HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

TESS ETKOWICZ

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Patricia Rich
Date: May 22, 2008

Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

TE - Tess Etkowicz[1] [interviewee]
PR - Patricia Rich [interviewer]
Date: May 22, 2008

Tape one, side one:

PR: This is May 22, 2008 and the interviewer is Patty Rich. Tess, I'm going to start by asking you to tell me where you were born and what year?

TE: I was born in Lublin, Poland in 1924, September the 19th.

PR: Okay, good. And can you tell me a little bit about your family, when you were born, who was in your family?

TE: My parents came from Lublin also, and in 1927 or '28, my family which consisted of four sisters and two brothers moved to Lodz, L-O-D-Z, which was a larger industrial city and that's where we lived to, during the war, till we ran away from there.

PR: Okay. And you were the youngest in your family, you said? You're the youngest?

TE: Yeah, I was the baby of the family.

PR: Okay. And can you talk a little bit about before the war now, like what was life like for your family? Like what kind of work did your father do? Did your mother work? What kind--you know, a little bit about what life was like?

TE: Mothers at that time did not work. Mothers took care of the family. Being we were six children--my oldest brother, after he finished his education, became a rep for a manufacturing company and--very successful. He was in the textile. He was very, very successful. My sisters were going to private high school. The oldest one was more interest in sewing. She was very gifted. She was not interest in higher education but the other sisters did and of course, I was the youngest one, so I had to wait my turn and that's when my brother paid for my private high school till the war broke out. The second brother was, what would you call a rebel. He decided to leave the Poland**,** he didn't like the system there and he went to France. He became a communist.

PR: He became what?

TE: A communist.

PR: A communist?

TE: Right. And in the eyes of a Jewish family that was a horrible thing, so he was there and that's where he lived.

PR: What was the age difference between you and your oldest sibling?

TE: 17 years.

PR: 17 years?

TE: That's right.

PR: Oh, okay.

---

[1]nee Erman.

TE: I was the baby of the family.

PR: So you really were. And how about your father, what did he do?

TE: My father was a sales representative in textile**…**

PR: Oh, okay.

TE: …and he was doing excellent. He was doing very good. He was very respected by his, by the people with whom he dealt. He had clients in different parts of Poland, and he was--I think that's what you call sales representative; practicing merchandise and other people want to--he was doing very--financially we were well doing, very well. Of course mothers in that country did not work and my mother had always a help at home, had a beautiful apartment and like I mentioned…

PR: In Lodz?

TE: In Lodz, yeah, at that time, yeah. My mother had help, full-time, live-in.

PR: And in terms of the Jewish community, were you part of a Jewish community?

TE: Oh absolutely, yes.

PR: What was that like? What was…

TE: My father was very much involved in a Jewish community, and my mother--was, at that time wives and husbands didn't go to the synagogue as much, but Father did. For the holidays was different, it's not like here. But we observed the religion and so on.

PR: Was there a big synagogue in Lodz?

TE: Well it was--the synagogue but not that big. Yes, there was big synagogue, too, but we, my father himself did not belong to big one, but it was across the street in a big house with a few rooms and Father was involved in it and charitable. It was just nice. It was nice.

PR: And as a child did you have a religious education?

TE: Yes, in school I had, we had a teacher who'd come and we had Hebrew amongst our curriculum. We had different, we had Latin, we had German of all the languages and we had Hebrew, and had religion, but basically we had basic education. Which is a very, very high standard education.

PR: And it was in a private school, you said?

TE: Yes.

PR: And what were relations like with your non-Jewish neighbors, prior to the war?

TE: Fine.

PR: Did you socialize together?

TE: No, no, there was no such a thing, no. No such a thing. There was, we had--there were some people lived on the first floor. One woman was taking in the laundry and so on. But like I said we had a live-in maid which treated, my mother treated like a part of the family and so there was no difference. She was not treated like a maid, she was treated like a part of the family.

PR: Okay, good. Did you ever experience any antisemitism before the war, before the Hitler period?

TE: Well certainly.

PR: What kind of things did you experience?

TE: Well you know you walked down the street and you were called *Zyd, Zyd, Zyd*. You know, *Zyd* is a Jew. And they make fun of you, but Jews were not liked in Poland. The Polish people did not like the Jews. There were some of a higher intelligence, higher education, that, that's a different story. But the basic ignorant Pole just thought that the, the Jews killed Jesus and that's, that was enough for them. So the antisemitism was terrible, was terrible. And they would not let be persuaded different, they would let not be taught different and it's a pity because they were going I, it's well my comments. I should not, I should abstain from them.

PR: Okay. Did any men in your family serve in the national army?

TE: I, my, I think my younger brother, the one that went to France, a little bit but not my older brother.

PR: So he was in the Polish army?

TE: Yeah, [unclear] then he left for France.

PR: Okay. So when did you first become aware that there was starting to be trouble that things were, you know, in Europe? When did you first notice that things were starting to change?

TE: I always felt the antisemitism because when you walking the street--and of course the section we lived, it was not exactly, it was mostly Jewish sections, not that you--the people, different people were walking there, there were different people but basically the stores were Jewish, the butcher shops were Jewish, the bakeries were Jewish, so it's was like, let's face it…

PR: Right, right.

TE: …it was not a ghetto or anything of that kind. I didn't never knew what's a ghetto, but the ghetto--the word meant--but they after the time you became aware but the, the fact that you went some place out of this environment, of the section or some place else, you would, you would have hear the word, *Zyd , Zyd, Zyd* and to me that sounded, what's that? I was like flabbergasted. What do they mean by that?

PR: Right. Now do you recall the German invasion of Poland?

TE: Oh yes.

PR: How old were you?

TE: I just turned 15.

PR: And what do you remember?

TE: Horror. Fright, because my daddy served in the First World War and he was talking about it, and how frightened he was. And my mother how frightened she was because they were married. And, and, I was so scared, because I adored my parents and

when I saw the, the frightened look on my father's face, oh I just stood there bewildered and I said if he has to go through that, what will happen to us?

PR: How did you learn about it? Did you experience it or did you read about it in the paper?

TE: About what?

PR: The German invasion of Poland.

TE: The radio, everything…

PR: Okay.

TE: Everything. And my brother run from Lodz to Warsaw. They thought they'd be safe in Warsaw if they [unclear] or whatever. Wrong. [Unclear] much they could do. Warsaw was attacked even harder than Lodz was. It took them longer to get back. So we were more worried about them over there, than in Lodz. It was, it was a terrible experience. So not only we were worried about ourselves but we were worried about him being there. It was a terrible, terrible time. Terrible. So we were just trying to--at least we didn't, well at least, this is the farthest from my thought now which as a kid, I didn't realize too much. At fifteen at that time, you were a kid. At fifteen here, you are grown up, at this era**.** At that era then, you were a child. So we had food, [unclear] Mommy prepared so much food, she put so much things away so we weren't hungry. But we worried what's happened to our brother. He's so far away plus no trains or anything like that, so they would have to walk. But would they be shot? Would they be killed? So when they came home, it was just like a blessing, it was like a blessing. At that time, he was married but they did not have children.

PR: Okay. So then what happened next?

TE: Well, next we stayed on for a little bit in Lodz, and then my father decided it's safer if we'll go away from Lodz because the Germans started acting very badly towards the Jews. And one day I was standing in our apartment at the front windows and I saw how they grabbed a Jew on the street that was wearing the earlocks, the what do you call it?

PR: The *peyes***.**

TE: The *peyes* and they started pulling them and cutting them, little by little, practically not cutting them, practically pulling them or they can pull up to what, pull down rather to cutting them. And the poor guy didn't know what to do. He was screaming and, and people, the Polish people were standing there laughing their head off. And I was standing behind the curtain and I was crying, what could I do? I was just a kid. What could I do? I couldn't, you know, go to the door. I went to open the door and my mother said, "Get away from the door!" She was pulling me over from the, from the window [unclear]. And I, I, I--that, that was incomprehensible to me. I just couldn't understand it. H ow can this happen? And that's when we decided to run away from there. So that night my father started packing some of the things that we should take, and then already started, we had in our building, some Germans, which up to a certain point they were just like

normal people, like everybody else. All at once we found out that they were the *Volksdeutsche*. Which means they were of the German descent, that's what they started calling themselves the *Volksdeutsche*. So the kids started coming into our apartment and they started appropriating the things they wanted, just simple. So they knock on the door and we open the door and the kids walk in, like Hitler himself and they come up to one portrait, and that was my grandfather. My sister-in-law, my brother's wife, was an artist and she painted from an old picture, my grandfather's portrait. The kid wanted the frame. So she says, "He's taking that picture." I said, "You don't touch that." So my daddy comes in and he said, "What do you want?" He said, "I want that for the Führer's portrait." So my father says, "You take nothing. You touch that and I break your fingers." So the kid got scared and they ran away. They started taunting us; they were coming to our apartment all the time for something. Now mind you that's children, of 12, 13 years old, so we knew that it's time to get out. The Monday they came in and they took my piano away. It was not a little piano. It was a big piano. They wanted the piano and they had--we had no right to say no. They just came, took it out of the apartment and went . So we knew we in trouble.

PR: So then you pack--your father started packing?

TE: My father started packing whatever, things that we had that were important which predominantly was my mother's jewelry and things like that, things of importance.

PR: And then what, what happened? Where did you go?

TE: And we went to Warsaw. My father got one of the men, it was a Polish man that he knew well, and he worked for my brothers. It was a company that my brother was working for. He was trustworthy and he took the things and at that time they didn't have [unclear] or thing like that. They had was woven straw suitcases, or baskets rather, and he took that, we entrusted him. What we going to do? He did bring it to Warsaw, and we left, everything, the apartment with everything, with furniture, and we went to Warsaw. We went there.

PR: What did you do? Where did you live in Warsaw? Did you get a place, or…?

TE: Yeah, we rented an apartment until it became ghetto, and we lived there.

PR: And how did the Jewish laws affect you at that time? Did you--you were wearing an armband, were you…?

TE: After a while, they gave us the armband, but that 's when I started revolting.

PR: What do you mean?

TE: I didn't want the armband. I didn't want to be, how should I say, branded by something. I didn't do nothing. So I was a Jew. So this one was a Christian, was that person wearing a cross?

PR: So did you not wear it?

TE: I had to. But sometime I didn't. I put something on top of it, another jacket, but that's when I decided it's time to get out. So we got our parents. My parents, went to Lublin. That's originally we came from, and my sister, the oldest sister with her little baby

and her husband went to Lublin and my sist-- my youngest sister, that was, did not look Jewish whatsoever was traveling back and forth and being able to get food when nobody was able to get food. And by the way, while I was in Warsaw and we became, we got, you know, we're closed in ghetto, I got sick.

PR: Can you, can I slow you down a minute? Your one move to Warsaw before the Warsaw Ghetto was established.

TE: Yes, yes, it became ghetto.

PR: And then you had to move again into the ghetto?

TE: Yes.

PR: Or you lived in the area that was the ghetto?

TE: Yes, it became a ghetto, and we--that area became a ghetto, so we were already there.

PR: Okay, okay.

TE: And that's part of the thing. And I became very sick. I got pleurisy and having pleurisy at that time was like death sentence. There were no medication, not anything at all, and there was no proper food to sustain me and the doctor that came at that time--there were practically no doctors. Well, I don't know what you call that now paramedic, I guess you can call it. But in the Polish they called it or the Jewish they called that *felczer*. Did you ever hear that name? A *felczer* was something like a paramedic.

PR: Okay.

TE: It's more than a nurse but much less than a doctor. And in order for me to make it, he had to take the fluid out of my lung. Now they don't do it that way now, but he had to extract that water, the fluid, with a needle, just like you give somebody an injection. He was doing it in reverse. It took him 15 times to extract that and that was painful. And I didn't want to scream because of my daddy standing there and my mother, so I was just groaning but I didn't cry. It took him 15 times to extract five glasses of water, fluid, from my lungs and I made it.

PR: But you made it.

TE: I'm here.

PR: Wow! Wow.

TE: And then the *felczer* which is the paramedic, told my sister, "You have to make sure that she gets eggs and butter." All the things that you are not supposed to eat now. And my sister was smuggling it from the Aryan side, so I could eat and survive. I made it.

PR: Wow. It's amazing. So she was able to go in and out.

TE: Yeah. She was just coming and looking through, and the Polish police said, "What are you looking in there for? You have no business looking in there." "Yeah, I just wanted to see what's going on, you know curiosity," and before you knew it she gave them a couple *zoltys* and she snuck in. They said, "You're crazy," in Polish they say "*Zwariowany*."

PR: So they thought she was a Pole?

TE: Yeah.

PR: And she was living outside of the ghetto?

TE: Oh yeah.

PR: Did she have a job?

TE: Hmmm?

PR: Did she have a job?

TE: No. She was just trying to stay outside to be able to help us to do something for us to survive.

PR: Okay. So, so then, so you were in the ghetto with your parents and how many of your siblings at that point? None of them?

TE: No, my sister was safe on outside.

PR: She was on the outside, and the others were all grown and gone other places.

TE: Yeah, we were scattered.

PR: Okay.

TE: We were scattered.

PR: And was there anything else about being in the Warsaw Ghetto that you would want to talk about?

TE: It was terrible, just watching my parents. Not to be able, to be able to have something for them to eat. It was awful. It was awful.

PR: Were you, was there--there was a Jewish group, right, that helped to make the, enforce the rules in the ghetto?

TE: Yeah.

PR: Did you ever have contact with them?

TE: Not me, I was just a kid.

PR: Yeah.

TE: I was still a kid, I was still thinking this is impossible, this is--it has to end. You know, you're a kid and you just don't want to believe that, that this is happening and it has to end. You--as bad as things are and as bad as I, you know as sick as I was I still had this, I still have this optimistic view, "Well that's going to be the end." In every family, you listen to the radios, smuggle some news or something, "That's it. We're gonna make it. We're gonna make it." Well I guess I was optimistic, I made it.

PR: Right, you did make it.

TE: But I didn't make it with what I want.

PR: Right. Were you hearing stories about what was happening to Jews elsewhere?

TE: Yes. But guess what, you didn't want to believe it. If you don't want to believe it, then you don't know it.

PR: Right.

TE: You don't know it. But when it started coming to you to open and to struggle then you do believe it. Now, finally my sister came and she was the backbone of everything. She was the backbone. She finally came and she took my parents and she took them to Lublin.

PR: How did she get them out?

TE: Leave it to her. She took them to Lublin and that's what they--back--they went back to their own roots.

PR: Can you talk about how she got them out? How did that happ--and you too, right?

TE: No.

PR: No, you stayed.

TE: I stayed.

PR: So how did, how did she get your parents out?

TE: Smuggled them out. There are ways: put the *babushka* on put [unclear]. I got them out but [unclear]. I got them out like that. I got them out from Lublin. That was it. As they say in French, *Odot quell* [phonetic]. Somebody will manage. In everybody's eyes I was still a kid. I wouldn't believe that I had so much guts, but I did.

PR: Right.

TE: You know with me, that, it was more wanting to survive; with me it was more I won't give them the satisfaction. That's what it was. I wouldn't allow them to kill me. If I do it, I do it on my own but I won't allow them to kill me. Simple.

PR: You have a strong will.

TE: Yah. Simple.

PR: So your parents left and what did you do then?

TE: And I went to a place in the country. If I could only remember the name; but I can't, I'm very sorry, very sorry. We went to the country. It's in a village but there was food and we stayed there for maybe six, eight months or so.

PR: Did we…

TE: After that…

PR: Oh your sister came back.

TE: Yeah.

PR: She took your parents to Lublin…

TE: Yeah.

PR: …and then she came back…

TE: Yeah.

PR: …and you and she went to this village?

TE: Yeah, she was there and I was there, too. And then I just couldn't stand to be away from my parents, so I said well I go and I try to bring them back. I was 18 then. That's guts. I went to Lublin and we had to wear that Star of David, right? So I'm wearing a jacket and I put on top of the jacket another little jacket. It was chilly. So, I put another

little jacket and we're going by wagon with a bunch of guys and with nothing. My hair was really light blonde, my own hair. Didn't notice, no touch up no nothing and my Polish was impeccable and I could sing. I didn't suffer from allergies so there was no problem and going into the wagon, "Where you going?" "We're going so forth, so forth." "Fine!" They were going to the train so we sitting in the thing and we're singing, all of us, and they all like me, here we are, happy-go-lucky. "Don't you want to take the jackets off?" "I'm a little chilly." "Okay, fine." Went in the train, I paid for my ticket whatever; I don't remember, it wasn't that much, [unclear] and I went to Lublin. They went wherever they were going, I don't remember anymore, it's been a while and I'm walking, "You going?" "I'm going this way." They went other way and slowly I made my way to the ghetto. And I'm walking around. I said to the people, "What's around there? What's there?" "Ahh, that's the ghetto. You don't want to go there." "Oh the ghetto, what's that?" And I looked in there, "Oh it's the ghetto," and I looked in there and they turned around and I smuggled in. Honest to God.

PR: You just slipped in.

TE: I slipped in. As God is my witness.

PR: What was there, like a gate or something? What was there?

TE: No, just the Polish police were standing there. The Polish police were standing there, and I went in there. I knew the address.

PR: You knew the address?

TE: [crying] I walked in and went to the apartment house and my mother and father saw me. [unclear] [short pause] you cry when I think of…

PR: …of your parents.

TE: "What are you doing here? Why did you come here?" So I said, "I want to be with you. I don't want to be away from you." "We don't want you here." That's nice when your parents tell you they don't want you here. I said, "I'm sorry, I'm here with you and that's where I'm going to stay." You know 'cause my sister was there with her little girl. She was the most magnificent little girl, gorgeous. And the little girl didn't remember me anymore because I hadn't seen her for almost two years and at that time she was four. So when I saw what was going over there with them, [unclear] this is no good. So what, what am I doing? I said, "We going to get out of there." So fine, I'm thinking about it and so on, but…

[Tape one, side one ended]

Tape one, side two:

PR: This is tape one, side two with Tess Etkowicz, interviewed by Patty Rich on May 22, 2008 and you were just saying, could you say again what disease you got? And you were just saying that you got…?

TE: Typhus

PR: …typhus, okay.

TE: Typhus fever.

PR: Go on.

TE: My father had to take me to the hospital in Lublin, Lublin. And of course, as soon as I got there they diagnosed me with typhus. They shaved my beautiful blonde hair and I looked like a boy. Well I cried terribly, because I got sick there which means my plans had to be postponed and of course being a girl, I became very vain I lost my hair with all that.

PR: Was it a Jewish hospital or the city hospital?

TE: A hospital.

PR: They would treat Jews in the hospital?

TE: Oh, it was just a hospital there, you know. It wasn't--it's in the ghetto.

PR: It was in the ghetto.

TE: Oh, certainly, that was in the ghetto. We were three people in one bed.

PR: In the hospital?

TE: In that hospital, if you can call that a hospital--three people in one bed. With me was a mother and a little child, with it a little boy of five and me. Not enough nurses and if you got sick, there's nobody that will attend that you needed a receptacle to--anyway, it was terrible. It was terrible. I was there 10 days. After 10 days, my daddy could come because he already had that during the First World War so he won't, you don't get it twice, so I was told. So he came to pick me up and when I came back to the apartment, I was in the apartment where my mother was before I couldn't even be with my parents because there was no room, so I was in another apartment. Anyway, the Germans are raiding the apartments to take the men. They come again, they want to take me. I have no hair. So they assumed I am a man; I'm a boy. So my mother said, "No, no, I'm not a, not a, *Junge*, *Mädchen*." So they said, "*Raus*," "Get out!" So my mother said, "I'm not a boy. I 'm a girl," and then she took the sheet and opened my shirt and showed them that I have Typhus. Did they got out of there. When they heard that I just had typhus they flew out of there like. But they left me.

PR: Close call.

TE: Yeah. Close call. So I covered myself. This is no good. I'm going to get my parents out of there. So I put a, you know what's a *babushka*?

PR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TE: I put a *babushka*. Two days after I was able to move etc. I checked if my parents have some money and we smuggled out of the ghetto. Does this sound like a fairytale?

PR: It does.

TE: It's honest to God. It's the truth. I was the most daring person, when I thought to myself, I have to get out my parents out of there. Because I knew that that ghetto was coming to an end. I knew it, what they were doing there. With that epidemic and with taking the men away and it's no good. So I said, I have to get my parents out of there. So I took a shawl and I put a *babushka* on whatever and camouflaged myself. I put on my mother one of those old lady's, you know, a [unclear] lady scarf and tied it up and my father had one of those caps and we went to the train. And I said to my mother and father, nothing, not one word, don't speak.

PR: Where was the train? In the ghetto? There was a train station…

TE: No, no. We go out of the ghetto. We went to the train station, we walked from the ghetto to the train station and we took the train to go to that little village.

PR: Where you had been before.

TE: Before. And I put--went on the train and I said, "Do not speak. Do not speak. Just pretend you're sleeping." [Unclear] I said to Mama, "You too, sleep, you're tired." And that's exactly what we did, exactly what we did, till we came with that train to that place and we got there. That's how I got my parents out of Lublin.

PR: Had you had to pay someone to get them out of the ghetto?

TE: Just walked out.

PR: You just walked out?

TE: Just walked out.

PR: Because you didn't look like Jews?

TE: Huh?

PR: Because you didn't look like Jews at that time?

TE: No, no, no. In order to go in and go out you had to manage. All you do is smuggle out, you know, like the police look this way, and one at a time. You just have to, you just have to count on *Hashem*[2] and count on luck. If they are both with you, then you're alright.

PR: Was your faith a strong part of your life at that time?

TE: It was. I wouldn't say fanatic, no. I was never a fanatic. I just prayed, I said, "Please, please be with us. We don't deserve that, we don't deserve that." I said, "They are crazy, we are not fanatics. They are fanatically crazy. But we are good people, help us." Because I would not let them destroy us as long as we can fight, we will fight. So we fought our way. But by fighting our way we did not destroy anybody else. I was too young to give in. And if I could get my parents with it, I would take it. I wasn't giving in for my parents either. I loved my parents. I owed my parents something. No, no, it

[2]Hebrew word for God.

wasn't owing. I loved my parents. I wanted my parents as long as I could keep them. When I was in that village and while my parents were in Lublin, I was unhappy. I missed them.

PR: Right.

TE: They were my life. They--I was devoted to them. They were my life.

PR: So when you got to the village then with your parents…

TE: Yes.

PR: …was that--that was a Polish village, right?

TE: Yes.

PR: Now, did you still, were you still identified as Jews or did you pass as Polish?

TE: No, they, no they knew that we were Jews. In fact, I [unclear] was alright.

PR: So they, so they weren't--it wasn't so hard to be a Jew there?

TE: No, no, that's okay. We paid the, the farmer for the rent or whatever. They didn't mind it.

PR: Okay.

TE: There was no ghetto there or anything like that.

PR: Okay.

TE: There was food. At least we were able to eat. I was able to, you know my parents were able to eat and whatever. And my brother was there, so it was okay. No we, we were alright there. We were okay.

PR: How long were you there with your parents?

TE: Oh nothing lasted too long, a few months or something like that. It was so, you know whatever, if it sounded, seemed to you like a while, could have been only a few months. It's, you know, we were always like on lookout, on a watch. It's so watchful about everything that you really couldn't keep up with the time. You really couldn't. We were always listening to the news. Now, where are the Russians now? Are they advancing or whatever. You were always on the lookout. I don't even--I couldn't even remember what year it was. I couldn't. It was always something, always something, always something going on.

PR: So what happened next?

TE: What? Then we couldn't stay there anymore after a few months. So we just…

PR: Why?

TE: Because the Germans were approaching those places. They were hunting, so I started running with my parents to different places and I was--when I think about it, I was hiding in the woods with them, would you believe it? Not at night but daytime and when we heard on the roads, they had a specific sound, the jeeps and so on, soon as we heard them riding we lie down on the ground so they wouldn't see anybody walking in the woods through the trees. When they went away, so we kept going. And then one night, it

was going towards the late evening, we stopped at a farmer's and if he knew that we were Jews he never said anything, but we asked if we could stay overnight in the barn. We were going back to that one little town that we stayed before. And he says, "Yeah," and his wife said with him, "It's okay. We could stay there." So we stayed, at least my parents were able to lie down and rest. All of a sudden we hear screaming, "*Raus, raus, schnell*,"[3] and I jumped up and the garage--the garage--the barn door opens up…

PR: Were you in the barn? You were sleeping in the barn…

TE: Yeah, yeah, we were sleeping in the barn. The dawn is up and somebody "*Raus*," you know with that "*Raus*." I knew it's not real German, but to hear somebody screaming you jump, so I grabbed my parents, we're running out and somebody with a gun ran after, well, any minute will put a bullet in my back and I said, "Well I hope that they do it fast, that they don't torture us." And then the farmer recognized the guy that was screaming and he started yelling at him in Polish, you know, cursing him. It was one of the guys from the village and he yelled at him and he got scared and run away.

PR: Close call.

TE: Somebody from the village. And this poor farmer was an epileptic and he got an epileptic attack. So I feel so sorry for him. I feel so terribly sorry and I said do you want us to leave he says, his wife said, "No." But I said, "But they're going to send somebody again." He said, "No they won't dare." So he let us stay through the morning and we left in the morning.

PR: So they were good people.

TE: Would you believe that? It's, you know what, you know all these things are coming back to me and I just wonder, how could people do those things? You see two older people, what would they get, they get a few dollars. You know, my father could have gotten a mass heart attack--what would he get out of it and this man was an epileptic, the farmer.

PR: So then what happ--then where did you go?

TE: Then in the morning we started walking and as we walking a gang of *polacks* stop us. "Out." Sounds like a fairy tale doesn't it? I said, "Now what's now?" but in Polish. I said, "What do you want? Okay, I have so much *zlotys*. How much you want?" I said "We just had some people holding up the farmer, he had an epilepsy attack. So what do you want? You have two older people and me. What do you want? How much satisfaction you get out of it?" So they realized, "Where you going?" I said, "We're going back to the village." "Don't go, the Germans are cleaning up." I said, "Thank you very much for telling us." I wanted to give something [unclear] but don't go there. I said "Well, thank you." And they went away and that was the best ones that I met. That was the decent--but they were going to stop us.

PR: So you knew how to talk to them?

---

[3]"Out, out, quickly."

TE: They thought I'm some kind of a backward, backwards person that doesn't even know how to speak Polish or anything but they found somebody who's as educated as they are or can meet them on their level and [unclear]-- "What is it? I'm made out of the same cloth that you are. It's just that my face is not the same. So what? We're all God's children." So he says, "Come on guys let's leave them alone and let them go." And then we found out that the Germans thought that section where I was [unclear] in [unclear] city announced that if all the Jews go to Radomsko, that's a smaller town, Olgade [phonetic] and Radomsko. They let them stay. So some of the older people already got tired of running and being scared, so they just said "We go." My sister and I didn't want them to go. We were scared that they doing the wrong thing. They said, "Let us go."

PR: Wait, your parents said let us go?

TE: Yeah, let us go there. So my sister said, "Okay," and she took them and saw them off that and see that they alright and a nice little place with other people and they were there maybe like two months and she was going there every one, every week or week and a half, two weeks. They were like in a compound.

PR: And where were you at that time? Were you still in the woods?

TE: I was back in Warsaw. I was on the other side. I was back in Warsaw…

PR: You were back in Warsaw.

TE: …but on the…

PR: …outside of the ghetto.

TE: Right. There was no ghetto.

PR: The ghetto was over.

TE: Right. I was out of the ghetto, the ghetto was over, finished. I was with the Gentiles. I had false papers and everything.

PR: So there's another piece of this story. How did you get from the woods by this village with the farmer with the epilepsy--how did you leave that and wind up in Warsaw? Was it when your sister took your parents and you said I'm going back to Warsaw?

TE: Yeah, took a train, took a train, has false papers, had a new name.

PR: How did you get your false papers?

TE: She secured it, my sister.

PR: Okay.

TE: Blonde I was, hazel eyes, close to blue eyes, so okay.

PR: You passed.

TE: My Polish was impeccable. For that matter it was, how did they call that intelligentsia. Yeah. So what could they tell me? My teeth are crooked, my legs are crooked? They couldn't judge me by that.

PR: So what's next in--so now we have two pieces of this, there's where your parents are and there's where you are.

TE: My parents went to Radomsko my sister was going there to see them, to bring them food, supplement the food, until one day she went and she saw the Polish police standing outside, you know, warming the hands, and she was not going there; she said "Hey, what you doing staying out there?" They said "Why do you care?" "Oh I'm just went by here. I'm going on down the street."

PR: Was she, was she passing as a Pole also?

TE: Oh yeah, oh yeah, absolutely. She said they asked her "Where you been?" She said "Oh, I'm going by and I saw you staying out here. It's cold. What are you standing out here for, just warming up?" So he said to her, "Oh well, *Zydkia* [phonetic] are gone." *Zydki*[4], you know a *Zydki* is the Jews. Oh, Oh [Polish phrase] her heart is broken, breaking her heart because she knows that the *Zydki* [phonetic] that are gone are her parents. "Oh," she says, "That what happen here?" [short pause] And she came back to Warsaw and I was in this one apartment with those people which they didn't know anything about me either and when she came, I said, "Oh," [unclear]. And then she took me on the side and told me. She said, "Don't cry." How can I not cry? How can I not cry my heart broken right then and there into pieces? [short pause] All those years, all those days hoping against hope, we make it, we make it, we make it, and we did make it. Nothing meant anymore, anything.

PR: After that.

TE: No, it didn't make any sense, didn't make any more sense.

PR: Did you know where they were deported to?

TE: Right away to Treblinka, to the gas chambers, that's it. And that's that. At that time, they didn't play around much, straight to gas chambers. [short pause] Every time that these people that we stayed in Warsaw non-Jews, non-Jewish people, that lady, very nice woman, she had no idea about it or anything. So, [unclear] I kept saying "*Katar, katar*."--is a cold. "It's terrible. What a terrible cold I have, my nose doesn't stop running and my eyes are running."

PR: Oh, because you were crying.

TE: Couldn't stop crying. [paused to blow nose]. We never give ourselves enough credit for the strength that we have, do we? We're stronger than we think. I never thought I would survive that, but I did.

PR: The death of your parents?

TE: Yeah, never thought that.

PR: You survived with pain.

TE: Yeah [pause] I go to bed at night and I say, "Goodnight mommy, daddy. I miss you."

PR: So how did you pick up and carry on? What did you do next?

TE: Well, then. I said, -- you know they also took my sister, the one that had that four year old little girl, the most magnificent little thing. They took her in Lublin,

[4]Polish: diminutive of the word "Jews", and often pejorative.

Lublin and they [unclear] put them on the transport, straight to Treblinka, four year old little baby girl. How cruel? How did I survive? Because my parents wanted me to live, and because it was for them and I said just because for them I'm going to live. It was rough.

PR: You took your strength from the fact that they willed you to live even if you didn't feel like it.

TE: No, no, filled my world but they were everything to me. I was the youngest one. And if my mommy, if my mother had one tear in her eye, I started crying, crocodile tears. I said, "Ma, why you crying?" She had a backache or maybe my daddy he was upset with something and said something to her. She was very sensitive, so I said, "Why, Ma please tell me why you crying." I cry with her.

PR: So what did you and your sister do then, during Warsaw with this family, staying with the woman in Warsaw?

TE: We were separated.

PR: Oh, she went somewhere else?

TE: I was left alone, I was left alone. I was on my own. And we never found one another till after the war. I was the youngest one and they thought I'd never survive. I fooled everybody.

PR: So, so did you--what year--was that close to the end of the war at that point or no?

TE: Well then after my parents went, then I was left all alone and then there was a uprising. The Warsaw, Polish uprising and I got caught there.

PR: Oh.

TE: I said well that gives me a chance to fight the Germans, because I was not in the ghetto to fight to the Germans…

PR: Right.

TE: …in the ghetto uprising. So I fought the Germans here, and I fought with them. I was helping in the hospital, I was bringing water to the hospital with rockets under fire. The bullets were flying near me but I wasn't scared, I said if I have to die, I die but at least I'm doing something. I'm doing something but I survived that, too. And then they, when they capitulated, well they couldn't fight-- a bunch of people without practically any weapons or anything…

PR: Yeah.

TE: …could not fight a army, tanks or anything like that. So when, the Polish capitulated, so they got at us and put us in some place in a barn, a huge monstrosity and I said, well that's the end of me. [Unclear] take me out as a Jew. So I said to myself well I make myself look like I'm injured or something, whatever. Maybe with, with the Polish people they won't have the--I don't know what was before--, maybe they won't, maybe they'll respect more than it would be a Jewish person would be injured, throws up. And so I had something in a bandage here and a scratch here, whatever. They put me on a train

and they sent me to a farm and I spent the rest of the time on the farm working and I had food. And they thought I was a *shiksa* [non-Jewish woman]. And I had food…

PR: Wow.

TE: …till the end of the war, till the Russians came and liberated us.

PR: Wow.

TE: So, I was liberated by the Russians and the farmers never knew that they had a Jew under their roof. And I had to go to church with them to Christmas time. I went to church with them Christmas time and they were talking about the Jews with such derogative mannerisms. They could smell a Jew a mile away, I said, "Yeah, isn't that something?" [she chuckled].

PR: Well…

TE: And when the time came and I-- you know when the Russians came and one of them stayed with us you know. One of them was a very nice guy and he stayed with us and later on I told him, *Ivrit*[5] [unclear] I forgot how you say that. He said, "Don't tell them. They could still kill you." I said, "You're kidding." He said, "Believe me." So I didn't tell them.

PR: It was the Russian who told you that?

TE: Yeah, till I was ready to leave. So I said, Well, I really had a c*hutzpah.* So when I was leaving I said to them, "Tell me, did I smell any different?" "What are you talking about?" They couldn't even speak decent. I said "Well I just want to know if I smell any different?" They said, "No." "Because I'm Jewish." I thought they're going to drop dead.

PR: [chuckle].

TE: I said I'm intelligent. But you know what, after that, they said "We're sorry we said that because we loved you very dearly. You're a wonderful person." I worked for them. The only thing I couldn't go near the pig because I was scared of that pig, but I worked very hard there, straightened out the place. It looked so nice and neat and everything.

PR: So where did you go when the war ended?

TE: I went back to Lodz. I had been to [unclear]. I went back to Lodz. I went to the apartment we lived, no, to the house where we lived, in that apartment. You think the hate for the Jews ended with the war, uh-uh [negative]. I went in there and I asked…

[Tape one, side two ended]

[5]Ms. Etkowicz probably means *Evrei*, which is the Russian word for Jew.

Tape two, side one:

PR: This is tape two, side one, interview with Tess Etkowicz. Patty Rich is the interviewer on May 22, 2008.

TE: So when I went to that apartment building and I spoke to the concierge and I explained to her that I just came back after the war to Lodz for the first time and we used to live here for many, many, many years and I know my parents were killed during the war but I'm trying to find out if anybody from my family survived and if anyone came. So the concierge was extremely hostile, thinking that I came to claim the apartment to the point that she was almost ready to hit me. So I said, "Well if anybody does come, please tell them that the sister, the younger sister was inquiring" and I left. I thought to myself I better leave before I get in trouble.

PR: And what was your family name?

TE: Erman, E-R-M-A-N.

PR: Erman.

TE: Erman. And I'm walking down the street very forlorn. And I stopped somebody and I said, "Would you know where is the place that I can go and inquire about some people that came back, the survivors of the Jewish faith or whatever?" So they said yes, go to that and that address, which was nearby. There is a meeting place or an organization, so on. So I went, which was just a few block or four block. So I went in there and there was a very, very charming gentleman, and I told him who I am, where I used to live. And he saw how morally and mentally I was beat. And I said, I thought maybe I had somebody from my family came here but it doesn't seem like no one survived or no one showed up yet. So, and I just came so I gave him my name. He says, "I'll tell you what. Come back like five o'clock, come back here. If you didn't find anyone till then, come back and you come with me to our apartment. You, my wife and me would like you to have dinner with us and you can have a nice bath and you stay overnight." I said, "Well, that's the nicest thing somebody [unclear]. Thank you so much." He said, "You're more than welcome." Nice young gentleman.

PR: Was he Jewish?

TE: Oh yes. That was the Jewish organization. So I'm going out, you know and they don't have that here. You have the yard, no, you have the courtyard and then you have the porte-cochere which is you go out and then you go out into the street. And as I am going out from the courtyard**,** into the porte-cochere and I see two women walking, close enough. I saw this one woman and I run into her and I started hysterically crying, and I mean, crying. I cried, crying so hard and I run into her and she tries to push me away and I cried so hard. It was my sister [short pause] and she pushes me away. It was my sister Dora. She couldn't believe it and I grabbed her by her hand and I start pulling her and I pulled her into the courtyard and I went into that office and this my sister. I just

found her walking here. She says some crazy woman grabbed me. She didn't know. Do you believe that?

PR: Wow!

TE: So I said--told them--

PR: Is this the sister that had been with you helping your parents? This is a different sister?

TE: No, no, that's the one. That's the one.

PR: This is the one that had been looking after your parents in Radomsko.

TE: Yes. Yeah, but she passed away now. [Unclear] She was in Israel, she passed away. I was the youngest one, then she was next. There was Helen and then there was the two, the brothers, two brothers, so--then she already, she lived on the main street. So she took me to the apartment and friends already lived there and when I walked in with her and those two other people, there was another revolution, when they saw me. It was just unbelievable how we found one another. Then one day I was walking on the street, I was going to, on the main street in Lodz, I was going to, to see a movie. And I went there to that movie house and I looked at it and I remembered that movie, what it says, "*Juden Verboten"* "Jews forbidden". And I said, I'm not going into that movie. I still remember that sign. I'm not going. I turned around and start walking back on that street, that was the main street in Lodz, and I see this man walking towards me and I jump at him and start screaming. Me, I'm always screaming. I start screaming and I grabbed him and the man, he started pushing me away and I couldn't get the words out of me. That was my brother, my oldest brother, Adash. Now how do you like that?

PR: Wow!

TE: See I'm finding everybody on the outside.

PR: Yeah, yeah. That's fortunate.

TE: So I grabbed him and I'm running across the main street in Lodz, the busiest street in Lodz and people, the cars are honking and blowing their horns and I'm running and I brought him into the house and we're running up the steps and I'm screaming, they were scared to open the door. I'm knocking at the door. So I said, "Open the door." So they opened the door and then they started screaming.

PR: Wow!

TE: How do you like my adventure?

PR: So when did you go to France?

TE: [blows nose] Hmmm?

PR: When did you go to France?

TE: I went to France in December that same year when we were liberated. I said, "That's it. I don't want Poland anymore, whole country." I said this is not a country. That was a vicious place to live. I found my sister. I found my brother. And one day I went to the shoemaker in Lodz and there was a newspaper. I said, "Let me see if I [unclear]." And I picked up the newspaper and I read, Helen Erman looking for her family.

And she gives an address, camp so and so, Italy. That was my other sister. That's the only one that was missing yet because the one with the little girl. [phone rings] Shall I answer that?

PR: Why don't you let it go?

TE: The only one that was missing [phone rings] because the one was a little girl went to the concentration camp. How is that for coincidence?

PR: Wow!

TE: So we were all there, accounted for. [short pause]

PR: Wow. So then in December you went to--you decided you were leaving Poland?

TE: Yeah, that's it. I had a group of young boys and I think we were three girls and four fellows. We just walked out of the house, apartment, we started walking. We took a train out of Lodz to whatever. We went, we passed the German frontier, we drove-- I mean we took the train, you see we're driving, we drive everyplace you go is drive. We took the train, we passed the frontier, we went through Saarbrucken into France and that's it. We walked and we rode the trains. We went to Paris. No papers, no nothing. And then I went to, to see my brother, was he shocked.

PR: Because he was in France?

TE: No, my brother lived in France, Serches.

PR: Oh yeah.

TE: Yeah.

PR: The communist.

TE: Huh?

PR: The one who became a communist?

TE: Yeah, right.

PR: Yeah.

TE: Was he shocked! I called him up and I said pick me up. He--we, we went to somebody's apartment; one of the girls had a cousin there. She accommodated all of us and we slept on the floor, whatever. Was she shocked when the whole group of us came in. Nobody spoke French. Oh we had adventures, I tell you. Group of us goes from Lodz to Paris took some trains, to walk the rest of the way.

PR: Yeah.

TE: That's when you're young, my dear. But nothing scared me, everything to do to get out of that rotten place. I cannot be confined and I cannot stand prejudice. I cannot stand prejudice. I treat everybody with respect unless they prove they don't deserve any. Then I don't bother with them. That's it, simple.

PR: And when did you come to the United States?

TE: January, Friday, January the 13, 1950.

PR: Okay.

TE: Three of us.

PR: And you had met Phil in…

TE: Paris.

PR: Paris?

TE: Philip was a soldier in the French army with General de Gaulle and the Free French[6].

PR: [pause] Tess is getting the picture to show me. Oh yeah, young man, handsome young man in uniform.

TE: Yes, yeah. He studied at the University of Nib Pueselle [phonetic] and he went to--when the, General de Gaulle made an appeal to the Francaises to join his army, that's what he called them, Free French; they came from everywhere, so Philip went to London. Yeah, so we went to Paris and that and then we came here.

PR: And you got married in Europe?

TE: Yeah, we got married in Paris and *Dix-huitieme arrondissement,* 18th, you know, *arrondissement* is like a zip, zip. Like here, zip code.

PR: Oh, okay. Well I think I'm going to turn off the tape recorder now.

TE: Okay.

PR: Is there anything else that we, you want to add that we might not have touched on about your experiences during the war?

TE: No, I think, I-- my voice wasn't the best, but,

[tape two, side one ended, interview ended]

[6]The Free French Forces (*Forces Francaises Libres* FFL) were French fighters in World War II who continued fighting against Germans after the surrender of France and the German Occupation.