

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
LEGACY PROJECT**

MEMOIRIST: SOPHIE NATHAN NATHAN
INTERVIEWER: MARK POPOWSKI
DATE: AUGUST 14, 1983
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

SPONSORED BY: Taylor Family Fund
CITATION: Sophie Nathan Nathan, August 14, 1983, OHC10510, p. xx from the Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Disk 1>

Mark: My name is Mark Popowski. Today's date is August 14, 1983. I am doing this interview in Atlanta, Georgia. What is your full name please?

Sophie: Sophie Nathan.

Mark: Your address?

Sophie: [I live at] 118 Windsor Drive, Montgomery, Alabama.¹

Mark: Your date of birth?

Sophie: November 7, 1921.

Mark: How old were you at the time of your liberation?

Sophie: In 1945, I was 24 . . . not quite 24.

Mark: You were then approximately 19 or 20 years old at the beginning of the war?²

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: Before the war, had you made up your mind as to the type of profession you wished to pursue?

Sophie: Yes, I wanted to become a children's nurse. The school system in Germany is different from here. We had to have . . . I could just go six years of high school but it gave me a

¹ Sophie says Montgomery but it was actually Birmingham, Alabama.

² World War II officially began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939—just two months before Sophie's eighteenth birthday.

diploma and from there on . . . I wanted to become a children's nurse. They told me I had to have a year of what you would call here 'home economics.' I went to Cologne [Germany]³ for a year. My parents sent me there. When I was through with this year, the only school that was open for that was in Berlin. I was not allowed to travel to Berlin.

Mark: What is your present occupation?

Sophie: I work as a clerk.

Mark: What city were you born in?

Sophie: In Emmerich [Germany].⁴

Mark: Was that considered an urban area or a rural area—a country area, a small town, or a village?

Sophie: It was a small town.

Mark: Who comprised your immediate family before the war?

Sophie: My parents, my sisters, myself . . . I had uncles, and aunts, and cousins.

Mark: Were they all living in Emmerich?

Sophie: No, we were the only ones, the only family. They were living in different parts of Germany.

Mark: What would you consider your social status before the war? Was it upper class, middle class . . .

Sophie: Middle class.

Mark: What type of economic status was your family? What type of business were they involved in?

Sophie: My father was a merchant.

Mark: Would you consider your family to have been educated?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: To the university level or . . .

Sophie: No, not quite . . . but college . . . I don't know the difference between them.

³ Cologne [German: Köln] is Germany's fourth largest city. It is located on both sides of the Rhine River in western Germany, near the border of Belgium and the Netherlands.

⁴ Emmerich is a city in northwest Germany on the lower part of the Rhine River, near the Dutch border. Emmerich was almost completely destroyed in an Allied bombing campaign on October 7, 1944. Since 2001, the city has been known as Emmerich am Rhein; until then it was called Emmerich.

Mark: It was a high school . . . a *Gymnasium*⁵ or . . .

Sophie: That's right, yes.

Mark: Before the war, what were your family's religious convictions? Were you religious?

Sophie: Conservative.

Mark: Conservative?

Sophie: Yes. We did keep a kosher⁶ home. Of course, after Hitler came it was very, very hard. We couldn't anymore.

Mark: You did have a . . .

Sophie: A conservative . . .

Mark: . . . a strong Jewish identity?

Sophie: Yes, we did.

Mark: Before the war, did you have a lot of contact—you and your family—with non-Jews?

Sophie: Yes, we did . . . It stopped while we were going to school because Hitler started in 1933.⁷

Mark: Let me expand. You said that your father was a merchant. Did he have a store that he did a lot of business with non-Jews or . . . ?

Sophie: Yes, he did. Not as a storekeeper, but as a middleman.

Mark: Before the war did you experience very much antisemitism?⁸

Sophie: Yes, while I was going to school.

Mark: Can you distinguish between antisemitism before and after Hitler's rise to power? Do you remember back that far? Can you make that distinction?

⁵ A *gymnasium* is a type of school providing secondary education in some parts of Europe, comparable to college preparatory high schools in the United States. The *gymnasium* prepares pupils to enter a university for advanced academic study.

⁶ Kosher/*Kashrut* is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food that may be consumed according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is termed 'kosher' in English. The word 'kosher' has become English vernacular, a colloquialism meaning proper, legitimate, genuine, fair, or acceptable.

⁷ Amid an economic depression and increasing political instability in Germany, Adolf Hitler and his party, the National Socialist German Workers' Party (or Nazi Party) rapidly rose to power. In 1932, the Nazi party was elected to fill more seats in the *Reichstag* [German: parliament] than any other party. In 1933, democratically elected President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor of Germany, a position responsible for leading the *Reichstag*. As Chancellor, he began transforming his position into a dictatorial one. When the President died in 1934, Hitler declared himself head of state and effectively became absolute dictator of Germany under the title of *Führer* [German: Leader].

⁸ Antisemitism is prejudice against, hostility to, or hatred of Jews.

Sophie: Yes, I can. Once I was in high school . . . this was after 1933 . . . at first I had girlfriends, because girls and boys were in separate schools. As the Hitler Youth⁹ got stronger, they tore away from me. In fact, I didn't have any friends anymore but for the few Jewish girls that were there.

Mark: The town you were from—Emmerich—how many Jews were there in that town?

Sophie: [In] 1939, there were about 30 families, maybe 100 people . . . in my time.

Mark: You were basically in a definite minority in this small town?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: You said your girlfriends drew away from you as the Hitler Youth became a more significant part of Hitler's Germany. Before that, what was life like for you in this town—as far as a Jew was concerned?

Sophie: There was really no difference because it was very strongly Catholic. The Catholics . . . they didn't make that much difference. Now . . .

Mark: When you say, 'That much difference' . . .

Sophie: Between a Jew and a Catholic because . . .

Mark: In other words, because you didn't feel any particular . . .

Sophie: Discrimination? No, we didn't. We went to Catholic kindergarten . . . We knew very much we were Jews, but there was no difference as far as contact with children was concerned.

Mark: If you could, as much as you can remember, give us a sequence of events as things got worse for Jews. In other words, from the time when you felt that you were not discriminated against. If you could just sort of give us a brief timeline of how things sort of progressed.

Sophie: I think once the Nuremberg Laws¹⁰ came out in 1935—I think. I don't know exactly—because by then you couldn't have any household help anymore. Then, of course, after

⁹ Hitler Youth was a youth organization of the Nazi party that existed from 1922 to 1945. It was paramilitary in organization and put emphasis on physical and military training. It was for males 14 to 18 years of age, but there was another section for young boys and a girls' section called *Bund Deutscher Madel*. The Hitler Youth were viewed as future "Aryan supermen" and were indoctrinated as such. They had uniforms like the SA with similar ranks and insignia.

¹⁰ Between 1933 and 1939, Nazi Party leaders began to persecute Jews through a series of antisemitic legislation that included more than 400 decrees and regulations restricting all aspects of their public and private lives. Nazi policies of exclusion brought radical and daunting social, economic, and communal change to the German Jewish community. German Jews found themselves increasingly disenfranchised by the Nuremberg Race Laws, which were introduced in 1935 and formed the cornerstone of the German Nazi Party's racial policy. They heralded in a new wave of antisemitic legislation that brought about immediate and concrete segregation. The Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of German citizenship, prohibited Jewish households from having German maids under the age of 45, prohibited any non-Jewish German from marrying a Jew, and outlawed sexual relations between Jews and Germans.

the *Kristallnacht*¹¹ in 1938. That's when the Jewish stores were broken into, and destroyed, and everything.

Mark: If you could tell us, what did the Nuremberg Laws . . . how did they affect you? What were they?

Sophie: The only way they really affected us . . . my mother used to have help at home. Then, of course, you couldn't have any hired in help anymore. It affected us in a way that we helped more at home and things like that. But we were children still. I was 12, 13, 14 years old. At that time in Germany, you were a child. Then I graduated high school in 1936. [I] really wanted to go on. You had to go on three more years to be able to enter a university. The school was run by nuns. The last three years were in a different city where I would have to commute. My mother went to the school to see if I could go on for the next three years. The nuns told her 'no.' They could not take a Jewish child. Then I went to Cologne in 1936 and stayed there for . . . no, this was 1938. [It] was 1938. . . I graduated high school. I went on to Cologne. My father was still able to go about his business by that time. But then after the *Kristallnacht*, they took him away and put him in prison in this little town that we were in. Across the street from us were Jewish merchants. There were two single ladies . . . they had taken the son of one of the ladies and sent him to Dachau.¹² We found out later on [that] they put my father in prison because they didn't want him to give any advice to these ladies—what to do about their store. They took it away from them anyhow. After that, they took my father's license away too. I came home in May of 1939 and was trying to find work somewhere. I had an uncle that lived close to Hannover [Germany],¹³ where there was a Jewish home for children that could not go to school anymore in little places in Germany. It was also a preparation camp for youth that wanted to go to Israel—

¹¹ On November 8 and 9, 1938, a state-sponsored nationwide pogrom was started by the Nazi regime. Across Germany and Austria, Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses were looted and burned. Jews were attacked on the streets and 91 were killed. Thousands of Jewish men were sent to concentration camps for several weeks and released only when they agreed to leave the country as soon as possible. The Jews were made to pay for the damages to their premises. The pogrom was called '*Kristallnacht*,' which means 'Night of Broken Glass,' because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows.

¹² Established on March 22, 1933, Dachau was the first concentration camp established by the Nazi regime. It was located in southern Germany near the town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. Originally, it was a camp for criminals, political prisoners, and other opponents of the Nazi regime. In 1938, in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, the Jewish population rose to 10,000, although most were eventually released after agreeing to emigrate from Germany. Over 188,000 prisoners passed through Dachau between 1933 and 1945. Prisoners at Dachau were used as forced laborers and thousands were literally worked to death or died as a result of the harsh, overcrowded conditions, medical experiments, and executions.

¹³ Hannover is a city in northern central Germany, located on the River Leine.

Hachshera.¹⁴ I went there to take care of these children: to see that they went to school, that they were dressed, that they went to eat, and things like that. I stayed there until November of 1941 because then I knew my parents had got their papers to be deported.¹⁵ I went home.

Mark: If I can back up a second, do you remember anything specifically about *Kristallnacht*? Do you remember the reaction of the Jews in your city or the Jews you were around at the time?

Sophie: I was in Cologne at the time. To this day . . . we were . . . we went way up on a balcony. To this day, I can see the synagogues burning¹⁶ . . .

Mark: In Cologne?

Sophie: In Cologne, yes. My parents were . . . maybe 120 miles away or something. I tried to get through by telephone and couldn't reach them. I didn't know what was going on at all. I had uncles living in Cologne and they just left. They went over the border. They went to Belgium.¹⁷ I don't think I will ever forget that.

Mark: Were there a lot of people that . . . I understand that you were young at that point in time. When did people first decide that they should leave Germany if they could? Do you remember? Do you recollect that people were leaving and trying to get out? When did that first start?

Sophie: Yes. In our town, about 1936. My husband was one of the first. He and his sister left because they had family. My father-in-law was more foresighted than my own father. They had family in the [United] States. In fact, my mother-in-law had two brothers here. My husband was 15 years old and he couldn't finish school. They just made it unbearable for him. He left school. Then, about six months later, he and his sister came to the United States. That was 1936.¹⁸ A

¹⁴ Amid the upsurge in antisemitism and nationalism in the early twentieth century and the barring of Jewish members from German youth groups, Jewish youth in Germany and throughout Europe became active in the Zionist movement. All emphasized *Aliyah* (the immigration of Jews to Israel) and community, with many also focusing on agriculture. *Hachshara* [Hebrew: training] camps in Germany prepared Jewish youth to be pioneers.

¹⁵ Heinrich Himmler had obtained permission from Hitler to begin deporting Jews from Germany in September 1941. At the time, no extermination camps had been constructed and, because killing German Jews could be politically sensitive, they were to be relocated east before being deported even further east the next spring. Riga and Minsk became the sites of ghettos for German-speaking Jews deported from the Reich in late 1941 and early 1942.

¹⁶ In the early hours of November 9, 1939, Cologne's major synagogues were ransacked and burned.

¹⁷ On the eve of World War II, approximately 65,000 Jews lived in Belgium. The overwhelming majority were immigrants and refugees. By May 1940, German forces occupied Belgium. Approximately 29,000 Jews in Belgium perished during the Holocaust.

¹⁸ Fifteen year old Heinz (Henry) Nathan and his 22 year old sister, Mertha, arrived in New York City, New York on May 28, 1936.

year later, my in-laws came over. Then the other daughter and her family, her husband came over. Then some other people left. A cousin of my husband went to South America. I wanted to go to Israel and my father wouldn't let me. Others left from this little town. When we were deported there were 16 of us.¹⁹ There were some left—some older people—that they just . . . whatever happened to them I don't know. It started around 1936 because they were the first ones to leave from this little town.

Mark: The people that remained behind . . . did they just feel that it was going to get better or . . . ?

Sophie: The only thing I can tell you: my father used to say, "I was born in this little town. I grew up with everybody. Nobody is going to harm me."—which, of course, proved wrong. Then after 1938, after the *Kristallnacht*, he was ready to leave but then our quota number for America was too high. We couldn't get in.²⁰

Mark: When the war actually started, you said you were about 19?

Sophie: It started in 1939.

Mark: You were about 19?

Sophie: Eighteen years old.

¹⁹ Sophie, her sister, and her parents are named among 112 people—along with their birthdates, addresses, and information on their deaths or present residences—on a list of "Jewish Families and Individuals that Lived in Emmerich and Elten [a neighboring village] after 1930" Taub, Ruth. *Jüdische Familien und Einzelpersonen, die nach 1930 in Emmerich und Elten gewohnt haben*. August 22, 1989. Emmerich Jewish Community Collection. Leo Baeck Institute. <http://digital.cjh.org/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1432914882158~660&locale=en_US&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=5&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true> Accessed 28 May 2015. According to Spector, Schmuel and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust: A-J*, New York: NYU Press, 2001, there were 86 Jews living in Emmerich in June 1933, about four months after the Nazi party's seizure of power in Germany. By May 1939, the Jewish population was down to 32. The exact number that remained in November 1941 and the fate of those left behind is unclear but, according to Spector and Wigoder, the last six Jewish residents of Emmerich were deported to Theresienstadt on July 22, 1942.

²⁰ The Immigration Act of 1924 limited maximum annual immigration into the United States to 153,774. Inside that total number, each country was assigned a total number of immigrants. Great Britain and Ireland dominated most of the available slots. Germany was assigned about 26,000 immigrants per year while countries like Poland were allowed 6,000 immigrants per year. The German quota number per year was not related to Jews but to all Germans. Those Jews who determined very early in the Nazi regime to leave Germany essentially had to get in line as their numbers would not be available for several years. Those Jews who took no steps to try to leave until *Kristallnacht* (or in the mid- to late-1930's) stood no chance of getting out of Germany as, after war broke out in 1939, all emigration from Germany was halted. Throughout the 1930s, isolationism and xenophobic sentiments allowed a restrictive immigration policy to prevail in the United States. Although aware of and sympathetic to the plight European Jews faced, President Roosevelt was also preoccupied by a severe economic depression. Fierce political opposition in Congress further prevented Roosevelt from asking for increased immigration quotas.

Mark: What were your first memories of the war, the actual war . . . your first memories or impressions?

Sophie: I was away from home . . . We were closer to the Polish border than my hometown was.²¹ I remember we had to evacuate one certain building in this complex where I was. I remember the bombs falling and spending nights in the bunkers with the children. In fact, we had made a whole basement into sleeping quarters for the children. I can remember going night after night after night. This was in 1939 and 1940, 1941 . . .²²

Mark: This was Emmerich?

Sophie: No, this was close to Hannover . . . I was away from home almost from 1938 on and just came back to Emmerich in 1941 because my parents had gotten their papers . . . to be deported.

Mark: When the war first started, or as in this particular case, from the time that things got very difficult for the Jews, I imagine Nuremburg and then the *Kristallnacht*, were there any of your gentile²³ friends or neighbors that made efforts to try and help you? What was their reaction? I know you said your girlfriends sort of . . . ?

Sophie: Yes, but . . . where my parents lived . . . the house next door, we had a common window . . . there was a common wall with the next door neighbors. In Germany, everything was rationed at the time. Jewish people wouldn't get coffee, which was very hard to get in Germany anyhow. But these neighbors helped my parents—now, that I have to say—and there were others. They were scared. I mean, they wouldn't come into the front door because they didn't want to be seen. But they did throw groceries through this common window. I myself was away from my hometown. I was just amongst Jewish people then.

Mark: Were there any attempts where you were at for people to help . . . I realize you were amongst Jews, were there any non-Jews that were sympathetic to your cause to the point where they could help you out?

Sophie: Not that I remember. Not that I know of. No, because we didn't have any contact there with non-Jewish people. It was like . . . a big camp. Everybody was Jewish—I mean as far as kitchen help, everybody.

²¹ Hannover, Germany is almost mid-way between Emmerich, Germany and the Polish border.

²² The British began bombing Hannover in May 1940. By war's end, much of the city had been destroyed in the Allies' strategic bombing campaigns.

²³ A gentile is a person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith.

Mark: In that particular situation in Hannover, I don't believe I understand how you got in . . . associated with that particular group of Jews. Did it just so happen that you were in Hannover and they . . . ?

Sophie: No, it was . . . my uncle knew the director. He got me the job, because you couldn't find jobs in Germany.

Mark: This place being a . . . ?

Sophie: It was a preparation camp for Israel. It also was . . . the children from small cities couldn't go to school anymore . . . they were in this particular home where they went to school. There was a school connected with it.

Mark: It provided education for the Jewish children and it also was a preparatory for . . . ?

Sophie: Israel, yes.

Mark: You said then in 1941 you went back to Emmerich?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: At that time, [you] were reunited with your parents. What happened then, in 1941? Why did you go back and then what happened?

Sophie: Because my parents . . . we had heard of transports . . . In fact, while I was in Hannover, at the time there were Polish Jews living in Hannover. We had heard of a transport going to Poland in 1940.²⁴ I had family that was in Belgium and they were sent to the southern part of France into a camp.²⁵ My parents had been told that they were going to be transported to Riga [Latvia].²⁶ This must have been in November of 1941. I don't know exactly anymore when . . . I went home. Because I wouldn't just . . . I would not have gone not with them . . . family was all you had.

Mark: You were able then to maintain contact throughout? From 1938 to 1941, you had regular contact with your family?

Sophie: Yes, because we could write. Yes.

²⁴ 100,000 Jews from German-annexed territories in Poland (the so-called province of Danzig-West Prussia, District Wartheland, and East Upper Silesia) were deported in the fall and winter of 1939—1940. In October 1940, around 7,000 Jews from southwestern Germany were deported to unoccupied France and interned at the Gurs concentration camp near the French-Spanish border.

²⁵ When the Germans conquered Belgium in May 1940, between 65,000 and 70,000 Jews lived in Belgium. The overwhelming majority were foreign and stateless Jews that had sought refuge in Belgium. In the summer of 1940, some German Jews were deported from Belgium to the Gurs and St. Cyprien internment camps in southern France.

²⁶ Riga is the capital city of Latvia, located 476 kilometers (296 miles) north-northwest of Minsk. German troops occupied Riga on July 1, 1941 and soon established a ghetto. IN late 1941 and early 1942, Riga and Minsk, became the sites for ghettos of German-speaking Jews deported from the Third Reich [herein referred to as 'German Jews'].

Mark: They had received then . . . notification. You were going to just maintain the family unit at that point?

Sophie: That's right. Yes.

Mark: What happened once you got back and the notification had been received? What was the next step?

Sophie: We were told what we could take with us. We could take one suitcase and it couldn't weigh any more than 40 pounds. We were told to take some groceries with us and a bedroll. Then on the tenth of December we . . . they took us out of our home and brought us to the railway station under police guard. From there, they send us to Dusseldorf [Germany]²⁷ and this was about 16 people out of Emmerich. Dusseldorf was the gathering place. There were people from other small cities in this particular part of Germany. Then on the tenth or eleventh of December 1941 they put us on the train to Riga.²⁸ We got to Riga on the fourteenth of December. We didn't know what was ahead of us. Nobody had told us. We didn't know where we were going or anything.

Mark: When you say the notification had been received . . . it was received and you had how long to prepare for the trip to Riga?

Sophie: Three or four weeks. I really don't know because I wasn't home at the time.

Mark: When you say you received notification, they notified you of exactly where you would be going? They said you would be going to Riga or . . . ?

Sophie: I think so. I don't know anymore.

Mark: But then, you were sent and didn't know where you were going?

Sophie: We didn't know where we were going.

Mark: The transport . . . can you tell us a little about the trip? What type of transportation was it?

Sophie: It was in regular trains. They didn't put us in these wagons.

²⁷ Dusseldorf [German: Düsseldorf] is a city located on the Rhine River in western Germany, near the borders of Belgium and the Netherlands. Dusseldorf is about 65 miles (105 kilometers) south of Emmerich, Germany.

²⁸ According to a report from the police officer who commanded the guards on the transport from Dusseldorf to Riga, 1,007 Jews from the towns of Dusseldorf, Duisburg, Krefeld, and other towns and communities in the area left Dusseldorf the morning of November 11, 1941. In the chaos of boarding, some cars were crowded with 60-65 people, while others held only 35-40. It rained or snowed the entire trip and the train's steam heater did not reach the last cars of the train. The trip would normally take 14 hours, but they did not arrive in Riga until the early morning hours of November 17, when temperatures were well below freezing. The officer complained that the prisoners were not supplied with enough water and would try to get off the train at every stop or delay to look for water. He reports that his guards required prompting to "act more energetically against Jews who wanted to disobey my orders."

Mark: It wasn't a cattle car?

Sophie: No, it wasn't a cattle car, but there was no food, no nothing. I remember when they stopped and they would let us out. At that time there was snow on the ground. We would go out to just get some water or something . . . I don't really remember very much about this trip but just that all of a sudden we were in Riga. It took four days because . . .

Mark: Before you left, your parents . . . did they live in their house...?

Sophie: Yes, in their own home. We left our home. That's what I've told a million times. I would leave mine as if you would leave your home—everything, everything/ All we could take was a suitcase with 40 pounds in it. The whole suitcase . . . we never saw those suitcases again and neither did we see the bed roll.

Mark: In other words, you put them on the train and that was the last you saw of them?

Sophie: That's right. Yes.

Mark: What did you find . . . first of all, where was Riga and what did you find when you got there?

Sophie: Riga was in Latvia. It was bitter cold. It was December. We stopped at a railroad station and there were SS²⁹ [with] dogs. They gave us a choice—I mean the older people like my father. [He] was in his sixties. They gave him a choice of going into a bus to get into the ghetto, but he didn't because he wanted to stay with us. I think those people that got on the bus never were seen again.³⁰ We walked and—whether it was an hour or two hours I don't remember anymore—we got into the ghetto behind barbed wire. We got into houses . . . They told us, “You go into this house. You go into that house.” There were 13 people in one room and a kitchen. I remember in the kitchen there was a pot with potatoes on the stove, carrots on the stove, there

²⁹ The SS or Schutzstaffel was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. It began at the end of 1920 as a small, permanent guard unit known as the “Saal-Schutz” made up of Nazi Party volunteers to provide security for party meetings in Munich. Later, in 1925, Heinrich Himmler joined the unit, which had by then been reformed and renamed the “Schutzstaffel.” Under Himmler's leadership, it grew from a small paramilitary formation to one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. Under Himmler's command, it was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II. After World War II, like the Nazi Party, it was declared a criminal organization by the International Military Tribunal and banned in Germany. The SS were known for using trained guard dogs, especially German shepherds, to help control prisoners.

³⁰ According to the account of another survivor, Gertrude Schneider, recorded in her book, *Journey Into Terror: Story of the Riga Ghetto* (Ardent Media, 1979), new arrivals of Jews who were unable to walk from the train station to the ghetto were told they could be driven. Many elderly, children, and other unsuspecting prisoners volunteered to go in the “gas vans.” Gassing vans were vehicles reequipped as a mobile gas chamber. Inhaling exhaust fumes that were pumped into an airtight compartment when the engine was running killed victims. Until gas chambers were developed as a more efficient method for killing large numbers of people, gassing vans were employed. By summer 1942, at least two gassing vans were operating in Riga.

was tea on the table. Later on we were told that Latvian Jews had . . . they had brought the Jews of Riga into the ghetto in July of 1941. About ten days before we had got there, they had put them in a synagogue and shot them and burned the synagogue.³¹ We didn't know at the time we got into the ghetto that that had happened because they had separated the ghetto for the German Jews from the ghetto of the Latvian Jews that were still left.³² There were about 2,000 Latvian Jews left. [The Germans] had separated [the two parts of the ghetto] by a street and by barbed wire on each side. The street was in between. There was barbed wire. They used to call it the 'German ghetto' and the 'Latvian ghetto.'

Mark: When you first went in, there were German . . . ?

Sophie: There were German Jews. There had been about . . . in fact, there had been two trains for us of 1,000 people each. They were called by the destinations they came from. There was one from Cologne, one from Kassel [Germany],³³ and we were named the 'Dusseldorf transport' because that was the gathering place. We were the third transport. There were about ten or twelve after. There were an awful lot more after ours but there were a lot that didn't reach the ghetto.³⁴ We found out later on . . . I guess they gassed them. I really don't know. I never found out about that.

Mark: You were assigned a place to live?

Sophie: That's right.

Mark: Is this place with your family still together?

Sophie: Yes.

³¹ Following the German occupation of Riga in July 1941, the city's synagogues were burned in a series of violent pogroms. Jewish people were rounded up and forced into synagogues, which were then set on fire. In October, 29,600 Jews from Riga and the surrounding area were confined to a ghetto. The murder of the Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto that Sophie is referring to is collectively referred to as the "Rumbula massacre." On November 30 and December 8, 1941, at least 25,500 of the Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto were taken to a nearby wooded area called "Rumbula" where they were shot and buried in large pits that had been prepared by Russian POWs.

³² Around 5,000 Latvian Jews—mostly young men and women healthy enough to work—were spared from the liquidation of the Riga ghetto at the end of 1941. They were confined to a separate part of the ghetto known as the "Latvian ghetto" and kept separate from the new arrivals. From November 1941 until mid-1942, a series of 20 transports brought more than 22,000 German, Austrian and Czech Jews to Riga and filled the main ghetto, as well as nearby camps at Jungfernhof and Salaspils. The Jews from the Third Reich were housed in the homes that had been vacated by the murdered Latvian Jews in what was now known as the "German ghetto."

³³ Kassel is a city located on the Fulda River in central Germany. A transport of around 1,000 Jews (around half from the city of Kassel and half from the surrounding area) was sent to Riga on December 9, 1941.

³⁴ On November 30, 1941, the first transport of 1,000 Jews from Berlin arrived in Riga. They were taken to the forest and killed along with over 25,000 Latvian Jews from the ghetto. Other survivors also reported that additional transports of German Jews were killed upon arrival in Riga between the fall of 1941 and mid-1942, but it is unclear how many.

Mark: This was your father, your mother, your sister, and yourself?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: What were your first few days like in the ghetto?

Sophie: I don't even remember. I guess we were so numb—that's about the only expression I can say—that I really don't remember. We were cold. We didn't have anything to eat. They had a place where they would give you . . . it was all . . . you were supposed to get your groceries there. You would get a slice of bread, and frozen fish heads, [and] frozen potatoes. You just made do with it. Everything was frozen.

Mark: Did you get into some sort of routine after a while in the ghetto? Were there some assignments?

Sophie: Yes, there were work assignments. The first work I did—and my sister also—was to . . . they brought us into a big factory where they had gathered all the belongings of the Latvian Jews. We were supposed to sort them out. That is when we started to steal because we found out . . . that we could exchange this clothing for food. Of course, you had to try not to get caught.

Mark: On a daily basis, you would work during the day?

Sophie: That's right and get . . . this was still within the ghetto. At the time, we never did get out of the ghetto.

Mark: Were your sister, and yourself, and your parents all doing the same thing?

Sophie: No, my parents did not work. I mean they had these *Appels* [German: roll calls] where they made you stand outside for hours, and hours, and hours. Those that worked they were sent on to work. That, I think, is when my father got sick. His toes froze and . . . they had a hospital—or what they called a hospital—but there was no medication or nothing. Then he passed away in May of 1942.

Mark: In the ghetto?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: He died of illness?

Sophie: Yes, he did. He died a natural death, so . . .

Mark: You had said before that you exchanged clothing for food. Was business carried on in the ghetto?

Sophie: It wasn't at that time in the ghetto. It was people that worked outside the ghetto. They would take this clothing and they would exchange . . . because they had contact with

Latvians. The Latvians didn't have anything to wear, [but] they had the food. So, through a third channel . . . we would get something to eat, maybe a piece of bread or a . . . piece of fat—what you call fatback here. That was the first time we had tried it, but we felt it was more important to keep ourselves healthy.

Mark: There were children in the ghetto?

Sophie: Yes, at that time there were children in the ghetto.

Mark: Were there any attempts to educate children, to keep the educational process going?

Sophie: Yes, it was. Even we went. Sometimes I think back [and wonder] why did we even . . . ? There was a teacher from the Cologne transport who tried to keep up a school for the children. Children did go to school at first.³⁵ We used to go at night and studied Goethe³⁶ [and] Schiller.³⁷ Sometimes when I think back, [I wonder], “Why do we do this?”

Mark: Was it all secular education or was there religious education also?

Sophie: I don't know. There was religious education. We didn't have any children in our family so I really . . . that I don't know. Now had services in a little room. I remember we went to say *kaddish*.³⁸ Of course, we couldn't sit *shiva*.³⁹ We had services in the home because in the same house there were . . . I don't know how many families living there, but there were other people that were saying *Kaddish* and there was a *minyan*.⁴⁰ That much I remember.

Mark: Were there people such as doctors in the ghetto that were able to carry on the professions they had had before the war?

Sophie: Yes, there were, but there was no medication. There were nurses in this particular hospital where my father was. At the time, I was working for the German army. They first didn't believe we were German. They couldn't understand that we spoke the same language and

³⁵ A large number of professors and teachers arrived in the “German ghetto” and were allowed to establish schools for the children.

³⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) was a German poet, playwright, novelist, scientist, statesman, theatre director, critic, and amateur artist. He is considered the greatest German literary figure of the modern era.

³⁷ Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1788–1805) was a German poet, playwright, philosopher, historian, and literary theorist.

³⁸ Also known as the “Mourner's *Kaddish*,” the word *Kaddish* means sanctification, and the prayer is a sanctification of G-d's name that is recited at funerals and by mourners.

³⁹ *Shiva*, literally “seven,” is the weeklong mourning period in Judaism for first-degree relatives: father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister and spouse. The ritual is referred to as “sitting *Shiva*.” Immediately after burial, first-degree relatives assume the status of “mourner.” This state lasts for seven days, during which the family members traditionally gather in one home and receive visitors. At the funeral, mourners traditionally rend an outer garment, a ritual known as ‘kerish.’ This garment is worn throughout *Shiva*.

⁴⁰ A *minyan* refers to the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations. According to many non-Orthodox streams of Judaism adult females count in the *minyan*.

everything. They tried to help us. They would give us something to eat. I remember very strongly: whatever we had, we brought to my father because in the hospital there was nothing to eat.

Mark: Was there any resistance in the ghetto?

Sophie: Not as far as I remember in the German part of the ghetto. I know I found out after it had happened. There was a police force in the German ghetto. There were German policemen. Everything was Jewish, but then there were a lot of young people in the Latvian ghetto as a police force. They were all very young . . .

Mark: They were Jewish people?

Sophie: Yes. After the resistance . . . after they . . . this was in October of 1942, when they really tried an uprising, but it didn't work.⁴¹ We found out then they had really prepared for it because underground they had a hospital with food and medication. They had lived there and they had contact. They spoke the language. They did have contact with Latvian non-Jewish people. [The Germans] killed almost the whole police force [in the Latvian ghetto]. There was no resistance in the German ghetto. That was something my children used to ask me: "Why not?" Where would you have gone? People had tried to flee but I don't think anybody ever made it. We never heard from anybody that ever made it.

Mark: Was there any type of leadership, any type of . . . Jewish government or Jewish Council there?

Sophie: Yes, there was. There was a Jewish Council there.⁴²

Mark: How did that work?

Sophie: It worked for the job. I don't think they had very much choice but to do the bidding of the SS. That's who we were under: the SS. I don't think [the Jewish Council members] were very helpful to the Jews.

⁴¹ The ghetto police force initially consisted of 42 Latvian Jewish men in charge of both the German-speaking part of the ghetto and the smaller Latvian part. At the beginning of 1942, they were involved in the organization of a resistance movement in the Latvian ghetto. Many of the Jews worked for the Wehrmacht, sorting weapons. The ghetto police organized the smuggling of weapons into the ghetto. The weapons were hidden along with ammunition and food in a bunker that had been prepared. When the Germans discovered their activities on October 29, 1942, all the members of the ghetto police were shot.

⁴² The German-speaking Jews who arrived in the Riga ghetto between 1941 and 1942 quickly established their own Jewish Council [German: *Judenrat*]. Some of the representatives had been elected during the process of deportation and organization initially depended on the location where each group had been deported from, but a centralized ghetto administration was soon established. The Jewish Council oversaw a social department, labor department, prison, and police unit. The Germans retained responsibility for the administration and assignment of housing.

Mark: Do you remember what they did, what their responsibilities or their activities were?

Sophie: I think the work *kommandos*⁴³ were part of their responsibilities—to get enough people together to . . . we used to go out of the ghetto every morning—under guard, of course. I guess they had to meet a quota for these different work *kommandos*. People were glad to get out of the ghetto to go to work.

Mark: Were these people on these Jewish Councils . . . were they appointed by the Germans?

Sophie: I think so. Yes, as far as I know.

Mark: Do you know anybody that ever refused to serve on one of these councils?

Sophie: No, I don't.

Mark: You said that people got out of the ghetto to work outside the ghetto. What type of work did they do?

Sophie: Everybody did different [jobs]. I personally . . . first, we shoveled snow on the railroads. That's where the Latvian people . . . had pity on us. They gave us bread. They used to have thick slices of bread like this. <holds up fingers to illustrate a thickness of approximately 3 inches> We would take it home. We would make three meals out of that. Then, pretty early on I worked for the German army in early 1942. At that time, they were preparing beach homes for . . . the German officers and we did the housework. Then in the winter of 1942, 1943 there were Latvian Jewish people, they were living in an apartment house outside of Riga under SS guard.⁴⁴ They were working for the SS. They were making boots for the SS. That's really the first time that I knew that there were Jewish people that really had a trade. In Germany, you didn't know this. [Jews] were either merchants or professionals. These Jewish people were furriers. They made fur coats. Everything was for the SS, of course. We worked for them by keeping house. I really don't remember any more of the work we did. They were very, very good to us—these Latvian Jewish people. They gave us food. That was all our concern: to have something to eat, to

⁴³ A *kommando* [German: unit or command] was the basic unit of organization of slave laborers during World War II.

⁴⁴ Jews in Riga's Latvian and German ghettos were used for forced labor. Most were employed by the Wehrmacht, SS, railway and postal service centers, or private companies and most of the workplaces were outside the ghetto. To avoid the long marches back and forth to the camp, many of the companies that employed the Jews housed them at the work sites. Thus many of the Latvian Jews especially were able to contact the local population and obtain extra food. While contact between the Latvian and foreign Jews was strictly forbidden, there was some contact. Many of the Latvian Jews spoke German fluently and assisted the newly arrived German speaking Jews in obtaining food.

take home to eat, and to get wood to heat, because in Riga the ice doesn't melt from September to May.

Mark: Do these furriers and shoemakers . . . do you feel that they had more food because they had a trade?

Sophie: Yes. They were . . . the *SS* wanted to keep them alive and they were fed better. They had . . . some had connections to the outside. They speak the language. They spoke Russian, they spoke Latvian, [and] they spoke Polish. They were very well educated.

Mark: Because of the fact you said they had connections to the outside, were you able to get any sort of newspapers or send any messages to the outside of the ghetto?

Sophie: We . . . not I personally nor my sister, but we had a friend—she is in this country now—she had an awful lot of connections to the *SS*. There were a lot of things going on that weren't . . . wasn't very nice. Anyhow, she tried to get some mail out to a friend in Germany and she was caught. She was put in jail. If she had not had her connections with the *SS* she would never have made it out.

Mark: Can you . . . you said that there were some things that were not very nice that were going on. Would you talk about that a little bit?

Sophie: There were quite a few . . . there were an awful lot of young Jewish women that would live with the *SS* men just to have something to eat, or maybe not be sent to Stutthof,⁴⁵ or things like that.

Mark: In other words . . . because of her contacts, she was saved?

Sophie: Yes, she was saved.

Mark: Did you [know] or were there progress reports on the war that you could get from the outside [about] how the war was going?

Sophie: No, we did not know anything. The only thing I can say in retrospect is, when the Allies invaded France, that's when they started shaving our heads and gave us prison clothes. Because we were noticeable then, you couldn't escape. But this is only in retrospect once I came to this country and knew about the invasion of France.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Stutthof was established in 1939 near Danzig (present-day Gdansk), on the Baltic Sea. There were a series of sub-camps attached to the main camp, which acted as a reserve for slave labor for the others. Conditions in the camp were brutal and more than 60,000 people died there.

⁴⁶ The Allies landed in the Normandy region of France on June 6, 1944. The invasion initiated the liberation of France and German forces in Paris surrendered on August 25. The decision to shave the heads of the prisoners and have them dress in striped uniforms was probably influenced more directly by the advance of the Russians in the

Mark: In other words, at the time you didn't know why they were doing it?

Sophie: We did not know anything. No, the only thing we noticed of course . . . no not as much in Riga. Later on when we were in Libau⁴⁷ when the Russians came closer, the air attacks.

Mark: You had said before that your friend would have been sent . . . you mentioned the name of a city or a camp . . . for sending a letter out. What was that and what did you know about that place?

Sophie: All we knew that [it] was Stutthof, which was close to what is Gdansk today. All we knew about it was that it was worse than what we had. We did not know about Auschwitz-Birkenau,⁴⁸ we did not know about the numbers <points to forearm to indicate where prisoner numbers were often tattooed> or anything.

Mark: Did you just sort of know that it was worse than what you had or had you met people who had come from there?

Sophie: No, nobody had ever come from there into the ghetto or into the camp where we were. No, we just knew. I guess through the grapevine. I don't know really. I don't know anymore how we knew.

Mark: In your ghetto, were people transported out?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: How and when?

Sophie: It first started early in 1942.⁴⁹ At that time they asked for people to go on their own, to . . .

east. The uniforms and shaved heads would have made it easier to identify the prisoners when they were being evacuated. Sigi Ziering, another survivor from the Riga ghetto, recalls this happening in early August 1944, shortly before the remaining Riga prisoners were sent to either Kaiserwald or Libau.

⁴⁷ Libau is the German name of the city of Liepāja [Latvian] in western Latvia. It is located 195 kilometers (121 miles) southwest of Riga on the Baltic Sea. The Libau ghetto had been liquidated in 1943 and, by the fall of 1944, only around 800 Jews remained as slave laborers, working for the Reichsbahn or German General electric Company (AEG). By October, those prisoners had been sent to Stutthof, so it is unclear why some prisoners from Riga were brought to Libau. Sigi Ziering, another survivor from Riga, recalls a last minute order that kept 200 prisoners from being sent to Stutthof when Riga was evacuated. On September 29, 1944, those prisoners were loaded onto a ship and sailed to Libau, where the Russians were already conducting frequent air raids. According to Ziering, the Riga prisoners were put to work at a clothing facility until late February 1945.

⁴⁸ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by the Third Reich just outside the town of Oswiecim (renamed Auschwitz by the Germans) in Polish areas annexed by Germany during World War II. It is estimated that the SS and police deported at a minimum 1.3 million people (approximately 1.1 million of which were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

⁴⁹ In March 15 and 26, 1942, close to 4,000 mostly elderly, infirm, and women with children from the Riga ghetto and the nearby transit camp known as Jungfernhof [Latvian: Jumpravmuiza] were killed in what became known as the Dünamünde Aktion. The prisoners had volunteered for what was said to be easy work in a non-existent fish

Mark: Volunteer?

Sophie: Volunteer. That's right. Some people that were in the same room had come from the same city that we came from, from Germany, they volunteered. My father said, "No I'm not going to volunteer for anything." They were promised to go into a fishing village and they would obviously have enough food . . . I hate to keep bringing this up, but it was . . . food was all we were concerned with because there wasn't any. I don't know if the people ever got there, whether they were . . . we knew they never . . . I don't know if they ever got there. Anyhow, they never lived for any length of time.

Mark: Initially it was volunteer with the promise of better food and . . . ?

Sophie: That's right. As long as we were in the ghetto there were transports that never reached the ghetto. That's what we heard. There were hangings in the ghetto, but no mass transports out of the ghetto.

Mark: There was never any compulsory [deportation] or there was no need to choose people to go? There was always enough volunteers?

Sophie: Not as long as we were in the ghetto, which was until November of 1942. That's when they . . . there was . . . second of November 1942 . . . after all the people had left—they were going to work—the *SS* came into the ghetto and took all the old people and children away.⁵⁰ When we came back, the ghetto was almost empty. I remember . . . we were just lucky. My mother by that time was working and we were all working for the army. The mother of a very good friend of mine was taken.

Mark: At that point in time, it went from being volunteer to they just liquidated the ghetto?

Sophie: Yes, they just liquidated the ghetto. Then, on the sixth of November, we were put into barracks from the army. That's when they separated families, women, husbands and wives . . . Men were put in one barrack and women in another.

Mark: At that point in time, you moved out of the houses and still remained in [Riga] in a barracks?

processing company near a former town known as Dünamünde [Latvian: Daugavgrīva]. Instead, the volunteers were taken into the nearby Bikernieki forest, where they were shot and thrown into pits that had been prepared.

⁵⁰ The liquidation of the Riga ghetto occurred incrementally in the fall of 1943. Those who were deemed fit for work were gradually transferred from Riga to the Kaiserwald concentration camp and its subcamps. On November 2, 1943, 2,268 Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau from Riga and about 4,000 were transferred to Kaiserwald. Sophie, her mother, and her sister were among the 5,500 Riga ghetto Jews who continued to work and were housed outside the ghetto, but came under the authority of the Kaiserwald camp.

Sophie: Yes. It was up at the ghetto. It was still within Riga.

Mark: At that point in time, was there still separation between Latvians and Germans, or were all the Jews together?

Sophie: I don't know. I think we were all together. I don't think they made any distinction then.

Mark: Once you moved into the barracks, how was your life as opposed to before moving into the barracks? Was your routine the same or your work or did things change as far as the routine and food?

Sophie: No, it did not change as far as the routine was concerned, because everybody that had worked for different German . . . it was the army, it was the road building. They were in barracks with the people they worked for. The routine stayed the same. [We] left from there and worked different places. We were under German army and the SS didn't have any hold over us then.

Mark: You, your sister, and your mother were together in the barracks?

Sophie: Yes, we were.

Mark: You still received the same ration of food at that time?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: You had said before, when your father passed away you went to say *kaddish*. Were there religious ceremonies being carried on in the ghetto? Was there a *seder* at *Pesach*?⁵¹

Sophie: No, there was no *seder*. They knew very well when *Yom Kippur*⁵² came along because that's when they made the work even harder. There would be hangings on *Shabbos* [Hebrew: Sabbath]. There . . . no, we did not have *seder* for anything. There was no *matzah* [Hebrew: unleavened Passover bread], no nothing.

Mark: There was no attempt to really . . . get together?

⁵¹ *Pesach* [Hebrew: Passover] is the anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. The holiday lasts for eight days. On the first two nights, the *seder*—the central event of the holiday—is celebrated. The *seder* service is one of the most colorful and joyous occasions in Jewish life. During Passover, *matzot* [unleavened bread] is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they did not have time to wait for the dough to rise.

⁵² *Yom Kippur* [Hebrew: Day of Atonement] is the most sacred day of the Jewish year. *Yom Kippur* is a 25-hour fast day, spent in prayer, reciting *yizkor* for deceased relatives, confessing sins, requesting divine forgiveness, and listening to Torah readings and sermons. People greet each other with the wish that they may be sealed in the heavenly book for a good year ahead. The day ends with the blowing of the shofar (a ram's horn). As an important holiday of the Jewish year, the Germans often planned *Aktions* or other forms of persecution to coincide with *Yom Kippur*.

Sophie: No, there wasn't.

Mark: The hangings that took place: were these random hangings or were they . . . ?

Sophie: People that got caught with food or maybe trying to escape. I know somebody that's in this country right now, his brother was hanged and they made us go by there. There was a certain place where they had the hangings. When you came back from work they made you walk by there.⁵³

Mark: Did you have a uniform or . . . ?

Sophie: No, not until 1944 when they gave us prison clothes. We just had whatever we could find to wear.

Mark: You said it was 1944. Was that the time that later you found out they had invaded France?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: Can you tell us what happened then to change from the routine that you had followed in the barracks?

Sophie: No, it didn't change the routine, it just . . . the only thing what happened [was] that they shaved our heads, that they gave us prison clothes . . . we wore the Star of David and with the prison clothes we got a number—but never tattooed. It was just attached, sewn onto our clothing. We stayed with this . . . we stayed with them . . . they sent us to Libau in September of 1944. We worked . . . since the liquidation of the ghetto until September of 1944 for the German Army. For this, I'm going to have to read from my notes.

Mark: Sure.

Sophie: I just seen: while we were working for the German army there was children. That's when they took the children away—those that had come with us into the barracks. One morning a car or whatever, a truck came and just took them away from their parents. They were never heard from again.

Mark: Did you, your mother, and your sister think you were going to survive?

Sophie: I think deep down we did. I think somehow that was what kept us going. I think somehow all we could think of . . . this . . . we were a group of young girls working for the army. We were loading wagons with army clothes or sorting out army clothes. We were living in

⁵³ The area within the Riga ghetto where the gallows were constructed was called the *Blechplatz* [German: Tin Square or Tin Place]. This was also where soccer matches and other community activities were held.

double beds on straw, no cover, no nothing. We used our coats to cover the straw to lay down on. All we could ever think of was if we could ever have a bedroom sheet. I don't know why but . . . I guess this was something that just kept us going. I have to say that the older generation—my mother's generation—was much stronger. If it had not been for them I don't think a lot of us would have made it. They kept [saying], "We got to get out of here. We got to get out of here. [We've] just got to keep on." I think sometimes we thought, "For what?"

Mark: Was there any unusual or special types of experiences in your time in the ghetto that we haven't covered that you feel like you would like to talk about? Please refer to your notes.

Sophie: Yes, I think I will have to . . . I remember . . . I don't know whether I am using the right expression, I tried to look it up in the dictionary . . . in the summer of 1943, they . . . where they sent my sister away first to . . . they send us into peat moss fields. That's what they would use to heat their homes with a lot. It was in a swamp. We had to get this peat moss out of the swamp and then put it out to dry. This was away from the ghetto. There were about . . . 20 or 30 young women. We stayed there from . . . I stayed there from July until October. This was in 1942. At that time, they had selections for Kaiserwald,⁵⁴ which was a camp close to Riga. It was within this group of German soldiers that were selecting people to work for them. My mother and my sister were working for the army. I remember very clearly that he was selecting me to go to Kaiserwald. My mother knew the German soldier because she was working for him. She told him, "This is my daughter." Then he said, "Okay, you go with your mother." That's what saved me.

Mark: You didn't go to . . . ?

Sophie: No, I did not go to Kaiserwald. I stayed with my mother and my sister. They were working for the German army. I had just come back. This was before the ghetto was dissolved.

Mark: Kaiserwald was a . . . ?

Sophie: Kaiserwald was . . . like a concentration camp, like Stutthof. I'm sure you've heard of Stutthof. I think that's what it was. But the idea not to be sent . . . that's the goal you had: stay

⁵⁴ The Kaiserwald concentration camp was located north of the city of Riga and established in March 1943. Jews from Hungary, Poland, and most of the Jews that survived the liquidations of the ghettos in Latvia (including Riga) were sent to Kaiserwald and its subcamps. By March 1944, there were around 12,000 prisoners in Kaiserwald. The prisoners were used for slave labor and contracted to German companies for the production of electrical goods or worked in factories, mines, and on farms. As the Russian army advanced in the summer of 1944, thousands of prisoners were murdered and the survivors were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp. The Russian army liberated the camp on October 13, 1944.

with your family—as long as you could, stay with your family. While we were working for the German army, there were selections. At one time, there was a doctor that came into the barracks. [He said], “You go right. You go left.” At that time my mother was in a hospital because she had trouble with her leg, trouble with her hand. This soldier that had saved me accompanied this SS doctor. [The doctor] was going to send my mother away. [The soldier] did the same thing for her that he did for me. He said, “No I need her. She is just sick here for a day or two. I need her. She is one of my best workers.”

Mark: There were . . . ?

Sophie: Yes, there were some people that were decent and that did help us. I will never forget . . . on *Kol Nidre*⁵⁵ night in . . . 1944, we were loading railroad cars with boots for the SS. We had to bring them out of a basement, walk up steps, and at that time we tried very hard to fast. It wasn't very hard to fast. It was just something . . . you had to cling to something. There was a German soldier that gave us chocolate that the pilots used for energy,⁵⁶ things like that. So there were some [Germans who helped us]. Otherwise I don't think any of us would have made it. There were some people that . . . helped us.

Mark: One of the things that I haven't gotten you to identify yet: if you could just mention, what was your father's, and what was your mother's, and your sister's names?

Sophie: My father's name was George Nathan. My mother's first name was Thea Nathan and my sister's name was Emmi.

Mark: You had said before that the strength of the older generation—their support—made it easier for you and your peers. Was this within the family? Was there a support system within the camp? In other words, did people come together or was it up to everybody to work it out for themselves?

Sophie: No, I think it was not just the family. It was the group of people [that] you worked with. They were supportive of each other and they developed a very strong bond . . . to this day. Not very long ago, a couple of years ago, some of the people we were in my camp with . . . after liberation went to Australia . . . they came to this country. They called me and you talk . . . it was

⁵⁵ *Kol Nidre* is an Aramaic declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on every *Yom Kippur* [Hebrew: the Day of Atonement], which is traditionally observed with 25 hours of fasting.

⁵⁶ Sophie may be referring to Schokakola, a dark chocolate with caffeine added, that was commonly included in the rations given to German *Luftwaffe* pilots as well as other special forces.

30 or 40 years like we had never been apart. There is just something about it that draws you very close.

Mark: Was there sharing of food? Or, in the case of illness was there medicine? Did people try to help each other in that respect?

Sophie: To a certain degree yes, and others didn't. Shortly before we were liberated, my mother was very, very sick. I think if we had stayed in this particular camp another week my mother would have never made it. We tried to . . . this particular woman had somehow gotten some extra bread. We tried to give her something else for the bread to give to my mother but she wouldn't. You had both types. There's just . . .

Mark: Did the people that didn't come together and support [one another], did they still manage to make it?

Sophie: Yes, they did.

Mark: Were there any . . . births in the ghetto?

Sophie: No, because the girls that were pregnant they had abortions.⁵⁷

Mark: Did they feel they didn't want to bring children into the world or were they forced to have abortions?

Sophie: I think they were forced.

Mark: There were no children born?

Sophie: No.

Mark: Were there any suicides?

Sophie: Not that I know of. No.

Mark: Do you remember any times when . . . any lighter moments? Was there any humor at any time? Was laughter a way of coping at any point in time?

Sophie: I think so. There were even evenings of music, under *SS* supervision.⁵⁸ They encouraged it at first. I don't know whether they were trying to make life a little more normal or what. I don't know. But there were musical evenings.

⁵⁷ According to the account of Gertrude Schneider, a few babies were born in the ghetto in the first year, but were immediately killed. Pregnant women were forced to have abortions. Sexual relations between prisoners were forbidden and women who required second abortions were eventually sterilized.

⁵⁸ In many ghettos and concentration or extermination camps, amateur and professional musicians from among the prisoners formed officially sanctioned orchestras, ensembles, bands, and choirs. The musicians performed as directed or permitted by the camp administration. Prisoners sometimes performed for the entertainment of the *SS*. Music often accompanied background music for work details leaving or returning to camps and for punishments or

Mark: These were for all of the people in the camp?

Sophie: Yes, whoever wanted to go.

Mark: Were you able to distinguish again, were there people that you could trust and people you couldn't trust in the day-to-day routine of the ghetto? Were there people who would turn against you?

Sophie: You might turn against them because there was police. I'm talking about German Jewish police now. Of course, it was part of their job to examine us when we came back into the ghetto, whether we had contraband with us, or what they called contraband. Some did act as if they searched us and others actually did search us. Of course, if they found something, that was it.

Mark: In working in the camps, were there any attempts at sabotage?

Sophie: Not that I know of. No.

Mark: With the small amount of food that you had, were there ways of conserving energy? Did you make any special attempt as far as conserving your strength?

Sophie: No, I don't think so.

Mark: In your camp, did the *SS* ever talk about what was happening to the Jews? I know you have expressed on a couple of occasions how it was the decision of an *SS* officer that potentially saved your life. Did they ever talk about what was happening?

Sophie: No. We didn't even know about Auschwitz-Birkenau until after liberation when we saw people with numbers on their arm. All we knew that . . . they had shot people in Riga and there are mass graves. There are some people in this country that were in this '*kommando*' as they called it. While they were doing this, they were kept in a prison outside the ghetto. Once they came back into the ghetto, they were young men that looked like old men. Of course, they were never allowed to talk about it, but we heard about it anyhow.⁵⁹

executions. In Riga, an orchestra regularly performed for the ghetto inhabitants and singing events were held. The administration and guards often attended the concerts.

⁵⁹ It is unclear what *kommando* Sophie is referring to. She could be referring to the prisoners that were housed in the Jungfernhof transit camp just outside of Riga and were charged with sorting the belongings of those who had been murdered during various *Aktions*. She could also be referring to the young men who were sent to build the nearby Salaspils concentration camp in the winter of 1941 and summer of 1942. The survivors of those work details returned to the ghetto as exhausted, living skeletons. Sophie could also be referring to a *Sonderkommando* [German: special unit], which were special work units made up of prisoners that were typically young males. Especially in extermination camps, they were charged with the disposal of bodies. In 1944, in an attempt to destroy evidence of the mass murders Sophie refers to, the Germans forced prisoners to reopen the mass graves and burn the bodies. Sophie may be referring to those prisoners. However, it is unusual that they would have been allowed to return to

Mark: Were there any non-Jews in the ghetto?

Sophie: No, it was strictly Jews.

Mark: Was there any difference between the type of work that the German Jews were asked to do and the Latvian Jews other than the *Aktion*?⁶⁰

Sophie: No, I don't really think so because the work *kommandos* were mixed partly. There were Latvian Jews and German Jews working together.

Mark: While you were in the camp, did your religious beliefs change in any way?

Sophie: No, I don't think so. I think we always knew that somebody had to be up there.

Mark: Did they change after the war? Were they . . . ?

Sophie: No, I think they were stronger . . . because people will ask you, "How come you got out? How come you ever made it?" There is no answer to it, but just that . . . somebody wanted us to get out. That's all I can ever say.

Mark: When you were in the camps, you really had no idea—except for the people that you knew were hanged or had been shot . . . when people were transported out, you had absolutely no idea what was happening other than it was not good?

Sophie: No. That's right. No, we didn't. We knew there were buses going out of the ghetto and once they got out there was gassing.

Mark: You knew they were gassed?

Sophie: Yes. We did not know anything about the ovens. We did not know about Treblinka⁶¹ or anything like that.

Mark: When did you first find out about that?

Sophie: When we went to Sweden, after liberation. We did not know.

Mark: What was your reaction when you first heard about it?

Sophie: I couldn't even tell you, because we couldn't even believe we were free. We [had] lived for more than three-and-a-half years under guard constantly, under a pistol or anything. We couldn't believe we were free. I think it was months that you didn't look over your shoulder and

the ghetto during this process. *Sonderkommando* were typically killed either after their work was completed or after a short, predetermined period of time. The prisoners charged with burning the bodies in Riga in 1944 were killed when their task was completed.

⁶⁰ *Aktion* is the German term used for any non-military campaign to further Nazi ideals of race, but most often referring to the assembly, and deportation of Jews to concentration or death camps.

⁶¹ Treblinka was established in the Lublin district of Poland in November 1941 and began operations as an extermination camp in July 1942. Between July 1942 and early 1943, nearly 900,000 Jews from all over Poland and Europe were murdered in Treblinka's gas chamber.

you didn't see anybody following you. I don't think it sank in until very much later, after we tried to lead a little more normal life and really talk to people from other camps—because there were just about 40 of us that got to Sweden that had been together in Riga. There are more now in this country but there were just 40 of us out of thousands.

Mark: That were actually liberated or . . . ?

Sophie: I don't know, because as the Russians came closer, from Riga we went to Libau and stayed there until February of 1945. Then they transported us by boat—in the hull of the boat—to Hamburg [Germany].⁶² There, we stayed in a prison⁶³ . . . under heavy air attack, but we would never get out of this particular room. We were under . . . they had locked the doors. We were just in this one particular room. We didn't even have room to sleep. We had wooden chairs that we would gather at night to sleep on. Now they did feed us but that was only minimal. We stayed in this prison until the middle of April. Then they made us march—I guess it is about 100 kilometers (around 60 miles)—from Hamburg to Kiel [Germany].⁶⁴ Hamburg is on the North Sea. Kiel was on the Baltic Sea. That's where you could really see that the older women—we were mostly women—that they had a lot more will to live. We were ready to give up. We just couldn't see any reason for going on. Then we got into about the worst camp there was: in Kiel.⁶⁵ That's where we couldn't keep clean anymore. That's where we didn't have anything to eat, but water soup. That's where we were liberated.

Mark: What was the name of that camp?

⁶² Hamburg is located in northern Germany on the Elbe River. It is the second-largest city in Germany and the second-largest port in Europe. During World War II, the city was the target of numerous Allied bombing missions between 1939 and 1945, which nearly decimated the city and killed at least 42,000 civilians.

⁶³ Sophie was probably kept in Fuhlsbüttel Prison [German: Fühlsbützel]. Fuhlsbüttel Prison (also known as “Kola Fu” or “Santa Fu”) has been in operation in Hamburg, Germany since the late nineteenth century. When the Nazi party came to power, the SS and then Gestapo used the prison to house political prisoners, criminals, Communists, and other “asocials.” The prison was also used to house transports of prisoners being sent to other camps and, in the winter of 1944-1945, a satellite camp of Neuengamme concentration camp was established in one of the prison's buildings. Sigi Ziering recalls being imprisoned in Fuhlsbüttel Prison with other Riga survivors from late February until mid-April 1945.

⁶⁴ Kiel is a city in north Germany on the Baltic Sea, located approximately 90 kilometers (56 miles) north of Hamburg. According to Sigi Ziering, they left Kiel on April 11, 1945. It took 4 days to get to Kiel. Along the way, they encountered heavy bombing.

⁶⁵ During the war, the city of Kiel was a major naval base and shipbuilding center, which used slave labor from the Kiel-Hassee camp that was established there in the summer of 1944. Little is known about the camp, except that it was a satellite camp of Neuengamme concentration camp. According to Sigi Ziering, it was a brutal labor camp, where the death rate soared as prisoners were forced to carry heavy parts through a swamp to the train station, while maintaining a very fast pace.

Sophie: I have no idea.⁶⁶ I have never been able to find out. All we knew was that the city was Kiel, which was a fairly large city.

Mark: In Germany?

Sophie: Yes, I don't even know if the camp had a name.

Mark: How long did you spend in there?

Sophie: Two weeks.

Mark: That was the last two weeks?

Sophie: Yes.

Mark: What can you tell us about the conditions in that camp?

Sophie: It was the worst that we had ever experienced. There was no way of keeping clean. We were made to work on blankets that were full of lice, so we had lice. There was nothing to eat—like a water soup and a piece of bread. There was no way of getting anything, too. That's where a lot of people died. That's where my mother almost . . . if it had been another week, my mother would have never made it.

Mark: Did they die from lack of nutrition?

Sophie: Yes, and from getting sick. There was no medication. There was nothing because this was towards the end of the war.

Mark: When people in this camp and in the ghetto got sick . . . were they allowed to die of the illness? Or, in some cases were they just killed?

Sophie: I know my father was allowed to die. I really don't know about anybody else. The only thing I can tell you: my father died on a Sunday morning. My mother had a cousin in the ghetto who was very religious. We were trying to bury him. By the time we could get anything together, he was gone. There was the cemetery in the ghetto and that's supposedly where they were buried, but we had no idea.

Mark: Did you suffer a permanent medical problem as a result of your experiences during the war?

Sophie: No.

Mark: Did either your mother or your sister?

⁶⁶ The name of the camp is "Arbeitserziehungslager Nordmark" which translates as "Labor Education Camp Nordmark."

Sophie: My mother did because she had a big scar on her leg where she got under a wheel of a cart. She has trouble with her hand, which was . . . I really don't remember anymore how it happened. I just know [that] in Sweden she was under a doctor's care for months, and months, and months. She can use her hand—which is the only thing that is important—but she has a big scar on this finger <points to a finger, which is not in view of camera> on her right hand.

Mark: Were the people that were the policemen, or the people that lived with the SS, were any of these people considered traitors?

Sophie: We knew somebody had to do it but, sure, they were resented. Yes, because they lived better. They were able to save their children. Even so, later on, when all the children were taken, their children were taken also. I guess they had a bit more push and pull to get a decent workplace or things like that.

Mark: Were they ever returned to the ghetto? In other words, had their usefulness at some point then . . . they had been used as much as they could be and they were returned to the ghetto in some instances?

Sophie: No, not that I know of.

Mark: In the ghetto that you were in, were there any type of medical experiments, anything . . . ?

Sophie: No, not that I know of. I think I would have known about that.

Mark: What was your worst experience during the war? Is there anything that particularly stands out in your mind as the worst experience that you could . . . ?

Sophie: One of the worst, yes. This was in Libau. There were an awful lot of air attacks and we were put . . . they made us go into the bunker. At the entrance of the bunkers, there were seats where the older people should sit or those that were not that well or just . . . at one time they asked my mother to sit there. She said, "No, I'm going with my girls." As it happened, a bomb fell on the first part of the bunker, so had she sat there she would be gone. You know how they say '*besbert*' [Yiddish: destiny]? That was, I think, one of the worst experiences. One time they caught a friend and myself. We were working for the army at the harbor in Riga and we had been able to get some eggs. We had to go by boat back to the barracks. We had been able to get some eggs and to get some bread. All of a sudden, somebody warned us there was going to be a search, so we hid the eggs and the bread under a stone or whatever it was. That was the scariest thing.

Even so, I was a young woman. I didn't have any children, but when they took the children away . . .

Mark: You said there was very little resistance in Riga. Was there resistance initially or did it continue throughout your stay in Riga?

Sophie: There was really . . . not that I know of. I think you are trying to refer to the Warsaw ghetto⁶⁷ or something like that. We didn't know about it. Maybe the Jews in the Latvian ghetto knew about it but we did not know about it. There really was no resistance but trying to escape. Certain people tried to escape, but I don't think anybody ever made it.

Mark: You had said that you smuggled or sometimes were given food and so forth. Do you recall any escape attempts at all from the ghetto?

Sophie: I recall one because this particular girl was engaged to one of the Latvian policemen . . . I mean Jewish Latvian policemen. The day before they shot the . . . before the uprising on the Latvian side, they tried to escape. There, I know she never made it. Then her [boy]friend was killed. He was shot. He was one of the policemen that was shot.

Mark: In Riga, I know we discussed before that . . . Eduard Roschmann.⁶⁸ You knew of him. Can you describe what his position was in the camp, how long he was there . . . ?

Sophie: I don't know exactly anymore how long he was *Kommandant*.⁶⁹ He gave all the orders. I don't know what else to tell.

Mark: Did you used to see him in the . . . ?

⁶⁷ After they occupied Warsaw, Poland, the Germans shoved an estimated 400,000 Jews into a small, walled off ghetto in October 1940. The conditions in the ghetto were harsh and nearly 100,000 Jews died of starvation and disease between 1940 and mid-1942. Mass deportations began in the summer of 1942 and again in January 1943. By then, most of the Jews knew what had happened to those deported before them and the Warsaw ghetto uprising began. Resistance held out until April of 1943, when the final liquidation of the ghetto began. By May, the ghetto was in ruins. Approximately 42,000 Warsaw ghetto survivors were sent to labor or concentration camps. At least 7,000 died fighting or in hiding in the ghetto, while another 7,000 were sent to the Treblinka killing center. Perhaps as many as 20,000 Jews escaped from the ghetto, while a handful actually survived in the rubble of the destroyed ghetto until the end of the war.

⁶⁸ Eduard Roschmann, an SS officer, became *Kommandant* of the Riga ghetto in January 1943. Frederick Forsyth portrayed Roschmann as the "Butcher of Riga" in his 1972 novel, *The Odessa File*. Although survivors vary in their accounts of his behavior, many prisoners were tortured and murdered under his command. In 1945, he was arrested by the Allies but disguised himself as a regular prisoner of war and was released. The British later identified and arrested him, but Roschmann escaped and fled to Italy and then South America. While living in Argentina in 1976, the West German government charged him with murder and severe violations of human rights in connection with the killing of at least 3,000 Jews between 1938 and 1945. Roschmann fled to Paraguay to avoid extradition and died there in 1977.

⁶⁹ The *Kommandant* [German: commander] was the highest commanding position within the SS service of a concentration camp.

Sophie: Yes, I used to see him strut through the ghetto. Everybody was scared. Everybody disappeared, because you never knew: was he going to pick you or just send you off? There was another commandant. His name was Krause.⁷⁰ Roschmann didn't stay all that long. Krause was there until the end of the ghetto.

Mark: For you, when were the first signs . . . can you tell me when you were first aware that the war was coming to an end and describe that period of time?

Sophie: We were not aware of the war coming to an end. The only thing we could . . . we didn't . . . we knew the Russians were coming closer and that's why they kept us sending back into Germany. We did not know anything about the war, nothing whatsoever. We had no contact with the outside world—nothing—and those we had contact with wouldn't talk.

Mark: When you say you 'had contact with' . . . who were those people who wouldn't talk?

Sophie: They were Germans. There was the prison guard that would open the door when they would bring us something to eat or when they made us go downstairs to work. But they would not say anything. We heard the bombings. We saw the bombs drop. I think I told you before: we didn't know how come they never hit the prison, but we found out later on that, in Germany, the prisons were built in a seven-star and the Allies knew about it.⁷¹ They also knew that either Jews were kept in prisons or political prisoners, not actual criminals. That's why they never bombed our prison. But at the time, we did not know.

Mark: Can you actually describe the time of liberation, the day that the war was over? If you could, tell us about that.

Sophie: The war wasn't over yet. We were liberated before the war [ended].⁷² The night before liberation . . . we got out of Germany on the first of May. The night before, we were told to take off our prison clothes and we were given other clothes. All we could think of was that this was the end.

Mark: This is in Kiel?

⁷⁰ Kurt Krause, an SS officer and former policeman from Berlin, assumed command of the Riga ghetto in December 1941. Survivors describe him as being particularly sadistic and thousands were murdered under his command. After leaving his post as *Kommandant* of the Riga ghetto in January 1943, he assumed a post at the nearby Salaspils concentration camp. As the war came to an end, Soviet partisans are said to have captured and murdered Krause.

⁷¹ From the air, one of the buildings of Fuhlsbüttel Prison (see footnote 62 above) is in the shape of a cross. Next to that building, five other buildings converge on a central courtyard, distinctly appearing like a star from the air.

⁷² American and British forces occupied the city of Kiel on May 5, 1945—just 3 days after Sophie had been evacuated. The war in Europe officially ended on May 7, 1945 when German General Alfred Jodl signed an unconditional surrender to the Allies in Reims, France. The following day, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel officially surrendered to Soviet forces in Berlin.

Sophie: This is in Kiel, yes. The next morning, we were told to stand in formation or whatever. I don't know what else to say. All of a sudden we see big trucks painted white with a red cross on.⁷³ All we could think was, "Is this going to be it?" because we had . . . while we were working for the army, we emptied railroad cars that had big red cross. They were supposed to be for the wounded soldiers, but there was nothing but ammunition or army clothing in there, anything. We had heard about buses being gassed. That was it. That was all we could think of. [Then] they came into this camp. They were Danish Red Cross people that spoke German. We didn't want to get into the buses. They told us, "You are going to be liberated." We didn't have a choice. They took us in these buses across the Danish border. I don't know whether it sank in then. I really don't know. They took our clothing away. They made us take showers so we would be clean. Then we were put on a train to go to Copenhagen [Denmark].⁷⁴ On the train, we were told . . . not to say that we were originally Jews out of Germany. We were not supposed to open our mouths. We found out later on that Count [Folke] Bernadotte⁷⁵ had given [Heinrich] Himmler⁷⁶ . . . I don't know what amount of money. He was supposed to save Polish-Jewish people. As it happened, we were counted amongst them and that's how we were saved.⁷⁷ Then

⁷³ After a series of negotiations with Heinrich Himmler, the Swedish Red Cross received permission to transport prisoners from concentration camps that had not yet been liberated by the advancing Allies. Originally, the Swedish Red Cross was only able to secure the release of Scandinavian prisoners in concentration camps. However, as the Allies continued to push into Germany in April 1945, Himmler became increasingly desperate. Hoping to negotiate his own surrender in the most favorable terms possible, he eventually allowed citizens of other countries to be evacuated and even agreed to include Jewish prisoners. Between mid-March and the beginning of May 1945, 15,345 prisoners were collected on buses painted white with red crosses and transported to Sweden. Many of the evacuees were brought to a holding center at the Neuengamme concentration camp before they were transferred across the German border to Padborg, Denmark and on to neutral Sweden—most via bus or train and then ferry, but some by boat.

⁷⁴ Copenhagen [Danish: København] is the capital and most populated city in Denmark. It is situated on the eastern coast of Zealand, an island in the North Sea, just 28 kilometers (17 miles) northwest of Malmö, Sweden.

⁷⁵ Count Folke Bernadotte (1895-1948) was a Swedish diplomat and nobleman, who served as vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross during World War II. During the final months of the war, he supervised an operation to rescue concentration camp inmates in areas under Nazi control. Bernadotte was killed in Jerusalem in 1948, while serving the United Nations as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

⁷⁶ Heinrich Himmler was the Reich Leader (*Reichsführer*) of the dreaded SS of the Nazi party from 1929 until 1945. Himmler presided over a vast ideological and bureaucratic empire that defined him for many, both inside and outside the Third Reich, as the second most powerful man in Germany during World War II. Himmler was the key and senior Nazi official responsible for conceiving, and overseeing implementation of the so-called "Final Solution," the Nazi plan to murder the Jews of Europe.

⁷⁷ If Sophie left Germany on May 1, 1945, she was part of the very last transport to make it to Sweden. According to an official report published by the Swedish Red Cross in 2000, the last transport evacuated on the "White Buses" left from Ravensbrück concentration camp on April 25, 1945. The Swedish Red Cross has no record of a transport from Kiel. Nonetheless, a train arrived at the Padborg station on the Danish border on May 2, 1945 carrying 2,800 mostly Polish women. The Swedish Red Cross had not negotiated the release of these prisoners and did not expect the transport. Therefore, these prisoners are not included in the official count of 15,345 prisoners rescued by the Swedish Red Cross. Their report suggests the prisoners were from work camps around Hamburg and had probably

on the train, we were given care packages. We were told to be very, very careful in eating.⁷⁸ We weren't used to it. Some of us were careful and others weren't. Some people died before we even got to Sweden. Then, once we got to Copenhagen, we were put on a boat. There, we were served coffee. I keep coming back to food. That was important to us. We landed in Malmo [Sweden: Malmö]⁷⁹ on a Friday evening. It was like *Purim*.⁸⁰ We find out later, it was like *Purim*.⁸¹ There was a tent put up. There were Swedish-Jewish people and they had set up tables and chairs. That's the first hot chocolate any of us had ever had for a long, long time. Then the Swedes—I don't know if it was the German-Jewish community or the Swedish Jewish community—they had gotten this school and put up beds in this school. We didn't know at the time where my mother was because she had been . . . they had sent her to a hospital in Malmo. We found out a couple of days later only because we kept searching for her. My sister and I were together.

Mark: She had made the trip to Sweden with you?

Sophie: Yes, she did. When we got to this school, there were the white beds. We stayed in there under doctor's care for about ten days. We were told . . . there was a big schoolyard and Swedish people came around and . . . they used to throw chocolate to us. They used to send . . . whatever they could throw over the fence. We were told not to eat it, because they tried to keep us strictly on rations to try to get us back to eating normally, trying to lead a normal life again. I think I told you before: we were very fortunate. We had family in Sweden. We were in Malmo. This is one thing might not be a very nice thing to say, but I feel very strongly about it: there

been sent on the orders of the *Kommandant*. It is not clear why the prisoners were sent or whom the buses that carried the prisoners to the Danish border belonged. Sigi Ziering, another Riga survivor who had also been sent to Libau, Hamburg, and Kiel, recounts a similar story as Sophie. He recalls the guards and *Kommandant* shepherding the prisoners from Kiel into buses with red crosses, which drove to the Danish border on May 1. He recalls arriving in Copenhagen on May 2 and then being sent by ferry to Sweden, where they were warmly welcomed. According to Sophie's recollection, they arrived in Malmo, Sweden on a Friday, which would have been May 4, 1945.

⁷⁸ After liberation, camp survivors faced a long and difficult road to recovery. Eating foods that were too rich or complex for survivors' bodies to handle could exasperate years of malnutrition and starvation, resulting in sickness or death.

⁷⁹ Malmo [Swedish: Malmö] is a city in southern Sweden [on the North Sea]. It is the third largest city in Sweden and, together with Copenhagen, the most densely populated area in Scandinavia.

⁸⁰ Purim is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire from destruction in the wake of a plot by Haman. According to the Biblical *Book of Esther*, Haman planned to kill all the Jews, but his plans were foiled. The day of deliverance became a day of feasting and rejoicing.

⁸¹ The actual holiday was Lag B'Omer, which is a minor holiday that occurs on the 33rd day of the Omer, the 49-day period between Passover and Shavuot. A break from the semi-mourning of the Omer, key aspects of Lag B'Omer include holding Jewish weddings (it's the one day during the Omer when Jewish law permits them), lighting bonfires and getting haircuts.

were people from the [American Jewish] Joint Distribution Committee.⁸² We had guarded our addresses from relatives . . . with our life. We used to wear them inside because we were supposed to throw everything overboard. We were not allowed to have anything. How we ever kept them I don't know anymore, but my mother had a brother and sister in this country [United States]. We had their addresses. These people from the Joint Distribution Committee came to us. They told us, "Give us the addresses. We will send telegrams to tell your relatives you are alive." Can you imagine waiting for days, and days, and days and you can't understand that your relatives don't care that you are even alive? We found out later those telegrams were never sent. There were young people that were of *Hachshara* in Sweden that had not been able to get on to Israel from Germany. They came later on and they told us. Through these young people . . . you have heard the name of [Fritz] Warburg,⁸³ the German-Jewish philanthropist that was in Sweden? He came originally from Hamburg . . . it was a banking house. His daughter was working as a volunteer amongst the . . . survivors. All you could ever do is [ask], "Do you know this one? Do you know that one?" We asked her. We knew this uncle—it was my mother's sister and her husband—that were on their way from Germany to Israel because their daughters were in Israel. When the war broke out, they got stuck in Sweden. My mother sent a card when we had to leave Germany to Sweden. Of course, we didn't know did it ever reached Sweden, but apparently it did. We asked this Eva Warburg⁸⁴ "Do you happen to know, isn't this family in Stockholm?" As it happened, she knew my uncle. She got in touch with him. He didn't say anything to my aunt until he got in touch with us personally. I guess nobody could believe that we got out. Then he got in touch with us. We stayed in Malmo for about ten days. Then they

⁸² The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC or "Joint") is a worldwide Jewish relief organization. It was established in 1914 to help support the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe and the near east during World War I. Prior to World War II, the JDC provided emergency aid for stranded refugees and worked to secure travel documents for those able to emigrate the rising tide of antisemitism in Germany. Once the United States entered the war, the JDC continued to channel aid to Jews living in desperate conditions under the shroud of Nazism. After the war, the JDC—working together with the Jewish Agency for Palestine, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and other organizations—became the central Jewish agency providing support and financial assistance to Jewish survivors.

⁸³ Fritz Moritz Warburg (1879–1962) was the youngest son of a prominent, philanthropic banking family in Germany and later in the United States. He married his distant cousin from Sweden, Anna Beata Warburg, in 1908 and had three daughters. During World War I, he served in Stockholm, Sweden as a commercial attaché of the German government. He returned to Hamburg after the war and became a partner in the family firm. In 1938, the Nazi party arrested him. Upon his release, he immigrated to Stockholm and became a Swedish citizen.

⁸⁴ Eva A. Warburg was the middle daughter of Fritz and Anna Beata Warburg. She was born in 1912 in Hamburg, Germany. She probably moved to Sweden when her parents immigrated there in 1938. In 1946, she married Naftali Unger.

send us to another city in Sweden where . . . the Swedish people were unbelievable to us. They tried every which way. They sent us to a little spa where . . . we were always under doctor's care just to see that we would eat the right food and we would get our strength back and everything. That's when my uncle and aunt came to visit us. My uncle was working at the time for a Jewish concern in Stockholm. He found jobs for my sister and myself. My mother went with him to Stockholm. He found jobs for us in Stockholm. My sister . . . we both worked for a Jewish family as a maid. That didn't matter, as long as we could at least earn something and get out of the camp situation. My mother had cousins in this country [United States]—a brother and sister—but they were not able to help us financially to get the affidavits, which you needed to get to come to this country.⁸⁵ We didn't have anything. What we earned . . . I can just give you a comparison . . . what we earned in a month as a maid might buy a dress. It was nothing—nothing that you could say . . . eventually we would pay for our own fare. That just wasn't possible because we were working illegally. We didn't have a work permit. We were just glad . . . whatever we made, we made. This sister of my mother's got in touch with cousins in this country, which were very well off. We had cousins on my father's side that were here. They were able to get an affidavit for the three of us. Then the cousins of my mother sent us the fare to come over. We came to this country in April of 1946.⁸⁶

Mark: How did the war . . . looking back at it, what impact did it have on your life? How did it influence the way you live today or did it have an influence?

Sophie: To this day, I can't watch the fireworks. On the Fourth of July, my husband used to take the boys because I couldn't watch it. At first the airplane . . . because all you knew were the bombs . . . the fireworks has to do with the . . . we used to call them 'Christmas trees'—the flares that they would send so they could see where they were bombing.⁸⁷ That still brings that memory back.

⁸⁵ An "Affidavit of Support and Sponsorship" was among the criteria applicants seeking an entry visa into the United States during the 1930's and 1940's must meet. This required two sponsors, who were US citizens or had permanent resident status. Sponsors had to provide proof of their financial status (Federal tax returns and an affidavit from their bank and employer) to ensure that the immigrants would not become dependent upon social welfare programs.

⁸⁶ Sophie, Emmi, and Thea Nathan are listed on the passenger manifest of the *SS Drottningholm*, which set sail from Gothenburg, Sweden on March 26, 1946. The family arrived in New York City, New York on April 8, 1946.

⁸⁷ During bombing raids, the Allies would first identify the target area for the bombers by dropping magnesium flares, called target indicators. Target indicators were available in various colors—including red, yellow, and green—and could be fused for both air and ground burst. They were attached to parachutes and fell slowly,

Mark: You had referred to the fact early on in the interview that your father felt very strongly that Emmerich was the city in which he had grown up in, that he was a German, and this was where he was going to stay. What is your feeling today toward Germany today and toward German people?

Sophie: I don't want anything to do with . . . I work with some of them and I am friendly with them. I went back to Germany and that was . . . a very big mistake. I would never do it again. There is just a certain feeling about . . . Germany. I just don't want to have any contact with them anymore. I work with German women but they don't mean anything to me. The only thing I can say as far as my father is concerned, he was not the exception to the rule because Germans are very nationalistic whether they were Jewish or not. Give you an example: my father he was in the First World War. He had the Iron Cross.⁸⁸ He took it with him. Of course, he didn't keep it. They took it away from him at the gathering place but maybe that tells you something.

Mark: Do you ever talk about your experiences during the war?

Sophie: No. That is why I did this.

Mark: Is there any reason that you haven't talked about it?

Sophie: I feel very strongly that unless you have really lived through it, it's very hard for the next one to understand. That's why there is a very strong bond between those of us that have gone through it, and were liberated together, and kept in touch. You don't have to see each other but you will call each other—as long as you were in this country [United States]. You will hear about the others because somebody will always write. You keep in touch with those that are in Australia. A friend of mine just went to Australia a couple of years ago. You feel very strongly. You want to hear all about what they are doing and how they are living. You want to see pictures. There is a group of survivors of Riga in New York.⁸⁹ We have gotten together and people have come from other countries. I hope to go in October. There is another gathering. There was a big gathering and we called it '30 years of liberation.' At that time, my husband was still alive and we went. Thirty-five years of liberation I didn't go, but, G-d willing, there's 40 years—in just another couple of years.

illuminating everything below. When detonated in the air, the green glow they often emanated resembled upside down fir trees. The German population thus referred to target indicators as "Christmas trees."

⁸⁸ The Prussian *Eiserne Kreuz* [German: Iron Cross] was first awarded during the Napoleonic Wars in 1813. It was a standard medal awarded in various classes to soldiers during World War I. Wearing the Iron Cross represented service and valor.

⁸⁹ The Society of Survivors of the Riga Ghetto, Inc. was established in 1971 in New York City, New York.

Mark: Do you feel another Holocaust is possible?

Sophie: I hope not. I would not live through another one. That much I know. I would never and I think . . . I really don't know if that would ever be possible.

Mark: Did you receive any reparations from the German government?⁹⁰

Sophie: Yes, because . . . my parents left their home and whatever they had—land and everything. Yes, we did. My mother still gets a widows pension and reparations for health . . . I don't know what to name it . . .

Mark: Disability?

Sophie: Disability. That's right . . . but neither my sister nor I. It is very much my fault because I don't want anything from the German . . . that's the way I felt. Now I am sorry I don't. We did . . . my mother did get . . . and according to German law everything goes in equal parts to survivors . . . not that my mother would have given it to us anyhow.

Mark: Is there anything that we haven't discussed so far, that you would like to talk about?

Sophie: I don't know.

Mark: What are your feelings about Israel? I know you said before the war you worked in the school, where were people preparing to go to Israel. Some of your relatives tried to . . .

Sophie: I feel a very strong bond. I would not want to go live in Israel, but I try to do whatever I can. This group in Riga we are trying to support a . . . trying to help a [unintelligible, 1:30:34 sounds like "team"] support a home for retarded children in Israel. I feel very strongly about it and that is one of my priorities. Just as the Holocaust museums are. I try to do as much as I can for Israel, always have. So did my husband. I have very strong feelings for Israel. I went to Israel. I would love to go back . . . I think that's one of the highlights of my life . . .

Mark: Do you still think about your experiences in the ghetto?

Sophie: Sometimes, certain days. You can't help but [think about it] and when you are together with other people you will, without really realizing, you will say, "Do you remember?" There are just certain days that bring it back.

⁹⁰ In 1952, the government of West Germany reached an agreement with the state of Israel and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany to pay reparations for material losses and injuries incurred during the Holocaust. Three separate German laws, known as the West German Federal Indemnification Laws, were adopted in 1953, 1956, and 1965. They further provided for compensation in the form of one-time payments and monthly pensions to Holocaust survivors. In the years since, other agreements for reparations have also been reached.

Mark: How have you felt about answering these questions and talking about it? How have you felt about this interview in general?

Sophie: I think it was good for me to talk about it. I wanted my children to know. I never talked about it. I remember both of them calling me when the *Holocaust*⁹¹ was on television. I don't know whether it was George or whether it was Mark. When Babi Yar⁹²—the section about Babi Yar—either one of them asked me, “How come, Mom? Why wouldn't they run? Why wouldn't they do this . . . ?” There was no way to run. Where would you run? There was no way out of the ghetto. At least, we felt there was no way out.

Mark: Sophie . . . I would like to thank you very much. I'm glad that you granted us this opportunity to have an interview with you. I can only speak for myself, but what you have done is a real *mitzvah* [Hebrew: good deed]. I just feel that it is very important for people such as yourself to document their experiences during the war so we—the children, as well as future generations—will know what you went through and will gain strength from your will to survive. Again, I thank you very much for myself, and for our generation, and future generations.

Sophie: You are welcome, because I feel, too, the next generation should know, so maybe it will never happen again, maybe there is a way of preventing it.

Mark: Thank you.

Sophie: You're welcome.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

⁹¹ *Holocaust* is an American television miniseries broadcast in four parts in April 1978 on the NBC television network. The miniseries followed a fictional German Jewish family's experiences during the Holocaust.

⁹² Kiev was the capital of Ukraine when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. Over 160,000, or 20 percent, of the city's population was Jewish. Nearly 100,000 Jews had fled Kiev by the time German forces entered the city on September 19, 1941. The 60,000 who remained were killed in a series of massacres carried out by the Germans and their auxiliaries over the next few months. The most notorious massacre began on September 29, 1941. Over the course of two days, 33,771 Jews were killed in a ravine near Kiev called “Babi Yar”, in what was one of the largest mass murders at an individual location during World War II.