

**THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM
ESTHER AND HERBERT TAYLOR
JEWISH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF ATLANTA
CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS PROJECT**

MEMOIRIST: IRENE BASES
INTERVIEWER: ERNA DZIEWINSKI MARTINO
DATE: APRIL 24, 1993
LOCATION: ATLANTA, GEORGIA

INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Disk 1>

Erna: This is Erna Dziejewski Martino. We are at the home of Mrs. Irene Bases on April 24, 1993. We are going to do a videotape of her testimony. What is your name and where do you live?

Irene: Irene Bases. I live in Atlanta [Georgia at] 1050 Riverside Drive.

Erna: When were you born?

Irene: October 28, 1919.

Erna: Tell me a little bit about the pre-war conditions where you born . . . what city, what state, what country, and tell us something about your country . . .

Irene: I was born in Krakow, Poland.¹ I went to school there, finished high school, went to France for my studies. It was interrupted by the war.

Erna: Tell me a little bit about your family—your parents, your siblings—and how you lived.

Irene: We had a very comfortable life. In comparison with American way of life, I think we were better off, really. I skied. I played tennis. I went skating. We went to camp in summer. It was a very, very nice life before the war. Eventually, I saw the situation in Poland and what was happening. I wanted to leave Poland, so I went to France.

Erna: How old were you at that time?

Irene: Seventeen. It was only for studying, because I was coming home for the Passover.² I was coming home for the summer holidays. I was only there two years. In July 1939, I knew the

¹ Krakow, Poland [Polish: Kraków, sometimes also 'Cracow'] is the second largest city in Poland, situated on the Vistula River. The city is one of the oldest in Poland and dates back to the seventh century.

² Passover [Hebrew: *Pesach*] is an eight-day holiday that celebrates the anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. Unleavened bread, *matzot*, is eaten in memory of the unleavened bread prepared by the Israelite during their hasty flight from Egypt, when they had not time to wait for the dough to rise. Jews are prohibited from

war was coming. The French papers were full of the news. I decided I wanted to be with my father. I came back to Poland. I must tell you one thing: I was in Vienna [Austria] when the Germans came to the city because I had an aunt who lived there.³ I will not go into details, but I went there and I saw what they [Germans] are able to do in the first day they came to Vienna. When I came to Krakow and I was telling them what I saw in Vienna, everybody was saying, “Impossible. This is propaganda. Absolutely impossible.” I saw the Jews cleaning the street with toothbrushes.⁴ People like my aunt . . . a day after they came, she wasn’t in her home already.

Erna: They took them out of their homes?

Irene: Yes. When I was telling what happened . . . and my aunt was terrified when she saw me. She said, “You go right back to Krakow, because I am afraid for you to be here.” I was there for two days. I went back to Poland, but nobody wanted to believe me. My brother and me were telling my father to run away, that things would be very, very bad. He [my father] didn’t want to listen—absolutely not. We didn’t want to leave him, so we stayed with him.

Erna: At this time how old were you and your brother?

Irene: I was 19, almost 20 probably. My brother was two years younger. When the war broke out, I had my passport.⁵ It was valid. My father insisted I should leave Poland and go back to France. I went to the railroad station. There were thousands of people.⁶ The trains were not going. I said to myself, “You are crazy. What? You are saving yourself and you are leaving your family behind.” I went home. I came home at four o’clock in the morning. I said, “Here I am

eating leavened bread during the entire week of Passover. In addition, Jews are supposed to avoid foods made with wheat, barley, rye, spelt or oats unless those foods are labeled ‘*kosher* for Passover.’

³ Vienna is the capital and largest city of Austria. Austria was forcibly annexed into the German Third Reich on March 12, 1938 after a succession of threats and the pressure from military feints in what is known as the Anschluss [German: annexation]. German troops marched into Austria, Hitler did a triumphant entry parade into Vienna and, until the end of World War II, Austria ceased to be its own country.

⁴ Once the Nazi party was in power, anti-Jewish policies were quickly applied to Vienna and Austria. In the days immediately following the Anschluss, the Jews of Vienna were subjected to a variety of humiliating and violent persecutions. They were driven through the streets while their homes and shops were plundered and both Jewish men and women were forced to scrub away pro-independence slogans that had been painted on the streets prior to the Anschluss.

⁵ On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. German forces entered Krakow on September 6, 1939. In October, the majority of German-occupied Poland was placed under civilian rule and became known as the Generalgouvernement [German: General Government]. Krakow became both the administrative capital of the Generalgouvernement and of District Krakow within the Generalgouvernement.

⁶ Hundreds of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees fled to get away from the German army as it advanced, hoping that the Polish army would halt the German advance. Many of the refugees traveled on foot or by any available transport—cars, bicycles, carts, or trucks—clogging roads and packing trains. The German army advanced so quickly through Poland, many of the refugees were unable to keep ahead of them. As the Germans advanced from the west and the Russians invaded from the east, many refugees soon returned home.

staying.” I am not sorry to this day that I did it. When the Germans came into Krakow, we were right away wearing the *Magen David* [Hebrew: Star of David].⁷

Erna: The yellow star?

Irene: The yellow star. My grandmother, who was still alive at that time, she couldn’t understand. [She said,] “What is this? You are dressed well and all of a sudden you have a *schmattas* [Yiddish: a rag, or an old, ragged garment] over your arm.” We had to find excuses to tell her, because we didn’t want to tell her the truth. Anyhow, she passed away during the time we were in Krakow. Then they [the Germans] started to talk about forming the ghetto.⁸ I didn’t want to go to the ghetto. We went to the provinces. We left almost everything behind, but we took essentials. We took some paintings, some silver, things like that with us. Life in the provinces wasn’t too bad. You didn’t have your comfortable apartments. We rented [from] some Poles. It wasn’t too bad. I was doing everything myself—cooking, scrubbing floors, everything—but this wasn’t the worst.

One day, a young engineer from a factory in Wolbrom [Poland]—it was a rubber factory—came to our house and told us that something unusual happened.⁹ They were ordering a meal for 70 people, which was unusual for a small town. He said to us, “It looks to me the *Gestapo* is coming.¹⁰ There will be . . . *Abschiebung* [German: deportation] . . . They select people . . . He was willing to take me into hiding but not the whole family. He couldn’t do it. We were talking about it. He said, “Take one kilogram of sugar and go into the woods.” We did. It was my father, his sister, her husband, my little cousin, my brother . . . We went into the woods. It was a terrible night.¹¹ You heard shooting all night long. When you are in a situation like that,

⁷ The German occupation authorities enforced anti-Jewish policies almost immediately. One such policy that went into effect on December 1, 1939 was that all Jews over the age of 12 were required to identify themselves by means of a blue Star of David on a white armband to be worn on the outer clothing on the right arm.

⁸ In March 1941, the establishment of a Jewish residential district, or ghetto, in the poor Krakow suburb of Podgorze was announced. The ghetto was to house those Jews who had managed to obtain permits indicating that they were economically necessary. Thousands fled the city to avoid enclosure in the ghetto.

⁹ Wolbrom is a town in southern Poland about 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Krakow. In 1931, the Jewish population of Wolbrom totaled about 5,300. The town was occupied by the German army on September 5, 1939 and incorporated into the area known as the *Generalgouvernement*. In mid-1940, the Germans began to move Jewish refugees—including some 3,000 Jews from Krakow—into Wolbrom. By 1942, the Jewish population of Wolbrom had swelled to approximately 9,300 people. In April 1942, all Jews in Wolbrom were ordered to move into a fenced-off ghetto quarter.

¹⁰ *Gestapo* is an abbreviation of *Geheime Staatspolizei* [German], which means “Secret State Police.” With virtually unlimited powers, it was highly feared. The *Gestapo* acted to oppress and persecute Jews and other opponents of the Nazis. The *Gestapo* ruthlessly rounded up Jews throughout Europe for deportation to extermination camps.

¹¹ On Friday, September 4, 1942, the *Judenrat* in Wolbrom was notified that everyone was required to report to the market square the next morning. Some committed suicide and some, like Irene’s family, hid. On Saturday,

you don't realize what is happening. Somehow it's all foggy for you. We heard the shooting all night long.

It [the weather] was not bad. It was September [1942]. We went into the woods and all of a sudden it started to rain, very heavy. It was quite impossible to stay like that. There was a peasant who was coming through the woods who took us to his house without his wife's knowledge. The wife didn't know. The son didn't know. He kept us for a week. I don't know his name. I could never repay him what he did. Eventually, you know how peasants are . . . I knew he would not go to anybody, because he would be afraid. I said, "Will you take a letter to a doctor?" The peasant, [hears the word] "doctor" [and] they are very impressed. He took the letter to a friend of mine. My friend told me it's completely *Judenrein* [German: free of Jews] after the whole thing, what they did.

Erna: This was the little town?

Irene: It wasn't such a little town. There were 70,000 Jews . . . maybe I am mistaken, maybe 17,000 Jews in this town.

Erna: They have taken them all away or they killed them all already?

Irene: I don't think . . . killed only those who wanted to hide in the woods and so on. They were killed. They took them by train to Treblinka.¹² We didn't know at the time it was Treblinka. We didn't know Belzec.¹³ We didn't know anything. We came back into this town. It was like a

September 5, the SS, assisted by Ukrainian auxiliaries, the German Gendarmerie, and units of the Polish Police, surrounded the ghetto. At least 1,000 Jews from two neighboring towns were added to the nearly 6,000 people assembled. Three hundred elderly and weak people were taken into the forest, shot, and thrown into open pits. About 2,500 men were kept as forced laborers. The rest were loaded into cattle wagons and sent to the Belzec extermination camp.

¹² Treblinka was established in the Lublin district of Poland as a forced-labor camp for Jews in November 1941. As part of the Operation Reinhard program, killing operations began in July 1942. Treblinka was a pure extermination facility. That is, the Germans intended that any Jews who went into the camp would never come out again. The Germans killed between 870,000 and 925,000 Jews at Treblinka between July 1942 and November 1943, when it was closed. At that point, the bodies in the mass graves were dug up, cremated and reburied. Thereafter it was razed to the ground and a farm was set up on the land. The Russians liberated the area in the summer of 1944 but there was nothing left to find except the disturbed ground over the mass graves. The Jews deported from Wolbrom in September 1942 were taken to Belzec, not Treblinka.

¹³ Belzec [Polish: Bełżec] was established in the Lublin district of Poland in November 1941 and began operations as a killing center in March 1942. Between March and December 1942, the Germans deported approximately 434,500 Jews and an undetermined number of Poles and Roma (Gypsies) to Belzec, where they were killed. At the end of 1942, the Germans forced Jewish prisoners to exhume and cremate the bodies in mass graves. When the job was complete in late spring 1943, those laborers were also killed and the camp was dismantled. The site was then ploughed over, a house was built and trees and crops were planted to disguise the area as a farm. Russian forces overran the region in July 1944.

cholera [epidemic] would come through the city.¹⁴ The doors were closed, the windows were closed . . . nobody. This was . . . Wolbrom was a typical, Jewish little town.

Erna: Outside of Krakow, not far from Krakow?

Irene: It was part of *Bezirk Miechow*.¹⁵ It was the first time in my life I was in a little town where the Jewish population was so big. Anyhow, nobody was there. There was one who was an informant for the *Gestapo*, who was left. The doctor, the pharmacist . . . very few . . . you could count on one hand who was left.¹⁶ The informant for the *Gestapo*—the Jewish guy—you had to give him regularly something so he should keep quiet. We stayed there . . . I don't remember. I do remember: September to November. I lived already in the place where the Jews used to live. You couldn't live outside where the gentiles were living. After two months, my old landlady came running. She said, "You know it looks like today they will take the rest." There were maybe 40 people, whatever [left].

Erna: This was a Polish woman?

Irene: A Polish woman. She said, "I will go at night. I will give the guys at the railroad station some vodka. You will be able to go to Krakow." We went and, unfortunately, not everybody succeeded. My aunt went—not with us, but she went the same night—and she was killed on the way . . . because they caught her. We came to Krakow and we entered the ghetto. The ghetto, when I came into Krakow, was after already two [transports had been sent] to Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹⁷ Two transports went already—one in June and one in October.¹⁸ We

¹⁴ Cholera is an infection in the small intestines caused by bacteria that is transmitted by contaminated drinking water or food. It was once a major scourge and killer as periodic epidemics swept through parts of the world regularly until the nature of its transmission through contaminated water came to be understood and combated with water treatment standards.

¹⁵ *Bezirk Miechow* [German: District Miechow] is a county or district in Poland. Miechow [Polish: Miechów] is the central town in the district, located approximately 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of Krakow and 24 kilometers (15 miles) east of Wolbrom. *Bezirk Miechow* was part of the larger Krakow District [German: Distrikt Krakau, Polish: Dystrykt krakowski], which was one of the administrative units of the Generalgouvernement [German: General Government] during World War II in German-occupied Poland.

¹⁶ During the September 5, 1942 *Aktion* in Wolbrom, between 2,000 and 2,500 men were separated, designated as fit for work, and housed in the community study center. Other Jews who had been in hiding soon joined the group. Over the next few weeks, representatives of German factories collected groups of the survivors for forced labor, with many sent to Plaszow. The last contingent of approximately 150 Jews was put to work burying the dead and sorting the property left behind after the ghetto's liquidation. In early November 1942, they were sent to Belzec. Between mid-September 1942 until Wolbrom was liberated at the end of 1944, nearly 400 Jews who had escaped the September *Aktion* were found in hiding or denounced and shot.

¹⁷ Auschwitz-Birkenau was a network of camps built and operated by Germany just outside the Polish 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

came to a town, the people were shocked—because the children were taken, mothers were taken . . . terrible.

Erna: When are talking about now?

Irene: We are talking about 1942, November.

Erna: So all this time from 1939—from when the war broke out—to 1942 you lived . . .

Irene: I lived in Krakow for a certain time.¹⁹ I would say in 1940 . . . I left from Wolbrom, the little town. Then I lived . . . life wasn't terrible there [in Wolbrom].²⁰ We didn't suffer as Jews. You had to be home at . . . eight o'clock. That is how it was. We played cards. We lived like people. It wasn't so bad. We knew that things were getting worse. Some people already were in different *lagers* [German: camps].

Erna: How did you know this? From what you heard from people?

Irene: Yes, from other people. Then one day a friend of mine came with an SS officer to our house.²¹ He wanted us to come into his *lager* because he was a pharmacist. He went into the *lager* voluntarily.

Erna: Into the camp?

were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

¹⁸ Between June 1 and 8, 1942, around 7,000 Jews were deported from the Krakow ghetto to the Belzec extermination camp. Only those who had stamps on their identity cards that identified them as workers were exempted from the deportation. Those who were unemployed or had white-collar professions and had been denied the stamp were deported. A second major roundup occurred on October 28, 1942. At least 6,000 were deported to the Belzec extermination camp and another 600 were killed on the spot.

¹⁹ After the German occupation of Poland, Irene and her family continued to live in Krakow until they moved to Wolbrom—sometime between the fall of 1940 and March 1941. In November or December 1942, they returned to Krakow and lived in the ghetto until sometime between October 1942 and March 1943, when they were sent to the Plaszow forced labor camp.

²⁰ Irene seems to be referring to conditions in Wolbrom between 1940 and 1942, where initially conditions were not as dire as in other communities. In Wolbrom, a Judenrat was responsible for organizing forced labor, enforcing the 7:00 PM until dawn curfew, and enforcing the order for Jews to wear the *Magen David*. Jews were required to stay in their own dwellings, refrain from travel, shave their beards, and were forbidden to eat certain foods. Money and goods were also confiscated. Many of the refugees that arrived in Wolbrom from Krakow—like Irene and her family—were absorbed into the homes of the local community or put up in communal buildings. Despite the influx of Jews in Wolbrom and the deplorable conditions, a public kitchen was established in October 1940 that fed up to 200 Jews, so no one went hungry. An open ghetto was established in May 1941. Conditions began to worsen in the spring of 1942. Random killings, abuse, and demands for goods increased and the price of food shot up. By April 1942, 4,940 Jews were registered as living in the Wolbrom ghetto, or more than 20 per house. The overcrowding exacerbated the deteriorating situation.

²¹ 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. Under Heinrich Himmler's leadership, it grew into one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the Third Reich. It was responsible for many of the crimes against humanity during World War II.

Irene: He became a very close friend with the SS man. He wanted us to go also so he brought this SS man to our place to talk to us how good it would be. My father was saying, “I never heard of something like going voluntarily. We have time to go when the time comes.” By the way, I wanted to tell you that this SS man killed my friend and his wife after being such a good friend to him. Anyhow, we went into the ghetto.

I must say one thing: the Krakow ghetto was completely different from the Warsaw [Poland] ghetto . . . completely.²² You never saw people lying around dead. If there were hungry people, we would helping them out. There were kitchens with food and soups. It was completely different. You saw people on the streets well dressed—those who remained, because a lot of them they took already.

Erna: How is it that you had access to all these things, because the Warsaw ghetto they just closed off?

Irene: I think very often about it. I came to the conclusion that because Krakow was the main city for the German occupation of Poland²³ and [Hans] Frank²⁴ . . . what he was?

Erna: Commandant?

Irene: Yes, Commandant.

Erna: He was in charge.

²² Poverty, hunger, overcrowding, and disease were common to all of the ghettos, including the Krakow ghetto. In both the Warsaw and Krakow ghettos, social programs that included food kitchens had been established but starvation was still rampant. At its peak, the Warsaw ghetto had some 460,000 inhabitants. Comparatively, the Krakow ghetto had a smaller population to contend with. At its peak, the Krakow ghetto was home to between 15,000 and 20,000 Jews. By the time Irene and her family moved into the Krakow ghetto in November or December of 1942, it had also already been partially liquidated and then was divided into two ghettos—one for able-bodied workers and one for the sick, elderly, and those unable to work. Irene and her family seem to have gone into the ghetto for workers. As the majority were working outside the Krakow ghetto and had more interactions with non-Jewish Poles, the opportunity for smuggling food may have helped offset the deplorable conditions. In Warsaw, smuggling was more difficult and a greater disparity existed between the elite few who managed to smuggle in food and the majority of the population, which lived under conditions of terrible poverty.

²³ When the Germans occupied Krakow in 1939, the city became the center of the General Government, a separate administrative region of the Third Reich, under Governor General Hans Frank (1900-1946). Frank continued to administer the General Government from Krakow throughout the end of 1944. A large garrison of *Wehrmacht* soldiers and German officers were stationed in the city.

²⁴ Hans Frank was an early supporter of the Nazi party. He studied law and eventually became the personal legal advisor to Adolf Hitler. After the outbreak of World War II, Frank was appointed Governor General of occupied Poland. In this capacity, Frank was responsible for the exploitation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians, as well as the deportation and murder of Polish Jews. After the war, he was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity and executed on October 16, 1946.

Irene: He was in charge. Maybe because of that. I talk to my Warsaw friends and they tell me stories . . . unbelievable . . . the hunger, the deaths on the street, people covered by newspaper. We didn't have that.

In 1943, everybody who was in ghetto in Krakow went to Plaszow.²⁵ The only thing they didn't take: the children. The children, most of them, I don't know . . . maybe Belzec . . . I don't know. The rest of the population of Krakow ghetto went to Plaszow.

Erna: Which was a slave labor camp, right?

Irene: At the beginning it was *Arbeit* [German: work, labor] camp . . .

Erna: Right, labor camp . . .

Irene: When it changed to concentration camp, we had our dose of hating. I don't know if you know **Amon Goeth** was the commandant of this miserable *lager*.²⁶ When he got drunk . . . so according to his whim . . . hanging or beating or whatever . . . but still Plaszow in comparison with other *lagers* was a paradise . . . a paradise because people, although they went hungry because they didn't get the normal food, but we still had people outside—Poles. We had our jewelry [and] whatever. They [the Jews] were selling for money things, like that. I would say fifty percent of the people who were in Plaszow were able to come by bread, maybe a little more sugar. Anyhow, you couldn't die of hunger in Plaszow. It wasn't a picnic, but . . .

We had, of course, a lot of transports. One was a very terrible transport of children, in May 1943.²⁷ Why I am mentioning it is because the perfidy of the Germans when they were taking the children. All the mothers were quite far away, but they were able to see the children

²⁵ The final liquidation of the Krakow ghetto began on March 13, 1943. At least 8,000 people who were considered able to work were marched to the Plaszow labor camp. The rest were either murdered in the ghetto or transported to their deaths. Also known as the 'Krakau-Plaszow' camp, the Plaszow camp was in a suburb of Krakow, Poland. It was established in October 1942 as a detention place for Jewish forced laborers in the district. The camp was occasionally expanded until 1944, when it reached its maximum size and became a concentration camp. The largest number of people confined in Plaszow at any one time was over 20,000. Plaszow was the site of mass executions and individual random violence. Thousands were killed there, mostly by shooting.

²⁶ Amon Goeth [also spelled: Goth or Göth] became the commandant of Plaszow labor camp near Krakow, Poland on February 11, 1943. He was in charge until September 13, 1944. He was a cruel, brutal, conscienceless sadist who murdered at random. He terrified all of the inmates whenever he roamed the camp on his white horse in the company of his dogs, who killed people on his command. After the war, Goeth was found guilty of murdering tens of thousands of Jews. He was executed by hanging on September 13, 1946 at age 37, not far from the former site of the Plaszow camp.

²⁷ In March 1944, a special barrack or "kindergarten" was installed in Plaszow. In mid-May between 250 and 300 children were separated from their parents and moved into the barrack. On May 15, 1944, the children were loaded into wagons, while their horrified parents, gathered nearby for a roll call, stood watching. The children were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were killed. Survivors who witnessed the deportation recall the Germans playing lullabies such as *Gute Nacht Mutti* [German: Goodnight Mommy] over loudspeakers.

being taken. They played the lullaby all the time—the Germans. Our concentration camp was already without children. There were maybe five or six prominent Jews who had their children kept . . . otherwise, no children.

Erna: Do you know where the children were taken?

Irene: I would say Auschwitz-[Birkenau] already by that time, because Belzec and Treblinka were a little bit slow in killing.²⁸ Auschwitz-[Birkenau] became a very good death factory. They took them there because it was much faster and much more . . . they were able to kill more people. We had transports going all the time—here, there. I will tell you frankly, I never wanted to survive because I felt passionately it was a lost case. It was so terrible. Everyday another transport . . . but somehow I did.

First of all, we were in different places. I will tell you because I went in a little factory that was making envelopes. It wasn't hard work. It was really nothing. One day, a new SS man came into Plaszow. The first day he came, just for the fun of it, killed six people. Everybody started to say, "He's terrible. He came here and G-d knows what will happen." Anyhow, he came to our envelope factory. We knew he was coming. I had a bag—like a beach bag—that I kept my towel, my soap, my toothpaste, and toothbrush. The main man who took care of this factory was a friend of my father. I said to him, "I would like to save it." He said, "Sure, of course." He told me to put it somewhere and I put it [there]. When the SS man came for inspections at three o'clock and he said, "If I find something I will kill the man who's in charge of the place." He came. [He was] tall, with his leather coat, with his leather gloves, with his revolver in his gloves. His revolver was clicking like he was going . . . you wouldn't believe it—nobody told him where my bag is. He came . . . kicked this case with his boot and my bag came out. He called the director of the factory, who had five children. I said, "My G-d. He will kill him. I have no children. He can kill me." I said, "I am the one that this bag belongs" because I did not want him to kill the man with five children. He said "*Raus*" [German: out]. I knew already what was waiting for me. I was somehow cold-blooded because I took my coat. Among hundreds of coats, I find my coat, I put it on, I go outside. I am going towards the place where they were killing people. He starts to laugh and says, "This will be too easy." When he said this, I said, "My G-d." He will . . . beat . . . hit me . . . they are hitting with a . . .

²⁸ Belzec was closed in late 1942. Treblinka was closed in early 1943. When the children were deported from Plaszow in May 1943, gassing operations at Auschwitz-Birkenau were at a high level of activity and would continue until November 1944.

Erna: . . . with a whip? He was going to whip you.

Irene: Yes. I would rather die than be hit like that. I thought, “My G-d!” . . . I am telling you this story because it’s a very interesting story. There were six women like me who were stupid enough to want to save the stupid towel and soap. He told us we are going into prison. There was a prison inside . . . Krakau-Plaszow.²⁹ I never was there [before]. For the first time, I descended into this prison . . . There in the prison was a rabbi—a very, very [well] known rabbi in Krakow called [unintelligible, 24:20, possibly Lutzke or Luther] with his family, who perished. I saw him there in the prison. We went there and the Jewish policeman told us he wants to give us ten days . . . [in the] *stehbunker* [German: standing bunker].

Erna: Stay in the bunker?

Irene: Yes. We knew that the Ukrainians who were watching the camp, when he told them [for us] to stay three days, they were fainting because it was impossible.³⁰ You stood, the water was running against your back . . . [They said,] “Ten days for women?” The policemen wanted to save us, so they said, “Be on the main cell. He will probably never come here.” Around two o’clock that night, [the SS man] came. The policeman came running. Each one of us was in the bunker, but the bunker wasn’t closed. He [the SS man] knew right away that there was something funny was going on. He opened the first bunker. It was a friend of mine. She said, “I am tired.” [He asked,] “How long you stay here?” He said in German, “*Eine Minute? Zwei Minuten?*” [German: One minute? Two minutes?]. She said, “No, very long. Few hours.” She was pretending like she’s very tired. Eventually he took me. When I came out, he said, “*Die Schwarze will eine Dienstmagd.*” [German: The Black One wants a maid/servant.]” I should be his . . .

Erna: Maid?

²⁹ In Plaszow, Amon Goeth’s office and the camp’s administration were housed in a building known as “The Grey House.” In August 1943, 5 holding cells, solitary confinement cells, and special tiny cells referred to as “standing bunkers” [German: *stehbunker*] were developed in the building’s basement. The standing bunkers were built for prisoners who violated camp regulations and were constructed so as to prevent a prisoner from doing anything but stand. The cells were for prisoners of the security police and the camps’ political department, mostly on death row.

³⁰ In many German-occupied territories throughout Europe, antisemitism, nationalism, ethnic hatred, anti-Communism, and opportunism often induced collaboration with the Nazi regime. Such collaboration was a critical element in implementing the Final Solution and the mass murder of other groups whom the Nazi regime targeted. Collaborators committed some of the worst atrocities of the Holocaust era. In Plaszow, Ukrainian guards were used to supplement the German SS staff until the official re-designation of the camp as a concentration camp in January 1944. Thereafter, the camp was staffed by 600 men of the SS *Totenkopfverbaende* (Death’s Head Units).

Irene: Maid. Right away, the Jewish police was afraid that a man that kills six men in one day, she would be the next one. They took me to a place that was not under his jurisdiction. This way I came into a magazine that I never knew something like that existed.³¹ People had food, whatever you wanted.

Erna: You mean storage?

Irene: Yes, they were stealing the things from the storage. They had oranges, almonds, whatever. This was good, because this way I was able to help a few friends who were hungry. I started to steal also inside those things. It was sometimes dangerous, because when we took it out from the magazine you could come across a SS and you were all too frightened because you were carrying it. Then after a while the SS took over the whole watching. Instead of the Jewish police, they were SS. When I was working, I think . . . maybe 15 people were working. It was really nothing. What is there to do? Put the things back and forth and back and forth—the coats . . . Unfortunately, what we got to keep . . . we got it from ghetto, from people houses that they liquidated the ghetto . . . shoes and . . .

Erna: People's belongings?

Irene: [People who had] came into the *lager*. Of course, jewelry . . . jewelry didn't belong to me. There was a separate people who took care of jewelry, not me. We took care of the clothes mostly. Next to us there was a SS uniform magazine. We worked there and my cousin . . .

Erna: I was just going to ask were you still in contact with your family?

Irene: My father and brother were in the same *lager* in Plaszow. My father was working in *Tischlerei* [German: carpentry].

Erna: Carpentry?

Irene: Carpentry, yes. He was working there. I met him every day. I was able to help them—sometimes less and sometimes more—depends. I was working. My brother also was there. My brother was a friend of the Jewish head of the police.³² When he got killed by **Goeth** . . .

Erna: By the German officer?

³¹ On the eastern edge of Plaszow was a complex of fenced barracks, which served as storehouses for the property stolen from Jews during resettlement campaigns. The items were segregated, cleaned, repaired, and then sent to Germany. The head of the storehouses, SS Untersturmführer Heinrich Balb, was not responsible to the camp Commandant, but directly to the SS and Police leader for the Krakow district.

³² In August 1944, Wilek Chilowicz, the head of the Jewish police in Plaszow was killed. Survivors claim Chilowicz assisted Goeth in securing a fortune on the black market from the sale of items stolen from prisoners and speculate Goeth ordered Chilowicz killed to prevent his testimony while he was under investigation by the SS. Survivors also reported that Chilowicz's family and other policemen and their families were killed at the same time.

Irene: They thought that my brother knows a lot of secrets, which . . . I was sure wasn't true. He was too young and the others wouldn't trust him. Anyhow, he got killed also. My father . . .

Erna: There in the camp?

Irene: Yes. My father went with a transport in 1944 to Gross-Rosen.³³ I was married and my husband went with my father. The tragedy of the whole thing is that a part of our camp went to Brunnlitz [Czechoslovakia].³⁴

Erna: You didn't tell us when you got married.

Irene: I got married in Wolbrom. My husband was with us all the time. Very fortunate people were selected to be in Brunnlitz. This was the [Oskar] Schindler group, which you have probably heard about.³⁵

Erna: Tell us about it.

Irene: There was this German, [Oskar] Schindler, who I would say that took he took bribes in order to have his favorite Jews, but nevertheless he did something. His Jews were better treated. He never hit anybody. He never . . . there was no hunger. He opened a factory in Sudetenland in Brunnlitz.³⁶ When slowly Plaszow was liquidated, he took his group of Jews to Brunnlitz. A lot of people gave whatever money they had in order to get there. My husband, who was an engineer, got on the list without money. But what happened . . . he promised me he will never

³³ Gross-Rosen was opened in May 1940 in a quarry near the village of Gross-Rosen. By 1944, there were about 110,000 prisoners in Gross-Rosen and its network of sub-camps. The living and working conditions were brutal. The rations were a slice of bread and watery soup each day. Prisoners slept on straw sacks that teemed with lice. It was classified as a Category III camp, or the most severe treatment classification. As the war neared its end, conditions grew even worse as evacuation transports arrived from the east swelling the camp to near bursting. The death rate skyrocketed. In January 1945, the camp population was evacuated ahead of the Russians. Some of the prisoners were packed tightly into open freight cars. Others were marched out on foot. Over half of the prisoners died on the death marches in the final days of the war. The Russian army liberated Gross-Rosen on February 13, 1945.

³⁴ Brunnlitz [German: Brünnlitz, Czech: Brněnec] is a village in eastern central Czech Republic, about midway between Prague, Czech Republic and Krakow, Poland. In October 1944, Oskar Schindler obtained permission to relocate his Plaszow enamelware factory to Brunnlitz as a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen.

³⁵ Oskar Schindler was an ethnic German born in Svitavy (Zwittau), Moravia (present-day Czech Republic). During World War II, he was a Nazi party-member who became a factory-owner in Krakow and employed Jews from Plaszow. He is credited with saving the lives of the almost 1,200 Jews he employed by transferring them to Brunnlitz in the fall of 1944, when Plaszow was being liquidated. The group of 1,200 Jews that Irene refers to are commonly called the Schindler Jews [German: *Schindlerjuden*] and their story was featured in "Schindler's List," a 1993 American film from director Steven Spielberg based on the novel *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally.

³⁶ The *Sudetenland* was an area along the border of Bohemia and Moravia near the Sudeten Mountains a predominately German population that had been a major source of contention between Germany and Czechoslovakia until the Munich Conference yielded it to Germany in 1938 as an attempt at appeasing the Germans.

leave my father behind. When they went to Brunnlitz, he said he's not going. He went with my father. Both of them perished in Buchenwald.³⁷

<break in tape, interview pauses, then resumes>

The one thing I never told my father . . . yes, I did tell my father my brother was killed. This was I think the last transport from Plaszow.³⁸ We were left 100 women and 300 men for the liquidation of the Plaszow ghetto [camp]. This was probably November [1944] when they left. We stayed. We had some news—very few news, but we heard that the front is nearing.³⁹ At night we were listening to the sound . . . sometimes we heard the sound of the war.

I should have been transported to Czestochowa [Poland] with my SS man, to work in the *lager* in Czestochowa.⁴⁰ He went the tenth of January [1945]. The seventeenth of January we were ordered to go by foot to Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁴¹ It was very easy to escape—very easy—when we were going through Krakow. We felt, and I felt especially, that we are not sure because what happened in Warsaw [Poland] when the Russian army was nearing—all of a sudden they stopped for a long time.⁴² We couldn't hide for a long time in Krakow. I felt, "What do I have to gain? I am all alone now. So what? I would save myself?" There was a boy in our *lager*—a boy, Christian—who came to me and said, "Come with me. I am going to my sister." I said, "No, I am

³⁷ Buchenwald was established in a wooded area near Weimer, Germany at the beginning July 1937. In addition to "extermination through work," the camp was known for its cruel punishment system and medical experiments. In 1942-1943, the camp assumed the role of a transit camp as it absorbed prisoners from other places and conditions deteriorated rapidly. Transports from Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz-Birkenau flooded into Buchenwald in early 1945, exasperating the disease and starvation already rampant in the camp. In all, approximately 56,000 of the 238,980 male prisoners who went through Buchenwald died.

³⁸ The evacuation of Plaszow began in August 1944, with 8,000 inmates sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen and Stutthof concentration camps. In September 1944, there were still 2,200 Jews in Plaszow. Irene's father and husband probably left on October 15, 1944, when the SS evacuated at least 1,500 of the remaining prisoners to Gross-Rosen concentration camp. At the beginning of 1945, there were 636 prisoners left in Plaszow—453 male and 183 female prisoners.

³⁹ The Russian army began pushing into Poland in the summer of 1944. By November, the front was rapidly approaching Krakow. The Russian army entered Krakow on January 18, 1945.

⁴⁰ Czestochowa is a city in southern Poland that has been the center of Polish Catholicism and a site of pilgrimage since the 14th century. After the ghetto that was established by the Germans was liquidated in 1942, a series of labor camps were established in the area. Only about 4,000 of the 30,000 Jews that were living in Czestochowa in 1939 remained by 1944. The Germans began evacuating the labor camps in December 1944 with the approach of the Russian army. By mid-January 1945, the prisoners had all been transferred to other camps in Germany.

⁴¹ On January 14, 1945—just three days before Russian troops liberated Krakow—the order was given to evacuate the remaining 623 inmates in Plaszow. It took three days to march to Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is approximately 62 kilometers (38 miles) west of Krakow. When they arrived, only 180 prisoners—178 females and 2 boys—were still alive.

⁴² On August 1, 1944, the *Armia Krajowa* (Polish Home Army) tried to seize control of Warsaw from the Germans in advance of the arrival of the Russian Army. The Russian Army was within sight of Warsaw, but did not advance into the city. The Germans used tanks, heavy artillery, and tactical bombers to suppress the uprising. When the resistance capitulated in October, hundreds of thousands of civilians were dead and Warsaw was mostly in ruins.

not going because there is no use. What will I go?” We came to **Auschwitz-Birkenau**. When we entered Auschwitz-Birkenau, you could feel the smell of burning flesh.

Erna: You said you knew you were going to Auschwitz-Birkenau?

Irene: Yes, we supposed, because the direction we were going, like Chrzanow [Poland]⁴³ . . .

Erna: What did you know at that point in time about Auschwitz-Birkenau, about what was going on?

Irene: Nothing. The only thing . . . when I came into Auschwitz, when I came into Birkenau, I felt the smell of burning flesh.

Erna: You walked in, you said?

Irene: We walked. All the time we walked. We came into a place where we are supposed to take showers. When I came into this place . . . all of a sudden I heard a voice . . . my name. Somebody was calling among the people. It was a girl who went to the same high school as me. She was one year younger. I didn't know but now I know—she was one of the first prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau and she survived. She said, “Are you there?” I said, “Yes. Who are you?” She told me her name, but I couldn't see her. She was behind a wall. She told me, “Don't be afraid. Tell your friends you are not going into gas chambers.” This is the first time I heard about gas chambers. She said, “You are going to normal showers and after the showers I will come over, and I will give you something to eat.” She told us. I said to my friends, “Look, we are going to showers.” Nobody took our clothes . . . nobody shaved our heads . . . nothing, because Auschwitz-Birkenau was already in disarray. The Russians were coming.

Erna: This was what year?

Irene: [This was in] January 1945. During the night I heard . . . Auschwitz-Birkenau was bombarded by the Russians.⁴⁴ Three days later we saw the filth. They gave us soup . . . impossible to eat . . . things like that. After three days in Auschwitz-Birkenau, we went by foot to Gross-Rosen, another concentration camp.⁴⁵ At Gross-Rosen the same story, the same terrible

⁴³ Chrzanów is a town in southern Poland, approximately 50 kilometers (31 miles) northwest of the Plaszow camp and approximately 20 kilometers (12 miles) northeast of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁴⁴ By mid-January 1945, Russian forces were approaching the area and Irene probably could hear the fighting as they advanced, but—in a highly contested decision to avoid possibly killing prisoners—the Allied forces never bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau (although in August 1944, the United States Army Air Force did carry out a heavy bombing of the I.G. Farben factory less than five miles from the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center.) Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by the Russians on January 27, 1945.

⁴⁵ Gross-Rosen is approximately 260 kilometers (160 miles) northwest of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced on death marches from the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp system between January 18, 1945 and January 27, 1945. As many as 15,000 prisoners died on the marches. Prisoners were sent west to concentration

scene. You saw people looking like cadavers wearing those striped things [prison uniforms]. From Gross-Rosen, we were put on a cattle train and we went to Ravensbruck.⁴⁶ Ravensbruck is something that I cannot describe. Germans were claiming they are so clean. Such a dirt you never saw in your life. You were going through a river of feces. It was so dirty. Unbelievable. They didn't do anything to us—nothing. We lie in a tent. I personally believe that I had typhoid there, because I must have been hallucinating.⁴⁷ I wanted only to get water. I had diarrhea. It was unbelievable. After a while they put us again on cattle trains and took us to Malchow [Germany].⁴⁸ Malchow was a Nazi . . .

Erna: Do you know why you were being moved?

Irene: They were moving because the Russians were coming. They were saving them and us together. Putting us with them all the time . . .

Erna: Going away from the Russians.

Irene: In Malchow, we didn't do anything—absolutely nothing. There was no food—absolutely no food. People were hungry. [It was] unbelievable. I don't know if I should tell you this story: my angel—the girl that I told you [the friend from Auschwitz-Birkenau]—she came to Malchow also because she had a number, one of the first numbers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁴⁹ The

camp in Germany, particularly to Flossenburg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, as well as to Mauthausen in Austria.

⁴⁶ Ravensbruck [German: Ravensbrück] was established in 1939 and approximately 120,000 women of 40 nationalities passed through it. In 1943, the population of the camp tripled and the conditions deteriorated drastically. When the number of women exceeded the barracks capacity, they were put in tents and slept on the bare ground. They died in droves every day. In the spring of 1945, thousands of women prisoners were marched out of Ravensbruck. On May 1, 1945 the Russian army liberated the last 2,000 prisoners left in the camp.

⁴⁷ Typhoid fever is a common bacterial disease caused by the ingestion of food or water contaminated by the feces of an infected person or from lice that fed on the feces. It was common in the camps due to hygienic conditions and the constant infestation by lice. Typhoid results in a high temperature, delirium, and intestinal hemorrhage and, if untreated, is often fatal.

⁴⁸ Malchow is a town in northeastern Germany on the Elde River. In 1943, Malchow became one of Ravensbruck's numerous sub-camps. Its prisoners provided cheap labor for an ammunition plant that was constructed there. Conditions at the camp were brutal, with many dying from abuse, starvation, or epidemics. At the end of the war, Malchow served as a transit camp for prisoners arriving from other concentration camps in the death marches that were taking place across Europe. In February 1945, Irene was among 3,000 women sent to Malchow from Ravensbruck. Living conditions deteriorated rapidly. About 1,000 women were put in what some referred to as the "stable," where they lay on straw on the floor. The rest were squeezed in with the veteran prisoners, in barracks designed to hold only 1,000. Typhus spread rapidly. By the end of March 1945, the camp was on the verge of collapse. On April 2, 1945 about 2,000 women—including Irene—were put on a transport to Leipzig.

⁴⁹ Irene's friend probably had been in Auschwitz-Birkenau since at least the spring of 1943. The first series of prisoner numbers in Auschwitz-Birkenau was introduced for male prisoners in May 1940. Female prisoners were only assigned numbers after March 1942. During the Holocaust, Auschwitz-Birkenau was the only camp where prisoners received tattoos. Tattooing was introduced at Auschwitz in the autumn of 1941. In the spring of 1943, camp authorities began tattooing almost all previously registered and newly arrived prisoners, including female prisoners.

Germans, when they saw a number like that, they treated her like royalty, because nobody survived with such a number. She got work and she was going out from Malchow to work. She was bringing me, everyday almost, a piece of bread with jam. I cannot tell you what it was. Today, if you get invited for a lobster dinner, it's no comparison. I felt terrible because she was depriving herself in order to give me. I told her, "Look, it is not fair that you should give me this food. I want to earn my food. Maybe you have an idea." She said, "If you could start finding jewelry in the camp, you can make some money. I will make some money." Not money, but bread. I said, "What do you meant jewelry?" She says, "Go among people and ask if they have any jewelry, and my German, with whom I am working, he is willing to pay [for jewelry] with bread." I said, "Okay." I started to go from one barrack to another to look for jewelry. One woman gave me a small thing. It was a Moses with the Ten Commandments.⁵⁰ Maybe before the war it was worth \$1, the whole thing. It was in silver. I said, "How much do you want for it?" She said, "A slice of bread." Because I had my friend with me—she was a pharmacist—I gave her the Moses. I said, "Keep it and I will look for some more jewelry." When I came back, she lost the Moses in the straw, because we were lying on the straw. What can I tell you? This is the story of the jewelry. But to show you what was going on in camp, how people wanted to somehow survive . . . It was very bad.

From Malchow, we went . . . I would say that we went to Leipzig [Germany] by cattle car again.⁵¹ In the meantime, a lot of people were sick. My friend, the pharmacist, also got typhoid. She was taken to the hospital. I wanted to save her clothes and her boots so each one of us took something. We were going for *Appel* [German: roll call] every day, like counting people. They were terrified—the Germans. Everyday counting—counting at noon, counting in the morning and the evening. When we were on this *Appelplatz* [German: roll call place] to be counted, we took her clothes with us in order when she comes out of the hospital, she should

⁵⁰ According to Jewish tradition, the "Ten Commandments" are ten categories that contain 613 *mitzvot* [Hebrew: commandments]. The ten categories are significant because they form the basis of man's relationship with G-d and man's relationship with his fellow people. While G-d directly gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people, it was Moses, who also led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, that received the tablets and brought them down from Mount Sinai.

⁵¹ Leipzig is a city in eastern Germany. Several thousand forced laborers were stationed in Leipzig during World War II, in a series of Buchenwald sub-camps. Irene probably was sent to a camp in Schönefeld, a suburb of Leipzig. A sub-camp for women was established at the Hugo-Schneider (HASAG) factory there in June 1944 and one for men in November 1944. The women's camp was evacuated in stages between April 13-15, 1945. The women who were evacuated were separated into smaller groups and marched east through small towns. Many died along the way before being liberated by the Russian army close to the town of Strehla, Germany.

have something to wear. In the meantime, I was trying to get a little bit for her—like sugar—she should lick a little bit of sugar to get stronger, but whatever I brought her, somebody was stealing from her, from under her head. She had a high temperature. One day I heard that they are going to evacuate the hospital. I ran over to save her from the hospital, but . . . [Count Folke Bernadotte came to take the sick people to Sweden.⁵² I took out her out of the hospital . . . unnecessarily. She could be saved by being taken to Sweden, but we didn't know what was going on. I took her and she was half alive. I took her with me.

From Malchow, we went to Leipzig. From Leipzig, we went on a three-week death march. This was unbelievable. There was no logic in the whole thing, because we were running back and forth. We were going towards Americans. We were going back towards the Russians. For me, it was the most beautiful time of my war life, because we were on the front. We saw what's going on and the destruction everywhere—how the German cities were bombarded. They were unbelievable sights. The Russian *katyushas* [Russian: rockets]—when they were falling down, for us it was the most beautiful sight. No matter if some people got killed. This was worth waiting for.

Eventually, we came to a place in what was like East Germany, near Leipzig. It was a small place, Strehla [Germany].⁵³ We were only seven women at that time. When everything ended, the SS people told us to go with them. We'd had enough of it already. We said, "We cannot go anymore." He took a few who wanted to go with them and killed them in the woods not far. We were staying in the barracks. After a while, we saw a Russian soldier. He was old. He said, "Girls, you are here all by yourself? It's very dangerous." We said, "Where should we go? There is no place to go." He said to us, "Go to a house and close the door." Anyhow, it didn't help. The Russians came and it was a terrible scene. They were raping . . .

Erna: The Jewish women?

Irene: Sure, they didn't care. They were drunk. They didn't know Jewish, not Jewish. You could tell him that you weren't [German], but they wouldn't listen. I was so panicky that I went

⁵² After a series of negotiations with Heinrich Himmler, the vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross, Count Folke Bernadotte, received permission to transport prisoners out of concentration camps in Germany that had not yet been liberated by the advancing Allies. Between mid-March and early May 1945, 15,345 prisoners were collected 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 Denmark and on to neutral Sweden. One of the transports that arrived in Neuengamme April 1945 had 484 prisoners from Leipzig.

⁵³ Strehla is a small town in eastern Germany on the Elbe River, approximately 65 kilometers (40 miles) to the east of Leipzig.

under the bed. He started to drag me from under the bed. I was screaming, “I am old! I am ugly!” He kicked me and I went from the [upper] floor to the first. I didn’t even . . . We heard nothing. My friend, the pharmacist, waited for me. We ran through the little city in our gowns, like nightgowns. I think it was nice nightgowns, what we found there. We ran through the city and nobody would let us in. Eventually—I don’t know how—I broke a window in a house that was completely dark. We went there. I was hysterical. We didn’t open the blinds. We saw there were some beds. I wouldn’t let them lie on the beds. I was crazy. I told them, “Go under the beds.” This poor woman had some bad cramps, stomach cramps. I heard them and I said, “Because of your stomach cramps they will find us.” She said, “What can I do? I cannot control it.” I was completely going nuts. Anyhow, in the morning, I said, “We have to go back to the place we were.” We went there and one of the girls was raped. From then on, we started to run back and forth, back and forth. We went to one little town . . . the general mayor was saying, “We cannot be responsible for you,” so we went to another [town] and so on. Eventually, we came across a cattle train that took us toward Poland. That was about it.

Erna: This was when the war was over?

Irene: Yes, the war was over. We were under the Russians, unfortunately. The girls that came under the Americans were much more fortunate. That was the reason why I went to Poland—because we had to escape from the Russians. We didn’t know the situation. Besides that, stupidly I was under the impression I am going to something, that something is left. On top of that, we promised each other . . . if we survived we would meet at a certain place—at a Christian friend’s house. Of course, when I went there, nobody came.

When I came to Krakow, I went to the Jewish community center and I asked if anybody from my family survived. They told me there is my cousin and there is my uncle. My uncle—my mother’s brother—survived in hiding. He was a lawyer. I went to his office and somehow he was . . . of course, happy to see me, but he was under the impression that I would survive. I don’t know how he could be, because it was really accidental if somebody survived unless he was in hiding and did something. With people in the concentration camp you couldn’t say who will, who will not. They [my uncle and cousin] didn’t have too much either, but what they had they shared with me.

I had my school friend with whom I went to high school. She was there in Krakow already because she was in hiding. She was coming every day to the Jewish Community Center

to inquire if I, by any chance, would come. When she heard that I came, she took me to her place. I stayed with her for a while. After a certain time, I met my second husband, who is Eva's [my daughter's] father. I knew his family and I knew him from before the war. His sister . . . they all came from Russia, so they survived.

Erna: You mean they were in hiding in Russia or they were Russian Jews?

Irene: No, they were from Krakow, but they were sent to Siberia [Russia] or whatever when the Russians took over Lvov [Poland].⁵⁴ They came back from Russia. I met one of his sisters. She was very happy to see me. She invited me to her house for the evening. She said, "My brother will come. I want you to meet him." I knew him, but . . . Eventually we got married . . . in 1946.

In the meantime, I still had hope that my father survived. I went to Theresienstadt⁵⁵ because I heard that some older people survived in Theresienstadt. I went. There was no normal communication. You went on a train with coal. It was unbelievable until you got to Prague [Czechoslovakia] and then to Theresienstadt.⁵⁶ When I came to Theresienstadt, there were very few people there. I couldn't find my father.

Erna: Did you see any resistance in any of the camps where you were?

Irene: Of what little resistance I heard, they were hanged. It was publicly made. Everybody had to come to see it. I can tell you I didn't see it, because I never looked. You were forced to look. If you didn't, there could be beatings or whatever. I never looked. There were a few hangings in our camp. I was lucky. There were people in Plaszow that were not lucky. They worked at . . . the *stein* [German: stone]⁵⁷ . . .

⁵⁴ Both the Russian and German armies invaded Poland in September 1939. The city of Lvov [Polish: Lwów] in southeastern Poland was in the Soviet zone of occupation from September 1939 until June 1941, when the Germans invaded. Under the Soviet occupation, hundreds of political activists or educated and affluent Jews who were labeled "bourgeois" enemies of the state were deported to Siberian labor camps. The majority of Soviet forced labor camps in the 1930's through 1950's were in the remote, sparsely populated, and extensive geographical region in Russia known as Siberia. The Siberian labor camps were used as a form of political repression and prisoners were often worked to death.

⁵⁵ The Theresienstadt (Terezín) "camp-ghetto" near Prague in the present day Czech Republic was opened in late 1941 and existed until May 1945. In the course of its existence, approximately 140,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, and about one third of the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia were sent to Theresienstadt. It served as a ghetto, an assembly camp, and a concentration camp. Roughly 33,000 died in Theresienstadt itself. Between January 1942 and the fall of 1944, nearly 90,000 Jews were deported to other ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. By the end of 1944, only 11,068 people remained in the ghetto.

⁵⁶ Prague is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic.

⁵⁷ There were two stone quarries near the Plaszow concentration camp, where male and female prisoners worked 12-hour shifts. The work was extremely arduous. Male prisoners broke down the rocks in the quarry. The stones were

Erna: Stones?

Irene: Stones, yes. This was work that had no sense whatsoever. They were cutting stones. I don't know for what. There was without any sense—the cutting. They were beating them. A lot of people died there. It wasn't all roses, but I, thank G-d, didn't go through it.

Erna: Did you see any religious practice in the camps?

Irene: Yes, a lot. We had a lot of people who were believing very strongly and we had to watch. When they wanted to pray, we had to watch if an SS man was coming. This was mostly successful. Especially during the **[High] Holy Days**, there were men who were praying and I saw it.⁵⁸ I even . . . during Passover, I went to the kitchen for special food that in our mind was allowed. No bread. We felt that . . . how do you call it . . . **haricot** [beans] . . . **KITNIYOT**

Erna: . . . green beans . . .

Irene: . . . yes, those things in situations like that were allowed. I had a woman who was working in the kitchen. She was an extremely nice person. She cooked for me, for those people food that they were able to get, because *matzo* was out of the question.⁵⁹ They didn't want to eat bread. I am telling you, this was possible in Plaszow. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, it was impossible.

Erna: You didn't tell us whether or not you were religious before the war.

Irene: No.

Erna: Did your beliefs change during the war or because of the war—your religious beliefs?

Irene: My father was begging me to be a believer. He was going to *shul*.⁶⁰ We had a kosher home—not maybe to exaggeration, but a kosher, normal Jewish home.⁶¹ After the war, I felt so against everything that was kosher. This was for a while. If my father would be alive, I am positive I would keep a kosher home, but he wasn't there. It wasn't important. Simple.

Erna: What about your faith, for example?

Irene: I definitely believe. I am not kosher. Let's say I am going for **yizkor**, I am celebrating all our holidays, but I was never very religious, no.

then loaded into cars and pulled out of the quarry by a human train of female prisoners that were divided into two rows and tied to the heavy cars.

⁵⁸ The two High Holy Days are *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (Jewish New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement).

⁵⁹ Matzo, matza or matzah is unleavened bread traditionally eaten by Jews during Passover.

⁶⁰ *Shul* is a Yiddish word for synagogue that is derived from a German word meaning “school,” and emphasizes the synagogue's role as a place of study.

⁶¹ Kosher/*Kashrut* refers to Jewish dietary laws that dictate how food is prepared or served and which kinds of foods or animals can be eaten. The word ‘kosher’ has become English vernacular, a colloquialism meaning proper, legitimate, genuine, fair, or acceptable. Kosher can also be used to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.

Erna: You said that you didn't really think you were going to survive or you didn't care whether you were going to survive.

Irene: I was positive I would not survive. The way I saw what was going on, there was no way. My brother had an idea: he wanted us to go to Hungary.⁶² That was something we should have done. My father was against it, and we were too. Whoever stayed in Poland, if they survived it's a miracle because, as it was, everybody was doomed for sure. There was no way. My philosophy—it may be wrong, but—was the shorter it lasts the better, because the longer . . . Why to go through seeing the hangings, the whole business every other day? Put an end to it so you will not see it anymore. We had no idea about Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Erna: What kind of condition were you in physically at the end of the war?

Irene: I was in pretty good condition considering. Don't forget, what I went through it's not much. In Plaszow, towards the end, I was well fed—to the point we didn't take the bread the Germans was giving us because it wasn't good enough. We had plenty. We were 400 people with a lot of different things we were able to sell. There was always contact with the Poles. People went to work and going to work they took with them certain things. Then they sold it. Krakow was completely different from any other place. You cannot do it in Auschwitz-Birkenau. You couldn't do it in Ravensbruck—impossible.

I had my clothes that were filthy, dirty with lice, whatever, but I was well dressed. I had my boots. One thing I will tell you about those boots: when we were going into this march, this SS woman who was with me—because I was in pretty good shape—she was always telling me, “You will be in the first line and you will coordinate the march.” I thought that she's so good to me and she sometimes . . . we didn't get anything, no food whatsoever . . . but she—the SS people—got packages of food that was not edible, like raw beets or raw potatoes. They didn't have much either, but she shared those with me. I didn't know why she was so good to me. I felt

⁶² Had Irene and her family escaped to Hungary, they may have enjoyed a relatively better quality of life for longer; however, it is not certain they would have escaped persecution. The Hungarian government began to build an alliance with Nazi Germany soon after Hitler came to power in 1933. The result of that relationship was the annexation of regions from Slovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia that had belonged to Hungary prior to World War II. By 1941, Hungary's Jewish population had thus swelled to over 800,000. Although the Hungarian Jews were subjected to wide-ranging discrimination and tens of thousands were killed, the majority lived in relative safety for much of the war. Initially, the Hungarian government refused to deport the Jews of Hungary. Then, in March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary. During April, the Jews of Hungary were forced into ghettos and, in May, deportations began. In just eight weeks, more than 420,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most were murdered on arrival. When the fiercely antisemitic Arrow Cross party came to power in October 1944, thousands more Jews were murdered and tens of thousands more were sent on death marches.

that she wants my boots. I said [to myself], “Instead of she should kill me for the boots, I will tell her to take the boots and that’s that.” I told her, “Look, you want my boots?” She says, “No, I want to escape with you.” She wanted to escape with me. I said, “That’s what I need at the end of the war!” I said, “I am afraid.” She said, “What are you afraid?” I was afraid to escape with her. I said, “No, I am afraid. You see, the war is nearing the end. I don’t want . . . I am afraid. I don’t know where to go.” She wanted already to escape with a *Häftling* [German: prisoner].

Erna: With a prisoner?

Irene: Yes, to save herself.

Erna: So you ended up with your boots?

Irene: I will tell you about the Germans in general. Also, I had a German in my . . . where I worked, who was very good to me. If I could see him today I would shot him myself, because I saw him with the Jewish blood so often on his hands. When he came sometimes they were bringing people who they caught outside with papers . . .

Erna: False papers?

Irene: <nodding yes> They brought them to our *lager* and a few of the SS would go and execute them. Very often he came and I saw he was covered with blood and it was Jewish blood . . . but to me, he was good. After the war they caught him. My friend from Israel—an older man who worked in the other magazine, for the [unintelligible: 1:04:20] magazine—he came to Canada. He said “Irene, you know [Bruno] Muller [German: Müller] got caught. Come with me to Germany to witness.” I said, “I am not going.” [He asked,] “Why do you not want to go?” I said, “Because he was very good to me and when he would start defending himself, he would ask me questions, ‘Was I good to you?’ This was true. I said, “I don’t want to deal with this today. You know what I mean.”

Like every German had his own *Jude* [German: Jew] that he liked, he was in love with me . . . [He was] a nobody from before [the war]—a zero. All of a sudden, with an SS uniform, he felt very important. He told me sometimes his mother was a charwoman and they didn’t have enough to eat. This was why he went into the SS. I remember one thing: I was in . . . it was December 1944. I was looking through the barbed wire, through the window, and I saw snow on the streets. It was actually streets, because we were outside of Krakow and it was already like little hills. He came over and said, “What are you thinking now?” I said to him, “I am thinking how my life changed—what I am now and what I would be normally.” He said to me . . . I said

because at that time of year I would be skiing. He said to me, “You will be skiing, but where I will be?” because this was already towards . . .

Erna: . . . towards the end?

Erna: Have you ever talked about your war experiences with your family or anyone else?

Irene: No. With my husband, very often. My husband went through the same thing as me so we talk very often, but not with my daughter, not with anybody. When I meet friends that went through the same thing as me, unfortunately, we come always to the subject, always.

Erna: You were singled out specifically for being a Jew. How do you feel about that?

Irene: I went to Hebrew high school. I was always very proud of being Jewish. Our school was Zionist oriented. We had nothing to do with religion—my school. First of all, for me, the creation of the state of Israel was something very, very important. Even today, what is happening in Israel is very important to me and very painful, because, unfortunately, we don’t see any end in sight. I have a lot of friends in Israel.

Erna: Did you ever apply for or receive war reparations?⁶³

Irene: Yes.

Erna: Can you describe your feelings in regard to this?

Irene: We had a very close friend of ours who was very influential in Israel: Chaim Randall [sp]. He was working together with [Menachem] Begin and he was against it, definitely.⁶⁴ When I was discussing it with him, he was telling me, “Are you crazy? What are you taking money?” The opinions were very divided. Some were saying, “You should.” The others say, “No.” We, in Canada, had a very difficult time to get the reparations. I, personally, think that the best reparations goes to the European Jews and the Americans also, but not to . . . I have friends in Europe, so I know the comparison. We were first declined. Then after many years, a friend of ours in Israel started again, and we got it. The minimum is what we were able to get.

Erna: How do you feel about reparations? You said that people were opposed to it.

Irene: If nobody would take the reparations, I would go along with everybody else, absolutely. There is no way they can repay for what they have done. As other people were taking

⁶³ In October 1951, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established to help with individual claims against Germany arising from the Holocaust. The Claims Conference initially recovered \$100 million from West Germany. Various additional settlements in the decades since have also been reached.

⁶⁴ Menachem Begin was an Israeli politician, founder of Likud [the Labor party], and the sixth Prime Minister of the State of Israel.

reparations, I felt it would be a little bit stupid. At the same time, we needed the money. Maybe if I would be very affluent I wouldn't. Then the question . . . they helped Israel a lot with their reparations, definitely. When I was in Israel, if there was any discussion about when they express hatred toward Germans—that I feel also. I said, “Look, you cannot be double-faced. On the one hand, we are taking. On the other, hand we hate.” The more years get by, I hate them more. Somehow it becomes stronger—not weaker, but stronger. I cannot stand when I hear them talking. Two years ago, I went to Germany only because the excursion I took went through Germany for one day. I hated every moment of it. Give me today a free ride into Germany, I wouldn't take it.

Erna: I was just going to you ask if you had returned to Europe since the war.

Irene: I was [in Europe] several [times], but never in Poland. I will never go to Poland. I hate the place. I hated it even before the war.

Erna: I am curious about how you feel about the Poles themselves.

Irene: To me, the concentration camps, because they took place in Poland⁶⁵ . . . [Poland] was the perfect place for concentration. No other nation would allow something like that to happen. I have a lot of friends who survived on false papers. What they are telling me, what they heard, how happy the Poles were to see what is happening to the Jews. I'm not saying that there weren't a few who were very nice. I am not saying it is not true. In comparison . . . you cannot even compare. They were all terrible.

Erna: When you go to an event, or you are in a particular place, or when you sleep, are you ever reminded of your war experiences? Can you tell me about it?

Irene: I did not understand your question.

Erna: Sometimes when you go to a particular place it reminds you of something that happened in your life before. Do you have flashbacks or associations?

Irene: Yes. From the beginning, after the war, I tried to avoid anything connected with this time in my life. Why? I will tell you very simply. I strongly believe that those people who went

⁶⁵ Although a large percentage of the millions of victims killed and imprisoned during the Holocaust were Polish citizens, concentration camps were not unique to Poland during World War II. After the Nazi party came to power in 1933, German authorities under National Socialism began to set up a series of concentration camps across Germany. As Germany conquered much of Europe, a centralized system was established under the SS to incarcerate increased numbers of prisoners whom they defined as political, ideological, or racial opponents of the regime. Their extensive camp system came to include concentration camps, labor camps, prisoner of war camps, transit camps, and camps which served as killing centers (often called extermination camps or death camps). By the end of World War II, there were over 1,000 camps across Europe.

through this hell cannot be normal. I wanted to be normal. I didn't want to go back through those times. Nevertheless, when I meet my friends—and I have, thank G-d, some who are still alive—who went through the same hell, we cannot avoid coming back to those times.

Erna: It always haunts you?

Irene: Absolutely. The funny part is: when here something happens—a hijacking or whatever—the people are three days, four days somewhere, they are starting to talk about what will happened, what psychological impact it will have . . . We went for years—nobody thought about psychological impact—in hell. It's unbelievable what we saw. In Ravensbruck, what he's telling after the opening of the museum . . . I don't remember if yesterday they mentioned . . . like I saw in Ravensbruck, hills of human bodies . . . hills. Like he said, nobody paid any attention. Like he said, they were walking through those corpses, because, unfortunately, you were not human at that time. The perfidy of the German was . . . that woman was telling it very well. They did it systematically. More and more and more, not right away from the beginning—right away from the beginning it didn't look so bad—and slowly, slowly.⁶⁶

I had a very funny accident with a German. I was in Florida with my husband. My husband was already after a stroke. We were in the hall of the hotel and the woman at the desk asked me if I speak German. The first thing—if I would think for a second I would say, “No.”—but the first thing, “Yes, I speak.” She introduced me to a group of German tourists who came to Florida. I thought I would die. You cannot make a scene. Anyhow, she asked me what they want, because they didn't speak any English. They had some problem with the bathroom. I explained to her. I said, “Goodbye,” and I went. The next morning I went with my husband into the garden. I always look for the shade because he couldn't sit in the sun, but everything was taken. All of a sudden, one of the Germans that I met the day before sees me with my husband. He sees that I want a chair in the shade. He comes to me. He says in German, “You are looking for a chair. I would be glad to give you.” I said, “Who needs your chair!?” The way I look at him. I didn't

⁶⁶ Irene seems to be referring to the dedication ceremonies for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which were held on April 22, 1993—two days prior to this interview. At the dedication, speeches were made by United States President William Clinton; Chaim Herzog, President of Israel; Harvey Meyerhoff, Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council; and Elie Wiesel, professor, author, and Holocaust survivor. In his speech, Herzog recounted liberating Bergen-Belsen. In his speech, Wiesel accused the Allied powers of knowing about the camps as early as April 1943 but failing to act. It is unclear whom exactly Irene is referencing, but the woman she refers to may be Wiesel's mother. In his speech, he described her as having absolutely no idea the Germans were exterminating Jews—right up until she was deported and killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944.

even answer. There was so much hatred in my way I looked at him. Maybe he wasn't even guilty of anything, but I hate them. There is no way you can forget, no way.

Erna: Do you think that another Holocaust is possible?

Irene: Yes, absolutely . . . because human nature is like that. Human nature is something terrible. Germans are not the only people who did this. The Spanish **did it in a different** way.⁶⁷ We didn't have [unintelligible: 1:17]. We were not so well educated. They [the Spanish] did it. I was in Toledo [Spain].⁶⁸ I saw what was happening there [during the Spanish Inquisition]—the same thing. Only you had a choice. If you became a Catholic, you could save yourself. The Germans didn't give us this choice. I had friends from Hungary. They had that choice because apparently, at the beginning, the Hungarians told them to come to a place, and if they Christianed [converted to Christianity] themselves, they can save themselves.⁶⁹ A lot of them did. She told me, my friend said when her father took them to . . . it was, I think it was **Cardinal Mindszenty** who was doing the christening. Her mother came home—it was a Friday—she lighted the [Shabbat] candles. That's what happened. Like what happened with the *Marranos* in Spain—the same thing.⁷⁰ We had no choice during the occupation.

Erna: How important is the existence of the state of Israel?

Irene: Very important, very important. One of the most important things in my life.

Erna: Tell me why.

Irene: Why? I was brought up this way. I went to Hebrew high school. It was something if you were able to live through the creation of the state of Israel.⁷¹ It is a miracle, because we were talking about it like it was utopia. You couldn't believe it would be possible. When we celebrated the first year of Israel's existence, my sister-in-law made a cake with the map of Israel, with little flags of Israel. It is something . . . a dream comes true. The only thing I can say

⁶⁷ Irene is likely referring to the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition, which was established in 1478. The Inquisition was originally intended in large part to ensure the orthodoxy of those who converted from Judaism and Islam. This regulation of faith intensified after royal decrees issued in the late fifteenth century forced a quarter million Jews to convert to Christianity or leave Spain.

⁶⁸ Toledo is a city in central Spain heavily influenced by a historical co-existence of Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

⁶⁹ In the period between World War I and World War II, Hungarian Jews were violently persecuted. Anti-Jewish legislation began in the 1920's and continued in the 1930's with a series of "Jewish Laws" that restricted the number of Jews in universities, liberal professions, administration, and commerce. By 1939, many Hungarian Jews had converted to Christianity to combat the loss of work and poverty.

⁷⁰ Marranos were originally Jews living in the Iberian Peninsula. Under pressure in the late fifteenth century, the Marranos converted to Christianity to escape persecution, but still saw themselves as Jews and practiced Judaism in secret as much as they could.

⁷¹ When the British Mandate over Palestine expired on May 14, 1948, the State of Israel declared its independence.

that maybe out of the terrible Holocaust, this was the good thing that came about. Maybe with the existence of Israel, it wouldn't be so easy to create a new Holocaust. First of all, the Jewish people are more organized. We have a lot of different organizations who are fighting everything. We have the **Anti-Defamation League** [and] a lot of things that didn't exist before the war.⁷²

Erna: I want to thank you for your time.

Irene: I thank you very much.

Erna: It is not an easy subject to talk about. I know that. It is very important to have your testimony on record.

Irene: Thank you.

<End Disk 1>

INTERVIEW ENDS

⁷² The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is an international Jewish non-governmental organization based in the United States. The ADL was founded in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." Today, the ADL describes itself as "the nation's premier civil rights/human relations agency."