HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

JENNY ISAKSON SOMMER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Martha Benoff
Date: April 22, 1985

Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

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JS - Jenny Isakson Sommer[1] [interviewee]
MB - Martha Benoff [interviewer]
E - Eileen [daughter of interviewee]
Date: April 22, 1985[2]

Tape one, side one:

MB: A couple of seconds, we'll ignore it. Okay?

JS: Okay, yes.

MB: It's going to click off in a half-hour, and then we'll just switch sides.

JS: Yah, right.

MB: I want you to talk. I'm going to ask you some questions, and then you just feel free to talk about what your experiences were. Okay? What I, I'm gonna refer to this in the beginning. What I want you to start off with, Jenny, is tell us a little bit about what your life was like pre-war.

JS: Pre-war.

MB: Before the war.

JS: Well, before pre-war, I had a very nice youth. I lived in Latvia, in Libau. My parents were both educated people. My mother was a pianist, a nurse besides that. My father was a craftsman. We had a shoe store with a small manufacturing place. We weren't rich, but we were very comfortable. We lived in a lovely home, in an apartment building, where our downstairs was for the family. We lived with my grandfather, because my grandmother passed away, and so we lived with my grandfather, he, who was a very wonderful man, very educated, very learned. And I had one-and-a-half sets of grandparents. From my father's side was the grandmother and grandfather. From my mother's side was just the grandfather. We lived as good Jews because there was lots of, well, we had lots of Jewish organizations. I belonged to a Zionist organization as a little girl. I entered *Betar*, which it was a Zionist organization, when I was, I think, about nine years old. And, it came Saturdays, we used to always join, go to the organizations, go on outings, sing Jewish Hebrew songs, learn about Israel. It was a beautiful youth. Myself, I went to a Jewish school, and at home we had Latvian schools. We had German schools. We had Yiddish schools. We had Hebrew schools. So, we had a variety. It was, I must say, we as children had a good youth in Libau, in Latvia. There was antisemitism. Because, I remember I went to school in a circle in my hometown where there were lots of schools--a German school, a Latvian school, a like a more than a high school, a university of art. And when the Latvian kids used to come out, the same time as us from the Yiddish school, the boys many times were beaten up. You know, actually, you know,

[1]Nee Judelowitz.
[2]Recorded at the 1985 American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Philadelphia, PA.

they called us, "Dirty Jew," but, not too often. You know, somehow, I don't know, maybe we didn't pay too much attention. We weren't beaten up all the time in the streets. But, that was...

MB: How far back do you remember? How little were you?

JS: I remember back, Latvia was only a free, a state only for twent-, a country only for 20 years. That's what Latvia existed, you know. Before that it was Russia and it was Germany. You know, so Latvia was an independent country only for 20 years.

MB: No I mean the antisemitism. How young were you when you were in...

JS: How young was I? Well, I went to school fir-, not from first grade, I'm sure not from third grade, from fourth grade.

MB: But you have recollection that far back.

JS: Oh yeah.

MB: When you were nine, ten.

JS: Oh yes. Oh yes.

MB: Of antisemitism.

JS: That they did call you, you know, "Jew." I remember that they were talking about-- I was a young girl-- that it was very difficult for Jewish people to go for medicine. They had to go overseas, you know, out of the country to go to study for. They wouldn't let Jewish, become Jewish doctors, you know? Later on it was a little bit easier, but they really had to be brilliant in order to get into medical school or higher education, you know. But we did have universities. I mean our people were really very cultured. In our hometown, my parents spoke three languages. We spoke Russian, German, and Latvian, Yiddish with my grandparents, you know? So, it wasn't, it was, I must say we had a nice, a very nice life at home. Till the Russians came in in 1940. That's when our misery started. In 1940, when the Russians came in and we were people above middle class, we would have been the second group to go to Siberia, because, you know, when you had a store, I mean you were above middle class. They considered you that you were a *bourgeois*, which was, meant that you are rich and you are an enemy of the country. So, lots of my husband's family were sent to Siberia because they were very well-to-do people. They were very rich people. And, my husband came, was born in Danzig. He suffered very much from antisemitism, because he was thrown out of school because he was Jewish. He wasn't permitted to go to school in Danzig. So his parents went to Gdynia, which was that time Poland. And when he was a young boy, he had to learn Polish all over again, because he didn't speak the language. And they thought of staying, if there would be good, they would stay in Gdynia. And, it didn't take long. They stayed a year. By the time he learned the language, they were ready to go again, because the Germans were very close to approach there. And being that my husband's parents were born in Latvia and had all the relations living in my hometown, they came back to Libau, to Latvia, my husband and his parents and his brother. And so my husband started to suffer already in 1938. He was thrown out of school already in 1938.

MB: But for you it was more in 1940?

JS: For us it was in 1940. We started to suffer already in 1940, being worried that we will be sent out to Siberia. But...

MB: How did you start to feel that? What kinds of effects were there in the community? What sorts of things were happening?

JS: Well, it was frightening because of the NKVD [Soviet police agency]. It was very, very frightening. You were just sleeping at night and thinking, well, the next thing you'll hear a knock on the door. Are we the next ones to go? In the morning when you woke up, well, in town, the town wasn't too big, you used to say to yourself, *Well, who was gone now? Who is gonna be next?* And it was tremendous pressure and fright. And you lived in fear, under the Russians already. Now, as young children as I was, I mean, the Russians as a nation, they are a very happy nation. The songs, and with, you know, they make the children feel very good. They are very, like the, like almost the Germans, they make their children feel very important. They do everything for the children. Being then I belonged to a Zionist organization as a young girl, when it came to school, they said, "You must become a Pioneer in Russia," I said, "I will never become a Pioneer." Because I had to burn my Zionist uniform when the Russians came in. And I had to destroy the pictures from *Betar*, because I was afraid that something was gonna happen to me. Okay? So, I never became a Pioneer, you know what a Pioneer is?

MB: Yes, yes, I do.

JS: And I was just very much, I said, "I'll never join any organizations no more. Israel is us. This is our land." You know, I was like brainwashed from childhood. This was our goal. And this was living under the Russians. Well...

MB: So what happened when you didn't join the Pioneers? Were they...

JS: Well, nothing...

MB: Was there any…?

JS: My, most of my girlfriends they all joined. But I stood neutral. I said, "Never again will I be in a party." And I was very much afraid that my parents and myself will be sent out because we were higher than middle class. And I was just frightened. We lived under fright.

MB: What were your parents telling you during this time?

JS: What...

MB: It was you, and you have, you had two sisters?

JS: I had, yes. Well, my sister was studying to be a nurse. When a lot of mothers with their young children were going into deep Russia, when the war broke out, when the Germans started to come into Latvia--and our town is the harbor town where all the big ships came to come to America, they, the harbor never froze, so this was a very important city for the Germans to occupy. So the Latvians were so strong, they were fighting one week not to give up the city of Latvia [Libau]. So, during the bombings, a lot of mothers with their children and fathers left for deep Russia. They were running with

the Russians away from the Germans. Now, my father gave away our business to the Russians in order for him to be on good par with the Russians. He said, "Maybe I'll get a job and save my family from going to Siberia, and being sent away." So we gave it away to the Russians, donated to them our, what we had, in order to be on good terms with them. Now, when the bombing started, my father said to my mother, "Take the children and go, flee. Go." In Jewish they say, "*Rotiva zich*!" That means, "Save yourself." My mother says, "You are not allowed to go because the Ru-, because you gave away the store and everything, the machinery, to the Russians." He wasn't, and he got a job in a big shoe factory, to be a manager. He wasn't allowed to leave his post. My sister at that time studied to be a nurse. And she was working in a city hospital. She was like interning. And she wasn't--during the war, during the bombing--she wasn't allowed to leave her post, because nurses and doctors were organized. They are not to leave their posts. So my mother plain refused to take the two children, the younger ones, and go. "Wherever you will stay, we'll be." So, this after a week of bombing--our house was not bombed--but my rest of the family, my aunts, my grandparents, my cousins, they were all bombed. They all ca-, we lived a little bit like, not in center of town. So they all came to live with us, in the same apartment, you know, in the lower level of the house. We lived about four families. We took in...

MB: How many people would you say?

JS: Right. How many people? Oh...

MB: Twenty? More?

JS: There must have been around 20 people.

MB: Yeah.

JS: All to us. They were all bombed out. They had nothing. So that was when the Germans marched in. And when the Germans marched in, a month later, well, I don't go in really to every detail. But after a month, all the men had to report. All the able and capable men, young men, everybody had to report to a square. And to this square they went, and they never returned. That was exact the 22nd of July, 1941. It was called the *Hauptwachplatz*, in town, in center of town. They, the story was they were sent out to work, which was never true. They were sent near a little village by us, which was called Sh'kaydin [phonetic], and they had to dig their own graves, and they were all killed there, by, very close, not too far from, well, it was called Sh'kaydin, the place. And they never returned.

MB: How did that information get back to you? How did people find out in your town, that that's what was happening? Was it through...

JS: How did the...

MB: Underground information?

JS: There was underground information. There were people that were listening to radio things, to, they set up little radio stations that they were catching the waves or whatever it was.

MB: Yeah. Like ham radio kind of thing.

JS: Ham radio things. They were just, during one of the, well, I guess I have to go back. I will tell you how really evidence came. If you saw the movies last night...

MB: Yes.

JS: And you saw the four women standing by the grave nude, that was in Latvia. That was not too far from my hometown. Because we had one of the women who was a marathon runner. She belonged to *Maccabi*. She jumped, she was, that was in the winter. That was terribly cold. And they were taking the people to the gr-, to be killed on sleds, horse and sleds. We had a lot of snow. And this girl ran away from the mass graves, because she was such a runner. And she ran into one of, a place where other Jewish girls were working for Germans. And they were hiding her. And the Germans ran after to find her. And they came to this place and they said, "If you, we know she is here." I forgot her name now. I even knew her name. She is right in front of my eyes.

MB: You can see her.

JS: I knew what she looked like. They said, "We will take you all if you don't give her away." This is clear evidence that we knew that they were being shot and killed, and that the children, the small children, were thrown in alive in those graves. You know I'm talking, I don't even think it's I don't think, I am telling a story like it would be...

MB: Like a movie.

JS: Like a movie!

MB: Like it didn't happen to you. [pause] You're doing well.

JS: Well, what can I say? This was when my father was taken away, and all my uncles, and all my cousins, all the men. We were all women with children left.

MB: And how old were you, about?

JS: Well, I'm born in 1925...

MB: I should do some math, huh?

JS: Which was 15 years old.

MB: Okay.

JS: Okay.

MB: Okay.

JS: I was a young 15, I must say. I wasn't very grown up, no. I wasn't, there were some 15-year-olds that were much more grown up. But, I was very frightened. I really went through a very hard time. And I must tell you that before our ghetto, when it was a tremendous auction, what they call *Aktion*--I don't know if it's in English "auction" or not--it's called in German *Aktion*--in 19-, I believe that this was in '41, 15th of December--I remember the day well; that was when I got married; and I don't know why I chose that, because I came back alive the 15th of December, and that's why I chose to get married on that day.

MB: Yeah. That's a good reason to choose that.

JS: They took us, they came to the house, and they knocked on the door, and

they lined us up, house to house, and they took us all to prison. And from prison, they were taking us all on sleds to be killed. My sister was working for a Jewish hospital, for *Linis Hatzedek* it was called. And she was practicing there as a nurse. She had a slip, a certificate from the Germans that she ought to, she was allowed to walk the streets after curfew hours. She was allowed to have certain privileges, to go to the hospital when nobody was allowed to go in the street. And we came to this prison with my mother, and my little sister, and my old aunts, and all my cousins. And we were standing with our hands up, exact the way you saw in the movies, lined up. And we thought right there and then that we were, this would be the end of us. But, they were taking all the people and shipping them on those sleds--lines of sleds--and shipping us on those sleds, sending us, taking us. They weren't taking us, they were taking us to work. But they were taking us to kill. At that time, my sister said that she had a white piece of paper, and she had to go to clear it. She had to see the head of the prison, that Latvian anti-Semite, that they were sitting with big boxes of vodka, because they were all so drunk that they were stoned. It was impossible for them to do otherwise. And she said, "I have a permission that I have to go to the hospital," she said. And so he looked at her, and she was in her uniform. And he says, "Get out of here." And she said, "I am not going. I have my mother and my two sisters here." And he said to her, "You are too beautiful to be dead," in Latvian, "to die," he said. "You take and get lost. Take your mother and sisters and get lost." That's when we went out of the prison. And we walked the streets, because our house was sealed. We could not go back to the house anymore. The Jews were marching on the streets. The *Aktion* was going on, and my aunts were screaming, "Where are you going? We are here!" And you know, we couldn't say a word to them, because we were just like paralyzed. We just couldn't say anything. Where are we going? Because we don't know where we are going. There is no way back. What's happening to us? Where are we going? And we walked the streets. And we could have been picked up from any SS after that, because we didn't know where we were going. We were just like going in the streets and not knowing where we are going. Then we realized...

E: [a girl] Can I talk?

MB: Sure.

E: Am I allowed to talk? Am I allowed to ask a question?

MB: Yeah, you can ask a question, sure.

E: Oh, okay. That that was already during the Germans, right?

JS: I'm talking about, yes, in 194-...

E: All right. Were you wearing your Jewish stars?

JS: We were wearing, yes.

E: Were you in the ghetto then? All the, this was...

JS: This was way before the ghetto.

E: Before the ghetto.

JS: Way before the ghetto we were wearing Jewish stars on our arms.

E: Now, how old were you when you had to wear the Jewish star?

JS: We weren't allowed to go on the sidewalk, which is a natural thing. I don't have to say it. We were walking in the gutter. And meanwhile all the *Kommandos*, all the Jews were lined up, whatever was left, and they were all marching to the prisons, in order to be taken on those sleds and being killed.

E: Well, if they took all of the women...

JS: Yes.

E: To the prison and were shipping them out to kill them...

JS: Yes.

E: Then where were the people that remained in the ghetto? Who were these people that...

JS: Darling, there were, the people that remained in the ghetto, we were 600 Jews in our little ghetto.

E: That's all there was?

JS: This was like one family, 600. And the men that were alive were only the ones that were working for the German SS and for the Gestapo. These were the only privileged Jews.

MB: And the men got shipped away and the women were taken away also.

JS: These Jews that were left in the ghetto, which were a couple of Jewish policemen, I mean...

E: And you were the only ones left in the whole family?

JS: Who?

E: You and [unclear] and your mother and your sister were the only ones left?

JS: No, my uncle that worked for the SS was, lived in the ghetto in the same apartment with us, with his wife and two children.

E: Okay.

JS: Okay. We lived...

E: Anybody else?

JS: Anybody else? No. Nobody else. One uncle...

E: Out of...

JS: With two little children, my mother, and my little sister. That's it, that was left from the family. That's it.

MB: And all your aunts and cousins were all...

JS: All my aunts and cousins.

MB: Taken.

JS: And my father came from nine sisters and brothers. Only two came before the war to America. And the rest were all killed with their families. My mother came from four children. There is not a, not even a speck of a cousin or a--nothing. It's just wiped out. Nobody. Nobody.

MB: So it's you and...

JS: Me...

MB: At that point you and your mom and your little sister...

JS: My little sister...

MB: And older sister.

JS: And my older sister. That's right.

MB: And you were walking. You were in this, just walking to...

JS: We were just walking. And we...

MB: How long?

JS: Oh, well, how long? How long was the whole town? It wasn't so long.

E: And who...

MB: No, I don't mean long, I mean, in time, how long?

JS: In time. How long?

MB: How long were you just wandering like that?

JS: We were wandering not very long, because from the prison we realized, where are we gonna go? We realized that this one uncle who was working for the SS, we knew that he had that white piece of paper. And hopefully he will be saved. And maybe we can hide there, by him, that he had the privilege to stay alive, you know? Because the SS needed him.

MB: What was he doing?

JS: Because he was a craftsman. He was a tailor. And he was doing for the SS the most expensive outfits for them. So he was a very good craftsman. And they...

MB: Somebody's looking for someone.

E: Yeah. For you?

JS: They only...

MB: No.

JS: No.

MB: Okay.

JS: They only left craftsmen because this is the people that they needed. They, otherwise they wiped them all out.

E: Now he had...

JS: The lawyers and the high class people, I mean the doctors and the lawyers and everything, they went the first shot. They didn't need any of these. They were the first ones to go.

MB: Yeah. Yeah. They didn't have the skills they needed.

JS: They didn't have the skills they needed.

E: Who was taking, who took charge of, was it your sister who was leading the way the whole way? Or when your mother got out of...

JS: Darling, you...

E: The prison did your mother take charge? Did your mother try and who...

JS: Who took charge?

E: Who do you think of the two of them, who was the stronger of the two?

JS: Well, I really, I can't recall who was the stronger one. All I knew that we were petrified, that we were so scared, that we came to this, which wasn't too far from the prison that my uncle lived, and we came knocking on the door, and we said, "Save us! We are here. Where do we go?" And there was a superintendent, he lived in a very beautiful building in center of Libau. And the superintendent hid us. Was a *goy*, was a Christian, was an Aryan. And he was in very good standings with my uncle. And he says, "The only thing I can do is ask him to hide you." So, overnight the *Aktion* was going on. It was like fire in the street. It was like, like it was burning, like you hear that...

MB: You couldn't have continued to wander much longer without being picked up.

JS: No, no, without being picked up. It was the coldest night of the year. Latvia was so cold. It was *freezing*. It was so freezing that when you were, when you breathed in, your nostrils are frozen.

MB: Yeah.

JS: It was cold that winter of '41. And, we came there and he got in touch with this Christian man. And he put us up on an attic, amongst pipes. We were in a crawl space in the, in the building up. And my little sister, who was six at that time, she was so clever. She never went to school yet. She was gorgeous. She was so beautiful. She understood everything we were talking to her, that she had to be absolutely so quiet that she couldn't make a peep. You couldn't give a *sneeze*. We were up on the attic, and he was hiding us amongst boxes. And he put straw on us. Do you know that the Germans came up on the attic, on a little ladder, and they opened that hole, and they went with a flashlight, and they were looking in!

MB: And you were covered.

JS: And they were saying, "Any *Juden* here?" You know? "Any Jews?" And we said, "*Well, this is the end of us. This is the finish of us. If they catch us they will kill us with their bayonets. They will murder us right there and then.*" And they passed. They went down. And two days later we came down from there. I don't think we had a drink of water or anything there.

MB: No food, no water.

JS: Nothing. And, I don't know. We just survived. We just survived. My little sister, I remember my mother praising her. "What a child. She is, what a child, how she understood." The fright, the scare, the, what it meant. I mean, she was a little girl!

MB: Yeah, what a [unclear]. Did you communicate at all? Did you talk at all when you were in there? Or did you have to be perfectly silent?

JS: Perfectly silent. We were whispering, because it was, every minute was just dangerous. And when they stopped taking all those Jews from the streets, we came out then.

MB: How did you know they had stopped? How did you know when to come out?

JS: Because this uncle of ours that worked for the SS knew. They had, the Jews had to scrub the sleds with the blood because some of the people, they were hitting them with the bayonets. And they were cutting them. And there was, the sleds were full of blood. There was evidence that the people were killed, you understand?

MB: Yeah.

JS: They came back and the Jews had to scrub the floors and blood on the things. It was just--where did we go after that? Do you know that there is a blackout time in my head that I can't...

MB: Keep going.

JS: That I can't remember where were we. I think it was a very short time after that that we were put in the ghetto. Yes, we did go back home.

MB: You did.

JS: We did go back home, yes. And somehow, I don't know how we got into our house.

E: And what was left in there? Was there anything left?

JS: There was the same things left exact the way it was. There was food on the table the way we left. Exactly when they came in, they gave you exact five minutes to walk out. Because before that, when we lived, they came, the Germans came in and took whatever they wanted in the house. They took the chandeliers. They took the furniture they wanted.

E: Oh, they had already taken that other...

JS: Oh, they took all our jewelry. They took, we had to deliver on the square all our jewelry, all our watches, all our radios, all our personal things. We had to deliver it for the Germans, you know?

MB: Yeah.

JS: And...

MB: But you don't remember how you got back to the house. That part's fuzzy.

JS: I don't remember how I got back to, I know when the *Aktion* was over, my uncle came, and he said, "You can come down now. It's over." And it wasn't too long after that, in, also around Yom Kippur time, they took us into the ghetto. We were allowed to go into the ghetto with very, very little. We lived in one apartment. I think we lived six-

Tape one, side two:

JS: Our room was as big as this, maybe seven by seven. We lived three people. We had one double bed and a little cot, where my mother slept with my little sister in a double bed, and I slept on a little cot. And we had a tiny little cabinet. And this is what we had in the ghetto. My mother went to an outside *Kommando*, which meant she went to work for the Germans. I was working for the Germans, naturally. I was taken every morning by truck to scrub floors, to carry, I was assisting to building, to, what is it called when you build, when you redo buildings. They took all the most gorgeous Jewish villas. The whole SS in the richest homes, they took it all for the SS They took all the belongings in there. And that's, if they didn't like the home, they rebuilt it. And the Jewish slave laborers did everything. We were standing and knocking bricks, cleaning bricks for them, in the head of the winter. I mean, we were slave laborers, you know, for them to do everything.

MB: How did they treat you?

JS: They treated me, I was telling my daughter last night that I was working, I was very privileged to work for one of the SS people, a youngster. I was a maid. That was one of the top jobs. I didn't have to, for a very short time, I think for a month. And his wife made me lay on my knees and wash a tub of wash every single day, without a scrubbing board. Because I had blood coming out from every finger, and I was rubbing to the, to my bone, to wash their clothes. Well, that didn't last very long, and we went back to outside slave labor, you know, to carrying, what is it called, gravel, stones, rocks, sand, unloading trainloads with shovels, you know, with...

MB: How did they feed you?

JS: How did they feed us?

MB: [unclear].

JS: You are talking about the ghetto.

MB: Yeah.

JS: We had rations. Fortunately enough, in the ghetto, in our ghetto, we were fortunate that we did not starve, because...

MB: Did someone help you or...

JS: Because first of all, we were very few. Second of all, we had a few things hidden by Latvians, and they kind of helped us out. They, while my mother was walking to work we had a German, a Latvian washwoman that used to come and exchange. My mother had two same of the bags made herself. And she used to give her the empty one. She used to walk by the, we used to walk like six, eight people in the middle of the street. So my mother walked on the outside of the line. She used to exchange the bag.

E: Who was this washwoman? Was she your washwoman?

JS: She was our washwoman that used to come every week to do the washing at home. And she had lots of our things: fur coats and some of some jewelry, and that we

thought that in case we over lived, over, you know, when things would be better, we were always hoping that things would come back to normal.

E: Change, yeah.

JS That we would have something.

E: Was she a Jewish woman?

JS: A Christian woman.

E: A Christian.

JS: A Christian. And so she used to bring us butter and flour and sugar and things, so we did not really starve in our ghetto. We did not.

MB: But you were sneaking that obviously.

JS: Sneaking...

MB: If you were caught...

JS: And if we would have been caught, it would have been *azoch un azvay* [Heaven help us] like they say. Well, from the ghetto on Yom Kippur night, we were taken to Kaiserwald to a concentration camp, which was next to Riga. And that's where our troubles really started.

MB: How did that happen? They knocked on the door? What happened?

JS: They, no, they--it was given out a, there was Jewish Police in the ghetto. There was a ghetto *Kommandant*, a SS. There was a Jewish *Juden-Ältester*, which meant one of the Jews who was in charge in the ghetto came and just said, "You have to be ready. We are gonna go. They are taking us somewheres." We did not know where. They loaded us in...

E: Did you suspect?

JS: Did we suspect? Nothing.

E: Nothing?

JS: They were taking us to work. That's what they told us.

E: You mean you had no...

MB: And you believed that?

E: Ref-, you had no idea of a concentration camp.

JS: No idea. No idea.

E: You had never even heard of a concentration camp.

JS: As a child I'll tell you, I, no. No. I, we did not, we were always hoping. We were so full of hope, that they're gonna, that we are gonna, the few will remain alive, that it, they will never do anything any more to us, that we were kind of--we had to be ready in no time with a, they gave us just with a little suitcase that we could carry.

MB: So you believed them, when they said they were taking you?

JS: Yes.

MB: You off to work?

JS: Yes! To work!

MB: You believed.

JS: We believed them. Certainly we believed them. What we had, I mean we had...

E: Did your mother really believe them or was she trying to protect you?

JS: There wasn't, what protection? I mean...

E: Did your sister believe them? Did your sister say anything to you like...

JS: No, I don't. No. We were going, there were two or three that committed suicide.

E: Well they obviously knew.

JS: Yes. They worked for the SS, and they obviously knew that something was going to happen.

MB: And you knew about the suicides?

JS: And we did know about the suicide, yes. Matter of fact, my sister was working in the ghetto as a nurse. And she had had, what is it called, cyanide? Poisoning? Poison pills.

MB: Cyanide.

JS: Somehow, in a little bottle, and she said, "In case of something, we are gonna kill ourselves."

MB: So she had an idea.

JS: She had an idea.

E: She was two-and-a-half years older than [unclear].

JS: Almost three, yes.

MB: Did you follow that, when she said, "In case something happens." Did you have any thoughts in your head of what that something could be?

JS: No. I don't know, I...

MB: That you recall. If you can recall.

JS: Kind of, I kind of, I don't know. I was a very, really, I was very frightened, I was always, I was never a leader kind of. I was always just a follower. And I was just always hoping for...

MB: So you believed.

JS: Some sort, I believed.

MB: You believed.

JS: I believed that things will get better, things will get better. They will never do anything to us, you know? And we got sent out on Yom Kippur night. And that's when I started to believe then things are happening, bad things are happening. They loaded us all in freight cars, and they closed the door on us. And they shoved us in. I don't know how many we were in one freight car. You could hardly breathe.

MB: Were you in with your sisters and mother?

JS: I was with my sister and my mother, yes. And we came to Kaiserwald. And right there and then, the SS was there, and they started screaming, and they started pushing, and they started with the bayonets. And one goes to the right, and one goes to

the left, and one goes to the right, and one goes to the left. And my mother was a very young woman at that time. She must have been not more than 44, 45. And she was supposed to come with me and my sister...

E: Your older sister.

JS: My older sister. And my little sister was supposed to go on the left side. And my mother said, "No! I am going with my child!"

MB: The little one.

JS: The little one. And...

E: And how old was she then?

JS: I, right there and then...

E: She was seven then?

JS: I remember fainting the first time in my life. I was so hysterical that they took my mother away from me. And the screams were just terrible, because between the mother and the children, it was just awful. And this one went on this barrack, and the scream-, and the men were on one side, and the children were on, and it was absolutely like I thought the world is now coming to an end. Now is the finish of me. When they took my mother away I thought...

E: How long did you live in the ghetto before they took you?

JS: Almost three years. Almost three years.

E: Three years?

JS: Yeah. Almost two years. I, like I said, the dates might not be 100 percent, because...

MB: [unclear].

JS: I have it written down, yes.

MB: Is okay.

JS: Yes.

MB: That's all right.

JS: And right there in Kaiserwald was, they took all our clothes away.

MB: So what happened, wait, when you...

JS: They took all our belongings.

MB: When you fainted, what's the next memory?

JS: Well it didn't, the next memory was that my sister was next to me and she...

MB: Your older sister.

JS: My older sister. And she said to me, "You will be okay You will be okay. We'll see Mommy soon. We'll see." But, you know, it was just [weeping] terrible. [pause] That's when they took us in, and they took all our clothes away, and all our belongings.

MB: It's okay. Take your time.

JS: And that's when we started to suffer, very badly. [pause] We were

working on outside *Kommandos*, going there from this concentration camp, hard labor work. And from there we were sent away to another working camp.

E: Was it, so, Kaiserwald?

JS: Yes.

E: Did it have a crematorium?

JS: No. Kaiserwald did not have.

E: They just shot them?

JS: You see, what they did to the mothers and the children and the sick and the ones that couldn't walk, they just took them on trucks and they brought them to the Riga Ghetto. There they were six weeks, and then we found out that they took them to Auschwitz, in trains. And they shipped them where the ovens were, and that...

MB: How did you find that out? Who told you that?

JS: Because there were people that were going, contacts, from the Riga Ghetto.

MB: Underground?

JS: Underground. All underground. Little pieces of paper.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

JS: Little, underground work. We knew that they were sent to the crematorium. We knew that the Riga Ghetto...

MB: And how long after?

JS: That was sent all the children and the mothers.

E: How long after did you find out that [unclear].

JS: I have no tissue. I have nothing. You haven't got either. And I left my bag there.

MB: I don't, no, sorry.

E: How long, how did you find out that your mother was dead? How long? Did you find right away after the six weeks or was it...

JS: No.

MB: After six months?

JS: No, after, ach, after quite a long time. But they were taken away in the Riga Ghetto and then we knew they were, they were not there anymore in the Riga Ghetto. But they really didn't know exact where they were taking them.

E: Do you know for a fact? Is there any eye witness who told you?

JS: There, it was told to us...

E: By?

JS: By people from the Riga Ghetto that in November...

E: That survived? People who...

JS: That survived, yes.

E: Yes.

JS: That in November they were taken away--September was Yom Kippur.

September, October, that they were in October or beginning of November--I have it in my other records where it was written down--that they were sent away to the crematoriums.

E: To Auschwitz.

JS: Yes. Yes. Where they were all, perished.

MB: How long were you in Kaiserwald?

JS: Kaiserwald, well, in Latvia I was from Kaiserwald to a working camp to, and then back to Kaiserwald. And then we were sent out from that working camp, we were sent to Stutthof.

MB: So they sent you back and forth.

JS: Back and forth, yes.

MB: With your sister? Were you with your sister this whole time?

JS: With my sister. I was separated from my sister for four months also, in Kaiserwald. She was sent, she was sent to--my sister married, a ghetto marriage.

E: Oh I, oh, she was married in the ghetto.

JS: My sister married in the ghetto.

E: How old was she?

JS: She was very young.

E: She wasn't that young.

JS: Just a minute. I was, how old was she?

E: You went into the ghetto at 15. You came out at 17. She was...

JS: 17. She was 20 almost.

E: 20. Okay

JS: Yes. She married the *Juden-Ältester*, which he was the leader of the ghetto. He was a lawyer. He was a very, status, he was much older than her. He was 13 years older. And I mean, how did that come about? Why did I talk about...

E: Because you said you were separated for four months.

MB: You were separated for four months.

JS: Right.

MB: And she was sent...

JS: Right.

MB: Somewhere.

JS: She was sent you see, when they separated the men from the women in the, Kaiserwald, her husband was sent to this working camp. And somehow he was trying to get his wife and me over to this same working camp. So certain connections. So he got her out from Kaiserwald to this working camp.

MB: But you...

JS: And she was working as a nurse there, too.

MB: And he couldn't get you out.

JS: But he couldn't get me out. So I was left with Essie, with your good

friend, in this Kaiserwald camp, which my sister's very good friend kind of took a little bit of care of me. What I mean, she kind of protected me a little. She was much older than me, and she kind of gave me a little bit of a lift, you know? And six months later, through also my sister being a nurse and my hu-, my brother-in-law, being a head of the Jewish people there in this particular camp which was called Stutt-, Shtolk [phonetic], had a connection to bring me out there, to this particular working camp. And so I was separated from my sister for about, I don't recall exact, four or six months, it was.

MB: A couple of months.

E: She brought you? She brought Daddy, too, or she just brought you?

JS: No, no, but Daddy was with her first husband, Monya Kaganski [phonetic]. My first husband, who was my childhood sweetheart, went through with me the whole thing, till the end, till we were liberated.

MB: He was in, you were in the camps together?

JS: With him, all along. And I shared a piece of bread with him when I had a half a slice. Because he was very sick in camp, and he was almost died three times. And our people, who we were so few from Libau, from Latvia, carried him out to *Appells*, that he had very high fever and pneumonia and what not, that he shouldn't be taken away and killed. They were carrying under their arms, under his arms, in order to do the roll call, the *Appell*.

E: How long did Daddy's mother live?

JS: Daddy's mother died just a very short time before the liberation.

E: Did she?

JS: Yes, a very short time. Well, my...

E: She was a dentist.

JS: Husband's mother was a dentist.

MB: Oh, so she was...

JS: And, but she didn't work as a dentist. She didn't. She was very bright, very educated. My husband was punished very deadly. He almost died because he went to see his mother. He went through the, what is it called, through the barbed wire. He risked his life to go to see his mother, to see her walk by and to wave to her from a *Kommando*. And they caught him. And they almost killed him. He got 25 hit, that he almost didn't come out alive.

MB: How did you find out that information about him?

JS: About my husband?

MB: Yeah, where...

JS: I have been together with him also...

MB: And you were allowed to be together with him in the camps?

JS: Well, we were working sometimes together.

MB: Okay

JS: I used to pass the shop where he was working.

MB: Okay.

JS: He was working as an electrician. And I guess I lost my touch. [pause] Why did I talk about it? Oh, from Kaiserwald, that I came to this working camp where I was reunited with my sister. And from there they took us to Stutthof, because the Russians approached this particular working camp and they took us to Stutthof. And in Stutthof was a horror, more than a horror.

MB: Worse than the first.

JS: Oh, my God.

MB: If you can compare.

JS: Oh, it was, the lice, and the food was absolutely, I mean, you got hit standing in line. You were, got killed standing in the *Appells* by the roll calls. You were, it was just, I, you know, an hour tape is, this is just a touch.

MB: It's a beginning.

JS: This is this much. It's no way of describing what we went through in Stutthof. I must give you a small incident. We were laying maybe six people on one cot. You know, there were three rows of what is it called, on bunk beds.

MB: Like bunk beds.

JS: Right. And our bunk bed we had two little pieces of wood where the straw mattresses were falling through, and the bunks, the bed bugs were eating us up alive. It was undescribable. You were waking up that you were, you used to, I used to say, "It's better to be dead than alive. What is worth living? It's not worth living! I mean, this is, this is this living? No. This isn't living."

MB: How did you do it? How did you get through?

JS: How did we do it?

E: Did you ever talk about...

MB: Yeah, how did you survive?

E: What it was gonna be like when, if you came out? What you were gonna do?

JS: Oh...

E: Did you ever say anything? Did you ever say, "Tomorrow's gonna be different?" Did you...

JS: Tomorrow is gonna be different. Well, today we passed the day. And what is gonna be tomorrow. Well, tomorrow we trying to survive another day. That's all. If we found a piece of potato peel--I worked with my sister for ten days in the kitchen, in Stutthof. We had to peel potatoes. And there were some people that took a few potatoes and put in in their pants. They tied it up, which everybody saw probably on films or what. I didn't have anything because I was a petrified child. I wouldn't, I would rather die from starvation than do something wrong. As we walked out from the kitchen, the SS stood with big pieces of wood, with the clubs, and they were hitting each one that came out, each one. And I got it on my head. And when I came back to the barracks, I said, "I

cannot live anymore, because my head is just," and then I had to lay down. It hurted me so, it hurt me so badly here, and then I said, "I want to be dead." And then I said, "If I ever get freed, I only wanted a white bed, a clean sheet, and a soft pillow." This was my dream. This is all I wanted. And I said, "I'll never want..."

MB: And that's what you thought about to get through.

JS: Right. This is what I wanted in my life. A white bed, and a soft pillow. Because my head was so hurting me that it was undescribable. Besides, I mean, every minute of your hour was a danger, a danger. I remember going to the garbage cans and finding a piece of cabbage leaf. I mean, it was a delicacy. This was not eating raw potato peels. I mean, a cabbage leaf is sweet. You know, well how delicious that is? It was just, what can I say? I don't believe myself that I went through this horror. I can't believe it.

MB: Have you ever talked, have you told the full story before? Have you talked about it a lot with...

JS: Short little...

MB: Relatives?

JS: Episodes. Very little short episodes. I, this is nothing. We were liber-, this, I mean, in order to make the hour tape, I must get my boat ride in. What time? Do you have five more minutes?

MB: Boat ride.

E: [unclear] you want to get, you had a boat ride?

MB: Boat ride.

JS: When we were li-, when...

E: Now let me ask you, were you hit on the head right before you, right before you were put onto the boat?

JS: No, this was in between, Eileen.

E: Because you told me that your head hurt on the boat.

JS: No, darling. On the boat I was with typhoid. I must have had a hundred and, I was delirious on the boat. When we were sent from Stutthof, myself and my brother-in-law was, and my husband in Stutthof that time, who was my childhood sweetheart, told me the story in the man's camp how he had typhoid at that time, how he woke up, when he was delirious, amongst a whole pile of completely dead people. He woke up and he says, "Where am I? What am I doing here? Nobody is alive!"

E: They must have thought he was dead.

JS: He must, he couldn't believe. And he, on all his fours, he didn't have the strength to walk out, to the barrack. And he went into a different barrack where he saw a couple of live people. But they let him lay there, because they thought he was dead. He was delirious and he was dead! So, this is how he got out of that barrack. When we were shipped on the boat out, when the Russians came close to Stutthof, and they were shipped out, there were a couple of boats, the *Kupaconan* [phonetic]. The people that could walk went on boats, and they took them away. They tried to put them in different camps. Our

boat was the last boat. My sister was on it. I was very sick. Her husband was very sick, with high ty-, with fever and high, you know, typhoid. No able, we couldn't even walk. We were put on that boat, and we were on the water. You must have heard about it, that boat, that it was bombed by the Russians. And the boat was on fire, and at that time I was delirious. And I said, "I will jump in the water not to get burned. What is better, to get burned or to drown?" There was a choice between drowning and burning.

E: You forgot to say that the boat had the yellow flag, which meant [unclear].

JS: The yellow flag, our boat had a yellow flag, and nobody would accept us, because we were a typhoid boat.

MB: So nobody would help.

JS: We were on the boat for ten days, on the water, with absolutely not one sip of water, not one crumb of food. And they were throwing in the people that were almost dead, but not dead. They were throwing in.

E: The SS [unclear].

JS: Into the water, overboard, because there wasn't room enough to stand for the people. One person was on top of the other.

MB: So they would just throw them out.

JS: They would just throw them out, the ones that looked practically dead, out. And when they died, into the water. So, in order, my brother-in-law was fortunate to be not to be thrown in the water alive, because she still wore her white cap, my sister. So they respected her kind of. He was thrown in a day before, into the water, before the liberation. He died.

E: Was he alive, Mom?

JS: He died!

E: He did die.

JS: He died. And my sister said to me, "Would you give a last look at your brother-in-law." Edmonya was his name. He died. And that's when I was in very high fever. And that's when the boat started, maybe a couple of hours later, the boat started to burn. And it was starting sinking. And that's when we were transferred to another, to a fire boat that came to rescue, you know? And that, when Kiel, in Germany, they were capitalizing, and that's when we were liberated, in Kiel.

MB: How, okay.

JS: And...

MB: Go ahead.

JS: And from there on in was the liberation. I mean, I can't even remember when I was taken in the ambulance to a field *plazarette*, from the German soldiers where they put us 20 Jewish girls in outskirts of Hamburg, in Itzehoe, in a field *plazarette*, which is a, we had little bunk beds. Not bunk beds, metal beds, and straw sacks and straw pillows. And we were very sick, deathly sick. I was in the hospital for six months.

MB: After the liberation.

JS: After the liberation. I couldn't even walk. I had frozen toes. I had yellow jaundice. I had pneumonia. I had sciatica. I had every, I can't even mention the disease that I had after the war. They were carrying us on stretchers outside the hospital for fresh air. We couldn't even sit up.

MB: You couldn't walk yet.

JS: We couldn't walk.

MB: What do you remember specifically of the liberation? How did you find out?

JS: How did we find out. When we were rescued on this fire ship, well, I was very ill at that time.

E: This was still a German fire ship.

JS: It was a German fire ship. And we were laying two days, I believe, in a garage with straw and coal, till the English people, the English liberated us. They came, and they marched into Kiel, in Germany. Because all the boats put on the white flag. They were capital-, what is it called? *Kapitulieren* [surrender] it's called in German. I don't know what it's called.

E: That's, I don't know.

JS: That means they are giving up. You can come in. You can march in.

MB: They were surrendering.

E: Surrendering.

JS: Surrendering.

MB: Okay.

JS: I couldn't think of the word.

MB: Okay.

JS: What do I think of the liberation? Well, I was too ill really to realize that what happened to me...

MB: Yes.

JS: You know, that I was liber-, and all I can say that the words I remember of my sister when she was saying, "If I will ever be liberated, and I will see a German, I will kill her, I will kill them with my bare hands. I will choke them and kill them with my bare hands." But you know what? As we got better, nobody of the Jews killed any Germans, because it wasn't in us, right?

MB: Yes.

JS: It wasn't in us. All I wanted is to live in peace, and to, not to starve. I remember being in the hospital and after coming out from the delirious stage, I remember when the German nurses came to feed us, I said, "I am liberated now! Why are you giving me a quarter of a slice of bread!?" I said, "It's freedom! I'm free now! Why aren't you feeding me?"

E: Do you remember how much you weighed?

JS: 65 pounds.

E: Oh my.

JS: They said, "We are doing it for you, for your own good. Because you will die otherwise. Your stomachs can't take it."

MB: Yes.

JS: So we were fortunate to have the nurses tell us that. Because there are plenty people after the war that died from overeating.

MB: Yeah.

JS: Their stomachs couldn't take, they collapsed. They were finished. They're dead! I was separated from my husband. He went to one hospital. I mean, he wasn't my husband at that time. And I was--I went to Itzehoe, and he went to...

MB: Did you know where each other was?

JS: No.

MB: You didn't know.

JS: I thought that he was dead, and he thought that I was dead. And we met six months after the war, in Neustadt. I came to see where more Jews are alive. We thought we were only surviving the 20 girls. We didn't know that any other Jews were alive. And we heard that there is a DP camp in Neustadt. So my sister says, "We must go! We must see who is alive! Let's see, there must be some other people. Maybe we'll find somebody." So...

MB: So that's where you found your husband?

JS: It, huh?

MB: That's where you found your husband?

JS: That's, we, he came the same day to Neustadt to look for me!

E: He wasn't in a DP camp. He was in another hospital.

JS: He was in another hospital. He wasn't in a DP camp.

MB: And he came looking for you.

E: And she came looking...

JS: He came looking.

E: On the same day!

JS: On the same day!

MB: Spooky.

E: Ten minutes apart.

MB: Really?

JS: Can you believe it? And that's when I made him, you know, through a connection, "Come over to our hospital. Be a patient." We were still patients in the hospital. "Transfer him," because my husband and my sister pulled me out from down from the barge where it was choking people to death, pulled me up those little stairs, a narrow little metal staircase that I shouldn't choke.[3] [Interview ended.]

[3]Her personal history form indicates that she arrived in the United States April 11, 1949. See also

history of her parents Herman Judelowitz and Sarah Gamper at www.ushmm.org.