

## THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE MUSEUM

**MEMOIRIST:** HELEN WEINGARTEN  
**INTERVIEWERS:** JOHN KENT  
RUTH EINSTEIN  
**LOCATION:** SANDY SPRINGS, GEORGIA  
**DATE:** JUNE 10, 2011

### INTERVIEW BEGINS

<Begin Disk 1>

**Ruth:** [Today is] June 10, 2011. We're here at the home of Helen Weingarten in Sandy Springs, Georgia, with John Kent as the interviewer.<sup>1</sup> I'm Ruth Einstein from the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum. We are so pleased that you agreed to speak with us today.

**Helen:** Sure.

**Ruth:** We will get started.

**John:** Let's start at the very beginning. What was your name when you were born?

**Helen:** Helen Fromoiwitz.

**John:** Can you spell that please?

**Helen:** F-r-o-m-o-i-w-i-t-z. I haven't used that name in about 70 years.

**John:** When were you born and where?

**Helen:** I was born in the Carpathian [Mountains]<sup>2</sup> . . . At that time, it was Romania.<sup>3</sup> When my mother was born, it was Hungarian. Then the Romanians came in. I went to a Romanian school. I speak Hungarian, but I don't speak Rumenish [Yiddish: Romanian]. I have no one to speak it with. I forgot [the language] but if I would be in Romania a couple of weeks, I would do it back.

**John:** What year were you born?

**Helen:** 1924.

**John:** Who were the people in your family—parents, brothers, sisters?

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy Springs is a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia located just north of the city.

<sup>2</sup> The Carpathian Mountains or Carpathians are a range of mountains forming an arc across Central Europe. The roughly 1,500 km (932 mi) long arc stretches through the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia. The region is dense with forested hills and fast-flowing rivers.

<sup>3</sup> Helen's hometown was in Transylvania, a historical region that has been dominated by several different peoples and countries throughout its history. Until World War I, the area had been part of Hungary. Until World War II, it was part of Romania.

**Helen:** We were six daughters and three sons. There was a mistake before.<sup>4</sup> One brother came to the United States when he was 17-years-old. One brother—I thought he died [during the war]. Then we found out after when we went to look for family. I found out he was alive. He went back home—15-year-old kid. My father told us, “We don’t know what’s going to happen. Whoever’s going to be alive, go home. Find each other—the family.” I didn’t go home because I had my four sisters. As far as I knew, my brother was dead, and my other sisters were dead, and everybody [was dead]. Why go home to nothing? Then we went to look for family and found some people who recognized me. [They] said, “You know what? Your brother is home.” I didn’t know . . . I [thought I] saw him on a truck [in Auschwitz-Birkenau] with a lot of naked boys going to the crematorium. I thought I saw him. But it wasn’t him. It was other kids.

**John:** What was that brother’s name?

**Helen:** Erwin. Eizik. He remembered what my father said: “Go home. Find somebody.” When those people saw me and told me my brother was alive, I passed out. For two hours I didn’t know where I was. I wrote a letter. I still think I made the biggest mistake not going. They were smugglers—two men and a woman from my hometown. They went back to the same place where I was born. I sent a letter and a picture from the four of us sisters. I told him where we lived. A kid from 16 started on the road to go to Austria, go to wherever . . . he made it.<sup>5</sup> He came and we were reunited. That’s all we had—five siblings from the nine.

**John:** What was the town?

**Helen:** Ujbocsko.<sup>6</sup> Or you can say Kretshnif.<sup>7</sup> Kretshnif everybody will know. If there is somebody from Kretshnif, they’ll know who I am, so I’d rather say Kretshnif.

**John:** And the Hungarian name is?

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<sup>4</sup> Helen was one of nine children. In order from oldest to youngest, the Fromowitz children were: Goldie (Regina), Morris, Frida, Rachel, Alexander, Ester, Helen, Perl (Pepi), and Erwin (Eisik). There is some discrepancy on whether there was a tenth sibling. In an account given by Erwin, another child was mentioned. The boy, named Nathan, appears to have been one of the oldest children and probably died as an infant.

<sup>5</sup> Erwin was sent from Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Mauthausen and Melk concentration camps (both in Austria). He was then sent on a death march to Linz, Austria and finally to Ebensee, where he was liberated by the Americans. When he returned home a few weeks later, he found no one. A former Czech partisan told him his sisters were alive in Germany. Erwin attempted to get to Germany, but only made it as far as Linz, Austria before becoming too ill to continue. However, he sent word that he was alive. After spending a few more weeks recuperating, he was able to continue to Germany and reunite with his surviving sisters.

<sup>6</sup> Ujbocsko [also known as Bocicioiu Mare; Hungarian: Újbocskó or Nagybockó] is a village in northwestern Romania, in the Carpathian Mountains. It lies across the Tisza River, on the border of Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> Kretshnif is the Yiddish name of Craciunesti [Romanian: Crăciunești], a village in northern Romania, on the Tisza River, at the border of Ukraine. It is located approximately 6 kilometers (3 miles) west of Helen’s village, Bocicioiu Mare, Romania. In 1941, there were 911 Jews living in the village—46 percent of the total population. Today, there are no Jews in Kretshnif.

**Helen:** Ujbocsko.

**John:** Let us start during the happier, normal days.

**Helen:** I went to school. It was interrupted because the Hungarians [came, then] the Romanians [came, then] the Hungarians came, and then the Germans came<sup>8</sup> . . . I speak all the languages because when you have a government, you have to learn [to] speak the languages. That was my life. I learned to sew there. In fact, I used that as my job after the war here in the United States.

**John:** How integrated was your family with non-Jewish people?

**Helen:** Very. We had . . . the street of Kretshnif was all Jews. There was not a Gentile [non-Jewish person] on that street. On the other side, going to the left, were Gentile people—very nice. We were all living together. The Catholics had a school for Catholics, and the Protestants, and the Jews went to another school. We were just happy. We didn't know any different. We didn't know anything. Sometime the kids used to call us names [when we were] passing by the church where the Catholic children were going to school. They used to call us 'lousy Jews' and all that, but we didn't pay attention because we were going to get into trouble. It already started.

**John:** What did you make of that as a kid?

**Helen:** It wasn't nice. When my brother [Alexander] was home—before he left for the United States—he would hit them. If they told him anything about the Jews, he would just hit them. He would fight. But what would little girls do? Nothing. Just let it go.

**John:** Did you have any understanding what that was about, why they were . . .

**Helen:** We knew that we didn't believe in Jesus and they knew that . . . little things one thing or another. We didn't make nothing of it. Later on, we found out that they really didn't like the Jews where we lived. Young people started [saying], "We don't like the Jews." We just didn't do nothing.

**John:** Tell us about your parents. What do you remember about their personalities?

**Helen:** My father was a men's clothes designer. He was very well known. He was a paramedic in the First World War. When somebody got sick in Kretshnif, they came to my father. He helped when he could. We had socialized medicine. Not everybody . . . My father. He

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<sup>8</sup> When Nazi Germany began to redraw national boundaries in Europe in 1940, the increasingly fascist Hungarian government was able to regain territory that included Transylvania, where Helen's hometown was. By November 1940, Hungary (and Romania) had formally allied with the Axis powers, bringing the area fully under the influence of Nazi Germany.

had people working for him. They had to have . . . We had aspirins. We had little things that you need around. That was it. Everybody had their . . . My mother raised the kids.

**John:** What were your parents' names?

**Helen:** My mother's name was Bertha. My father's name was Frank (Ferenz). They were very well liked in the community.

**John:** Describe yourself as a girl. What kind of personality did you have?

**Helen:** I liked myself. I had a boyfriend—which you weren't supposed to have. You had older sisters. I was 15 or 16 and I loved the boy. He didn't survive, though. I still think about him once in a while. That's it. That was my life. [It was] not much but we were happy.

**John:** In what way was your family Jewish? What did that mean to you?

**Helen:** Strictly Orthodox Jews.<sup>9</sup> I was Orthodox until after the war.

When they took us out of the homes and put us in the school, we didn't know what was happening. There came orders to get the Jews out of the houses. They put us in a big schoolroom. We were just there. We took the food from home what we still had. They didn't provide food for us or anything.

A couple of days later, we were transported to Slatina.<sup>10</sup> Across the bridge was Czechoslovakia, which also Hungary occupied. We were there in the ghetto. That's when we knew what the ghetto means. We didn't know anything until we got there and they housed us with people. If you had a house, you took in people. That's the way it was. This is where we stayed for a number of months and worked there. I cleaned the streets. That was my job. I don't know what my father did . . . First, they shaved his beard. We just lived day to day for about six or seven months.

Then they put us in cattle cars. [There] came orders. We had to go someplace. We didn't know where. They put us in cattle cars. For five days and five nights we traveled without food—just a piece of bread about two inches or so that had to last for you for five days.

Whatever else we had left kept us alive. We wound up someplace. I still listen to the whistle of

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<sup>9</sup> Orthodox Judaism is a traditional branch of Judaism that strictly follows the Written *Torah* and the Oral Law concerning prayer, dress, food, sex, family relations, social behavior, the Sabbath day, holidays and more.

<sup>10</sup> Slatina is the Romanian name of Solotvyno, a town in present-day western Ukraine, along the Tisza River near the Romanian border. Prior to World War I, it was known as Aknaszlatina and was Hungarian. Between the wars, it was part of Czechoslovakia and known as Selo-Slatina. After Germany occupied the area in March 1944, from mid to late April 1944 the Jews of Hungary were forced into ghettos. Over 2,000 Jews from Slatina and another 3,000 from the surrounding area were concentrated in an improvised ghetto. On May 24, 1944, they were all transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where most were murdered.

the train when the train got in to Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>11</sup> We didn't know what Auschwitz was. We didn't know what Birkenau was. It was Poland. We didn't know anything.

When we looked out, we saw people. I thought they were crazy. They were shaved. Somebody had a short dress, somebody had a long dress. I didn't know what to make of it. We had luggage with us. When we left the train, everything was left by the train. You couldn't take nothing. They took you away. Then they separated you. I'm sure you've heard about that. [They directed us,] "Young girls here. Mothers with babies, with small children here. Older persons . . ." My mother said maybe she can babysit. Whatever she'll do, [maybe] they'll give her a job babysitting. Then the men were separated. I didn't know where . . . nothing.

They did they same thing to us. They shaved our heads completely bald. Then we didn't recognize . . . the sisters. I didn't know who they were because I'd never seen them without the hair. Then we found each other. One sister, Frida, came and said she found out that all the flames and the chimneys that goes on the out that our parents were there—gassed and killed. That was it. You couldn't mourn because you were next. Every day they took people to the crematoriums.

After seven months in Auschwitz-Birkenau, what we did . . . we filled the graves from the bombs. The bombs were falling in the summertime. In the wintertime, we shoveled snows and all that. After the Sukkot holidays, three days after they took us away—500 girls on a walk to the crematorium.<sup>12</sup> We knew where we were going. Big deal. We knew where we were going. We were going to die. We couldn't escape from that. But then . . . two SS men came with some papers.<sup>13</sup> They said, "They are not going there. They are going to work." They turned us around and put us in cattle cars.

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<sup>11</sup> 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 were Jews) to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex between 1940 and 1945. Camp authorities murdered 1.1 million of these prisoners.

<sup>12</sup> Sukkot was from October 1 through October 8 in 1944.

<sup>13</sup> 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 "*Schutz-Staffel*." 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.

From there, we went to Nuremberg [Germany].<sup>14</sup> Five days and five nights with a little bread, with practically nothing. We still didn't know where we were going. We survived. Some people didn't survive. They passed out. They died on the way. When we got there, we got food. They gave us something to eat. They put us up in a factory. There we worked. The sister who has Alzheimer's,<sup>15</sup> her and I worked . . . what we did a motor for airplanes. I never done that before in my life. I didn't know what it was. They were the SS. They showed us what to do. [They said,] "If you do wrong, we'll kill you." That's what we did for about four or five months.

Then they were going to take us away because the Russians were coming closer. A lot of people went on [death marches]. We didn't want to go. We said, "Kill us right here. Why go someplace and kill us there?" [We said this to] the SS. We didn't want to go. They didn't make us go because [we refused and said,] "Kill us here. That's it. Get rid of us and finish." We didn't go and then two days later the Americans came in and liberated us.

**John:** Do you know what date that was?

**Helen:** April 16, 1945.

**John:** What condition were you in on liberation day?

**Helen:** You don't even want to know! I was about maybe 65 or 70 pounds—nothing. We were happy. We were still four sisters. A lot of people were sick. A lot of people didn't make it. After [liberation], they died.<sup>16</sup> When they started to eat, that was it. We started [recuperating] little by little. This is how we survived.

Then came a few officers to talk to us who spoke Yiddish.<sup>17</sup> We didn't speak English at that time. They said, "Whoever has family in the United States," and we remembered someplace where they lived . . . I had my older sister—who is still alive in Cleveland [Ohio]<sup>18</sup>—

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<sup>14</sup> Nuremberg [German: Nürnberg] is a city in Bavaria, Germany.

<sup>15</sup> Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia. There is no cure for the disease, which worsens as it progresses and eventually leads to death.

<sup>16</sup> After liberation, camp survivors faced a long and difficult road to recovery. Survivors were often so weak, emaciated, or sick that thousands died in the weeks after liberation. Well-meaning soldiers without proper medical training often gave survivors foods that made their conditions worse. 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.

<sup>17</sup> Yiddish is the common historical language of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. It is heavily Germanic based but uses the Hebrew alphabet. The language was spoken or understood as a common tongue for many European Jews up until the middle of the twentieth century.

<sup>18</sup> Cleveland is a major city in Ohio on the shores of Lake Erie.

she remembered Asbury Park, New Jersey.<sup>19</sup> We wrote a letter. My brother got the letter. This is when he knew that we were alive.

It took us five years to come to the United States because the quotas were gone.<sup>20</sup> The [Romanian] quota—I was still under [Romanian] quota—was gone. The Polish quota was gone. Then [Harry] Truman came into power.<sup>21</sup> Truman became President. He signed in about 200,000 displaced persons to the United States. We got into it. We came here in 1949.<sup>22</sup> This is my life.

In Germany, I got married.<sup>23</sup> [He was] also a Holocaust survivor. He was five and a half years in the concentration camps. I had a baby. I brought a one-year-old baby to the United States with my husband. Then I had a little girl born in Ohio. That was my family. I made my family. This is about . . . the thing of my life. But what I went through is another story.

Every day they picked out in Auschwitz-Birkenau . . . they needed so many . . . Dr. Mengele . . . He was the one who [selected] me.<sup>24</sup> I was a young girl, which was okay for work. I survived.

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<sup>19</sup> Helen's older brother, Alexander, had immigrated to the United States prior to the war and lived in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Asbury Park is a small seaside city on the New Jersey coast.

<sup>20</sup> The 1924 Immigration Act set annual quotas based on a prospective immigrant's country of birth. It was aimed at restricting Southern and Eastern European immigrants, mainly Jews fleeing persecution in Poland and Russia, who had started immigrating to the United States in large numbers in the 1890's. At the end of the war, these quotas were still in place. After the war ended, President Harry S. Truman favored efforts to ease U.S. immigration restrictions for Jewish displaced persons but existing laws had no provisions for displaced persons until Truman issued a directive on December 22, 1945, ordering the State Department to fill existing quotas and give first preference to displaced persons. Still, of the 40,000 visas issued under the program, only about 28,000 went to Jews and between 1946 and 1948, only 16,000 Jewish refugees entered the United States. In 1948, Congress passed legislation to admit more DPs to the United States. The 1948 Displaced Persons Act authorized the entry of 202,000 displaced persons over the next two years but within the quota system.

<sup>21</sup> Harry S. Truman was the 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States (1945-1953). He succeeded to the presidency on April 12, 1945 on the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and was president during the final months of World War II. He was elected in his own right in 1948.

<sup>22</sup> On July 9, 1949, Helen and her family left Bremerhaven, Germany aboard the USAT General Eltinge. They arrived in Boston, Massachusetts on July 18, 1949 and headed to Loraine, Ohio.

<sup>23</sup> Helen married Isak Weingarten in Germany in 1945-1947. In 1948, their son Salomon was born.

<sup>24</sup> An initial selection process took place upon arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Selection (German: *Selektion*) is the term the Nazi regime used to describe the process of choosing victims for the gas chambers in the extermination camps by separating them from those considered fit to work. Josef Mengele was an SS physician who earned the nickname the 'Angel of Death' in Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was notorious for being one of the physicians who sorted newly arrived prisoners on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, picking out those he wanted for his medical experiments—especially twins. Many survivors recall being selected by Mengele, but caution should be used as a number of German physicians were present in the camp and took turns performing the selections at the arrival ramp. Various medical staff was also involved in the routine selections of prisoners during roll call. Those prisoners regarded as unfit for labor because of terminal exhaustion or sickness would be sent to the gas chambers or otherwise murdered.

**John:** Let's go back earlier. When things started to change in Germany in 1933, you were about nine years old.

**Helen:** Yes. I didn't know.

**John:** Was there any change at all? What were you aware of in Romania? Did that affect Romania?

**Helen:** I don't know the name because I was a little girl at that time, but somebody was running for president.<sup>25</sup> The Jewish people said he was not a good man. At that time, they killed Jewish people already. They put them in kosher butcher shops—hung them up . . . dead people. This is what I remember when I grew up.

**John:** This was in the 1930's?

**Helen:** Around there. I was a little girl. He wasn't elected. Somebody else was.

**John:** Do you know anything else about that? Did your parents tell you . . .

**Helen:** Not much. They didn't know either.

**John:** There were just people hanging in butcher shops?

**Helen:** Kosher. They killed the people and hung them up. That's what I remember. It wasn't much to remember. I don't even know when my mother's birthday was. She was too busy talking to us, raising her children. My father she kept a birthday. It was the second day of Passover.<sup>26</sup> Other than that, they were busy people. We were busy kids growing up. That was my life.

**John:** When did things start to change from normal? What types of things started to change? When the war started . . .

**Helen:** I was a kid. We didn't know much what was going on really. I don't know . . . maybe somebody had a paper.

**John:** On *Kristallnacht*, you were 14?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Even before Romania fell into the orbit of Nazi Germany, Romanian authorities pursued a policy of harsh, persecutory antisemitism—particularly against Jews living in eastern borderlands, who were falsely associated with Soviet communism, and those living in Transylvania (the region where Helen's family lived), who were identified with past Hungarian rule. It is unclear what political candidate Helen is referring to and no record could be found regarding the hanging of Jews in Ujbocko's or Kretshnif's kosher butcher shop, but high-levels of political tension and antisemitism undoubtedly were evident even to a child in the 1930's.

<sup>26</sup> Passover is an eight-day holiday that celebrates the anniversary of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage.

<sup>27</sup> On November 8 and 9, 1938, the Nazis started a state-sponsored nationwide pogrom. Across Germany (and in 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 pogrom was called '*Kristallnacht*,' which means 'Night of Broken Glass,' because of all the damage done to Jewish shop windows.

**Helen:** *Kristallnacht* was in [Germany]. That is when it started there. *Kristall* . . . night. They killed the . . . Germans. I think. I didn't know much about it.

**John:** There wasn't a whole lot of news or radio?

**Helen:** No. We only knew sometimes . . . In 1944, two girls came from Slatina, where we were in the ghetto. They walked home maybe 20 miles from there and passed by, and told us, "There is something wrong. They are taking Jews together in a place." They didn't even know what, but they escaped. That's all we knew about that. Then we got into the ghetto.

**John:** When the war started in 1939 . . .

**Helen:** In 1939, I was about 14 or 15 . . . We didn't know much.

**John:** The war didn't affect Romania at that point?

**Helen:** No, not us. We were just every day the same thing, living there.

**John:** Until 1944, after the first four or five years of the war . . .

**Helen:** We still didn't know much.

**John:** It didn't affect the economy or anything like that?

**Helen:** No. If you worked, you made a living. My father worked all the time.

**John:** Did Romania have any kind of Jewish laws or restrictions?

**Helen:** We had to wear a star on the arm.<sup>28</sup>

**John:** What was that like for you?

**Helen:** We knew already something was going on. This is when we believed that something is going on. We had to wear the star. Then we had to have papers.<sup>29</sup> This is when I [learned when] my mother and my father was born. We went to the courthouse. We needed papers. Then I knew my mother was born in 1886 and my father was born in 1885. That's all I knew about their birthdates. They were—like I said—too busy talking to us. We didn't ask any questions.

**John:** When you were walking around with a yellow star . . .

**Helen:** Everybody walked around with a yellow star.

**John:** Did the non-Jews treat you any differently then?

**Helen:** No. They treated us different before that. The same thing . . . They knew.

<sup>28</sup> As early as May 1938, Hungary had adopted comprehensive anti-Jewish laws and measures. In 1941, racial laws that were modeled on Germany's Nuremberg Laws were introduced. Among other provisions, the laws defined "Jews" in so-called racial terms, forbade intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, excluded Jews from full participation in various professions, and restricted their opportunities in economic life. Until the German occupation in March 1944, however, Jews were not required to wear yellow stars.

<sup>29</sup> In the summer of 1941, Hungarian authorities required all Jews in the area to obtain valid Hungarian citizenship papers.

**John:** Who were the people enforcing the rules?

**Helen:** Gendarmes used to come around once in a while.<sup>30</sup> [They were] like police, but they didn't do nothing. There was no crime really because the Jewish people just lived together in the same street, doing the same thing—what you're supposed to do. No, they didn't . . . They treated us the same.

**John:** When did the Holocaust begin for you?

**Helen:** In 1944.

**John:** What was the first thing that happened that told you that something was definitely wrong?

**Helen:** When they took us. There came an order . . . first, in 1942, there was an order about 500 Jews they have to have to get together.<sup>31</sup> They sent them away. They never came back. We found out that they killed them somehow. Then in 1944 . . . We still had 2 years after . . . Then came the order for the rest of the Jews to pack up and leave. That's when we came in [to the ghetto].

**John:** So you grabbed what you could and headed to the train station?

**Helen:** No, they took us to the schoolhouse. This is where they gathered all the rest of the Jewish people . . . until everybody was there. They had a list of names. After that, there were trucks, I believe, that took us to the ghetto across the bridge. We had water going . . . and you crossed the bridge—it wasn't long. This is where we got together. They put us in houses.

**John:** Did they tell you what was going to happen?

**Helen:** Nothing.

**John:** No other instructions?

**Helen:** Nothing.

**John:** What was day-to-day life like in the ghetto?

**Helen:** I worked there. Everybody had a little job. They didn't bring in food. For some reason . . . I don't know what happened. I don't remember. The people used to cook something. I

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<sup>30</sup> During World War II, Gendarmerie were the Hungarian police force whose job was to maintain order in the Hungarian countryside. They were additionally responsible for carrying out the regime's anti-Jewish policies. After the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, the Gendarmerie was charged with putting the Jews in ghettos. As Jews were forbidden from leaving the ghettos, Gendarmerie guarded the perimeters. Gendarmes had a reputation for brutality. Individual gendarmes often tortured Jews and extorted personal valuables from them.

<sup>31</sup> Towards the end of the summer of 1941, 496 Jewish residents of Kretshnif who had not obtained Hungarian citizenship papers were deported to Kamenets-Podolsk—a city in the present-day western Ukraine—and murdered.

worked in a big city called Maramarossziget.<sup>32</sup> That's in Hungarian. I worked there. It was by a family that moved from us away to there. I worked there. Something happened . . . I can't remember what happened. We left and we went home before Passover in 1944.<sup>33</sup> This is when it happened. When we were in the ghetto, we got a package from that family who was still in Maramarossziget, at home. They sent a package with food. I don't know why it got there. We had some food to eat.

**John:** What was the approximate date? Do you know at all when the ghetto period was?

**Helen:** It was early March to June [1944] . . . end of February I think it was when they took us away. [In the] middle of June, they took us to Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>34</sup>

**John:** Your whole family was together until that point?

**Helen:** All the time.

**John:** What was the day like when they told you to leave? How did that work?

**Helen:** We just left. There was nothing . . . They came with their guns. When we got to Auschwitz-Birkenau, they told us to take off our clothes. When you come from home, you don't do that. They went up on a long table—quite a few—with machine guns, and said, “If you don't take clothes off, we will kill you right here.” Everybody took clothes off. Everybody got a dress. They took us to shave. We didn't want to go. They said they'd kill you right then and there, so we go. They had the power, the authority. We didn't.

**John:** Talk a little more about those five days on the train. What do you remember?

**Helen:** Kids were crying. Babies were crying. We were there about 100 in a cattle car [with] no facilities. A pail was there for . . . Then one day, the train stopped. There was another train on the other tracks that threw in sandwiches. They somehow knew that little window was there. They threw in the sandwiches. It was . . . the people there . . . a little piece [was] better than nothing. That was the five days travelling.

**John:** Were you able to see out the window at all?

**Helen:** Nothing. It was dark.

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<sup>32</sup> Sighet [Hungarian: Maramarossziget; known today as Sighetu Marmatiei] is a town in northwestern Romania, near the Hungarian and Ukrainian borders. By the age of sixteen, Helen had completed her education and moved to Sighet, where she studied sewing for a year before returning home to her family to work in a weaving factory. Sighet is approximately 10 kilometers (6 miles) southwest of Bocicoiu Mare.

<sup>33</sup> In 1944, Passover was the week of April 8-15, around the time Helen's family was confined to the Slatina ghetto.

<sup>34</sup> Between May 15 and July 9, 1944, around 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary in more than 145 trains. Under the guidance of German SS officials, the Hungarian police carried out the roundups and forced the Jews onto the deportation trains. Most were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and murdered upon arrival.

**John:** What condition were you in? There was no water either?

**Helen:** Very little. [We were in] very bad condition. Some people passed out. Some people just [died]. It was very bad.

Then we had another travel from Auschwitz to Nuremberg five days and five nights. What did they give you? In Auschwitz, we got a little bread [for the trip]. It was called ‘Army bread’ or something. <motions off camera> It was about this long and this wide. We just did every day a little piece to last the five . . . We didn’t know how long it was going to be, the traveling.

**John:** When the door first opened in Auschwitz -Birkenau, what was your impression of what was going on?

**Helen:** I thought people were crazy, walking around . . . [There were] shaved people . . .

**John:** Did anyone talk to you?

**Helen:** No, nothing. We just came out of the trains. They said, “Leave the luggage. We’ll get it to you in the rooms.” Like in a hotel. That was it. That’s when they went to the crematorium—my mom, my dad, my sisters, my brother, their children.<sup>35</sup> One [sister] had four children and my brother had two little girls. Gone.

**John:** They shaved you and gave you clothes?

**Helen:** One dress. Not clothes—one dress.

**John:** What happened right after that?

**Helen:** Nothing really. We just walked aimlessly. We didn’t know where we were. We didn’t know what was happening. Once a week, they took us to the shower and gave us another dress. Nothing.

**John:** Were all the people in the barrack from the same countries or were they all mixed together?

**Helen:** Mixed. Different countries. Our toilet was one long room with cement things and holes. Men was going up and down. Whoever needed to do . . . it was nothing. We were animals. They really made animals out of us.

**John:** At what point did you start working there?

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<sup>35</sup> Both of Helen’s parents, her older brother Morris, her older sister Rachel, and Rachel’s four children were sent to the gas chambers upon arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Another sister, Frida, later died from disease in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**Helen:** We were in a barrack and they told us to get out. They needed 50 women. We went out and worked. Then we came back and somebody else went out. We worked the whole time. Many of the times we were like nothing.

**John:** Where you with your sisters the whole time or did you get separated?

**Helen:** I was with my four sisters together. We were holding hands.

Of course, there was a lot of bombs falling on Nuremberg [and] on Auschwitz-Birkenau too. But they didn't bomb us. We had shrapnel . . . They came from some place. Then in Nuremberg, we used to have bunkers. They took us in the bunkers. When we came out, the barracks were gone—all burned.

We lived like animals. A piece of bread that big <Indicates a small piece of bread off camera> for the day and a small baked potato. That was the daily food for us.

**John:** Do you remember what the camp sounded like when you were outside?

**Helen:** Just looking. Doing nothing. Just looking. Transports came in every day from different places. We were all praying, like holidays. We had a prayer book. A transport came in and they threw in a prayer book. We did what we were supposed to do because we were Orthodox people.

**John:** Everyone in that barrack was Jewish?

**Helen:** All of them. One night, we looked out. They took gypsies. They were old men, and young men, and children, and babies, and bigger ones . . . I was wondering, "How did those people survive with their kids?" Our people didn't survive. One day, they killed them all. They cleaned them up.<sup>36</sup>

**John:** How did you know that?

**Helen:** It was empty. Then we found out they cleaned them up. They killed them all. The place was empty next to ours. Our places were like a street, all with electric wires. The wires were about six feet tall, maybe taller . . . Then there was this much <motions off camera> rope or something away from the electric fences. If you went closer, you were dead. A lot of people,

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<sup>36</sup> Among the groups the Nazi regime singled out for persecution on so-called racial grounds were the Roma, Sinti and Lalleri (Gypsies), whose fate was parallel to that of the Jews. Some 23,000 Gypsies in the Greater German Reich were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At least 19,000 died there. Uniquely, entire families were housed together in a special compound that was called the "Gypsy family camp." In the spring of 1944, camp leadership decided to murder the inhabitants of the Gypsy compound. After transferring as many as 3,000 Roma capable of work to Auschwitz I and other concentration camps, the SS killed the remaining inmates on August 2, 1944.

[especially] the mothers that they took away the children . . . you saw them on the fences, dead. They wouldn't survive.

**John:** How did it affect you to see death?

**Helen:** You stepped over them. We figured if we survive today, we are not going to survive tomorrow. You took it like it was supposed to be like that. That was it.

**John:** Do you remember any of the smells?

**Helen:** It smelled from the chimneys. It smelled like humans. The [smoke] looked to me like human figures coming out from the crematoriums. We had, I think, about six or eight crematoriums. They needed a lot of crematoriums because there were a lot of people that had to be eliminated.

**John:** What did the women talk about at night when it was sort of quiet?

**Helen:** They talked of home, of food, of being hungry . . . When we got to Nuremberg, we had already a little bit more food than in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

After Nuremberg, they took us away to Mehltheuer [Germany].<sup>37</sup> We weren't finished yet. In Mehltheuer, we were about six or seven weeks. We worked in another factory. I don't know what we made. We made pieces like . . . They looked like hatchets, [like] when you chop up something . . . pieces of steel. They used them for something. I don't know for what. I worked at four machines. From there, they wanted us away. We didn't want to go. This is where the place was—Mehltheuer.

<End Disk 1>

<Begin Disk 2>

**John:** Do you want to continue what we were saying about the extreme anti-Jewish mentality?

**Helen:** Yes.

**John:** The butcher shop scene that you mentioned . . . that was before 1933?

<brief discussion off camera>

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<sup>37</sup> Mehltheuer is a village in eastern Germany near the border of Poland. It is approximately 150 kilometers northeast of Nuremberg. Mehltheuer became a sub-camp of the Flossenbürg concentration camp in September 1944, when a former net and curtain factory in Mehltheuer was converted into a factory producing various parts for the Vomag AG company from nearby Plauen. The factory grounds were fenced in and equipped with guard towers. A prisoner group of 200 mostly Polish women and girls from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp arrived in December. The prisoners were housed in the company's warehouse, a shed, and on the top floor of the factory, in whose lower rooms they were brought to work on machine tools. The camp was expanded on March 9, 1945 when 146 female prisoners arrived from the closed-down sub-camp at the Siemens-Schuckert Werke in Nuremberg.

**Helen:** Yes. I was a little girl. This is what is in my mind. It never left my mind.

**John:** It sounds like they had a very strong hatred toward Jews before Hitler's influence.

**Helen:** They was always against Jews, always. I told you when I went to school and was a little girl, they used to call after us, "Lazy . . . lousy Jews," and all those names.

**John:** *Lusta zsidó* [Hungarian: lazy Jew]?

**Helen:** But we passed a church and my mother told us, "Don't look at the church. That's not Jewish, Orthodox." That's what I remember. And we didn't [look]. One time I peeked. I saw chandeliers and I saw a lot of . . .

**John:** You briefly mentioned that Romania had a king.<sup>38</sup>

**Helen:** We were under a king. Hungarians were coming back. My mother used to say, "Don't ask for a better king or whoever, because you never know who you're going to get." King Carol wasn't for the Jews. Somehow, he left and the Romanians left. Then the Hungarians came back in. We welcomed the Hungarians with a big sign [that read,] "Welcome." This is when they said, "Hitler is coming upon you Jews . . ." This is when we found out first what, something he said . . . made some sense what's going to happen. And it did. Then the Germans came in.<sup>39</sup> The Hungarians gave us over to the Germans no problem.<sup>40</sup>

**John:** Did your parents ever discuss that things were getting tougher and tougher and "Maybe we should leave or do something"?

**Helen:** Nothing. My father was in the United States two years before the First World War. He left my mother with a little girl. [He was going] to take her out [of Romania] to the United

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<sup>38</sup> Until 1938, Romania was a constitutional monarchy under King Carol II, who had assumed the throne in 1930. The 1930's were marked by social unrest, high unemployment, and strikes. Nationalist parties and the fascist Iron Guard grew in popularity and political rivalries soon put the country on the verge of civil war. At the outbreak of World War II, a royal dictatorship was in place and Romania adopted a position of neutrality. After Romania lost about 30 percent of its territory (mostly gained after World War I) to the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Bulgaria in 1940, the increasingly unpopular King Carol II was forced to abdicate. Although his son Michael I assumed the throne, a coalition government under General Ion Antonescu and the Iron Guard came to power. On November 20, 1940, Romania formally joined the Axis powers.

<sup>39</sup> Hungary suffered tremendous losses on the Eastern front in 1942-1943. Recognizing that Germany was likely to lose the war, Hungary began negotiating an armistice with the western allies. To prevent losing the territory, German forces invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944.

<sup>40</sup> Despite antisemitic restrictions and the execution of some 20,000 Jews who had not obtained Hungarian citizenship in 1942, most Hungarian Jews were spared deportation prior to the German occupation of the country in 1944, as the Nazis did not directly control the internal activities of their allies and Hungary had initially refused to deport its Jewish population. After German occupation, Hungarian authorities began to systematically deport the Hungarian Jews. In April 1944, Hungarian authorities ordered Hungarian Jews living outside Budapest (roughly 500,000) to concentrate in certain cities, usually regional government seats. Hungarian gendarmes were sent into the rural regions to round up the Jews and dispatch them to the cities, where makeshift ghettos were established. None of these ghettos existed for more than a few weeks and many were liquidated within days.

States after he established himself. But my mother had her mother and she wouldn't leave her mother. My mother had four brothers in the United States that came before the First World War. My father didn't like it here. It wasn't kosher enough. I don't know. He came back. That's what we were told.

He came back and went to the Army. I don't know which Army it was then. It must have been under Austria-Hungary.<sup>41</sup> He was a paramedic. I'm repeating [the story I've already told you]. He knew a little bit of what to do if a child gets sick. We had a country doctor also. The hospital was about ten kilometers [six miles] away. A few of my sisters had appendicitis.<sup>42</sup> They cleaned it up there. Other than that, it was just making a living.

**John:** Before you were all taken away, what plans did you have for your adult life? You were about 18, 19 or 20.

**Helen:** None because we are not going to live. We knew we were not going to survive.

**John:** Even in the early 1940's . . .

**Helen:** In the 1940's.

**John:** Before . . .

**Helen:** Before? No. We were okay. We were working. I had a job.

**John:** What were you expecting for your adult life?

**Helen:** Not much. Just come in and take it as it is. That's it. We took it. They took us and destroyed our lives.

**John:** Did you finish high school or the equivalent?

**Helen:** Nothing. We didn't have high school. You had to go to the city for high school. [We had] just elementary school. I went to the United States school. When I came here, I was twenty-five. I went to night school a couple of years. I learned to spell, write a letter, read, and understand, comprehend everything. I do okay.

**John:** Let's go back to Auschwitz-Birkenau again. We're jumping around a little. Who were the leaders in the block?

**Helen:** Okay. We had SS women.

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<sup>41</sup> Austria-Hungary, also known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was a constitutional union of the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary that existed from 1867 to 1918, when it collapsed as a result of defeat in World War I. Austria-Hungary was one of the Central Powers in World War I. During that period, the region Helen's family was from belonged to Hungary.

<sup>42</sup> Appendicitis is inflammation of the appendix. If the inflamed appendix is not surgically removed, it usually ruptures, causing a fatal infection.

**John:** Were they German or Polish?

**Helen:** They were all German, but I understood [them]. The food . . . We had soup [in] Auschwitz-Birkenau. Everybody had a little bit. They were SS women.

**John:** What were they like?

**Helen:** If you did anything wrong, they killed you. There was no other way. Auschwitz-Birkenau was a death camp. You don't survive from there. I don't know how we survived. When some people ask me, "How did you survive?" I tell them G-d had a plan for me, for us. I got married. I had two children. I got three grandchildren. I got one great-grand baby. That's why he let me live. I still believe in G-d.

**John:** When were you closest to death?

**Helen:** Every day. There was no day to say, "I'm going to be saved." Nothing. Because you couldn't escape from the electric fences. The SS were in the [guard] towers watching everything. We just didn't . . .

One time, we were in the factories. I was with a sister in one factory. My two other sisters were next [to us] in another building. The bombs were falling. They took us in the basement. Being in the basement, we were [along] the wall. The pressure from the bombs threw us to the other wall in the same building. When it was over, it took two hours for people . . . They knew there were some people here in that factory. It took two hours to make a . . . the windows or whatever, to pull us one by one from the factory. When I was out already and walking to the place where we were sleeping, I saw the building where my other sisters were on fire. They survived.

Then there were people . . . We were kind of young and inexperienced. People were on bicycles there. They wanted to know . . . Maybe if we would have told them . . . We were not supervised at the time. If we had told them we were in a concentration camp, maybe they would have helped us escape. But we didn't say nothing because we were afraid.

**John:** Can you think of any times where you had to make a decision that saved your life? Where there ever moments where you thought, "Either I go this way or that way. Either I say this or I don't say that"?

**Helen:** No. You had no say in nothing. You were just an animal there. When they took us out from Auschwitz-Birkenau, going to the right to the crematoriums and those people came . . .

Had they come a few minutes later, we would all have been gassed. This is how we were saved then.

**John:** Maybe explain that. I don't think you've said that yet.

**Helen:** We were 500 girls taken out from Auschwitz-Birkenau. They told us, "500 girls." Most of them we knew each other from *der Appell* [German: roll call], [when they were] standing outside counting us. When they took us out from Auschwitz-Birkenau, [they] took us to the right to the crematoriums. SS, of course, took us. You couldn't escape there. Then two SS people—men—came and stopped us. We were walking to the crematorium. They took papers to show to the SS that those people are going to work. We were chosen. We were rented. I don't know how. The Siemens company got us.<sup>43</sup> They took us, turned us around. We went to the train station. They put us in the cattle cars. This is how we survived Auschwitz-Birkenau's crematoriums.

**John:** That was the day you all went to Germany from there?

**Helen:** Yes.

**Ruth:** How do you feel about Siemens Company?

**Helen:** They made good on us. After [the war], we found out we worked for the Siemens Company and made our papers. They didn't pay us enough . . . The Siemens didn't take us to the concentration camps. They needed our work for the war. Like I said, I worked on motors for airplanes for Siemens. But they did pay us some money after the war.<sup>44</sup> We found out we worked for Siemens, we made our papers, and they gave us some money.

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<sup>43</sup> Founded in 1847, today Siemens AG is a German conglomerate company headquartered in Berlin and Munich and the largest industrial manufacturing company in Europe. Private German companies—such as Messerschmidt, Junkers, Siemens, and I. G. Farben—were integrated into military preparations during World War II. These firms relied on forced laborers to meet their production quotas. In late 1944, at the height of World War II, Siemens' total workforce of 244,000 included some 50,000 people who had been put to work against their will in numerous factories across the Reich. The Siemens-Schuckert Werke in Nuremberg was a subcamp of the Flossenbürg concentration camp. It existed from October 18, 1944 to March 6, 1945. It was the only Nuremberg subcamp that held Jewish women as forced laborers. Company representatives had chosen the Hungarian women and girls aged 14 to 40 in Auschwitz-Birkenau. 593 women were transported from Auschwitz-Birkenau on railway cattle cars with inadequate food. Only 550 were registered up on arrival in Nuremberg. They were registered with Flossenbürg identification numbers from the series 55573 through 56290.

<sup>44</sup> As a result of negotiations by the Jewish Claims Conference and several firms, a few of the women received financial compensation from Siemens at the beginning of the 1960's. Then In 1999, in response to numerous class action lawsuits, the German government created a foundation with assets of approximately \$5 billion. Siemens AG was among the companies who contributed (\$12 million) to the funding of the foundation. Slave laborers used by German industrial companies in World War II could apply to receive a lump sum payment of between \$2,500 and \$7,500. When final payments were made at the end of 2006, over 140,000 Jewish survivors from more than 25 countries had received payments.

**John:** When you all left Auschwitz-Birkenau, did you know vaguely where you were going?

**Helen:** Nothing. They didn't tell us nothing. When we were in Nuremberg, Germany, the bombs were falling day and night. Our camp was across from a cemetery.<sup>45</sup> They couldn't bury enough people. [Civilians] that lived there [were] bombed, and got killed, and we still survived.

**John:** What kind of a camp or facility was that?

**Helen:** Just a barrack with single beds and mattresses from straw. It was okay. We were always in the bunkers because the bombs were falling. This is where we worked filling up the big holes.<sup>46</sup>

**John:** Craters?

**Helen:** Yes.

**John:** Was there a name for that particular place in Nuremberg?

**Helen:** Nothing. We found out it was Nuremberg. I told you—we were animals. We didn't see a paper. We didn't read nothing. We didn't know nothing. Whatever happened, every day the same thing.

<off camera conversation>

**John:** Was there ever any contact with people outside the camp?

**Helen:** No, of course not. I don't know if they—the people living outside [the camp]—knew what was happening. I don't know.

**John:** Did you have the striped uniforms? What kind of clothes did they have?

**Helen:** My husband . . . I have someplace a paper to show you . . . My husband had the striped suit. I still have the paper. I got it the other day from California from a cousin. They wore [uniforms]. You knew [prisoners] is what they were. We wore the same thing, just a dress and that's it.

**John:** Did you have an identification number?

**Helen:** Yes. When we came into Auschwitz-Birkenau, the numbers they didn't do anymore—the tattoos.<sup>47</sup> But we had a number [sewn onto the chest of our uniforms]. It was 4-4-

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<sup>45</sup> The Siemens-Schuckert Werke camp was established in Katzwanger Strasse opposite the main entrance of the southern cemetery. It was a barracks camp surrounded by barbed wire. Some of the women worked in the camp, while others were taken to factories in the northern part of the city. More than 200 women did not work. The prisoners were employed shifting heavy iron pieces, removing rust from metal, or put to work on production lines.

<sup>46</sup> The Siemens-Schuckert Werke camp was destroyed in bombing raids at the end of February 1945 and the prisoners were transferred to a school close to the main railway station. They were used there to remove rubble.

8-5-5.<sup>48</sup> I remember the number that I had on my dress: 4-4-8-5-5. That's about 70 . . . How many years?

**John:** That would be a hard thing to forget. How long did the Nuremberg phase go on?

**Helen:** We were glad to go away from there after they took us away because the bombs were falling. First, we knew they were going to bomb, because they came and they made pictures. Some planes were going by. That's what they told us. I don't know why they bombed our place because we were the Jews there. Afterwards, they took us away because the Americans were coming closer or some Russians. I don't know what happened.

In Nuremberg, in the bunkers, we met American soldiers. They were captured somehow. We couldn't communicate, but they had a map and they said, "Russian here. American here." A little information we got from them. When the Americans came in, they took right away the captured soldiers with them.

We were going away.<sup>49</sup> They took us away to Mehltheuer. That is where we were liberated.

**John:** Where was that town approximately?

**Helen:** Near Plauen [Germany].<sup>50</sup> I don't know. We didn't have any geography, or any knowledge, or anything. We lived like animals.

**John:** Was that a town, or a camp, or a factory?

**Helen:** It was in a factory. We lived in the factory. It was a small community. Down [stairs or down the street] were tracks with German soldiers. We were in the factory upstairs on the

<sup>47</sup> During the Holocaust, concentration camp prisoners received tattoos only at one location: the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex. Tattooing was introduced at Auschwitz in the autumn of 1941 for Soviet prisoners of war. In March 1942, tattoos were used to identify prisoners at Auschwitz II (Birkenau). By the spring of 1943, the SS authorities throughout the entire Auschwitz complex adopted the practice of tattooing almost all previously registered and newly arrived prisoners, including female prisoners. Prisoners were given tattoos on their forearms of their camp serial number, which was also sewn onto their uniforms. Only prisoners selected for work were registered and given serial numbers; those that were sent directly to the gas chambers were not registered or given tattoos. In order to avoid the assignment of excessively high numbers from the general series to the large number of Hungarian Jews arriving in 1944, the SS authorities introduced new sequences of numbers in mid-May 1944. It is not clear why Helen did not receive a tattoo.

<sup>48</sup> On October 18, 1944, Helen was registered in the Flossenbürg camp system as Helene Freumovits. Her prisoner number was recorded as 55851 on page 273, reel number 1 of the database of prisoners interned in the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp—a list compiled in the 1950's to use as evidence against camp administrators and guards being put on trial for war crimes.

<sup>49</sup> On March 3, 1945, during the chaos of an air raid, 144 prisoners were sent to Mehltheuer. The remaining prisoners were sent to the Holleischen camp.

<sup>50</sup> Plauen is a town in east-central Germany, situated near the border of the Czech Republic. It is approximately ten kilometers (6 miles) southeast of Mehltheuer.

third floor. One time, I was looking out the window and a plane came as close . . . almost as [low as] the building. They were shooting at the train, at the German soldiers. We were . . . We still survived. We didn't know what was happening. I can still see the plane open up a door or something on the plane and shooting out the train where the soldiers were.

**John:** When you were back in Auschwitz-Birkenau, were you ever aware of any kind of underground activity or information passing? No gossip?

**Helen:** Nothing.

<conversation off camera>

**John:** What kind of Jewish life, if any, did you all have?

**Helen:** Nothing. We had a prayer book. We knew approximately when a holiday came. We were praying there. On *Yom Kippur*, we didn't have any food but we were fasting.<sup>51</sup> On *Yom Kippur*, they burned more Jews than ever—on the holidays.<sup>52</sup> We found that out.

**John:** You said earlier that you believed in G-d . . .

**Helen:** I still believe.

**John:** It's maybe a delicate subject . . .

**Helen:** My husband didn't because he was four and a half years [in the camps] and he lost his whole family. When my children were born, I educated them in Hebrew. [They went to] Hebrew school, and Sunday school, and whatever they needed to be educated. I know how to read Hebrew and I know how to write a Jewish letter because my mother made sure that we know.

**John:** Did your beliefs give you a sense of purpose or that you'd be saved? What did that belief . . .

**Helen:** <shaking head to indicate "no"> We couldn't be saved. I don't know how we were saved. We were just waiting every day to be transported to the crematorium. Dr. Mengele came everyday and took people from us.

**Ruth:** I'm sorry to interrupt, but were you ever angry at G-d?

**Helen:** We just asked where he was. That's what we did. We said, "Where is G-d? Where is he?" Six million Jews and he let them all just be . . . Hitler. He committed suicide after. Who

<sup>51</sup> *Yom Kippur* [Hebrew: Day of Atonement] is a 25-hour fast day and the most sacred day of the Jewish year.

<sup>52</sup> In many cases, the Germans planned deportations and other operations so that they would coincide with the Jewish holidays.

knows? I don't care. I don't know. But all the Jews! Six million Jews. So where was G-d? That right. That's it. The questions were there, but there were no answers.

**Ruth:** How do you live with the fact that there's no answer? What do you make of that?

**Helen:** I've got two children that I pray for them to be well and happy. I got three grandchildren and the same thing. And I have an itty bitsy little two-year-old [great-grandchild]. That's it. I wouldn't talk against G-d because I'm superstitious. I'm afraid. I just don't want to say nothing.

**John:** Was there any sense that some people were more worthy of staying alive? Often after a tornado or some traumatic event, people say, "Well, G-d saved me. It's a miracle," and that sort of thing.

**Helen:** It was a miracle that we are alive. It is a miracle. Maybe—just maybe—he thought that he'd let so many people go and just save a few. Thank G-d we are multiplying. We are. We're having babies and they have babies. The Jewish population is coming back, I hope. I know. My sisters have children. My brother has children.

**John:** Going back to that last factory where you were. How long did that period last before liberation?

**Helen:** Just about six or seven weeks. From there, they wanted us to leave and we didn't want to go.

**John:** Sounds like March and April 1945?

**Helen:** Yes.

**John:** They were going to march you out?

**Helen:** Yes, away from the liberation places. When we were liberated . . .

**John:** How could you talk back to the soldiers or the SS?

**Helen:** No. It was a *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder], a woman who spoke German.<sup>53</sup> We didn't [speak German]. She was like a foreman. They made her a foreman to take care of us. She explained that they wanted us to leave and we are not going to go.<sup>54</sup> Let them kill us here. They were going to kill us anyway.

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<sup>53</sup> The *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder] was a German Jewish woman named Eugenia Lerner, who had mistakenly been recorded as Polish on the transport list. Other survivors credit her with maintaining a level of order among the prisoners and equitably distributing rations.

<sup>54</sup> After the war, Lerner testified that she had personally seen orders the camp commandant received shortly before liberation. According to the orders, he was supposed to lead the prisoners into a nearby forest and shoot them all. He told Lerner he would not do it.

**John:** It was her decision to say that?

**Helen:** She talked to the SS. That didn't help us. Her name was Lola Zwiklinska.<sup>55</sup> After 70 some years . . .

**John:** Was that a Polish lady?

**Helen:** Yes, a Jewish Polish lady.

**John:** So you just stayed there until you heard . . .

**Helen:** Until the Americans came in.<sup>56</sup> The SS people stayed and put candles in the windows. They lit candles and put it in the windows so that there was not going to be fire. Then the tanks came in.

**John:** When you realized, "The war's finally over today," what was that like for you?

**Helen:** That was happiness. That's when we were talking about life, future, things that we were going to do.

**John:** After liberation, did you go to a hospital? How did the recovery phase happen?

**Helen:** That was another story. After liberation, we were . . . the Allies and the Russians divided places.<sup>57</sup> [They said,] "That will belong to the Allies and that's going to be Russian." We were nine girls and three or four boys who were liberated and stayed in this place. An American officer came and said, "All girls have to leave because the Russians are coming to take over and we don't want . . . They like the girls. They can rape you. They can . . . Just come." They took us away from there.<sup>58</sup>

Then we wound up in Rehau, Germany, on the border across the place from the Russians.<sup>59</sup> We were in Rehau. We lived there. This is when I got married. This is when I had my baby.

**John:** How do you spell that town?

**Helen:** R-E-H-A-U.

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<sup>55</sup> This seems to be a reference to an SS guard rather than the *Lagerältester*. Other survivor testimonies include references to one particular female SS guard who was particularly brutal and was nicknamed "Zwiklinska."

<sup>56</sup> American troops liberated the camp on April 16, 1945.

<sup>57</sup> From 1945 to 1949, Germany was occupied by the Allied forces and divided into four administrative zones by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France and the United States. Much of southern Germany fell within the American zone and included the cities of Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Stuttgart, and Nürnberg.

<sup>58</sup> On May 1, 1945, the women were taken to another camp, the Rentzschmühle on the Elster River, which had been set up as a hospital.

<sup>59</sup> Rehau is a Bavarian town in eastern Germany, near the border of the Czech Republic. Rehau is approximately 12 kilometers (7 miles) southeast of Hof, where a large displaced persons camp was established after the war. Altogether about 600,000 refugees were processed in Hof, with 23,292 of them staying in Bavaria.

**John:** Was that Germany?

**Helen:** Yes, that was in Germany.

**Ruth:** Was that a Displaced Persons camp?<sup>60</sup>

**Helen:** An apartment. We got an apartment. In those days, the Germans gave you an apartment. They knew that something happened. We deserved something. We got an apartment.

**John:** What were the interactions with the German civilians like after the war?

**Helen:** They gave us food. They gave us clothes. They gave us everything. And apartments. They gave everything because they figured we deserved something.

**John:** How did you feel towards them?

**Helen:** You can't describe how you feel because . . . I still feel bad about the Germans. I still do. When I hear something about Germany . . . We had a speaker, a rabbi, where we live here. For some reason, he chose to speak about Germany. I don't know why. I walked out and I never go to hear him. He comes every month. I don't want to hear him. That's the way we feel.

**John:** Was there any urge for revenge or to yell at them after the war?

**Helen:** They were still the Germans. We were still a minority there. You couldn't do nothing—just live and they let you live. They gave you food, clothing . . .

**John:** Was there any kind of organized help at the time, like the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration <sup>61</sup> or Jewish groups?

**Helen:** A lot of people came from Poland.<sup>62</sup> We had a place—a displaced persons place. We were in an apartment. The people that came from across the borders stayed there until they got their apartments. We were about 80 people in that little community. It was nice.

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<sup>60</sup> When hostilities ended on May 8, 1945 in Europe, as many as 100,000 Jewish survivors found themselves among the 7,000,000 uprooted and homeless people classified as displaced persons (DPs). In a chaotic six-month period, 6,000,000 non-Jewish DPs, who had been deported to Germany as forced laborers for the Nazis, wandered through Germany and Eastern Europe toward their homelands. The liberated Jews, who were plagued by illness and exhaustion, emerged from concentration camps and hiding places to discover a world in which they had no place. Bereft of home and family, and reluctant to return to their pre-war homelands, these Jews were joined in a matter of months by more than 150,000 other Jews fleeing fierce antisemitism in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Russia. Allied forces established temporary facilities (DP Camps) across Germany, Austria, and Italy to house DPs.

<sup>61</sup> The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was founded in 1943 to provide economic assistance to European nations after World War II and to repatriate and assist the refugees who would come under Allied control. UNRRA managed hundreds of displaced persons camps in Germany, Italy, and Austria and played a major role in repatriating survivors to their home countries in 1946-1947. It largely shut down operations in 1947.

<sup>62</sup> The Soviet defeat of Germany in Eastern Europe led to a tremendous geographic shift in Polish territory and, ultimately, to the establishment of a communist dictatorship in Poland which was largely antisemitic. After a surge of anti-Jewish violence in 1946, over 75,000 Jews streamed out of Poland into the Allied-occupied zones in Germany, Austria, and Italy.

- John:** All of your [four surviving] sisters?
- Helen:** Yes, and Holocaust people—survivors.
- John:** What are the names of those [four surviving] sisters?
- Helen:** Goldie, Ester, Helen, and Perl, and Erwin, my brother—he’s still alive, thank G-d.
- John:** What was day-to-day life like in that apartment?
- Helen:** Nothing. We just lived. We had parties and we had dances. Just normal activities.
- John:** How did you go about becoming human again?
- Helen:** It didn’t take too much. You were liberated. You were a human being again. It didn’t take much.
- John:** How did you trust people again?
- Helen:** Just the Jews. We were with the Jews.
- Ruth:** Helen, while you were in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the other places, how did the Jewish people generally react to each other? How were the relationships? Were they always good or were they under stress?
- Helen:** We were always under stress but nobody talked about nothing else but food. We were always hungry there. That’s about it. Everybody was in the same boat.
- Ruth:** Were they supportive or did people just not pay any attention to you?
- Helen:** Not paying attention to nobody. They were for themselves. They walked around aimlessly, everybody. They didn’t know where they were, what they were doing, what they were going to do, nothing.
- Ruth:** Did you make friends with other women or just your sisters?
- Helen:** No, we made . . . We slept on those little . . . we called it “beds” . . . lumber. We were sleeping there and, sure, we talked to the people.
- John:** Did you feel you could open up to other people or were you always keeping your distance?
- Helen:** You didn’t open up because they had the same thing. They were going through the same thing as I did and the rest of us.
- John:** How much did people help each other if somebody was sick, or hurt, or fell down?
- Helen:** They took them away to the crematorium. There was no problem. I knew I was next, so I wasn’t worried. I wasn’t scared. I knew I was next.
- John:** Was there ever any stealing or fighting?

**Helen:** There was no stealing, no fighting. There was nothing to steal from. Nothing. They had nothing and I had nothing.

**Ruth:** You were saying there were no decisions you could make—you couldn't say "yes" and you couldn't say, "no." So right after liberation, when you finally started to become a human being again, how did you know how to make decisions?

**Helen:** It comes natural to you. We got material. We went to a dressmaker. She made our clothes. We went to a store. We got some money from the Germans—*Marks*. We started a normal life.

**Ruth:** Did you feel hopeful or were you depressed?

**Helen:** Hopeful. Depressed was something else. The depression is still on because I still have nightmares. I'm running [and] they are taking a way a baby of mine. That's the depression, but we did make it . . . We were hoping.

**John:** When did you meet your husband?

**Helen:** In 1946.

**John:** In that town?

**Helen:** He came back from Poland. He looked for family. I think he found a sister. He came back and he was in that place where they organized for the displaced people that came from other places. He stayed there. He got an apartment. We met at dances. We got married.

**John:** What was his name? Tell us a little about him.

**Helen:** His name was Isak Weingarten. He was . . . We were waiting till . . . We wanted to go to Israel. But when we got married and I got pregnant . . . They wouldn't take pregnant people on the ships. You know what happened with the . . . They turned around. They turned away the ships.<sup>63</sup>

Then I had family in the United States. We wanted to come here, but like I said before: the quotas were [full]. Then Truman became president. We started to work and we made our life here.

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<sup>63</sup> Helen is likely referring to the *Exodus 1947*, a ship that left France on July 11, 1947 carrying Jews intent on entering Palestine. At the time the British, who had restricted entry, controlled Palestine. Most of the passengers were Holocaust survivors who had no legal immigration certificates to Palestine. Following wide media coverage, the British Royal Navy seized the ship and escorted it to the port of Haifa. The passengers were put on three different ships and returned to France. When they got there, they refused to get off and went on a hunger strike. The British government refused to back down. Further negotiations resulted in them being sent to DP camps in Germany. The women and children got off voluntarily but the men had to be removed forcibly. Eventually most of the refugees made it to Palestine via Cyprus, illegal smuggling, or legal immigration after Israel became a nation.

**John:** What did Israel or Palestine mean to you?

**Helen:** It meant a lot. When my son was born [in 1948] this is when the state was born—Israel.<sup>64</sup> We had celebrations. We marched in the street. We were singing and dancing—just happy. We had a state, a country.

**John:** You left Europe in 1949?

**Helen:** We came here in 1949. Yes.

**John:** There were four years you stayed in Germany. What were those first years in Germany like?

**Helen:** Nothing. We lived there. We were happy. We were alive. There were no crematoriums for us, no SS anymore. We were alive. We lived. They gave us clothes. They gave us material. We went to dressmakers. We had shoes. We had everything.

**John:** How did you go about leaving? What was the final point? You came to America because the quota came through . . .

**Helen:** I had an uncle. I came to an uncle. He signed the papers for me. He had a friend whose name was also Weingarten. [With the help of] the two of the families—we were related to the Weingartens—we came to the United States. We got an apartment and we got jobs.

**John:** Which city did you get to first?

**Helen:** Loraine, Ohio.<sup>65</sup>

**John:** Ohio. That's where your uncle was?

**Helen:** My uncle had a lumberyard there.

**John:** What are your first memories of being in America?

**Helen:** No language, of course . . . no money. The apartments at that time were rent controlled, which is low rent. My husband got a job in the steel factory because he didn't speak any English—none of us did. Then we started to learn. I went to school.

**John:** What condition was your husband in? You said he was in the camps for four and a half years.

**Helen:** Four and a half years, yes.

**John:** What was he like at the end of the war?

**Helen:** Same thing.

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<sup>64</sup> May 14, 1948 is considered the day Israel became a state.

<sup>65</sup> Lorain is a city in northeastern Ohio on Lake Erie, approximately 30 miles (48 kilometers) west of Cleveland.

**John:** I mean mentally more than physically.

**Helen:** Mentally, yes . . . Well, you had to make . . . You have to live. You have to start living.

**John:** Can you tell us a little about his story briefly?

**Helen:** All I know is that he was [in the camps for four] and a half years. He was in a lot more places than I was. I never knew him before. I only met him after the war.

**John:** Which city was he from originally?

**Helen:** He was from Sosnowiec, Poland.<sup>66</sup> He was born [in 1912] in Niwka [Poland], in a little community.<sup>67</sup> Then he moved to Sosnowiec with his family. They killed his parents just like mine. Then he didn't believe in G-d. It bothered me a lot, but I kept it going with the children, with Hebrew school, with Sunday school, with holidays, with Temple, with synagogues . . . I did that.

**John:** What was his personality and attitude like?

**Helen:** He didn't care. He just didn't care about it because [he felt,] "What did G-d do for me?" That's the way he was.

**John:** In Ohio, he was working in the steel factory and you had one child?

**Helen:** I had one child in Ohio because we didn't know where we were going to be. [My husband] was older than I was. That's the way it was. Everybody tried to make a home.

**John:** How much did the locals reach out to you and try to make you feel at home?

**Helen:** Here in the [United] States?

**John:** Yes, in Ohio.

**Helen:** They welcomed us. There was a committee.

**John:** Was there any kind of a Jewish community there?

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<sup>66</sup> Before the war, about 31,000 Jews lived in the southern Polish city of Sosnowiec (about one-third of the general population). After occupying Sosnowiec on September 4, 1939, the Germans began persecuting the Jewish population. The first Sosnowiec Jews were sent to labor camps in October 1940 and until August 1942 there were periodic transports from Sosnowiec to various labor camps. The first series of deportation of Jews from Sosnowiec to Auschwitz-Birkenau was between May and August 1942. Between August 1942 and March 1943, there were three major roundups and another wave of Sosnowiec Jews were transported to labor camps. The resettlement of Sosnowiec's Jews was completed by March 1943.

<sup>67</sup> Niwka, Poland is a small village in present-day southern Poland. It is approximately 140 kilometers (87 miles) east of Sosnowiec and 75 kilometers (46 miles) east of Krakow.

**Helen:** Yes, the Jewish community welcomed us. They had a lady president there [that] belonged to *Hadassah*,<sup>68</sup> to the Sisterhood<sup>69</sup> . . . a *life* life.

**John:** Were American Jews any different than the Jewish life you knew in Europe?

**Helen:** Sort of. I don't know if they were different because I left when I was young. Here, I came and I was older. I didn't know the language, and I didn't know where I was, and how it's going to be . . .

**John:** How did you communicate with people those first few years?

**Helen:** A lot of people spoke Jewish and a lot of people spoke Hungarian, which I did. I spoke Polish. Czechoslovakian I knew but I don't know anymore because I haven't used it in so many years. I can't use Rumenish. I went to a Rumenish school and I didn't speak Rumenish [after the war]. I forgot it. But I speak Hungarian, I speak German, I speak Jewish, I speak English now . . . I can communicate in Polish and a little bit of Hebrew . . . Just a little here, a little there . . . I could get by wherever I would be.

**John:** [What about] the differences between American culture, American society, American people, and Europe.

**Helen:** It is different.

**John:** What differences did you notice when you were adjusting here?

**Helen:** It is a lot different. The people are nice but that has nothing to do with . . . It's a different life. You have to adjust wherever you go. When you are in Italy, you do what the Italians do. We did exactly what we were supposed to do. They approached us for *Hadassah*. We joined. They approached us for Sisterhood when the kids started Sunday school. We joined the Sisterhood. We joined the synagogue. We did everything that [other American Jews] would do. Then we learned to speak the language. When the child gets to play outside, he comes in with "yes" and "no" and all those little things. You learn. Then you have television.

**John:** How much did the people around you know of what you and your husband had experienced?

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<sup>68</sup> *Hadassah*, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, is a volunteer organization founded in 1912 by Henrietta Szold, with more than 300,000 members and supporters worldwide. It supports health care and medical research, education and youth programs in Israel, and advocacy, education, and leadership development in the United States.

<sup>69</sup> Sisterhood refers to a group of women in a synagogue congregation who join together to offer social, cultural, educational, and volunteer service opportunities.

**Helen:** Some people didn't care to listen and some people wanted to know. I lectured in the synagogue—there was a lot of people there—and in a couple of churches, high schools . . .

**John:** This was back in the 1950's or more recently?

**Helen:** I've been here . . . In Fort Lauderdale [Florida], I didn't.<sup>70</sup> In Clearwater [Florida], I still lectured once because I came from Ohio.<sup>71</sup> In Ohio, I lectured a few places.

**John:** When did you leave Ohio?

**Helen:** Twenty-six years ago.

**John:** You stayed in Loraine?

**Helen:** In Loraine, Ohio. Thirty-seven years.

**John:** That's when you went to Fort Lauderdale?

**Helen:** My son had an office in Clearwater. My husband needed bypass surgeries and all that. He needed to walk and in the winter, we couldn't. [My son] said, "Dad, come." I said, "I'll have to see." I wasn't crazy about Florida at first. I had hot flashes. That wasn't for me. But to save my husband's life, I came. He retired at that time. We came to Florida. When he passed away and my son moved away to Saint Petersburg [Florida], I came to Fort Lauderdale.

**John:** Had you been back to Europe over the years?

**Helen:** Not Europe, no. I went back to Ohio. I went to two weddings, three *bar mitzvahs*, and a *bat mitzvah* . . . from the family.<sup>72</sup> I went from Florida.

**John:** Since 1949, you haven't wanted to go back to Europe?

**Helen:** No. There was nothing for me to go back to.<sup>73</sup> My brother—the one who passed away—went back and he said, "The house is gone. They took everything apart from the village. There's nothing left." So why would I go? I've got friends in New York that went home.

<sup>70</sup> Fort Lauderdale is a city on Florida's southeastern coast, 28 miles (45 km) north of Miami.

<sup>71</sup> Clearwater is a city located on the Gulf of Mexico in Florida, northwest of Tampa and St. Petersburg.

<sup>72</sup> A *bar mitzvah* [Hebrew: son of commandment] is a rite of passage for Jewish boys aged 13 years and one day. At that time, a Jewish boy is considered a responsible adult for most religious purposes. He is now duty bound to keep the commandments, he puts on *tefillin*, and may be counted to the *minyan* quorum for public worship. He celebrates the *bar mitzvah* by being called up to the reading of the *Torah* in the synagogue, usually on the next available Sabbath after his Hebrew birthday. A *bat mitzvah* [Hebrew: daughter of commandment] is a similar rite of passage for Jewish girls aged 12 years and one day according to her Hebrew birthday. Synagogue ceremonies are held for *bat mitzvah* girls in Reform and Conservative communities, but it has not won the universal approval of Orthodox rabbis.

<sup>73</sup> According to a 1941 census, Hungary, including the recently annexed territories, had a Jewish population of 825,000—less than 6 percent of the total population. About 63,000 died or were killed prior to the German occupation in March 1944. Under German occupation, just over 500,000 died from maltreatment or were murdered. Some 255,000 Jews, less than one-third of those who had lived within enlarged Hungary in March 1944, survived the Holocaust. About 190,000 of these were residents of Hungary in its 1920 borders.

**John:** How do you suppose you are different from other immigrants who did not experience that? How is the Holocaust background different?

**Helen:** Than regular people?

**John:** Than just being an immigrant starting in a new country?

**Helen:** It's nothing different. No, what happened to me happened to me and what happens to you happens to you. Wherever I came . . . In Ohio, I made friends. In Clearwater, I made friends. In Fort Lauderdale, I left friends. Here I made a couple of good friends. I always make friends wherever I am. Everybody would say, "Oh, you're going to move? You're going to make friends. You're easy to make friends [with]." I am.

**John:** What qualities do you suppose you had that allowed you to get through that critical year [in the camps] from 1944 to 1945 . . . beyond just luck?

**Helen:** I don't know. Luck. That's all. Luck and a miracle after. Just luck. I said before: Dr. Mengele touched me everyday, [turning me] around to see if I [was healthy enough] for work, which I was. Young people worked. I did.

**Ruth:** What did it mean to you when you had your first child?

**Helen:** I loved it. It was happiness. It was just one of those things that you can't explain because it's something that you lived to see . . . to have a baby. You didn't believe that before. You couldn't believe it.

**Ruth:** When you were learning to be a mother, did you miss not having your mother to teach you? What were the thoughts you had during those years?

**Helen:** I was very sick when I was pregnant with my children. With my daughter, I was three months in the hospital. I had thyroid problems and they didn't know. That was 60 years ago. With my son, it was probably the same thing, but after the three months I was okay. I had the babies. I think I did a good job. One is a doctor and one is a teacher.

**Ruth:** Did you talk to them about your experiences when they were growing up?

**Helen:** Not in the beginning. They were about 10 or 12 years old. I just couldn't do that—to put it on them to know what their mother went through or their father. But they told me they heard it from other people. If I didn't tell them, somebody else [would].

**Ruth:** Did you and your husband have similar or different views about teaching your children about the war?

**Helen:** My husband . . . I taught my children in Hebrew school and Sunday school, which he didn't care. He said, "You do good in high school and college and make something of your self—what we didn't." [They] did. We put them through colleges.

**Ruth:** He was interested in them getting the education that had been denied to him?

**Helen:** Yes, that's right.

**John:** What kind of education did you continue once you came here?

**Helen:** I went to night school to learn. First, I had to become a citizen. You needed some history. You needed to write a little bit, spelling . . . I learned that and I learned the comprehension . . . You live here and you learn. I did the best I could. I'm not a scholar, but it's enough for me. What I need, I have.

**Ruth:** What do you think about being in America?

**Helen:** Oh, G-d. You don't know. If you are not coming from there, you don't know how to appreciate America.

We had a friend. She taught me how to play *Mahjong*.<sup>74</sup> One time, we were in her van—she picked us up to go play. We were talking about something. I said, "Here, I live like I'm a millionaire." She stopped the station wagon. She was about 300 pounds. She started to laugh and couldn't stop because [I said] I'm a millionaire. I have a refrigerator. I have a television. I have a toilet indoors—not outside. Excuse my talking. I have a toaster. I have all those little things—a washer, a dryer—that you don't [think] about. It's just there. When I told her all about what I have that I didn't have, then she understood.

**John:** I'm curious. You said you haven't had any desire to go back to Romania? Isn't there any kind of nostalgia for your youth, where you think, "This is where I grew up?"

**Helen:** Nothing. Three-quarters of the people I knew are dead. The rest of them are in New York, or Cleveland [Ohio], California, or Florida . . . No. I have no desire.

**John:** Do you feel Hungarian or Romanian?

**Helen:** I feel a Jew. That's all. I have no desire. Never have. Now I don't travel any more. When my daughter moved to Atlanta, I came about fifty times. I flew in from Ohio and from Florida to visit. Then she met this young man—an Atlanta boy—and got married and had a

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<sup>74</sup> *Mahjong* (also spelled 'mah jongg') is a popular game that originated in China, played by four players using tiles with Chinese characters and symbols.

beautiful wedding. I came here. I didn't come to Atlanta. I came to her. I don't know about Atlanta [Georgia]. Now I live here and I still don't know Atlanta.

**Ruth:** Helen, you've said that you've spent a lot of time and energy and it's important to you to speak to groups of students about your experiences. What do you want them to learn about your experiences? What do you try to tell them?

**Helen:** They have to know what happened to the Jews and to me [for] being a Jew—for nothing else, just for being a Jew. They have to know . . . It can't happen again. We don't know. They have to know what happened. Maybe they can prevent something. I don't know. We didn't. Everybody says, "You didn't have a gun? You didn't shoot back?" No, you didn't. I hope that they learn from me not to have to go through something like this.

**John:** To what extent do you think the Germans and the rest of Europe are genuinely remorseful and have changed? How much do you trust that?

**Helen:** I don't trust them. I don't even trust the Hungarians because they did the same thing. They told [the Germans], "Take the Jews." They took the Jews. Everything—like little babies—the Germans told them what to do and they did. I don't trust them either, but the Germans I never will trust. Everybody has to know what the Germans did to us.

**Ruth:** Why do you think they did it?

**Helen:** Because we were Jews. I don't know why. [Hitler] wanted to just eliminate the Jews. That's it.

**John:** How about the Romanians and Hungarians? That was separate from Hitler.

**Helen:** The Hungarians weren't so [great] either. I lived with the Hungarians because the Romanians wasn't long there. Nobody liked the Jews—nobody—but some people just kept it to themselves and some people just did it.

**John:** Do you think it was because Jews do not believe in Jesus?

**Helen:** Maybe it was because we don't believe in Jesus . . . I don't know. Maybe they said we killed Jesus. You know that story.

**John:** With your Orthodox Jewish upbringing, did they ever talk about that there is this 2,000-year-old hostility? What did they teach on that?

**Helen:** No. We were taught that Jesus had nothing to do with us. He was a Jew also, but [the sentiment was,] "We don't believe in Jesus and that's it." My mother, my father, everybody in

my village, nobody believed in Jesus. Maybe that did it. Who knows? They just wanted to eliminate the Jews.

**Ruth:** One thing that I wonder: You grow up sensing that people hate you. How do you retain your sense of pride and . . .

**Helen:** You still live there and be with the people. You make business with them. You do normal things.

**Ruth:** But you wanted your children to have a strong sense of being Jewish?

**Helen:** And they do. We had Hebrew school. We had Sunday school. They know how to read Hebrew. They know . . .

**Ruth:** Was Loraine a large town?

**Helen:** No. Now it is large. When we came, it was about 30,000 [people]. Now there's about 200,000.

**John:** What part of Ohio?

**Helen:** Outskirts of Cleveland, [on] the west side.

**Ruth:** It is part of Cleveland or it is its own place?

**Helen:** It's like a suburb. It's away from Cleveland. I would say about 25 miles away, where we lived.

**John:** [Unintelligible name; sounds like "D'monuge"]. He lived right around there some place.

**Helen:** He lived right around Lorain. I remember that. [Unintelligible name; sounds like "Damien"]. I know the name.

**Ruth:** When you think about your experiences now, is there anything in particular that pops into your head? I know when you fall asleep you have some trouble. Over the 65 years since that was over, has anything changed in how you think about it?

**Helen:** Think about what?

**Ruth:** Your experiences during the war.

**Helen:** You'll always think about it. You can't get that out of your system, out of your mind because it was there. It's still there. Thank G-d you didn't have to go through that. Having that experience, it stays with you. It stays.

**John:** How do suppose that makes you different? There are memories, but as far as how you see the world, relate to people, your values . . .

**Helen:** I'm not different. People like me. I like people. When I was in the hospital, they all asked, "How's Helen? How's Helen doing?"

**Ruth:** It didn't make you bitter?

**Helen:** Here? Why would I be bitter here? I live here. I enjoy life here. I'm in the United States. You don't know . . . in America it's . . . People live here. It's not Europe. If you come from Europe, you know how to appreciate here.

**John:** I'm thinking of examples like my dad. He used to hoard food. He always wanted a few months of food stored away just in case. Things so-called 'normal' people wouldn't do.

**Helen:** You mean in Europe?

**John:** Here or things like not wanting to be too openly Jewish. There aren't any Nazis here but you do not want to be too openly Jewish because you never know what is going to happen.

**Helen:** You can be Jewish here openly.

**John:** I don't know what's right or wrong, but there are individual reactions.

**Helen:** I have no idea what people think. If somebody doesn't like me, it's okay.

**Ruth:** You're going to be you.

**Helen:** I'm still me.

**John:** Did your husband think that you were naïve or just unusually optimistic?

**Helen:** No. He lost a lot of people.

**John:** So did you.

**Helen:** Yes, but I was young. He was older. He was about 13 years older than I was. I thought, "Maybe he'll take care of me." I needed a home. But that's not important now. No. He also came from a strictly Orthodox [family]. In Europe, they didn't know anything else. He lost everything. His thinking was different than mine.

**Ruth:** Can you think of an example of how he reacted to something in a way that was different than how you did?

**Helen:** He didn't want to go to the synagogue. We used to fight. He came with me.

**John:** So his convictions changed where yours more or less stayed consistent?

**Helen:** Not exactly stayed [the same]. I was Orthodox. I'm Conservative now.<sup>75</sup> He was Reform.<sup>76</sup> Now you know. He would go to Friday night services at the Reformed *shul* [Yiddish: synagogue]. I went with him just to go.

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<sup>75</sup> Conservative Judaism is a form of Judaism that seeks to preserve Jewish tradition and ritual but has a more

**Ruth:** He still wanted to be part of the Jewish community?

**Helen:** Yes, he did. He wanted to be part and we did. We belonged to a synagogue. I'm still a member of *Hadassah*—a life member in Ohio—and the Sisterhood. We all did that.

**John:** To bring up the Israel connection again: What's your opinion on the complaint, "Why should we have to pay for what Hitler did to you people?" The folks in the Middle East say, "What happened to you was your problem. We don't have to pay for it."

**Helen:** They don't pay it. Germany is paying for it.<sup>77</sup> They have their own problems there. Germany is . . . not everybody gets . . . I get a pension. My husband couldn't get a pension because . . . something went wrong. It's not important now. But I get a pension now [for] working in the ghetto, money. I got vacation money. They approved already for this year [some] vacation money. They pay, but how long are they going to pay? Another ten years? That's it. People are dying out—including me. I'm 87 years old. How long do you think I'm . . .

I went for an ID Tuesday . . . First, I didn't get it two weeks before. Then my daughter took me. I needed the citizen papers with me. She says, "Do you need it for five years? \$20. Or, eight years? \$30." I said, "Give me for the \$20. I don't know if I'm going to live for five years first. Then I have time to make it after."

That's the way you think. You are here. You are normal people here. Not everybody is normal. Okay. Let's put it this way—people have problems. Everybody has problems.

**John:** When you watch news from the Middle East of everything in the last 60 years . . .

**Helen:** It affects me like it affects you. Same way.

flexible approach to the interpretation of the law than Orthodox Judaism. It attempts to combine a positive attitude toward modern culture, while preserving a commitment to Jewish observance. They also observe gender equality (mixed seating, women rabbis and *bat mitzvahs*).

<sup>76</sup> Reform Judaism is a division within Judaism especially in North America and Western Europe. Historically it began in the nineteenth century. In general, the Reform movement maintains that Judaism and Jewish traditions should be modernized and compatible with participation in Western culture. While the *Torah* remains the law, in Reform Judaism women are included (mixed seating, *bat mitzvah* and women rabbis), music is allowed in the services and most of the service is in English.

<sup>77</sup> Between 1945 and 1947, the Allied governments enacted various legislation dealing with reparations to be paid to the victims of Nazi oppression. The Jewish Agency presented the first official claim to the Allied governments in September 1945. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) was established in October 1951 to help with individual claims against Germany arising from the Holocaust. The Claims Conference initially recovered \$100 million from West Germany, with direct compensation to Holocaust survivors paid in installments. 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.

**John:** What does it do to you to see scenes of bombs, and shootings, and arguments on and on?

**Helen:** The same way as you do.

**John:** What's your view, though?

**Helen:** I'm for Israel a million times, not a hundred. It hurts me when I know an Israeli child gets killed. It breaks my heart because we don't have a lot. They have a lot—the other countries. I care nobody should get killed, but if [somebody] has to be killed, let them be killed instead of our kids. You got an opinion? It's an honest opinion. I hope you didn't tape it!

**Ruth:** We like honest opinions.

**Helen:** Yes. Everybody has a different opinion.

**Ruth:** Are you worried about people forgetting about the Holocaust? You mentioned—and it's true—that the Holocaust survivors are . . .

**Helen:** They're not forgetting.

**Ruth:** But they won't be around forever.

**Helen:** No, but that's why we are lecturing, that's why I have this paper, that's why we have the tape. I made a tape about three or four years ago and it's in every Holocaust place—Washington [D.C.], New York, Miami, wherever.<sup>78</sup> There is a tape.

**John:** How would just knowing the history prevent it from happening again in some other form?

**Helen:** I can't explain that . . . to prevent it from happening again. Who knows that? I don't.

**Ruth:** Do you think the world has learned anything?

**Helen:** Who knows? I don't know. A lot of Jewish people didn't want to hear about it.

**John:** Why?

**Helen:** I don't know. They just didn't want to hear about it.

**Ruth:** Do you think that's changed?

**Helen:** I don't know. I doubt it.

**John:** Nobody likes to hear horrible things, but do you think there is any other reason?

**Helen:** If you are a Jew, you know what a Jew went through. A lot of people know [and] and a lot of people don't—Jewish people, I mean.

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<sup>78</sup> The USC Shoah Foundation recorded Helen Froimowitz-Weingarten's testimony in 1998. The video can be viewed onsite at many institutions around the world using interview code 42563.

**Ruth:** That must hurt.

**Helen:** It does, yes. But what do they know what I went through? Nobody knows really. You can't know . . . Nobody can know unless the ones who went through it.

**John:** Imagine that 100 years from now, someone is going to be in a museum watching this. You're talking to the future—three generations from now. What would you want them to know?

**Helen:** I hope they will remember people who went through it, and feel something, and saying, "Hey, I'm a Jew." That's what I want them to know, because the Jews . . . Something is happening. It's going a little bit under. The Jewish language is fading a little bit. One hundred years from now, who knows?

I'll tell you something: since I speak English—and people tell me my English is pretty good—I'm forgetting. I can't express myself in Jewish anymore the way I used to because if you don't use it, you lose it. And I don't use it. But I still use it with my children.

**John:** What language do you think in?

**Helen:** American English. To my children . . . they speak Yiddish, if they have to. They understand everything. I'm still speaking to them in Yiddish on the telephone . . . because I don't want them to forget what they learned during their lifetime.

**John:** Their roots.

**Helen:** Yes.

**John:** Thank you very much for telling us the story.

**Helen:** I was glad to do it. I hope I did something valuable to whoever is going to see it.

**John:** You did.

**Ruth:** Thank you.

<End Disk 2>

**Interview Ends**