

Paula Kelman
A36
29m26s

Interviewer: I'm going to talk to you a little bit about your prewar life in Poland. I haven't had a chance to get your story until just now. So, you'll have to forgive me if I look through here.

Paula Kelman: We have the storm. I don't have no phone, no nothing.

Interviewer: I know. That's okay. A little bit about your time in the ghetto and in camp, and then your DP (displaced persons) camp and then a little bit about after liberation, liberation and after. I want you to take all the time that you need. I want you to feel comfortable as comfortable as you can. We understand that this is very difficult. We understand everyone is a little nervous.

Paula Kelman: 1939, the war started. I was born in Poland in Częstochowa, the city. In 1939, when the war, September, started, 6th or 3rd, whatever, then the bombs went flying everywhere. And then--

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about before 1939.

Paula Kelman: Well, I have a happy childhood. Great parents, grandparents, we were a very happy family and they'd been well-off. My grandparents and my parents, they'd been in business and I went to a private school, to a Jewish school. And I have a lot of friends and I was doing like a normal child. I was riding bicycle and playing soccer and all the things to do like young girls are doing. But then, when the--

Interviewer: What city are you from?

Paula Kelman: Częstochowa, Poland. That's a beautiful city.

Interviewer: How far would you...say that's from Łódź or Warsaw or--

Paula Kelman: Everything. My husband was born in Warsaw, not too far away, but Poland was not big. There was no "too far" from nowhere.

Interviewer: So you had three brothers and a sister?

Paula Kelman: There was five of us.

Interviewer: There were five of you?

Paula Kelman:

Uh-huh. My oldest brother... When we were in the house, then the Germans came 1939 and they came to the house. We was wearing pajamas, you know, kids and everything. That was at night. They came with their rifles and they say, "Rauschen," that means get out from the house. And no belonging, just little belonging and that's it. And we went to ghetto and in ghetto, we stayed in one room. And then, later, we had to work in ghetto. I was doing all kinds of work. Wintertime, we have to (mimes the act of shoveling) snow. We could not have childhood anymore when the war started. There was not normal. And there had been selection. They select the people left and right. To left, that means they went to Auschwitz. At that time, we don't know where they had been going. They told us, then, they're going to work. And then, two guys, they ran away – I don't know how – they came back to ghetto and they said there's no such a thing. That's no place for them to work. They're going to Auschwitz and they're dying – the showers they have been taking – and that's what was happening. I was the youngest one. My parents, they go. Then, I stayed with my sister, she was married, and her husband. And then, I lost two brothers and one brother, the oldest one, we used to go every summer for vacation like in country here, to Arkansas or whatever. And this woman, she knew us. She was a Polish woman and my brother said to her, "Are you going to hide us?" She said, "Sure, just come over and everything will be all right." Then he wants me to go with him, but my sister said, "No," whatever happened to me, that happened to her and she goes to stay in ghetto, and he went with the uncles and cousins over there. And the first day when they came over, she reported to the Germans, and the Germans came and killed them. One cousin, he was in my age, and he ran away and came back to ghetto and he told us – he lives now in Israel – and then, we know that my brother got killed and how he got killed. And after that, when we have selection. I used to have long hair as a girl, then my sister cut my hair and put on me high-heeled shoes when we have the selection and put lipstick. When the Germans asked me, "How old bist du?" That means, "How old are you?" Then I say, "18 years," and I was only 12 or 13 years old at that time. If not, they would send me away. And then, I just stayed with my sister and they said there was big ghetto, and from a big ghetto, sometime, we wear those bands with the Magen David, the stars. Then, I went outside, want to get bread, then I took off the bands and when to the Pollocks and buy some bread and came back to ghetto.

Interviewer:

Risking your life?

Paula Kelman:

Risking my life.

Interviewer:

To get bread.

Paula Kelman:

Get bread because, in ghetto, we don't have anything. They don't give us

nothing. We used to buy potatoes. My sister was having a ring, her wedding ring. She sold the ring and got potatoes for it and we've been cooking everyday potatoes. That's what we've been living on in ghetto. And then, they send most people to Auschwitz and what's just left maybe 3,000 or 4,000, I don't remember exactly. Then, they make a smaller ghetto and in the smaller ghetto, I was living with the girls and my sister was living with her husband, different street. They put us to work, then after, the people got to evacuate, you know, they went to Auschwitz, then we have to go to their homes and select things, separate gold and everything. Then, the Germans can send to Germany everything. And while we were going to work, we got German shepherds behind us and rifles. Wherever we went, we have them or we walk there. And one time, I took a sheet and put on – you know, then I can sell it – and put it on my body and another girl was having something, too, before we came to ghetto. Then the Germans, they came and look who stole something. Then they picked me up and put me on the side and the girl, I don't know her well, but they put her on the side, too. And my sister, she knew the policeman, the Jewish policeman in ghetto, and she found out, then the Jewish policeman kept us at the police station. They're supposed to, the Germans, come and kill us about 12 o'clock at night.

- Interviewer: Let me ask...can we stop and ask you something. There was a Jewish policeman?
- Paula Kelman: The Jewish policeman, he saved my life really.
- Interviewer: Why had he not been part of a roundup and put in the ghetto or taken to a--?
- Paula Kelman: The Jewish policemen, they've been over us, in the ghetto.
- Interviewer: So, he lived and worked in the ghetto?
- Paula Kelman: Right.
- Interviewer: As a policeman.
- Paula Kelman: As a policeman.
- Interviewer: And he worked with German policemen?
- Paula Kelman: Worked with the Germans. He has to do what the Germans tell him what to do. They've been on the...Some, they've been more with the Germans than with us--
- Interviewer: Stealing in the ghetto would cause you to be killed.

Paula Kelman: I was working there and I'm supposed to go and work and select those things for them and we're not supposed to take anything. But when I take something and come back to ghetto, some of the guys that used to work with the Polish people over there, they used to do carpentry, different work for the Germans, then we used to sell to them and they give us money. We could buy some bread or something for that money. It's the reason we tried to steal something. It was really...the Jews were...belonged everything to the Jewish people, but they think they belonged everything to them. And I was very skinny at that time and I don't know how he noticed. I put on my stomach with the girdle and everything. And then, they have the grave for me and everything. They're supposed to kill me. And my sister was crying and everything. With the other girl. The other girl came to the German. She was begging him on the knees. In German, she said, "Please don't kill me. Let me live." And he pushed her away like nothing happened.

Interviewer: Did they kill her?

Paula Kelman: No, she went with me together.

Interviewer: Okay.

Paula Kelman: And they make graves for us like we...they got killed...cover up the graves and we went back to ghetto at night.

Interviewer: So, the Jewish policemen told him he killed you?

Paula Kelman: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: But really, they faked your death. They built a grave so that anyone looking would think you were dead.

Paula Kelman: They were gone and cover up.

Interviewer: And you snuck back into the ghetto.

Paula Kelman: He snuck me, the Jewish guy, at night. And then, when were working in the ghetto, the small ghetto, some guys they tried to kill a German and they don't succeed. Then we have to go outside and watch. We stay, all of us, without stockings, without nothing. It was so cold and the snow was pouring on us and everything. One German and they said, "Hold your hands up." The 24 hours we stayed there, I don't know how we made it. One German – he was really heavy, I remember – I think he felt sorry for me. When he passed by, he said to me, "Put your hands down when I'm here. Then you can put them up again." In front of us, they picked up 20 boys, 16, 17, 18, and they kill like, we have to watch with the guns. It was

awful. They've been staying there. And we have to stay still there with our hands up. And then, we went back to ghetto and we were working. I was going to the German houses and clean up after them with girls. And then was working over there, one Polish woman, she was the maid then. She treat us. She picks for us hamburger. That was a big treat. She was nice and we have to polish the shoes. You have to polish those shoes. They have to shine and everything, those tall shoes. And every time when we were going there, they still took the German shepherds and the Germans, they walk with their rifles. That's what we saw all day long, the rifles and German shepherds, because if we tried to run away, then the German shepherds would start to eat us up and everything. We was in Ghetto until 1942. In '42, they fixed ammunition factory in my city that was named HASAG. People was coming like he was from Lodz. They've been coming from Lodz to Czestochowa and they work the same camp [where we was ammunition factory.

Interviewer: Let me stop you for a second. Tell me about the Polish maid.

Paula Kelman: The Polish which man?

Interviewer: The Polish maid that you had worked for?

Paula Kelman: She was working for the Germans in their house and we were coming there, about 10 girls, and clean the house. Then she was feeling sorry for us. That was on Sundays. And she picks us hamburger while they went to church, the Germans. While they've been in church, then she picks a little special treat for us because we don't have meat, nothing in the ghetto. And she was nice, but – what else you want to know?

Interviewer: Were you religious? Were you religious?

Paula Kelman: My parents were religious.

Interviewer: Were you religious as children?

Paula Kelman: Yeah, we were skipping kosher and everything, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you find that your faith helped you at all in the ghetto?

Paula Kelman: When I was in ghetto, then I say to God, "Oh God, where are you? My parents gone, my brothers gone and we suffer so much. Each day, we don't know are we're going to live? "Where are you?" I was wondering. I'll be honest with you. I don't know whether to believe in Him or not. But then, the other day I was praying, "Please, let us go out from the mess and everything. How anybody can watch what happened to us?" You see, my sister, she was pregnant in ghetto and she had her baby and the baby

was born and they threw the baby against the wall and they killed the baby and we have to watch that, too. I can talk days and days, never been through what I went through, and I was just a young girl. They took away my childhood and I have to be working so hard like the men working. Everything that I was doing, we have to work hard. And then, after the ghetto in 1942, they've been building the ammunition factory. We have to go there, and put the bricks up, everything, make the barracks for us. I was making the bullets in the ammunition factory. It was two holes on the bottom and I have five machines to operate and if I will not do my production, so many boxes a day, then they will take me to the room over there where the police hit... what you called it?

Interviewer: The torture room thing?

Paula Kelman: No, where they're hitting--

Interviewer: The club?

Paula Kelman: The club. They took us over there in the little room, they gave us something that was like a map on the behind, and we have to go back to work and you were so dizzy, they hit us so many times. You don't know what you was doing. Have to go back and finish your work. They don't feel sorry, nothing for us. Whether you're young or not. And every day, when we went to work, we have to say, stay up and we have a number right here, still number with the pin like they call you not by name, they call you 1585 or something like that.

Interviewer: Do you remember your number?

Paula Kelman: I think it was 1585. And then, we worked 12 hours, one week we worked daytime, the other week we worked at night. And in the barracks, when I was sleeping on the hay, we just have hay, we don't have mattress or nothing and no blankets like that which is covered with a little coat. Then, the girl, when she was working at night, then I was sleeping. When she was working in daytime, then I was sleeping there. We exchanged. Their barracks like they have here for kids, but it's not the same. Barracks. And we have to take shower about 30 girls and the shower was over there. They gave us soap, it was like... I don't know what kind of soap it was. And the food, they gave us a black bread that was divided about 20 girls, a little piece, no butter nothing. And at lunch time, they make soup from leaves, I don't know what was inside and we ate because we don't have other choice. But the food was not enough. I don't know how we survived. I'm glad it was good to us because we survived with our working so hard and not sleeping well and everything. We have always some debonair Germans, but they're all [unintelligible] in black outfits on the roof and they've been watching us, so we ran away. That was awful.

Interviewer: You were in the ghetto and then you were sent to a camp or did the ghetto become a camp?

Paula Kelman: You see, they have selection. They send some people to Auschwitz, different places. And I was sent to the camp, then I was lucky because the same city, there was a labor camp.

Interviewer: Is this HASAG?

Paula Kelman: HASAG. In my city--

Interviewer: So, you were there from 1942 to 1945?

Paula Kelman: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Tell me about liberation.

Paula Kelman: I was liberated by Russian. We were working, the machines, everything. And the Germans came and they've been intent to send us to Auschwitz and they said "Rausch," that means "Get out from work and go to your barracks." And we went there and we stayed there maybe two hours. They've been intent to send us away. And we heard shooting and shooting, killing and everything, and we don't know what was happening. All night, we stayed there. And some of our boys, because we have separate barracks for girls and separate barracks for boys, they came with the guns. No, before that, when the Germans was intent to send us then one German came to the other German and told him something in the ear, but we don't know what he was talking. And they left. After they left, there was shooting and bombs and everything. In some places, where we stayed, there was fire. And our boys, they went over there and took guns, the Germans left some guns and they came in and we were so scared. We said, "Why you put the guns? They'll come back, they will kill us right then." They said, "I don't care what they will do. We don't have much to lose. We go kill them." And in the morning, the Russian came. We were liberated by the Russians.

Interviewer: What was that day like?

Paula Kelman: They came to us to the camp and they say to us in Russian you're free, you can go wherever you want to. And my sister was staying... I was staying in one and she was staying in the other one. They have two places, the factory. Her name was [Warta (sp) 0:20:43.7]. That's the place in Czestochowa. In the morning, when the Russian came, they gave us food because we were hungry and everything. They've been...

Interviewer: You had everything taken away from you. You lost your parents...

Paula Kelman: I lost my brothers.

Interviewer: You lost your brothers.

Paula Kelman: I lost my grandparents.

Interviewer: You were a child. What did that mean, you were free? Free for what? What did that mean to you?

Paula Kelman: When I got...when they say free, still we were living in fear. We don't know where we were like you say. I was like somebody hypnotized me or something. I just said to myself that's me or not me, nobody. Then, I went to look for my sister and she was looking for me. When we find each other, then the next day, we went where we used to live in the neighborhood. We went there and some Polish people I used to play with, a girl, she was really nice to me. She was three houses from us and she brought us food and everything because her daughter was the same age what I was and she used to come to our house, spend nights with me. We were very close friends. And the mother was very nice. She said to me, "If I knew you were in the camp, I will bring you food and I'd be good to you," and everything. Nobody wanted to risk their life. Just few risk their life and they hide people. I have some friends. They've been in shelter and they're living today, but most of them, they killed.

Interviewer: You went to Bergen-Belsen, right?

Paula Kelman: After the war.

Interviewer: Right. That was you went into a displaced persons camp.

Paula Kelman: Before I went to Bergen-Belsen, we were living in the apartment, me and my sister and my brother-in-law. And after the war, there was some Polish people, they call them [unintelligible 0:22:56.7], they were like [unintelligible 0:22:58.4] Polish and they tried to kill the Jews what was left.

Interviewer: They came in after the war and tried to kill the Jews that were surviving?

Paula Kelman: Yeah, in our city.

Interviewer: And they were Polish.

Paula Kelman: They were Polish.

Interviewer: Were they working for the Nazis?

Paula Kelman: That was after the war.

Interviewer: But do you know if they were former Nazis or anything like that?

Paula Kelman: I don't know what they were, but I know we used to call them Polish [unintelligible 0:23:21.7]. Then, they came one night. We were living on the first floor and the janitor, [what he worked for the apartments place and ask them where's the Jews] -- they came with the guns. And he don't show them. If he will show them, they will kill us. Then, my sister said "It's no place for us to stay in Poland. We got to go to Germany, get out from here." When we went from Germany, then you could not just go. We hide over there with the suitcases on the train -- isn't that something? -- and we hoped then nobody will see us. Then we came to Germany to Berlin and then from Berlin, we went to Nuremberg or some kind. And then, we went to the DP camp, to Bergen-Belsen after the war. After the war, we were living there. Let's see, we came there 1946 and I got married 1949. You see, my brother was in Russia and my husband's sister, she was there, and they got married in Poland, and you know how, we were looking for the family, whatever was left. Then, we found out that my brother came to Germany and lived in Marburg, the city close to Nuremberg. Then when we find out, then we went to see him and my husband went there to see him, too, and I met my husband there, 1946, and we got married 1949.

Interviewer: What brought you to Memphis?

Paula Kelman: The federation, the HIAS.

Interviewer: The HIAS brought you?

Paula Kelman: I was sponsored by them. I don't have no family here, then they sponsored us and sent us to...like other people went to different cities. And we came to Memphis. We got married 1949 in June and we came here in January 15 or 16 by boat.

Interviewer: When your granddaughter comes to you and tries to understand what happened, tries to understand how people could be so evil, what do you tell her?

Paula Kelman: My daughter, when she was in her age younger, she used to ask me, "Mom, what happened?" I never wanted to discuss with her. I don't know why. I was hurting. I don't want her to know. Then every time when she asks me, I went to the kitchen, I was cooking and everything, I change the subject. And my husband, too, he will not talk either 'cause he

was in Auschwitz. He was in the march. He weighed 80 pounds after the liberation.

Interviewer: Is he no longer living?

Paula Kelman: Four years ago, he died. And I never wanted to discuss. Lately, I'm going to schools and talk, because my daughter wants me to talk. But, on beginning, I just...I kept inside and it was worse to keep inside.

Interviewer: How do you explain the evil to them?

Paula Kelman: When I was in the camp, I'd be honest with you I said, "When I go out, I'll go kill all the Germans." And after the war, when I got married to my husband, we used to live with the German people. We rented room from them, and when the Americans used to give us food, chocolate a lot, I shared with her, I gave her. And she didn't have kids and she said to me, "You know, Paula, don't go to United States. Stay here. You'll be my child. I'll give you the tobacco store." But I was not having desire to have my children in Germany.

Interviewer: Did you ever ask her if she knew what was happening?

Paula Kelman: Yes 'cause she said she didn't know.

Interviewer: Do you believe that?

Paula Kelman: No.

Interviewer: Was that hard for you?

Paula Kelman: Very hard. But you see, I was just talking when I was hurt, then I said I'd kill them, all of them, but then when I was liberated, I did nothing to them. Just was talking like two human beings.

Interviewer: Have you been back?

Paula Kelman: No. My son asked me. My brother lives in Israel and he wants to go to Poland and see where my grandparents used to live where my parents and...that was three years ago. And my son said to me, "Mom, I will love to go there and see Poland." I said, "No, I don't have no desire to go there. Even if they give me free ticket, free hotel, I don't want to go there." No desire.

Interviewer: What do you want people to know about what happened?

Paula Kelman: I want people not to forget what happened and keep up with that, having

history there, and I want the people really to be nice to each other and respect each other, I mean what religion you are, we got one God, and be nice to each other and love each other. And I really appreciate this country. I be honest with you. When I came here, I was kissing the ground because my children, grandchildren, maybe they don't appreciate this as much as I appreciate it because they've been born here, but I really appreciate. America is the best county and people should appreciate. You're all born here, you should know, we have freedom here, we can express what we wanted and I love. And I like Memphis, too.