

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

ALEXANDRA GORKO

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Eileen Steinberg

Date: August 19, 1985

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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AG - Alexandra Gorko¹ [interviewee]

ES - Eileen Steinberg [interviewer]

Date: August 19, 1985²

Tape one, side one:

ES: Eileen Steinberg interviewing Alexandra Gorko, August 19, 1985. Please tell me where you were born and when and a little bit about your family.

AG: I was born in Russia, Kiev, in 1916, and I remember very well my grandparents. My grandfather, grandmother, and two aunts who lived in Russia. I knew that my parents lived before in Poland where my brother was born. My brother was five years older than I. I remember very well when the Communists came and wanted a letter from my grandfather, who had a tanning factory or tanning mill. I remember that they came with their bayonets, and stuck the mattresses, the couches, the chairs, and were looking for gold, for leather, for jewelry, etc. I also remember that it took us after, I don't remember exactly what year it was, but when I was six or seven, I, we ran away to Pol-, back to Poland. And it took my mother and me and my brother and my wet nurse three months to get to Lodz, Poland.

ES: What was your...

AG: My father ran away before that.

ES: Where did he go to?

AG: To Poland.

ES: He went first.

AG: Yes.

ES: And then the rest of the family came afterwards?

AG: Yes.

ES: What was your life like in Lodz before the war?

AG: We were well to do. I went to private school.

ES: What did your father do?

AG: My father had this spinning mill. We weren't very rich, but we were well off.

ES: Did your family experience any anti-Semitism before the Hitler period?

AG: No, not to my knowledge. We were living between Poles, and I didn't remember that I had any incidents of anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, I married a Pole. My first husband was a Polish man born in Russia.

ES: Did you or your family belong to any Jewish organizations or to a synagogue before?

¹née Paley.

²See also a follow-up interview with Alexandra from 1986 and two testimonies of her husband Anatole Gorko 1985 and (not transcribed yet, 1986).

AG: No.

ES: None.

AG: No, no. My parents didn't belong to any synagogue.

ES: Did any men in your family serve in any national army?

AG: No. No.

ES: Can you tell me a little bit about your life in Poland in the early part of 1939 just before the German invasion?

AG: Before the German invasion. I only remember, well what do you want me...

ES: How old were you?

AG: I was working at the national health.

ES: You were already a nurse at that time?

AG: Yes, I was. Yeah, I was 23 when the war broke out.

ES: And you were working as a nurse?

AG: I was working. My husband was a jurist. He was a judge and he went to, he was a captain in the reserve, and he went to the army in 19-, in 25th of August, 1939. We knew already that the war was starting, in August. And I never saw him again.

ES: So he enlisted in the Polish Army?

AG: He didn't enlist. He had to go. He was a reservist.

ES: Okay.

AG: He was a reserve. Kept in the reserve.

ES: About how many Jews lived in your town?

AG: Oh, about a million, a million, and, Jews, oh, Jews? About 400,000.

ES: Okay.

AG: Maybe even a half a million with, [husband says, "No."] no, exactly.

ES: Okay. You were in Lodz, so there was a highly organized Jewish community there.

AG: Yes, it was.

ES: Was there a *kehillah*?

AG: Yes. As a matter of fact, a doctor who was in that community, Jewish community, asked me before they closed the ghetto, they all started to organize the ghetto to go there and organize a hospital for the Jewish population. And I did.

ES: Did you feel that the *kehillah* represented the best interests of the community?

AG: At that time, yes.

ES: What...

AG: Later was different.

ES: What happened to you and your family during the weeks right after the German invasion?

AG: As I told you, I went right aw-, what happened? The Germans came and took, of course I didn't live with my mother. My brother was single. He lived with my

mother. I had a, we had a house in the suburb. They came first of all. They took paintings, they took my dog, and they took my piano. The Germans. And they wanted to know where is my husband. I don't know if you know that right away when they came in, they took away all the education that, intelligentsia. They took lawyers, teachers, doctors. My husband was a judge, so they were looking for him, too. And I didn't know where he was. They let it go at this, but a week later they came again and they wanted to know again where he is. And I said, "I don't know. I know that he went to Warsaw. He went to the army. Went to." They took me to jail. And they kept me 24 hours, didn't give me anything to eat or drink and kept asking me, "Where is your husband? Where is your husband?" And I still kept answering them that I don't know. And the light was burning all the time day and night in the room where I was. I was alone in the room. Finally they saw that I really didn't know where he was because I didn't, I couldn't tell them anything else, so they let me go. Then they came again and took ev-, all the furniture, everything what was in the house. I don't know exactly, but I think someone moved in after this. Was it the Germans, was the Germans or Poles, I don't know, in our house.

ES: Where did you go?

AG: I went to my mother, to my mother's apartment.

ES: Did they bother your parents too?

AG: My father was dead.

ES: Okay. So it was just your mother and brother living.

AG: Yes. My brother was a lawyer too, but he wasn't working in his profession. He was a manager of a stocking factory, nylon factory. So they didn't know he was a lawyer. They didn't take him. A few days later one of the doctors from the *kehillah* like you said, called me in, asking me to work and I says ask me to and I went. I was there about two months when one day when we knew already that all the Jews have to get to the ghetto and the ghetto will be closed. And my mother and father came one day to the hospital where I was working. With, only what they could carry. And my mother found an apartment with another woman and they lived together, four people in one room. I was all the time living in the hospital.

ES: During this period of time when you were, when the ghetto was being organized and everyone was being rounded up, did you or your family receive any help from any non-Jewish people?

AG: At the beginning, yes, from...

ES: What kind of help?

AG: Mostly food. We didn't need anything else but food. Yes.

ES: What, was this was from neighbors and friends that you got help?

AG: This was a friend of my mother who used to, her husband used to be our neighbor. This was before the ghetto was closed.

ES: All right, after...

AG: It was very difficult to get food.

ES: After the ghetto was closed, were you able to have any contact with the outside?

AG: Only one time. A friend came and we were behind barbed wires. He came and brought a package of food and dropped it and ran away. This was right at the beginning of the ghetto. Then we didn't hear from him.

ES: Once you were inside the ghetto and the ghetto was closed, how did you and your family support yourselves?

AG: I was working in the...

ES: So you were able to get your food, and you had a place...

AG: Yes.

ES: To stay.

AG: Everybody had food. Everybody was working or not received a portion. We had cards. We had to register and have rations.

ES: Rations.

AG: Rations.

ES: How would you describe the *Judenrat*? The *Judenrat* in your town?

AG: They took bribes. They, they, how to explain it to you? Their friends and relatives were better off if not. For instance, my brother could not get a job in the ghetto. Everybody else had a job. He couldn't get a job because, as a manager of the factory, he sorted or threw out the *älteste* (oldest) Jews, Rumkowski because he wanted, he used to be an agent, this, "King of the Jews" they called him. It was an insurance agent, and my brother didn't want to buy insurance from him. So later on he took revenge on him, and my brother couldn't get a job. It was two years he was in the ghetto, he didn't work. My mother got a job from one of the, they were called [unclear], not factories, [unclear]. One of our friends was a manager of a leather factory. They made belts and pocket books and all kinds of leather boots for the Germans. So my mother was able to get a job there sewing or something on the machine. I don't even know.

ES: So your brother was the only one that was not working.

AG: My brother wasn't working.

ES: Did you have any communication with the outside world through newspapers or radios? Did you hear anything at all about what was going on?

AG: No. Only what my brother heard from BBC and his friends. I told you that they listened to the radio.

ES: Okay. Tell me about that now.

AG: Yes. This was, I think in 1940, end of 1940. Thirteen young men built a radio in a bottle in the cellar, not in the basement, in the cellar. And someone denounced them. The Germans came and arrested all thirteen men, all their families, and even people who carried the same last name. It was about 150 people. On a very, very cold day in January 31, 1940. [husband says, "It was January 31."] January 31, 1941. They took them all away and we never heard from them. After the war, we heard. We don't know exactly

the truth that they were taken to Chelmno, which was a little city near Lodz, and they were all shot. I remember that a man who was wearing my brother's winter coat. I, in Europe we didn't buy ready-made outer wear. We bought material and we had it made by tailors. And I remember exactly how this coat was made. And I was two or three years I followed this man and didn't, felt, I hoped against hope that it's not my brother's coat, that my brother is alive and well. And I never found out about this.

ES: Were you aware of any underground in the ghetto?

AG: No, I didn't. But I didn't have any contact with people outside of the ghetto. Only with nurses and doctors. It was, I was very busy. I was supervising a hospital. I was working very hard, 48 hours, sometimes 72 hours without rest. We didn't have many trained nurses. We took in everyone who wanted to help. As a matter of fact, my mother was helping too. There were a few nurses who were sick, and my mother took care of them.

ES: Did you have enough...

AG: One day, this was the first time when they, when the Germans came and took our patients, our mental patients, away. And I took it very hard, because between them there were a few, patients, I knew their families. They also took people from an old age home which was near the hospital. The hospital was in private homes. They took them, they rebuilt a few houses into one house where was there in the beginning the hospital.

ES: Did you have enough supplies, medicine?

AG: No, no. We had, in the beginning we had whatever we could take from the city, but later on after their syringes that time were glass. We had to sharpen the needles. At one time I remember we had 90, 91, 90 or 91 bed hospital. We had only three syringes and ten needles. The Germans gave us iodine. They gave us aspirin. They didn't give us any pain killers. They didn't give us anything else. It was very hard to work. We didn't get sheets or pillow cases. We had to change every two weeks the sheets for the people. Some private people donated their own linens and this way we could wash once the ones who were soiled and use the other one.

ES: To what extent did the Poles help the Nazis persecute the Jews?

AG: When we were in the ghetto, we didn't know what they did. We only found out later when we went to the camps that they took part in that. As long as they didn't help us they helped the Nazis.

ES: How long did you help in the hospital in Lodz? How long were you there?

AG: It was until the end. Until the hospital existed.

ES: Until the ghetto was liquidated?

AG: About the hospital where I worked, one hospital was closed. The other one was open, and it was about a month before they liquidated the ghetto we didn't have hospitals. But we had near there, factories. We had a private home. We were organized to a camp office where there were doctors and nurses. And I was working in one of them, near a bakery which was, I thought it was very good for me because near the bakery I would have bread. But I didn't.

ES: Why?

AG: The bread was counted. They couldn't give anyone anything. Everything was counted as a regulation. We got soup and one tenth of a kilogram, well how much was one tenth of a kilogram? It was about eight, ten ounces of bread a day and a plate of soup, which was made out of a kind of greens. Probably grass, and potato peels.

ES: When was the ghetto liquidated?

AG: The ghetto was liquidated in August, 1944.

ES: And what happened to you?

AG: We were running away from the Germans. One of my friends who was, her parents they died in the ghetto, and my mother. And we ran from one empty house into another. And this way we were ahead of the German ambulances. Of the German, cars, buses really. They had buses.

ES: To round you up?

AG: They followed us, to round us up. And it took us about two, two weeks. We didn't, whatever we had to eat, we finished. We didn't have what to eat for about three days. And we came to a house where we saw a cellar. And there were a lot of grass and it looks like the people just moved. And this was near the Polish part of the city. Next to that part of the city. And we noticed that there was a cellar. We took, there was a big basin we took and put water in the basin, and we all three got in that cellar. We covered that, it was a little rug. We covered the rug and put a table over us. We pushed the table over us. And we heard the German shepherds dogs running around, smelling this. They smelled us, but they couldn't find us, because we were our, we were, how you call it, crouching?

ES: Crouching down in the cellar?

AG: Crouching down and our feet were in water, so they couldn't find us. And they, we heard the Germans swearing, cursing that the *Verfluchte* Jews are here, and we cannot find them. The dogs know that they are here. And they left. After they left we didn't hear them any more. We got out of the cellar and we were very hungry. And we felt that we couldn't take it any more and we have to give ourselves up. So we got out from the house and as soon as we got out, they knew that we would not stay there long. And they were right there in the, how you call, em...

ES: Right outside the house?

AG: Outside the house, yeah, in the, we had courts.

ES: Courtyards?

AG: Courtyards. In the courtyard. And they took us right away and put us in the bus. There was a full bus already of people, and they took us, I don't remember where, but there were a lot of people in, was a factory, or it was some kind of a big room they took us. And the same night they put us in the cattle cars and we didn't know where. They told us to take whatever we had. So we had knapsacks in the house, so we took the knapsacks, and from there, from this big room, we went, I don't remember how long it took us to get to Auschwitz. I don't remember. It took about three, four days. Three days.

ES: You were the only one from your family?

AG: No, with my mother.

ES: Your mother was with you?

AG: Yeah.

ES: Okay.

AG: Yes. I told you.

ES: Okay.

AG: That my...

ES: And the two friends, okay, your mother...

AG: No, one friend. One friend, my mother, and I. The three of us. And we came to a, I had a pocketbook where I had money. I had American dollars which lately we couldn't even buy anything for, 'cause there was no food to buy. We, I had morphine. I don't remember where I got it, but I had morphine. I think I got it in the, in the contagious diseases hospital. But they had morphine. I had enough for my mother and for myself, because I understood what will happen. We didn't know about gas chambers, but we knew that we are too exhausted and too malnourished, that we couldn't stand anymore life what we led the last few years. When we came to Auschwitz, they...

ES: Just for a minute, tell me what the trip was like on the train.

AG: I was thinking about my past. I was trying to tell my mother that everything will be okay, that we will go with, we were told that we are going to work, that we are just going to be transferred to another ghetto or another work camp. That we will get work. My mother didn't say a word all through the three days. She was, she had probably a premonition what it was. I didn't. My friend was trying to talk to my mother, explain to her, tell her, give her hope. But my mother didn't answer, didn't talk to us. It was very crowded in there. We couldn't, mostly we were standing. Couldn't lay down. There was about 90 or 100 people in the cattle car. They opened it once a day. We had a bucket for extremities. We, they gave us water. They didn't give us any food all the three days. When we came to Auschwitz, was night. We didn't see what was there. But as soon as we came in, there were Jewish men and women and they were directed by the Germans to take everything away from us. Right away they took my bag with the morphine, with everything. This was the end of my...

ES: Everything you had.

AG: All, yeah. I even had a big diamond in, big diamond ring in the bag. And the Jews told us, the Germans didn't talk to us, but the Jews did, "See? See this?" We saw smoke and we saw and felt smoke, and we saw, we thought is oven baking bread or some thing. And the Jewish people who were there longer told us, "See? These are your brothers and sisters, your mothers and fathers burning." We said, "What are you talking? How can you say a thing like this?" We didn't believe them. A German soldier told my mother to go on one side, and me and my friend on the other side. We didn't, I didn't want to. I wanted to go with my mother. My friend was holding me very tight, my hand very tight. She didn't

let me go. And my mother just stood there and looked at me. And I saw in her eyes that she knows that she will never see me again. But I didn't feel this way. I didn't understand. I didn't know what was going on. My mother probably did. And I wanted to go to my mother, but she, she didn't push me away, but she, she made a move like, "Don't go with me." And my friend was holding me tight. And the German soldier said, "Let her go. She wants to be with her mother." And she said, "No," and she knew German, she-

Tape one, side two:

ES: Eileen Steinberg interviewing Alexandra Gorko, August 19, 1985. Side two. So your friend saved your life by saying, no and holding onto you.

AG: Yes. Next day, I don't remember where I, where we spent the night, but next day we all had to get up very early and stay for, it was called an *Appell* where they were counting us. They were counting us and they were asking the names, where we are from, how old we are and they told us our numbers. But I don't remember. I never remembered my number. They didn't...

ES: Tattoo.

AG: Tattoo us. They told us that some of us will go to work. They didn't tell us where and when. The whole day we stood in the hot sun and nobody knew what happened, what will happen, where our relatives are, where the mothers with children are, where the older women are. They were all women in the camp. We didn't see any men, and we didn't know where the men are. Even that they were together with us in the cattle cars. After it was maybe six or seven in the evening, it was still light, they brought us food. We didn't eat anything for three days. We had only water. They brought us soup and a piece of bread. And they separated us. We went to different barracks. I was still with my friend in the barrack. Then next day Germans came and asked if there are nurses between us. And there were three. I, and two others. They weren't really nurses. They weren't trained nurses, but they were working in the hospital as nurses. For some reason they only took me. I was very glad that I will be able to do something. I knew that there are Jews who are sick in the ambulatorium [unclear meaning]. And when I came in there, they gave me a white uniform and that time Mengele came. And he looked at me. He asked me how long I am a nurse, how old I am. I told him. And he said, "Here are some pregnant women. You have to give them some injections." And he showed me where the syringes are, and there was a can, and I was, I smelled kerosene or gasoline or something like this. And I said to him, "This I have to inject?" And he said, "Yes. I am making, I am trying to do an experiment. And you will be helping me." And I said, "No. I will not. I took a vow to save people, not to kill them." And he said, "No?" And took out his revolver. And I said, "You could kill me, but I will not do it." He looked at me, he took the revolver, put the revolver back, and said, "Take her and beat her up in front of the whole camp." The two Germans took me and beat me with probably a belt or whatever. In the beginning I cried. I hollered. I yelled. Finally I lost consciousness. When I woke up it was night and I thought to myself, "I'm still alive. How could I be alive?" And I moved and I felt that there are bodies around me. And I couldn't move much. I couldn't get up, but I tried to touch, and I touched and they were cadavers. They were people. Cold people, and I thought to myself, "I cannot move." I can-, I was in pain. So I probably will die. No body will know where I am and what happened to me. And my friend, her name was Toby, Tosha. She would not know what happened to me. At, it was maybe four, five o'clock, the sun started to come out. It was still dark, but in

the east the sun was starting to come up. And I heard that two, two people are crawling. And this was my friend, and she found someone, and they had their-, then I was conscious again. When I felt that I am not going to live, I will not, nobody will know where I am, what happened to me, I was conscious again. And when I came to, I felt that cold water was running over me and my friend and her, another girl, brought a bucket of water and they revived me. How we got to the barracks, I don't remember. We crawled all the way. And that time I slept on the floor under the, under the...

ES: Bottom of the barrack?

AG: Bottom, no, they were cots, like shelves.

ES: I've seen pictures. [Husband says, "Bunkers."] And you slept under the bottom?

AG: Under, yeah, I couldn't get...

ES: Up on top.

AG: On top.

ES: I understand.

AG: In the morning they told us all to get up. I don't know how I got up, how I walked, 'cause it was very painful. I thought that I will, that I have a broken back, but I didn't. I forgot to tell you. Before, in the ghetto, when they, it was about three months before they took us to Auschwitz, they took all the children away. And they told us, we were at that time in another hospital, they told us to drop children, the babies, you know, babies, two-year-olds, infants, from the windows, into, from the fourth floor of the hospital—it was in a factory—to the trucks, and I said, "I will not do it." And a German kicked me. And I was conscious; I was unconscious for three days. And that time my mother revived me and took me to some room. I don't know where I was. One of the doctors said that I have a broken coccyx. It's the...

ES: Bone at the bottom of the back.

AG: Yes. So I had already a broken coccyx. And that time I felt that I think I had a broken spine. Toby and another girl held me up and this way we were standing on...

ES: Line.

AG: Line. In line. A few days later, I don't remember how long or what it was, but a few days later the German woman, how they call them?

ES: The *Kapo*?

AG: The *Kapo*? Yeah, *Kapo*. Said that we have to get undressed, leave all our clothes in the barracks, and Dr. Mengele came. We were all standing in lines, and he, he had a club. Eh, he was, he came on a, dri-, riding on a horse. But he led the horse, he gave it to the German, and had the crop. With the crop...

ES: The whip like...

AG: Yeah, club it's called. He showed who was to go right, who was to go left. And Toby was behind me, no, she was in front of me. She went to the right, and I went to the right. And the girl who was in back of us, who saved me, he put her to the left. This I

remember, and later I don't remember. We went back to the barracks. We had to get dressed, and they told us that we are going to a work camp. By that time I already knew about the gas chambers. I already knew what was going on in the gas chambers. We were told to go to take, a day later, we were told to go and take a shower. And we were sure, they gave us soap, they gave us towels, and we were sure that we are going to the gas chamber. But, when we turned the taps, water was running, so we knew that it's not gas, it's water.

ES: A real shower.

AG: It was cold water. But it was worth it. After about, I don't remember how long it was, two or three weeks or before two or three weeks, before we couldn't bathe, we couldn't wash. This was a luxury. They gave us different clothes, not our clothes. They gave us the prison uniforms, blue and white stripes. And they gave us clogs, wood en clogs. And the same night they put us again in cattle cars. And we were, I don't remember, about a week it took us to get to Milha-, to Ravensbrück. In Ravensbrück we were...

ES: Now you were in Germany?

AG: Yeah. Ravensbrück was in Germany. And we saw Polish women, not Jewish women. We were, a few of us, were with Polish women. The few who went from our barracks were the Polish women. The rest I don't know what happened to them. We were told by the Polish women we were ridiculed. They had hair; we didn't. They shaved our heads. We didn't have hair at all. We were laughed at, ridiculed, cursed. They said that because of us they are in camp. They went to work every day, we didn't. A few days later we heard airplanes over, flying over us, and we were told that they came, this, that the Swedish, we saw that they were Swedish Red Cross, and they came for the children, to take the children from Ravensbrück. In our barracks there were no children, and we didn't see that there, that the planes, they were flying back. They didn't even stop. They were flying back. A day later, yes, and I don't know where Toby went, 'cause she wasn't with me. She was probably in a different barrack, but she wasn't with me. But there was a young girl, and she asked me if I am from Lodz, and I said, "Yes, from Lodz Ghetto." She said she is from the ghetto. She worked in there. She was a dress maker, so she worked in some factory where they made uniforms for the Germans. And she said, "Let's us keep together." And I said, "Okay." She spoke Polish. Mostly the girls who I was in the barracks spoke Jewish. I didn't, so I couldn't communicate. I understood them, but I couldn't speak to them. I answered them in Polish, and they didn't like it. They said, "Oh, this is one of those intelligentsia." Even the Jews were ridiculing each other. "You don't know how to speak Jewish. What?" And, it was very unpleasant, but this girl spoke Polish. She spoke to me, and I remember one, and we didn't do anything. The Jewish girls didn't do anything. The Polish girls went in the morning to work. And they got different food than we did. One time they asked for volunteers to go to the kitchen to bring a kettle of soup. And this girl, her name was Paula—as a matter of fact, she survived too—she said, "Let's go. Let's try. Maybe we get more to eat." And we went. We carried a very heavy kettle of soup. We had

to rest a few times, and the *Kapo* was hitting us. Why do we rest? The soup will get cold. And when we came to the barracks there was, we saw a table, a long table, and a few Germans in white uniforms. And one woman was sitting there. And they were told, we were told that they are doctors, and they will examine us. So we felt right away it's another selection, that they will select some people to work, and some. I was very tired and because I was carrying this kettle my heart was beating very fast. As a matter of fact, I had rheumatic fever when I was 18 years old, and it left me with a myocarditis, inflammation of the heart muscle. I was in pain. Of course I didn't say anything, and they said we have to stay in line. They were examining us, one after another. Paula was before me, and then was my next. And when I came to and they put the stethoscope to my breast, the doctor right away put me on the other side. I was the only one put on the other side with the other girls. And I don't know, but Paula heard that the woman doctor spoke Polish, she thought she spoke Polish. But this was a Czechoslovakian doctor. She was also a prisoner. But they let her examine the, slaves. We were slaves. We weren't prisoners. Paula had so much courage that she went to the doctor and asked her in Polish, told her that we just brought, there's nothing wrong with me, but we just brought a big kettle of soup and she begged her to let me go with her, with Paula. The doctor spoke German to the German doctors and she told them what happened. And they let me go. This was second time, third time, really, that my life was saved.

ES: Two times by one person now? By Paula?

AG: For many years I tried to find Toby. In Lodz someone told me that she survived the war, but that she married a Polish officer who was in the English Army during the war. A Polish general had a brigade, the English Army general Anders, and her husband was in this army. She married him and moved to England. We tried to find her through Red Cross, through all kinds of agencies, and we couldn't find her. She changed her name.

ES: What happened after Paula saved you this time?

AG: After Paula saved me this time, a few days later they put us again into cattle cars. This time I didn't know anyone in the, in the car beside Paula. And they told us we are going to work camp. We came to that work camp was called Mühlhausen. And it was an ammunition factory. It was built this way, that on top of the factory were trees planted, so from outside...

ES: Camouflaged?

AG: You wouldn't even know that it's a factory there. It was about, it was two story factory, and it looked like woods all around. But there was, what you call, a basement, but it's called, it was called, a shelter, in case when they will b-...

ES: An air raid shelter?

AG: Air raid. And the air raids were very often. This was already fall of 1944. It was cold. It was rainy. But if there were airplanes fly, flew over us, and every time we thought that they will drop a bomb and bomb that factory. Our work consisted of taking little springs, springs, and putting them in little, bullets. I was very adept at this, because

we had to work in gloves. White gloves they gave us. And we had to use tweezers. And as a nurse I knew how to operate the tweezers. So I was always praised by the *Kapos* I am doing such a good job. I tried not to, but I had to. If not, they would beat me or they wouldn't give me my ration.

ES: What kind of *Kapos*, what nationality were the *Kapos*?

AG: The *Kapos* were German. German women. But one was good to us, good, she didn't give us any more food, but she used to bring us rags. We, and a needle, thread. We sewed brassieres. It was cold, so we made like bandages and bandaged our breasts. It was a little warmer. We were walking from the barracks to the, to the factory every morning, four o'clock in the morning. Before that we had to stay on the *Appell*, and they counted us. About, took about an hour. And we stayed, we stood in rain, in snow, and then we walked to the camp. And we passed a village. And the Germans saw us. Some good souls dropped a piece of bread or a potato or whatever. Of course, I wasn't the one, I wasn't, I didn't care, and I wasn't fast enough to jump and take it. That time it was already we were there in this camp about five months, five, yeah, about five months, five or six months. It was already Spring. And we heard, we didn't know how we heard, through grapevine, that the Germans are losing. And there is hope that we will survive. They let us there we will survive.

ES: This is the beginning of 1945?

AG: This was '44.

ES: Still in '44.

AG: '44.

ES: Okay.

AG: No, '45, '45, yes, '45. This was like in February, beginning, yeah, in February. Yeah, February because they took us that time again somewhere else because they knew that the front is coming closer. We are bombarded, not bombarded, but there were air raids. And every time the *Kapos* told us to go into the shelter we didn't. We were laughing and singing and dancing. And they were the ones who hid themselves. We didn't. We were sure that probably they will drop a bomb, but they didn't know there is a factory. They thought that it's woods, forest. One day, it was in February, yes, possibly, February, like half February, the snow was melting in some places. They told us to, we didn't have anything to take, just to stay in a field, that we are going somewhere else. That time I noticed one of girls I knew. I worked with her mother in the social health. Her mother was a pharmacist, and they used to live in the same house where my mother lived, so I noticed her. She was very happy to see me. I don't know how she knew. She said we are going to Germany back. We were, I don't know exactly where we were. We were on the Belgian, Dutch...

ES: Border?

AG: Border, yeah. Because sometimes we heard French singing. So we assumed it must be Belgian. They put us again in the cattle cars, but we were full of hope that time.

We were sure that on the way there will be an air raid and they will bomb us. But we didn't care. As long as the war will end. And many times they put us on different rails because they had to have the roads for the Germans for the soldiers.

ES: Soldiers on the train.

AG: Yes. On the train. It took about, it took us about two weeks to get to Bergen-Belsen. We came to Bergen-Belsen. We saw that it's a concentration camp.

Tape two, side one:

ES: Eileen Steinberg interviewing Alexandra Gorko, August 19, 1985. Side three. Continue telling me about what happened when you got to Bergen-Belsen.

AG: There were sick people, mostly sick people. And there they put us to work. I was working on the railroad, putting rails. I never did any physical work beside nursing, and they gave me some kind of, I don't know what the instrument's called. They told me to put some screws in the rails, put them all together, and I don't believe myself that I could do it. And I even taught other people to do it. The rails went no where, but they punished us this way. They, they took advantage of us. They wanted to put our morale down. They knew that the end of the war is close. Of course we didn't. At that time we didn't hear any airplanes. We didn't know what's going on, and we thought we will never get out of there. People were falling like flies. People couldn't even eat. There was dysentery, typhoid fever. They kept food away from us. They didn't give us every day bread. They gave us some times only soup. They said that they have to give, to send every thing to the front for the soldiers. There is no bread for Jews. And we were work ing. It was a very hot spring that year. And they took away the clogs from us. We were bare feet. Our uniforms were dirty. They were almost standing up when we tried to wash them in cold water, which was a big exertion, because they didn't even let us near the tubs, the water. We had to smuggle our selves to the, to the outhouse. They didn't let us. Dysentery, typhoid fever was all over. People were falling at work. The other one had two, they gave us spades to put them in graves. It was going on like this. We never thought that we will survive. That, that, I didn't get sick, it was a miracle. I don't know how. Paula got sick. She didn't have typhoid, but she was exhausted. She was just falling off her feet of exhaustion. But we were still together. We were always together. We were holding to each other like, I never had a sister, but if I would have, I couldn't have a better one than she was. As a matter of fact, she is in France. In 1973 we finally could make a trip to Israel and to France, and we saw her. She is not well. One of her legs is, at the mus-... [muscle] is swollen. It looks like three of her normal, the other leg. In the camp, even in Mühlhausen, she had, cysts on her neck, which didn't heal. Open, and didn't heal. And it was always...

ES: Infected?

AG: Inf-, yeah. It was bacteria coming out and pus, yeah. And a nurse, he had to come, because pus was coming out and I suspected that she had TB. But she survived. And one day, it was a very hot day, in, it was probably, yeah, it was April. It was already April. The Germans disappeared. They, we didn't know where they are. One day, second day, three days they weren't there. And we didn't understand what happened. Not even one of them. So, the strongest of us, which I was too, I wasn't sick, we started to look for food. And we found warehouses, but they were locked and couldn't open them. And everybody ran to the taps of water and whoever drank the water, right away got sick. And I was hollering whoever was near me, "Don't drink the water! Don't drink the water! It seems

like it's poison, poisoned!" But people didn't listen, and it was going on like three-and-a-half days. All of a sudden we heard heavy machinery, tanks and we saw all the men coming in, soldiers on tanks, speaking English. And this was the English Army. General Montgomery's army. And we, everybody who could, fell on their knees and people who could pray, prayed. The other one was kissing them and hugging the English men. And they were older men like their 40's, even in their 50's. They were crying like babies when they saw us. They opened the warehouses, which were full of bread and sausage and beans and all kinds of food which they didn't give us, which they didn't have time to take with them, the Germans. The English people gave us their rations. We were asking for rice. I was hollering, "Rice! Rice! Rice!" But the, they were so generous that they put their rations into the rice, and 15,000 people died after they liberated us. 15,000 people were dead. 15,000 dead. 15,000 people died after. Then we were, doctors came, chaplains. Was one Jewish chaplain who spoke German, and he asked who has relatives in United States or in England. He can radio them, send radio telegrams. And to tell them where, and what cities, and he will find them. I went to him and I said, "You don't have to find my relatives because I remember their addresses and their names." And I told him, "I have two aunts in Philadelphia. One lives 2741 Jefferson Street, and the other, Jefferson Street, Germantown, and the other one lives at 2005 Salford Street. Her name is Marie Embinder, and the other is Adele Bronstein." And about three or four days later I was called to the office. They had already arranged an office and people were working, who could walk were working. They gave us clothes. They gave us soap. They gave us bandages and all kinds of medication. Doctors were examining us. They were English doctors. There weren't enough, so they had German doctors. The Germans all around Bergen-Belsen didn't know what was going on. They didn't know what was going on.

ES: They claimed they didn't know.

AG: They knew there was something there, but they didn't know. They thought we are criminals. And about three or four days later I was called to the office and they read to me a telegram which my aunt from Philadelphia sent, and asked that they are very happy that they got a radio telegram from this, I don't remember his name now, that English chaplain. And they're very happy that I am alive and they want me to come to United States and where is my mother and brother and husband. So I knew that my mother died. I hoped against hope that maybe my mother survived, but that I knew that they didn't survive. But I still had hope that my husband did.

ES: Because your husband wasn't Jewish?

AG: That's right. See, it's, it's fate. It has nothing to do with. A few weeks later the Swedish Red Cross came and took the people who were sick and people who were, had TB, typhoid fever. There was other diseases. They took them to Sweden. Then people who remained who had sores, who had, who coughed, who had all kind of, not serious diseases, didn't want to go to the German hospital, there was a German hospital. So I was, I offered

my services and we opened in one of the barracks a [husband says, "Sick room."] Sick room. Right. Like a sick room. Not a hospital but a sick room.

ES: Right in Bergen-Belsen.

AG: Right in Bergen-Belsen. We got medication from the Germans. The English Army brought some. Then they took from the Germans and came a Russian doctor who I found out, I uncovered him that he wasn't a doctor because he didn't know how to write a prescription. He was probably an aide somewhere. And I had to, asked me to write a prescription. So I told him to go away, because if not I would denounce you. I'm not a doctor. And he disappeared. There also was a Polish dentist who was a dentist. He helped people who needed, had cavities, had aches, and so on and so on. And we decided to, at about six months later, yeah, three months later I still was thinking I knew that I cannot go to Lodz, there is nobody, nobody there. And my father-in-law died before the war. He had cancer and he died in my arms in the hospital where I was working. So I was waiting for some sign from my husband. In the meantime, I found out that one of my friends is in Lodz, so I wrote to her and asked her to go to court and ask about my husband. And she wrote me back that they don't know about him nothing. He didn't come back.

ES: Was your friend a non-Jewish friend?

AG: Non-Jewish friend. No, she was Jewish.

ES: Jewish.

AG: She was Jewish, yeah, but she went to my, to other friends...

ES: She had gone back to Lodz then.

AG: Yeah, she had gone back to Lodz. Eva. And then so I decided that I am going to, he was, if he didn't come back to Lodz he was probably in the Polish Army. And I knew that there is a headquarters of the Polish Army in St. Georgio, near Rome. So I decided I'm going there to look for him. He doesn't know where I am and maybe I will find him somewhere there or I find some sign of life there. So, how I got there, it took me about three, three, four, about a week until I got to Italy from Germany. I had to change trains. I didn't have a ticket. I didn't have this. I didn't have, really I didn't know where to get off the trains, when...

ES: Running on schedule.

AG: On time. This was three months after the war ended. I went to St. Georgio. They didn't hear about him. They didn't know anything about him. Here I am, and I don't know what to do. Go back to Lodz, I knew that I have nobody there. Not nobody. What to do, I didn't know. Paula didn't go back either. So we were both staying there in Bergen-Belsen.

ES: You went back from St. Georgio to Bergen-Belsen?

AG: Back, yes. Back. And I was working again. I was busy. I was working. I received letters from my aunt, and packages and clothes. And I shared those, the food, and I shared the clothes. And I didn't know what to do. I was waiting. One day, [pause] I got a, someone came from the office for me that a English major is asking for me. So of course I

flew. I was sure that it's my husband. He probably was in the English Army a major. He is not a captain anymore. He is a major. And I came in there and I saw it wasn't my husband. It was, and I fainted. And I came to. This was the son of a doctor who was working in Lodz. He was in Switzerland. For Jews was very difficult to get into a Polish university. There was a *numerus clausus*. It was a quota. So, they were well to do. He sent him to Switzerland when the war broke out. He, and he stayed in the Polish Army. And he looked for his father, for his mother. There were lists all over with the names of people who survived. And he saw my name on one of the lists, so he came from England to Bergen-Belsen. Such a disappointment. At that time I decided I am going to United States. I am going to United States and, but I wrote to my aunt that I'm going to the American Zone of Germany because if not I cannot—this was the English Zone—I cannot get to United States from there. And she started to make papers for me to sponsor me. But I thought to myself, before I go, let me go to Lodz and see. Maybe some friends, maybe some cousins were left. I, we had a quite a family in Warsaw, not in Lodz but in Warsaw. Maybe I go to Warsaw, maybe it's someone survived. I went to Lodz. It was in May, 1946, yeah, 1946. And I came, didn't find any one, find one, a wife of a doctor who I used to work with. And she invited me to stay in her apartment and I stayed there and I didn't have any money. I had to work, so I got a job at the maternity clinic but I couldn't work there. I saw there women who were having children, coming from Russia. Mostly they came from Russia with pregnant, and there were babies in the clinic. I couldn't work there. And I took a job in a private house. Someone told me about a woman who had typhoid fever convalescing and I had a job there. And one of my friends told me, she was also a nurse and she survived, that one of the nurses, a German nurse, who had her children, who sent her children to England, survived, and she lives in a hotel on this and this street. And next day she is going to London to her children. And if I want to see her I have to go tonight after work to see her. And I was waiting for a bus. And to go to her, and I saw my husband approaching...

ES: You, your present husband?

AG: We knew each other, yes, my present husband. We met in 1939 in January. His wife was also a nurse, and we both took stateboard. In Poland you had to work three years until you could take a stateboard. You had enough experience to take that board. And we met that time. And we were in touch all through the ghetto. They had a little girl. And I didn't know. I lost touch when we were running away, when we didn't work any more, I lost touch with them. And I didn't know where they were or they survived.

ES: So this is the first time you had seen him in all those years.

AG: Seen him in, no, no, in about year and a half. As a matter of fact, in the ghetto he was sick. He was in contagious diseases hospital, and his wife was in quarantine and she couldn't get out from there to see him. And I did. I used to go every night after work, sometimes during the night; and I used to feed him. He was delirious. He had very high temperature. Delirious. He used to hit me, kick me. I used to bring some little bit of tea, lemon, something to feed him because they couldn't. They didn't have the time and

they couldn't feed him and I didn't know that time that he would survive, because he was very sick. When I was waiting for the bus I saw him approaching, and I thought to myself, "If he will recognize me, it's okay. If not, I will not stop him." I didn't look my best. I didn't. This was a year and a half after the war, no a year after the war, but, you know how it was, not the best of circumstances we met. But he saw me from a distance, and he ran and we, I didn't go to this nurse, this German nurse, Austrian really. And I never saw her. I didn't know if she would find her children or not. We were sitting in a café until they closed. They threw us out. We were talking and we told our stories. And about three weeks later we got married. And we got married, we moved. We went to American Zone of Germany. And by this time my aunt had already papers for me but she didn't have enough money in the bank to sponsor him, so she had to make arrangements for both of us to come. And we spent two years in Munich, Germany. And I was working in an apothecary. I didn't want to work in the German hospital with the German nurses. I worked in an apothecary. And he was working for the Joint Commission. After two years we came here in July, 1948. The rest...

ES: You started a new life here.

AG: We started a new life. We struggled. We worked very hard. I worked right away; a week after we came we were both working. We stayed six weeks with my aunt. I was working in my profession right away. He didn't. He had to struggle and work in physical work, which he wasn't used to. He got sick. But we made it.

ES: I wanna hear...

AG: We are very happy to be in the United States, the land of opportunity. We have a wonderful daughter and a very nice Jewish son-in-law. They are very much in love. They are very happy. My daughter is very talented, very intelligent, bright. And we have a wonderful *nachas*.

ES: You deserve it.

AG: Four years ago we both retired. We are filling our time with all kind of volunteer work. We belong to Action Alliance. We belong to Political Alliance. We belong to Senior Co-ops.

ES: You keep busy with all sorts of things.

AG: Yes. We are active in Northeast Regional Committee. My husband is a treasurer. I am secretary. And...

ES: Your time is occupied.

AG: Our time is occupied. We never forgot what we went through. We always talk about it. We talk about my husband's wife and child, about my husband.

ES: Mrs. Gorko, what was it that really kept you going? You were in so many camps and endured so many hardships.

AG: Only hope that my husband survived.

ES: That's what kept you going.

AG: Yes. I was seventeen when I married him. He was thirty. He was, I lost my father when I was thirteen. He built my character. He built my...

ES: He did a marvelous job.

AG: Thank you.

ES: Did you ever find out what happened to your husband?

AG: Yes I did. When I came to Lodz, I found one of his friends who wasn't with him, but he told me that many officers who were in the officers' camp and survived told him that my husband, his brother, his brother-in-law, and three more friends ran away to Rumania and they were found by the Germans with shepherd dogs in the woods in Rumania and they were shot. And the other ones who were in the camp were all through the war in the officers' camp and came back to Lodz, sick, malnourished, without hope, but survived.

ES: So you knew finally, once and for all, that he was dead.

AG: So I knew that he was dead.

ES: Thank you very much for sharing your courageous story with me.

[Tape two, side two, blank. Interview ended.]