with him sort of and I knew that that he found someone who is able to do that.

29:16

WEITZ: Excuse me, what happened to the young man who helped you get away?

29:19

HELLER: He was arrested.

29:20

WEITZ: That he was arrested.

29:23

HELLER: And I knew that it was the end because I understand, I, I tried to find out what happened.

29:31

I went to the place where he worked and they, they said he was taken away.

29:36

And he, in the course of the beating, he admitted he was Jewish.

29:40

And of course that was the end of that.

29:44

WEITZ: Now you were hiding in Krakow.

29:46

HELLER: I was hiding and found the old and I found this.

29:51

I, I knew about him that, but he was in Vienna at the time.

29:55

The problem was I needed money and it was he was during, it's so complicated.

30:05

It was during the previous when he was sent away from Krakow.

30:10

He lived in Krasnov for a while and was there in a camp and he buried his whole family treasures and a place.

30:22

And he sent me from Vienna a letter with the exact plan where the [?] was hidden.

30:31

And I had to go with the train to Krasnov then use this false ID and try to find the treasure, because without the money I couldn't get to Vienna.

30:47

This was done on a sort of a

30:49

People wanted to make money and they would give you false papers.

30:57

And I did find it, which was most incredible.

31:00

This was March, I remembered and I went there with a little gadget thought that I'll be able to dig it out.

31:08

I found only because he was such a person that when he said exactly what it was, I But I couldn't do that out and I did as far as seeing something there, but I knew the people whose estate this was barely done.

31:27

I was afraid to go there, but because I was desperate, I I did this was a Polish very aristocratic family and the the maid wouldn't let me in to see the lady.

31:41

She says who are you?

31:43

And I tried to say that I am a fiance of this Mr.

31:47

so and so and she says, oh, I can't believe that.

31:51

Finally she allowed me to go see this lady and I told her who I was.

31:57

She says I don't believe that Henry would have very things without telling us about it.

32:05

But I said I almost, I, I got as far as seeing it.

32:10

So she gave me one of her sons.

32:12

They had about six boards.

32:14

They were a big house.

32:15

We did, we took a shopper, he made a few and he got that out.

32:20

And I, I was, I didn't know what to do.

32:24

Anyways, I tried to, I opened those money.

32:26

There was a money and jewelry.

32:29

So I gave them some of them.

32:30

And she says, no, don't do it.

32:32

But I said, and then I put this into this little suitcase the people used to smuggle apples from that area to Krakow.

32:43

And I was sure that as I walk back to the railroad station was quite a walk, maybe 3 kilometers.

32:53

And she probably called the police to pick me up.

32:56

I was positive, but she didn't.

32:59

And I went to this railroad station and this again, there were this railroad station was full of these smugglers and there was coming German police trying to search if they have things that they smuggle and they shouldn't do they have the proper ID to go on the train.

33:18

And I was in the middle of this with that suitcase in which I have this fortune.

33:25

And this incredible story is that I I had to transfer and stayed on the railroad for another, I don't know how many hours to wait for another train.

33:37

There was a time of the train transfer or whatever they want.

33:42

And I must have showed this ID numerous times.

33:45

And every time I would show it, my blood would run out just to my feet because I thought the minute he turns this up, I'll be arrested.

33:55

It wouldn't help it.

33:58

And I, I remember staying at the one of this trailer waiting for the next one, maybe 6-7 hours at night and I was hearing people talking about all these different stories that they discovered a person that had the papers and everything and they were Jewish.

34:15

WEITZ: Imagine

HELLER: these stories.

34:18

People were there.

34:19

By then, people were beginning to get this idea that there is such a possibility that people have.

34:28

I returned to Krakow and I had to find this person who knew the person who who did these things that wasn't so simple.

34:42

Through this friend of mine of my childhood, he said that he saw this man walking once and he actually found him some place and put me in touch with him.

34:55

And at that time the major person who did this was arrested.

35:02

So I had to wait about maybe two months.

35:07

And this wasn't so simple because this woman lived in the one room apartment and you had to go to the washroom through a through a sort of a balcony.

35:18

There was an outside washroom and the neighbors began to be suspicious.

35:24

And so this person I knew who knew the other person, he found a room, a seamstress.

35:34

She also lived in one room.

35:36

She allowed me to stay with her for a while.

35:40

She had a German boyfriend come to visit but I had to go under her bed during the time he would visit so he won't discover there was anybody there.

35:52

There was quite a traumatic visit each time he he came to to to house and I had to be under the bed.

36:02

This is all you proud?

36:03

That's incredible.

36:04

WEITZ: While you're there, do you hear anything about the other Jews in the ghetto or?

36:08

HELLER: Yes, this woman whose husband was in ghetto.

36:11

I mean, Plaszow, she's to deliver some she yeah, she would even take some food to him through somebody, somebody who worked and went out or something like that.

36:23

And at that time, they only knew that this Plaszow was still in operation and they would use these people for various working facilities.

36:35

I suppose that Schindler was still operating.

36:39

It was.

36:40

This was, I guess, in 1943.

36:42

And it was still a clash of an existence.

36:49

Yeah, You know, 'cause you were

WEITZ: at the end of 44,

HELLER: this was already actually this was already 44 because I, I came from [place name] in but it must have been winter 44 January, February and I stated till I think April until I could go to Vienna.

37:14

I got finally this [?] paper.

37:15

I had to realize all that money and the go to sell it and it cost it.

37:21

I don't remember most of my money that I had.

37:26

And I, I, this, this whole thing was that a woman went in this place of me went to be examined.

37:37

You had to be examined.

37:38

And this was a place where they had a very good eye for the Jews to fish out.

37:44

No Poles really wanted to go to Germany.

37:48

You know, you were going as a volunteer.

37:50

This was the way this was arranged.

37:52

I think it's so hard to understand or to follow this story.

37:56

WEITZ: But then they could get in a home here.

37:58

They would get people off the street.

38:01

HELLER: They were, and that's why it was suspicious.

38:04

Even when someone volunteered, why would anybody want to volunteer?

38:07

So she went in my place.

38:11

My papers were her papers.

38:13

She was many years older than I was.

38:16

So they had to doctor this somehow.

38:20

And I still was made four years older than I was.

38:25

And I always looked very, I was puny.

38:28

I was little I, I looked much younger than I actually was.

38:33

So I when arrived in Vienna, they would very wonder what I'm doing there.

38:38

And as a matter of fact, when I finally was sent to this Nazi family as the maid, she was suspicious that someone like that can do the work, which I didn't know how, frankly, it was quite a difficult time, even physically to do.

38:55

WEITZ: You were the only maid?

HELELR: the only male that taking care of the children.

39:00

And by then the bombing was started in Vienna.

39:05

And every single day and night the bombers were coming.

39:08

And she had two suitcases with the rice which her husband smuggled from Italy, I think.

39:16

And I have to take these suitcases with the rice to the basement every day and up, which are very this heavy.

39:24

WEITZ: Was he a high-ranking?

39:25

HELLER: He was in the [?] that even told he was an architect.

39:30

And he actually at that time was in Italy building a bunker for Hitler, which was supposed to be in the Alps.

39:40

Utterly bomb proof.

39:42

I guess they never finished that because by then things were depressing.

39:48

And it was most incredible time I found my husband.

39:54

My this was my friend.

39:56

He was working, He was also at this Polish labor in a monastery.

40:02

He would work as a gardener in Vienna in a sort of a [?].

40:06

It's a suburb of Vienna.

40:08

WEITZ: Yes, I know it is right.

40:11

HELLER: And so he would meet with me in the evening, bring me always some something that he was able to save from his food.

40:19

I couldn't eat the stuff.

40:21

In a way it was blessing that she was such a good housekeeper because she was a better housekeeper.

40:27

She would realize it.

40:29

I was not a very good maid, but she she didn't have a choice and she had to accept.

40:39

As a matter of fact, only Nazis would get that maid.

40:41

Otherwise the people would be used for better purposes.

40:44

But because she had three children.

40:49

WEITZ: So how long did you work for her?

40:50

HELLER: I work for her the whole years while I was there and many people ask me, did you finally tell her when the war was over that you were Jewish?

41:00

I didn't and why I didn't, at least I think this was one.

41:04

I was terrified.

41:05

It took me 15 years before I couldn't even say I was Jewish.

41:08

I was in the United States for I don't know how many years, and I just couldn't bring this through my throat.

41:16

I thought I will be Polish and I first made this decision with my husband.

41:22

We will leave the per paper as they are, which we are because he his name was Novak and we as a mother of my older son's name is Anthony hardly a Jewish name.

41:37

WEITZ: Your husband you got married right after that.

41:39

HELLER: I went right after the actually where our first marriage was in the Polish Embassy.

41:44

Somebody wrote a contract and then we before coming to the United States, they didn't think this was a valid marriage.

41:51

So we went to a judgement and we had all these false papers.

41:56

WEITZ: So your name was at that time, I think that

HELLER: Novak

WEITZ: Novak,

and what was his real name?

HELLER: Freeman

42:07

And I guess when we came to the United States, we could, we probably had a chance to straighten all this, but we didn't want to and we were afraid.

42:16

It's so hard to explain.

42:18

I married my husband now.

42:21

He said the first time I meet someone who would remain in the papers older than the actual age, a woman.

42:30

So I sent for my death.

42:31

Was the reason I got your birth certificate

WEITZ: Good for you.

42:36

But you were married as Poles

42:38

And how long did you stay in Vienna before you got home?

42:43

HELLER: Two years actually.

42:44

WEITZ: And you, you left Vienna as Poles, not Jews?

42:49

HELLER: There was a very as Poles

WEITZ: because there was a quota for Polish people,

HELLER: no, there was a special quota actually was for the Jews.

42:58

It was such a confusing thing.

43:00

And today it's very hard to even to explain.

43:02

When we went to the American, we went to the American authorities.

43:07

This was a Truman quota as special because that was very early.

43:11

They didn't send people.

43:13

Yeah, this was 1947.

43:14

We were in the first.

43:16

I really didn't want to leave.

43:18

It was the most terrible time for me.

43:21

I didn't want to leave.

43:23

My husband was very practical and he felt we cannot stay there.

43:28

No, he had to make a decision.

43:30

He was with the Polish embassy.

43:31

He would have to either return to Poland and take part in whatever Polish government, government.

43:38

He also had to declare that he his beliefs are in the in the government.

43:45

That was changing from day-to-day, right?

43:50

And so he felt that this was time to go.

43:52

It was time to go and not we could return to Poland and he, he was thinking to return to Poland, but I didn't want to do that either.

44:02

And we, we were quickly approved by this by the authorities, even though we were investigated quite thoroughly.

44:11

The reason we were approved is because the American what was it?

44:19

I can't see no, no, the American FBI and except that see, they came to us at night and they asked Henry for his Polish passport.

44:32

They wanted to copy it for their purposes.

44:37

And they convinced him that if he wants to go to the United States, he should call, collaborate with WEITZ: You mean they would plan to plan someone.

44:45

HELLER: They were thinking of you and or whatever in Poland.

44:49

They had some, I guess, ideas what they can do with it.

44:52

And they asked him about all the other people.

44:56

Later on, we found out that there was someone else who gave his name as a reliable source, who also collaborated.

45:06

And as to when we came, that's why we were approved very quickly and we came to the United States.

45:16

We arrived in New York, but we knew someone who who we met like 3 months before in Vienna and he went to Chicago and we didn't know who we didn't know about it.

45:27

Like typical American fashion, they brought us to to New York and and they left us.

45:36

And we were utterly lost

WEITZ: 1947

HELELR: yes.

45:39

And we contacted this person who we hardly knew and he says, oh, it's very nice in Chicago.

45:46

Why don't you come to Chicago?

45:49

We went to Chicago.

45:50

It was summer.

45:52

It was hard.

45:53

It was terrible.

45:55

WEITZ: Tell me, go back to what about your family and did you find out what did you

HELLER: the reason I earned in 1945 to Krakow because I thought that maybe my sisters or somebody survived and I'll find out.

46:09

They will come to to the place where they live.

46:12

But they didn't find anybody.

46:15

And I couldn't stand it in Krakow.

46:20

I was so excited about going to the city that I loved.

46:24

I remember the beautiful and the city wasn't the city anymore because there was nobody there that was part of that city for me and I wanted to leave as as quick as possible.

46:37

I stayed there maybe 7 days.

46:39

WEITZ: And were you able to follow up on any good family find out what happened?

46:45

HELLER: I never found out anything about my younger sister.

46:49

I think she was arrested when I was in Guetta and she was brought to jail there and there was a whole thing with I went there to bring her food and she returned this, this, this, you know the dish.

47:08

And there was a letter from her.

47:11

She thought she knew who, who denounced her and I, the letter was found by the Jewish police and I was called to this.

47:23

Who was that head that was later burned?

47:26

This man?

47:28

No, no.

47:28

You mean in the ghetto?

47:29

WEITZ: I can't think of his name.

47:34

HELLER: Horrible guy.

47:35

WEITZ: Yes, yes.

47:36

HELLER: I was called to his office and they were asking me all kinds of questions.

47:41

Who was this person who she wrote that denounced that they wanted to know?

47:46

I didn't want to give him give them his name because I knew he knew about my mother when she was hidden.

47:54

So I didn't want them to get to him that he will reveal anymore rights.

48:00

And they were sort of crying for quite a while and they let me go.

48:06

WEITZ: What did you do?

48:09

HELLER: They kept it, the letter, the letter they kept.

48:14

And as a matter of fact, I had to seek someone who knew someone.

48:21

I don't know.

48:21

Do you remember this?

48:22

This was such a horrible thing in the ghetto.

48:25

You have to know somebody

WEITZ: protect,

HELLER: protect for any silly little thing.

48:31

I don't even remember.

48:32

I think that I had to seek some somebody who knew somebody to let me go to let me just be with this because I was so worried about my mother and to allow me to bring food again.

48:46

But then she was taken.

48:48

They they clean up the whole jail and they took her.

48:51

And from what I understood, she must have gone to Belzec.

48:56

So that's what they were sending people.

48:59

WEITZ: I mean, most people that period.

49:00

Were sent to Belzec from Krkaow.

HELLER: Right

49:03

That's right.

49:04

There was.

49:08

WEITZ: And that your sister, that was the

HELLER: that was my younger sister.

49:13

My elder sister was in Vilna and after the war I was married and married yet another child that very few Jews survive there, that they were all taken.

49:26

I don't know, probably.

49:28

And never heard about her.

49:31

As a matter of fact.

49:35

WEITZ: They didn't escape to Russia, right?

49:36

HELLER: No, no, no, no.

49:38

There was absolutely no sign.

49:41

I had some information when I was in Krakow.

49:45

I was meeting people.

49:46

They knew.

49:48

They knew that my mother was shot on the street.

49:51

Someone recognized.

49:52

She was apparently hiding.

49:55

I don't know exactly how she got to Krakow, but someone knew that she was shot in the street by being enough.

50:05

This is a Jewish woman and and my father was hiding also.

50:11

It was a man that was a servant and he offered he came to our home and he said he will hide it.

50:18

But in a small village in Poland they they somehow got immediately when and they felt that he must be making fortune of that too.

50:28

And so they probably to and he was taken from there.

50:33

I had no idea what happened and your husband's family, my husband's family all our killed.

50:44

He had a sister who was taken to her husband was a physician and he was taken to Lublin and the 1st efforts of of taking Jews there to re resettle them or something.

51:00

And I don't know whether they even had a baby too.

51:03

And they were all taken someplace.

51:07

It didn't help in the face actually.

51:09

That was before they even would take people to Auschwitz or such camps.

51:17

And so no one survived from his family.

51:20

We were just

WEITZ: lucky

HELLER: We were.

51:27

WEITZ: So when you get to Chicago, it was very hard?

HELLER: terrible.

51:32

It was very terrible, especially that our lives in Vienna in this intervening time was extremely exciting.

51:39

It was it was the sort of desperate but very gay.

51:47

We we had really very good life.

51:54

We even traveled or throughout Austria.

51:57

WEITZ: It's hard to settle down.

51:59

HELLER: Yes and had a special status as the Polish Embassy and the and the means at that time kowtow to all that and then we came to United States and special catapulted to 0 and I got a job as a seamstress.

52:19

I told him that I knew something about sewing that dated back to Madritsch

WEITZ: finishing school [laugh]

HELLER: and of course I didn't know too much, but there was a shortage, I guess, and I worked as a alteration lady and I really learned how to do things how to.

52:40

So the people are very helpful.

52:44

They were sort of nice in that respect that they wanted to train me to, to show me.

52:50

And I was pretty able to learn that was very well.

52:57

And actually in 1950, he became pregnant and my husband had variety of jobs, horrible jobs.

53:05

We lived in a rented room above an attic.

53:08

It was it was terrible.

53:12

And then when I became pregnant, we felt we will have to find a place.

53:19

But the same friends that brought us over, they had an apartment and they allowed us to have a bedroom with them.

53:27

And when my child was born, that's right.

53:30

I mean, just prior to that

WEITZ: Son or daughter?

HELLER: was a son, I had two sons and I found we found an apartment to pay on the table and somehow we found an apartment arrived on and actually my state in the United States changed from that moment up.

53:53

WEITZ: So two sons, right.

53:58

Any grandchildren?

HELLER: One

WEITZ: One grandchild,

HELLER: Yes

54:07

Lovely little girl who I always wanted to.

54:10

So it's just great

WEITZ: do they live close to you?

54:14

HELLER: Yes.

54:15

This particular son.

54:16

Yes.

54:17

The other one never married.

54:18

I guess this is what it's a source of great pain.

54:22

I did a lot of reading about the survivor children.

54:31
Right.

54:32
WEITZ: Well, how do your sons were, you know?

54:35
Yeah.

54:36
[Mrs. Heller starts crying, Sonia Weitz brings out tissue] WEITZ: I'm prepared.

54:37
OK.

54:37
Good.

54:38
Oh God,
WEITZ: you have to come sooner, later.

54:46
You thought if I start talking about your grandchildren, you feel better
HELLER: My children that sort of here.

54:53
WEITZ: Do they want to know?

54:56
HELLER: They do.

54:58
But there was a time that exactly that's all of us tried to protect.

55:12
There is no doubt about it in my mind that they had to be affected by this.

55:18
And I guess this is difficult to separate.

55:23
Must be one of the major reasons, at least I tell myself that that my son has such difficult time to compare themselves to to another person.

55:34

Actually, my younger son got married when my husband became ill and was obvious that he's terminally ill.

55:41

Yeah.

55:42

And he had this girlfriend and my oldest son said now you have this person, why don't you make him happy and get married, which he did.

55:52

And because I'm a social worker, I foresee not such a good things to come out of it.

55:58

But let's hope now.

55:58

WEITZ: Don't be pessimistic.

56:00

HELLER: Right.

56:01

WEITZ: So your other son is single.

56:03

HELLER: Yes.

56:05

Oh, yes.

56:06

He has a very good life.

56:07

WEITZ: I have one of those two.

56:08

HELLER: Oh, really?

56:10

WEITZ: Yeah.

56:10

I have three children.

56:12

One is twin daughters, 1 is Israel, married, has children, and one is here changing the world.

56:18

And my son is in Dallas.

56:21

He is not married.

56:22

He just

HELLER: is oldest.

56:24

WEITZ: He's the oldest.

56:25

Yeah.

56:26

So you know, you're not the only one.

56:28

HELLER: Of course I know that.

56:29

WEITZ: But do you feel that your children were more affected because of the background, more affected

HELLER: they had to be affected by it.

56:38

It's not all negative.

56:40

I'm sure

WEITZ: that's right.

56:41

HELLER: I'm sure that not everything's positive right, But I right now the studies are being made about the grandchildren and I imagine that they too accept that there's so many intermarriages that I guess they should water down this this Jewish trauma.

57:02

WEITZ: I'm not so sure that the trauma is all negative.

57:05

You know, most of the children of survivors have turned to social work to

HELELR: yes, I'm one of them.

57:12

WEITZ: That's it.

57:13

HELLER: I kept asking my son who is a physician, and so many are, is it because; he says no.

57:20

It's because you're nagging.

57:24

WEITZ: But it is just, well, I know many young people who are very mixed up, have nothing to do with the Holocaust.

57:33

HELLER: No question they are highly motivated.

57:35

This has affected the children of the survivors were extremely motivated.

57:41

They are also quite angry about all this.

57:44

Probably

WEITZ: if you stop and think that survivors tonight present company excluded, of course, but I think survivors are amazing.

57:54

Can you imagine taking yourself up?

57:56

I mean, be objective in your social work, be objective.

57:59

HELLER: Oh, I have a tremendous admiration for the spirit of the people.

58:03

I think of my present husband who survived six years in the concentration camp, that he could survive this, not only physically but mentally.

58:12

Certainly they are scars, but I actually do.

58:17

As a matter of fact, my experience is about human race.

58:21

I saw the worst.

58:23

I saw people.

58:24

They were more like animals than than human beings.

58:27

And really, I guess we do reverse to that when it comes to it pure survival.

58:34

But there was also the noble part of human race which always amazed me no end

WEITZ: absolutely

HELLER: that under these horrible conditions people are able to to get some better part of themselves forward.

58:54

WEITZ: If you had a words of wisdom for jobs, for the camera, what would you say?

59:00

I know that's always such a hard question.

59:03

When I know when it's good to me, I feel that I don't.

59:06

People think I have a secret.

59:08

We don't.

59:09

HELLER: I think that certainly suffering makes you a better person.

59:15

I do believe that.

59:19

Of course, it could be the reverse.

59:20

I too, but I do believe that it makes you more empathetic.

59:26

Have to pay.

WEITZ: Well, it wasn't so terrible.

59:33

Come on, it wasn't so bad, right?

59:39

I think we want to give you a chance to get out of here and start a normal life again.

59:45

It wasn't really bad, was it?

59:46

HELLER: Just wonderful,

WEITZ: really.

59:51

I've never done that before, you know, I had to hold on to my emotions with you because this wasn't my show.

59:57

It was your show.

59:59

But you did.

1:00:00

It's a wonderful tape.

1:00:01

I'm sure it is.

1:00:01

You want to see part of it?

HELLER: No.

1:00:03
Can we?