

Maria Devinki Testimony Transcript

I am Maria Devinki.

Interviewer: Maria, how about we start by having you paint a portrait of what your life was like before the war.

We was a family of three children and my parents living in a small city in Poland named Wodzisław. We come from pretty much religious family. My father was very much involved more in religion than anything else. My mother operated a business - was certain merchandise we couldn't get in that small city. She was importing all those things from different countries like Germany, Czechoslovakia and other small places where we couldn't get this. We was making a very nice living. With three children, very comfortable, two brothers and me.

Have a brother... My oldest brother was 22 when the war broke out. I was 19. My youngest brother was 15. We all finished school as much as we possibly could. And the last few years before the war was a little critical because Jews didn't have the same privilege to attend *Gymnasium* or University. So I finished my two years of *Gymnasium* and I had one more year to go able to be a mathematics teacher and that was forbidden already for me. I couldn't do it so I stepped in and helped my mother to operate her business. My brother finished. He was an accountant and he was working for a factory and that was making parts for building supply parts in nature of chrome, brass...that type of material. He was also a young man what he was very religious, but he was accepted because he very good in mathematics. I went to two schools, I went to a Hebrew school with the name *Beis Yaakov* - this means the House of Jacob - until I was 19 until 1939, when the war started. We was good students. We had a lot of friends. We had Jewish friends, we had non-Jewish friends. We lived in an area where not, basically, a lot of Jews was living. It was a main street.

In 1939, September 1, the German army took over our city. From that day on, everything changed. My friends, the closest friends who we attended school all through the years, the non-Jewish was afraid to be any longer close enough with us. They tried to separate themselves. We felt like we [had not] done anything wrong, we not changed. We the same people, what happened? We was too young to understand. It's going to be... there's a change in the world. But, we was doing our best to continue to operate the business until the German Army come in and cleaned everything out. Come in with a truck. It was September 1, 1939, took over. Three months later, before Christmas - it was before Christmas or Christmas time - they come over with trucks and they need all type of merchandise. Whatever a merchant had on hand they took out from the store and they didn't even say thank you. They just loaded up, and one was standing there with a gun, to my mother, "stay away, don't touch it." If she want to take like coffee or tea was very expensive in our city. And we had this by the bulk. She want to take a little bit away to save for us - you hold the gun to her - "Don't touch it. Go away." We didn't

know that it's such a rule that you can take it without money. So we argued, and before you know, I stand in front of her. I says, "Why don't you let her take it?" I was speaking good German. "Why don't you let her take this? It's for the children." He give me two slaps on my face.

And after this we really didn't have too much left. But that was not the worst part of that. After a while they decided that we live in a too good of a neighborhood. Jews shouldn't live in that neighborhood. We had to move in the back where our janitor was living. That was other side from the complex, and give those units to the Army or to whoever was assigned. So it was seven people had to move in in a two room apartment. We stayed there for another three, four months and then they come in and took my two brothers. They send them to Sędziszów. This is a station, a railroad station, to walk on the tracks. After a while, they come back every morning and took out from each house, if there was young people from 16 to 25 to work on the streets. There was not paved streets in our city. It was those brick, the round stones, let's say this way. So the men was putting in the stone, the women was throwing in the cement, every day eight o'clock in the morning. We have to concentrate on our block of 20, 30 girls and whatever men and do that kind of work till the middle of '41.

In '41, they start coming in with trucks, and taking out the men and send them away. We didn't know where they went to work. They said it's a camp, they have to work. One is in ammunition places, one is in whatever places they send. We didn't know even where our two brothers are. We discovered this later, very much later. Then Skarżysko, Skarżysko was a camp, was not a death camp, was a working camp and they was working. The end of '41, they start taking women for certain things. And a disease broke out in our city - typhus. So they cut off the ghetto from the city and put all the sick people in the ghetto with the well ones, which just Jewish ones. So they assigned every student to take care of those sick people. We have to go every morning to wash them. They was afraid to go near it. They would come in and kill them, but they was afraid if they go in that section, they might get sick with the typhus. So they assigned us to go in to wash them, change them, feed them if any food was available and this was going on for two, three months. Some died. Some was killed and naturally, we have to bury. That's the group that was left - city was a small city, the group was left, not sent out to camp, had to take care of the sick and the dead and whatever disaster in the city. We had to do this. And we was like nine girls, friends we all went to school, and the biggest part of our job was to do this. And when we was through with this, every Friday night they went to another house, and took out one of those girls. Saturday morning we heard so and so was killed. She's in front of the house. The next Friday night they did this to another one - eight of them, all eight of them I lost.

I was the only one left. I was left - I went in hiding. Had a friend, a non-Jewish friend, and he make me papers. And I had the Red Cross band. So when I was wearing the ... my Jewish Band - Mogen David - I crossed on this the Red Cross band on top of it. This way I could go out in places where they didn't know me well and buy food or exchange something or

do something else or work for somebody. Even clean a house or cook or something to bring home to my parents. I was the only one left, so I decided I'm not going to be here too much longer because maybe next Friday, it's time for me.

I went to Krakow. It was a city 56 miles away from our city. I stayed in Krakow. I went to work there - and also on those papers as not a Jewish person. I worked in a restaurant. I worked in a hospital. After a while, I was afraid what happened to my parents. My brothers were not home any more. So, I got back home. I got back to the city and it was quiet. We didn't hear any more of those killings. There was no more young, young people my age any longer there. The majority was already sent out to all kind of work. So finally, whatever was left, a few men, all the younger they took back to the railroad to that station. And I was one of them. And I worked there till 1942.

In 1942, we heard in September, there was one time they come on the trucks and took as many as they could, but we didn't know. We thought all those people go to work. They'll come back next week or next month or whatever. In 1942 there was a police, a Jewish police - they called them like they're controlling the area where the ghetto is - and they give them the information to us what to do, how to live and when they need us. And one particular night, one of those policemen said it's going to be a clean-up. A completely *aussiedlung* of that city. I had a friend, actually it was my boyfriend, my husband. We was hanging around for years. He come to me, to Sędziszów... he was working in a different area, and he come to me to the railroad station, and he was telling me that news and he said, "We have to do something."

I says, "What do you want me to do?"

He says, "We have to get married."

I says, "What is the big deal now to get married? My parents are not (my father was already, I forgot this) my father's not around anymore, my two brothers are not around anymore. What do I care to get married?"

He says, that much might save us, because they say that younger married couples have a better chance than the single. So I thought to survive you do everything. So, we got married, four, four couples got married the same night. After that happened, that was the 20th of September. Three days later, the German Gestapo come into the city and it was 8 o'clock in the morning they went door to door whoever was living in the ghetto, knocked on the door and old, young whoever was left out, out, out. I see my grandfather 83 years old. He had a wife she didn't see anymore, she was already, also in aged. He was holding her. They didn't know why she don't walk so fast, because she couldn't see. So, they knocked her down walking out from the door. She fall on the floor and left there. They took him on the truck. And so it happened that they had taken out from each house as many as was left. Put on the trucks and that was the end of that city. At that time, I was still working on that railroad. They picked us up from that railroad. They took us to Skarżysko. My brothers was there. My brothers already had enough

knowledge how to do and make life easier they give me advice. They say there's a chance for us to escape. But you have to be patient. Of course, I assigned for the kitchen. Cause I was afraid I'm not strong enough, I'm not sizable enough to work on that heavy job patrolling. So signed for the kitchen. I says I'm a good cook. I'm a good cleaner. I'm this... They took me and I peeled potatoes and I cooked whatever I possibly could do for them. And my brother, the younger one, the 15-year-old got together with one of those main, whoever the... In German I know better what to say. The... you lose the words. The Blockältester – one of those that commanded, what he was taking on his department - and he showed him that he has so many \$20 bills in his boots. He'd let him have the boots, if he let us all three go. He give him his uniform and my brother give him his clothes and the boots - in the boots was five \$20 gold bills. And he put us on a train and we went back to a little city, smaller than the one we left. And somebody from the non-Jewish people was waiting for us, we contact them, and put us in hiding.

In 1943, January, we went into a farm and digged. At that time I was married. There was me, my husband, my two brothers and my mother. We didn't went altogether, but little by little, that Gentile brought us together to that bunker. We digged a square of 10 feet wide and 6 feet deep and we all was hiding in that. In the beginning, was me and my two brother, then my husband, then my mother, then my husband's sister, and two children. We was in that place several months. My husband had lot of money because everything they took out from the store, had a lot of merchandise stored between friends who had textile business also. And those people where he storaged everything, give him as much as he need every month he went there. He was paying to that farmer 10,000 zlotys, here is dollars but, whatever the amount is a month to keep us.

One good day, it was very crowded – we was almost like not sitting but stand up when we was sleeping because there was no air underground. We had to open... the cover was up, a piece of board put together in a square and straw on top, hay, straw, whatever a farmer has in his, in his garages. And we had to lift it up from underneath to lift that little thing a little bit to get some air. Otherwise, the little light what we had- we had a petroleum little light downstairs - went out, by not having enough air to survive. And we seven people survived. We had to sleep there, we had to eat there. If the woman was in a good mood, she brought us down potatoes. She boiled potatoes with the skin for the cattles, for the pigs, for the poultry whatever. So she'd throw down a few potatoes for us if she was in good mood. If she was not, we could wait 2 and 3 days for some food. Everything happened in the middle of the night like 2, 3 o'clock in the morning when we were sure there was nobody on the farms or in the area. We went up and got a little water from it was like water we have to go through like a -what would you call this? It comes out from a spring.

Interviewer: A well?

A well. We have to... And a bucket went down, and we rolled it down and brought up a little water and we shared. The water was the only solution we had every night. We went up and

had some water that would solve our hunger and our thirst. And, of course, this was going on for months and months. I got very sick, my mother got very sick. We didn't think we would survive and we didn't care anymore. It was so uncomfortable and it was so embarrassing. Everything was just like no cleansing, the mice, and everything else was living with us. We slept with them, we ate with them. It was just not even in one word saying I really don't know what makes us how strong a person is. What makes us think it's worth to fight this and to continue and try to survive because every day the Gestapo come in on the farm for food. They need cattle, they need whatever for the army, that was stationed all over in the area. They come in for the food and when they used to come in the first thing they ask, "Any *Jude* here? Any *Jude*? Are any Jews around on the farm?" They was going around and on those areas where they have any kind of suspicions, they put the things from the rifles down to point up or the ground was soft. If it's soft, they'll open it to try to see what's underneath. And a lot of people killed this way - brought them up from the ground. There was a lot of people hide on farms in that particular area. I don't know any other places. So there was not a day, where they didn't show up. And that was our day's waiting for will we survive tonight? Or will we live next day or whatever the case would be.

One good day, the farmer come in... Come in - this was a Sunday. He come in and he said...and knocks on our thing. We didn't open but he said, "I'm Vladic." We opened a little bit the thing. He says I have to talk to you. "What is it?" I just got back from church and they was telling me in church there's rumors on the farm, that I'm keeping Jews. They start living a little more richer than before, because money was coming in every month to an extent he was going around bragging about he was going to build a new house, he was going to tear down what he has. And his wife was going to the city and buying better clothes. It was kind of rumors, suspicions. So, we know after that discussion, we have no chance to stay. So we all pack, dressed as women - men and women dressed as woman and put in some kind of a little cover up and a basket with eggs. Everyone was having a basket with eggs. We had to walk 7 miles at 11 o'clock in the night, we did this. We walked through a post was where some soldiers was stationed in that place. And one - the post was staying in front of it because he have to watch it like a watchman. He ask us, "Stop!" in German. "*Wo gehst du?*" And we all was speaking good German. We said we going from the market. "What do you have?"

"Eggs."

He said, "go ahead." Eggs he didn't need. If we'd have probably said kielbasa or sausage or something else or vodka, he probably would stopped us. But we said eggs, so he let us go. He said, "Go." He didn't know we, whatever we are. We went to that other farm and settled there. We didn't have too much money left. Most of the money went to that farm, that other farm.

And all those things was done by a Gentile who was an army man. He was in the Polish army and the underground. And he did this because I went to - the friendship was they was

doing business in our place in our store what we had in that city. But I went to school with his brother – went to *Gymnasium*. We was close friends and he felt sorry for me. He want to help me. So he was the one to put the whole things together with the farmer and telling him, “I’m overlooking them, and don’t do any harm to them because you’ll be in the same situation they are because I’m going be on their side.” So he kept us as long as he want.

The other farmer, he went to the other farmer. He told him, they don’t have any more money, they’re not going to be able to pay, but I will reward you. They have homes, they have beautiful homes. My husband’s side was very wealthy and we had a beautiful home. Whatever, the war is not going to be forever. And that was already in ’44. If they’re not alive, I will reward you. And that old man trusted him. He says ok I take them. And they build the same things underground and we stayed there till the end of the war.

In the meantime, there was still a shortage and even he needs some money. My older brother went out to the city in the middle of the night, Saturday night, in ’44, April 15th - to get his clothes, he had couple suits, some jackets, some other stuff. Tried to bring it to that farmer, tell him, go sell it. Whatever you get for it, \$10, \$20 something will help you for whatever. And when he went to pick this up a man said, “I buy this suit from you. How much you want?”

He said, “Whatever you give me.”

He said, “I give you \$30.”

“Ok,” he said, “\$30 is better than nothing.” He took the \$30, walked back - tried to come back to the farm. It was 7 miles from the city. He followed him, he killed him and took away the \$30.

By 1945, January, we start looking over, we went upstairs when things we hear – airplanes going back and forth. Three days later, he come down and we heard the planes back and forth on our farm. We didn’t know why and what is all about. Three days later, the 18th of January, he come down, knocks. He said, “You can come out. Everything is ok. I don’t know what’s any Jews around or any of your family or any of your friends, but the Russians are in your city.” Seven miles away. They didn’t come to the farm. They come to the main station, wherever, to take over. We was afraid. We didn’t trust him. We were so scared of everything. Everybody talked to us, but nobody was honest with us. We didn’t want to. We said, “No, we stay here, don’t worry about us. You don’t have to bring us food if you don’t want to. Just leave us alone.”

He said, “I want you to come up and see for yourself.” Little by little my youngest brother went out and he looked around was quiet. You couldn’t hear anybody talking, talking. Everybody was scared. The Russians are here. So he come back, and told us yes, there must be some change because you don’t see any soldiers, any Germans, or whatever. We all got up. We didn’t have any clothes or nothing. It was in January. It was bitter cold. This part of the country

is very cold in the winter time. We didn't have any clothes, because everything we had, in that period of time, deteriorated. And if anything was good, the farmer wanted and we gladly give it because that's all we had to offer. So she give us blankets from the horses, what you cover horse in the night. We cover ourselves up with the blankets. We had no shoes. We walk the 7 miles to the city. We come in the city we find another Jewish family come in. The single men come in from different camp because the camps was not liberated so early. That was later on May or April something – the Spring. But the camps around the area they was working, not death camps.

And we tried to get together and organize a house for all of us to could live together. And we start looking for food. That's number one on the agenda. We knocked on doors. I, myself, went to a friend of mine. It that was the *Burgermeister's* sister-in-law, his wife's sister. The *Burgermeister* is like the mayor here in this country. She was my best friend because we lived across the street. I was living in a main area. And I give her all what I, all my belongings before I left. I said, if I come back, I might look into it and if not, it's all yours. She was my best friend. I knock on her door, she see my face, she thought she seen somebody dead. She almost passed out. I thought she'd feel sorry for me. She says, "No, I don't want you to be. I'm afraid if you here they going to kill me."

I said, "What are you afraid? I understand the Russians are here. The Germans are gone."

"Doesn't make any difference. I don't want you here."

I says, "I don't want anything from you, except give me my clothes – a dress, a coat, a pair of shoes, something." I says, "I just have something to wear."

"I have nothing. The police took everything and I have nothing left and I cannot give you anything."

And I says, "Can you give me a few potatoes?" She took two potatoes in her hand and says, "Take it." (Maria makes a motion with her hands showing the girl threw the potatoes at her.) This was 1945 in January.

We got together the few of us, was 17 – my family, and a couple other people, and my, my husband's older brother and his wife come back – we got 17 people. We got in my brother-in-laws, my sister-in-laws family's house was a big house. It was not occupied. We tried organize and live there until something will happen. Then, of course, we start... I was not good in Russian but my mother speaked Russian because she lived through World War I and she was talking to the Russians and they start helping us and start giving us food and give us some type of organization where we can get clothes and so forth. But, I myself, and my husband didn't think we can remain any longer in that city. We just, we not welcome. Period. Because they was afraid. We left so many our possessions and whatever it is, between friends and neighbors, that

we going ask for everything to give us back. So, we was not welcome. They didn't feel like anybody should ask for anything. We should be dead.

So we packed our stuff and we went to Sosnowiec, which was not far from the German border. We settled there and I start doing some type of transactions with people - buying sewing, buying clothes, selling dresses. Whatever I could. I bought old clothes, fixed it, reselled it, and opened a grocery store. And I was going back and forth to that city, to that small city, buying groceries and bringing them back goods from big cities what they didn't have, like sugar, like cigarettes, like matches. That kind of thing was a shortage. You couldn't get it for no price. So we'd get any type of food for this. We exchanged this.

One good day, my brother and my mother and his girlfriend is still in that small city. I went back to that city and I told my brother, it's no place for you to stay in that small city. There's no future for us here, period. We have to look for some country to go and forget about Poland. We went through too much and you see that it's not just a matter of Germany, that the Germans didn't appreciate us. But now our friends, we raised with them, we lived with them, we went to school with them and we did a lot of things for them and now we see how they feel about us. And he said, "Ok." And I rented a place in Sosnowiec for him and for my mother. I want them to come there. He come with me, looked everything over. He liked it.

In the meantime, he was having business too. He was good mechanical. He bought an old truck and fixed it and went back to cities bought old clothes, old shoes, old things like that and did some adjustment in it and sold it. Made some type of transaction and able to survive. Where I suggest this, he said, "ok, I go with you, we check." And he went with me, and he liked it and he went back home to picked up my mother and his girlfriend. That night, it was May 1, 1945, the A.K. [Armia Krajowa] come in and killed him. He was 21. The AK that was against the Russian, against the German and against the Jews. AK was going all through the war, all since '39. It was an organization against Hitler, against his army. If they could do something wrong for them, they do. They did, of course. They didn't the Communism either, but they occupied the country and they had to live with it. If they could do some harm they did. But the same talking, they didn't like the Jews either. So that was the end of my other brother.

So I was left, me and my mother and my husband from the whole group. We was a family in that whole city of 96 people on my mother's side, and we was left – the three of us. We was in Sosnowiec for a while. I brought my mother there. We stayed there for a while, but I says, "I don't want..." I was making money. I was doing very well. I said, "No, I cannot live anymore in that city, in that country. I have to go. I want to sign up." They was telling me that, the HIAS was telling me that you have two privileges, but how soon, we don't know. You can sign up for Israel. You can sign up for the United States, if anybody will sponsor you. My husband had an uncle in Brooklyn, in New York. He wrote him letters back and forth. We would like for somebody to sponsor us. We don't need any support. We're young. We can work. We can do anything possible. Just sooner is better. Of course, he was trying. He was an

older gentleman from, who knows, from what age and he was trying. He was retired. If you don't have any business you can really not sponsor too many people. We was three people to sponsor.

So we went to Germany – to Regensburg. My son was born in 1946. We stayed in Germany till 1950. We sign for our visa. But this was take time. But we decide that we not going to stay – not in Poland, not in Czechoslovakia, not in Germany. Europe is not any longer for us. We have to go where we will get over with this and get on with our lives if possible. In 1950, our visa come in and they send us to Regensburg, to Kansas City. We didn't know anything about Kansas City. We want to go to New York, because his uncle lives in New York. They say, “No, there is too many arriving to New York and settling there. Say we coming just to visit my family, and they never want to leave, like this is our haven, this is our place.” And everybody for some reason or another had more confidence in that big city of New York. I say, “What I know about New York? What I know about Kansas City? Wherever they send me, it's a city. I'm starting from scratch. Life begins today.”

Source: Maria Devinki video testimony - <https://mchekc.org/portfolio-posts/devinkimaria/>