

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

HANNA SECKEL

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Nora Levin

Date: March 26, 1982

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Gratz College

Melrose Park, PA 19027

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HS - Hanna Seckel¹ [interviewee]

NL - Nora Levin [interviewer]

Date: March 26, 1982

Tape one, side one:

NL: This is an interview with Mrs. Hanna Sechel, S-E-C-H-E-L. This is tape one, side one, March 26, 1981, Nora Levin interviewing. [tape off then on] Corrections, this is 1982, and please spell Mrs. Seckel's name S-E-C-K-E-L. Mrs. Seckel, can you first please tell us a little about your childhood, where you were born, and when, and a little about your family background?

HS: Okay, I was born in Czechoslovakia.

NL: In what town, please?

HS: I was born in Kolin, which is like 60 kilometers out of Prague, but I moved when I was eight months old, which I don't remember, to Prague.

NL: How do you spell that, please?

HS: My, K-O-L-I-N.

NL: Thank you.

HS: My grandparents, both my grandparents lived in that town. My parents then moved before I was one year to Prague. My father got into business. My mother was 19 when I was born, so basically I had a very young parent. I had a brother who was four years younger than I, and I think that as all middle-class Jewish families, the education, the religion, and the family circle was very important to us. You...

NL: You had just one brother?

HS: I just had one brother. My mother was out of seven. My father was out of three. We were a very close clan with the whole family. There were no holidays where not everybody got together, except that one of my aunts, she divorced and that was *grosse Schande* [great shame]. And another aunt married a Gentile. That was even worse. Actually she was the only one who survived, except me. So, the...

NL: You were...

HS: Family closeness was very important and we were always taught you do not do anything bad or so to speak or out of line, because you would shame the family. And we had a very close ties with the family, which I think our generation doesn't understand at all.

NL: Was it an observant family?

HS: No. No. I think we, you know, just celebrated the holidays, but no, we didn't keep *kashrut* at all.

¹Hanna's maiden name was Dubova. Her second married name is Drucker. Hanna spelled her first name differently, depending on where she lived. Hana was the spelling used as a child in Czechoslovakia according to Rachael Cerrotti, her granddaughter.

NL: Did you go to the synagogue?

HS: Yes.

NL: On high...

HS: We went to the synagogue.

NL: Holidays?

HS: On high holidays.

NL: On the high holidays.

HS: And other children, you know, when I was a girl, when I was little I was allowed to go to the men's section with my dad. That was sort of a very highlight thing. I, when I got ten I couldn't, and that was sort of a heartbreak...

NL: Why?

HS: Not to be able, because then I had to go over to the women's section.

NL: At ten.

HS: Yeah. So...

NL: Did you go to Hebrew school, or a Sunday School?

HS: No, because in Europe that was a little different. You did not have, the community didn't support a synagogue. You paid the taxes. Now every religious group was taxed, so we had a Jewish tax. And that, thus the synagogues were supported, or any religious institution. And a fund drive. But in the public schools, you had your religious instruction always, which meant you had it three times a week, the first hour of the day. And it was a pretty, well, for the Jewish people the rabbi or the Hebrew instruction; the Catholic, the nuns came in. And the Protestants. And the one who were non-believer, they go to school an hour or two hours later.

NL: I see. And your brother also had this kind of religious education?

HS: Yeah, we all did. We were, yeah, we went to a regular public school before the "Jewish question" arose.

NL: And what do you remember of your relations with non-Jewish children in the school? Did you feel...

HS: No different, no. No different, when I was in elementary school. But from fifth grade on, when I had to go to another school, and probably met diversified people, as a child I remember I always was told if somebody called me a "dirty Jew" or another word, don't say anything. Don't make waves. Take it. Okay? And if somebody spilled ink on you or put your pigtails into the inkwell behind you because you were maybe Jewish, maybe they did to the other, but because we're Jewish, don't speak up. Don't say anything. Take it. You know, okay, don't make waves.

NL: Were there such anti-Jewish episodes from time to time?

HS: I really cannot recall. I mean, it was sort of, maybe, I don't know, maybe we developed an immunity towards being called a "dirty Jew." I do not recall that somebody would personally accost me or be vengeful to me because I was Jewish. I cannot recall that at all.

NL: And you had some non-Jewish playmates, I suppose?

HS: Yeah, yeah. School was all right, as I said. We had Catholic, Protestant, and Jews.

NL: And in the fifth grade something happened?

HS: The fifth grade, then you moved to different schools and like here you move to high school. You move to a different school as you pass an exam and could go to a different school. And it wasn't too bad because then I went to a French school, a completely French schools, where all the subjects were taught in French. And this was outside of my neighborhood. And I really do not recall in school being very much abused of being Jewish...

NL: There weren't many...

HS: At all.

NL: Jewish children in such a school, I would suppose.

HS: Yes, there were.

NL: There were.

HS: Many Jewish and...

NL: French rather than German was the preferred language for upper...

HS: No...

NL: Class?

HS: German was. No we had...

NL: German.

HS: Always all the Jewish families read a German-Jewish newspaper, which was published in Vienna and was called *Prager Tageblatt*. Maybe it was, or maybe it was published in Prague. I don't know. But that was read. We always, always had a German-speaking maid, a governess. So we had been brought up bi-lingually, and eventually tri-lingual. Don't forget that my parents actually were the first generation of Czechoslovakia before that it was the Austrian Empire, the Hungro-Austrian [Austro-Hungarian] Empire. And the official language, the *official* language, was German, for the official papers. So everybody spoke German rather than Yiddish. I never spoke Yiddish until I came to the States. That's where I learned it. So, no, I...

NL: But the interest in French was cultural?

HS: The French was, you know, *toi toi*, upper class. We were...

NL: The language of diplomacy...

HS: Yeah, diplomacy, yeah. And so and so, you, from fifth grade on I met some pretty nice people, pretty nice kids. And I don't, okay, so, I got myself very much involved in the Zionist Youth Movement, when I was like ten. And thanks to that I really am here. But I was very much involved in that always after school and learning through *Maccabi Hatzair* which it was called. And we were learning Hebrew and singing all these Palestine—it was Palestine, not Israel, at that time—and so we were...

NL: Do you remember what attracted you to the movement, Hanna? Was there an inspiring leader or...

HS: Well, it was the way, okay, when you, like in school you didn't have sports. So of course your parents always looked out that their children should not just develop the brain but also the brawn. And there was a sports organization in Czech which was called *Sokol*, S-O-K-O-L, who did not accept Jews, like the country clubs here. But the Jewish people had their own gyms, and that was called *Maccabi*. And we used to go there after school two, three times. Red, whit-, blue and white shorts we used to wear. And I think through that, I really don't know how I got into it. It seems like I've been it all my life. Through that, I think there was an outing or something like that. And I got caught up...

NL: You were caught up in the...

HS: Caught up in it, and I went to camp and had very that pioneer spirit. And *hashachar* [preparatory camp]. We were, we slept on the floor and ate from the same pot for five weeks and...

NL: Real *chalutzot*.

HS: Yeah! *Anachnu chalutzim* [we are pioneers], all the time.

NL: Yes.

HS: And I stuck with this. And my parents were very unhappy about that...

NL: I was going to ask.

HS: At that time, extremely. And every time, "Where are you going?" "I'm going to a meeting here and there." And, "Who is going to be there?" The first time I really broke loose and...

NL: They were not Zionists?

HS: They were not Zionists. They were very, they didn't give me too much, at least, maybe I was so caught up in it that I didn't pay that much attention how heart-broken they were. But they were certainly not very supportive, and did not...

NL: And your brother, did they, did he...

HS: My brother was four years younger than I, so when I was ten, he was six. So it really didn't matter that much to him. But...

NL: This was very meaningful for you.

HS: Yeah, I was, I found my niche, finally.

NL: And your parents...

HS: And as a matter of fact, most of my friends who survived, who are in Israel, are still from that era.

NL: Well, that's interesting.

HS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NL: [coughs] Excuse me.

HS: Here's one [unclear]...

NL: And can you tell me a little about the life of your parents in the pre-war period? They were comfortable economically and socially?

HS: Yeah.

NL: And happy in their life?

HS: I think so. It's very difficult to think back what you saw as a child.

NL: Yes.

HS: I was very happy. I had—we did a lot of things. My parents were very sporty, and we went skiing a lot. In particular my father was into the European football and we used to go to football games, played football. We rented in the summer, every summer, a summerhouse. We took the whole household including the maid to the summerhouse. And we were very much into the outdoors. I...

NL: What was...

HS: Don't recall ever, at least I don't think I recall ever having any serious arguments or disagreement, or hearing any in my house. Maybe they did it when we were asleep.

NL: But it was a serene household?

HS: I was, I had a very happy childhood and good relationships.

NL: What was Father's business, Hanna?

HS: My father was a doctor.

NL: And so his patients were Jewish and non-Jewish, I presume.

HS: I do not know.

NL: You don't know.

HS: That I do not know.

NL: And would you know if they had any non-Jewish friends, socially? You weren't aware at that point?

HS: I recall some dinner parties in the house, but you know, in that time the children were seen but not heard. And if there was a party for the adults, you just did not mix into that at all. You said, "Hello, how are you?" And, "Goodnight," and say, "Hello," and shake hands and make a curtsy and go away.

NL: Can you tell me a little about the neighborhood where you lived?

HS: We lived in, actually across a church, but within the boundaries of, where they call it the *Alt-Neu Synagogue*, the old-new synagogue.

NL: Oh yes.

HS: Could walk it right across a main street there.

NL: Yes.

HS: So with, from our windows there was a church, but it was, I think it was sort of mixed. Maybe the half a street later was practically all Jewish. When we, we lived in an apartment house and we had a maid who lived in. And...

NL: And you could walk to school?

HS: To elementary school, but to the, from fifth grade on to the French school I had to either take a streetcar. Or, if I wanted to save money, I walked it, which was about an hour's walk.

NL: And what year are we speaking about? When did you enter the French school, approximately?

HS: '35, '36.

NL: '36.

HS: '36.

NL: And you were then about 11?

HS: Yeah.

NL: And so...

HS: I stayed only two years.

NL: Two years.

HS: Yeah.

NL: And what happened at the end of that time?

HS: Well then, you know, is this, now you come to, two years later you come into '38...

NL: '38.

HS: Which was, of course the Sudetenland was...

NL: The Sudetenland.

HS: Occupied, and...

NL: How did that affect your family or your life?

HS: I think it did. I think, first of all, I think it affected it before because we had an aunt who was in Vienna. And they came to live with us. They escaped from Vienna and so then we were like, you know, two families in one apartment.

NL: I see.

HS: Also, it started affecting us long before that, because the maid just left. okay, well, we were told as kids that we are big enough. We don't need a maid. But...

NL: There were other factors, undoubtedly.

HS: Yes, yes. But there was, and so my aunt, Helena, with her family, they came from Vienna and they were telling us how things are. And of course everybody was saying, "That can happen in Austria but *never, never* in Czechoslovakia. We are a democracy. We have a democratic president, and this will not happen." But I, there were a lot of people coming, particular, I think, I don't know, because I didn't live anywhere else, but I thought that in our neighborhood there were a lot of strange Jewish people coming in suddenly. And so then the streets...

NL: Immigrants.

HS: Were more crowded.

NL: Yes.

HS: What happened in the other neighborhood, I don't know. And...

NL: They were coming mostly from Austria, do you suppose?
HS: Austria. A lot of people came from Poland also.
NL: From Poland also.
HS: Yeah, many. And...
NL: So you were aware of...
HS: What is the question?
NL: What happened in the French school? And you were saying that in the middle '30s...
HS: Oh yeah. So then of course...
NL: That it really was changing.
HS: Yeah, and you also asked how, and then of course when the Sudetenland was occupied and there was a general mobilization, and we had to leave. I mean, I don't know, under Czechoslovakia there was a mobilization in '38. And we had to go to the country. They thought that the city is going to be bombed. And what affected us also that we, all kids, we had to walk with gas masks. Everybody had to buy a gas mask. But that's not a "Jewish question." It was just a question that the war is coming on, and we had all these exercises, you know, the gas alarms instead of fire alarm exercise. And so then we put on the gas mask on and how to go under the desks in the classroom and all that thing. But as far as the "Jewish question" was, was that in 1938 the Jews were not allowed to go to public schools any more. There was a decree that you cannot attend the school any more.
NL: This was a Czech government decree?
HS: No. I might be wrong, but...
NL: Maybe it's...
HS: In 19-...
NL: '39.
HS: 19-, March, 1939.
NL: Right.
HS: March 1939, where we were occupied in what became Protectorate Bohemia-Moravia. And the decree was pretty soon after that that the Jews cannot attend schools.
NL: That was after the destruction of the Republic...
HS: Right.
NL: Actually.
HS: Yeah. But the mobilization was '38.
NL: '38.
HS: In September. And it was March '39...
NL: And Father was involved in that mobilization? You don't remember. And when you say you were in...

HS: No, I think...I remember that just the kids and my mother, we just wandered out of the city and...

NL: Into the country.

HS: Into the countryside, yeah.

NL: And then between September '38, the time of Munich, and March '39 when the Republic was destroyed, there was...

HS: A lot of things were brewing...

NL: Melting...

HS: A lot of things were happening. For my part, you know, in the Zionist organization, we got a lot of *shaliach* [emissary from Israel] came from Palestine and was telling us what's going to happen. And I came home and I, my parents were saying, "It's a lot of propaganda," you know. "They all want you to go to Palestine. They—it's nothing is going to happen. They just are painting the whole thing black in order to get the young people into Palestine and..."

NL: Did you want to go at that time, Hanna?

HS: Oh yes.

NL: You did.

HS: Oh yes.

NL: Did any of your friends go?

HS: All my, no, not directly, no. Because first we had to go, like we had a certain camp, like a summer camp.

NL: *Hachsharah*.

HS: A *Hachsharah* camp, like my kids were in Young Judea Camp. And so you had to go through the training and in 1938 I went to a camp. My parents let me go. And summer 19-, yeah, 1938, yeah, I'm really not prepared.

NL: That's all right.

HS: 1937, 1938 I went to the camp where we were, lived, *chalutz* life. I loved it. It was great.

NL: And you really were getting yourself ready to go to Palestine.

HS: Oh yeah. I learned Hebrew and...

NL: You learned Hebrew.

HS: I learned Hebrew and we studied constantly Hebrew. And we studied the whole political situation, to the chagrin of my parents, instead of studying the French. And in 1939...

NL: [coughs] Excuse me.

HS: Summer, okay, now, the *Protektorat* became March. I still went to school.

NL: That's '39.

HS: '39, until May.

NL: Until May.

HS: And '39, in May, I came to school. Now, excuse me, that's all wrong. In 1939, in March, April...

NL: April.

HS: I went to school. And I get to school, and the whole school is full of German troops. They eliminated a French school. And they used it as the headquarters as the [unclear]. So we all we sent home, but not by the virtue of being Jewish. At the time that French school was, there was also an English school and that German Army took on. And they said that we are going to have classrooms somewhere else. That then happened except for the Jewish students. The Jewish student could not attend. I really do not know where the classrooms, where the classes were held. The school, the physical school, was occupied by the German Army. We got there one day and that was it. And we were sent home. And as a matter of fact, I do have sort of like a paper here where it says the school has been dissolved. But apparently there were still some classes somewhere else. But then it was that the Jewish people would not go, could not go.

NL: To any public school?

HS: To any public school, but there was a Jewish school. There was a Jewish school which was started which apparently was, of course I have some people now an age who remember, you know, who taught there. They were young women of 17 or 18 who became teachers, and there was established a Jewish group for Jewish children. I...

NL: You attended that?

HS: Did not attend that...

NL: No.

HS: Because this was April, and I didn't want to go. I just was going to the Zionist movement and I was saying that I'm going to go in September to school in *aliyah*, '39, September, '39. But then I started being very active in the *Maccabi Hatzair* and still wanted to organize a summer camp, which we did, in 1939. So I never went, except that we used to get together and just learn. But I didn't go into any...

NL: Formal.

HS: Official, formal school, yeah.

NL: And what was happening to Brother? What is your brother's name?

HS: My brother's name was Peter.

NL: Peter. And what was happening to his life during this time?

HS: His, well, his life was—I like to think, I'm not sure, but I like to think that he was extremely brilliant. He was, because he wrote a lot of poetry when he was even like ten, eleven years old. He drew beautifully. He drew beautiful cartoons. He was...

NL: Talented.

HS: Very talented. And he went to a Jewish school. He hated it.

NL: He was not interested in those things?

HS: Oh no.

NL: Or was he...

HS: No, he just, I think that he was, he hated that he had to get out of his school and go into that...

NL: Which he had loved.

HS: Which he had loved. And to go to a Jewish school. And he started going for the small children into the *Maccabi Hatzair*, in that *tzophim* [scout movement]. And it's funny because my daughter now is the regional director for Zionist movement. So I always keep telling them I brought them a, their career, made a career out of that. So I pursued this all my life.

NL: Yes. Did he...

HS: He was much more...

NL: Adjust, do you know?

HS: He was much more, he could find happiness sort of within himself. He did a lot of writing and poetry. And so and so. He could, he was *schlepping* along as my younger brother. [tape off then on] Oh, what was the question?

NL: About your brother and his writing. He started a newspaper?

HS: He started a newspaper for the *Maccabi Hatzair*, Zionist movement, and he attended the Jewish school then. How it affected him emotionally, I really didn't find out until sort of later, when I was in Denmark. [unclear] And my parents, I remember there were sort of like a lot of clandestine meetings in our house. I think they were trying to get to Uganda. I remember studying about Uganda in that time, because we had relatives in Cincinnati, Ohio—that's how I came after the war to America—who they tried to get, you know, papers and get to America and get a visa here and get an affidavit to here. But nothing was moving out of America. Papers were not coming and...

NL: Very few Czech Jews were able to come to this country.

HS: I do not know. I cannot really answer that.

NL: It's my—yes.

HS: All I can answer is for my own family.

NL: Were they thinking of Palestine as an alternative, do you know?

HS: I cannot answer that, in all honesty either. I know there was a lot of talk about Uganda. We had to study Uganda because they were accepting Jews there at that time.

NL: Is that so?

HS: Of all places!

NL: Yes.

HS: I remember because that was such a strange name for me, you know, Uganda. We kept saying it over and over and again, and looked it up.

NL: Do you know the British had offered it to Jews in 1905?

HS: Yeah.

NL: And so this was a revival of the idea, possibly.

HS: And then, of course, my grandmother had a sister here in Cincinnati, Ohio. So they were trying to get here, and get their papers here. But the wheels were just grinding too slow to save many people that way, as far as papers forged, I mean, from here. The affidavits and so on.

NL: Was Father's business practice affected, after March '39? Was he able to practice?

HS: Not too, not too, not too, not yet.

NL: Not yet.

HS: No. Not...

NL: And were you aware that Jewish stores were being closed or taken over?

HS: Oh yes, oh yes, oh yeah, well, we wore the star and all that stuff, you know, we did.

NL: As early as March?

HS: No, not as early as March.

NL: A little later.

HS: It was June...

NL: June '39.

HS: Yeah, we wore the stars, and the stores had, you know, "This is a Jewish store," the store, *Juden Geschäft*.

NL: But Jews were still able to operate their stores, do you think?

HS: Yeah, except that they were not allowed to have any gentile employees. Also, our ration cards were different.

NL: Was there curfew, do you remember?

HS: There was a curfew, but it was not steady. It would be like one week it was here and the next week there wouldn't be a curfew. It was sort of...

NL: Erratic.

HS: And there were the fancy strikes, like that.

NL: Do you remember that your relations with non-Jewish children, or friends, were affected, Hanna?

HS: Yeah. Well, I don't know whether they were affected. I think that we started to stick more to ourselves. You sort of, it was sort of like a natural progression that we started to sever all your relationship with the non-Jewish people, non-Jewish play-, well, they were not playmates any more.

NL: Friends.

HS: Friends, yeah.

NL: But...

HS: And you sort of gravitated more towards your own at that time.

NL: But your parents were still able to keep their apartment...

HS: Yes.

NL: Through the fall of '39?

HS: Oh yeah, right. After I left they still had their apartment.

NL: And so you stayed in Prague until when, Hanna?

HS: October, '39.

NL: And then what did you do?

HS: I went to Denmark.

NL: Why Denmark?

HS: Well, you see, that's, actually, what happened was that in, let me see, in the summer of '39, I still went to camp, to the *Maccabi Hatzair* camp, and came back. In any camp we sort of came back and...

NL: Had Denmark been...

HS: Started to think about emigration.

NL: Had Denmark been discussed there as a transit...

HS: No.

NL: No?

HS: No. Because we were in *Hachsharah*, and because we were going to Palestine, we had to learn farming, okay? And the League for Peace and Freedom, the International League for Peace and Freedom put in that they are going to take a certain amount of children between the age of 12 and 15 into Denmark to teach them farming.

NL: I see.

HS: And that's how we got to Denmark in...

NL: This was not connected to any Zionist movement, then, but quite independent.

HS: No, I, it was in a way, because the Zionist movement submitted the list to the League of Peace and Freedom, which would not take just any children. It was more-

Tape one, side two:

NL: Tape one, side two, continuing our interview with Mrs. Hanna Seckel. [coughs] Excuse me. Hanna, I was asking about the League, this association that sponsored the agricultural training program. I asked if it was linked in any way with the Zionist movement. And you, I think you said that...

HS: Well the League itself wasn't, but the League did fight against any kind of persecution. And they did say that they would accommodate so and so many young people. They used to call them children—it was like a *Kinder aliyah* [children's immigration]—and to train them in Denmark in agriculture and farming. And it probably, the League, the Danish League for Peace and Freedom did contact the undercover Zionistic organizations because they didn't exist, sort of. And they in turn contacted us youngsters who were there. But there was a price to be paid for that later. You know, you had to buy yourself out, or buy yourself into Denmark, or buy yourself out of Czechoslovakia. And it was really up to the parents of the children whether they could afford to pay for this expensive emigration.

NL: And your parents, then, were required to pay the League for this so privileged...

HS: I really, I cannot answer whether it was the League or whether it was also partially supporting the Zionistic organization. But I know there was a high price to be paid for that.

NL: And your parents paid it, of course.

HS: Yes.

NL: Were many other Jewish families involved in this, do you know, Hanna? Or was it too expensive?

HS: Well, we were, there were three transports going.

NL: In '39.

HS: In '39, to Denmark.

NL: And about how many...

HS: And there were transports also going from Germany at this time.

NL: And about how many children in each of the three transports?

HS: There were about close to 100.

NL: Close to a hundred.

HS: Yes.

NL: And your brother, was he interested?

HS: He was. He was too young.

NL: He was too young.

HS: He couldn't go. There was a specific, I just was lucky. I fell into the age requirement at that time.

NL: So you left in October.

HS: I left in October of '39.

NL: It must have been a wrenching separation from your family.

HS: Well, you know, looking back and being in a old, for me it was a fantastic adventure. And on looking back, I, many, many times in my life I said, "How selfish was I, and not..."

NL: But you were young.

HS: Well I, and, it took me years before I even could even think about how my parents must have felt about that. It took me years even wanted to see the picture of my parents on the platform, on the train.

NL: But you had no idea a war was coming, or that you'd be separated, did you?

HS: Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.

NL: You knew?

HS: The war broke out, we left after the war broke out. We left in the end of October.

NL: Ah yes, of, Poland was invaded, of course, in September.

HS: Yeah. Oh yes, but things were going really bad, and we knew they are not going to get any better. And, you know, yet...

NL: But for you, going to Denmark...

HS: But for me...

NL: Was...

HS: Well, I was on my own. I was just 14.

NL: Fourteen.

HS: And we sat on the train and we sang Hebrew songs and going through Berlin and we were in this compartment, all closed in.

NL: It was an intense experience.

HS: I was in love with somebody and he was on the train and then, you know, you got there, and you broke down. But...

NL: Were you able to maintain contact with your parents by mail?

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative]. Because then in April Denmark was occupied. And so then we became the *Grosses Deutsches Reich* and so there was constant mail contact. And I still have all my letters. And when I came home I, after the war, I found all of my letters that I had sent it home. And I still have it. It's all yellow and so on, but I have every single letter which we had, and which we corresponded.

NL: Where in Denmark did you stay when you got there?

HS: Well...

NL: Were you taken to a farm?

HS: We were taken to a farm. Do you want to see a picture?

NL: Of course. If-- we could do that a little later.

HS: Yeah.

NL: Where in Denmark?

HS: Gørløse, per Gørløse, G-O-R-L-O-S-E, and it's a umlaut O, per, P-E-R, small p-e-r, it means like post office. And the same thing, Gørløse. And that farm was an unusual Danish farm because there was neither running water nor electricity. And...

NL: Was it near any city or town?

HS: It was near Hillrøb. And that was the closest place.

NL: Can you spell that?

HS: H-I-L-L-R-Ø-B, umlaut O. And the Danes put like a slash through the O.

NL: No running water?

HS: No running water, no electricity. And no, nothing but Danish spoken, no other language. I was...

NL: Were you with your comrades?

HS: No, the thing is that somehow it happened that two of us, a boy who is now in Denmark, stayed in Denmark, and I, we were shipped into this little village. Now he was a little luckier than I, because he was shipped to a school teacher. We were met at the train, the two of us, by a priest, when we came from Copenhagen to Gørløse, by a priest and a schoolteacher. They came to meet us at the train, in their...

NL: Regalia?

HS: Regalia, right. And he stayed with the school teacher, whereas I was, I don't remember if I was driven by horse, cart, to the farm.

NL: To the priest's farm?

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: To another farm.

NL: To another farm.

HS: And they had four children, and they needed a maid. And here I was put into the position of being the helper.

NL: And what happened to the other children in the transport?

HS: The boy, the other children went to another village.

NL: Were they all scattered, do you know?

HS: We were all scattered, yeah, each one.

NL: All scattered.

HS: All scattered.

NL: I see. Of course this is not what you had in mind when you left.

HS: No. No, we were all scattered. It's, actually under, in Copenhagen the representative, Mrs. Nielson, *Frau* Nielson, she met us and she, and we were running with those signs. And this one goes this way and this one goes this way and...

NL: I see.

HS: So, but the two of us were the only ones who went from this train to the town. And the other ones went to another town, which was called Naestved. But they

were sort of closer together. But this boy and I, we, at the time we thought it was far away. When I came back it wasn't really that far away, but we thought it was far, far away. And there were just the two of us, trying contact. They did have a phone, though, which you cranked up by hand and called the operator. But...

NL: But you knew no Danish.

HS: I didn't know Danish. And the winter was *extremely* severe. The snow drifts were *extremely* severe. And I...

NL: It must have been a shocking experience.

HS: It was a shock, it was, it was. Yeah, I had a completely unheated room, sort of outside. And I did all the farm chores and going, pump the water in the morning, from the pump, which was absolutely frozen. And...

NL: Frozen. Did you have any warm clothing for that?

HS: Yes. We were allowed to take like 50 kilograms with us, and well, we didn't have any boots or anything like that. So we always had to write to the League and ask for boots. But they sort of collected clothing for us.

NL: Did some representative come from time to time...

HS: Once in a while they should come.

NL: To see how you were faring?

HS: And there was a *Frau* Openheimer. I remember her name. She came, but we always used to make fun of her, us kids, because she never did anything for us. You know, she would put down our name and say, she'd say, "I'll send you a pair of boots." But she didn't. So, we had these wooden shoes. And we stuffed them with straw to keep them warm. And the farmer, I think the farmers was pretty much disillusioned with me, because I really did not know anything and did not know any farming. And in the morning you had to cook this oatmeal porridge. And I, in the beginning I did not know how to do that.

NL: Coming from an upper-class...

HS: Pumping the water, and then boiling the water and, or, in the morning you got up. Or you pumped the water in the evening, and so you could have water for cooking in the morning. And you would start your fire in the morning in the kitchen. But the water was, even in the kitchen, it was frozen deep. And so you had to hack that ice. And it was pretty cold. My room was so cold that like in the morning my sheets were frozen from my breath. My blankets were frozen.

NL: Good heavens.

HS: And so...

NL: You were in the main house, or in a barn?

HS: Well, I was not in the main house. And I was not in the barn. I was like in the servants' quarters, which were not heated. Actually, the house wasn't heated either, because you just kindled your fires...

NL: For each individual room.

HS: For each individual room. Or you took a brick and stuck them in the stove and then...

NL: Took it to bed.

HS: Took it to bed, yeah.

NL: Did you get enough to eat?

HS: Yeah. Oh yeah, I got fat.

NL: And how did you withstand the cold? Or did you come down with colds that first winter?

HS: I withstood it, yeah.

NL: You withstood it.

HS: I withstood it, yeah.

NL: And were they relatively kindly people or...

HS: I can't tell, because we could not communicate at all. I...

NL: You didn't learn much Danish, then?

HS: Yeah, well, of course. You do start learning. Eventually I went to school in Denmark, in that...

NL: But those first...

HS: Yeah.

NL: Few months must have been very tough.

HS: But, it was very hard. I cried many a tear. I didn't want to write home any letters. Everything was fine when I wrote home because I know they had more than their share and they wanted me, they were happy that I was out of that situation. Until April of '40.

NL: Did you hear, then, from your parents? The mail got through.

HS: The mail got through. As a matter of fact, my parents were so that they sent that farmer also some presents for Yule, which is Christmas in Danish. And...

NL: What did they write about their situation?

HS: Well, most of the letters were censored.

NL: So they couldn't say much?

HS: My brother, who did a very good cartoon at that time, and sort of enclosed cartoons in that, which I still do have. And so I could, you know...

NL: What were your parents writing?

HS: Well, you know...

NL: Just that they were all right?

HS: It's an odd thing, because, or maybe it's not, because it took me I would say a good 30 years before I even started to reread the letters. I just didn't want to.

NL: I can understand that.

HS: And [pause; HS was pained to recall this].

NL: We'll pass on that.

HS: The situation was so that, you know, this was taken, that was taken. And the jewelry was taken and they could go out on the street only such and such hours. And the ration cards were taken and then three families and four families and five families moved into our apartment, into the concentrated ghetto. And about the selections. This one was selected to go, and these ones were selected to go. And this family isn't here anymore. And if the family wasn't, the family moved, you knew where they moved to, because you knew they couldn't get out of the country. So the only way they could move to was into the cattle car.² So...

NL: And...

HS: Yes, but...

NL: Were you in touch...

HS: Then...

NL: With some of your own, excuse me.

HS: Yeah. April, '40, Denmark was occupied. Okay. And...

NL: How did that affect your life?

HS: In the beginning, terribly. But you learn to live with any situation.

NL: Were you allowed to stay in the farm?

HS: The—I recall this quite vividly. Suddenly one morning, there's a whole German Army marching through the field into that farm, a cavalry, on horses. And they settled themselves down in the barn. Now the, and I crawled under the bed. [chuckles] Not literally, but I just didn't want to get out of my room. The farmer knew that I speak German, and he wanted me out there to communicate with the German soldiers.

NL: He knew of course that you were Jewish?

HS: Yeah, but I don't think that ever was a question. You know, before WWII, there, except for the White Russians, who came through, Denmark, there was no Jewish question. The Danes are not very religious oriented. They are all more or less Lutheran. They go to church once a year on Christmas. And there was no...

NL: Yes.

HS: Nothing.

NL: Very little antisemitism.

HS: Particularly in the farms, or in the, in Copenhagen there was a synagogue, which I did not know until much, much later.

NL: But there was really no Jewish problem in Denmark?

HS: No, they just probably found out, you know, the Danes at that time, are very good-natured people. So they just felt sorry and they took us. And, not only that but, you know, we were a helping hand. I mean, we didn't get paid.

NL: You didn't.

HS: No, nothing.

²Most of the Jews from Czechoslovakia were sent to Theresienstadt and ultimately perished in Auschwitz.

NL: Just your board and keep?

HS: Yeah, as a matter of fact we didn't even have money for stamps, you know, to send letters.

NL: You had to get that from your parents?

HS: Yeah, they used to send this International Reply Card where you could go to the, you know, you can go to the post office and change it for that.

NL: Yes.

HS: No, we didn't, no, no money, no money whatsoever. I mean really no money.

NL: Was this considered a fairly prosperous farm?

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: I don't think so because...

NL: Hard working.

HS: I didn't stay there, I stayed there one term through June. And then I moved to another farm.

NL: Now I interrupted you. You were about to say the farmer wanted you to speak to the Germans.

HS: Yeah. And I said, "No." I didn't want to do that. Well, you see, it was very, for the farmer it was very advantageous, because the German would pay a lot, and it was, you know, the farmer did not know their money was worth nothing. But they printed their money like crazy, and they would pay three times, four times the market price of anything which they wanted. They didn't, they did not take it. They would pay for it with their *Deutsche Reichs Marks*. And it was a very nice thing for the farmer to do. And I would not go there.

NL: So how did he negotiate?

HS: And so he called, how did he negotiate? I don't know. He called the school teacher where this other boy, the boy was in, and he complained to him that, you know, that, about that he asked me to do it and I do not want to do that. They, the Germans stayed on the farm I think like one week, and then they moved on. They supplied their horses and they supplied themselves with their, we slaughtered a lot of pigs at that farm, which I learned how to do too, and make sausages, which I learned how to do. And they took a lot of hay for their horses, and then they moved on.

NL: They didn't molest you or the farm family?

HS: No. No.

NL: How did you get on with the children?

HS: They thought that I was unique, crazy, different, which I was. But I got along fine, because—would you believe, this was my first Christmas present from the farmer in 1939.

NL: Oh, oh.

HS: A silver spoon.

NL: This was their name, Borg?

HS: No, that's the castle.

NL: Oh, that's the castle, I see, Fredricksborg.

HS: Yeah. Those were hamlets.

NL: Is that so?

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative]. I was right near there, which I did not know at the time. Well, anyhow, so you cannot move around unless you learn how to ride a bike. I never knew how to ride a bike, so here they got me an old dilapidated bike and I learned how to ride a bike. And in the winter, we used to put rope around the tires, instead of snow tires, and I rode the bike that way. The snow was very, very deep. And...

NL: So you stayed with this...

HS: I stayed until May...

NL: Family until June? May.

HS: Or June, '40. And then I moved to Naestved, where the whole nucleus of the *hashachar* people...

NL: You did this on your own, Hanna, or were you instructed to do it?

HS: No, no, you see, at that time when you lived on a farm, all the farm help, like the seasonal farm help, was contracted for six months at a time. So you could only move...

NL: After the contract was...

HS: After the contract. But...

NL: Over.

HS: Even the contract was a non-paying thing, but you could not move. And so, we got in touch with some of the kids who were in Naestved and I said, "I would like to go, you know, near you." But they had a *pagishot* [meeting] and they had a *madrich* [instructor] who came from, I think he was, he was financed both by the League and by the Zionist organization, which was extremely, extremely small and extremely poor of funds. And of course now, don't forget, it was under German occupation in Denmark. But they had a *madrich* who came around to these centers where the kids were, once a week, or you know, twice a month, where we got together to learn something. It either was math or, very informally, but mostly it was all Zionist teaching, a lot of Hebrew, and Hebrew conversation. But we got together, at least.

NL: And that must have been such a relief.

HS: So I wanted to go there, and I did. You had to get a permit from the police to move from one place to the other, but I got there. And then I came to a very nice farm.

NL: In Naestved.

HS: In Naestved, yeah, near Naestved. I had a very good friend, who was not on a farm. She was sort of like a, she was lucky, she was adopted girl of a music teacher, in Naestved. And the farm was outside of Naestved. Of course Naestved is a little town.

And she was, she lived with her family in town. Oh my God, you know, go to the village, and go to town was really quite a treat. But the woman, she lived, was a music teacher. Yeah, anyhow, talking about music, because there was no electricity, there was no radio. And when I came to Naestved, for the first time in a long time I heard music. And it was really quite something for me to hear just somebody plinking on the piano. It was, I envied her that she was there. And they really liked her because she was not like a maid there. She was like their adopted daughter, because they didn't have any children.

NL: They didn't.

HS: She lives in Canada now. So, I'm still in touch with them.

NL: So this new place was quite pleasant?

HS: This was a very nice farm, and...

NL: The work you did was not quite so hard?

HS: Yeah, it was, and then, it was the same work but...

NL: The same work.

HS: It, you know, to kindle the fire, to work on the fields, to milk 14 cows, by hand, in an hour. That was the goal. And...

NL: Oh, so it was...

HS: To take care of the chickens. They had thousands of chickens. I learned that. And I think my worst job was always to empty the latrine. I hated that job!

NL: It was an outdoor latrine?

HS: Outdoor, yeah, outdoor, like that. I hated to go there. Well, you know, people have done worse in concentration camps, my goodness.

NL: But still, you were 16.

HS: But in the winter I loved it because it was all frozen, but in the summer I hated it because it was so full and I had to lift it up and it spilled all over the place.

NL: Oh my.

HS: But, I also lived in the servant quarter. I was, but I ate with the family.

NL: And your room was still unheated?

HS: My room was still unheated. As a matter of fact, that room was even worse because there was a, the wall, the outside wall where it comes together was cracked. So the cold air [she says "or"] was coming in.

NL: The cold air drifted in.

HS: Yeah, it was. But they...

NL: But you...

HS: They made me a birthday party, and they invited all the *chaverim* inside that. And they were very nice. They, all kind of...

NL: Was there electricity and water in this...

HS: Yes, there was electricity and water.

NL: This was a more modern farm.

HS: Not warm water but there was water, but not warm water. We used to wash the clothes. They had a washing machine which was run by hand. That was more than on the other farm. And I remember putting that thing, the clothes in the machine, boiling your water, bringing the water into the machine, and turning the machine by hand. And I always said after 15 turns I have to know 15 Hebrew words.

NL: Aw.

HS: That's how I...

NL: It was a good routine.

HS: I was learning Hebrew, yeah.

NL: Yes, an excellent routine.

HS: So, and it was then that I...

NL: Were there children in this family, Hanna?

HS: There was only, the farmer was a newly-wed.

NL: I see.

HS: See, on the farms it worked like this. If you inherit the farm from your parents, your parents stay on the farm. If you buy a farm, and the people are elderly, they stay on the farm too and they have like their own...

NL: Quarters.

HS: Quarters.

NL: I see.

HS: This, their name was Nugord. He was one of 13 children. The parents, it was a fantastic family. His parents were school teachers. They lived in the schoolhouse. It was a one-room schoolhouse. And they kept adopting children all the time. That was the Finnish-Russian War, and they adopted, the one who had 13 children adopted two other Finnish orphans from the Finnish-Russian War. So they had, but all the children were from the age 30 to the age 1. That son was the oldest one, who just got married, and he bought this farm. So their owner, who also lived on the farm in his quarters on that side, and I lived on the other side. But they got, they had a baby then, when I was there. But they were young. They were like 19, 20 years old, you know?

NL: And you were in touch with your comrades...

HS: Yeah.

NL: During that time.

HS: Yeah, with the *chaverim*, yes.

NL: And still hearing from your parents, until when?

HS: '41.

NL: '41. And they were still in Prague until '41? What month, Hanna?

HS: September.

NL: September. Were you hearing any news about the war...

HS: Oh yes.

NL: During this time?

HS: Well you see, they did, the farmers were, well, it's very interesting, because first there were a lot of pro-German, very much so.

NL: How do you account for that?

HS: I think they got a lot of money. Because the British, when they were exporting, like they're exporting the pork or the bacon or anything to Britain, before the war Britain had very stringent requirements. And you know, the pig had to be fed to exactly that same weight so the bacon is exactly that way. And the German took it the way it was and they paid more than the British did. Now I do not know, at that time, I did not know, at that time, about all the underground which was going on in Denmark. That I did not know until like '42. I did not know about the sabotages which were done in the big cities. That I did not know. I only lived in this little, tiny world.

NL: Yes. Your perspective was...

HS: So I, it would be extremely unfair to say to me [for me to say] that all the Danes were pro-Germanic. All I know is just where I lived, that...

NL: But culturally there was a closeness, too, I think, between Danes and Germans, prior to the war.

HS: We didn't ever meet any adults except the people where we lived.

NL: You didn't get into town very much?

HS: Oh, I got into church on Christmas, you know, to go to the midnight mass. And oh, we went to a couple of barn dances, where the farm boys came. But we, and I had no clothes, because I started developing. I developed very fast and I used to run with safety pins all around because I had no clothes, no clothes at all.

NL: And so you stayed on this farm until when?

HS: You see, I was very hungry, I think we all were, for some kind of education.

NL: Of course.

HS: We were, at that time I spoke Danish. I wrote Danish. And so...

NL: You just picked that up?

HS: Yeah, where you live, you pick it up. And I wanted to, how do you say, better myself, go higher in life. And I wanted to do two things: first of all, work as a maid in the city, which I thought I would like to do, and second, I wanted to go to school. So, I started, I still wanted to stay within the agricultural field because I was going to Palestine.

NL: That was still your aim?

HS: Ah yes, we all did. But what happened was this, that in 1941 we got—and I do not know from whom; I'd really have to ask my friend in Denmark because he keeps fantastic records of what happened to all of us—that a transport is going to Palestine. And they were transporting by 30. And we were going to go because we couldn't go any other way, because the war was going. We were going to go to Sweden, to Finland, to Russia, and that way, to Palestine. In other words, the eastern way. And we got our...

NL: Papers?

HS: Papers, and a little luggage was sent.

NL: This was...

HS: And we were going. That's '41.

NL: '41.

HS: They picked 30 people to go, and one transport went. And they got stuck in the Finnish-Russian conflict.

NL: And had to come back?

HS: And they had to come back. Some of them-

Tape two, side one:

NL: This is tape two, side one, continuing our interview with Mrs. Hanna Seckel. Now you were saying this transport was caught in the conflict of the...

HS: Finnish-Russian War.

NL: Finnish-Russian War. And the transport had to come back...

HS: The Czech transport. Some of the people, the German, some of the children from Germany, but they went somewhere else than we were, so I really did not know that at the time.

NL: Some of the German children, you think, may have gotten through?

HS: Yeah, they got through. And one of my friends got through. And he is a big *macher* now in Israel. I got a letter from him from India.

NL: What a journey that must have been...

HS: Yes.

NL: By way of Russia!

HS: Yes, yeah, Asiatic Russia and down through Asia at that time.

NL: My oh my! And so you didn't get onto one of these transports?

HS: No, the luggage went, but..

NL: The luggage went?

HS: Yeah, but we didn't go.

NL: With your small supplies.

HS: Yeah.

NL: So you returned to the farm?

HS: Yeah.

NL: Now you had talked about schooling. Were you in school?

HS: So now I started, started doing these things. I, you see, on the farm it was like this. You had a six month's contract. You only had to stay, you know, it goes from June to November and from November to May, or something like that. And this was not just because of us, but all of them were employed that way, on that farm. And they would like get paid at the end of the six months' period. So, what my farmer did, he gave me like 30 *kroner* at the time for the six months. And I really wanted to go to school. I really wanted to learn. So I started to write to different schools, not a school school so to speak, but in Denmark they had these finishing schools. I don't know whether you know what it is. It's a school where girls from better families learn the proper way of housekeeping and entertainment and...

NL: Social amenities.

HS: Social things, yes. Okay, I think that doesn't exist anymore either. But it did exist. There were like, and the boys starting to be itchy also and they started to, wanted to go to agricultural schools. And of course, at that time the girls couldn't get into agricultural schools.

NL: Not even in Denmark?

HS: Not even in Denmark. But, oh, maybe they could, but we never thought that it was our role to do that. It never occurred to us. And it just was not how you...

NL: No.

HS: You were in Europe at all. And so I started to write and apply to different schools, which were also around six months' period, which were like boarding schools. You stayed, you learned your nutrition and you learned your dietetic, yeah, your...

NL: Dietetics.

HS: Dietetics. You learned your...

NL: Menu making.

HS: Menu making. I still have a big Danish cookbook now, which is written by hand. And but what I did, I tried to strike a bargain with them. I used to write to these schools and tell them that I would be a maid in the school, or a maid to the mistress, the owner of that school, for free tuition. And one school, on the whole, did reply, and they told me, "Come on."

NL: Well...

HS: So, I did.

NL: In one of the larger towns?

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: No. These schools were usually like on a estate.

NL: I see.

HS: Or ex-estate. And, I remember, I took my toothbrush and my knapsack and I took my bicycle and I biked for hours and hours and hours and got to this school. And I think that was sort of almost, it was a terrible let-down. Because on the farm I was one of them. And here on the school I certainly was [not] one of them. All of these girls, they were from good families. They were learning how to be mistresses of the houses.

NL: Well-dressed, probably.

HS: Well, we had to wear uniforms during the school hours.

NL: I see, I see.

HS: I didn't have that either. And I didn't have money for textbooks or anything like that. I did become a maid to the owner of that school, who was incredible—I will show you pictures later, very interesting—who slept on a high-rise four poster, which were like two steps up, or really like this Queen Mary bed with the curtains all around it. And so, I was her chambermaid in that I was emptying her chamber pots and things like that, and doing stuff in her house. And I got my tuition free that way. I think maybe it was my problem, looking back. I thought that everybody hated me, everybody looked down on me. I didn't see any of the *chaverim*. I...

NL: You were isolated from them.

HS: Completely, completely isolated.

NL: Right.

HS: I was the only one who was in a position who didn't pay tuition, who didn't have textbooks. And I was very unhappy. I was extremely unhappy. I had no money at all, I mean really, I mean *no money*. And so I used to copy these textbooks and study at night, but then I got up early in the morning to do the housework in her house and then go to classes. And [tape off then on]

NL: Hanna, what was the attitude of the director of this school toward you? Was she...

HS: Yeah, you see, that's...

NL: At all involved with...

HS: Later on in life, I really do not know, I think that I had a tremendous complex myself. I thought that, you know, I was, I *knew* I was not as good as they were. I knew I was that Cinderella. I [pause] had a feeling that everybody is looking down on me. I felt very uncomfortable with all the, I mean, really physical hard work which was so new to me except for being on *Hachsharah* when I was a kid, during the summer and this physical work. I was emotionally more comfortable on the farm, because I just was, even though I was a maid, there was no class distinction. I mean, I was one of them. I ate with them and...

NL: You felt a part of the family.

HS: I felt part of the family. But there, I certainly was not.

NL: There was a class distinction.

HS: Yeah. The girls, they came from all over. They came from Sweden. They came from Norway. They were all, when they were out of their uniforms during the day, you know, I, had the uniform, nothing. But maybe I was wrong. But that's the way I felt. Because when Christmas came they gave me a uniform because I only had one.

NL: But how could you have felt otherwise? That situation...

HS: And they gave me a uniform and they gave me textbooks for Christmas.

NL: Oh.

HS: A textbook. The girls got together, and they gave me a ring.

NL: A ring?

HS: Yeah. So they just...

NL: Just as a token of their love.

HS: Just as a token, yeah.

NL: Did they have any idea of what your background had been in Prague?

HS: No, they just knew that I was...

NL: Didn't you ever...

HS: A strange bird.

NL: Did you ever want to tell them?

HS: No, no, no. I didn't, no.

NL: I wonder why.

HS: I don't know. Maybe I just wanted to be so much a part of them...

NL: You didn't think that would interest them? Or was it a world away?

HS: I was still trying, I was trying so hard, so hard to be part of them that...

NL: Yes.

HS: I felt they didn't want part of me.

NL: Mmm.

HS: I slept, I didn't sleep in the dorm. I slept in the maid's quarters. That was another thing. So, and also like, you know, there was a boys' military academy. They got to dances together.

NL: You weren't part of that?

HS: No. I couldn't. I didn't. I, first of all, I was working.

NL: So you were shut out.

HS: I was working.

NL: Yes.

HS: And secondly, I had no clothes. And I had no money. And...

NL: Were you then...

HS: I remember I was washing this uniform in the morning. There were no dryers at that time. And I am ironing it when it was wet, so I could wear it the next day.

NL: You were wearing...

HS: And ironing it. And then I had a, I still have it, I wrote everything by hand. And I used to wr-, I don't know why, but I always used to write in green ink. I don't know why. But I had a window which was called *Mansarde*, that's, under the roof where the window is slanted like that. And I had a little, like a chest, like a toy chest, not a chest of drawers but an open chest. And one day I came to their room and it snowed in and the snow washed all my textbooks out.

NL: Oh my.

HS: And I, I thought it was the worst tragedy. In the meantime my parents are somewhere in concentration camp! But...

NL: But, but...

HS: And all my, everything was washed off. And all the ink was running. The snow was sitting and...

NL: Oh my dear.

HS: Penetrating all through my books.

NL: Everything that you had handwritten.

HS: Handwritten, yeah, it was awful. So that was sort of like before Christmas. And for Christmas they gave me a textbook, one textbook.

NL: That was a catastrophe!

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative]. But it's, you know, when you think of it now, it is so...

NL: Were you getting anything out of your studies? Did they mean anything to you? Or was it so unreal?

HS: The studies were mostly [pause]...

NL: They were marginal. They were marginal, weren't they...

HS: Yeah.

NL: To any substantive work?

HS: Well there was...

NL: Or did you have literature?

HS: No.

NL: No literature.

HS: No, no. It was a finishing, housekeeping school. There was no Danish or there was no literature. There was no math. There was mostly...

NL: There was history?

HS: Nutrition.

NL: Making of menus.

HS: Make, yeah, making up menus, how to run your estates [chuckles].

NL: Were you hearing from your comrades during this time?

HS: No, um, no. I, well, Christmas came, and everybody left the school to go home. And here I was.

NL: All alone.

HS: All alone.

NL: Oh my. Well how was the director? Was she charitable? Kindly? Or self-centered?

HS: She looked like Queen Victoria. I'll show you pictures later. It's, when I look at it today I think, unreal. She wore a black dress, all the way down to the floor, with a...

NL: Brooch?

HS: Cameo here, and a big bowler hat.

NL: Oh my dear.

HS: And she had a long mustache which were all here, and a white shawl.

NL: Grotesque.

HS: And her daughter...

NL: What did...

HS: Her daughter...

NL: Yes?

HS: Was the, she was the head mistress and her daughter was whatever, the mistress. There was a part in the middle, and the bun in the back. Also had a dress but not black.

NL: How were the other teachers?

HS: The only one who really took interest in me was a teacher who was teaching early childcare, or child bear...

NL: Childcare.

HS: Childcare. She was a physician and she did not live on the estate. She came in. She was the one who really took some kind of interest in me. Because I went in and baby-sit for her children once in a while. And she said, "Well, you know, what do you want to do when you finish? And what are you going to do? And what are your plans?" What am I going to do? You know, for us the war is going to last a whole lifetime. And it was, we never even think what's going to happen. "Going to Palestine." It still was Palestine at that time. "But, and when you go, what are you going to do meantime when you finish school?" And so I said, "Well my biggest ambition at this time is to become a maid in the city, not on the farm. I want to get out of that farm business." And actually she was the one who was instrumental for me then to get a job after the school was finished, in a banking family, for a banker.

NL: So how long did you stay in this school then?

HS: Six months.

NL: Six months. This takes us into '42?

HS: '43. It takes us into '43.

NL: '43. And you knew by then that your, pardon me, parents had gone to Theresienstadt? And people also...

HS: No, they did not go to Theresienstadt.

NL: No?

HS: They went to Auschwitz right away.

NL: From Prague?

HS: Yeah. I got a letter [pause] '42, '42, I got a letter from my brother at that time where he said, "You know, I thought I would be *bar mitzvah* but it doesn't look that way. And it was the only thing I wanted to live for was for my *bar mitzvah*." So that would be '42. And then I got a letter also from my parents saying this is the last letter I'm getting. Okay. They had been selected. And...

NL: They said that in so many words?

HS: Well, yeah, it's the last letter. And it was the last letter. I had an uncle who escaped to Russia. It was my mother's brother. And, you know, but nobody knew where he was. And they felt that, you know, somehow if you ever can get in touch with him. But of course then what was occupied by the Germans. You couldn't go to Russia, you know, right to Russia anywhere, you see. Anyhow...

NL: So...

HS: At that time I really tried to commit suicide seriously when I found out that, you know...

NL: You knew what Auschwitz meant, then?

HS: Yes and no. I did not know what we know now.

NL: And I wonder...

HS: There was no way.

NL: How much your parents knew. Because in '42 it was still very early.

HS: You knew it was...

NL: Something terrible.

HS: Worse than bad. But you did not know what it really was. We did not know it. Although, at that time also somehow when I was in the school, the underground, the Danish underground was brewing a lot.

NL: You were hearing some...

HS: I was hearing a lot of, you know, vague, a lot of effects from the Danish underground.

NL: How did that come to the school, Hanna?

HS: I do not know.

NL: Through the...

HS: I do not know. Maybe through the young people...

NL: Talk on the streets?

HS: Through the talk. The school was on an estate. It was near Sorö. That's the name of the town, S-O-R-Ö. And it was, there was a lot of talk about underground. And they called themselves radishes, because the Danes are, their colors are white and red and the radish is underground. And they're white and red.

NL: I see.

HS: And so they were there radishes, they were called.

NL: Interesting.

HS: Yeah.

NL: And there was talk of sabotage...

HS: Yeah.

NL: In '42.

HS: Yeah, yeah. There was a lot, maybe also through the faculty things started filtering down.

NL: Mmm hmm.

HS: And...

NL: Were you aware of an anti-German feeling by then?

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative]. Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm, yes.

NL: So, this physician that you've mentioned...

HS: Yeah, Showek.

NL: She made arrangements for you to go?

HS: She made arrangements for me after we left the school, and found me in Naestved in a banking family a position as a maid.

NL: And Naestved is a fairly large town?

HS: Naestved...

NL: Or a small town?

HS: Oh, either [pause] I would say 100,000, 150,000.

NL: What sustained you during this terrible time, Hanna? You said you...

HS: You mean financially?

NL: No, no, spiritually.

HS: I don't know. I really, I wish I could say some high-falutin philosophy...

NL: No, no, but...

HS: Or something like that.

NL: You were 18 or so.

HS: No, I was 17, 16 at the...

NL: 17, all alone.

HS: First of all, you knew that you are lucky. We *knew* that. I mean, you knew that. You felt it. You smelled it. You could feel it that you're lucky.

NL: You really did know that.

HS: Yeah, you knew that. You knew that you were very lucky.

NL: Were you aware, then, of what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe, or just...

HS: Yes.

NL: Or you...

HS: Not, as I said before, not as much, but you knew that if you stayed, you would not live in those conditions you are living in now, that you would not survive. I mean, you knew that it was a thing you did not know about, the gas chambers, but I think you knew that you have it better...

NL: That it was terrible in your part of Europe.

HS: Than they did. You absolutely knew that. You knew that. You, I knew that I had plenty of food to eat, which I did. I became real fat. I knew I had a roof over my head. I spoke Danish. I, nobody was on my back. The German were in Denmark already now for two years, but you really didn't even feel them that much, at least I didn't. And...

NL: Well, it was a model protectorate...

HS: Yeah.

NL: Up until '43.

HS: Yeah. So...

NL: And this woman, this...

HS: And I spoke Danish fluently and I wrote it and. One thing I never went through, like, you know, the kids go through, I never went through this finding myself business. [chuckles] I never had this kind of a problem.

NL: You didn't have the luxury. You need to have the luxury of...

HS: Yeah.

NL: Time and space for that. Do you think this woman physician was a kind of support for you?

HS: Yeah, she was the one who said, "What are you going to do?" Yeah, and she posed me the question. And I says, "Well, I'm going to stay here as a maid." Because that was the only thing I could think of, you know, continue to be, like for Christmas when all the girls went home I would, you know, do all the Christmas cleaning and all that and be there with [pause] the owner, with the mistress. And just think I never thought ahead. I knew that eventually I'm going to go to Palestine. I *knew* that. This is what was my *raison d'être*, to be there.

NL: So that must have been a very strong pulling force.

HS: But, there started being crumbling things like there was some of the kids who started hearing about, who went over to Sweden already, and they were saying that, "Things are not going to stay that way under the German occupation and are going to get worse. We are not going to stay pro-, you know, not persecuted. Things are going to pop. Now it's almost two-and-a-half years after the occupation. Nothing has been done against the Jews here, but it's not going to stay that way."

NL: I see.

HS: So some of them went to Sweden, but what Sweden did at that time was that they didn't take them in. They did *not* send them back to Denmark. They sent them back to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Germany. The Swedes did not send them back to the Danes, where they came from, and many of the young people who did take the courage, this is early '43 now I'm talking about...

NL: They deported them back?

HS: They deported them from that place where they came from. So many of them did perish in concentration camps later.

NL: This was '43?

HS: That's the beginning '43. Don't forget that Sweden in that time had a pact with Germany.

NL: Well Sweden was neutral I thought.

HS: Sweden was neutral, but...

NL: Yes.

HS: But Sweden was supplying all...

NL: Iron ore.

HS: Iron ore to Germany. They did have a sort of a government in exile, under the British auspices or something, in order to maintain their picture of neutrality. But they did, commercially and politically, they were pro-Germanic, very much so, the Swedes.

NL: And...

HS: In order to be sort of considered as a neutral country they had, you know, like, there was a Czech Embassy in exile there who had, which had no power, no diplomatic power or something like that. But they were trying to help the immigrants or something, you know, like that.

NL: And...

HS: But the Swedes did, in the beginning, send them back to Poland, wherever people came from.

NL: And there were large numbers of such Jews who...

HS: No. There, we all were, heard about incident here and incident there, and things starting to come filtering down to me.

NL: So you went to work, then, with this banking family? Was this...

HS: I went to work with the banking family, in Naestved.

NL: Early, early '43?

HS: No, June '43.

NL: June.

HS: Right.

NL: And how was that situation?

HS: That was terrible. But I was also near this girl who was at this music teacher because she stayed there, who was adopted, who lives in Canada now, whom I stayed...

NL: Very close to.

HS: Yeah.

NL: So you could see her at least. And this family was...

HS: This family was a banking family. The bank was on the first floor. Their headquarters was on the second floor, and my quarters were like on the third floor. So it's a little town like that. And everything was fine, until one day I used their bathroom, instead of going up to, upstairs. And the woman just absolutely flipped her lid, that I used her toilet on the second floor...

NL: Oh my dear.

HS: Instead of third floor. But I didn't, I wasn't there long. I was there six weeks, when the thing against the Jewish people started.

NL: October, in '43.

HS: October, yeah, it was '43. And when I worked, like in September, was starting rumors, "You go underground." And...

NL: You heard this from the Danish people?

HS: From the Danish people. It was a [pause] I really do not know. Many of, particularly the boys—you know at that time they are 18, 19—they knew. And they were supposed to, we had a chain if something happened. You know, your contacts...

NL: Your comrades in the Zionist movement.

HS: Yes, yeah. The person who was supposed to contact me left, to save his own skin. He is in Israel now too, without contacting me. And nobody contacted me.

NL: Where did he go?

HS: He went to the coast to go to Sweden.

NL: Oh, to flee. And he never gave you the message? [pause] And did your banking family know? Did they warn you? They didn't try to protect you?

HS: No, one day a Dane came and picked me up.
NL: A Danish policeman?
HS: No, a Danish young man from the underground, from that other...
NL: I see.
HS: He picked me up.
NL: He...
HS: Took me to the coast.
NL: He took, he knew you were Jewish. How do you suppose he knew? Did you ever find out?
HS: Yeah. We were all registered with police.
NL: I see.
HS: But you see, in Copenhagen where the...
NL: Bulk of the population was.
HS: Jewish population is, their list came from the Jewish community or from the synagogue.
NL: Yes.
HS: But they already had left a long, long time, I mean not a long time ago. That time two weeks is a long time. You know, one day is a long time.
NL: Yes, yes.
HS: And so before this sort of fizzled down, and that, I must say the Danes really made sure of, there was a transport 350 Jews going to concentra-, to Theresienstadt, from Denmark.⁴ That was it. That was it. That was the only one.
NL: The only one.
HS: The only one.
NL: Were any of your friends in that...
HS: So we were, no.
NL: No.
HS: These were mostly people from Copenhagen. And we were not allowed in cities.
NL: I see.
HS: Yeah, by the police. And we were not allowed to the cities. And when we got to Sweden we were not allowed in the cities either. Sweden was much stricter at that time.
NL: And so your other friends were similarly picked up by Danes.
HS: By Danes, yes. And taken to the coast.
NL: By bicycle?
HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative].
NL: What did this young man...

⁴This transport consisted mostly of old people who could not easily hide or be hidden. Many of them survived as a result of the continuous intervention of Danish officials and King Christian.

HS: But the curfew, there was curfew, right? So we was...

NL: Yes.

HS: Going through the curfew.

NL: What did this young man say to you, Hanna? Do you remember?

HS: Oh, he said to me, "Go in hiding," you know? But at that time you're already, you know, things were brewing and you knew, you develop a seventh sense or sixth sense for these things.

NL: And so you went to the coast with him?

HS: We went to the coast, on a bike. We went to a church and stayed in that church for one week.

NL: Just housed there?

HS: Housed in the church, and we slept under the pews.

NL: You were told...

HS: I was the...

NL: Did they give you some food?

HS: Yeah, they brought some food in. Okay, now this is a completely different story in my life. I, where I was in the church, I was the only female and only Jewish. Most of them were Danish officers who were there at the time. But I was particularly involved...

NL: They were also in hiding or underground?

HS: They were underground, but they wanted to flee to Denmark. Okay, they were from there...

NL: To Sweden.

HS: To, excuse me, yes, to Sweden, and flee Denmark.

NL: I see.

HS: And there were people who were in the Danish Army that probably had, I really do not know, because nobody talked...

NL: A sort of...

HS: Anti-Nazi...

NL: Resistance army.

HS: Yeah. But there were no Jewish families, except there was one mother who was like 80, with her daughter, who was like 60. And they were pretty much feeble. And when I—and every night we took outings to that, to the beach and to see whether, you know, a boat came. Now the thing is this, the Danish fishermen, they took you over. But you had to pay. Well, I had nothing. So, you know, nobody does anything for altruistic motives. And so the ones who could pay more, they got in first. The ones who didn't pay anything, they had to sneak themselves, almost, on the boat. But the heads were counted. And I often wondered later in life whether even the banking family knew when I left or why I left. Because...

NL: I wondered about that myself.

HS: Yes. I often wondered, yes, because I just left.
NL: They knew you were Jewish, of course?
HS: You know, I think so, yeah. I think, yeah.
NL: You're not even sure.
HS: Yeah, yeah. They knew I was a poor immigrant. [chuckles] Yes.
NL: So you stayed in this church for a week. You were the only young woman.
HS: Yeah. And...
NL: And...
HS: Yeah.
NL: Were you treated respectfully?
HS: Yes, yes. I mean there were, you know, this church was sort of like a center where people came, people left, people came, people left. And you...
NL: And eventually.
HS: Were processing.
NL: Yes.
HS: So, I got on a boat. And it was a fishing boat, a herring boat, a little, tiny boat. And there were 25 of us. And it was, so what do you call these little fishing boats? There is a name for it. Anyhow, and you see, people came from different hiding places. And who is on my boat is the chief rabbi, Rabbi Melchior.
NL: Melchior?
HS: Yeah.
NL: Of Copenhagen.
HS: Of Copenhagen, whose grandson my daughter eventually met in Israel.
NL: My word.
HS: Okay.
NL: Was he with his family?
HS: With his whole family.
NL: What sort of...
HS: Five children.
NL: What sort of man was he?
HS: Okay, could we shut off the machine? This I don't [tape off then on]
Okay, I found out that he-

Tape two, side two:

NL: This is tape two, side two, continuing our interview with Mrs. Hanna Seckel. Yes.

HS: I did not know. I never was in Copenhagen, except on the train station, when I arrived in '39. And I, at that time when I arrived, this is, the site that I see, the first thing I see telephone, telegraph. And I says, "Oh my gosh, that looks like Czech, you know, I won't have such a hard time of speaking the Danish language." But that was the only time that I was in Copenhagen. Never was, we were not allowed to go to the cities. And every time you moved like from one place to the other you had to have a permit from the police to do that and they took a long time. And so, I really had nothing to do with the Jewish community. We were a nucleus of people. We got together sometimes on Hanukkah and on Pesach. We got together on each other's birthday. But that was all out in the country. We really did not know what was happening in the city. So I did not know who he was, even. You knew right away, but I did not know his name was Melchior. I did not know. I found that out on the boat. And he was there with his wife and five children. And of course he wanted certain privileges, being the Chief Rabbi. And there was also this lady, this, with her mother, with her 80-year-old mother. And there were a couple of Danish officers on the boat. And then some other young Danish people who were in the underground. Nobody ever revealed...

NL: To...

HS: But the Rabbi, his family, myself and those two ladies were the only Jewish people. The other ones were the Danes, who were fleeing, so it was not a boat full of Jews. There were 25 of us. And we go in the hull of the ship and they cover us up with straw and all of us and so on. And we are sailing and sailing and sailing and sailing and sailing and sailing. Well, between Helsingör and Hålsingborg, which is the Kattegat, the distance is really nothing. And we're on the boat for ten hours and we are getting nowhere.

NL: Right. And you're under these...

HS: Yeah, so, you know, when we are up on the open sea, this is October now, it's right after. We see the German always did the raids on *yomtov*, right, on the Jewish holiday. So that was right after Yom Kippur. And suddenly, okay, I think it was the Rabbi, who did find out that this fisherman, who really was not a f-, either he was not a fisherman but he didn't have a map. He didn't have a compass. He didn't nothing. He just sailed according to the stars. And what happened that we wound up in Gødser, which is the Polish side, right, on the Kattegat. And the German came on board of the ship.

NL: Oh my.

HS: The German soldiers with their bayonets. And we were under this. They were walking on top of that boat. And...

NL: Mmm!

HS: You know...

NL: Oh!

HS: Your heart was in your throat, to say the least. And we were all there. And later on, I think to this day, I think that the German must have known that we were there. It's impossible they did not know, when they examined this little shanty, that they would not know that we were not there. Okay?

NL: And never once uncovered the tarpaulin?

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: Well, they never, there were some herring on top of that tarpaulin and we were under the herrings.

NL: Just one man, one German?

HS: No. I think there were, they all, they never came one, never, never, never. They always came in pairs. And he ordered the fisherman to go back...

NL: To Denmark.

HS: To Denmark, which we did.

NL: Another ten-hour trip. And what [unclear]...

HS: We turned around on the same boat and went the other direction. Well, at that time, everybody was getting sea sick, absolutely, you know. Everybody was sick. I didn't because I hadn't eaten for four days, so I had nothing to throw up. But...

NL: Oh, you must have been...

HS: Now the Rabbi started such a stink. Oh gosh.

NL: Because the man had lost his direction?

HS: He was now saying he's a, you know, he was bribing him. He says, you know, "If you've got a value, I'll give you," I don't know, well he was just absolutely bribing him, saying, "I'm a Chief Rabbi and you have to take us to Denmark [Sweden] and I have a suitcase full of silver." I remember this so vividly. And, "You have to," and so on, so on. And the fisherman says to him, "Look, my life is at stake just as much"—he had a young man there with him—"as yours. I mean, I am going to be decapitated as much. Well I have a interest to get you over too, not for you, but for me." And we got to Sweden eventually. What I want to say, maybe off the record, is that many, many years later when my children attended Hebrew School, they used to get a newspaper which was called *New Horizon* or something, from the Union Hebrew organization.

NL: Of Congregations.

HS: Congregations.

NL: Yes.

HS: And there is an article about the brave Jews. And one of them is about Rabbi Melchior, that he knocked over, or knocked out the fisherman, and he took the boat himself, with all of us, to safety.

NL: Oh my.

HS: And when I saw that...

NL: Oh my.

HS: When my children, I read that, I wrote to the publisher, and I wrote them my maiden name. And I said, "This is not so. I know the date. I know the day." And I says, "I have nothing against the Rabbi. At this point he must be an elderly man." Still, the other son still was alive, and then his son became a Rabbi, and his grandson also.

NL: Oh my.

HS: But it was *not true*. It is not true.

NL: He was far from a hero.

HS: And I still have the...

NL: Yes.

HS: I still have the book, where it says, *A Rabbi Remembers*, it's called. It is not true. That is not what that man did.

NL: He wasn't behaving very nicely at all.

HS: Not at all. Not at all. I remember even that his son who, now, of course, he was a real redhead and he was always throwing up and green in his face. And I wasn't sick. So I used to carry all these buckets and throw in into the sea. But that really bothered me quite many years later. I don't know why, but it did bother me, that did.

NL: Well, you expect some moral leadership at a time like that.

HS: That he was, you know, that then, 25 years later, he makes himself such a hero that he took us to safety, which was not true at all.

NL: It became a myth.

HS: Yeah. But I was...

NL: Well how do you account for the fact that the fisherman lost his direction? Was he just inexperienced?

HS: Well, then many, much later we found out that he was really, you know, he was a criminal. And his, all his criminal in the Danish, not in the war sense, okay.

NL: But...

HS: I mean, not subversive element to the...

NL: But had...

HS: Occupation, but he was a criminal, and his license was revoked. His compass was revoked, and his [unclear]. Everything was, and he was trying to make money.

NL: I see.

HS: Then somebody else told me later on that he really was not a fisherman at all.

NL: I see.

HS: But we got into the Danish [Swedish] waters. And that was 22 hours later after we left...

NL: 22 hours.

HS: That I know. And you know, it's like crossing the...

NL: It's two-and-a-half miles or so.

HS: Delaware! Yeah, like crossing the Delaware.

NL: Isn't it?

HS: And I think that was really something. Because suddenly you see the coast. Yeah, first we didn't even know whether it was the Danish coast or the Swedish coast or the Polish coast. And suddenly we see all these little rowboats coming, rowing out to us and waving and God, I mean, it really was something, you know? And many years later when I sort of see about these Vietnamese, the boat people, how they came over and Israel took some of the boat people, I know exactly...

NL: Exactly...

HS: Exactly how they felt.

NL: How it felt.

HS: I know. And the Swedes came over in rowboats and they took us on the rowboats. Now, we didn't even know where we landed, I mean, what town or what not. And we all just, we just all cried. We all just abso-, it was like seeing the Promised Land, you know? We all did cry a lot.

NL: How did you...

HS: And now we come to the Danish coast [Swedish], and, yeah, go ahead.

NL: Excuse me. What happened to change Swedish opinion about immigrants?

HS: I think it was...

NL: [coughing] Excuse me, it was...

HS: Stalingrad.

NL: Stalingrad. I have read that. And a more pro-Allied feeling developing within Sweden. Did you also hear that there had been an arrangement made between Neils Bohr, the famous Dutch scientist, and the Swedish king to create a haven for Danish Jews?

HS: Neils Bohr?

NL: Neils Bohr. Did you ever hear that story? That has appeared also in some of the texts.

HS: Yes?

NL: But there was a real welcome for you.

HS: Well you see, the Danes themselves were very protective towards the Jews.

NL: But it required a refuge in Sweden...

HS: Yeah.

NL: To make this possible.

HS: Yeah.

NL: So Sweden had to be willing.

HS: Well you know the famous story about that Danish king didn't allow the Danes to wear the Jewish star, right? And that he was the first one who rode on his horse, and which is an absolutely true story. And we *never* wore a star.

NL: But the fact that Sweden allowed itself and became willing to be the refuge, that's an interesting patch of history. In any case...

HS: At that time there was already a lot of, like government, right, we, when I got there late, and this is '43 now, there was a Czech government in exile there.

NL: In Sweden?

HS: Yes.

NL: Interesting.

HS: Yes.

NL: So where were you taken then?

HS: Like I said, we did not know where we landed, okay? One more little story which...

NL: Sure.

HS: I always really like. It's sort of a little anecdote. We come to the coast, and the fishermen, or the people in the rowboats kind of pick us up. And at that time we landed on the land, set foot on the land. It's a fishing village. And here's the boat full of 25, 30 people. And now that, have never seen, in this town, never seen anything in this fishing village like that. And they're all starting to fight among each other. Now Danish and Swedish is very similar, the language. It's, you can understand particularly when they get mad, you can understand what they're talking about. And they were, these fishing wives, they were fighting who is going to go whose house to eat? Because they set out big spreads for us.

NL: They were really quarreling over...

HS: Who, yeah...

NL: Who would have the honor?

HS: How, well, who is going to have how many for lunch, or for dinner, or for that, who.

NL: Wow.

HS: Okay? We haven't eaten.

NL: Interesting.

HS: And now, I did not know most of the people on the boat, because everybody, you know, just stuck to himself except I met all of them but didn't ask their name in that I was emptying all these buckets of that vomit all the time. And so, and everybody was pulling people, "Come to my house. Come to my house. Come to my house to eat." And I then decided I better stick with the rabbi, even though I didn't like him.

NL: [chuckles]

HS: But go with the Jewish family, anyhow.

NL: [laughing, coughing] Excuse me!

HS: So I go to this house, and here is set up a typically, typically Swedish smorgasbord, okay? And the table is full with salamis and cheeses and herrings and bread, dark bread, rye bread, and oh, oh my God.

NL: Oh my.

HS: And I haven't eaten for four days.

NL: Oh my.

HS: And just looking at it, and the rabbi looks at it and he says, "That's not kosher."

NL: Oh my dear.

HS: "All I want is a hard-boiled egg." But I...

NL: Oh my.

HS: I don't know, it just hit me so badly, because and now I did not know what shall I do? Shall I eat or shall I have a hard-boiled egg? [chuckling] And you know, I'm saying this anecdote for one reason, because you went through so much, and this suddenly became a big problem!

NL: It was a problem. You were in a dilemma. Were the Swedish people horrified by the Rabbi's lack of hospitality?

HS: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

NL: They produced the hard-boiled egg. And what did you decide? I don't...

HS: I ate a hard-boiled egg too.

NL: You didn't partake of...

HS: Yeah, I, and I ate the herring.

NL: All of the...

HS: Because they had all these kinds of herring. I ate the hard-boiled egg. So then...

NL: My. Were there other refugees with...

HS: We, I was the only one in this house with the rabbi's family.

NL: I see. And...

HS: And in the evening, or next day, in the evening—in the evening, because we didn't stay there overnight—the police came. We called the police and the police came, took our data. They took our fingerprints. They took our pictures. And they took us to a high school. No, yeah, they took us to a high school. And there was more paper formalities and so on. And they assigned us to go to different places. Now in the meantime I was just thinking, "Where are all the *chaverim*? Where did they go?"

NL: Yes.

HS: "When did they go? Where, now, how come I'm the only one?"

NL: Where...

HS: "Or did they all go?" I did not know. "How am I going to get in touch with them," and all that stuff. Now, an interesting anecdote was this, that they brought us

clothes, because nothing. So, I got my first pair of black panties, my first pair of a black bra, a black dress, and black stockings.

NL: All black?

HS: All black. Somebody must have been mourning. And, but I never in my life had black panties. And they were really sexy. But, at the same time, we got, which I, I was 18, but I was as innocent as a baby. No idea today, just it's like last century. Maybe it was. They gave us birth control pills.

NL: My word!

HS: And they gave us a little soap, or it was like for the vagina, a little foam.

NL: Douche?

HS: I became so insulted. You have no idea. I said, "What do they think I am? Do they think that I am a street girl?"

NL: This was given to you by...

HS: By the Red Cross.

NL: In the high school?

HS: Yeah.

NL: By the Swedish Red Cross? How very Swedish. But how extremely...

HS: I was, I thought, "Who do they think I am?" You know, what am I? Look, oh...

NL: Oh my. What did the Red Cross worker say?

HS: Nothing. They just, you know, they had packages and they gave it to...

NL: Routine, like giving you Band-Aids.

HS: Yeah, yeah. And, that's also one of my memories which sort of was a new experience! [chuckles]

NL: Oh [unclear]. How many people were there in the high school, do you suppose?

HS: A lot.

NL: Hundreds or more?

HS: Yeah, a lot of people.

NL: Hundreds.

HS: Now...

NL: But still, you didn't see any of your comrades.

HS: No. No, no. "Where are you going? Do you have relatives? Who is going to take you?" You know, "Nobody is going to take me." "So what are you going to do?" You know, "Stay here for one week or so."

NL: They had even baths there?

HS: But it was not really a high school. It was also a agricultural boarding school.

NL: I see.

HS: But they were like on a potato break, what they call potato vacation break, where the kids go home and pick the potatoes and then they come back to school. And the school had to start pretty soon. So they had to empty the gym where we were sleeping, eating. And so now what am, oh, what am I going to do? No idea where the other people were, absolutely no idea. No way to get in touch with them.

NL: Did any...

HS: And that class did not do very much.

NL: Were there any representatives of Jewish organizations at this point?

HS: No, no, nothing.

NL: Nothing?

HS: Nothing. Nothing. No.

NL: Because I had read that the Jewish community actually provided...

HS: Maybe they did, but not for me.

NL: A good deal of funds for this reception.

HS: Probably yes, but not for me.

NL: But you didn't see any.

HS: No. And the rabbi disappears with his wife, because he has of course contacts.

NL: Contacts.

HS: He doesn't say a word to me, "Do you want to come along? Where do you have to go? Where do you have to—?" Nothing.

NL: Nothing.

HS: Nothing.

NL: Nothing.

HS: Okay.

NL: That's...

HS: So what I decided is to become a maid in the school, okay? When the students arrive, it's boys.

NL: There wasn't a family that came to ask if you would be willing...

HS: No, at that time I was 18 also.

NL: I see.

HS: I was no more a child. And...

NL: So again you relied on your own resources.

HS: So I decided to become a maid in the school. So they...I asked, you know, when the school starts and so on. And they understood. You see, this southern part of Sweden, they use a lot of Danish words. Further on when you come up to Stockholm in the northern part of Sweden, then it becomes really Swedish. But they have a lot of, you know, don't forget those kings were also brothers, right? The Danish [unclear]. So, it's sort of a cousin language. So that's what I did. But...

NL: You introduced yourself to the officials of the school?

HS: Yeah. I said, you know, to, whether I could stay there and work in the kitchen. So they told me the only job they would have is in the kitchen, to clean fish, because they like, in Sweden you eat herring every lunch, breakfast, and dinner. And that's what I did for six months. I was over there. Later I was sitting in the kitchen with a...

NL: Fish knife?

HS: Fish knife, and a apron, which was made of burlap. And I was cleaning fish and once in a while I was cooking in these big, big pots the oatmeal for breakfast, and washing the pots. The pots were so big you could stand in them and wash them. And that's what I did, for six months.

NL: And Hannah, all of the other people were farmed out to homes?

HS: All of the other people were farmed out...

NL: And you were the only person...

HS: I was the only one who stayed.

NL: Who had no place to go.

HS: In the meantime I was trying to get in touch somehow with the *chaverim*.

NL: With your friends. Yes, what had happened to them?

HS: What had happened? I could not get in touch with anybody. I, today I think that I didn't go about it the right way. I did not know which way to go about it. However...

NL: They did come to Sweden, didn't they?

HS: They did come to Sweden, yeah. They did come to Sweden. Some of them immediately, the boys, immediately when they came to Sweden, by Sweden being neutral, they enlisted in the Czech Army out of England. And they went to England.

NL: I see.

HS: And they got into that Czech Army...

NL: In exile.

HS: In exile.

NL: And the girls?

HS: The girls stayed on. But by that time there were a lot of romances going on also.

NL: I see.

HS: Very, you know, we were a, like a, you know, why I am so friendly with all these people, we were the family.

NL: Of course.

HS: We were very, we thought we were supportive of each other and we probably were.

NL: And you were. But how terrible that you couldn't make contact.

HS: So, I couldn't get contact. And then it went on, and then afterwards I started, you know...

NL: Excuse me, were you far from Stockholm?

HS: Yes. I was right on the southern tip. I was near Lund.

NL: I see.

HS: Lund. Okay? Between Malmö and Lund I was, okay? And Lund is the oldest university really in Scandinavia there.

NL: So, you...

HS: So I was running, you know, going to the uni-, okay, and also it was the first time, when I was there afterwards, I saw lit streets. I never remembered. Because as long as I remembered, we always had blackouts. We had, you know, when I saw a movie with a neon sign, marquee, I—that was really quite able to see that, because you know, all, since '38, really, there always was a blackout.

NL: Yes.

HS: And no lights and...

NL: Six years already.

HS: The, always the windows...

NL: The curtains.

HS: Yeah, the black paper, the tar paper on the windows and so...

NL: Were you treated decently at the school?

HS: Yeah, it was okay, you know.

NL: Six months of cleaning herring.

HS: Cleaning herring, and so, and then...

NL: What, eight hours a day?

HS: Yeah, eight hours a day.

NL: Did they pay you?

HS: No.

NL: Still no pay.

HS: No, I got room and board and, you know...

NL: And did you make friends with any people there?

HS: I made friends with a very, very old lady, who was a real heavy old lady. She always sat there and her legs were bad and she [unclear].

NL: But not with the other students?

HS: But then I made friends with a male student, a great friend, who was a German-Jew, who was going to that school there. And, well, anyhow, I decided this is not what I'm going to do, not something what I want to do all my life. And I applied to nursing school.

NL: In Lund?

HS: Anywhere.

NL: Oh you just wrote.

HS: Anywhere. On the same premise as I did in the housekeeping school. If I get my tuition free, I am going to do what—I had the same ad in the *Jewish Exponent* [chuckles] many years later!

NL: I see the origin of that now, Hanna.

HS: I am going to do for you to pay for my tuition any housework, any work, any for your children. And I was accepted in a nursing school, in Norrköping, which is north Sweden.

NL: How do you spell that, please?

HS: N-O-R-K-Ö-P-I-N-G. And the O is umlaut. Norrköping.

NL: And was that near, is that near Stockholm?

HS: It's north of Stockholm.

NL: North of Stockholm. How did you get there?

HS: By train, but for hours.

NL: Did you get some money for that?

HS: The Red Cross.

NL: The Red Cross.

HS: Okay.

NL: This is now still...

HS: '44.

NL: This is '44.

HS: That's '44. Now what's happening is this. The Swedish Red Cross is now bringing some people from concentration camps. This is the year. That was before...

NL: From Theresienstadt.

HS: From Theresienstadt. Count Bernadotte was the one who was eventually killed in...

NL: He was the head of the Swedish Red Cross, I believe, yes.

HS: He started going to the concentration camps. And of course now you read papers, now you find out everything which is happening. You are now starting to get information. I did then contact the Czech government in exile, and I got—and that was really my blessing—I got to a family, a Czech family, Jewish. She wasn't Jewish, but anyhow, we were Jewish, a family.

NL: [coughing] excuse me.

HS: Whose husband, the name was Jakerle [phonetic]. And he worked at the exile embassy in Stockholm. And they lived in Stockholm. And through them I was first time, first time, first time accepted somewhere as a member of the family. I mean, a true member of the family. They had no children. At that time I am 18 also. They had a lot of contacts. No, I'm sorry. This is much later. This is later. This is later. This is later. This is the end of '44 now.

NL: So we'll go back to the nursing school.

HS: Nursing school.

NL: Yes.

HS: Anyhow, so I get to this nursing school, and I did the same thing. Now I stayed there, and I think I got a stipend of 20 *kroner*. I got 20 *kroner* from the Red Cross. And I had the same problem again. Now, how do I buy a uniform? No money, you know. So I don't know. I got some old uniform. And the same thing, I kept washing this uniform at night and ironing it in the morning. And I...

NL: No textbooks.

HS: No textbooks. I still have my Swedish nursing textbook here. [chuckles] And, starting to learn the language, which wasn't really that difficult, but it was different again.

NL: You had a new, new life.

HS: A new language. And...

NL: You didn't...

HS: And they gave me a whole semester tuition free.

NL: For, in return for menial work.

HS: Yeah. But they told me the second semester they cannot do it, that I have to get, it wasn't really that expensive, but it was, you know, you don't have it, you don't have it.

NL: It's expensive if you don't have it.

HS: Right. And the second semester, they told me they cannot do this anymore, because, and I either have to come up with the money or quit.

NL: You can't come back.

HS: Quit. So, what I did was that I contacted another hospital, with another nursing school, with the same proposition. And I went there, which was in Södertälje. And that's really closer to Stockholm.

NL: Would you be good enough to spell that?

HS: S-Ö-D-E-R-L-J-E [Södertälje], and the O is again umlaut, Södertälje.

NL: And that was also in the north?

HS: But, in the [unclear] was the first time I delivered a baby. I helped a, they had midwives. They didn't have obstetricians. It was winter. It was a hospital sort of out in the country, in the boondocks. And I remember women coming like on skis to have their babies delivered.

NL: My word! And you already became an expert midwife?

HS: Well, I was in the deliveries. And I cried the first time I saw a baby coming. Yeah.

NL: What an experience.

HS: So...

NL: This was also in the north?

HS: The first time I saw, and now I am able, mind you I am now all of 18, and I'm going to have to change, go to the men's ward. You know, there are not hospitals like

this. A long ward with one bed next to the other. Okay, but when you are working you have this.

NL: Was the course work interesting for you?

HS: Yes. The nursing work?

NL: The nursing work, yes.

HS: Yes, I liked it, yeah. I really liked it.

NL: You liked that. And the people...

HS: Also, you know, and there...were not many avenues for a woman, you know? You're either a maid or you're a nurse or...

NL: [unclear]

HS: [unclear] you couldn't be, and there was no, not that much.

NL: Very limited opportunities.

HS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NL: Were the people there kindly disposed toward you?

HS: Yeah. I think so. I made good friends with a...

NL: Good friends.

HS: Norwegian girl. I made very good friends there. We slept there and it was—and, well anyhow, so then I went to another hospital, with this, on the same premise. And I was there one semester. But our shifts were 12-hour shifts, not 8-hour shifts. It was from 8:00 in the morning to 8:00 at night, from 8:00 at night to 8:00 in the morning. The shifts were only two shifts. No, three, like here. I think that has changed. After we were only two shifts always.

NL: And was it [unclear]...

HS: [unclear] something...

NL: Contact?

HS: Something. I'm sorry.

NL: Go ahead.

HS: After this school, and after cleaning the fish-

Tape three, side one:

NL: Continuing the interview with Mrs. Hanna Seckel. This is tape three, side one. Yes, you wanted to insert something after the fish cleaning job.

HS: Yeah. In Sweden.

NL: In Sweden.

HS: Before I went to nursing school in Norrköping, I went to work in a nursing home which was sponsored by, I think, the Jewish Agency, which were like the Danish people who escaped to Sweden who were elderly and ill. And it was sort of like a stopover for them. And I worked there and at that time, the invasion of Normandy took place.

NL: I see.

HS: And I remember buying myself a big chocolate bar and giving all the patients big chocolate bars because I think that was the greatest thing that has happened in all these years.

NL: Yes.

HS: And from then on I really was hoping maybe, thinking maybe the war is going to be over in a week, in a day, and hoping that starting to get some kind of information from home, which didn't happen. And when the nursing home then was, well, in the nursing home, I started to apply to nursing schools. That's all. I just wanted to say that. Because the invasion of Normandy took place at that time.

NL: It's a very important, memorable date.

HS: Yeah.

NL: And so, you had said earlier that, was it late '44 you began making inquiries of the Czech government in exile to try to find some Czech families in Sweden?

HS: Yeah, Czech families. And you know, on the whole, because they also had a lot of contact with the British and so on. And as I said before, the young men, the *chaverim* now, they were 18 or 19, they started, enlisted into the British Army. And that I found out through the Czech Embassy in exile at that time. Another time I was trying to get in touch with the *chaverim* but they were scattered all over. The boys were in England where some of the girls went with them because their romance is starting to blossom out at that time. And however, I was stuck way up there in the north of Sweden and not having money to take a train or a bus or anything like that. I just stuck it out.

NL: And you were out of touch, then.

HS: I was completely, completely out of touch until 1972. Believe that.

NL: My, oh my.

HS: Yeah, out of that. Anyhow, it's so, right, so from Norrköping I went to another hospital with the same agreement. And that was in [unclear]. It was an hour away from Stockholm [unclear]. And then I got sick. I got a ruptured appendix and so was quite ill there. And the thing was this same thing it was...

NL: You still hadn't gotten a nursing certificate?
HS: No.
NL: The same thing...
HS: The semester was over, and I got a job and now I really wanted money.
NL: Of course.
HS: I wanted some kind of money. And also, all, every hospital had a different uniform so you had to, so I decided to go and work for money and I went to an insane asylum to work.
NL: Oh my dear.
HS: Which was near Uppsala. And Uppsala is the old university which here they call it Uppsal.
NL: Yes.
HS: But it's Uppsala. And it was called Ullerokes. We were Rokes Hospital and that was like 20 miles out of Uppsala. It was a big insane asylum there. And I worked in the, well, they stuck me right away into the very, very...
NL: Violent.
HS: Violent ward, yeah.
NL: Oh my dear.
HS: But, I got paid.
NL: This was 1945 by then?
HS: That's '44, '45.
NL: Still '44.
HS: '44, '45 I was there.
NL: How did you handle them, Hanna? Were they giving...
HS: With difficulty.
NL: Were they giving them, they weren't giving drugs yet, were they?
HS: No. But they were getting shock treatments.
NL: Shock treatment. My, my, my.
HS: So I worked there and I celebrated my 20th birthday down there.
NL: All alone still.
HS: Yeah.
NL: How long did you stay?
HS: And at that time I started, well being in Sweden, and being in a country which is, as we said before, with sexual...
NL: [unclear]
HS: relations, I started to think, I'm 20 and I still know nothing, as far as sexual life is concerned. And, but I really wouldn't even say I wasn't interested in men. It was just...
NL: No opportunity.

HS: There was no opportunity. There was no, maybe not a need, there was not a...

NL: And you were out of your milieu.

HS: Yeah. It wasn't my thing.

NL: Your old friends...

HS: But I remember my 20th birthday, when I thought, my gosh, you know, I don't even know...

NL: A young man.

HS: A young man. I never had a, well, I had a romance when I was 14, and I started thinking about myself a little more than a machine who works and maybe started thinking what's all about that, a young woman, you know, who, maybe my needs started to coming out, having some kind of a close relationship. But it didn't come about, and I think that too passed. But I really do remember my, when I was 20 I was starting, thinking a little, you know, what is going to be as far as me, my femininity is concerned.

NL: Did you have any days off at this institution? And how could you spend them, if you knew some people or...

HS: I don't know. I had a bicycle. And I would go to the Uppsala University. And so I go to the Uppsala University and I find out that one of the *chaverim* is a student there...

NL: I see.

HS: Whose name is now, his name was Hardie Burger. His name is Daniel Alon, whom I wrote down, and he is a, the professor of archaeology in Jerusalem University. And he is very famous for soil conservation in Israel. So...

NL: You made contact with him.

HS: I made contact with him. And he was one of them who did not go to England, for some reason. However, his sister, I think, was in England. And his sister eventually married an Israeli who became a diplomat in Norway. But he left like very shortly after that also.

NL: So that...

HS: So, as far, you know, my romantic life, or anything like that in my...

NL: Very [unclear]...

HS: Normal...

NL: Development.

HS: Development, sort of was always stagnated. But I didn't feel it that it did.

NL: Did you take some courses at the University or did you just audit?

HS: Yeah.

NL: You audited.

HS: I just audited.

NL: You had already learned the language.

HS: Oh yeah, well I was in school, in nursing school already for years.

NL: In the nursing school, yes.

HS: Okay, one nursing school here and one nursing school there. It's just, so, and that, and I got my, what they call, not a diploma, but after 18 months you get like a...

NL: Certificate?

HS: Certificate, and a cross, a silver cross. You could wear out your uniform before you...

NL: Certifying that you were a nurse.

HS: Certifying, yeah.

NL: And how long did you stay in the insane asylum?

HS: Well, now we are '45 and the war is over.

NL: But you were still in the insane asylum?

HS: And now the rumor starts going around that those who escaped from Denmark, and they go back to Denmark now, will become automatically Danish citizens.

NL: I see.

HS: And that was a big thing with me, because I was a citizen of nothing. I had no citizenship. And, you know, a human being consists of what is all in paperwork. And if you don't have paperwork...

NL: Especially in Europe, yes.

HS: Especially in Europe. And Sweden was very, very strict about these things.

NL: Is that so?

HS: It's, for us, for all the immigrants now, this is what was very difficult for me when I was cleaning the fish in the school. It took months before I got a permit from the police to be something else than a fish cleaner. You always had to stay within the profession. You had to have somebody to vouch for you, and I had no one, to go like to nursing school. And it also took you a police permit to move from one place to the other. So, this is where you always stayed, within your...

NL: Bounds, yes.

HS: Whatever were your boundaries, with your trade, or what not, because it was...

NL: How could you...

HS: Practically impossible to climb. And so now this thing comes that you can become a citizen, if you return at a certain time, which I did. But I want to retrack a little. I, the Czech family in Stockholm, which I mentioned the husband who worked for the Czech government in exile, really took to me. They were very, really good to me. And through them I met like the Czech community there. It was not necessarily all Jewish. Some of them escaped from the Nazis and so on. But there was a culture, finally, which I thought I, they used to give me tickets to go to concerts and I'd go to theater. I went first time to a museum in a hundred years. And it, I...

NL: Oh, what a [unclear].

HS: I was invited for dinner where the table was set, the first time. You know, so, and...

NL: Oh.

HS: They gave me a present on my birthday.

NL: Yes, you could speak Czech finally.

HS: Or something very nice. And I sort of was eating all this up. And I think I was good for them too, because they had no children and they felt they were doing something for me. But our friendship remained. I mean, and they had a summerhouse. I used to go out there with them to their summerhouse. And they had a dog. I used to play with the dog. It was like a normal life!

NL: Yes.

HS: A normal family life.

NL: Yes.

HS: Yeah, I had somewhere to go on the weekend. So, and this is the outfit I got. She made me this. This is still from her.

NL: Oh.

HS: As a tea cozy. And...

NL: You're still in touch?

HS: Well, they're both dead now. See, she, he died in Sweden and she came to live with me and she dissolved the house in Sweden, came to live with me, went to visit somebody in Seattle, and met somebody and married there. And then she died, you know, shortly after that. He, but she lived with me quite a while here. And she was an author. She wrote several books. And through her I met other people in literature who were authors, and musicians, who were their friends.

NL: A stimulating circle for you.

HS: So, it was nice.

NL: Oh yes.

HS: It was very nice.

NL: Oh yes.

HS: So that émigré society of course were all these artists and authors...

NL: Intellectuals, yes.

HS: Were, and the, yeah...

NL: Yes. Had any of them known your parents?

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: No, no. So, that was a...

NL: And you went back to Denmark. When?

HS: I went back to Denmark, and now we were interned in Denmark again. We got to Denmark and we were interned for one week again in a school and slept on the floor and so on. But, the rumor wasn't true. We didn't get any citizenship.

NL: You didn't get your citizenship.
HS: And nobody knew who started the rumors.
NL: Oh my.
HS: Now we are in '45. But I got a job pretty fast. I got a job in a restitution office.
NL: Office.
HS: [pause] Which was really nice. It was the first time I took courses in typing and I worked there and did a lot of translating and so on.
NL: This was for applicants, Danish-Jewish applicants for restitution, because of...
HS: Restitution, yeah.
NL: Their internment.
HS: It's called *Zentralkontore*.
NL: And so you were earning a little money.
HS: I was earning money. I got myself a room, with a Jewish family who had a retarded child and I took care of the child for them.
NL: This was in Copenhagen?
HS: That's in, now I'm in Copenhagen.
NL: Finally in the city.
HS: Yeah, in the city, yeah. And I'm eating it all up.
NL: And that must, oh yes.
HS: It's '45 now. And I worked there. And in 1946 I decided to go back home. And that's the end of my story.
NL: You heard nothing about the fate of your parents specifically?
HS: Well, I went back home in '46...
NL: To Prague?
HS: To Prague. And my uncle, who was in Russia, he did survive. He came back. And at that time he made the military his career. He became a real ardent Communist. Is this off?
NL: We can turn it off.
HS: [tape off then on] And he has an interesting story too, which I find interesting. But during the whole course of the war and, I mean, during the course in Sweden and all this, I really lost contact of all the *chaverim*. They were, all after the war, they're all all spread out. I was not, and I think, I don't know why, but I was the only one who sort of lost contact. Because I was, in '43 the person who was supposed to contact me to escape didn't, and they all escaped in one group. And I never, never contacted them again until in the '70s.
NL: They had no way of getting to you...
HS: And they did not know where I was.
NL: Once you went down to the farms.

HS: Where I was, right. And this was...

NL: Yes.

HS: In '72, ten years ago, when I contacted them again. I want to go to my uncle. In the beginning I said my mother was out of seven and my father was out of three. Nobody survived, except my uncle, and my aunt on my father's side who married a Gentile, who never let go of her. He was actually the first, he was the one who went before her, because he didn't want to divorce her. They had a daughter, whom they put into a convent, who...

NL: Survived?

HS: Survived. I'm in touch with her. My aunt and uncle on my father's side, they came both back, but he contracted bone tuberculosis, and he died not long after liberation.

NL: They were in Theresienstadt.

HS: And he was in a work camp. She was in Theresienstadt. And she lived until, she was a young woman, a young woman, well, she was my age.

NL: Well...

HS: But she died in the '60s. My uncle, who was the youngest of the seven children, he was the only boy, he came back from Russia. He made military his career, an ardent Communist. He had a marvelous life. He had a pheasant under the glass and the caviar on the table. In 1966—he's a General now—and he is a specialist in strategic command, whatever this means.

NL: In Czechoslovakia?

HS: In Czechoslovakia. He also lectures at the military academy. He is a professor there at the military academy.

NL: Do you hear from him, Hanna?

HS: Yes.

NL: You do.

HS: Oh yes. At that time, I didn't. I did hear from him through a contact. But he would never write directly to me. In 1946 when I came back, he, because he had the military uniform—and that means a lot in Europe, to run around with a military uniform—he could rescue little things which my parents hid with the gentile people, and thus I had that.

NL: I see.

HS: And the letters. And...

NL: Their, the apartment was still pretty much intact?

HS: The apartment was there, but they wouldn't let me in when I saw it.

NL: They wouldn't let you in.

HS: And, right. And I stayed in Czechoslovakia for one year.

NL: Where did you live, Hanna?

HS: I lived with my aunt, and with my cousin. And I went to the university. I had an exam and I went to Charles University.

NL: I see. How was life there for Jews in '46, '47? Of course there were so few Jews left.

HS: There were so few Jews, and it was irrelevant. It was...

NL: The Communists had not yet taken over, had they?

HS: No. Well, you see, I was there while the Communistic coup took place. So then I went back to Denmark again.

NL: I see. But in '46 it was still...

HS: Yeah, but, '46 and by then the Communists took over while I was there.

NL: '47, '48.

HS: Yeah. And I went back to Denmark.

NL: To Denmark. How was life at the university while you were there?

HS: It was fine. There was a professor who lectured who also lived in Denmark for a while and...

NL: You found some friends.

HS: I found some friends. I lived with my aunt and I was trying to, I was really busy trying to find some contact about the survived people. I was running to Theresienstadt. I took the train, I took the bus, running to Theresienstadt.

NL: You did go there.

HS: To look at that. And...

NL: What did you major...

HS: I wanted to get a, some kind of a death certificate. I wanted to do something with some insurance and all these paper, paper, paper things. And my uncle...

NL: Helped you.

HS: Was quite helpful in that.

NL: He was already leaning toward Communism?

HS: Oh, he was...

NL: A committed Communist.

HS: [unclear]

NL: He was committed.

HS: He was an absolutely committed Communist. In 1966—this is my uncle's story, not mine—he gets a call from the military headquarters. In 24 hours he is going to Cairo to teach the Egyptians tactics against the Jews in Israel.

NL: Oh my. Oh my.

HS: Okay? He is to teach them, well, anyway. Well, it wasn't spelled out that way but that's the way he told it to me later. And now all these years nobody knew he was Jewish. [pause] And he married a gentile woman. And he didn't want to have that much with it to do either. He was 15, I think, when he left, when the war started. And he

walked all the way through Poland. He walked all the way to Russia, all by foot. It took him a couple of years. And it really didn't mean that much. Communism was his religion.

NL: He didn't have any feeling about...

HS: He didn't have any feeling about it, but...

NL: The Jewish State?

HS: Yet when I was home, I went to see my rabbi from way back who married my parents and all this, who survived the concentration camp. He was at that time blind and he was in his 80's, but he did survive. And my uncle took me to see him. But that's about it. He did not have any, at least overtly, he never expressed any feelings.

NL: Expressed it, yes.

HS: Yeah, Communism took over.

NL: Well he was just a child when he left.

HS: And, but I was in a Zionist atmosphere and Jewish atmosphere so for me it was different. So 1966 he gets a call that he has to go to Egypt. And they knew that they are going to proclaim a war against Israel. And he is going to instruct the Egyptian Army, whatever. And suddenly the wheels started going in his head. And that's what he told me. He says, "What am I going to do? Slaughter my people again who have been slaughtered? Am I going to be responsible? But I am a military man. You know, even in this army you don't say no. You can't. Well I'm not going to admit that I am Jewish."

NL: Mmm.

HS: And he accepted that, he encountered a tremendous, did not know, really did not know what to do. He couldn't say no, and he knew that he cannot teach wrong. And of course he says, "I wrote my lectures the other way around," or something, you know. He's stalling it and so on. And you see how fate does catch up with you, right? Or your background catches up with you. All that. Most unexpected circumstances, right?

NL: He did go to Cairo?

HS: No.

NL: He didn't.

HS: The interesting part of it is that neither the Russian nor the Czech Army ever ever dug into his background. The Arabs did. The Egyptians did.

NL: How ironic.

HS: They went to the town where he was born, the same town I was born. They went to interview the people who were the neighbors. And they were told that they never came back after the war. They never got any really proof. That's my uncle saying. Although I think they must have because if they got into the records to the Jewish community, records which were kept, they must have found his birth certificate. Because he never changed his name. My mother's maiden name was not [pause] typically like Jewish.

NL: Jewish, so...

HS: [unclear] could have been anything, okay?

NL: Yes.

HS: Neither was mine, really, the maiden name was not Jewish, really Jewish either. It could be anything. So it was not like, you know, something which you know is definitely Jewish. And like two days, 48 hours, he told me, before he was called into the headquarters again, and they said they are sending somebody else, which was one of his brilliant students they were sending.

NL: How ironic.

HS: So he got off the hook that way. But he was saying, you know, "If I didn't, if the Arabs didn't, I really..."

NL: He would have gone...

HS: "I would have to do it."

NL: "To go to war against Israel."

HS: But he never became, I mean after that, even that experience didn't teach him that he is going to...

NL: Change the course of his life.

HS: No.

NL: No.

HS: No. He is still alive. He is only a couple of years older than I am.

NL: What he has watched the Communists do to Jewish life, one wonders.

HS: It doesn't faze him. It does not faze him. He is retired, a retired General. He's retired as a professor of strategic command. And the military academy in Brno sends, the people from Cuba come there to study, people from El Salvador, now all these South American countries they come and study there. The guerrilla warfare there.

NL: Yes.

HS: And he is lecturing that. You know, El Salvador is another thing. I think [unclear]. But he is retired now, and what, he gets retirement from both places. What he does, he takes tours. He's like the constant tour guide into Russia. He takes people who go...

NL: I see.

HS: So he is very much sold on Russia.

NL: The "good life," in quotation marks.

HS: Yeah. He does live a good life.

NL: Hanna, what did you feel in '47 that made you return to Denmark? What was happening?

HS: All right, okay, first of all, I didn't think that I really, when I got there, I wanted to leave that same day. There was, if it weren't for my aunt who was there, and my uncle who was there, I felt nothing. I did not feel I belonged. I just didn't feel, I didn't. I went to the house we lived in. I went to that school I went in. I went to the *shul*. I felt that's, not me. That's not for me. This is *not my life*.

NL: Ghosts.

HS: But I don't know where my life is. I don't know what my life is. But I know this is not it. Because I feel worse being a stranger here than being a stranger in a strange land, or in Denmark, or in Sweden, which I knew. But it is a stranger feeling to be a stranger at home than be a stranger in a strange place. And I figure I want to get this degree, because the education was free, number one. Number two, I still had all these ends to tie. Number three, I wanted to spend some time with my relatives, the few. And I think the main thing was that I wanted to get a degree.

NL: And you did get it.

HS: Yeah. And...

NL: So you left in '47.

HS: Yeah. I left in '47, went back to Denmark.

NL: And what did you do?

HS: Oh yeah, that thing was this, yeah, why I did this was that, you see, because I was not a citizen, right, when I didn't have a passport, I had the Nansen Pass, the stateless passport, which was...

NL: Didn't you get your Czech citizenship back? Or didn't you want it?

HS: I didn't even, well see, I never, the passport I emigrated on, the piece of paper which the Nazi gave us was a Jewish passport, right?

NL: Yes.

HS: I went through Czechoslovakia on a Danish stateless passport.

NL: I see.

HS: Which [pause] I would have become no citizen at all if I didn't return within six months. But I went to the Czech and the Danish Embassy and got it renewed for another six months. So, and by that time I knew I am not going to stay. I never, never wanted to become a Czech citizen ever again. Also, everything was very shabby. The Communists were creeping in. Everybody was, it was the same thing like under the Nazis. Everybody was afraid for, of everybody. Everybody was whispering under the table. Everything was done very secretly.

NL: Right.

HS: The tension and the fear...

NL: Not...

HS: You could sweat it. You could smell it again. You could feel it. And I lived in a different land. I knew, and also, the consumer goods which, I'm not a materialistic person at all, but I could have had it if I had the money. It was there. It was available. It was for me to see in the shop windows. And there it was and everybody was very drab. But I think the smell of the fear was worse than anything else. And I never—my aunt and my uncle, they wanted me to stay there, because...

NL: You were the last in the family for them?

HS: Yeah, but they had a daughter, Eva, who still I'm in contact with.

NL: She's still in Czechoslovakia?

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative], and she's a very devout Catholic, because she was raised in a convent and she retained. And of course it was a mixed marriage to begin with. And so but...

NL: She...

HS: She was a devout Catholic. Now she is a devout Communist, in Russia.

NL: So you returned to Denmark.

HS: And so I returned to Denmark. And I got extremely ill. I was very sick. I was sick for three months.

NL: Who took care of you?

HS: The hospital.

NL: It was too many shocks, too much. It was a breakdown I suppose?

HS: No, no, it was a physical...

NL: Physical.

HS: Physical, physical state. No, I'm pretty strong and...

NL: Of course you are.

HS: And, oh, it's funny. I shouldn't say that. And [pause]...

NL: Did you go...

HS: I went back to Sweden. I couldn't find...

NL: You went back to Sweden.

HS: I went back to Sweden.

NL: You couldn't find a place for yourself?

HS: First of all, there was, the housing was, I couldn't find a room. I couldn't find a job. I was sick for three months. I had poisoning, blood poisoning all over my body. And, I woke up one day and I thought I, then I took a streetcar to the hospital and I [mumbling]. Well, anyhow, so that was that. And I finally got a room near this train station and [chuckles] I see I'm naive. Now I'm 22, almost 22. Naive.

NL: This is now in Sweden?

HS: No, that's in Denmark there.

NL: Still in Denmark.

HS: When I returned to Denmark from Czechoslovakia. I get this room.

Tape three, side two:

HS: In 1946, before I went to Czechoslovakia, I'm in Copenhagen, and they think that an American big vessel is coming. Well, you know, for us, the American was next to God, next to angel. And we ran to the *lange linie* [Copenhagen waterfront] to see this big American ship coming in, American Navy. But it was, oh, you know, and well just the naiveté of us standing there, standing at the pier and that ship comes and everybody is just, it's after the war, but still. But it was quite something, you know, to see the Americans who liberated all these people...

NL: Yes, a great [unclear].

HS: Throughout the war. And I am standing there. And suddenly this sailor comes, two sailors coming and they grabbed me on each side. I did not know, *I did not know* what they wanted from me. I found out the hard way! [chuckles] I was so naive! Can you believe that? All this I went through, I mean I, that field, I was...

NL: Still...

HS: The most naive person.

NL: It wasn't, yes.

HS: But anyhow, so, I found out soon enough that, you know, where I rented a room from, on the floor I was, and I wrote to these Czech people in Sweden that I really would like to go back to Sweden.

NL: They had remained in Sweden?

HS: Oh yes, oh yes. And I went back to Sweden, and I got a very nice job. And I got an apartment and I worked for *Aktieboluget Gas Accumulator*, was Mr. Nobel, Nobel's firm.

NL: The Nobel of the Nobel Peace Prize?

HS: And just by [unclear] you know, he invented the dynamite.

NL: The dynamite, yes.

HS: And that was sort of a very interesting thing that he is given a peace prize. And I worked there as a translator, an interpreter in the office, for the, it was an engineering firm, and they did a lot of engineering.

NL: Finally you had a job that was really commensurate with your talents.

HS: And it was very nice. I really liked that. I made friends. I started to go to school to learn English.

NL: This was now your ninth language, I suppose.

HS: However, in 194-, see, my parents had, my grandmother had a step-sister in Cincinnati, Ohio. And when this whole thing, Holocaust, broke out, everybody was trying to find a relative who would send you an affidavit. And they hemmed and hawed. And when they finally decided they are going to do it, it was much, much, much, much too late. But in 1945, after the war finished, I went to the American Embassy. And I said whether this would be good for me. It was not for me, but since, oh, since, I think that I

am the sole survivor, whether that would reflect upon me. And thus I went to Czechoslovakia in '46 and got all these mass death certificates to present to the American Embassy that yes, they are not alive. And thus the affidavit would come to me. And because I was on a Czech quota, living in Sweden, they took till 1950 before I came here. In the meantime, though, I was working in the *Gas Accumulator*, and when the affidavit finally came, I didn't want to go. Because I really did...

NL: You wanted to stay in Sweden.

HS: I, well, I had a good, I, was somebody.

NL: Yes.

HS: I had a good life. I have good friends.

NL: A good life, yes.

HS: I had this family. I belonged now to some hiking club and you know, this and this and that. And I tour, and also I had to starting saving money to go to this big Atlantic trip.

NL: Yes.

HS: Over the Atlantic Ocean. And then I finally decided, well, I learned more English and worse comes to worse I can, I still am no citizen of no country, which meant, well, I have to return within six months. If I don't like it, now I have to have money for two trips...

NL: Back and forth.

HS: Back and forth. And well, I came and I never returned. I stayed.

NL: Whom did, you contacted your relatives in Cincinnati, Hanna?

HS: Yeah, I went to Cincinnati. I went to New York, and as a matter of fact, I also found out that my aunt had a sister-in-law in Jackson Heights, New York. And I stayed there two days or something. And then I had to go. At that time it was different than it's now. You had to go to the town or to the city where your sponsor came from.

NL: I see.

HS: So I went to Cincinnati, Ohio. [chuckles] And, nobody told me that America is so big! Even if you see it on the map.

NL: [chuckles]

HS: So I get on the train in New York and think three hours later I'm going to be in Cincinnati.

NL: [chuckles]

HS: So I was in Cincinnati, Ohio.

NL: Did you get a cordial reception?

HS: Well, that was another thing. You see, while I was in Sweden, I got in contact with this family Weil. And they had a son by the name Joe. And they wrote me, in German, that if I marry Joe, pro forma, that I can come to America immediately. Well, I didn't want to do that. I, my life was not in jeopardy. So I say, "I'll wait my turn." If it takes another year, you know. And then I really wasn't that eager. But when I get to

Cincinnati, they wanted me to marry Joe for real, you see? And I made quite a few boo-boo's, but that doesn't belong to that. I made [tape off then on] Sweden...

NL: A few words about the American experience.

HS: In Sweden I saved enough money that I decided if I'm leaving Europe I want to see France and England, because I worked in this firm. And I got very good friends; I am still in touch with the people who worked, I worked with. And so I was in France for a couple weeks, a couple weeks, and England. And then I went on the *Queen Elizabeth II* to America. You can edit this if you want. I mean you can...

NL: Well I just would like to know how you made your way once you had to support yourself.

HS: Okay, so then, now, I come to these people and I said to them, "I have this package to deliver to these people." And they said, "You're not going there." And I says, "Why not? I want to call them." They said, "No, you are not calling them." I says, "Why not?" And they said, "Well, they are niggers. Okay? You are not going to do this." And I says, "Why not?" "You do not understand." "Oh no, I am very smart. Yes, I understand." "If somebody finds out that—" "No!" It was like this. I ask *him* to come and pick it up, and he is telling me he can't, he can't come to pick, okay? And I says, "Why not?" He says, "I just can't." So I tell my relatives, I says, "I am going there, to deliver it. How to get there?" And they say I can't, to go there. Okay? I'm still figuring out anything. I can't figure this thing out. So then finally he says, "Oh, they are niggers." So I says, "So what?" You know. "You can't do this." So I decided that I'm going to meet this man, who was the brother of this man, and they are sending Joe, their son, to chaperone me.

NL: Mmm.

HS: And, he chaperones me, and I get off the bus. And he is on the bus with me. And in front of the man he slaps me in the face, Joe, and he says, "I don't want you to be a nigger lover," in front of him. And I...

NL: Oh my. This was your introduction...

HS: I was stubborn. And I go with this, this black young man. He just wanted to disappear. I says, "Oh no," with my broken English. "We are going to have a cup of coffee somewhere." And there was nowhere to go and have a cup of coffee. And he called me, this black man, and invited me to his house. And I said it to my relatives, and I came back, and my suitcase was in front of the door. And they said they don't want to see me anymore, because their house is going to be burned down. And that was, I was here two months. I thought I was such a smart alec, you know?

NL: That was your introduction to America.

HS: Mmm hmm [affirmative].

NL: Then you went back east to New York? You stayed in Cincinnati?

HS: Mmm, I was looking for a job. No, and then I, in the meantime I met a girl from Denmark, a Jewish girl from Denmark who had some relatives there. And I said to her—and I got a room for \$5 a week. I shared a bed. And I was looking for a job. And

since I had a nursing degree, I was looking for Red Cross. And the first thing I see in the paper is Blue Cross. I thought, Blue Cross, Red Cross, the same thing. I go in and apply to Blue Cross for a job, and I was a file clerk. And I got the job. And I stayed there. And then, for a while, and then I got a job in a speech and hearing clinic. And then I decided that I hated Cincinnati with a passion. In the meantime I met my future husband, which is another story. But I, and he was engaged to somebody else, which I did not know. And I didn't like it. I probably wouldn't have liked it anywhere after coming from Sweden. I hated the heat. I just could not stand the heat. Air conditioning didn't exist at the time. You know, the air conditioning, this was '50. And all I knew about America, what I read, but I always was sort of fascinated by San Francisco. And I saved my money, I bought my one-way ticket, and went to San Francisco. I stopped by in Colorado. I fell in love with Denver. I got a, went to the Jewish hospital, got a job in the Jewish hospital in Denver, Colorado. I'm staying at the Y for \$2 a night. Remember that.

NL: [chuckles]

HS: Alone. And the day I was supposed to start the job I called them up and I said, "You know, I still want to go to San Francisco." And I went to San Francisco. I stayed there for two years. I worked in a hospital.

NL: That must have been lovely.

HS: And the man whom I met in Cincinnati came to San Francisco to propose, because his engagement was off. And I said, "Only under one condition, that we come to San Francisco." And I never did, I never did again. And that's fate. So, I worked in San Francisco. At that time I was getting \$50 a, \$45, no, in Cincinnati I was getting \$35 a week. And it was a fortune.

NL: Sure.

HS: \$5 a week was my room. I saved in three months to go by train. I want on this California Zephyr, by train. Oh boy, oh my God, I mean, such a country.

NL: Yes.

HS: I stayed in Salt Lake City, you know.

NL: You saw the country.

HS: Today the youngsters, they just buy a car and they go.

NL: I know, but in those days that was an adventure.

HS: Yeah. And...

NL: Thank you so very much, Hanna.

HS: So there, I don't know that...

NL: This was an extraordinary saga.

HS: It's much...

NL: Yes, oh, there is much of value and of interest...

HS: And...

NL: That will be important, especially for younger people. Thank you very much.

HS: Yeah, it was...