



Ella Krzetowski



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Place of Interview: Ella Krzetowski's home in Morton Grove

Interviewer: Chad Comello

Duration: 89 minutes

Transcribers: Charles Menicocci, Eric Skoglund

INTRODUCTION

Ella Krzetowski has lived in Morton Grove for 24 years. She was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1925, and was 14 years old when Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939. As Jews, she and her family were sent to the Lodz ghetto, where she stayed for four years. During this time she worked at a tailor shop sewing German uniforms and refashioning clothes that were sent from concentration camps into shoes for German soldiers. When the Lodz ghetto was liquidated in August 1944, she was sent to Auschwitz, where she stayed briefly before being sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and then to the Magdeburg concentration camp. There she worked in a munitions factory for the remainder of the war, when she was liberated by Russian forces while on a forced march near the Germany-Poland border. After a long journey back home to Lodz, she learned her parents, sister, and older brother all had perished in the Holocaust.

She then married Leon, her late husband of 71 years (also a Holocaust survivor), and for five and a half years lived in a Displaced Persons camp—where her daughters Florence and Fay were born—while they awaited sponsorship to move to the United States. When it finally came, in 1952 the family moved to Chicago, where Ella and Leon raised their three kids (a son, Joseph, was born a few months after they settled in Chicago). Ella worked nights at the Shure Brothers factory in Evanston while Leon worked days as a house painter.

In this interview, Ella talks about her early life in Lodz, her experiences in the Lodz ghetto and various concentration camps throughout the war, and the feeling of finally being liberated. She also discusses the ordeal of returning home after the war, how she met her husband, raising two children in a DP camp, and the life she built with her family in Chicago.

In addition to being documented in the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database (find her record here: goo.gl/KNzf5U), Ella took part in a 1995 video interview as part of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Visual History Archive of Holocaust Oral Testimonies. The video is accessible at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Skokie, Illinois, and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Israel.

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

EK: Ella Krzetowski

Q: Question asked by interviewer Chad Comello

FG: Florence Golden, Ella Krzetowski's daughter

FW: Fay Wasserman, Ella Krzetowski's daughter

EK: I was born in Poland, in Lodz. I have my parents, I have two brothers, and a sister. They all perished. My brother really passed away here, because he was in Russia during the Holocaust, so he survived. But my parents, my sister, and my other brother, they perished. Me and my sister and my parents still stayed in Lodz. And when the Germans started talking about the ghetto, you know what is a ghetto?

Q: Yes.

EK: OK. So they sent all the Jews from Lodz to the ghetto. The ghetto was in Lodz too, but was in a very poor section. There was old and poor, we didn't have showers, we didn't have bathtubs, we didn't have sinks. Everything was out. In the ghetto I had a pump for pumping the water, but there was a poor section that's where he sent us. And there was me, my sister, and my parents because my two brothers ran away they trying to save themselves. So we were just four of

us. We have a room, because there is so many people came, they have to accommodate everybody. My kitchen now is bigger than the room where we have the four people. We didn't have a sink; we have to go to the pump. This was even in a big city, but it was a poor section that they didn't want to develop probably. Because when I was living before the war, we have a bathtub, we have a stove with a little gas on the side. But my mother didn't like it; she liked the regular. So like I said it was a difference to living before the war.

Q: Yeah, tell me about that. Before the war, growing up in Lodz, what was like for you?

EK: I was born in Lodz and I got lost in Lodz. I was the baby in the family. I got one sister and two brothers. I was the baby. So I was very comfortable. My father had business, so I was very comfortable. I was going to school. I finished my seven grades, thanks God, so I was a little smart. Then the war broke out at that time in 1939, yeah? Yeah, because in '40 I was in the ghetto. In September '39.

Q: What did your father do for business?

EK: My father had, how do you call this...a cleaning store. No laundries, just suits, coats, men's shirts, men's things. My father had workers for everything; he didn't

do those things. Because before he was different, but after '35, which was the Depression, my father lost everything.

FG: What did he do before?

EK: Before my father was selling the stuff for men's suits, men's coats. The fabric for men's clothes, men's things. So that's what my father was selling. Before the Depression we were very good condition. My mother has a cleaning woman, I have a nanny.

Q: Wow.

EK: I still have the picture. A nanny and everything was good. But after the Depression my father lost everything so he put on a cleaning store. But no cleaning by us, everything was taken out. My father didn't clean nothing. It's not like now with the chemicals. But my father got workers and they ironed, they cleaned. We lived very comfortable. We lived on the main street in Lodz. My daughter went just a few years ago and she saw. But my house was demolished. I know because when the Germans bombed Lodz, the bomb fell two houses from ours, so our building cracked. So when I came back, I was thinking the building was gone, but was still there. But when she went the building was gone everything.

So like I said we were comfortable. I was going to school. Before the Depression my mother had a maid and she got a nanny for me because I was the baby. I still have the picture. What Lola gave me with the nanny.

Q: What did you do for fun as a girl?

EK: What I was doing? I was too young to have fun.

Q: Too young to have fun? [laughter]

EK: That's right. I was the baby so everybody was babying me. So later I went to school and I finished school and everything was nice. I finished my grades, and I supposed to go higher, but the Germans didn't let me go.

Q: Did you have a favorite subject in school?

EK: Not really. I don't know. That's what I cannot remember what I had as favorite.

Q: Did you like school?

EK: Yes, I liked school. I finished all seven grades. Thanks God with everything, I never fail [laughter]. So like I said, I was supposed to go higher, because by us

was different: we had no high school. We had high school but you had to pay for it. But I was young. I was glad I finished my grammar school. Because when I finished the grammar school, war broke out, and I was in ghetto. I was four years in ghetto so I was no baby anymore, because I was so young and not so big. So when the Germans came to Lodz, right away the Jews... I was living on a main street, like Michigan Avenue, so we were not allowed to go on the street, the Jews. So first was the yellow band.

Q: Did that start right after the war broke out or was there...

EK: When the Germans came to Lodz. The Germans came three days later when the war broke out.

Q: Right. What was it like before the Germans came?

EK: Before? I was going to school and I have girlfriends and we were very comfortable. We have a nice apartment, not a house, but an apartment. My father has the business, so we were very comfortable and my mother has the cleaning coming from time to time for laundry. We were washing every day, but at that time you have a big basket and you keep the laundry in the washroom or some place. When I went to ghetto I was just 14. So I didn't remember all the things, but we were very comfortable. My father has the business and I was

going to school. I have two brothers and a sister, they were older, and I was the baby, and everybody was comfortable.

Q: Did you have any sense that the war was coming?

EK: No. Not me. Maybe my father. My brother knew about it. That's right because all of a sudden they mobilized men. There was a month before the war broke out. So my brothers, one was supposed to go, but they were not on the list. So when the war broke out, the Germans right away came and we Jews couldn't do nothing. I was living on a main street so I couldn't go out from the house. I had to look back someplace to go to a back street, because Jews was not allowed to go on that street.

Q: And you said that is when you got the armbands?

EK: Yeah, so when they came we had the yellow bands. Then was yellow stars. Then when the ghetto comes, there was yellow stars, but Jude was written inside. You know what is Jude? Jew.

Q: Jew, right. So when the war started were you still in your home? Or was that when you were moved to the ghetto?

EK: I was in the ghetto. No, before the war?

Q: After the war started.

EK: During the war when the Germans came to Lodz, they right away took the Jews where they lived, in a beautiful neighborhood, and throw them in the ghetto.

Q: So everyone was forced right away into the ghetto?

EK: Or they sent them out. It depended how they were feeling. That time was not Auschwitz, but it was...I forgot the town ...

FG: Magdeburg?

EK: I forgot. It was first one before Auschwitz. Treblinka. Yeah, that's right. So they were sending to Treblinka. Like my husband, he was out from ghetto in '41. The ghetto closed in '40 in May, and my husband was sent out in '41 to work. He was so many years in Auschwitz. He had a number. He just passed away. Not even a year.

Q: I'm sorry.

EK: So like I said, my life before the war was beautiful. I had two brothers and a sister and I was the baby so everybody was watching on me.

Q: Once you were in the ghetto, what was your day-to-day life like?

EK: Oh gosh. When I was in the ghetto, you have to work; if you didn't work, you didn't get food. The ghetto was closed, so you couldn't get out anymore. You were like in a jail. The ghetto was big, very big, because they sent people from around Lodz, and then they sent German Jews to the ghetto. The ghetto was really always full and sent out, always selection.

FG: It was the second largest next to Warsaw.

Q: Wow.

EK: It was a big ghetto. Because it wasn't just Lodz residents; they were from around Lodz, the small towns, so it was really, really big. And they were sending out. They were not captive people constantly. If you got sick, they would send you out. When you didn't work, you'd be out. And everything goes through, at that time Auschwitz, and the other one, Treblinka. So they were sending them and there was another one. Bergen-Belsen. I was in Bergen-Belsen, yes. But Bergen-Belsen was later than Auschwitz.

In the beginning I was working. I don't know how to explain to you. It was a special way you sewed leather. You were putting the leather in a special clip and you were making holes and you put the thread this way and that way. And it was the harness for the horses.

FG: The lacing.

EK: That's right, so we were sewing this in ghetto. And they closed this, so I went to the tailor shop. Because in ghetto you have to work, and if you don't work you're going out.

Q: Were you working with other kids your age or were you with adults too?

EK: No, I was working with adults. Not kids because kids were very little. So I was working. In the beginning of the ghettos they make the young—the children, the teenagers—they make a special group for... I don't know what it is in English. It's a special seat and there was like a clip; you put the leather, you tie it, you got two needles but you first need to make a hole. How you call this?

FW: An awl?

EK: A tool like that and you make holes and then you put the thread and sew it. That was for the horses.

FG: A saddle?

EK: It was a saddle special. So you put the leather in it, you block it to stay, and you got two threads with a needle and you... not a screwdriver, what you make holes?

FG: The awl.

EK: I don't know. And you make a hole, and you sew. You put the threads this way and this way. So that's what I was working in the beginning in ghetto. Do you have other question? Maybe I am going too fast?

Q: No, it's fine. You said you did that and then you worked in a tailor shop?

EK: Yeah, this was my first job what I just said. And then they send me to the tailor shop sewing German uniforms. First, my job is on the sewing machine. The machine was bigger than I. I couldn't sit straight so I was sitting on the edge, and I was trying to get the pedals because it was not like now. I have to pedal to sew. I couldn't sit straight because I couldn't reach the pedals. I was sitting on the

edge to reach the pedal. And this is how I was sewing the seam on the sleeve. Then they took me away, so I was making buttonholes. So the machine cut it and I have to sew it over. And then they took me away from this. And I was sewing the uniforms, the hooks. And then they take me away. That was everything in the ghetto.

Q: And you were still with your family in the ghetto?

EK: I was still with my family, just my mother, my father and my sister. My two brothers ran away. We didn't know exactly where they were.

Q: So was there any way to get information from the outside during that time? So you didn't hear anything about the war?

EK: We were cut off of the whole war. Just the ghetto was.

Q: So how did that make you feel at that time? What were you thinking at that time?

EK: You know what, we saw what goes on and we saw that they sent people out every time there's selection. So you were lucky and you were happy that you were still alive, that you're still there. So really, and I was so young, where they

put me I was going, because I want to live. So we know if you're not working, you cannot get food.

Q: What sort of food would you have there?

EK: We were getting one soup. The soup was water and two pieces of potato. That was the soup. And you were lucky you get it.

Q: Wow. And is that one a day?

EK: This was one a day, yeah. And then we were getting a piece of bread. The bread was two pounds of round bread. So you got four for a week, one piece, one quarter for a week.

Q: Wow.

EK: Yeah. We had four people, so my father brought the whole bread and we divided in four. Because that's how it was. Everybody was for themselves, even my parents, my mother. I didn't want to take away from my mother or from my father, and my father didn't want to take away from me. So when came the bread, my father divided right away and gave it to us. And this was for the whole week. So sometimes my father ate because he was working, so sometimes I slice up a

piece and put it in his bread. Because I was not a big eater, thanks God, so I could share with my father. My mother was like me and my sister was, so I was just watching my father because he was working hard. He had never worked so hard in his life. So it was hard for me. Over time, when I saw my father has no bread because we divided each one into portion, I slice a piece and put it in his thing. I was lucky that I was never a big eater, and that's what saved me. I was hungry, so you know what I was eating? They send in coffee. But it's not coffee, it's just they take the petals from corn—you know corn has like little petals—and they toast it. They make it like coffee, you know, dark, and they were sending to ghetto. My parents were not going to eat it, so I took a cup of the coffee. When you eat it, it was choking you because the pieces were scratching. But you're hungry so you didn't care about it. So I took the coffee and I put two saccharines, because there was no sugar, and I eat it. This was my, how you say, bigos [a Polish stew].

Ghetto was very hard. You get one soup at work and then you have to wait for the rations. They were bringing sometimes potato that was frozen—you know, wintertime. So you got frozen potatoes because they not going to give you good potatoes. So they were shipping frozen potatoes, but the frozen potatoes were good too. So my mother was grating the potatoes and sometimes put flour and sometimes not, so I don't know what she was doing. She make, like, patties. But this was a bigos, because they don't send this every time. Ghetto was very

hard. Lots of people were dying just from hunger. They get swollen, and they died from hunger. It was terrible, terrible epidemics of this.

Q: And how long were you in the ghetto?

EK: Four years.

Q: Four years? Wow.

FG: She was one of the last to be liquidated to go to the camps.

Q: Wow, so that would've been '43?

EK: '44. In '44 I came to Auschwitz from the ghetto.

Q: That's a long time in that situation.

EK: Oh yes, oh yes. You don't need to tell me [laughter]. You'd see people dying on the street from hunger. Not just what you went through. Because like when I went to work so I have to sit, so I was getting work soup, which was two potatoes and water. But I was happy with this, so that's what it is. So I was on the sewing machine, then my foreman was such a nice guy. He saw I cannot reach the

pedals and I'm working so hard, so he took me from the sewing machine and he put me to the guy that made holes. You know, buttonholes, so I was sewing over to closing in. So this was my job.

Then I was sewing the uniform, everything worn by the Germans. Uniform, everything. Straw shoes, you know. When people went to Auschwitz, Auschwitz sent us the clothing and we were tearing the clothes in braided special thing to make it shoes for the soldiers to go to Russia. We were braiding it and the pedals we were sewing together to make boots to go over the shoe because if the Germans were going to Russia, there was winter, there was cold. So that's what we were doing.

Q: So you were getting the clothes from the prisoners in the camps sent back to you?

EK: From Auschwitz, Majdanek, from any of those places, yeah.

Q: They would send the clothes back to the ghetto to be remade.

EK: Yes, and there were special sections where the women were tearing pieces and then went to the special place where they were making the boots. It was really boots, not a shoe. So they braid it, tore it, make like a braid. And they were

making shoes for the Germans—boots, not shoes, you know, high. So they go to Russia and they have winter so they have very good shoes.

Q: And did you know what was happening in the camps during this time when you would get those clothes back? Did you have any sense of what was happening outside?

EK: We never knew from where the clothes were coming. I was working in tailor shop so everything was new material. We were making uniforms for the Germans, the blue uniforms.

Q: Then when people were selected to leave, did they know where they were going?

EK: When they liquidate our tailor shop, they say they moving us in a different town because it's closer, it's better. But we never knew it was Auschwitz. The better town was Auschwitz. That's how they were treating people. But I was in ghetto until liquidation almost, four years.

Q: And that was in 1944, right?

EK: 1944, in August I came to Auschwitz.

Q: So, what happened the day of liquidation for you?

EK: But it was not liquidation. I was the first one in the tailor shop I was working. So the tailor shop was the first one to be moved. They told us they were moving the factory someplace else, but it was Auschwitz. So we didn't know. We didn't know about Auschwitz because you were closed in. Nobody was coming back from Auschwitz. So you don't know what goes on behind the wires. So when they liquidate our tailor shop, they said all tailor shops is moving to a different place. So people were packing things. I don't know why, I took just a little school bag. You know, those leather things for the school. So I throw in, you know, things that I needed because I didn't have too many. But I never saw this. The minute you came to Auschwitz you have to throw everything away, you have to strip yourself nude, and that's it. You never saw nothing while you were there. My dressing from Auschwitz until liberation was a men's shirt. A giant men's shirt. That was my dress. Not just dress, everything. They were throwing. You were passing after them nude and they were throwing you, so thanks God they throw me a men's shirt. So I was lucky. From the wintertime, when I was in Bergen-Belsen, I cut the sleeve, because the sleeve is long and I make socks to cover my legs from this. That's how we were doing. That's how we were trying. Trying to live, even in Auschwitz. Thanks God, I was not too long in Auschwitz, because they send me to Bergen-Belsen. You hear of Bergen-Belsen?

Q: Yes.

EK: Another camp, yes.

Q: What was it like, once you left the ghetto, getting to Auschwitz? Were you on a train?

EK: On a train, yes. The train was nothing. Was not a train like you're thinking. There was nothing in the train, just the walls and a floor, and we were sitting on the floor. It was cold. When we were going from Bergen-Belsen to Magdeburg I was sent from Bergen-Belsen to Magdeburg to ammunition factory.

Q: So you were in several camps then during that time.

EK: Yeah, I was four years in the ghetto.

Q: Right.

EK: And I was working as I told you in the beginning, so I was working with the leather. The Germans, they would come special. They came just for selection. Everything was Jewish.

Q: Right.

EK: Just one, Biebow. His name was Hans Biebow. He was the German who took care of our ghetto. So he was the one that was coming to the factories. The supplies he was sending. So it depends how he likes it.

Q: Right. And then what do you remember about arriving at Auschwitz?

EK: Oh. We didn't know about Auschwitz. But the train, it was how you calling, I forgot already but there was nothing there. Empty.

FG: Cattle car.

EK: No, it was not a cattle car. It was open the doors, sliding the door, but was empty inside. Just a little window was on the top. We sit on the floor. No chairs, no nothing. Just you sitting where you wanted on the floor. And we were very close together because they were pushing, you know, to make you uncomfortable.

Q: How long was the journey on the train?

EK: They didn't want to go fast, so from Lodz to Auschwitz we wouldn't be so long like we were traveling. But they wanted to keep us—maybe somebody was going

to die there or something. So we were traveling I think two days, more than two days, in the train. When we went from ghetto to the train, they give us a piece of bread. But we were hungry, all of us, so some people left a piece, some not. The trip to Auschwitz was about two or three days, so we didn't have nothing. No water, no nothing. So we were sitting on the floor. It was warm. That was in September. It was still warm. There was just a little window on the top. So lots of people were sitting back to back. I was sitting this way, the other person was facing the other way. And that's how we were squeezed into the train.

Q: So when you were led off the train, that's when they took your possessions and you had to strip down? Or what happened once you left the train?

EK: You just have to get out and leave everything. I didn't have too much because they said don't take too much. So I just took necessary clothes, nothing else. But I didn't have this because Auschwitz get everything off. They stripped me even of what I was wearing. I told you I got a men's shirt. I'm glad the man was big, probably. So the shirt was long enough for me and the sleeve was long, so when I came to Magdeburg I cut off the sleeve because they were long. So I cut off and I make socks to cover my feet. Some of the girls got a needle and thread.

Then for counting in Magdeburg, we were very nice to German soldiers. And they were sorry for us. Maybe they married and have children, I don't know what, so that they feel that their children were going to go through what I go

through. So they brought needles with thread, and some girl got scissors, so I cut my sleeve from the coat. Not from the coat, from my shirt. And I sew one thing and I put socks and I put strings to hold the socks. That's how we were doing. We didn't have luxury, that's it.

Q: And then were you working right away at Auschwitz?

EK: No, at Auschwitz I didn't work. At Auschwitz we went right away to the barracks. We were laying on the bunk beds and we were just going like the morning to go to the washroom to wash. Just, you know, your face and things. It was outside. Everything in Auschwitz was outside. The toilet was on the steps and the washing was the same thing. Cold water, there was no warm water. I was lucky it was August. So we would rinse ourselves because you cannot wash yourself too much. You have to be clean, you have to do everything. First we didn't have no hairs or we didn't need it because every hair was taken down.

Q: Oh yeah, everyone was shaved.

EK: Yeah.

Q: How long were you at Auschwitz?

EK: At Auschwitz it was August...I think a month. Lucky. From Auschwitz I was sent to Bergen-Belsen, another camp. In Bergen-Belsen, in the beginning we were outside in tents. They opened tents for us. There was little straw and then they give us little blankets, you know, the little military blankets. I was with my girlfriend, so one we put on the straw and with the other we cover ourselves. Both, because it was big blankets. That's how we were doing. The whole time, even when we were in Magdeburg, the same way, because we didn't have no covers. They give us just a little—it's not even a blanket, it's like a flannel sheet.

Q: Once you arrived at Auschwitz and then went on to Bergen-Belsen, did you understand what those camps were for?

EK: Oh, when you come to Auschwitz you understand right away.

Q: And then some people went to those camps never left, right? But then you—

EK: Well, no, Auschwitz was going through. No, Auschwitz was people don't stay long. Maybe some of them stayed working. Like the girls, I can tell you about the girls. When the shipment comes, they were throwing clothes to you. This was their job. Some of them was the job where they were shaving the hair and everything. But they were longer and who knows, you know? They don't keep people too long there. They always changing. But go there and a new thing

comes in. That's what I know, but maybe difference because I was in Auschwitz just a month. In September I was already in Bergen-Belsen.

Q: And then how long were you in Bergen-Belsen?

EK: At Bergen-Belsen I was from middle September until after Christmas. At Christmas we were done. After Christmas I was shipped to Magdeburg.

Q: OK. And you didn't work in Bergen-Belsen?

EK: No, Bergen-Belsen was just a camp. No work. But I work in Magdeburg, ammunition factory. Yeah, in Magdeburg I was working.

Q: What sort of work did you do at that factory?

EK: I was making the shells that goes to the...

Q: Some type of gun?

EK: You know the shells you put in the cannon. On top of the shell was a metal, and the metal has a little hole. I have to check with my nail how deep the hole was. If the hole hit my nails, it's no good. It's too deep. So I have to measure every hole

from the shell. You know, the shells go in the...I don't know what kind...but you know those cannons or something big that was like this, like my table. But mine was just 12 or 13 inches. On the top was metal; it was a little hole. I had to check with my nail, and if it was not hitting my nail, it's no good. So I was working in Magdeburg. That's what was my turn.

Q: Right, and then how long were you there?

EK: In Magdeburg I was from Christmas 'til April.

Q: 'Til when you were liberated.

EK: On march. In April they took us on march because the Russian was coming closer, so they took us on march. We were marching for two or three days. The German soldiers were having the cannon with the bomb-ball you know...how you call this? But they were going like this and on the top there was a ball. In the ball was the ammunition or something. So that's why they were watching us. That's what I was going.

Q: So they took you and others on a march...

EK: Whole Magdeburg...

Q: The whole camp?

EK: The whole factory, because it was a big factory. Just the Jews because on the first floor was Polish workers, so I don't know what they done with them. They just took us marching alone. I mean just all the Jewish ones. So I don't know what they done with the Polish ones. But in our camp there were two barracks of the Polish and two barracks the Jewish. The Polish were working the same factory with I, but they were working on the downstairs and they were working the big big big something, ammunition. And we were working on the second floor having the shells, the small thing that does in the...in the...I don't know where they were putting them, but it was ammunition.

Q: During this time did you interact with any other types of people or just the people that you knew who you talked with?

EK: No, there was men, they were working on the machines to make the holes to the shell, which I have to check.

Q: Right.

EK: So they have a barrack before ours. They cannot go to our our place, because there was a gate. And before the gate was a barrack of men, which were by the machines. They were girls, we were checking after, if the hole was too big or too small.

Q: Did you make any friends?

EK: Sure, we all have friends, because Sunday we were not working. Sunday we were sitting in the barrack and couldn't go no place. We were singing, sitting on the bunk beds and put ourselves on the highest one. We were sitting there, we were singing, and were talking jokes. Something to keep us busy.

Q: Did you think you were going to survive or did you not think you were going to survive?

EK: You know what, I was so young, so I really didn't think about it. I never had in my mind that I was going to do this because I want to survive. No. No, I didn't think about it, never. He put me here, I was here; he put me there, I was there. I was not a rebel, you know, 'Go do something!' There was girls that were, but the poor girls they never survive. There were girls that were going away like this that want to make it something, but they were caught and that was the thing.

Q: They tried to escape?

EK: Sometimes they like to escape, sometimes they wanted to steal. Because like in barracks, there is the kitchen, because they were cooking for us just one soup. One soup a day. The SS man and the woman, they were checking. The kitchen was not just for us—we got one or two potatoes—but for the military, for the... I just said it and I forgot already... The SS, they were watching us, and they have a kitchen. The kitchen was next to our barracks, so there was a big garbage thing, so they were throwing in the bones. Some of the girls were tall so they can reach it, so they take the bones and scrape the bones inside for the marrow. You know what I am talking about?

Q: Sure.

EK: But they were dangerous, because they put chloride in the things and some girls went to the sink and washed them off everything and they pull out the marrow to eat. I couldn't do this. Lots of girls didn't do it. In our barrack only one girl was doing it. In barrack there was maybe 30 girls, and she was the only one. She was watching when they throw out the bones from the kitchen. There even was pour chloride on it and she didn't care, went to the sink and washed off the chloride and she was pulling the marrow. But she was the only one. Everybody was

admiring. Nobody wants to be in danger, because if they see you they gonna shoot you.

But we were really working. You have to work. We have selection there. If you didn't work or you make a mistake, it's danger. I was lucky. My foreman was very good. A German, and he has a daughter like me. That's what he told me. He was afraid the Russian was going to do the same to his daughter what the German do to me. He was not supposed to talk to me, but like through sign language. So he was always bringing me not bread, but the crust from the bread. He was always bringing me, but I cannot see it and I have to watch it, so he put behind the machine, then he stay and point it to me. I said why is he so good to me? So when I went behind there, he said when he sees me he sees what the Russian is gonna do to his daughter. So that's why he was so good to me.

Q: Wow. So you say you were taken on a march with all the girls...

EK: Yeah the march, we were going to march over a week 'til we came close to the Russian border. Not the Russian border, but what the Russians took of Germany. We were in Germany, but there was Russia section, America section, and England section. Germany was divided in three, so we were on the Russian section because it was close to Poland. But what was close to France or something, they were in a different section. So we were in the section close to Poland, in Germany.

Q: So you were on that march. Was that when you encountered the Russian army?
Was that how you were liberated?

EK: Mmhmm.

Q: Is that when you knew that you were free? What were you thinking at that moment?

EK: In that moment I was really... We saw we were on a field. We were going and going and couldn't find nothing, so there was a big field. We said we're going to sit down and rest, because there was nobody behind us anymore. Everybody was running. Even the Germans were running. We didn't know. We were five girls left over from the whole group. We don't know where the rest went. So we were walking. We saw German homes, so we were looking for food, but there was no food there. Maybe when they run away maybe they took the food with. Then we were liberated by the Russians. Not by the Americans.

Q: So the Russians found you in that field?

EK: No, in that field we were laying in a big, empty lot, and all of a sudden we saw a little motorcycle, a double. We saw it coming and thought, *Uh-oh*. We didn't know

it was Russian, we were thinking the Germans find us. We are in a plain field, with corn or potatoes, I don't remember... Potatoes! Because we were digging for potatoes. I'm not a farmer so don't know what it was. But we were digging and got the potatoes, so we ate the potatoes—with the peel, not washing, because when you're hungry you don't look for those things. So all of the sudden we are sitting in the field, we are already tired of marching; we are tired of everything; we are hungry. A motorcycle comes and a little guy came out in a uniform. But we see this is not a German uniform really. We were sitting and he pointed this way. So we were thinking maybe it was the Germans, now we're gonna be lost.

We were six girls, and we went 'What's gonna be, gonna be' and we came there. And on one side of the field, it was Ukrainian people. And they didn't want to let us into the building because we were Jewish. So we were sitting on the field. So when they came in on the motorcycles, we were scared and we think 'Oh, the Germans probably find us', but it was Russia. We didn't want to go. We were sitting on the field far away, and they would motion and we didn't want it. Because we were afraid!

Then we decided maybe the Germans are going to kill us, we're not going to go. So let us go, what's gonna be is gonna be. So we went and it was Russia. So we don't speak Russian, but one guy he was Jewish. From Russia! And he says to us, what language we speak? So we said Polish. I didn't speak Jewish too much. I understood but I cannot speak. So he said, 'From where are we?' so we said from Poland. 'Oh, Poland is already liberated, they got food, they got

everything.' Which is true. That was May, and Lodz was liberated in January. So he was already saying the truth. We were thinking that nobody's there anymore.

So, we were happy that the war is finished, but now how are we gonna go? We've never been in Germany; we've never marched like this. Where are we going to find a train or something to go back to Poland? So we were walking, walking, 'til a truck pass by with a Russian. Everything was Russian; we didn't see no Germans. So, we ask him, 'We wanna go to Lodz.' They don't know what Lodz is, they don't know nothing, because we don't speak Russian. He didn't understand our Polish. A second came by, and we know they were going in groups, the Russians. We stopped them and we ask if somebody speak Jewish. One guy said yes, so we tell him 'We want to go to Lodz. How we can go?' We don't know where we are. We know we were in Germany, but which city we never knew. So he said, 'Go this way, but it's far away. You're going to walk, walk, walk, then a little train going to come and take you to the border.'

So, this was something. 'So where is the little train? Where is this place?' 'You have to walk straight this way. Go straight, straight. Maybe tomorrow you're going to be there.' So we start walking. Night comes, and we were not going to walk at night because we were afraid of the Russians. So we find the empty houses. We were looking for attics, you know? So it was something, so we went in there, throw the chairs, throw everything that was there on the steps. God forbid the Russians should know that we were there. And that's how we were

traveling until we came to Posen. Posen was on the border of Germany and Poland. That's how we were after the liberation.

Q: Right. So then you got the train and then you got to Lodz?

EK: Yeah, in a small town we got a little train, which is very little. We sit on the floor. It was like a military train. It took us to Posen. That is Polish, on the border of Germany. And then we got a train, a regular train to Lodz.

Q: And then what happened once you got home to Lodz?

EK: Oy. It was another war, because I came home and I was... [gets emotional] And I was going to my house, and I knock on the door and a Polish woman opens the door. She saw me with the uniform so she knows from where I'm coming, so she locked the door. That was my homecoming. Until I met my husband, I was really not thinking about nothing because my parents were not there, nobody's there, my brothers I don't know. My one brother ran away to Russia but I don't hear nothing, so who knows where he is? Not my other brother, not my sister, nobody, just me. I cannot go to the house because somebody is living there. And she locked the door on me. She saw me, so she probably knew I live here, but she didn't say anything. She just saw me and she locked the door.

I never went there anymore. It was too painful. I didn't have anywhere to be, and not just me—we were three girls together. So we were sitting on the steps where the Jewish center was. In Poland, at 11 o'clock everything was closed. You cannot get out and you cannot get in.

FG: Like a curfew. They would close the gates. You know, like you see in the stores.

EK: Yeah, so we didn't have a place to go. We were three of us. So we were sitting on the steps. After liberation. After coming home. Because I couldn't go to the house; she didn't let me in. So that was my second war. Until I met my husband.

Q: When did you meet your husband?

EK: My husband, you see, in ghetto he was a shoemaker. He was a young boy. He was by that time sixteen, so he was trying to make a living to buy a piece of bread or something. So he was a shoemaker. He came to us—my father needed to fix something—and we didn't have no leather, so my father had leather belts. So that's what we were using if the sole was gone. We were using the leather belts to put on the sole.

My husband's sister was working at my end, so I knew him a little. But after the war, he recognized me but I didn't recognize him, because he was four years away from ghetto. He was at that time 15 and here is a man almost 20. So

big changes. I didn't know who he was but he recognized me. I was walking on the street and he came over and asked about my sister, because he knew my sister too. I was shocked, and said to him, 'How do you know my sister?' He said who he is and I said, 'Oh gosh'... He fixed my shoe there and didn't make a nice job, so I was so angry, so now I see him and he probably don't want to talk to me. But he talked to me. He married me!

Q: So he talked to you after you had tried to go home, but were just on the streets? That is when he talked to you?

EK: Yeah, so he started looking for something, a room someplace we should be able to go in. Because girls, we had to watch ourselves. We were young girls so you have to watch yourself to whom you talk or something. So when he met me, we didn't have no money, couldn't buy ourselves something to eat. Germans didn't give us money, so we didn't have no money. So we couldn't eat, we were hungry. One guy by the train when we came, he was so nice, he gave us 100 zloty. We were thinking 100 zloty would be the value before the war. We didn't know what the money was worth now.

So we were so excited, we four girls. We went to the store. We saw bread, that was the best thing for us. So we went to the store and said, 'Can we have bread?' The woman said yes, and we ask how much was it. We were thinking that we were gonna get change. At that time the money was very valuable...we

didn't know, we were going before the war. 100 zloty before the war you could buy the whole thing. So we said we have 100 zloty. 'You don't have enough for the bread.' Oh God. So we said, 'Give us half.' So she started cutting the bread, you know, a little bigger than this. So she give us a half. We give her the zloty and we said, 'Give us the change.' The whole bread was 150 zloty or something, I don't remember, but I know we had to have change. 'No change.' Oh gosh, we were so angry. Now we got a piece of bread and were without the money. So the coming home was another war for me. Because I came in May, and Lodz was liberated in January. So people already have homes, people already work, you know—it was normal. It was not a war anymore. My husband came in January, so he was already, like you say, big shot.

Q: So he was already established, or more established, when you got home.

EK: Yeah, he already had an apartment. It was a group, you know, people live together. He had four boyfriends that were liberated together. So they went to Lodz, they found an apartment, and they took it and they lived together.

Q: So did they help you then when you got back?

EK: Oh, he helped me, yes, a lot, because if it were not for him I wouldn't be here at all. Because my coming home was very bad. Very bad. I didn't have place to sit, I

didn't have place to sleep, I have no money to eat. And I don't have nothing. But when you're going to the Jewish organization and they have names of people they are looking for, I was there every day and nobody looks for me. That means that nobody survived. So it was hard. And then I got sick. My nerves went and I got stomach pain. And I was thinking, Stomach pain? Maybe from the food that I was eating? But it was nerves. I was suffering. I was lucky I was not hungry because I couldn't eat, because I got pain through-and-through. And I don't have nobody, so I was very depressed, not thinking about nothing. Until I met my husband. He saved me.

Q: So then what was that postwar period like as you try to recover from this experience? How long did you stay in Lodz?

EK: One year.

Q: And you got married during that time?

EK: Yeah, I got married, because I didn't want to go and stay with him if I'm not married. So I said no. So he said he'd promise. But I didn't have nobody, he didn't have nobody. We were just four kids, for him it was eight. He was the only one who survived. Not a sister, not a brother, not a cousin, nothing.

Q: And he was from Lodz originally?

EK: Yes.

Q: OK. So once you got married, what was your life like?

EK: I was married in Lodz because I found out that my older brother ran away to Russia during the war, so he survived. So I was waiting for him to come to Lodz. When he came to Lodz, I was just a month with him in Lodz and we left.

Q: And where did you go?

EK: There was a Jewish organization on the border of Germany and Czech. Every survivor who had no place to go or something, they took. And there was the plan to go to Israel. At that time Israel was not Israel yet, but still Jerusalem and everything was Jewish. So we were planning to go there from Germany at that time, but my brother left. I told you my brother from Russia survived, so we were together and then he went to Israel during even the war. Israel what was not Israel yet, but fighting. So he left from Germany and I was still in Germany living because I had no place to go. My brother was in Israel and he said, 'Don't come here, there is very hard living and everything. You went through so much. Stay in Germany, maybe somebody only open the door.' So we stayed, and both my

daughters were born in Germany. I stayed until America opened the thing so I could come to America.

FG: The Displaced Persons camp. So not only did they have to wait for the liquidation of the camps, then your horror story starts all over again because a lot of the survivors were sent to the old concentration camps just because there weren't enough facilities to accommodate them. So my parents ended up in a military barracks in Germany, and they were moved twice while they were there. We were there five and a half years.

Q: Wow. So until 1950...?

FG: Until 1952. And they had papers to leave, but nobody was able to sponsor them. At that point you needed to be sponsored. God forbid we came to the United States and had to ask them for something. So four years after we were in the DP camp, my mother and father got their papers and I was born. My sister wasn't quite born yet; my mother was just pregnant, but before we left she was born. And then McCarthy closed the doors, and for another year and a half we waited.

Q: Did you get a sponsorship at that point?

FG: There was an organization, the Joint [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee]. HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society] was the major sponsor.

EK: HIAS, yeah.

FG: But they were flooded, so we had to wait for another sponsor because there were no relatives here; we came with nobody. So we have to find an organization that would sponsor us so that we could come. So we were in the DP camps for five and a half years.

Q: Wow. So when were you—

FG: I was born in the DP camp.

Q: OK. Do you have any remembrance of that or were you too young?

FG: No, I have some recollection of it. My father set up a little shoemaker area, so he did some work in the DP camps. [To EK] And I think things were still rationed, right? You had a list of food that you were allowed to have.

EK: Oh yeah. They were sending it to the camp. It was a camp, too. But it was an American camp, so they were sending from America. Not to us, but to the camp.

And then we got the portions because we didn't have no money to go shopping, so everything was DP. Everything was under American.

Q: What was it like to have a baby in that camp during that time?

EK: It was very hard. I gonna tell you, I got three diapers when she was born. They gave me three diapers.

Q: That's good for a day, maybe? [laughter]

EK: UNRRA. You hear about UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration]? It was the American, United States, United Nations, whatever, taking DPs. We were DPs, displaced persons. So they were sending food, they were sending everything to the camp. It was a military camp with four big buildings. It was probably for the officers, the German officers maybe. Yeah, so we have little rooms. So I'm with my brother and we have a room the size of my kitchen maybe. Maybe like the kitchen. It was two families: my brother and his wife and a baby, and I with my husband and a baby.

Q: Wow. So that was for five years?

EK: That was after the war, in '46.

FG: We moved around for two years in one spot, and then they needed the barracks back, and so they moved us to another spot. So it wasn't all in one location.

Q: And then you moved to the United States after that?

EK: Yeah, from there I went. We got papers, because the order was who was working in Germany can apply for America. So I was working in Germany... what is the town? I forgot. I was working in the ammunition factory...

FG: Magdeburg.

EK: Yes, right. That was in Germany, so I got right to come to America. So I brought my family with me. They allowed me the family, so I came to America. That I was working in Germany during the war.

Q: Where did you go when you came to the United States?

EK: I arrived with a ship, not a plane. The ship was from Korea—was the time of the war, Florence?

FG: Yeah. The Korean War.

EK: In '51? '52?

FG: '52. I think it was called the USS Taylor.

EK: General Taylor. On the General Taylor I came to America.

Q: Did you arrive in New York?

EK: Yeah.

Q: And then what did you do at that point?

EK: In New York, my girlfriend came a few months before. So we were staying with her and then my husband had to go to the sponsor, the Jewish organization HIAS. They were sponsoring, and my orders were Chicago, but we arrived in New York. So my husband has to go to the organization that had our papers, in Chicago. Somebody sponsored us from Chicago. So we have to come to Chicago. In New York, my girlfriend came two months before me to America, so she already had an apartment and everything. We stayed there because she wanted us to stay in New York together because we were together in Germany.

But my husband didn't like New York. He said it's dirty, because we came in March, so the snow was black. So he says, 'No, I'm not staying in New York, it's a dirty city. I said why? Then we go on the train, you know, the streetcars, and a man reads the paper and when finished throws it under the seat. My husband saw it; that's enough. He said, 'No, we're going to Chicago with the sponsor.' But we came to Chicago he saw the same thing, the black snow and everything. [laughter] I said, 'You see? You were just thinking New York was dirty.' 'No, I like it here in Chicago.' Yeah, that's why we wind up in Chicago and my girlfriend in New York. But we were close together the whole time, until they gone. My husband just passed away in February.

Q: How long were you married?

EK: 71 and a half years.

Q: Wow.

EK: He was the first one and last one. Yeah. That's what was it. That is very hard for me. [gets emotional] Because I was with him so many years and everything was together. Now I have to depend on my daughters—which, they are angels—but myself I don't feel it's right. I didn't plan this; somebody planned for me. So that's

why I really... appreciate this... My daughters aren't daughters; they're two angels I have.

FW: She's our blessing.

EK: They are 24 hours. If I need something, just think something, they're here. If I need something, they are right away here. They right away with me. They don't leave me anything alone. Yeah. So like I said, I'm lucky with this.

Q: So you moved to Chicago in the 1950s. When did you end up in Morton Grove?

EK: Huh?

Q: How long were you in Chicago?

EK: From the time I came. I stay in New York maybe a month, not even a month. Then straight to Chicago because my visa was for Chicago.

Q: Then did you move to Morton Grove right away?

EK: No, Morton Grove was not even existing.

Q: Oh, no? [laughter] So where in Chicago did you live?

EK: I lived on the West Side, on Avis. You don't know probably. Did you live there?

Q: No.

EK: You too young; you live probably on North Side. So like I said I was living on the South Side on Avis. I was there two years. Leo, my husband, was working here on the North Side on Montrose, and he was driving on Avis on the South Side. We looking and looking and found one little apartment because we couldn't afford, because I was not working; he was the only one. It was a very small apartment, but it was our own. I start working too, because he got sick, so I went to work too. I went at night, because in the daytime I could not leave. My son was still too young for school and she was just in kindergarten, so I have to go at night to work, because there was not enough money with my husband.

Q: What kind of work did you do?

EK: I worked at Shure Brothers.

Q: The Shure here?

FG: Right, but it wasn't there.

EK: What?

Q: It's in Niles. The headquarters of Shure is still around here.

EK: No, no, this was in Evanston. The factory was in Evanston. They were making the telephones, the speaker. I was putting the rubber and gluing on. I put the hot cream and I stick it on. I put the glue here and put a little black thing—I don't know, was it the speaker, maybe was the thing. That was what I was doing at Shure Brothers.

Q: So you were taking care of the kids in during the day and working at night. Wow.

EK: Because I couldn't leave them. My husband was working. I couldn't leave them alone, so I left at 6 o'clock. I made dinner and everything. Fay was the professional dishwasher. She was five or six years old. She couldn't reach the sink, so my husband made a little stool for her. She stood on the stool—I still have stool—and wash the dishes. She loved it. When I had company for dinner, she was standing and waiting: empty plate [grabbing motion] and straight to the sink. [laughter] That was her profession. Sometimes my friends were worried

because maybe they wanted something else, so they were holding the dishes like this. [laughter] That was what she was doing. She loved dishwashing.

Q: Then what did your husband do for work at this time?

EK: The first job was a paint store, mixing the paint, breaking the paint. It was a big, big store on Montrose. Bell. Yeah. He was breaking the old paint with the clubs, making it so it could be used, because if paint stays too long it can stick together. So that was his first job. And then he got a job in the factory. He was in the factory 25 years or more, because he got two awards. One was the watch, the other one I forgot. Anyway, he was working there over 25 years.

FG: Had there not been war he would have been... Both of them were so bright, but they were so young. They never finished school.

EK: That's why, for me, now is very hard. They help me very much. They try to do best for me, but I'm still by myself. Because being married so many years, he was the first one and the last one. We went through so much, running away from Poland; we have to go through the mountains 'til we came to Germany. And Germany was not so good either, because then UNRRA took over, so it was not an easy job. Until '52. We were supposed to come in '51, but in the '50s, what was the Senator's name? McCarthy?

Q: McCarthy.

EK: McCarthy. He closed the gate. He didn't let any come in. So we were waiting another year until they opened again and we came, in '52.

Q: What was Leon like, your husband?

EK: Oh... [laughter] You know, it's a different feeling, because we are all from the war. We were all in concentration camps. We went through the whole war, not pleasant. He was longer in Auschwitz, he left the ghetto in '41, so he was so many years working. My husband had a number from Auschwitz. I didn't because I came to Auschwitz as the shipment; they couldn't do it. But my husband came to Auschwitz in the beginning. The war started in '39? In '40 he was in Auschwitz.

Q: What attracted you to him? What did you like about him?

EK: You see, we didn't date like you're supposed to because we were in ghetto, and in ghetto I didn't talk to him, but I knew who he was. My aunt and his sister were working in a kitchen at the beginning of the ghetto in '40. So I was coming sometimes to my aunt for soup my parents and my sister can have. Everything was rationed. So I came to my aunt so she could give me soup. His sister and my

aunt were working in the same kitchen. So I saw him, but I didn't pay attention. When I got married he said, 'I was saying hello to you and you didn't answer.' I said, 'I didn't know you! I don't answer to people, especially as I'm a young girl you a man so I didn't answer.' He was just six months older than I. [laughter]

FG: He looked older.

EK: So that's what I say. He really saved me. That what I was crying: he saved me and I couldn't save him now. But that's a different story, that's what it is.

Q: When did you move to Morton Grove?

EK: We are 20-some years here.

FG: About 24 years here.

EK: In '93 we moved here.

Q: What brought you to Morton Grove? Why did you move here?

EK: First, I had a friend here. And second I was going winters to Florida. I had a house in Chicago on Richmond and during winter I had people brush the snow,

because you have to do it. It's not like now where you wait for the snow like a diamond, but it was snow. So we decided that are we going to sell in Florida or are we going to sell the house? So we decided to sell the house, and we bought the condo. How many years since we sold Florida? Ten years?

FG: Not that much. About five or six years. Five.

EK: Five years, yeah. Five years we sold Florida. Like this we were always in Florida in the winter, because my husband couldn't take the winter. So we sold the house, we bought the condo, and we had the condo in Florida. Now everything is sold, nothing. Yeah, that's what it is.

FG: It's beautiful.

EK: Yeah, that's what it is. It is very hard, very hard, very hard, very hard. That's right. How about coffee or something?

Q: Oh no, that's fine, thank you. Well, thank you for sharing all those stories.

EK: Yeah, I try sharing. It's hard for me. It's very hard for me.

Q: Yeah, I understand.

EK: To talk about it. Because is very painful. Some people can be talking about everything, but for me it is a very painful thing. I really don't talk too much, because I tell my kids I wanted they should know something. But like this, I don't talk. Because if you're going to talk every time about this, life is not interesting, because you're bringing out what you left unhappy. So we talk, but 24 hours? No. My kids know about it, but I have not wanted to. In Washington they I have my thing in the museum [the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum]. Here [at the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie] I didn't do too much. So that's it.